



Module 4: Pilgrim

Objective: assess changes to Dr. Harding's religious commitments and expressions by examining an unpublished semi-biographical essay he wrote for *National Geographic* in 1983 about the trip he took with his wife Rosemarie, daughter Rachel, and son Jonathan through the route of the Underground Railroad the previous year. In the essay, he discusses his own religious commitments, that of Harriet Tubman and other Underground Railroad leaders, and the inheritors of the legacy of the Underground Railroad in the communities and institutions that he and his family visited.

Key Concepts:

- Students will learn about the changes in Harding's life from last encountering him in 1969 through his 1983 Underground Railroad trip;
- Students will creatively imagine the experience of those seeking freedom on the Underground Railroad;
- Students will evaluate key moments from Harding's pilgrimage in order to understand the nature of his spirituality;
- Students will consider the historical connections between resistance to various forms of racism and the African-American religious tradition as expressed in Dr. Harding's life.

Estimated Module Time: 50 Minutes.

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Citation: Tobin Miller Shearer, *Vincent Harding, Religion, and the Long Civil Rights Movement*, June 2025.

Teacher Preparation:

1. Copy and cut **Underground Railroad (UR) Cards** (found at the end of this lesson) into twenty slips of paper. Shuffle and place in a stack for later distribution.
2. Review **Harding Update and Context** section below so that you can explain what happened in Harding's life in your own words.
3. Make enough copies of the **Harding's Underground Railroad Spiritual Stories** handouts (found at the end of this lesson) for each student to have access to one. Be sure that you use at least one copy of each of the six stories.
4. If using the exercise entitled "Harriet Tubman bird Story pictures," have drawing supplies available.
5. If using the exercise entitled "Actual account," distribute in digital form a version of Harding's original *National Geographic* essay draft and assign writing essay as identified below.

Materials:

1. Prepared **UR Cards** (above).
2. **Harding's Underground Railroad Spiritual Stories** handouts (above).
3. Have a chalkboard, flipchart, or marker board available for use.
4. If using the Extend the lesson activity, "Harriet Tubman Bird Story pictures," provide drawing supplies.
5. If using the exercise entitled "Actual account," distribute in digital form the transcription of Harding's original *National Geographic* essay draft, one of the following:¹
 - a. Module 4 - Harding - National Geographic essay 1984 (Transcribed).docx
 - b. Module 4 - Harding - National Geographic essay 1984 (Transcribed).pdf

¹ Vincent Harding, "We were a black family..., 1984,": Emory University Rose Archives, Vincent Harding Papers, MSS 868, Series 12, Unprocessed Additions, 1968-2014, Box 99, Folder: [unmarked folder - unlabeled manuscript with Harding's personal reflections'], all forms used by permission of Vincent Harding estate, as per email to author on June 8, 2025, from Dr. Rachel Harding.

Introducing the Module:

A Movement from the Past. Without preamble or introduction read the following list:

- 100,000 enslaved people guided to freedom
- 10-20 miles separated most safe houses
- much of the activity took place in the open in broad daylight
- none of its work was subterranean
- fugitive slave acts from 1793 to 1850 allowed “slave catchers” to make a lot of money and made life in northern states precarious for enslaved people who escaped
- Canada allowed Black people full civil rights and refused to extradite escapees to the U.S
- Harriet Tubman – born Araminta Ross – credited a “vision of God” with prompting her to lead an estimated 300 people out of slavery

Ask, “what did I just describe?” Allow for a variety of answers.

After several students have ventured guesses, say, “Correct. I’ve just described the loose network of abolitionists – including formerly enslaved Africans, free Blacks, and White people – who helped guide escapees from slavery to freedom in the North. Although nothing was done literally underground and there were no actual railroads involved, the Underground Railroad was one form that resistance to racism and slavery took prior to the Civil War.”

Add, “Today, we’re going to examine several key moments in a trip that Vincent Harding took with his family to visit important sites of those involved in the efforts of the Underground Railroad in 1983 in order to examine the connections between African-American religious practices and historical traditions of resistance to racism.”

Module Steps:

1. **Class quiz.** Say, “We’re now going to take a surprise quiz about the Underground Railroad. Don’t worry, though, it won’t count toward your class grade. We’ll do the quiz as a class, and you’ll have both the questions and the answers.”

Distribute twenty **Underground Railroad Cards** (found at the end of this module). Have the first student with a question card (marked by a large Q) read the question. Have one of those holding an answer card venture an answer until the correct answer is found. Repeat until all the questions have been found and the correct answers found.

Ask, “So what have we learned about the *Underground Railroad* by taking that quiz?” Have students repeat back the information in sentence form. Write the statements on a chalkboard, flipchart, or marker board.

Possible statements include:

- Most escapees came from border states like Kentucky, Virginia, and Maryland;
- Hiding places were known as stations, safe houses, or depots;
- both African Methodist Episcopalians and Quakers were heavily involved in Underground Railroad activities;
- Rev. Jermain Loguen – who was a former fugitive himself – helped 1,500 escapees to freedom;
- at the young age of 15, North Carolinian Quaker Levi Coffin started working with the Underground Railroad;
- John Brown founded the League of Gileadists to assist enslaved Africans to Canada;
- Araminta Ross – aka Harriet Tubman – escaped from slavery in 1859;
- Her husband remarried after her escape and refused to come with her when she came back to rescue him;
- Louis Napoleon – an escapee himself – was so well known for his involvement in the movement to freedom that “Underground R. R. agent” was listed as his occupation on his death certificate;
- Vigilance Committees helped protect formerly enslaved escapees in the North.

2. **Harding update and context.** Inform the class of the following changes in Harding’s life:

- a. **From Atlanta to Philadelphia.** In search of better educational opportunities for their children, Harding and his wife Rosemarie had moved to Philadelphia in the late 1970s.
- b. **IBW.** Although he would continue on the board of the Institute of the Black World as its chairperson for many years, as he invested more and more time in his scholarship and teaching, he did less and less with the IBW.
- c. **Short-term academic gigs.** For the next ten years, Harding worked in a variety of short-term academic posts and ended up leading weekend retreats and residential classes on African-American history and religion at the Quaker retreat center near Philadelphia known as Pendle Hill.
- d. **Book and permanent position.** In 1981, his book on the black struggle for freedom up to the Civil War – *There is A River* – appeared in print and he accepted a permanent, tenure-track position at the Methodist Iliff School of Theology on the campus of the University of Denver in Colorado.

- e. **Religious context.** Through most of his and Rosemarie's time in Atlanta, they had been active participants in organized religious communities ranging from Seventh-day Adventists to Mennonites while also connecting with but not belonging to groups such as the Society of Friends, also known as Quakers, and historical Black congregations such as African Methodist Episcopal congregations. By the time they moved to Philadelphia, they were not, however, as directly connected to formal religious communities. Although Vincent would occasionally speak to and work with religious-based nonprofits such as American Friends Service Committee and Mennonite Central Committee, he no longer identified with either of these communities. Nonetheless, as the stories used in this lesson make clear, Dr. Harding continued to remain open to encounters with the divine in both formal and non-formal religious settings. Whether through nature, in moments of solitude and reflection at historic places, or even as a visitor in a formal religious community, he did not shy from exploring his experiences with feelings, presences, and insight which extended beyond the rational realm. Through the accounts of his religious encounters while on the trail of the Underground Railroad, Harding thus represents the strands of communal worship, individual nature-based epiphanies, personal connections with the presence of deceased ancestors, and an openness to the divine that have all been part of the African-American religious tradition.

3. **Religious stories.** Say, "Now let's look at what Vincent Harding experienced while travelling through various Underground Railroad sites with his family. I'm going to distribute anecdotes that he wrote down about his journey. In groups of 3 or 4, I want you to read the anecdote, and do four things." Write the following on a chalkboard, marker board or flip chart as you read them:

- a. Identify what was most significant to Harding about the experience in the anecdote;
- b. Describe what could be considered "religious" about the events described in the anecdote;
- c. On the back of the handout, write down one or two results of the events described in the anecdote in Harding's life; what did the experience offer him? How – if at all – did it change him?;
- d. On the back of the handout write down three sentences about what you think the relationship has been for many activists between religious experiences like those Harding described and efforts to resist racism and slavery.

Distribute copies of **Harding's Underground Railroad Religious Stories** handouts (found at the end of this lesson). All seven stories should be included in the distribution.

4. **Contemporary comparison.** Ask students to identify the resources they think Harding gained from the religious encounters identified in their anecdote. List in a column on a chalkboard, flip chart, or marker board.

Ask students to identify the resources for social change that people gain from spiritual experiences in contemporary settings. Possible answers include: courage to continue; sense of purpose; vision for changing the status quo; a community of resistance; strength for the struggle; ethical motivations. List in a column next to the Harding list just generated.

5. **Discuss.** Ask students:

- a. How do the differing lists compare? What stands out most immediately? Why?
- b. Was there anything special or unique about Harding's religious experiences? Have others had similar kinds of experiences in the past? In contemporary settings?
- c. How else did people involved either in the Underground Railroad itself or later efforts to challenge racism gain similar emotional, cultural, and community resources?
- d. What kinds of connections were evidenced between the stories Harding described and what one might experience in a more formal religious service or ritual? What are the similarities and differences between the two?
- e. Based on what you read of Harding's experiences, how do you think his orientation toward religious commitments and experiences changed between 1969 and 1983?

6. **Re-telling the story.** Have a student read to the entire class **Harding's Underground Railroad Religious Story #1 – The Harriet Tubman bird**. A long-time practice in many African-American religious communities, such as the Seventh-Day Adventist congregation in which Harding was raised, is to relate the experience of a religious encounter, such as the one described here, to other members of your religious community. In what ways is Harding's telling the story in a written form meant for national publication similar to or different from telling that story during a religious service? Does the meaning of that experience change if it is told in a non-formal religious setting instead of a formal one?

What does this kind of experience suggest to you about Harding's system of belief? What do you think it meant to him to be spiritual or religious at that moment in time and at that geographical location?

Extend the Lesson:

These exercises will take longer than 50 minutes.

- **Harriet Tubman bird story pictures.** Encourage artistically talented students to draw pictures representing Harding's Harriet Tubman bird story. Ask them to speak about their drawing to the class.
- **Skitload.** In lieu of the "Re-telling the story" exercise above, break students into small groups according to the **Harding's Underground Railroad Religious Stories** handout they received and assign them to write or extemporize a skit depicting the events described. They may extemporize dialogue, but their skit should include reference to at least three key details from their story.
- **Haikus.** Have students write haikus (5 syllable line, 7 syllable line, 5 syllable line) about what it must have felt like to experience what Harding did. Students should focus their poem on their emotions represented in the story. Do they think Harding felt sadness, wonder, awe, confusion, encouragement? After students have written and read their haikus out loud, talk together about the recurring theme of commitment in struggles for social and racial justice.
- **Actual account.** The article from which Harding's Underground Railroad Spiritual stories are excerpted was never published. Harding had been approached by an editor at the *National Geographic* about writing a long-form essay on the history of the Underground Railroad. Harding asked for and received funding from the magazine to support a research trip along the routes frequented by escapees. He also received a loan from the *National Geographic* to fund the extra costs involved in bringing his family with him on the pilgrimage. When he turned in a 47-page, highly personal – and very religiously focused – article draft that didn't even cover the entirety of his family's 5,000 mile journey, the editor said they couldn't use it. Nonetheless, the complete essay is a fascinating and highly engrossing read. Assign students to read the entire essay (available in transcribed versions as Word or PDF files or in the original manuscript form as a PDF file). Ask them to bring in advance of class three thoughtful paragraphs describing the important elements of Harding's religious pilgrimage described in the essay. Discuss student findings in class.

Underground Railroad Cards

Q From which southern states did most of the people helped by the Underground Railroad originate?	A the border states such as Kentucky, Virginia, and Maryland
Q What were hiding places referred to as?	A stations, safe houses, or depots
Q Which two religious communities were among the most active in their support of the Underground Railroad?	A Members of the African Methodist Episcopal Church (mostly Black members); Quakers/Society of Friends (mostly White members)
Q How many escapees did Rev. Jermain Loguen – himself a former fugitive – assist on their way to freedom?	A 1,500
Q How old was Underground Railroad “conductor” Levi Coffin – a Quaker from North Carolina – when he first began to help enslaved people escape?	A 15
Q Which well-known abolitionist founded the League of Gileadists, to assist fugitives on their way to Canada?	A John Brown

<i>Q</i> In what year did Araminta Ross first escape from enslavement in Maryland?	<i>A</i> 1849
<i>Q</i> Why did Harriet Tubman's husband refuse to leave enslavement when she came back to rescue him?	<i>A</i> He had remarried.
<i>Q</i> What did escapee Louis Napoleon's death certificate list as his occupation?	<i>A</i> Underground R.R. Agent
<i>Q</i> What were organized groups of northerners committed to protecting escapees called?	<i>A</i> Vigilance Committees

Harding Underground Railroad Religious Stories²

#1 – The Harriet Tubman bird

The next morning, long before the church services were scheduled to begin, Rosemarie and I returned to Bucktown. The sky was bright, clear and cloudless. Because we had forgotten the mosquito repellent, and they were swarming as usual, Rosemarie waited until I left the car. Walking down the dirt road past the unpainted remains of the deserted frame house, along the gully at the side of the cornfield, I moved toward the edge of the woods, feeling out the area to which Mrs. Travers had pointed, "where Harriet was born."

When the place seemed right, I stopped and faced the woods, absorbing as much of their silence as I could. I was three or four hundred yards away from the road, alone with the trees, the sun, the sky--and the mosquitos. Forgetting them, I remained silent for a long while, and then called out, "Harriet." I repeated her name into the silence, perhaps three more times. "Harriet." Suddenly a bird appeared, high above me at the top of the tall trees. Its body and head appeared to be brown; its wings were brown with white trailing feathers. It looked like a small eagle. As I remained silent, looking up, it circled directly over me with no movement of its wings, soaring, circling, at least six or seven times. I was unaware of time.

In ways that I do not begin to understand, I was convinced that communication was taking place. With my face up to the bird, I kneeled down and said, "Thank you, Harriet," as the circling continued. Soon I stood up, and shortly after that another bird of the same kind appeared even higher in the sky. At that moment, my Harriet bird flapped its wings, made its last turn, and flew off through the tops of the trees toward the southeast.

(It was not until several months later that I re-read one of the earliest biographical sketches of Harriet Tubman, written by a friend while "Moses" was still alive and active. There I saw, as if for the first time, "[Harriet] declares that before her escape from slavery, she used to dream of flying over fields and towns, and rivers and mountains, looking down upon them 'like a bird' ...")

I told Rosemarie what had happened, and she understood. Then leaving there, yet never leaving there, we drove over to the church where the service would begin in a few hours. Somehow I needed to imagine where the remains of the original church had been incorporated into the Social Hall structure. Wherever I thought they might be, I touched with my hands, my face, pressed with my body, searching for the way into that

² Excerpted from Vincent Harding, "We were a black family...", 1984," Emory University Rose Archives, Vincent Harding Papers, MSS 868, Series 12, Unprocessed Additions, 1968-2014, Box 99, Folder: [unmarked folder - unlabeled manuscript with Harding's personal reflections'].

life stream. Outside, in back of the two buildings, venturing into the thick and marshy based woods, I could not help but admire the strength, courage and determination of the men, women and children who had set out into those woods in the darkness, searching for their freedom.

Harding Underground Railroad Religious Stories³

#2 – The Harriet Tubman Memorial Service

When the Memorial Service began, just about everything came together. The little church was nearly filled to its capacity of some 110 persons. The majority of persons seemed to be over 35 and draw from the surrounding communities. For more than two hours, it was possible to see Harriet in her natural habitat, the local black religious community, which at its best believes in the creative interpretation of sacred and secular, of past, present and future, of religion and politics.

The opening Psalm provided a context: “the Lord is my light and my salvation, whom shall I fear ... though an host shall encamp against me, my heart shall not fear ...” Clearly this was not a song to be confined in a church building, or by a comfortable bedside. It was one that General Tubman could clearly appropriate and offer up in all the dark and threatening hours of her nights on the road, encouraging the fearful members of her flock to hold on. The prayer also gave thanks for such persons as Harriet “who paved the way for what we have today,” called upon the congregation to be helped to “realize that we, two, are making history.” Against the background of it all, rose the strains of sweet hour of prayer.” A solo is sung, “his eye is on the Sparrow,” reaching out to the experience of all the Harriets in search of freedom. One woman with strong voice and deep velvet-like skin reads a short essay on Harriet which is based on the affirmation: “I believe in order to do the work she had to do, she had to talk with God all the way.” All this is punctuated with loud, “Amen,” and “Yes, Lords,” as men and women affirm the tradition of Harriet, the mystic freedom fighter, setting the flight to freedom in the context of the black religious experience.

Nowhere was this more clearly and vividly demonstrated that day than in the songs of the men's gospel group, the Southern Sons of Cambridge, led by Thomas Travers-Addie's husband- with his rhythmic acoustical guitar. For just the night before the meeting, one of the group members had been inspired to create a new song, based on Martin King's famous use of the black spiritual, “Free At Last!” and in a powerful, sometimes shouting often deeply moving performance, that took on the quality of ritual drama, and cries of ecstasy from the gathered community, the Southern Sons bound King and Harriet and the black religious tradition together with all of us, and we knew we were joined, all of us. (There were two white persons in the congregation, a young photographer and a woman from the next county who, as a local historian, had written an important article on Tubman and Bucktown.)

³ Excerpted from Vincent Harding, “We were a black family..., 1984,” Emory University Rose Archives, Vincent Harding Papers, MSS 868, Series 12, Unprocessed Additions, 1968-2014, Box 99, Folder: [unmarked folder - unlabeled manuscript with Harding's personal reflections].

The sermon was preached by a native of Bucktown, the Rev. Edward Jackson, a retired A.M.E. Zion pastor, a member of the extended family gathered there. His basic theme was that "Harriet Tubman left a shining example for her people, one of the best gifts she could give us." Tying Tubman to King and to Jesus, honestly and emotionally involved in his subject matter, he drew deep levels of responses from the congregation. Then, just as he was closing, in a powerful surge of emotion, he turned to the young white photographer who was busy snapping pictures, surprised him by grasping his hand and saying, "I expect to meet you in the earth made new." (Perhaps it was left to Matt the photographer to decide whether that referred to the traditional Christian vision of a "new heaven and a new earth" beyond time, or if it was an invitation to work for the kind of new earth that Harriet and her tens of thousands of cohorts had been attempting to create in this time and space.)

After the collections and the announcements, in good black church tradition, we out of town visitors were asked to offer our greetings. It was in that setting that Peggy Driggs, native white southerner and resident of a nearby town, could claim both Harriet Tubman and Rosemarie Harding as long-lost sisters, and Rosemarie could remind us that Harriet Tubman, like all who worked in the freedom movement, had struggled to set free whites as well as blacks so when we stood to sing the familiar hymn of partying, "blessed be the tie that binds, I thought of the bonds of commitment, struggle and sacrifice for human liberation, and their capacity to draw women and men together across all barriers, including those of time and space. I thought of the flight to freedom, both past and present, thought of Harriet soaring above, and realized that we had begun our pilgrimage in the right place at the right time.

Harding Underground Railroad Religious Stories⁴

#3 - Listening in the Darkness

So, when the boat trip was over we went toward Delaware, crossing the state lines, picking up the river just outside of Seaford, off of route 20. We came to the Nanticoke near sunset, and I sensed the 19th century presence. Climbing down an embankment, moving with the water among the trees as the darkness deepened, I wrote in my journal:

Now into the woods near sunset, along the banks of the slow eddying outlet from the Nanticoke, I am among the trees, listening, listening. How precious are these trees, everywhere along our way. Now, listening with the trees, I am wondering how it was to be here at night, alone, together, wondering about hope and freedom, listening for dogs, listening for danger, listening for Harriet, listening for God. Swing low, sweet chariot. Still listening in the darkness, standing between two very tall and solidly slender sentinels of the silence, listening to their memories of men and women hiding in the darkness, listening to evening birds, listening to the first drops of wishful rain. Listening to the trees with the pores of my body, leaning against their strength, remembering how it was, how it was. Coming for to carry me home.

According to the 19th century accounts, most fugitives who made their way North from the Eastern Shore, eventually went through Philadelphia. (That was one of Tubman's regular routes, and she often received help in Delaware places like Camden, Dover, Blackbird and Wilmington. In the latter town, the key supporter and comrade was Thomas Farrett, the courageous Quaker, who openly risked his life and his property on behalf of human freedom. In Philadelphia, the city's strong black and Quaker populations gave leadership in the anti-slavery movement, and by the early 1850s they had established an effective vigilance committee. In Philadelphia, as elsewhere, these committees served to coordinate the various efforts on behalf of fugitives coming into the city, providing temporary housing, helping with employment, organizing protection against slave catchers, including acts of civil disobedience against U.S. marshals who were employed to see that fugitives were returned to slavery. William Still, a hard-working, committed Black abolitionist who had experienced many aspects of slavery, was the Executive Director and secretary of The Philadelphia Committee.

⁴ Excerpted from Vincent Harding, "We were a black family..., 1984," Emory University Rose Archives, Vincent Harding Papers, MSS 868, Series 12, Unprocessed Additions, 1968-2014, Box 99, Folder: [unmarked folder - unlabeled manuscript with Harding's personal reflections].

Harding Underground Railroad Religious Stories⁵

#4 – Climbing Jacob's Ladder

Then, in the midst of our discussion, Evelyn Still Broy simply, insistently said, "Well, if you want to see an underground thing, you ought to see the farm where we used to live." That almost casual remark led to a major discovery. The farm was less than ten miles away, located on Creek Road in a community called Lumberton; a small caravan of cars was soon on its way there.

Charles Broy, Evelyn's husband from the Cherokee Nation, went ahead to clear the visit with the owner. He and Evelyn had lived on the dairy farm for 34 years and had moved off only last year, but he was still working there. It was he who took us to the opening that led down into a carefully constructed, brick lined cavern-like space that had obviously served more than one purpose.

According to Broy, a gentle, unpretentious man, the ground level opening had been in a garage that had been recently torn down. In the cavern was an old well, with the shaft from a windmill reaching down. Along the wall nearest the opening where the decayed remnants of a wooden ladder that had been used for a long time. But as Broy and his wife pointed out, there was also a now boarded-up shaft that came out about halfway down the cavern / well area. As Broy had been told the story, this was a shoot that made it possible for a fugitive to slide quickly down into the structure, without having to open the top and climb down.

Several of us quickly climbed down the newer wooden ladder that is kept above ground at the side for that purpose. There was a relatively new well that goes down some 140 feet into the ground. But it was after we were down there that we discovered something else. There had been a false floor in this well house. There were still pieces of wood jutting out of the wall about four feet above the sandy bottom level. Broy said he had been told that this space was for hiding the fugitives, and there was a way for them to quickly move into that hiding area.

The house was built in 1836 and the cavern area seemed to have been built at the same time. The original owner had been a Quaker. According to the current owner, the story of the double uses of the well had been passed down since that 19th century ownership. Soon more than a dozen of us had come down the ladder to experience the hiding place. Sometimes we were quiet. Sometimes we were overwhelmed with excitement and

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conversation. Sometimes, going up and down the ladder, we sang "We are climbing Jacob's Ladder."

Finally, after all the movement and the picture-taking were over, I knew that it was necessary for me to stand down there alone. I asked Charles Broy to cover up the opening on top, and I sat and waited in the darkness. I had to touch the walls, sharing the darkness and its feeling with how many before me? I needed to take a piece of the wood that remained from the false basement floor. How many feet? How many women and men, how many children had lain down in darkness on that wood? I had to be there by myself for a while, in the silence, which was not fully silenced. For I heard the voices of the others above, some wondering out loud what I was doing. I listened to the voices of the others no longer hear, and yet still here. I listened to the rock music from the radio of the white teenagers who now occupied the old brick house that stands next to the cavern, listened as the Squires played "lonely is the night."

Then, partly in response to the supplications from above, I climbed Jacob's ladder, and the sun was very warm and very welcoming to me.

Later that day, my journal: "How fitting that Charles Broy should lead us to the hiding place. Full-blooded Cherokee he believes, part of that long, intertwined history of our people's. I'll fitting. Thank you, Charles Broy for opening the way to us. We remember other openings, other hiding places provided by your forebears. And now we are together. Thank you.

Harding Underground Railroad Religious Stories⁶

#5 – Escapees in the Attic

There was, however, at least one important remaining structure that needed to be explored. It was called the warrant house, and during the days of slavery the abolitionist family who lived there, right on the Erie Canal, had offered shelter and protection to many black travelers toward freedom. As far as we could tell, the house was no longer on the canal, and was not far from the motel where we were staying when Gellway came to get us. So, three of our party, accompanied by Gellway, sat out in the rain, led partly by instinct, partly by history. After traversing a rather typical modern suburban strip of auto dealers, fast food shops, furniture stores and quick serve groceries, we moved back into history and found the house, at 1956 West Henrietta.

None of us had any idea who might be living there and how they would receive four unannounced male visitors, including a photographer. Nevertheless, we decided to stop and see. What we found renewed our trust in history and instincts. The door was opened by a Black young woman, Allison Williams, a graduate student in science at the University of Rochester. After a brief explanation of who we were, she seemed not at all surprised, for there had been similar visitors before. The house was currently occupied by a group of graduate students and as the only Black person among them she had taken special interest in the history of the Warrant House. Indeed, she said she occasionally gave tours of the building to groups of school children and their teachers. We had once more come to the right place at the right time.

Several decades before, the house had been moved about two hundred yards away from its original place on the canal, but much of the old furniture had been retained, like a massive dining room table. Up on the second floor we found the most important element of the setting for us. Next to one of the small bedrooms was a closet. With clothes hanging in it there was no way to tell there was a door on the far side of the closet. We went through and found ourselves in the attic. One set of stairs led downstairs to a back exit that would have been very close to the canal. The other stairs led up to a cupola which provided an unobstructed view for miles around.

We went up to the cupola. Fugitives had hidden in the attic and in the cupola as well. It was about eight feet high at its center point and its floor space measured about six by twelve. My mind rushed back to the darkness of the cavern in New Jersey. From there to this cupola seemed a long way. Allison was talking, telling of how she sometimes

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came up here to practice her cello, "Often," she said, "I really feel that I'm not alone up here, and it doesn't bother me at all." As a matter of fact, she said, "I feel a real sense of community with the folks who have passed through." We felt it too.

While I kept thinking of a flight to freedom that carried frightened, desperate, courageous, hoping people from caverns to cupolas, Charles was asking Allison about her parents. They lived in Wooster, Ohio, she said. One of them taught at the University there, Charles kept probing, gently, thoughtfully. Finally, he asked, where did they go to college? Penn State, she said, and then Charles burst out with a combination laugh and shout. "I thought so! thought so! You look just like your mother!" Allison was the daughter of friends he had gone to school with almost three decades before. "Your father's name was Ted, and we called your mother 'Leapin Lena'--she as such a good dancer." No less amazed, Allison laughed about the new knowledge concerning her mother. Meanwhile, the tie of his story, of freedom seeking, of flight and redemption, the tie of all the lives and all the tears and all the laughter that undergirded our own, in caverns and cupolas, that tie, that Bucktown tie, that Lumberton tie, that Wooster tie, had bound us again.

Before we left Allison and the Warrant House we discovered that there were other connections as well. She told us that the house had been the center for significant draft resistance activity during the period of the Vietnam War, and that it had generally been related to a radical student tradition. But that was now fading, and partly for this reason, she was moving. Perhaps a new tradition needed to be created, a new set of ties needed to be forged. The daughter of Leapin Lena will have her turn.

Harding Underground Railroad Religious Stories⁷

#6 – Standing on the Other Side

The Michigan Avenue Church--as we might have expected--was not far from the Niagara River, the "crossing over" river, and we were soon there, passing through a community where Black people and Puerto Ricans sat on their stoops close to the river. For those of us who had travelled some 2000 miles since leaving Bucktown, Maryland, it was a powerful moment.

Monroe took us to the area where the ferry used to carry the freedom-seekers across the river, a swift, strong river. The area where we stood looking over to Canada was called Broderick Park, less than a quarter of a mile north of Peace Bridge. We had to use another smaller bridge to cross a canal to get here to the edge of the Niagara. The rain came and went as we looked at the other side.

I stepped back on to the Ferry Street bridge that crossed the canal. I looked. I cried. I wrote:

"Looking at the river, at the other side. Lord! The other side! Thank you! The other side! I am me not them, I know, and yet I know too that I am them. Standing and looking and dreaming of freedom, and wondering if we'll ever get across this swift, with its treacherous undercurrents. No way to swim. Did anyone try? No way now to fly. Did anyone try? Oh, Lord! Canada! Canada! Let me fly!

Not having yet discovered how to live the way of our dreams, we drove to Canada, over the Peace Bridge. On the other side, we celebrated, took pictures of each other, of the water, of the United States. And I wondered what was here that they had seen when they came over. Surely not the line up of signs behind me: Viking Day Cleaners, McMahaon's Fish Market, Live Bait, Denture Clinic, these were not the signs they sought or saw. But there was more, as ever. There was on the edge of that shore a large, tall elm tree, leaning over the water, appearing at least 150 years old. Now its roots were exposed near the water's edge. But this tree must have been there. This sign: tree from the past, tree of the future, tree of parents and children, tree of hope, tree of life. Tree of life at the water's edge. Freedom's tree. Home tree, free at last!

⁷ Excerpted from Vincent Harding, "We were a black family..., 1984," Emory University Rose Archives, Vincent Harding Papers, MSS 868, Series 12, Unprocessed Additions, 1968-2014, Box 99, Folder: [unmarked folder - unlabeled manuscript with Harding's personal reflections].