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Frederick Douglass: Challenge and Response

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To be invited to open the Frederick Douglass Commemorative Series is an honor which I deeply appreciate. I have always found it stimulating to turn my attention to Frederick Douglass and it is especially gratifying to do so in this particular city and under such distinguished auspices. The University of Rochester performs something of a public service in presenting such a series.

The University's decision to devote this opening lecture to Frederick Douglass would seem highly appropriate. In his career the usable past comes into its own. His words have a contemporary ring and his outlook is scarcely less instructive for our day than for his. If today the civil rights movement has become a major issue in our country, certainly this may warrant a fresh look at the race relations reformers of the nineteenth century. If today the voice of the Negro himself is now being listened to as never before, certainly this may warrant a fresh hearing to an eloquent Negro American reformer who lived in a day as unquiet as our own.

A figure of heroic proportions, one who contributed notably to making American democracy a viable force, Douglass was destined to cast a long shadow. "Were ever so many miracles crowded into a single life?" asked a contemporary.

The day and year of his birth are uncertain, for he was born a slave. But when he died five state legislatures adopted resolutions of regret, and at his last rites, held in Washington on a winter afternoon in 1895, two United States Senators and a Supreme Court justice were numbered among the honorary pall bearers. A Washington Post editorial stated that he "died in an epoch which he did more than any other to create." *PK*

Douglass indeed did symbolize many characteristic American traits, perhaps most obviously the driving force to pull oneself up by his bootstraps. After twenty years in slavery, he fled to New Bedford, Massachusetts, where for three years he lived a hand-to-mouth existence. Things took a turn for the better in 1841 when he came an abolitionist lecturer, following the accidental discovery of a fluent tongue and a talent for the public platform.

His subsequent career reflected the central issues of his times. In 1847 here at Rochester, he became editor of an anti-slavery weekly which he published for sixteen years. In 1848, he took a prominent part in the Seneca Falls Convention in New York which formally inaugurated the woman's rights movement in ~~the United States~~ ^{the United States}. During the Civil War he recruited troops for the Union Army, and he urged the Lincoln administration to strike forcefully against slavery. After the war he worked for a Reconstruction policy that would guarantee the right to vote without respect to race. Beginning in 1877 he received high federal appointments from successive Republican

administrations, becoming in turn Marshal of the District of Columbia, Recorder of Deeds for the District, and Minister to the Republic of Haiti.

What is it that makes Douglass a figure worthy of our attention? Let four of his contemporaries suggest an answer. Frederick Law Olmsted, who traveled extensively in the slave states, wrote of Douglass in 1854: "All the statesmanship and kind mastership of the South has done less, in fifty years, to elevate and dignify the African race, than he in ten." 13 Another contemporary opinion of Douglass was expressed by Mark Twain in a letter to President-elect James A. Garfield on January 12, 1881, urging him to reappoint Douglass as Marshal of the District: "I offer this petition with peculiar pleasure and strong desire," wrote Twain, "because I honor this man's high and blemishless character and so admire his brave, long crusade for the liberties and elevation of his race." 14

Writing ten years earlier Senator (and later Vice-President) Henry Wilson struck an even broader note: "The main interest and importance of Mr. Douglass's career, are public, rather than personal. Full of thrilling adventure, striking contrasts, brilliant passages, and undoubted usefulness, as his history was, his providential relations to some of the most marked facts and features of American history constitute the chief elements of that interest and importance


which by common consent belong to it." [✓] This more rounded view of Douglass was expressed by Governor Theodore Roosevelt when he came to Rochester on June 10, 1899, to speak at the unveiling of the Douglass monument: "I am proud to be able to do my part in paying respect to a man who was a worthy representative of his race because he was a worthy representative of the American nation." [✓]

Like other men of mark in history, Douglass had much to overcome. One of the well-known life writers of recent times, Emil Ludwig, has pointed out that great men are not gods-- that they have been gripped by the same all-too-human passions, repressions and encumbrances which afflict every other mortal-- but that they achieved greatness because they fought through to their goals. The New Testament phrase, "He that overcometh," is personified in Douglass.

To say that Douglass's career was strewn with obstacles is to put him in the general class of achievers. The odds against Douglass, however, were especially great and they stand in stark contrast to the unusual kind of man he became-- well-rounded, high-principled, and of a spacious outlook. Hence the distinctive, indeed peculiar, nature of his upstream career would seem to warrant our appraisal. What circumstances enabled Frederick Douglass to emerge from the shadows?

If anyone were entitled to be called a self-made man, surely it was Douglass. But even in his case there were outward circumstances that cannot be ignored. To begin with,

Douglass came to manhood in a day when reformist movements were in ferment. The quarter of a century preceding the Civil War was characterized by crusades, among them woman's rights, temperance, world peace, universal education, and prison improvement. Foremost of these reforms in shaping this country's destiny was the abolitionist crusade--the movement to wipe out slavery. Hence when Frederick Douglass joined the abolitionists in 1841, the times were favorable for a man of his antecedents and his talents. The anti-slavery platform was a school for the training of orators, and Douglass did not take long to become "a cataract that roared."

If the times operated to the advantage of Douglass, so did the locale--the particular places he lived. True he was born a slave, but at the age of eight he was sent to Baltimore. City slavery was less oppressive than plantation slavery, the former offering far more "elbow room." "A city slave," wrote Douglass, "is almost a freeman, compared with a slave on the plantation." "Going to live in Baltimore laid the foundation, and opened the gateway, to all my subsequent prosperity." 

His first ten years in freedom Douglass spent in Massachusetts. At New Bedford, his first place of residence, he soon learned of an abolition society made up of Negroes. He joined their ranks, leaving only to become a full-time agent of the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society. Here he

met William Lloyd Garrison, Wendell Phillips and their fellow reformers. These dedicated men and women gave Douglass a helping hand. "To these friends, earnest, courageous, inflexible, ready to own me as a man and brother, against all the scorn, contempt, and derision of a slavery-polluted atmosphere, I owe my success in life," he wrote in later years. ~~8.~~ And, as Douglass himself noted, his early befrienders numbered many Negroes. The first two of these were David Ruggles, secretary of the New York Vigilance Committee, with whom he spent his first two weeks in freedom, and Nathan Johnson of New Bedford, who provided a roof for the young runaway and his bride, and bestowed upon him the surname Douglass.

After nearly ten years in Massachusetts, Douglass in 1847 moved to Rochester where he was to spend the next twenty-five years. Again during the shaping years of his life, he was fortunate in his place of residence. Rochester, an enterprising town of 30,000 in the 1840's, was an important station in the underground railroad. Myron Holley, a son of Rochester, had been one of the founders of the Liberty Party in 1840. Five years earlier the women of Rochester had organized an anti-slavery society. In 1843, Rochester had been the site of a state convention of Negroes even though the town's own colored population numbered barely 400.

Douglass never regretted coming to Rochester. "I know of no place in the Union," he wrote in 1882, "where I could

have located at the time with less resistance, or received a larger measure of sympathy and cooperation, and I now look back to my life and labors there with unalloyed satisfaction, and having spent a quarter of a century among its people, I shall always feel more at home there than anywhere else in this country." ~~V.~~

Rochester had indeed met Douglass half-way. In conducting his underground activities, he received valued assistance from such men as Samuel D. Porter. In March 1852, the Rochester Ladies' Anti-Slavery Society contributed \$233 to the support of Douglass's weekly newspaper. ~~V.~~ Later that year the women had met at Corinthian Hall to hear him deliver one of his most forceful and widely reprinted lectures, "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?"

A final outward circumstance contributing to the rise of Douglass was his personal appearance. His looks helped him. He was well-proportioned, being tall and broad-shouldered. A newspaper editor, N. P. Rogers, described Douglass as he looked in 1841--the year in which he became an abolitionist lecturer. "A commanding person--over six feet, we should say, in height, and of most manly proportions. His head would strike a phrenologist amid a sea of them, and his voice would ring like a trumpet in the field. Let the South congratulate itself that he is a fugitive. It would not have been safe for her if ^{he} had remained about the plantations a year or two longer." ~~V.~~

Like Rogers, James Russell Lowell, who saw the youthful Douglass frequently, was impressed by what he saw: "The very look and bearing of Douglass are eloquent," wrote Lowell in 1844, "and are full of an irresistible logic against the oppression of his race." ¹² Even after the first flush of youth, Douglass retained his power to make a lasting impression on people seeing him for the first time. On one occasion while waiting in President Lincoln's outer office on August 19, 1864, Douglass was the object of a close scrutiny by Joseph T. Mills, another White House visitor. Mills reported his impressions to Lincoln and then hurried home to write them down in his diary:

Mr. President I was in your reception room today. There in a corner I saw a man quietly reading who possessed a remarkable physiognomy. I was rivetted to the spot. I stood and stared at him. He raised his flashing eyes and caught me in the act. I was compelled to speak. Said I, Are you the President? No replied the stranger, I am Frederick Douglass. ¹³

His arresting appearance and the times in which he lived by no means account for the full measure of Douglass's accomplishments. Paul Lawrence Dunbar did not have Douglass in mind when he said that some men are born great, some men achieve greatness, and some men lived during Reconstruction times. Fame did not come to Douglass unearned. "Greatness was inherent in his being, and circumstances simply evoked it," wrote William H. Crogman, a late nineteenth century Negro college president. ¹⁴

His own qualities of mind enabled Douglass to move inexorably toward his goals. At the base of these mental qualities was a thirst for knowledge. The first great ambition of the young Douglass was to master the printed page. As a slave boy of 12 years old in Baltimore, he took the first pennies he ever owned and bought a popular book of orations. He then bribed white boys on the docks to teach him to read. Often he had no money left to buy writing materials. "During this time," as he tells it himself, "my copy-book was the board fence, brick wall and pavement, my pen and ink was a lump of chalk."

To Douglass freedom from chattel slavery was but half a victory unless followed by a liberation of the mind. He expressed the opinion that there was no useful thing a man might do that could not be better done by an educated man than an uneducated one. Referring to his slavery background, he wryly observed that some know the value of education by having it. "I know its value by not having it." Speaking at Storer College in 1880, Douglass shared his credo with students. "If," said he, "a man is without education, he is but a pitiable object; a giant in body, but a pigmy in intellect, and, at best, but half a man.....Education, on the other hand, means emancipation; it means light and liberty." VS.

Throughout his life he exhibited this desire to learn, to lead a rich life in the brain. He acquired a personal library of over ten thousand volumes; he started to learn

French when he was over seventy. Always to make a new man of himself--this was his goal.

Dougllass was a learner because of his desire to increase his effectiveness as a reformer and to improve the quality of life itself. This twin purpose made Dougllass a hard-worker, one to whom conscientious preparation became a way of life. He never wrote an article or gave a speech without first doing his homework carefully. One example may suffice. After discussing slavery in a speech given at Moorfields, England on May 12, 1846, Dougllass lists his sources, to wit: "The laws referred to may be found by consulting Brevard's Digest; Haywood's Manual; Virginia Revised Code; Prince's Digest, Missouri Laws; Mississippi Revised Code." ¹⁶ The vocabulary of denunciation Dougllass knew full well, but his language was more than the perpetually indignant and passionate agitation against wrong. His words were the product of what today would be termed scientific research. Dougllass was never careless with the facts. In 1845, when he had just turned twenty-seven, he wrote his autobiography, NARRATIVE OF LIFE OF FREDERICK DOUGLASS, which went into eleven editions within five years. One reason for the success of the Narrative was its credibility--the book was soundly buttressed with specific data on persons and places, not a single one of them fictitious.

Richard T. Greener, first Negro graduate of Harvard College, in speaking of Douglass at memorial exercises held by the city of Boston on December 20, 1895, took note of his thoroughness. "He seemed to have the grand Miltonic scorn of coming into a contest of thought unprepared; with his blade not well sharpened, the hilt untried, and the point not tested," said Greener. "I dare assert, judged by any papers of eminent American Statesman, that Mr. Douglass will be found never to have been careless in the form of his thought, never negligent in his method."

As careful as he was with facts, Douglass was equally as meticulous in putting his thoughts in writing. The most cursory examination of his papers will show that he wrote over and over again, striving for clarity and precision. It may be that Douglass was so careful in composing his sentences because he knew that almost everything he wrote would find its way into print and perhaps into posterity. At any rate, Douglass would have agreed fully with a present-day literary critic, Herbert Hill, that "the urgencies of social protest cannot be invoked as an excuse for shoddy undisciplined writing. For writing without artistic quality can only lead to dull and ineffective protest literature. Indeed, for the writer, a serious and purposeful commitment to racial justice and social action requires the most intense devotion to literary technique and artistic discipline."

The sense of personal responsibility that went into his literary efforts was characteristic of Douglass. He did not believe in waiting for things to take a turn for the better. As a slave he made two attempts to escape, not losing heart because the first was thwarted. Desirous of freedom he began, as he put it, to pray with his legs. In 1894 Douglass was paid a visit by Daniel Hale Williams, first physician in the world to operate successfully on the human heart, and a charter member of the American College of Surgeons. Having his troubles as head of Freedmen's Hospital Williams drove out to the Douglass residence seeking advice. The words of the aged reformer, then 77, might have been a capsule of his own career: "The only way you can succeed, Dan, is to override the obstacles in your way. By the power that is within you, do what you hope to do." ~~1/2~~

These words to Dr. Williams were typical of Douglass. He was always urging Negroes to be up and doing whatever betide. He knew what it was to be black in his native land but he did not believe that prejudice absolved its victims from the exercise of personal responsibility. In the very first issue of his newspaper, the North Star, he stated his credo: "While advocating your rights, the North Star will strive to throw light on your duties: while it will not fail to make known your virtues, it will not shun to discover your faults." ~~1/2~~

in Washington
D.C.

To say that Douglass believed in racial self-reliance does not mean that he was against cooperating with whites. "It is gallant to go forth single-handedly, but is it wise?" he said in a speech on John Brown. Douglass was opposed to separate, all-Negro organizations, believing that a solid colored minority would tend to polarize racial resentments. Hence, he took a stand, for example, against the formation in 1888 of a woman's suffrage association of colored women. "I have associated with white people in various societies," wrote he, "in anti-slavery societies, temperance societies, literary societies, woman's suffrage societies, and I see no reason why educated and well informed colored women should not do the same." D.

Douglass reasoned that the Negro was an American and that inasmuch as there could be but one America, a nation within a nation would be an anomaly. In addressing a Negro high school graduating class in Baltimore in the closing year of his life, Douglass pointed out that "the evils now crushing us to earth have their root and sap in this narrow spirit of race and color, and we have no more right to foster it than men of any other race." D.

Far from being a self-segregator, Douglass might indeed be called a mainstream Negro. He believed that the true mission of America was to remove barriers between its people, making for mobility rather than rigidity. He was too careful a thinker to believe that a Negro organization--church, club

or fraternity--was inferior by virtue of its being Negro. Indeed when he moved to Washington he attended a Negro church--the African Methodist Episcopal Metropolitan church (although he never became a member, despite the pastor's cordial invitation). But he did not believe that separation was the solution to the Negro problem.

Douglass did not advocate a policy of "go-it-alone." But he did hold that the Negro's white friends could not do for him what he could do for himself. Douglass held it as an article of faith that the Negro's destiny was largely in his own hands. "If we succeed in the race of life, it must be by our own energies, and our own exertions," he said over and over. The Negro should be his own man, speaking up for himself. This was necessary, affirmed Douglass, not merely to inspire the colored people themselves but to furnish doubting whites with an object lesson in the Negro's readiness for equality.

Douglass knew what it was to become one's own spokesman, having taken this step in 1847 while on the threshold of his career. In that year he had broken with the Massachusetts abolitionists. As much as he admired them he left their ranks when he became convinced that their attitude toward him was to some degree patronizing, smacking of "father knows best." They wanted Douglass to stick to a script they had written for him, confining his speeches to his experiences as a slave rather than his reflections as a man. Douglass

refused, having opened his eyes, as he phrased it, and looked out of them through another telescope. ²³ No people, observed Douglass, ever "stood forth in the attitude of freedom" unless some one from among themselves had arisen to lead them on to victory.

A final consideration of Douglass as a nineteenth century mover and shaker must take note of his qualities of the spirit. Foremost among these was a sense of humanity that crossed the barrier of race and color. Douglass was broad and encompassing in his outlook and sympathies. This ecumenical spirit was perhaps the more unusual inasmuch as Douglass was pro-Negro to the core. "Whatever character or capacity you ascribe to us," he told a New York audience in May 1853, "I am not ashamed to be numbered with this race. I utterly abhor and spurn with all contempt possible that cowardly meanness which leads any colored man to repudiate his connection with the race." ²⁴ One of Douglass's Negro critics in the 1880's T. Thomas Fortune, editor of the New York Freeman, paid tribute to his battle for the Negro. On April 2, 1886, Fortune wrote as follows: "Of course I do not agree to all your views, but the fight for the race is there and that satisfies me." ²⁵

But Douglass was not ethnocentric; instead, his interests embraced the family of man. As he said on one occasion, the black people were his people, the yellow people were his people and the white people were his people. "Now, as always," he wrote in a private letter in April 1884, "I am for any movement whenever there is a good cause to promote,

a right to assert, a chain to be broken, a burden to be removed, or a wrong to be redressed." ~~2/21~~

In part Douglass's broad outlook stemmed from his early association with such figures as William Lloyd Garrison and Wendell Phillips, whose reform interest were far-ranging. In part, too, Douglass's broad sympathies may have resulted from being a Negro. Paradoxically, it would seem, his belonging to a despised group had given him a deeper, more inclusive sense of human brotherhood. Douglass's deep interest in the plight of his fellow men may be viewed as a mark of maturity if we are to believe the new school of "ego psychology."

But whatever the reasons Douglass belonged to "the fellowship of the concerned." His own success never lulled his conscience, leading him to murmur, "Soul, take thine ease." He could be numbered among those who mourned man's inhumanity to man. Oppressed peoples in other lands evoked his words of support--the Irish under England, the Hungarians under Austria and the Cubans under Spain.

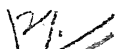
Of the non-racial domestic reforms that engaged Douglass's attention, woman's rights took highest rank. "Right is of no sex," said Douglass in 1847, and throughout his life no man was a more zealous woman's righter. Ignoring volleys of criticism and abuse, he took part in many of the state and national conventions held by the embattled women's groups. Age did not diminish his interest. On his last afternoon he attended a meeting of the National Council of Women in

Washington, D.C., at which he was warmly received. He returned home and as he and his wife were talking after dinner, his heart gave way.

Nearly two hours later, as the National Council of Women opened their evening session, Mary Wright Sewall, the presiding officer, took solemn note of his passing. It was a historic coincidence, she said, that the man who embodied the struggle between liberty and oppression should have spent his last day in company with the seekers of "a new expression of freedom." ~~It~~ It was a sentiment Douglass would not have quarrelled with, being not wide of the mark.

A final estimate of Douglass as an achiever would perhaps be incomplete without mention of two ~~soft~~ spots. He was a Republican, inflexibly and immutably, his devotion to that party being sealed late in 1872 when the Republicans of New York sent him to Washington as the bearer of the State's electoral vote for Ulysses S. Grant. It was Douglass who gave us that gem of political literature, "The Republican party is the deck; all else is the sea." ~~Douglass~~ Douglass was somewhat a waver of the "bloody shirt," ever identifying the Democrats as the party of the rebellion. By 1890 the Republican party had deserted the colored man, spurred by Northern merchants and industrialists who felt that business was hurt by the "Negro issue." But even after the Republicans had begun to woo the South at the expense of the Negro, Douglass remained a party faithful.

Douglass's economic beliefs had a similarly restricted scope. Making money--the cash nexus--found in him an ardent advocate. He urged Negro^s to think twice before following the biblical admonition not to lay up for themselves treasures on earth. Himself moderately well off, he reflected something of the acquisitive spirit typical of America's gilded age.

Because his political and economic outlooks were somewhat oversimplified, Douglass tended to view Negro-white relationships almost exclusively in moral terms. Race prejudice as an expression of cultural taboo, or race tension in relation to class struggle, loomed small to him. Hence he tended a bit to underestimate the barriers Negro^s would have to scale. He was fond of Shakespeare's passage about the fault lying in ourselves if we were underlings. But he would have been moved by the line written half a century after his death by one of Bel Kaufman's students in UP THE DOWN STAIRCASE: "When he (Shakespeare) said the fault dear Brutus is not in our stars meaning we got only ourselves to blame he wasn't a color person." 

Despite these clouded perceptions, most of what Douglass said and stood for has a relevance for our times. His social insights were, on the whole, remarkable. Two brief final illustrations may be noted. A careful reader of the American character, Douglass knew that his countrymen, as heirs of the Declaration of Independence, were committed to the call of freedom and equality. In the dark days of the Dred Scott

decision he had proclaimed that "the best defense of free American institutions is the hearts of the American people."^{30.}

But Douglass also knew that America's dedication to freedom and equality could not be taken for granted--that his countrymen were prone to infringe upon the rights of the Negro. In a speech in Washington in 1889, under the auspices of the Bethel Literary and Historical Association, Douglass summed up the attitude of the mass of Americans, his statement as cogent now as it was then. "Justice and magnanimity are elements of the American character. They may do much for us. But we are in no position to depend upon these qualities exclusively. Depend upon it, whenever, the American people shall become convinced that they have gone too far in recognizing the rights of the Negro, they will find some way to abridge these rights. The Negro is great but the welfare of the nation will be considered greater. They will forget the Negro's service in the late war. They will forget his loyalty to the republic."^{31.}

Finally, Douglass saw the Negro as the touchstone of American democracy, its inescapable test. In the main an optimist, he did not believe that human problems were so vast as to defy solution. But neither did he believe that they would go away of themselves. Hence one of Douglass's major contributions was in holding up a mirror to America, in making her face up to the unfinished business of democracy. The land of the free must needs come to grips with itself.

America's inevitable self-confrontation was a theme of one of Douglass's greatest speeches, delivered in Washington, D.C., on the occasion of the twenty-first anniversary of emancipation in the District of Columbia, and subsequently reprinted upon the request of twenty prominent Negroes, headed by former United States Senator B. K. Bruce. The words of Douglass on that occasion have a contemporary ring:

What Abraham Lincoln said in respect of the United States is as true of the colored people as of the relations of those states. They cannot remain half slave and half free. You must give them all or take from all. Until this half-and-half condition is ended, you will have an aggrieved class, and this discussion will go on. Until the public schools shall cease to be caste schools in every part of our country, this discussion will go on. Until color shall cease to be a bar to equal participation in the offices and honors of the country, this discussion will go on. Until the trades-unions and the workshops of the country shall cease to proscribe the colored man, this discussion will go on. In a word, until truth and humanity shall cease to be living ideas, this discussion will go on.

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