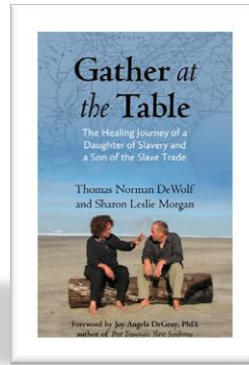


Gather at the Table

Study Guide



About the Book

Gather at the Table is the story of two people – a black woman and a white man – who embarked upon a “healing journey” to overcome the trauma of historic harms brought on by America’s legacy of slavery and the lingering effects of present-day racism. They committed to learning more about the impact on their lives and the implications for people throughout the United States and around the world. In *Gather at the Table*, Sharon and Tom share their stories, those of their ancestors, and their three-year journey together.

When Thomas Norman DeWolf learned he was related to prominent slave traders, it rocked his previously well-ordered world. He became aware, as never before, of America’s history of slavery and oppression, the continuing legacy of racism, and the privileges he enjoys simply by being a white man.

Sharon Leslie Morgan's epiphany came as she researched her family genealogy and found at least a dozen people who were enslaved. That some of these ancestors were fathered by white men exacerbated feelings of alienation and anger, powerful feelings that led her to leave America and live abroad for more than a decade. She re-visits the past to make sense of her present.

Gather at the Table introduces an approach to communicating about “race” that can lead to understanding, acknowledging and healing racial wounds for individuals and communities.

About the Authors

Thomas Norman DeWolf is the author of *Inheriting the Trade: A Northern Family Confronts Its Legacy as the Largest Slave-Trading Dynasty in U.S. History*. He is featured in the Emmy-nominated documentary film *Traces of the Trade: A Story from the Deep North*, which premiered at the Sundance Film Festival and on the acclaimed PBS series P.O.V. Tom speaks regularly about healing from the legacy of slavery and racism at conferences, colleges, universities and workshops throughout the United States.

Sharon Leslie Morgan is an internationally recognized pioneer in multicultural marketing. She has lived for extended periods of time in Jamaica, South Africa and France. An avid genealogist, she is the webmaster for OurBlackAncestry.com, which is dedicated to “empowering our future by honoring our past.” Sharon is a founder of the Black Public Relations Society (BPRS) and has been a long-time member of the National Genealogical Society (NGS), the African American History and Genealogical Society (AAHGS), the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA), and Mensa, The International High I.Q. Society.

Questions for Discussion

Foreword

- 1) Joy Angela DeGruy writes of the authors, "...they neatly weave their individual perspectives of events and experiences; sometimes in such sharp contrast that it is difficult to believe they were in the same place at the same time."
 - a. Can you imagine yourself embarking on a difficult journey with someone with whom you have little in common?
 - b. If so, how would you approach such an endeavor?
- 2) DeGruy writes, "For Sharon, race is a 'real' place where she has lived her whole life" and "For Tom, race is a place he has only recently *chosen* to visit."
 - a. What differences do you perceive in how people of color and white people approach issues of race?
 - b. What are your personal feelings about race?
 - c. How do your feelings about race affect your relationships with others?

Introduction

- 3) Sharon was confronted by an angry white man in the parking lot of her local post office.
 - a. Why do you think the man erupted as he did?
 - b. How would you react if you were in Sharon's position?

Chapter 1: The Recalcitrant Bat

- 4) Susan and Will encountered people of color who were descended from people their white ancestors enslaved and to whom they were related by blood.
 - a. Are you aware of people from multiple races in your family tree?
 - b. How do you think you would you feel if you met previously unknown relatives of another race?
 - c. If you are white, how would you feel if you found out there was "black blood" in your ancestry?
- 5) Sharon and Tom felt led by ancestral spirits.
 - a. Do you share their belief?
 - b. If so, what experiences have you had that reinforce your belief?

Chapter 2: Castaways from Security Island

- 6) People who grow up in the North experience racism differently than people from the South.
 - a. How did you experience racism where you grew up?
 - b. Do you think your family or your community were racist?
 - c. Is it possible for a black person to be racist?

- 7) This chapter introduces the “Cycles of Violence.”
- In thinking of traumatic experiences in your life, what points listed on the cycles have you experienced?
 - Did you find yourself moving between the cycles of victim and aggressor?

Chapter 3: Friends on Purpose

- 8) Sharon and Tom built a purposeful relationship and created a series of experiences to grow and test that relationship.
- Can you imagine doing something similar to what Tom and Sharon did?
 - Are there reasons why they could not achieve healing on their own?
- 9) Tom and Sharon encountered several “faith traditions” along their journey. The Mennonites are considered one of the “peace” churches with a focus on healing from trauma, and peacebuilding. Bahá’ís espouse a core belief in the oneness of humanity.
- If you have a faith tradition, in what ways has your faith community been engaged in confronting racism and other forms of oppression?
 - In what ways has your faith community ignored or exacerbated the problems?
- 10) Sharon was uncomfortable in “backabush California.” Tom was uncomfortable in Harlem. Neither of them felt completely comfortable with each other’s families.
- Have you had similar experiences?
 - How much of your discomfort had to do with race?

Chapter 4: Lizard Brain

- 11) This chapter discusses how people learn and discern “truth.”
- What were you raised to believe was “the truth” about race?
 - Have you come to believe differently as you’ve grown older? If so, how?
- 12) The authors describe slavery experiences of people at ages 2, 5, 8, and so on.
- What did you feel when you put yourself in those scenarios?
- 13) Sharon finds it “almost impossible to imagine reconciling with white people.”
- Why do you think Sharon feels that way?
 - Do you think it is possible for black and white people to reconcile their differences?
- 14) Research in neuroscience indicates that racial prejudice is rooted in the brain, has been inherited down through generations, and still governs our instincts today.
- Have you witnessed examples of these inheritances in yourself or those around you?

Chapter 5: Many Rivers to Cross

- 15) It seems that every major town, like Chicago, has a street named for Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. that is invariably located in the black section of town.
- Why do you suppose that is?
 - Do you think this is appropriate? Why or why not?
- 16) America is a land of immigrants. People, black and white, have always been on the move. During the Great Migration, millions of African Americans left the South for the North.
- What was your family's migration path?
 - What caused them to uproot their lives and move on?
- 17) There are many cities that remain segregated, including Chicago, which is still considered the most segregated major city in the United States.
- How segregated is your town?
 - What issues does your community face as a result?
- 18) Sharon expressed the fear that white people might herd black people into concentration camps, just as the United States has done in the past to American Indians, Japanese and Italian Americans.
- Is it realistic to fear that this could happen again?

Chapter 6: The Past is Present

- 19) It is a given that people are most comfortable around those who are like them. Tom is from Oregon, which was designed to be "white on purpose."
- Why is integration generally considered a better solution to achieving racial equity and justice than "separate but equal"?
- 20) Sharon and Tom both have ancestors they would rather not be related to.
- Why is knowing about one's ancestry important?
 - Is there anyone in your family tree that you would rather not claim?
- 21) Bettie Warfe and Robert Gavin had a long-term relationship and 17 children together. Such relationships between white men and black women were not uncommon.
- Can such relationships be described as consensual – or even loving – given the disparity in power between male and female, white and black?

Chapter 7: Colored Water

- 22) Sharon believes it is a lot harder for white people to deal with the issues of slavery and racism than it is for black people.
- What do you think?
- 23) Sharon and Tom grew up in troubled times in very different circumstances and their experiences continue to inform their world view.

- a. Thinking about your own life, what formative experiences do you recall that informed your attitudes about race?

Chapter 8: Cycles of Violence

- 24) Tom and Sharon contend that violence is intrinsic to the American way of life.
- a. Do you agree with their contention?
 - b. If so, why do you think America as a nation, and so many individual Americans, are so violent?
- 25) Dr. Howard Zehr suggests that “restorative justice can help reframe the discussion of historic slavery, racism, privilege and present-day inequities.”
- a. Do you agree or disagree with Dr. Zehr? Why?
- 26) Entire communities were either terrorized by or participated in horrific acts of violence.
- a. If you are white, do you believe you would you have stood up to your community or would you have gone along with an act of terror?
 - b. If you are black and were the victim of or witnessed an act of terror, how do you believe you would have responded?

Chapter 9: Grave Matters

- 27) Genealogy is a central theme throughout *Gather at the Table*.
- a. What do you know about your family history?
 - b. Has this book inspired you to do further research into your family’s connection to slavery?
- 28) Tom and Sharon visited many sites related to the struggle for civil rights and experienced deep emotional reactions to what they saw.
- a. Is there a difference between “civil rights” and “human rights”?
 - b. Would you have been willing to put your life on the line for the right to vote or to sit at the front of a bus?
 - c. How would you go about teaching young people who have no experience with this part of American history how significant and meaningful the civil rights struggle was?

Chapter 10: The Crossroads of Liberty and Commerce

- 29) Sharon and Tom encountered many symbols of America’s past that they found painful, including Confederate flags, historical markers and tributes to Ku Klux Klan leaders.
- a. Are any such symbols found in your community?
- 30) Sharon and Tom were impressed by the many instances they found of the intersection of “liberty and commerce.”
- a. Does money prevail over morals?
 - b. Have you ever compromised your integrity in the pursuit of success?

- 31) Sharon wanted to visit “the scene of the crime” by sleeping in an antebellum home and touring a plantation – Tom did not.
- Would you be interested in visiting such places or not?
- 32) Mrs. Feltus showed Tom and Sharon many artifacts that have been in her family for generations.
- What is the most cherished possession you have that that has been passed down from previous generations?
 - What does this possession symbolize for you?
- 33) The tour guide at Longwood presented a view of Uncle Frederick as a cherished friend and savior of the Nutt family.
- How do you perceive Uncle Frederick’s role in the Nutt family?
 - Is there a difference between being a “servant” or a “slave”?

Chapter 11: Truth Be Told

- 34) Part of the “healing journey,” as taught in the STAR program, is finding healthy ways to resolve conflict.
- Have you learned anything from Sharon’s and Tom’s experiences that will help you more successfully resolve conflicts in your life?
- 35) The painful history of the Tulsa Race Riot was buried for generations.
- Do you know of any similar historical events that have been hidden in your community or state?
- 36) John Brown used violence in pursuit of his goals.
- Can the use of violence be justified to help achieve equality and justice?
 - Why was non-violence a successful tactic during the civil rights movement?

Chapter 12: The Devil’s Half Acre

- 37) Historians generally agree that American history is filled with paradox. One example is that the white Founding Founders spoke vehemently of freedom while brutally enslaving African people.
- How do you resolve this paradox in your mind?
 - Now that you know more about Thomas Jefferson and other founders of the United States, how do you feel about them?
- 38) Interpretive centers have a difficult time attracting African Americans to portray slaves.
- If you are black, is this a job you think you could do?
 - If you are white, how would you feel about witnessing such a portrayal?

- 39) Tee Turner spoke of how he allowed the Confederate statue in Richmond to keep him in bondage and spoke of enslaved people being reduced to a “slave mentality.”
- How was Tee in bondage to the statue?
 - What is a “slave mentality”?
- 40) Part of Sharon’s and Tom’s healing journey was the recognition beforehand that it would be painful.
- Is experiencing pain necessary for healing?
 - If so, why?

Chapter 13: Ripples on a Pond

- 41) Tom and Sharon contend that “inequity and mistrust along racial lines are systemic throughout American society.”
- Can you cite examples in your own life and community in which this is true?
- 42) “History teaches that every few generations society experiences upheaval.”
- Can you point to any examples today that prove this statement to be true?
 - Do you believe society in general is on the verge of a paradigm shift to a new way of thinking?
- 43) Sharon and Tom claim that “today’s youth cannot escape the shadow of racism that has been passed down organically from parents and others who cling to a distorted image of American history.”
- Do you agree or disagree?
 - Has America achieved a “post-racial” society?
- 44) Tom and Sharon claim “the real challenge is that the system is designed to protect the powerful and it feeds on isms—racism, classism, sexism—all methods to keep people divided and conquered.”
- Do you agree or disagree?
 - Can you cite examples from recent media stories that support your opinion?
- 45) *Gather at the Table* has a goal of offering productive ways to discuss race using an approach that leads to understanding and healing for individuals and communities.
- Do you think the model offered in *Gather at the Table* can be useful to you and/or others?
 - What have you learned from *Gather at the Table* that you will incorporate into your life?

Endorsements

“Gather at the Table is an honest exploration into the deep social wounds left by racism, violence and injustice, as the authors work through their own prejudices in search of reconciliation — and ultimately find friendship.”

Leymah Gbowee, 2011 Nobel Peace Laureate

“An extraordinary story of an honest, meaningful conversation across the racial divide. At times it hurts to read. And well it should. Centuries of injustice and trauma that face us every day in this country have no place for half-truths. Sharon and Tom took the harder road – searching for healing, they literally walked together into painful histories and found friendship.”

John Paul Lederach, Professor of International Peacebuilding

Joan B Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies, University of Notre Dame

“This is a true story about two people who defied the odds and shattered the myth that unity between black and white is not possible. Tom and Sharon offer a gift to posterity with this rich recounting of their personal histories as well as an important piece of America’s history, told through the eyes of two of slavery’s children. They offer hope and encouragement to all of us who aspire to engage in a process of ‘change’ – to right the wrongs of the past and forge a more just and peaceful future.”

Joy Angela DeGruy

Sociologist and Author, *Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome*

“Sharon and Tom, take us on a heart-opening journey of awakening. As a nation, we owe them a deep bow of gratitude as they help us navigate the deep divides of race and otherness.”

Belvie Rooks, Co-Founder, Growing A Global Heart

“What a courageous journey – communicated in an engaging, readable style, with candor, humor, and deep feeling.”

Carolyn Yoder, Author, *The Little Book of Trauma Healing: When Violence Strikes and Community is Threatened* and Founding Director of STAR (Strategies for Trauma Awareness & Resilience) at Eastern Mennonite University

Further Reading

- *The Little Book of Trauma Healing: When Violence Strikes and Community is Threatened*, by Carolyn Yoder (Good Books, 2005)
- *The Hidden Wound*, by Wendell Berry (North Point Press, 1989)
- *Witnessing Whiteness: The Need to Talk About Race and How to Do It*, by Shelly Tochluk (Rowman & Littlefield Education, 2010)
- *A People’s History of the United States*, by Howard Zinn (Harper, 2003)
- *Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome*, by Joy DeGruy Leary (Uptone Press, 2005)
- *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, by Michelle Alexander (The New Press, 2010)
- *Atonement and Forgiveness: A New Model for Black Reparations*, by Roy L. Brooks (University of California Press, 2004)