

Escape from the Sunlit Prison of the American Dream

How Slavery and Urban Sprawl's Feedback Loops
Undermine Quality of Life in America

(Part I Only)

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PART I The Difficulty Finding Home

1. History's Relevance to Finding Home

What is home? Four walls and a roof? Is it a neighborhood? A larger municipal entity? Is it a feeling? Familiarity? Safety? Freedom? For over two decades of my adult life, I searched in vain for home in America. For the past fifteen, I've lived in Halifax, Nova Scotia raising a family, and trying to make sense of my experiences. It took me years before I understood what my questions were, much less the answers. In the end, I came to understand that there was a way of living that I valued highly, one that does not exist in the United States for the broad middle class but exists elsewhere. My inability to find this way of living had much to do with my country's unique history, American exceptionalism if you will.

In the late 1940s, the federal government kicked suburban sprawl into high gear by providing loans to builders on the condition that the houses could not be sold to blacks. It wasn't some unwritten rule that kept them out, but rather the terms of the contract. In Levittown—America's first mass-produced suburb—standard paperwork contained a clause in capital letters that stated that a house could not “be used or occupied by any person other than members of the Caucasian race.” As whites like my mom and dad were emptying out of the cities for suburbia, impoverished blacks from the segregated South

were pouring in, participating in the North's version of racial apartheid that would set the stage for the large-scale urban riots that would erupt in the 1960s.

While black Americans from the South were getting fleeced in decaying Northern cities, my extended family and millions like them were being handed federally-backed mortgages and tax deductions to live out the American dream in suburban pods. Our quiet streets and large backyards were the be-all end-all of human existence, the envy of the rest of the world. The thing was, I didn't necessarily buy into the dream even as a kid. In fact, a few of us considered it something of a bad dream, even as we remained safely cocooned and separate from the large swaths of urban (i.e., black) America that was falling apart. We went to school and learned that Jefferson was a heroic founding father, Lincoln freed the slaves, and America was great. It was that simple.

By the time I was a pre-teen in the mid-1970s, I cared nothing about big backyards and felt alienated whenever I'd leave our subdivision to walk on the shoulder of a busy arterial road that led to the nearest strip mall a mile away. I instinctively disliked my monotonous environment and felt something was missing but, as a kid, I could not have told you what. Life in the pod could be soul-suckingly dull but I was exposed to little else aside from visits to grandparents living in imploding cities whose dynamics I could not possibly comprehend.

As soon as my friends and I were old enough to drive, we did, often engaging in that variant of Russian roulette known as drinking and driving. A Saturday night in 1980 often meant traveling long distances by car along back roads to and from a party with beer flowing through our veins, without a thought given to wearing a seatbelt. Given our behavior, I'm surprised more of us didn't die. The thing was, so little ever happened in

our own pod, we were always driving somewhere. “Getting out” was an ongoing theme, although we never uttered the word “suburb” since we had little frame of reference to any other way of living.

The culmination of my high school experience was a week we spent in Ocean City, Maryland. I can still clearly remember the morning my friends and I gassed up my 1965 Dodge Coronet on a warm, crystal-clear blue morning in June 1981 to make the drive down from Central Pennsylvania to cavort on the beach. We’d just graduated and the future was ours.

If I sit with myself for a minute, I can remember the music, the drive, the beer, the friendship, and the laughter. In my still-developing, adolescent brain I had two notions of relevance rattling around that have since been proven wrong. The first was that time lasts forever. The second is that my nation's history was just that, history with little relevance to my own life in the present day. These weren't conscious ideas per se. The first—notion of time—was a feeling or a perspective. The second—history's relevance—was more the case that I thought nothing about history's applicability to my own life.

In my twenties and into my mid-thirties, I was still only vaguely aware of the passage of time. That started to change around the age of thirty-seven. When I hit forty, I thought life was going by way quicker than I ever imagined it would, and fifteen years on, I held the view that history is much closer to me and far more relevant to my life than I ever could have imagined as a teenager.

2. Two Central Problems with Finding Home

On December 12, 1941, Roosevelt's Attorney General, Francis Biddle, issued an official memo to all his federal prosecuting attorneys referred to as, Justice Department Circular 3591.¹ The Japanese had bombed Pearl Harbor five days earlier and my father's aircraft carrier—the USS Yorktown—would leave four days later from Norfolk, VA to make its way through the Panama Canal en route to the Pacific.² The title of Circular 3591 is "Involuntary Servitude, Slavery, and Peonage." Its essential purpose was to direct justice department lawyers to eradicate slavery in the United States.

The U.S. government knew for decades that slavery was still being practiced inside the country, but then, consider the context. Little more than three decades earlier, President Woodrow Wilson had segregated the federal government, and just fifteen years before the outbreak of World War Two, more than 30,000 white-robed members of the Klu Klux Klan paraded down Pennsylvania Avenue to adoring crowds and breathless coverage in the *Washington Post* that included lines like:

“Phantom-like hosts of the Ku Klux Klan spread their white robes over the most historic thoroughfare yesterday in one of the greatest demonstrations this city has ever known,”

With the outbreak of war, Roosevelt didn't want to hand the Japanese and Germans a propaganda victory. How would it look for America to be fighting for freedom and against fascism abroad when at the same time there were clear cases of oppression at home?

I mentioned events involving my father (a combat pilot) in 1941 to make the point that these things didn't happen so long ago. They are a fundamental part of our history and our culture. This continuation of slavery is part of what drove six million blacks to northern cities. Those people brought with them tremendous amounts of trauma, living in a country where enslavement was a fact of life between 1619 and 1941. This 322-year period accounts for 80% of the time American culture has been forming and is what truly makes the United States unique among all OECD nations. This dynamic goes to the heart of the divide in American culture and is at the root of the polarization and dysfunction we see in American life, dynamics that shape what is possible in terms of how and where we live.

I grew up believing slavery was something that happened only to blacks and that it had little to do with me personally. I've since come to understand slavery in America as being a multifaceted disease that's affected all Americans in terms of how we feel about places, what we fear, and what we hate.

Whereas *slavery* has degraded the person, *sprawl* has degraded both the person and the place. The two are inexorably linked. Just as the United States is the only nation to have practiced slavery inside its own borders for more than three centuries, it is also the only

OECD nation in which mainstream middle-class families are not found living in cities. They're all living in auto-dependent suburbs, which is considered the only viable option.

In America, the term “urban” brings with it negative connotations, a place where city life is endured by the poor, enjoyed by the rich (in select cities), and experienced by middle-class professionals in a small percentage of cities up until the day the first kid reaches school age.

Yes, there are exceptions. Cities remain viable for the LGBTQ community and, more broadly, for those who never have kids. And yes, some middle-class parents buck the trend and stick it out but they are not the mainstream, and I say this based on firsthand experience raising children in an American city. The life I've led in two different Canadian cities for twenty years—with and without children—bears little resemblance to the years I lived in Philadelphia, Boston, Portland, OR, Baltimore, and Washington DC.

This brings me to the two central problems that made finding home in America so difficult, namely feedback loops put into play by slavery and suburban sprawl fundamentally undermines quality of life in the United States. In practice, this means that older, traditional cities in America are not considered options by middle-class families, and the vast majority of new places constructed are built around the automobile rather than the human being.

3. A Definition for Home and Why it Matters

Quality of life is often used subjectively, referring to an individual's health, comfort, and ability to enjoy life events. I'm using the term to describe something very tangible.

Quality of life's cornerstone is living life at the human scale, which is to say that I can open my front door and walk to what I need over the course of a week be it a grocery, school, restaurant, athletic field, movie theater, dentist, or pretty much anything and feel both physically and psychologically comfortable doing so. The buildings surrounding me elicit a positive response because they reflect my own human nature as well as the natural world around me. I can see the sky without needing to crane my neck because buildings range from two to six stories in height. Walking down the street, I can see or imagine lives being lived behind the windows and doors I pass by. The powers that be that shape such a place think in terms of design rather than density. Life lived at the human scale is about the quality of the walk, sustaining a physical activity that has been a fundamental part of the human experience for the past 2.5 million years.³

With this description in mind, the degree to which a city (or town) offers a high quality of life is the degree to which such a place is:

- 1) Built at the human scale, allowing its residents to comfortably walk or bike to everything needed or desired over the course of a week. (physical)
- 2) Able to provide convenient, direct access to nature (physical)
- 3) Governed by people who understand the human scale and make decisions that sustain and enhance it. (social)
- 4) Populated by a functional middle-class society whose well-being, on balance, makes it possible to live comfortably and safely in the human-scale environment. (social)

This definition for quality of life brings us back to my initial question. *What is home?* For me, home is a psychological state that's established when these four

conditions are in place, conditions that are anything but theoretical. For the better part of fifteen years of living in Halifax, Nova Scotia, my family and I have experienced a quality of life that does not exist in any American city as a mainstream, middle-class lifestyle. In saying this, I'm keenly aware that in the present day, I can find baby strollers in Brooklyn and a few other places, but a handful of upcoming or outright pricey urban neighborhoods scattered across America does not represent the mainstream middle class in a nation of over 350 million people.

Why does all this even matter?

Many Americans, especially those who are in their twenties or thirties today, are less enamored with the drive-everywhere culture that previous generations embraced so readily. Nielsen—considered the top market research firm in the world—surveyed millennials and found that 62 percent of them want to live in, “vibrant, creative energy cities offering a mix of housing, shopping, and offices right outside their doorstep.” That translates into 51 million people in just one generation alone: a sizable chunk of the population who want to live in places where they can comfortably and safely use their own two feet to get everywhere they need to go.

There are good reasons why many younger people are drawn to such a lifestyle. Plenty of research completed over the past two decades shows that relative to the auto-dependent suburbs we grew up in, walkable communities are better for us economically, environmentally, and socially, not to mention better for our health.

How we physically construct a community very much matters. Suburban sprawl is not the sole cause of the obesity epidemic, but eliminating walking from the average American's lifestyle didn't help. The intensifying climate crisis is not entirely due to vehicle emissions, but building auto-dependent places that maximize the use of oil is a significant part of the problem.

My own experience living outside the United States has taught me that how we treat one another also matters. The reason my wife and I have been able to raise our three children without fear and stress in “urban” Halifax is not that Canadians are somehow more righteous. They've got a different history in terms of how its citizens have been treated which has produced a different outcome regarding how people behave on a day-to-day basis and—importantly—how they feel about one another in the present day.

Had British colonists been able to grow cotton in Nova Scotia, the stars and stripes would be flying today from every flag pole around, and the kind of fear, hatred, and polarization that characterizes much of American life would exist here as well. The relative level of civility in my day-to-day life is more a function of geography rather than enlightened thinking. I can peek under the covers in Halifax and find most of the same social pathologies as the U.S. They're just on a different scale.

4. American Cities as Receptacles of Trauma

Early on, I got through college with the help of part-time work, grants, and a paid internship in high-tech. When I graduated, I had work experience and a job lined up writing software to test something called a virtual circuit switch. My supervisor was kind enough to let me defer my start date by two months which set me up to get a small bank loan, buy a backpack, and hop on a plane to Europe. The seeds of my dissatisfaction with quality of life in America were sown during those two months in Europe, during which time I fell in love with walking, becoming attached to the emotional world I experienced while immersed in inviting spaces designed around human beings rather than automobiles. I had no concrete way of expressing what I was feeling nor did I understand my emotions.

In my thirties, I wanted to know why suburban sprawl seemed to be the only game in town in America and what, if anything, might be done to change the way developers constructed space. These questions sent me back to graduate school to study urban design and planning in Canada. Experience as an urban planner in both the United States and Canada and years spent living in American cities fed a companion interest in understanding why things played out as they did in urban America. Why did both sides of my family abandon Philadelphia and Toledo in the 1950s and 1960s? Why did these places vibrate differently than European cities? What went wrong with the American city?

Thousands of pages have been written about the downfall of urban communities. Redlining, blockbusting, urban renewal, ill-conceived highways, the disappearance of manufacturing jobs, and poor governance are but a sample of legitimate, intertwined

reasons. Although we may or may not understand the significance of each of these, there's one dynamic Americans instinctually get, namely white flight—that collective, unspoken narrative in the minds of more than a few whites which includes thoughts not uttered out of fear of being labeled a racist. *Blacks moved in so we moved out. We could see the city going downhill. Something's wrong with the people who moved in. Look at how they live and how they die in such large numbers at the hands of their neighbors. No way I'm living around that. Besides, their kids' test scores are rock bottom. There's good reason why I live in the suburbs.*

Experience in post-1945 America has shown that time and again after a black family moved into a neighborhood, the place remained integrated for only as long as it took the last white family to move out. In the present day, liberals focus on racism, and conservatives silently—or perhaps not so silently these days—seethe over personal behavior they find objectionable. The two camps shout past each other.

In some respects, I'm not so different from the conservative who looks askance at a lot of behavior in urban America. My wife Christine and I spent three and a half years raising our two young boys on 11th Street in Washington DC and for a time, the city placed our house under police protection. For three nights, twenty-foot-tall, gas-powered crime scene lights lit up the front of our townhouse like a movie set. A police van and squad car sat beneath our bedroom window.

The DC government cared nothing for our circumstances per se, but local drug dealers had a problem with me and city officials did not want to see a *Washington Post* article with a storyline that read, “White, married father of two boys shot dead in Columbia Heights.” The visible police presence sent an unambiguous message: “If you kill this man, we will complicate your lives.” At the time, people got killed all the time in Washington D.C., but I was different; my white privilege was working overtime.

Years spent in urban America taught me about racial animosity, contempt, and limits in terms of tolerance and compassion. There's a whole set of candid discussions we're unlikely to ever have at a national level concerning personal behavior and diversity due to political correctness on one hand and blind hatred on the other. In the absence of such a dialog, quality of life suffers.

There is, however, an even more important discussion regarding our past that's required for any meaningful dialog about behavior and diversity to get off the ground. When living in American cities and confronted with dysfunctional behavior that rubbed my value system the wrong way, I'd often ask, "*What's the matter with them?*" More recently, I've come to believe there's a more productive question for me to be asking, namely, "*What happened to them?*" The first question is rooted in judgment. The second need not preclude judgment but leads to a fair bit more understanding.

Considering the facts—and mindful of the omissions and mythmaking in my high school American history textbook—black Americans were exposed to tremendous levels of intergenerational trauma. Of the six million black Americans who migrated to Northern cities during the Great Migration (1915 through 1970), many were able to move beyond their trauma, thrive and lead productive lives. Others, however, could not.

Growing up, I had a front-row seat watching how trauma played out in my parents' lives. During World War II, my father was wounded and his dive bomber severely damaged in an attack on the Japanese fleet during the Battle of the Coral Sea. Skill and luck saved his life. After returning from the Pacific as a hero celebrated in the Toledo press, he began to drink and it marred a promising life. As a child, my mother was abused by her father in a way that too many women would find hauntingly familiar. She spent her short life chafing against daemons, denying her blue-collar roots, and died at age 46. When I consider how these two people were unable to overcome their trauma, why would I presume every black human being in America magically got over the devastating impact of heinous forms of abuse, persistent degradation, and terror at the hands of whites who frequently engaged in forms of torture that closely mirrors Islamic State atrocities? In a very real sense, the Great Migration turned American cities into receptacles of trauma. Just as with my white, relatively privileged parents, that trauma produced dysfunction that reverberates in the present day and degrades quality of life.

5. Barriers to Building at The Human Scale

When I left high tech to study urban planning in Canada in my mid-thirties, Christine and I didn't yet have children and I was indifferent to the difficulties raising a family in an American city and ignorant of black American trauma and its relationship to my own quality of life. Going into graduate school, I was focused on understanding the mechanics of how urban sprawl spread. I wanted to know what barriers stood in the way of creating the kind of walkable, human-scaled environments I valued, the kinds of places I'd experienced years earlier in Europe. Once I understood what the barriers were, I could then determine what, if anything, municipalities were doing to overcome them. If I could identify successful approaches, then they could presumably be replicated elsewhere. The fact my questions were ultimately answered by my thesis research and not as part of the core curriculum says something about urban planning education.

Ultimately, I identified three categories of barriers standing between a developer and the fruition of his human-scaled, mix-use project.ⁱ *Regulatory barriers* prevent him from obtaining plan approval. *Financial barriers* prevent him from getting the project competitively financed. Lastly, *citizen opposition to increased density* contributes to a political atmosphere that reinforces the status quo from a regulatory perspective.

Of the many suburban municipalities across the US that indicated they were attempting to stop building sprawl and start building mixed-use, human-scale development only one, Gaithersburg, Maryland, was getting consistent results on the ground. They had successfully overcome the barriers using a very specific five-day public

ⁱ In my experience, developers have always been men.

process called a design charrette that had been developed by urban designers who I considered, and still consider, visionaries. Having found my golden key, I wanted to put it to use elsewhere.

Out of graduate school, I was hired by Baltimore County, who was ostensibly interested in my research. For me, it seemed an ideal fit because, if widespread change were to come to America regarding a shift in development patterns, the epicenter of that shift would be in municipal government since it's where development plans get approved or rejected.

My objective was to make the design charrette an integral part of the municipality's development regulations, which was a tall order. Gaithersburg did it and I wanted to show that this accomplishment could be replicated elsewhere. Unfortunately, circumstances did not unfold as I'd hoped. After being given the opportunity to leverage my master's thesis and craft a redevelopment policy focusing on distressed "first-ring" suburbs surrounding Baltimore, MD, I witnessed how organizational dysfunction and the political process can co-opt a good idea, dilute it, and ultimately render it impotent. Well-intentioned people who write optimistically about "suburbia running its course" and the "end of sprawl being in sight" have likely spent little time in a municipal planning and development office.

Over the past three decades, mixed-use, human-scale projects have been built, and some talented urban designers have worked with developers who share the vision of a walkable America. This said it's helpful to put the overall impact of these projects into perspective.

California is home to forty million people. And how many new human-scale projects do you think have been built in California over the past thirty years? Depending on your source, the number ranges from between six and thirteen. In other words, not many. I've spent time in two of these mixed-use projects in the San Francisco Bay area. The first, Santana Row, is an upscale outdoor mall with high-end restaurants and luxury condominium units. It's well-designed, but at the end of the day, it's an isolated shopping mall surrounded by suburban sprawl on all sides. The second spot called Laguna West was conceived of as a large mixed-use project, but it is 100% suburban sprawl in execution.

Despite the accomplishments of a handful of designers and developers over the past thirty years, most of what gets built today in California and elsewhere is largely similar to what I grew up in the 1970s. But when I say “the end of suburbia is nowhere in sight,” don’t take my word for it. Open up a web browser, go to realtor.com, and search for new homes in Austin, Cincinnati, Baltimore County, or any place of your choosing. Your search results are going to consist largely of single-family homes with an attached, two-car garage. Repeat the exercise three decades from now and the results will likely be much the same.

My experience in planning offices taught me the limits of pursuing transformative change. It’s exceedingly rare to find what’s required on the part of local politicians, developers, and municipal planners to stop building sprawl and start building at the human scale. Vision, knowledge, and leadership are needed from each group for anything to change, and the right mixture of these qualities doesn’t exist outside a handful of jurisdictions where education and income levels are higher than average. The net effect is that quality of life’s cornerstone is missing outside traditional cities and most middle-class families are faced with a choice between auto-dependent isolation and urban dysfunction.

6. Greater Levels of Freedom Outside America

Recently, our twelve-year-old daughter mentioned that she'd walked to a grocery store in Halifax with a friend to pick up a few things for her friend's parents. At the time, I thought it unremarkable as the store sits eight blocks from our house, and she and I had walked there in the past. The thing is, there's not a single American city I've lived in, visited, or otherwise know of where white, middle-class tween girls are walking around in an urban environment alone. The age and degree to which middle-class children in Halifax are free to navigate the city depend upon parenting style, personality, and gender. But at some point, kids do negotiate the place on their terms.

In America, much is made of freedom yet our children and their peers in Halifax operate with a level of autonomy and independence that could not be easily replicated south of the 49th parallel.⁴ Suburban sprawl requires children to spend inordinate amounts of time in CO₂-emitting vehicles, sitting in traffic, walled off from others traveling through fractured landscapes that are impractical and unpleasant to travel through on foot. Simultaneously, dynamics put in play by slavery and white supremacy have contributed to the production of violence, poverty, hatred, fear, and anxiety in the lives of children and adults alike that make navigating most traditional urban environments a non-starter for the middle class. The proliferation of concealed carry (gun) laws across the country suggest fear resides in suburbia as well.

In contrast, our children live in an urban environment where not only do young people experience freedom of mobility, but also freedom from fear. As for their parents,

I've never known or read of a single person who's expressed the need to carry a concealed weapon to protect themselves from fellow Canadians.

Slavery's feedback loops in America shape a culture that, at first glance, grows increasingly authoritative and antithetical to freedom in a broader sense. The historical record, however, reveals that today's dysfunction is but an extension of the past. Thomas Jefferson, for example, lived a lavish lifestyle, was frequently in debt, and owned over six-hundred human beings during his lifetime. He bought and sold them as if they were stocks to pay his many bills. Jefferson's regrets about slavery never got in the way of profit, and indeed he wrote to George Washington in 1798 pointing out that he was making four percent per year off the birth of black children without so much as lifting a finger. Separated in time by two hundred years, Donald Trump and Jefferson shared a kinship in that both individuals were guided by a national creed implying anything is acceptable in America regardless of the cost to others, so long as it generates sufficient sums of cash for the right person. This is not an expression of cynicism, but rather a clarification regarding precisely what the historical record reveals.

As the decedent of a seventeenth-century Puritan named John Cass, I understand the whole freedom narrative. As a child, I was taught to consider people like my earliest relatives—who settled in Rockingham, New Hampshire in 1640—to be proof that the bedrock of American society is freedom. In the context of this reassuring narrative, I was given my middle name, Cass, in honor of my first cousin (four generations removed) Senator Lewis Cass who, as the Democratic Party's nominee for President of the United States, narrowly lost the election of 1848.⁵ His relevance to my story is that he was the first to articulate what amounted to be a racial doctrine that was designed to accommodate enslaving black Americans as the nation grew westward.⁶ Implementation of the "Cass Doctrine," in the form of national legislation, contributed directly to the outbreak of the Civil War.

I need look no further than my birth certificate to find an example of how, as Americans, we're influenced by inaccurate narratives regarding our past. My parents named me after a family member who was understood to be a hero when in fact, he was something quite different.⁷ Lewis's most consequential contribution to American culture

was his central role in the degradation and exploitation of others. As Secretary of War under President Andrew Jackson (Trump's favorite president),⁸ Lewis Cass was responsible for removing all native peoples from lands east of the Mississippi River.⁹ As a leader of the Democratic Party, he successfully advanced constitutional arguments claiming white men could bring black men, women, and children into territories as property and keep them enslaved up until the point where yet-to-be-drafted state constitutions said otherwise.¹⁰

Deep-seated social problems that negatively affect freedom originate with powerful men like Lewis Cass and Thomas Jefferson—the kind of men who make decisions that irreparably harm human well-being in the name of individual liberties for the privileged, or otherwise powerful.¹¹ Power imbalances of this sort undermine freedom and quality of life by producing lasting, morphing dysfunction. These same power imbalances feed an American narrative regarding freedom that is not aligned with reality.

My claim that, as Canadians, our children enjoy a level of freedom that does not exist in the United States is rooted in more than perception. Various non-governmental organizations and think tanks measure levels of freedom within countries using metrics relevant to political rights, civil liberties, and economic opportunity. Each organization's mission and ideological orientation influence the selection and relative importance of the metrics they analyze. These organizations all compile a freedom index that ranks countries based on the scores produced by their analysis. Importantly, in none of these indices do we find the United States at the top of any list.

The oldest and arguably most prominent organization to produce a freedom ranking is Freedom House. Established in 1941 with the support of President Roosevelt, Freedom House's initial *raison d'être* was to counter isolationist sentiment at home by acknowledging the specter of fascism abroad. Bipartisan in nature, Freedom House's metrics are derived from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Their most recent report ranks the United States 53rd out of 210 countries, placing it in the company of Croatia and Mongolia. Canada, by comparison, is ranked 4th. More broadly, it doesn't matter if the organization doing the freedom analysis is the business-oriented Economist Intelligence Unit, a libertarian-oriented Cato Institute, or the Fraser Institute; the bottom

line is that the United States is not considered to be the freest nation on earth by any measure.

Countries consistently considered to be the freest in the world include those in Western Europe as well as Australia, New Zealand, and Canada. What all these capitalist nations share in common is a commitment to social democratic policies widely rejected in the United States— policies like universal health care, subsidized child care, and the higher marginal tax rates of the sort my income is subject to in Canada. Widespread support for these kinds of policies can be found in a homogenous country like Finland, a moderately diverse country like New Zealand, and a highly diverse country like Canada.

In the United States, any public figure who advocates for policies widely supported elsewhere is accused of wanting to turn the country into the boogeyman known as Venezuela—an authoritarian country that appears near the bottom of all freedom indexes. The social democratic policies conservative critics denounce are characteristics of the freest nations on earth. It's also worth noting that Venezuela and the United States share important traits in common in that both are plagued by high levels of income inequality and violence in a way that the freest nations on earth are not.

Having lived for years in both the United States and Canada I feel—in a visceral sense—somewhat freer in the latter. I value waking up each day knowing the clerk at my drugstore has the same healthcare I have. It doesn't upset me that some middle-class friends of ours receive monthly child benefit payments that my family's not eligible for. It seems reasonable to me that university tuition assistance is available to some kids, but not our own. I feel relieved living in a country where people of lesser means don't vote against their economic self-interest. And I value being part of a society in which I'm not considered left-wing because I don't begrudge paying more in taxes than I would in America to help make this stuff happen. These kinds of policies contribute directly to freedom by making better neighbors. If you want to live in a walkable, human-scale environment, the material and mental well-being of the people in your country matters a great deal.

7. The Sunlit Prison's Endgame

The way in which slavery's feedback loops play out in unacknowledged ways in American life, coupled with the fact that local politicians, planners, and developers habitually blanket the landscape with suburban sprawl produced within me a deep sense of confusion and dissatisfaction. It was the dissatisfaction that fueled the journey.

It wasn't any one thing but rather a whole lot of things over twenty years: the murder of a friend and the general sense of despair in my mother's blue-collar Philadelphia; the leafy suburban isolation and loneliness in swanky northern New Jersey; the car-choked madness of Tysons Corner; the work-first culture, shifting demographics, and gang activity in Arlington; the discourteous element and attendant alienation in Boston; the abandoned ruins that characterized my father's city of Toledo; the false promise of statewide land use planning and environmental destruction in Oregon; the ribbon of affluence that bisected Baltimore and the abyss that surrounded it; and finally, the racial conflict and violence that permeated our lives in Washington DC.

I knew life outside the U.S.A. was different enough. I'd not forgotten what I'd experienced in Europe living on borrowed cash. I'd lived that emotional life again with Christine for over three years in Vancouver, British Columbia, and Halifax. These experiences and others like them over the years fueled a desire to not let go of something fundamental that I wanted for myself—namely, to live life on my feet in the absence of fear. A seemingly trivial ask, but, in hindsight, one difficult to grant in a nation unaware of what's been lost through its attachment to the cul-de-sac and disassociation from what 322 years of slavery has cost us all.

In 1949, James Baldwin wrote of being “trapped and immobilized in the sunlit prison of the American dream.” It’s a prison that’s as relevant to the life of a married, middle-aged father of three as it was to a brilliant, twenty-four-year-old black writer living in Harlem over seventy years ago. For me, the sunlit prison is the product of slavery and sprawl’s feedback loops: a culture marred by fear, violence, vacuous materialism, poor health, intense hero-worship, the devaluing of education, environmental destruction, and a sense of disconnectedness from each other and the natural world around us. It’s a culture that feeds on itself and grows stronger with time. It’s not a challenging exercise to consider the conditions listed and match them up with observed life in a nation where most public school children are eligible for subsidized lunches, and seven out of ten will struggle with the burden of being obese or overweight once they enter adulthood. The gap between the dream sold and the experience delivered is significant.

My search for home was about finding a way out of this prison. I didn’t escape when I crossed the Canadian border. What I’d seen and experienced stuck with me and I only began to feel free once I could make sense of it all, which took time. In the end, two principal lessons regarding the prison’s endgame stood out.

The first is that the production of bad human habitat will remain the norm in America, endlessly pursuing development that fractures us socially, harms our health, and is disastrous for us environmentally. Constructing communities around the automobile rather than the human being will go down in history as one of the biggest tragedies mankind’s ever produced. The quality of life I’ve experienced in Halifax will remain elusive for most because local politicians, developers, and the planners who serve as their lackeys have little knowledge of and less interest in engaging in the work of overcoming the barriers to human-scale development.

The second lesson is that the United States is politically polarized today just as it was in 1854 and, as a result, the nation is unable to address the biggest issues of our time, with a profound impact on quality of life. In 1854, the principal issue was accommodating people’s desire to enslave human beings as the nation grew westward. Today, it’s trauma-saturated cities, climate change, healthcare, income inequality, a woman’s right to choose when to have a child, and racial justice. If you don’t acknowledge a pathological past and deal with it, you stay stuck in it, unable to even start

to heal. This holds regardless of whether you're talking about an individual or a nation. And that's precisely America's predicament—two fundamentally different worldviews pitted against each other to a degree that does not exist in Canada or any other western country I've spent time in outside the United States.

Endnotes

¹ See Douglas Blackmon. *Slavery by Another Name: The Re-enslavement of Black Americans from the Civil War to World War II*. (New York: Anchor Books, 2009)

² Yorktown CV5. Naval History and Heritage Command
<https://www.history.navy.mil/research/histories/ship-histories/danfs/y/yorktown-iii.html>

³ The American urban designer Jeff Speck has written eloquently about the importance of the quality of the walk. Speck is one of the clearest communicators regarding the relevance and importance of the intersection of urban design and emotional well being.

⁴ A majority of Canadians, however, live in the same auto-dependent environments as Americans. It's just that cities have remained viable options for families. This said, middle class Canadians are being priced out of walkable environments due to supply and demand. (i.e., Canadian planners, almost exclusively pursue sprawl development.)

⁵ My relationship to Lewis Cass is easy enough to understand. My grandmother Nellie Cass had a grandfather named Joseph Garrish Cass. Lewis was his first cousin.

⁶ Lewis Cass first articulated his policy of "Popular Sovereignty" when unveiling his presidential platform in the fall of 1857 in correspondence known as the Nicholson letter. His role in defining American racial policy well known. See for example https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Bleeding_Kansas

⁷ In addition to the man who was almost president, Cass was a young brigadier general fighting the British in the War of 1812, Governor of the Michigan Territory, Andrew Jackson's Secretary of War, Ambassador to France, US Senator, Secretary of State in the years leading up to civil war. As Secretary of War he implemented the Indian Removal Act of 1830.

⁸ Joffe, Julia. What Donald Trump's Flimsy Handle on American History Means. *GQ Magazine*. 23-Oct. 2019. (10-Nov. 2019) <<https://www.gq.com/story/donald-trump-george-washington-bad-history>>

⁹ Louis Jacobson. "What's up with Donald Trump and Andrew Jackson?" *Politifact*. 2 2017.
<https://www.politifact.com/article/2017/may/02/whats-up-with-donald-trump-andrew-jackson/>

¹⁰ Many have written about the Cass Doctrine. See for example, Robert Russel. "Constitutional Doctrines with Regard to Slavery in Territories." *The Journal of Southern History*, Nov., 1966, Vol. 32, No. 4 (Nov., 1966), pp.

466-486 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2204926>

¹¹ Thomas Jefferson provided Lewis Cass with his first public appointment as a U.S. marshal in 1807.