

Wanted: Underground Railroad Conductors

Written by Jeffrey L. Boney

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One of my historical heroes is the patriot, Harriet Tubman.

Her desire for shared equality and her sense of justice, became a source of internal enlightenment and empowerment, that prompted her to lead one of the greatest mobilization efforts in U.S. history.

Here is a black woman who looked at her situation and made a conscious DECISION to stand up against the injustices that her foreparents endured; refusing to accept that she and her peers had to experience it. She knew that if she didn't do SOMETHING, she would continue to allow the fans of injustice to enslave her and her people forever. Therefore, Tubman made a conscious decision not to tolerate it anymore.

On September 17, 1849, Tubman escaped from slavery with two of her brothers, only to have her brothers change their minds, forcing her return to the very slave masters they were running away from. Because Tubman refused to accept her role as a slave, she escaped again; this time without her brothers. Tubman made use of the network known as the **Underground Railroad**.

The Underground Railroad was a well-organized system developed by white abolitionists, free and enslaved blacks and many other anti-slavery activists, such as members of the Religious Society of Friends, often called the Quakers. Tubman traveled the Underground Railroad by night, guided by the North Star, so as to avoid bounty hunters seeking to collect rewards for capturing and returning fugitive slaves to their slave masters. Tubman was the chief "**conductor**" of the

Underground Railroad and she trained other "**conductors**"

on how the Underground Railroad worked, developing a variety of tactics for their use to avoid detection.

For 11 years Tubman returned again and again, rescuing some 70 slaves in 13 expeditions, including her three brothers (two of which wanted to return to their slavery the first time they escaped), their wives and some of their children. She also provided specific instructions to about 50 to 60 other fugitives who escaped to the north. Her dangerous work required

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tremendous ingenuity; she usually worked during winter months to minimize the likelihood that the group would be seen. Once she would make contact with escaping slaves, they would leave town on Saturday evenings, because newspapers would not print runaway notices until Monday morning.

Despite the best efforts of the bounty hunters and the slave masters, Tubman was never captured, and neither were the fugitives she helped escaped. She was an outstanding "conductor," with an impeccable record and a commitment to service that is second to none. Years after her last Underground Railroad expedition, she told an audience: **"I was conductor of the Underground Railroad for eight years, and I can say what most conductors can't say - I never ran my train off the track and I never lost a passenger."**

Tubman never spoke about the locations or the tactics she used to help free slaves until later in her life, because the routes she followed were used by other fugitive slaves who were seeking to escape slavery and lead others to freedom.

Not only did Harriet Tubman risk her life on countless occasions, she empowered her people by giving them a blueprint to attain freedom. She didn't give them a handout or an excuse, she showed them how to be free and gave them a choice to escape. There were many who followed her blueprint, but there were many who made the choice to remain in their slavery and chose not to take that risk. There were many slaves who found it socially safe to remain in bondage, rather than risk their lives to attain true freedom.

Tubman knew that she could not escape slavery and help others alone; she had to network and solicit partners and establish trust amongst many people, including White abolitionists. She understood that this cause was bigger than her, therefore she needed others who believed in the cause of abolition; even if those people who helped her looked like the very people who had a history of oppressing her. She understood that not every White person wanted to see her oppressed and she also understood that many White abolitionists had the resources and/or influence to aid her cause.

More importantly, White abolitionists had to have a mindset and commitment to aid the cause, because they saw the cause as being something bigger than their social status. They too, took risks for the sake of the cause.

Fast forward to modern times and you see that the boldness of Tubman, and the blueprint for freedom that she created, has been "archived" by many in the Black community and picked up by other groups with a commitment to freeing themselves of the selected injustices that they have chosen to champion.

If Tubman was alive today, I could see her with a glaring Public Service Announcement: "Wanted: Underground Railroad Conductors."

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There are many "conductors" that have escaped from the bondage in areas that continue to plague the Black community today, and are continuously helping others get free.

There are many who have escaped, however, there are many who refuse to see the plight of Black America as a cause worth fighting for or a cause worth getting out of their social safety net for. There are many who have "Gotten theirs," and who aren't willing to return to the places they were delivered from in order to teach others and show them the way of escape and challenge them to escape and never turn back.

Harriet Tubman could have stayed where she was for the rest of her life. Truthfully, it was the smartest and the safest thing for someone to do who was only worried about themselves. Thankfully though, Tubman didn't just want freedom for herself alone. On the contrary, Tubman wanted to share that freedom that she knew was attainable with all of her people that were still in bondage.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu once said, "If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor."

What side are you on?

I choose to be a "**conductor**" and I encourage everyone, regardless of race, to help address the issues plaguing the black community by becoming a modern day Underground Railroad Conductor too!

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