

THE PRICE FOR
THEIR POUND
OF FLESH

The Value of the Enslaved,
from Womb to Grave,
in the Building of a Nation

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ADOLESCENCE AND YOUNG ADULT AWARENESS OF ENSLAVEMENT AND SOUL VALUES

The pubescent years were terrifying. Not only were their bodies changing, but this was also a time when enslaved children experienced the separation they had feared all their lives. Daughters and sons were taken from their parents as the external value of their bodies increased. Market scenes from their childhood now made sense and haunted them for the rest of their lives. At this stage in their maturation, they knew full well that others claimed ownership of them and sexual assault came at any age.

However, their parents (if present), as well as other kin, reminded them of a value that enslavers and traders could not commodify—the spiritual value of their immortal selves. *Soul values*—my term for such valuation—often escaped calculation and developed during these years. Enriched through an inner spiritual centering that facilitated survival, soul values were reinforced by loved ones. Sometimes this internal value appeared as a spirit, a voice, a vision, a premonition, a sermon, an ancestor, (a) God. It came in public and private settings and was occasionally described as a personal message from a higher being, a heaviness in the core of their bodies. “My soul began singing,” one enslaved person recalled, “and I was told that I was one of the elected children.”⁶ This telling, this uplifting, this singing of a “fearful trill, of things unknown, but longed for still” made the enslaved feel free during captivity.⁷ Freedom of the soul matured in puberty.

Soul values, which came from deep within a person’s heart, were often felt in childhood, yet not fully articulated until the early teens. Recreating the social and economic circumstances under which enslaved people suffered allows us to make educated conclusions regarding enslaved adolescents’ internalized soul values. Unlike appraisal and sale values, these yearnings came from within; outsiders did not bargain for them. Such values shaped and defined enslaved people’s characters. “From the time I was

a little boy," Edward Walker related, "it always ground my feelings to know that I had to work for another man." These feelings were "not encouraged by my parents or the other slaves." Instead, they "came from within me and grew with the years." As he aged, Walker had the fortunate opportunity to learn to read and write and developed "a big taste for arithmetic." He "could add up numbers like a flash, could multiply and divide quickly, and correctly, and was good at fractions." These skills, his inherent yearning, and his belief in an incalculable soul value led to Walker's successful escape years later.⁸ Enslaved people often expressed their soul values by running away.

The internal and spiritual lives of the enslaved varied. Some believed in a Christian or Muslim God, others relied on West African, Caribbean, and Brazilian religious philosophies such as Vodun, Santeria, and Candomblé.⁹ Some enslaved people appeared to have no faith or did not comment on it. Historian Albert Raboteau reminds us that enslaved people's religion was an "invisible institution," which can be traced through enslaved testimony and behavior. For some, the idea of an afterlife was an extremely important part of their belief system. They held on to the notion that there was a place beyond the here and now where they would be redeemed and released from captivity. Some enslaved people dreamed that place was Africa, while others referred to it as heaven. In coastal Georgia, the large population of African-born enslaved people dreamed of flying home to Africa and anxiously waited for that to come to pass.¹⁰

In addition to an increasing spiritual awareness, puberty also represented the years "adolescents reached sexual maturity and [became] capable of reproduction."¹¹ The onset of menses for girls and the deepening voices of young boys served as physical manifestations of their transition into adulthood, as both sexes became physically stronger and more capable of heavy labor. Puberty also brought forth the importance of their increased commodification. These years generated outsiders' interest in their bodies, especially the interest of medical professionals and enslavers who actively sought ways to maximize their profits. For some, puberty simply meant more challenging health issues, and just as at other stages of life, enslaved people confronted death during these years. Some young women died giving birth; others within a few days or months of giving birth.

Young men, on the other hand, experienced complications such as shame or lack of arousal resulting from being forced to have sex on demand. As a result, they were physically assaulted by enslavers and spent much of their early teens and twenties on the auction block. Sometimes they took the stand with their parents, and on other occasions, their parents tried to purchase them.

One witness shared the following story of a young child and his father being auctioned: "I saw a beautiful boy of twelve years of age, put on the auction-block, and on one side of him stood an old gray-headed negro—it was plain he was his father—and he kept his eyes on the boy, and the boy kept his eyes upon the old gray-headed man, and the tears rolled in silence down the cheeks of each."¹² Imagine the gaze between the father and son. This was not the look of buyers and sellers inspecting property. It was a lingering stare that both knew might be their last. A paternal gaze with a son's eyes locked on his father's—a reverse gaze. The value between this father and son, immersed in tears and silence, was priceless. At twelve years old, this young boy knew it might be the last time he saw his father. They had likely lived together for all of the young boy's life and this would be the first time they were separated.

As with children under ten first learning about their captivity, for adolescents and young adults, separation and sale was a defining moment. This rare testimony describing a father and son on the auction block shows that paternal lineage was valuable to this duo and others. We know nothing about his mother or whether he had siblings, but we know the two held hands as they stood there together with an uncertain future on the horizon.

Some enslaved children remember their fathers fighting to keep their families together by raising funds to purchase them. Although it was extremely difficult for enslaved people to purchase themselves, Solomon Bayley, enslaved in Delaware and Virginia in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, spent much of his adult life purchasing yet, ironically, burying members of his family. He bought his family members with a clear understanding of American and British currency, both in circulation at the time. As a skilled tradesman, Bayley received small amounts of money for some of the labor he performed. After saving enough to purchase his wife,

Thamar, Bayley wanted to raise funds to purchase his only son, Spence. He knew that his son's enslaver had died and all of his property was to be sold. Bayley remembered when the two were first separated; Spence was only nine months old and too young to fully comprehend the transaction. Bayley, on the other hand, went into "a fit of distress" when his son was "sent away" from him.

Years later, in 1813, he learned that Spence was going to be sold again, and his friends and neighbors (both black and white) encouraged him to try to purchase the boy. When he arrived at the courthouse, Bayley heard the "crier" (auctioneer) shout "a likely young negro fellow for sale," and *he*, the father, laid the first bid. "I bid two hundred dollars," said Bayley, knowing full well that was only "half what he was appraised" for when his enslaver died. Bayley understood the difference in values and knew that an appraised value was not the same as a sale price. He waited anxiously to see if anyone else bid on his son. To his disappointment, a man bid \$333 and one-third, "which was thirty-three dollars and a third more than" Bayley had. Discouraged by the thought of losing his son again, Bayley bid a second time. "A shilling," he interjected, and the trader responded with a bid of \$20 more, increasing the price to \$354. Sadly, Bayley "thought I must give him up, and let him go," but he decided to bid once more. In total desperation, he bid "a cent" and the "crier" rejected that bid, asking him to raise it to a shilling. The penny was the last of his money. Bayley's situation looked grim when the trader once again outbid him. As the price continued to rise, Bayley "cried, and turned off, and went and leaned against the court house." He exhausted all his cash and now pondered the loss of his son all over again. Luckily for him, through faith and prayer, bystanders (referred to as "three great men") came to his aid and gave him extra money to help purchase his son for \$360 *and* a shilling. One of the men was a Methodist minister. Bayley signed the bond along with securities from the three men, who agreed to cover his costs so that he and Spence could be together.¹³

Imagine this scene from Spence's perspective. How might he have experienced this trade? What was it like to watch his father bid on him? Was he proud? Did he even remember his father? Did it matter? Here was someone who valued him in a different way. His father's actions show a man trying to live in freedom with those dear to him. Participating in

an auction for his own child signals that some enslaved people faced their commodification in the very space in which they and their families were objectified. Spence witnessed his father actively trying to purchase him so their family could live in a place where people valued him beyond his market price. His father came prepared to buy him and play by the rules of an institution that defined his family as property. The institution of slavery did not always account for soul values. Such values disrupted appraisal and sale transactions daily. Spence witnessed his father's expression of love side by side with the cold calculation of market values necessary to purchase him. He also saw his father give up, cry, and almost accept defeat, that is, until three men stepped in and contributed funds to complete the sale. By age twelve, Spence knew that he had multiple values and interests on his body and his soul. Unfortunately, like his sisters, he too died "prematurely."¹⁴

Fathers were not alone in trying to purchase their families. Mothers, such as Charity Bowery, did the same. Bowery lived with her young daughter and twelve-year-old son Richard. She worried about Richard because she knew as he matured it would be "hard work for him to bring his mind to be a slave." Approaching the age of realization and a sense of their place in the world, Bowery brought all of her money to Mistress McKinley, hoping to purchase her son. But, according to Bowery, McKinley would not let her "have my boy." One day, after Bowery had been away, she returned to find her daughter crying in front of McKinley, who was counting a wad of money. At first, Bowery thought McKinley had hit her daughter, but when she asked the child what was wrong, her daughter "pointed to mistress's lap and said 'Broder's money! Broder's money!'" Richard was gone, and his sister understood that the only remaining part of him was the money in the lap of her mistress. Perhaps she could not fully process where Richard had gone or why he had left, but certainly she recognized that her brother's absence meant cash for McKinley. Bowery immediately understood that McKinley had sold her son. McKinley then looked Bowery in the face and said, "Yes, Charity; and I got a great price for him!"¹⁵

As young men and women grew up, they learned to distinguish between the multiple values placed on and within their bodies. Bowery's young daughter knew that money represented her "Broder" and that he was sold

for "a great price" that day. She was probably beginning to understand what boys and girls Richard's age learned—their external market and appraisal values took them away from loved ones. Had Richard grasped the idea of an internal soul value? We do not know. There is evidence, however, that from a young age, some enslaved youth recognized that nobody could purchase their soul. It was the only place where they were truly free. For many, this freedom came at the moment of death, when the spirit left the body. Until they reached spiritual freedom, they still had to contend with external commodification.