

Maine Voices: Emancipation the beginning of a process that continues 150 years later

Slavery is officially illegal, but we continue to mistreat people of color in the workplace.

By JEFFREY NEIL YOUNG

BRUNSWICK — New Year's Day marked the 150th anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation. The Proclamation and the ensuing passage of the 13th Amendment are the focus of the movie "Lincoln," featuring an incredible performance by Daniel Day-Lewis as our 16th president.

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In fact, despite the broad language of the Emancipation Proclamation declaring "all persons held as slaves ... are, and henceforward shall be free," the document was limited to the Southern states that had seceded from the Union. Moreover, it did not apply to those parts of the Confederacy already under the Union's control.

The movie illuminates the arm-twisting and horse-trading Lincoln had to engage in to get Congress to pass the landmark legislation, which banished slavery altogether.

What the movie doesn't show is how Lincoln's views on slavery and civil rights changed. Several years ago, a friend gave me a box set of tapes of the 1858 Lincoln-Douglass debates, reenacted in their entirety. An unusual gift, yes, but fascinating.

Comparison of Lincoln's statements in these famous debates to the Proclamation some five years later reveals how quickly Lincoln's views about slavery evolved over time.

It wasn't until almost 100 years later, with the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, that African-Americans truly were freed.

As Robert Caro recounts in "The Passage of Power," part four of his prize-winning biography of Lyndon Johnson, a president who previously largely had stood with the solid South in favoring segregation underwent a sea change in his thinking.

In Johnson's case, he remembered not only how Latinos he had taught had been discriminated against, but was moved when a black assistant – a college graduate – could not find a place to eat or sleep while driving Johnson's car back to Texas. Johnson told the assistant: "Well, that hurt me, that almost brought me to tears, and I realized how important public accommodations were. (I) determined that if ever I had a chance I was going to do something about it."

Transformative as the Emancipation Proclamation, the 13th Amendment and the Civil Rights Act were, we still have considerable work to do to achieve the dream of Martin Luther King, LBJ and Lincoln. Because while slavery is officially illegal, we continue to mistreat people of color.

According to the Oxford Dictionary, a slave is a person who is the legal property of another and is forced to obey them; a person who works very hard without proper remuneration or appreciation; or a person who is excessively dependent upon or controlled by something.

Some workers in Maine are still treated inhumanely: at times forced to live in crowded and inhumane conditions; denied the right to speak their own language in the workplace; and paid less than minimum wage and denied overtime to which they legally are entitled.

This is not the America of equal opportunity that Lincoln sought to ensure. We need to do better.

Often immigrants are afraid to speak up because employers have threatened them with termination – or even deportation.

Many employers also have policies requiring that employees speak only English. While this makes sense for workers who serve the public, workers who don't interact with customers, such as those working a night shift in a factory or stocking store shelves, should not be prohibited from speaking their native language.

While employers use this tactic ostensibly out of fear that the workers are talking about the company or their co-workers, such policies limit the ability of immigrant workers to truly understand the work and safety measures. There is simply no reason to prevent workers from using their native language.

Another example is the way some employers have responded to harassment of immigrants. A common solution employers use is to move the victim of the harassment to another shift or job.

While this may be the quickest and easiest solution, this is unfair to the person who hasn't done anything wrong. Uprooting a worker's schedule and forcing him to learn a new job is simply adding onto the pain inflicted on that worker.

Forced to work without proper pay. Completely dependent and living at the whim of someone else. Prevented from speaking the language of their choice. Required to deal with harassment or be moved to another shift. It's not slavery, but it's not freedom, either.

As we honor the 150th anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation, let's renew Lincoln's promise – to treat all of our fellow citizens, regardless of color, fairly, with dignity and respect, and in accord with the laws of the land.

– *Special to the Press Herald*