

A HEALING JOURNEY

By Dan Holly



A lot of interesting books come across the desks of the editors of Diversity MBA Magazine but one that really caught our eye recently was *Gather at the Table*. This book tells the story of Sharon Leslie Morgan, a black woman who is the descendant of slaves, and Thomas Norman DeWolf, a white man who is a descendant of a family that was the largest slave-trading dynasty in U.S. history. The pair travelled through 27 states and abroad – in a quest for healing.

DeWolf, a resident of Oregon and a writer, speaker and community coordinator, had confronted his family's past in his 2008 book *Inheriting the Trade*. Morgan, a resident of New York and a writer and genealogist, was avidly interested in African-American history and keenly aware of the brutality of slavery. They were an unlikely pair on this physical, psychological and spiritual journey but both felt that it would help them – and maybe help the rest of us.

The pair sat down for an interview with *Diversity MBA Magazine*. (Note: Some answers have been edited for brevity and/or clarity.)

DMBA: How did you come up with the idea for this book?

DeWolf: When I wrote my first book, which was published in 2008, about my relationship to my ancestors, the largest slave-trading dynasty in history, I found out about this group called Coming to the Table [a group devoted to racial healing]. I began participating in their activities, and one of the things I participated in was a week-long class during a summer peace-building institute. Sharon and I both participated in that class, so that's when we met.

It was about a year later when we were both at a conference in Jackson, Miss., when we first talked about this concept of writing a book. For me, one of the drivers was, when people think about racism, it's so big and so huge that they think, 'How can I, one little person, do anything about it?' Sharon and I decided, 'What if just the two of us tried to live this healing model, this coming-to-the-table model, together? One black woman, one white man – let's give it a shot and see how it works out for us'...That was the seed of the idea – to make it a concept that individuals could get their arms around.

DMBA: Were you optimistic that two people could change anything?

DeWolf: There was hope and at the same time, realistically, there was no reason to believe that this experiment would work. Sharon and I didn't know each other and when first met, we didn't immediately hit it off. [Morgan chuckles]...

The commitment we made was not just to gather at the table but to stay when it gets hard, which it does.

DMBA: Sharon, I want to hear what was behind that laugh when Tom said that it wasn't easy going at first.

Morgan: [Chuckles again.] I was actually very angry at first. As a genealogist, everything you find out about slavery just makes you angry. I wasn't quite sure it was going to work and that probably had a lot to do with why I didn't have a good reaction to him in the beginning – he was a descendant of the largest

slave trading family. But I had read his book [*Inheriting the Trade*] and I did admire the book. As it went on, there were moments when I was still very angry and I would strike out at Tom because he represented all white people...so there were moments when it was still very painful and difficult for me.

But over a period of time – now it has been years – it did help me achieve some resolution because I had someone to confront, who was willing to look at the history and deal with it honestly, and was willing to stay there and try to work this thing through. And we did work a lot of things through.

There are still days when I'm angry but mostly not at Tom. [They both share a hearty laugh.]

DMBA: I'm sure writing this book, in which you travelled through 27 states and overseas, was not without obstacles, hurdles and problems. What were some of the obstacles that you encountered?

Morgan: One was people not wanting to go back to revisit that [history] in order to understand where we are today. You have white people in a state of incredible denial, and they just don't want to deal with it, and then you have black people who are so pained by the experience that they don't want to deal with it. But the bottom line is that we have to deal with it or we'll never get over it.

DeWolf: Just on the logistical side was just finances. The biggest chunk of the journey took place in just under a month when we drove 6,000 miles and drove through 21 states. Logistically that was the biggest challenge for us. But with the commitment we made, there was just no way we weren't going to find our way through these things.

DMBA: What kind of reaction have you gotten from friends and family?

Morgan: Our families have been very supportive. Part of the exercise was going beyond having a relationship — beyond me and Tom; it was meeting our families and our friends. We stayed with families [while travelling]. A lot of people didn't understand why we were doing it. [Both laugh.] But beyond that, it was positive.

DMBA: What did you learn – about yourselves, about the human condition, about the prospects for improving the world?

Morgan: One thing I learned – or I guess was reinforced – was that history really does inform the present and if we don't deal with it there won't be a change. And people have to do that honestly and have to be very sincere in their desire for change. History happened but it doesn't have to be our future.

DeWolf: The thing that struck me through this whole experience is that, as human beings we tend to separate ourselves into 'us and them' pretty easily – 'I'm a Christian, you're a Jew or Muslim; I'm a man you're a woman; I'm white, you're black or brown; I like the Dodgers, you like the Giants;'... The attractiveness of birds of a feather, finding the flock that meets our needs, is a really strong draw. One of the big things that helped me individually and that I think is useful on a large scale is the recognition that once you actually make the commitment to being in a relationship with 'the other,' so many of these barriers have the potential to quickly fall away...As time goes on and we share thousands of meals together and we fly across the country and we hung out with my grandchildren and with her grandchildren... You go out to eat, you walk along the beach, you begin to realize that you have far more in common than you have separating you.

That seems so obvious on the surface but the reality is the way it plays out way too often is that we isolate ourselves in our safe places, which really are not safe at all...The consequence is further isolation, separation and misunderstanding. [DMBA]

To find out more about *Gather at the Table*, visit gatheratthetable.net.

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