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Not that long ago, I received an invitation to spend a few days at the historic home of James Madison. James Madison, of course, was the fourth president of the United States, the father of the Constitution, the architect of the Bill of Rights. And as a historian, I was really excited to go to this historic site, because I understand and appreciate the power of place.

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Now, Madison called his estate Montpelier. And Montpelier is absolutely beautiful. It's several thousand acres of rolling hills, farmland and forest, with absolutely breathtaking views of the Blue Ridge Mountains. But it's a haunting beauty, because Montpelier was also a slave labor camp.

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You see, James Madison enslaved more than 100 people over the course of his lifetime. And he never freed a single soul, not even upon his death. The centerpiece of Montpelier is Madison's mansion. Now this is where James Madison grew up, this is where he returned to after his presidency, this is where he eventually died. And the centerpiece of Madison's mansion is his library. This room on the second floor, where Madison conceived and conceptualized the Bill of Rights.

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When I visited for the first time, the director of education, Christian Cotz -- cool white dude --

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(Laughter)

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took me almost immediately to the library. And it was amazing, being able to stand in this place where such an important moment in American history happened.

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But then after a little while there, Christian actually took me downstairs to the cellars of the mansion. Now, in the cellars of the mansion, that's where the enslaved African Americans who

managed the house spent most of their time. It's also where they were installing a new exhibition on slavery in America. And while we were there, Christian instructed me to do something I thought was a little bit strange. He told me to take my hand and place it on the brick walls of the cellar and to slide it along, until I felt these impressions or ridges in the face of the brick.

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Now look, I was going to be staying on-site on this former slave plantation for a couple of days, so I wasn't trying to upset any white people.

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(Laughter)

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Because when this was over, I wanted to make sure that I could get out.

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(Laughter)

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But as I'm actually sliding my hand along the cellar wall, I couldn't help but think about my daughters, and my youngest one in particular, who was only about two or three years old at the time, because every time she hopped out of our car, she would take her hand and slide it along the outside, which is absolutely disgusting. And then -- and then, if I couldn't get to her in time, she would take her fingers and pop them in her mouth, which would drive me absolutely crazy. So this is what I'm thinking about while I'm supposed to be a historian.

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(Laughter)

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But then, I actually do feel these impressions in the brick. I feel these ridges in the brick. And it takes a second to realize what they are. What they are are tiny hand prints. Because all of the

bricks at James Madison's estate were made by the children that he enslaved. And that's when it hit me that the library in which James Madison conceives and conceptualizes the Bill of Rights rests on a foundation of bricks made by the children that he enslaved. And this is hard history.

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It's hard history, because it's difficult to imagine the kind of inhumanity that leads one to enslave children to make bricks for your comfort and convenience. It's hard history, because it's hard to talk about the violence of slavery, the beatings, the whippings, the kidnappings, the forced family separations. It's hard history, because it's hard to teach white supremacy, which is the ideology that justified slavery. And so rather than confront hard history, we tend to avoid it.

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Now, sometimes that means just making stuff up. I can't tell you how many times I've heard people say that "states' rights" was the primary cause of the Civil War. That would actually come as a surprise to the people who fought in the Civil War.

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(Laughter)

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Sometimes, we try to rationalize hard history. When people visit Montpelier -- and by "people," in this instance, I mean white people -- when they visit Montpelier and learn about Madison enslaving people, they often ask, "But wasn't he a good master?" A "good master?" There is no such thing as a good master. There is only worse and worser.

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And sometimes, we just pretend the past didn't happen. I can't tell you how many times I've heard people say, "It's hard to imagine slavery existing outside of the plantation South." No, it ain't. Slavery existed in every American colony, slavery existed in my home state of New York for 50 years after the American Revolution.

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So why do we do this? Why do we avoid confronting hard history? Literary performer and educator Regie Gibson had the truth of it when he said that our problem as Americans is we actually hate history. What we love is nostalgia. Nostalgia. We love stories about the past that make us feel comfortable about the present. But we can't keep doing this.

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George Santayana, the Spanish writer and philosopher, said that those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it. Now as a historian, I spend a lot of time thinking about this very statement, and in a sense, it applies to us in America. But in a way, it doesn't. Because, inherent in this statement, is the notion that at some point, we stopped doing the things that have created inequality in the first place. And a harsh reality is, we haven't.

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Consider the racial wealth gap. Wealth is generated by accumulating resources in one generation and transferring them to subsequent generations. Median white household wealth is 147,000 dollars. Median Black household wealth is four thousand dollars. How do you explain this growing gap? Hard history.

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My great-great-grandfather was born enslaved in Jasper County, Georgia, in the 1850s. While enslaved, he was never allowed to accumulate anything, and he was emancipated with nothing. He was never compensated for the bricks that he made. My great-grandfather was also born in Jasper County, Georgia, in the 1870s, and he actually managed to accumulate a fair bit of land. But then, in nineteen-teens, Jim Crow took that land from him. And then Jim Crow took his life.

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My grandfather, Leonard Jeffries Senior, was born in Georgia, but there was nothing left for him there, so he actually grew up in Newark, New Jersey. And he spent most of his life working as a custodian. Job discrimination, segregated education and redlining kept him from ever breaking into the middle class. And so when he passed away in the early 1990s, he left to his two sons nothing more than a life-insurance policy that was barely enough to cover his funeral expenses.

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Now my parents, both social workers, they actually managed to purchase a home in the Crown Heights section of Brooklyn, New York, in 1980, for 55,000 dollars. Now Crown Heights, at the time, was an all-Black neighborhood, and it was kind of rough. My brother and I often went to sleep, by the mid-1980s, hearing gunshots. But my parents protected us, and my parents also held onto that home. For 40 years. And they're still there.

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But something quintessentially American happened about 20 years ago. About 20 years ago, they went to sleep one night in an all-Black neighborhood, and they woke up the next morning in an all-white neighborhood.

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(Laughter)

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And as a result of gentrification, not only did all their neighbors mysteriously disappear, but the value of their home skyrocketed. So that home that they purchased for 55,000 dollars -- at 29 percent interest, by the way -- that home is now worth 30 times what they paid it for. Thirty times. Do the math with me. That's 55,000 times 30, carry the zeros -- That's a lot of money.

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(Laughter)

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So that means, as their single and sole asset, when the time comes for them to pass that asset on to my brother and I, that will be the first time in my family's history, more than 150 years after the end of slavery, that there will be a meaningful transfer of wealth in my family. And it's not because family members haven't saved, haven't worked hard, haven't valued education. It's because of hard history.

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So when I think about the past, my concern about not remembering it is not that we will repeat it if we don't remember it. My concern, my fear is that if we don't remember the past, we will continue it. We will continue to do the things that created inequality and injustice in the first place. So what we must do is we must disrupt the continuum of hard history.

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And we can do this by seeking truth. By confronting hard history directly. By magnifying hard history for all the world to see. We can do this by speaking truth. Teachers teaching hard history to their students. To do anything else is to commit educational malpractice. And parents have to speak truth to their children, so that they understand where we have come from as a nation. And finally, we must all act on truth. Individually and collectively, publicly and privately, in small ways and in large ways. We must do the things that will bend the arc of the moral universe towards justice. To do nothing is to be complicit in inequality.

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History reminds us that we, as a nation, stand on the shoulders of political giants like James Madison. But hard history reminds us that we, as a nation, also stand on the shoulders of enslaved African American children. Little Black boys and little Black girls who, with their bare hands, made the bricks that serve as the foundation for this nation. And if we are serious about creating a fair and just society, then we would do well to remember that, and we would do well to remember them.

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Thank you.

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(Applause)