

# JEFFERSON EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY

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## TRUTH IN LOVE

### Freedom Fighters Learned the Lesson

By Parris J. Baker  
January 2024

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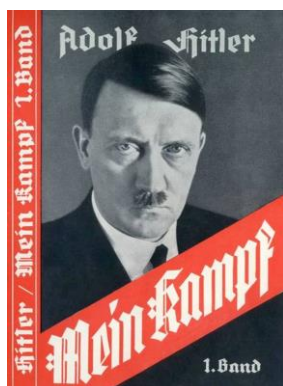


Maya Angelou may have said it best: “When someone shows you who they are, believe them the first time.” In the case of former President Donald J. Trump, Americans should follow Professor Angelou’s instruction. Ignoring it could prove extremely costly!

Bernard Lonergan, a Canadian Jesuit priest, philosopher, and theologian, referred to this type of ignorance as a deliberate flight from understanding<sup>[1]</sup> – purposeful and premeditated refusal or rejection of unsolicited acumens that, if adhered to, would require individuals or groups to change fundamental and treasured beliefs about themselves and others. The ensuing process of change, perceived primarily through a lens of cowardice, arrogance, or apathy by the individual or group members, would be detrimental, infuriating, and embarrassing. The refusal to attend, even passively, to rhetoric and behavior, because of one’s innate cowardice, arrogance, or apathy, can and generally does lead to individual and group violence.

At the onset of his 2016 presidential campaign, candidate Trump clearly revealed that his political ideology was informed by racism and bigotry. He launched his first disparaging diatribes against immigrants from Mexico, calling them rapists and implying they are drug users and criminals. Following a 2017 white supremacist rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, where Heather Heyer, a nonviolent protester, was killed, Mr. Trump refused to condemn the neo-Nazi participants, citing there were “very fine people” on both sides. In 2018, then-

President Trump referred to Haiti, El Salvador, and several African nations as (expletive)-hole countries.



It should not be surprising to Americans that the twice impeached, four-time indicted former president continues to use racially charged rhetoric. In a recent campaign speech in New Hampshire, Trump accused immigrants of “poisoning the blood of our country,” a phrase used by Adolf Hitler in his book, *Mein Kampf*.

Hitler wrote *Mein Kampf* (which translates in English to: My Struggle) while he was in prison in Landsberg am Lech, Germany. He had been found guilty of high treason for attempting to overthrow the German nation-state.

Hitler’s reference to blood addresses the belief regarding the fundamental principles and symbolic meanings of blood found in biology and genetics, religion and spirituality, culture and society mores, and body politics[2].

Though convicted of treason and sentenced to five years of imprisonment, Hitler was incarcerated less than nine months. Once out of prison, he continued to spread Nazi propaganda and promote the overthrow of the Germany nation. Hitler’s propaganda strategy worked, and he gained control of the Germany republic when he became Chancellor in 1933. Hitler’s overthrow of Germany eventually led to World War II, declared in 1939. The United States, reluctantly, entered the war in 1941 after the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor.

In the period between 1933 and 1941, Americans were aware of the persecutions, oppression, and murder of Jews ordered and executed by Hitler and Nazi Germany. However, consumed with numerous domestic crises such as the Great Depression, famine, and massive inflation, the United States prioritized the welfare and defense of the nation and elected not to become directly involved with the military and humanitarian conflicts. Regarding the attempted genocide and extermination of Jews and other non-Aryan groups, America remained a silent spectator.

Rabbi Joachim Prinz[3] reminded our nation of the dangers of remaining silent in the face of tyranny:

When I was the rabbi of the Jewish community in Berlin under the Hitler regime, I learned many things. The most important thing that I learned under those tragic circumstances is that bigotry and hatred are not the most urgent problems. The most urgent, the most disgraceful, the most shameful and the most tragic problem is silence. A great people which had created a great civilization had become a nation of silent onlookers.

They remained silent in the face of hate, in the face of brutality and in the face of mass murder. America must not become a nation of onlookers.

Silence in this context is defined by the following principles: (1) the absence of sound, speech, and articulation and (2) the absence of the symbiotic direct action. The Apostle James refers to this symbiosis as “faith without works.”<sup>[4]</sup> Silence is an implicit, nonverbal identification with tyranny and white supremacy that pretentiously shouts to the tyrant or white supremacist, “I agree with you!” or whispers in terrified vibrato, “I am afraid of you!”

Though our American ethos espouses and values freedom, I fear that most Americans live every day of their lives not in the luminous light of freedom, but in the darkening shadow of oppression. America declared its independence on July 4, 1776. Black people were proclaimed emancipated on January 1, 1863. However, when each decree was issued, both groups were declared self-governing but did not immediately experience freedom. Freedom was not experienced until after the Revolutionary and Civil Wars.

A declared independence and emancipation proclamation did not free most people in America, including and especially by members of the white majority group. Black people, Indigenous First Nation people, Hispanic and Latino people were not free. Women did not have the right to vote until 60 years later. People must be prepared for freedom, both the oppressor as well as the oppressed.

Freedom is an enormous responsibility; therefore, freedom also becomes a tremendous burden. Declarations of independence or emancipation are discrete events. Each declaration of independence or emancipation occurs on a specific date in which the legal relationship between the oppressor and the oppressed will be altered. However, if, as Lonergan articulates, there is a deliberate flight of understanding, a refusal to address and modify one’s perception of the other, it is possible for an individual, group, or nation to be declared independent or emancipated and still not be free. The deliberate flight of understanding is generally accompanied by violence.

Freedom requires both the oppressed and the oppressor to be liberated. The formerly oppressed people must first perceive themselves and their former oppressor differently; as equals to their former oppressors, as a full participant in a once oppressive environment, with the ability to self-determine. Second, the oppressors must also undergo a process of liberation. It is imperative that they see the formerly oppressed people differently and favorably. The perceptions of each group will be reflected in how each group refers to themselves and the other group.

Moreover, members in the oppressive group (by birth, racial, ethnic, or religious affiliation, or a covenant or pledge of allegiance), must perceive themselves differently. Representatives of this group are generally not the perpetrators of tyranny, subjugation, and exploitation, but they are privileged by it. It is extremely important how members of this group perceive their leaders who occupy positions of power – those with governmental, military, economic, and religious power.

Seldom, if ever, does this group perceive itself as an oppressed group. Yet, oppression silences the oppressed. Their refusal or fear to speak or their withdrawal from other modes of communication associated with direct articulations and actions against the oppressor are clear indicators that they are not free. The oppressed seek repeated validation from their oppressors. Like an abused animal who cowers in the presence of the abuser, the oppressed fear retribution, reprisal, and revenge; they make excuses for the inexcusable behaviors of the oppressor, and, as in the folktale, “The Emperors’ New Clothes,” the people closest to the emperor, who could have told him the truth, participated in the pretense, thus allowing the charade to continue.[5]

True freedom is different. Freedom occurs when the formerly oppressed, the oppressor, and the oppressors with power experience a cognitive shift in their perception of legal, religious, and political power. Independence or emancipation is the release of the oppressed from the oppressor. Freedom facilitates the liberation from the ecology of oppression. Power is shared. Free people are freedom fighters! Freedom fighters are as affrontive to oppression and oppressive people, laws, and symbols of tyranny as were the oppressors who initiated them. Those who experience true freedom will be troubled by injustice, concerned for the lives of others, and will not be satisfied until all are free. These individuals have no tolerance for hate, no excuses from racists, and have no idea how to be and remain silent.

Freedom fighters understand, “When someone shows you who they are, believe them the first time.”

[1] Bernard Lonergan, *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding*. New York: Philosophical Library (1958)

[2] United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. [Here](#)

[3] Rabbi Joachim Prinz. Excerpt of speech presented at the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, Washington, D. C. August 1963. [Here](#)

[4] James 2: 14-17: What good is it, dear brothers, and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not show it by your actions? Can that kind of faith save anyone? <sup>15</sup> Suppose you see a brother or sister who has no food or clothing, and you say, “Good-bye and have a good day; stay warm and eat well”—but then you do not give that person any food or clothing. What good does that do? So, you see, faith by itself is not enough. Unless it produces virtuous deeds, it is dead and useless. (New Living Translation)

[5] Hans Christian Andersen's *The Emperor's new clothes: An all-star retelling of the classic fairy tale*. (1998). New York: Harcourt Brace.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Parris J. Baker is an Associate Professor at Gannon University, where he is the Social Work, Mortuary Science and Gerontology Program Director. An alumnus of Gannon, Baker received his graduate degree from Case Western Reserve University, Jack, Joseph, & Morton Mandel School of Applied Social Sciences and his doctorate from the University of Pittsburgh, School of Social Work. Presently, Baker serves as the Senior Pastor of Believers International Worship Center, Inc. He is married and has five children.



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