

## Karamu Forum: Reflections on freedom's journey

Written by Dr. Artika R. Tyner  
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What does freedom truly mean?

For African-Americans, was it won 150 years ago with the passage of the Emancipation Proclamation? What are some of the challenges facing freedom today? These are some of the questions that I began to ponder as I explored freedom's journey through the chapters of the past, present, and future.

I was blessed with the opportunity to sit at the professor's (Dr. Mahmoud El-Kati) feet and learn more about freedom and my role as a freedom fighter. El-Kati taught us that freedom is a continual pursuit and not a destination. One of the first lessons that I learned from El-Kati was the importance of understanding history since the past is a prologue to the future. As we gathered together at the solidarity discussions, I began to make a connection between the history of freedom in the context of the African-American experience and freedom's challenges today. I realized that I was "miseducated" about the role of African-Americans in the pursuit of freedom in America. I learned two important lessons from the Professor's teachings.

**Lesson 1:** I had viewed freedom as something that could be won and would be freely given by the oppressor but ignored the fact that freedom is a pursuit fueled by eternal struggle. In the words of Frederick Douglass, "Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will." In turn, freedom must be demanded.

**Lesson 2:** Freedom is not a resting place and it requires people like you and me to make a commitment to pursue freedom as a moral imperative. We have to make a commitment to remain vigilant. Therefore, we who believe in freedom cannot rest.

Starting with the first lesson, history teaches us that those who came before us understood the importance of freedom and their role in bringing the vision of freedom to fruition. One example of this is the demonstration of faith and tenacity of the thousands who gathered together on a cold winter night on Dec. 31, 1862. This gathering was called Freedom's Eve.

On that day, the African-American community, slave and freed, gathered together in anticipation of the realization of their future freedom, hence the name, Freedom's Eve. They were waiting

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for the clock to strike midnight in order to seize the promise of freedom outlined in the Emancipation Proclamation. The Emancipation Proclamation issued by President Abraham Lincoln declared that on New Year's Day, Jan. 1, 1863 all slaves would forever be free in the rebellion states. As the African-American community prepared to embark on this journey to freedom, celebrating Freedom's Eve became a cherished tradition.

Freedom's Eve in 1862 was a time for rejoicing. Frederick Douglass, remarked, "We shout for joy that we live to record this righteous decree." For many, the prayers of their ancestors had finally come to fruition as they reached towards a future of freedom and liberty.

While for others, Freedom's Eve was a call to action, they recognized their moral responsibility to fight for the full realization of freedom for their brothers and sisters. They were united in the struggle. The Emancipation Proclamation alone did not abolish slavery or free slaves, but served as a catalyst for change since many slaves decided to seize their own freedom. Two hundred thousand freed slaves joined the Union Army and left their mark on history. In fact, 103 of these soldiers were from Minnesota.

Today, Freedom's Eve is a symbol of not only the struggle of African-Americans for freedom from slavery but also a symbol of tenacious courage. Yet, Freedom's Eve also connects history with the present since it informs our struggle today to secure the promise of freedom for our future generations.

Fast forward to today, we must critically ask ourselves how have we progressed on the journey to freedom? Are there invisible chains that are keeping others in bondage or ensnared in systems of oppression? What have we done to free someone else? This is related to the second lesson that I learned from El-Kati. Freedom is an ongoing battle that requires you and I to take action.

One such obstruction on freedom's journey is the emergence of mass incarceration. Today, the U.S. has the highest incarceration rate in the world with over 2 million people who are incarcerated. The prison population has grown by 700 percent from 1970 to 2005. There is a social and moral cost associated with this epidemic. The social cost is the impact on our economy when the average annual cost of incarceration is \$31,307 and over \$70 billion is spent annually for corrections. Could we perhaps reinvest these dollars in ways that would strengthen the social fabric of our nation, for example in education, job development and access to affordable housing? You be the judge.

Lastly, there are moral costs associated with the racial disparities in the rate of incarceration. While people of color make up about 30 percent of the United States' population, they account for 60 percent of those imprisoned. The incarceration rates disproportionately impact men of color. One in every 15 African-American men and one in every 36 Hispanic men are incarcerated in comparison to one in every 106 white men. The time has come to raise critical questions about freedom issues like mass incarceration and take a stand for justice. I sincerely thank Dr. Mahmoud El-Kati for raising our consciousness and challenging us to daily embark on the journey to seek freedom for all.