



Why I Free Slaves: Historian Timothy Patrick McCarthy

Timothy Patrick McCarthy is an expert on slavery and abolitionism in 19th-century America. He is a genuine scholar of slavery. And even he didn't realize the massive scope and reach—or even existence—of modern slavery until he read Free the Slaves Co-founder Kevin Bales' groundbreaking 1999 work, *Disposable People*.

"It was an earth-shattering book for me," McCarthy says. "I was completely blind to the reality that the things I was studying historically still existed in the present. In my present, in our present." Modern slavery is sneaky—hiding in supply chains of ubiquitous foods, goods and commodities, in restaurants, homes, factories, farms and brothels. The faces and stories of slaves are invisible, suppressed.



"I fight for freedom because freedom is the foundation of everything. It is our moral responsibility to do the work of freeing those who are not."

Experts estimate there are 40 million men, women and children enslaved around the world today—more than any time in human history.

Teaching Modern Slavery for the First Time

Disposable People opened McCarthy's eyes to a brutal reality unfolding in real time. His life, and work, took a sharp turn toward confronting this global humanitarian emergency; he was driven to determine the manifestations of modern slavery—and find an existing abolitionist movement ready to meet the crisis and eradicate the insidious institutions of oppression and bondage.

As a 19-year-old undergrad, McCarthy fell in love with archivist work—"letters from the past"—before earning a doctorate in American history with a focus on 19th-century African-American culture, especially the abolitionist movement, which became the basis for his two books.

In 1999, McCarthy was happy, satisfied and calmly unaware of the path he would soon walk as a modern abolitionist and committed FTS supporter. He was invited to design a new undergraduate course at Harvard, where he currently directs the [Human Rights and Social Movements Program at the Carr Center for Human Rights Policy](#). Alongside historical manuscripts he wanted to include modern texts. A friend told him about *Disposable People*.

Bales' book snapped McCarthy out of the uninformed yet common perspective that slavery is over. He put his academic background, backbone and bent to good use, reading and researching all he could. A year or so later he reached out to Bales. In his young course on American protest literature, McCarthy taught



Disposable People, Bales guest lectured—and the class became the first course in the country to teach modern slavery as part of the curriculum.

Kevin Bales co-founded FTS in 2000. McCarthy was deeply drawn to our mission; FTS clicked with the past and brought freedom fighting into the now. "It reminded me so much of anti-slavery societies in the 19th century. This was a modern-day abolitionist organization meeting the challenge and crisis of modern-day slavery."

Lessons of the Past Resound Today

Boston and Cambridge were hotbeds of the American Revolution, yet they also have deep roots in slavery. “When the Declaration of Independence was signed,” McCarthy explains, “Every single one of the 13 colonies had some form of slavery.” The legacies of slavery still haunt; they coexist presently with the legacies of freedom. “Just as they coexisted, precariously and treacherously, at the birth of the nation itself.”



McCarthy teaches that the past is present. He takes his historical perspective seriously and to heart. He seeks to convey a message that stirs his students to action.

“The past certainly helps shape present-day realities,” McCarthy says, “But it also helps offer lessons to help us deal with the legacies of slavery and segregation,

oppression and discrimination. There are so many lessons to learn from the abolitionists historically.”

Lesson One: It only takes a few passionate people to start a revolution.

The abolitionist movement in America—nestled under the mighty cultural touchstones of Lincoln, emancipation, The Civil War—started quietly in the early 1800s with a handful of concerned citizens outraged at the injustice of slavery. They held meetings, founded organizations, recruited more people, conducted research and mobilized resources. “They did all the things movements need to not just establish themselves but to sustain themselves,” McCarthy says. “It doesn’t take a world population to change the world.”

Lesson Two: A movement needs richly diverse stakeholders.

Diversity gives anti-slavery work its strength and sustenance. McCarthy calls American abolitionism the first global human rights movement. From its humble beginnings, abolitionism became the first U.S. social movement that was interracial, in which men and women worked together and crossed economic class lines and religious affiliations—stakeholders sprawled across all sectors of society took part.

FTS Supports 'Freedom Ecosystem'

For many years McCarthy has been a FTS donor, advocate and board member. FTS creates a space for diverse people to come together for an anti-slavery cause. Citizens, activists, NGOs, elected officials, international development groups and other anti-slavery organizations bolster, collaborate with and depend on FTS.

"Now we have a freedom ecosystem, where there's an emerging movement of many different organizations working in close contact to mobilize resources," McCarthy says. "Free the Slaves is exemplary in bringing together different stakeholders and has been a leader for its entire existence. I've had a front-row seat to that remarkable work."

All social movements must gather and mobilize resources: financial, material, human. "Free the Slaves deserves our donations because it operates on a fairly lean budget," McCarthy says. "[FTS] puts its money where its work is." Crucial donors like McCarthy fund our Community-based Model for Freedom: grassroots anti-slavery advocacy in communities where slavery is most rampant.



Our model is local, targeted and effective. We educate vulnerable villagers, raise awareness of trafficking tricks and illegal debt traps and empower resilience so people can resist slavery on their own. We free slaves and change the conditions that allow slavery to exist. FTS helps build sustainable systems of freedom.

"I've chosen to donate my time and treasure," McCarthy says. "Free the Slaves is an organization I believe in, whose values I'm very much aligned with, whose people I trust and whose work is absolutely indispensable."

Stories Have Powerful Impact

What slavery conceals, McCarthy fights to illuminate. Abolitionists raise consciousness and change society by telling the stories of slaves striving to be free.

During Civil War-era abolitionism, stories of slavery and freedom had a powerful impact on society. "Those stories changed hearts and minds," McCarthy says. "These were firsthand accounts, moral witnesses, of the worst that is in us as human beings. Yet they're also accounts of the best that's in us, when we tap into those yearnings to be free."

In a world where slavery still exists, storytelling is as a wake-up call for freedom. Slaves may want to cry out for help but often cannot. “[FTS] is a trailblazer,” McCarthy says, “Showcasing the lives and livelihoods, the struggles and aspirations and dreams, of people who have been enslaved, who are enslaved and who have achieved their freedom, in part with the help of Free the Slaves.”

Stories inspire people to become freedom fighters in their own right. Awareness begets action.

McCarthy asks his students, and himself, “What will you have done in this life to be an agent of history? We can be inspired from the past. But that history must inspire us to do *our* work in *our* time, so that we become the lesson-makers for those who come after us.”

Calling Policy-Makers and Poets, Media and Ministers

McCarthy life’s work is bringing historical theories to life for his students, who are making sense of the world and learning how to act in a new way. He encourages and counsels both budding and practiced activists to be thoughtful “boundary-crossers” and enthusiastic problem-solvers. He considers himself a loving critic, confronting slavery with both analysis and resistance.

When McCarthy thinks about history and social justice, he thinks about bridges. The world is in pain, but it also contains the ability to transform. His role—and work with FTS—is to build bridges between ideas and ideals, scholarship and action.

Everyone can take part: young and old, business leaders and faith communities, policy-makers and politicians. “You can have poets and writers and visual artists, media culture and journalists, ordinary citizens,” McCarthy says, growing ever more animated. “Not all people standing at the founding of the abolitionist movement lived to see the day of emancipation, but many did. It was a daunting task, and they confronted it with unbelievable boldness and bravery. We have to do the same thing today.”



**Free the Slaves needs your help.
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We Don't Free Slaves, You Do!**