

By Kate Murray

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## Burying Ground part of a much larger quest

The unveiling of the African Burying Ground Memorial was a golden moment for Portsmouth. Credit goes to a lot of people for this remarkable endeavor. Everyone has something to be proud of, even if it is just living in a community that can accomplish such a landmark project. Certainly the timing of the unveiling could not have been better in the wake of the events in Baltimore, Ferguson, Cleveland and many other places. The whole nation needed some infusion of hope and good will.

The national attention was well deserved although I do think Emily Corwin, from New Hampshire Public Radio, got it a little wrong when she said that the project was "built with support from federal grants and community donations." That is true, but misleading. The federal monies amounted to far less than 2 percent of the total project. I think it matters that we recognize this was not a federal government project but a project of the people of Portsmouth. The memorial has been recognized nationally as a model not only for the sensitivity and respect it shows, but also as an example of how communities can come together and work together.



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But as with all things, there is a cautionary note to be heeded, something to keep our feet on the ground. Much of what I have heard and read sounded like this was an attempt to close the door on a nasty bit of our history. We admitted the wrongs we committed, but now, with the memorial, we seem to have the impression that we have done our duty, paid our homage and done our penance. To a certain extent, that is true but I hope the memorial will not be just the ending to a story but also the beginning of a new one. To me, it represents an invitation for us to develop a deeper awareness of the injustices that still plague the world.

Slavery is not a thing of the past. It exists today and its impact reaches all the way to Portsmouth. World-wide, right now, almost 36 million people are slaves. We condone it and are complicit in it whenever we benefit because someone, somewhere in the world, is forced to work without pay. Whether we are aware of it or not, we reap the benefits of slavery by way of cheaper clothes and food. The cultivation of coffee and sugar and the processing of cotton are just some of the commodities that rely on slave labor. There are companies who address these issues and insist that farms and factories pay their workers a fair wage. I hope our new memorial will help us to be mindful of that, and that we will find ourselves willing to support those companies that seek to free enslaved workers and lift them out of poverty.

One thing we should have learned by now from human history is that we are always committing some kind of atrocity, either unwittingly or with full awareness. It is hubris to think that we are not doing the same today. I am not simply thinking of the egregious acts of murderous groups such as ISIS. I am talking of wrongs of which we may not be so aware. We are only now recognizing how inhumanely we treat our farm animals, or the cruelty of holding sea mammals in captivity. I am not suggesting these things rise to the level of the cruelty of human slavery, but only that there is always work to be done as we strive to create a more just world. In another 200 years, another memorial may be created acknowledging injustices we unknowingly perpetrated today. This memorial provides us with the occasion to take a moment of personal discernment and examine how we work for justice. Justice is not a task that you check off your to do list. It is a life long endeavor. It is the work of humankind.

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