

The Slow Awakening of the Human Conscience: The Case of John Brown

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Objective: What does an honest, moral man do when his country is engaged in sin and brutal wrongs and evil injustice?

Jesse Max Barber, founder of Niagara Movement (1905), president of Philadelphia Chapter of NAACP (1919), and founder of John Brown Memorial Association (1924), at placement of Statue at John Brown Farm, 1935:

“Here was a man who put humanity above race, right above law, and freedom above everything. He appealed from the sanctions of the law to the higher law of humanity. He was big enough and bold enough to defy a nation for the right. He was a traitor to his country in order to be true to his conscience and his God. Such men leap beyond the ramparts of common laws and common men and set the standards of the race on higher ground.

... Men will yet learn that in the shifting phantasmagoria of time nations and races rise and splutter and boast and perish but that God and justice and the human race live on.”

John Brown (1800-1859) and the Adirondacks

1849 - 1851 Brown family lived at rental farm in Adirondacks

1855 - 1863 Brown family lived at John Brown Farm

1896 Farm property donated to New York State

“Everything reminds one of Omnipotence, and where if you do get your crops cut off once in a while, you will feel your dependence.”

A Bad Quaker and a Bad Mason

1698 --- Robert Pyle, Quaker

- the emphasis on the doctrine of the Golden Rule
- the tacit acknowledgment that slavery represents a state of war
- the attempt to purify the world
- black uplift as a precursor to freedom
- the sin of both slavery and blacks

1800 --- John Brown born

Brown believed in two instruments, the Golden Rule and the *Declaration of Independence*, and declared that it was “better that a whole generation of men, women and children should pass away by a violent death than that a word of either should be violated.”



A statue of abolitionist John Brown at the John Brown Farm, a state historic site, in North Elba near Lake Placid, NY

1824 -- Brown as a Freemason, then Anti-Mason

In the context of Inherent Human Rights, Higher Law, Nature's Laws

1850 Seward Speech to US Senate: "We hold no arbitrary authority over anything, whether acquired lawfully or seized by usurpation. The Constitution regulates our stewardship; the Constitution devotes the domain to union, to justice, to defense, to welfare, and to liberty. But there is a higher law than the Constitution."

1852 Frederick Douglass, What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?

"You profess to believe, 'that, of one blood, God made all nations of men to dwell on the face of all the earth,' and hath commanded all men everywhere to love one another; yet you notoriously hate (and glory in your hatred) all men whose skins are not colored like your own."

Yet Douglass remained hopeful. He believed the *Declaration of Independence* embodied the great principles of freedom and justice, and "the Constitution is a glorious Liberty document," *if* it was interpreted as it ought to be interpreted. "The conscience of the nation must be roused."

1854 Rev. Joshua Young Sermon: "There is a Power superior to Congress, a Law higher than any human constitution. . . . God's government is higher than man's government, and the Divine law broader than human law."

Henry David Thoreau: "What is wanted is men, not of policy, but of probity—who recognize a higher law than the Constitution, or the decision of the majority."

"Is it not possible that an individual may be right and a government wrong? Are laws to be enforced simply because they are made? Or declared by any number of men to be good, if they are *not* good?"

Ralph Waldo Emerson: "Nothing is more absurd than...to complain of a party of men united in opposition to Slavery. . . . As well complain of gravity, or the ebb of the tide. Who makes the Abolitionist? The Slaveholder." "Whatever is false cannot be enacted. This law of nature is universal: gravity is only one of its languages; justice is another. Any attempt to violate it is punished, and recoils on the man. . . . The sky has not lost its azure because our eyes are sick. . . . Nature is not so helpless but it can rid itself of every crime."

1858 Declaration of Liberty: "We hold these truths to be Self Evident; . . . That Nature hath freely given to all Men, a full Supply of Air, Water, & Land; for their sustenance, & mutual happiness; That No Man has any right to deprive his fellow Man, of these Inherent rights." . . .

"To secure equal rights, privileges, & justice to all; Irrespective of Sex; or Nation; To Secure Fraternal Kindness to all Friends of Equal Moral privileges, to all who honestly abandon their Despotic oppressive rule. We hold this truth to be self evident; That it is the highest Privilege, & Plain Duty of Man; to strive in every reasonable way, to promote the Happiness, Mental, Moral, & Physical, elevation of his fellow Man. And that People, or Clanish Oppressors; who wickedly violate this sacred principle; oppressing their fellow Men, Will bring upon themselves that certain & fearful retribution, which is the Natural, and Necessary penalty of evil Doing. . . . Indeed; I tremble for my Country, when I reflect; that God is Just; And that his Justice; will not sleep forever &c. &c. Nature is mourning for its murdered, and Afflicted Children. Hung be the Heavens in Scarlet."

1859 Charles H. Langston: "I never thought that I should ever join in doing honor to or mourning for any American *white* man. . . . I find in Capt. John Brown, the hero of Harper's Ferry, a lover of mankind --- not of any particular class or color, but of all men. . . . He fully, really, practically and *actively* believed in the equality and brotherhood of man. . . . With him these were not 'rhetorical flourish' or 'glittering generality,' but 'simple, plain, practical, easy of application'. . . . He is the only American citizen who has lived fully up to the *Declaration of Independence*."