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FREDERICK DOUGLASS SESQUICENTENNIAL LECTURES
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It is appropriate that, in the midst of the continuing struggle for equal rights, the University of Rochester honor the great hero of another, earlier struggle, one which culminated in the granting of the surface trappings, but not the reality, of freedom. To the shame and detriment of America, that earlier struggle was left unfinished, thus leaving intact the racism which oppresses 20 million Negro Americans today.

Frederick Douglass shares with today's Negro citizens two characteristics. One is color, which meant chattel slavery for him and means second-class citizenship for them. Another shared trait is the determination to erase disabilities that arise from race and color.

When we examine Douglass' life and writings, what strikes us most is their tragic relevance to today's situation. Douglass tells of sitting on a wharf in Baltimore and listening to the heart-rending wails of people forced onto ships carrying them to the dreaded slave markets of New Orleans. And today's young Douglass's sit in numberless ghettos and hear their brothers weep from cold, from hunger, from fear of rats and vermin, and from despair and rage at a world they never made and conditions for which they are not responsible.

And the words of Frederick Douglass ring through the years with a tragic timeliness, as current as tomorrow's headlines. One hundred and ten years ago he said:

"The whole history of the progress of human liberty shows that all concessions yet made to her august claims have been born of earnest struggle. The conflict has been exciting, agitating, all-absorbing, and for the time being, putting all other tumults to silence. It must do this or it does nothing. If there is no struggle, there is no progress. Those who profess to favor freedom and yet deprecate agitation are men who want crops without plowing up the ground, they want rain without thunder and lightning. They want the ocean without the awful roar of its many waters. ..."

The major injustice to which Douglass addressed his efforts, slavery, was ended but the change in the legal status of the Negro was not matched by similar changes in the social and economic order, and the resulting injustices have thrived like cancer on the nation's body for a hundred years. Today we are treating this cancer of racism and inequality, and from our efforts we will forge a society in which freedom and equality are more than just words, which have little meaning for a tenth of the population.

Frederick Douglass escaped to the relative freedom of the North, where his immense natural talents brought him fame and the respect of people here and abroad. He became a leader of the abolitionist movement, a writer and public speaker, spokesman for the newly freed Negro population, Minister to Haiti, and U.S. Marshal for the District of Columbia. For many years, he made his home here in Rochester, yet his children were not allowed to attend schools with white children and his house was burned to the ground.

It was after that incident that Douglass said that although Rochester was among "the most liberal" of cities, it had "its full share of that Ku-Klux spirit which makes anything owned by a colored man a little less respected and secure than when owned by a white citizen."

This statement is as true today as it was when he made it. We hear almost daily of shootings and beatings in the South and the stoning of homes of Negroes in the North. After a century of progress and change, racism is still a feature of American life, and the person and property of Negro citizens are still less respected and less secure than those of white citizens. This is a lesson I learned quite early in life.

By all standards, my parents occupied positions which made them respected community leaders. But I can remember incidents which occurred which made it quite clear to me as I was growing up that, solely because of their color, they had fewer options and prerogatives than white families of lower social standing.

My father was president of Lincoln Ridge School, near Louisville, Kentucky, and my mother was the first Negro postmistress in the United States, so I was fortunate in that I escaped the brutal poverty which most Negroes were subjected to. I was fortunate too, in that my parents placed great emphasis on excellence and the importance of education

My father strongly believed in preparing oneself, in the expectation that people must be prepared to take advantage of the opportunities which he felt sure would come. He placed great emphasis on personal responsibility and achievement, often saying that "a man good for excuses is good for nothing." I was surrounded by books and a love of learning, and I was given a motivation and an accelerated education denied most children.

My mother was totally devoted to people, and had a genuine concern for the welfare of others that is all too rare. I would like to think that I have derived from my parents both this respect for excellence and concern for people.

As an educator, my father had to contend with forces in

the South which objected to Negroes getting an education or otherwise putting themselves in a position to escape the lot of the field hand, good for what labor could be extracted from him and for little else. For the Negro was seen not as a man, but as a resource for economic exploitation.

Douglass tells of getting the rudiments of an education from his mistress, who ended the lessons when her husband objected, saying that, "learning would spoil the best nigger in the world." And this is the attitude which has prevailed up to our own day, when it is changing, not because of morality, but because the economic demands of the labor market now require an educated labor force. Of course, some of our Southern states cling to that attitude because education and self-realization go hand in hand and learning threatens the rotting social structure.

Each semester my father would go out to the rural plantations to recruit Negro youth for his school. The plantation owners did not like to see a potential farmhand become a literate, self-sufficient citizen, so the first thing Father did when he rode into town in his old buggy was to find the local Negro, and each town had one, who was oblivious to intimidation. It was, of course, all the better if this man was big and strong. Together they would travel around the countryside recruiting young people.

He needed such protection and had to resort to this and other devious means, because of the limits placed on the Negro male. The Southern ethos was to keep the male down and the Negro family as consciously disorganized after slavery as it was deliberately destroyed during slavery.

I can recall another incident which illustrates this. My father took me to a local store to buy a suit and when we arrived home my mother didn't like it because the alterations were badly done. She took the suit back to the store, where she argued the manager into taking it back.

But she was the one who had to go. By the unwritten law of the South my father was forbidden to dispute with a white man. Even though he held a position of prominence in the community, he was still subject to the restrictions placed on Negro men, restrictions which prevented them from assuming all the duties and responsibilities of the male in our society.

These were the ways in which I was made aware of the pervasive atmosphere of racism. Because the small towns surrounding the school were so dependent upon it economically, there were few overt racial incidents. In fact, there were some white teachers at the school, but looking back I can see now that they were there to assume "the white man's burden" as missionaries, and not as committed liberals. Discrimination in larger towns to which we went for shopping or entertainment was more obvious, and it wasn't long before we stopped going to the movies in Shelbyville, Ky. rather than sit in the colored section" -- the balcony.

But due to the rather unique conditions in which I grew up, I was relatively shielded from the more blatant aspects of the Southern Way of Life, and only slowly became aware of the limitations placed upon the opportunities open to Negroes.

It was this unwritten code of racism which led me to take a pre-med course when I went to college. I was not driven by any burning desire to become a great healer. It was a pragmatic choice based on the alternatives open to a young Negro in the South. Doctors were the only Negroes who had the freedom and the independence to say and do what they wished without fear of white people. And almost alone among Negroes, they had the cars and the fine homes which only whites could expect to get.

This is indicative of the thinking that goes into career choices of young Negroes today. Their ambitions are limited to or restricted by what they know

to be open to them in terms of the American pattern of discrimination. Just as I had my sights set on medicine because this was the way I could escape the restrictions placed on Negroes in the South, so, too, many promising would-be chemists and engineers have opted for the post office or other civil service jobs which they knew would give them security and relative immunity from the last-hired-first-fired practices of industry.

It is important to note that while opportunities since then have increased, the Negro is always in a tenuous position as regards employment. His unemployment rate is double that for white workers, and for young Negroes just entering the job market it is still higher -- over a third of Negro teenagers in some ghetto areas are unemployed. It has been estimated that perhaps a quarter of Negro males have been unemployed for some period in the past year. At every level of employment Negro workers are more prone to be laid off and average far less in salaries than do white workers. The median income for Negroes is 56 per cent that for whites, actually less than it was fifteen years ago. All this comes at a time when the economy has been surging forward in an unprecedented period of expansion.

For the Negro with education and skills, opportunities exist today in fields long closed to Negroes. But even for these jobs, the Negro applicant must have stronger credentials than his white competitors, especially if the first "model" Negroes have already been hired and have taken their place by the window or in the most visible part of the office, where they can be seen and their employers complimented on their liberalism. The Negro is not yet at the stage where he can not only be as good as the next fellow, but is also allowed to be as ordinary or as bad.

When Douglass told free Negroes in 1853: "We must find new methods of obtaining a livelihood, for the old ones are failing us very fast," he might have been commenting upon today's situation. Negroes are concentrated in less-

skilled jobs with less growth potential, both in terms of advancement and in respect to future job openings.

The revolution for equality is meeting the technological revolution head-on, and the jobs which Negroes have traditionally held are being automated out of existence at the same time that the greatest expansion of labor needs is taking place in industries and in job categories long closed to Negro workers.

Take the present level of opportunity, the present situation as regards employment, and the long-term trends which indicate that no major changes in present job patterns can be expected. Add to these the results of a recent Labor Department study which show that the non-white labor force will be 50 percent larger by 1980, and you have a combustible mixture which must be dealt with through vigorous federal action and by a national commitment to bring Negroes into the mainstream of American life.

Because only limited opportunities are offered Negroes in civilian employment, there has been a gravitation of young Negroes to the military. Re-enlistment rates for Negroes are sharply higher than for white soldiers, and in some front-line units a fourth of the men are Negroes. It is a sad commentary on American life that, because of their color, men choose such hazardous and ultimately non-productive careers. For a few badly-needed extra dollars a month they volunteer for such dangerous specialties as the paratroops, and for the status and masculine roles denied them in civilian life, they choose those elite units most exposed to danger.

Traditionally, Negroes have looked upon military service as a means of advancing their claims for full citizenship. Douglass himself called on Negroes to join the Union Army, saying:

"Once let the black man get upon his person the brass letters U.S.; let him get an eagle on his button, and a musket on his shoulder, and bullets in

his pocket, and there is no power on earth or under the earth which can deny that he has earned the right of citizenship in the United States."

But more important to young Negro men than the buying of respect with blood are the opportunities to learn skills, to qualify for the liberal benefits available to veterans, to become part of an environment in which color plays a secondary role, in sharp contrast to civilian life, and to take advantage of the educational opportunities offered by the services.

It was these educational opportunities that led me to enlist in the Army in 1942. I still had hopes of becoming a doctor, and since I couldn't afford to finance my education, I planned on being sent to medical school by the Army. But places in the only two Negro medical schools in the South were filled for the next four years, and so I was assigned to MIT to take an accelerated engineering course as preparation for assignment to a combat engineering outfit.

The Army I entered was quite different from the Army of today. Last summer I went to Vietnam and I could see the tremendous changes that have taken place since my days as a soldier in a segregated Army. In Vietnam I saw total integration on all levels. Negro officers and sergeants were in positions of battle command, and color played no apparent factor in determining a man's authority or responsibility. It is important to point to this change in the military, for it has occurred in a very few years, and it offers a model for the rest of society, for it shows that racism can be rooted out in every other area of our national life in which it has become a fixture.

What I saw and heard in Vietnam was a far cry from my experiences in World War II. The outfit I was assigned to was called a combat engineering outfit, but that really meant a service road-building company. It was then general practice to relegate the segregated Negro units to rear-guard action

and not trust them with responsibility in the difficult front-line operations. This policy was breached in my unit only once -- for the Battle of the Bulge, when the dire need for manpower overcame color prejudice.

All the men in my unit were Negroes, most of them from the South. All of the officers were white Southerners. Neither group had much of an educational background. I can recall the day I reported for duty. I could see that my commanding officer was pleased -- I was over six feet tall and weighed 190, perfect for service in a work battalion. But then he looked at my record and his face fell. He could accept the fact that I was a Negro, but not that I was a Negro with a college degree and 2½ years at Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

While we were stationed in the United States, the officers ruled by fear. They had the authority and the means to enforce their will, so they were able to dominate the men, but they never won their respect. This was due partly to the natural animosity of the men toward white Southerners who were little different from the racists in their home towns, and partly to the knowledge that these officers were their superiors only because they were white. There were a few Negroes in the company who had a college education and who were capable of wearing brass or silver bars, and the men were aware that color determined who their officers would be.

When we reached overseas the situation changed drastically. The officers could no longer rule on the basis of fear, for now the camp was bristling with loaded guns and racial tension. They would get orders from headquarters to do certain things and the men would refuse to carry them out. The officers got to the point where they were terrified of the men, afraid to speak to them, even afraid to come out of their tents at night.

As first sergeant, it was my duty to attempt to bridge this fear-gap between men and officers. Over a period of time, I spent long hours with

the officers, trying to convince them that they had to treat the men with respect for their feelings and their manhood. Slowly, I could see them change their attitudes as they came to respect the men they got to know. And with the change in attitudes came a change in the fear and tension that had dominated the camp.

This experience decided me on a career in race relations. I thought that I might be able to help change the similar situation which existed on a much larger scale back home. I was convinced that this was a problem which called for education on both sides: education for the Negro in skills to make up for centuries of slavery and discrimination; and education for white people in exposure in human relations and to teach them appreciation and respect for the Negro as an individual.

I had seen how people could modify their attitudes when it became necessary for them to do so, and I had seen how simple contact with Negroes had wrought deep changes in individuals who had never before questioned the myths about race they were brought up to believe.

An experience I had at MIT illustrates this last point. I arrived there with three other Negroes, the first to take part in that Army program. At first they didn't know what to do with us, so they put us off in a room while they had a meeting. We figured out what they must be talking about and decided we wouldn't segregate ourselves, so when they came to us and said: "Of course, you fellows want to stay together," we said: "No, not unless it was a rule of the Army or MIT, and if so, we want to know more about it." They had to admit that there was no such rule, and the captain in charge finally ended the discussion by saying that vacancies would have to be filled as they occurred, and I was sent up to a room to join two whites who were rooming together.

When I announced I was to be their new roommate, one of them, from Mississippi, walked out of the room. He came back when he was told he had to, but he didn't speak to me for three weeks. Then we spoke occasionally, then studied together, and finally we were double-dating and became the best of friends. At the end of six months I was best man at his wedding. In fact, he once paid me the greatest compliment I suppose a white Southern gentleman can make -- he told me that he would be flattered if I were to marry his sister.

Although this fellow was able to overcome more than 20 years of rigid indoctrination about race in a matter of weeks, society as a whole cannot change without a great deal of effort and without deep structural changes. Short-term approaches are necessary, and I have participated in them as a charter member of CORE and during a long association with the NAACP, including a very active period with the NAACP Atlanta chapter. But perhaps more important than the necessary attacks on the more obvious and visible aspects of discrimination, are attempts to change the social, political, and economic structures of society.

I have always felt that if you want to change the system, you had to understand it and influence the people who make the decisions and who are in a position to change policy. This is a matter of matching brains, wit and facts with people and making them understand that they have a vested interest in the solution of the problem. All the moral exhortations and appeals to patriotism and decency will have less of an effect on the American businessman than, for example, the simple fact that discrimination costs American business \$27 billion per year in lost purchasing power.

I naturally gravitated toward the Urban League and to a career with this interracial agency which is devoting its efforts to making available badly needed services to the Negro community while at the same time influencing,

through education and example, the people who have the jobs to give and the leadership standing or status to bring about lasting change.

Recent years have seen some gains in the position of Negro citizens. No longer can you drive along Highway 41 between Atlanta and Nashville and see, as I can recall seeing many years ago, not only "white only" and "colored" signs, but a sign in the front of a motel advertising "Cold Beer" for whites, and "Cool Beer" for Negroes. But such small changes have little meaning for the young Negro of today. He cannot fathom the stupidity of a system which made Negroes go to the back of the buses or herd into the balconies of theatres.

Instead he hears talk of democracy and equality and expanding opportunities and he wants what everyone else in this society expects to get. When faced with discrimination, he can no longer bow to the system in the way his parents had to, but he stands up and fights it. He knows there is no justification for using his color as a basis for denying him what is rightfully his. He knows that prejudice has no rational basis and he knows that he cannot tolerate it.

For the revolution for equal rights is also a revolution of ^Vrising expectations and each small concession by society only paves the way for the next one. Only six years ago desegregation of Southern lunch counters was a big issue. Then the right to vote was an issue. Now we can be satisfied with nothing less than complete equality on all levels of American life. This means that jobs, housing, education and all other aspects of life must be made available to Negroes on the same basis that they are made available to whites.

And Negroes must match their insistence on complete equality with the determination to take full advantage of those opportunities which already exist. Negroes have a responsibility to seek the best possible education for

themselves and their children, even if it means fighting City Hall to get it. They must insist on representation in making the decisions which affect their lives.

Negroes must prepare themselves for the non-traditional jobs which are beginning to open up and they must learn to use their economic strength to bolster the economy of the ghetto, thereby creating more jobs and more money. In all phases of life, Negroes must aggressively fight to expand opportunities and to take advantage of them when the fight is won.

But the ultimate responsibility for solution of the racial problems which plague the country must lie with the white community. The present position of Negro citizens is one which is the result of a determined effort by the rest of society to exclude them. The Negro has received an extraordinary amount of assistance to get to where he is today, the position at the lower end of the socio-economic scale; he is going to need at least as much help to get out of it.

The problem is reaching crisis proportions. Although the past several years have brought gains to some Negroes, the position of the masses of Negroes is worsening. Statistics show that segregation in schools and in housing is increasing and that the Negro is slipping further behind. In ghettos like Watts in Los Angeles or Hough in Cleveland, median income actually declined at a time when the nation was enjoying its biggest peacetime economic boom in history.

And the Negro population is changing too. It is a young population. The majority of Negroes today are under the age of 24, and 60 percent of this group lives in poverty. In a society which makes a religion of consumption and a God of the dollar, they are unwilling to watch quietly while the rest of society enjoys the material possessions and comforts which are the ultimate standards

of individual worth and accomplishment.

Their restlessness and despair could be the explosive element which threatens the social fabric of our society. Or, their energy and desire could be channeled into productive sources, for their own good and for the nation's.

The laws passed in recent years, the anti-poverty programs of the government, and the special efforts of private agencies and individuals indicate that society is aware of the seriousness of the current situation and is willing to do something about it. Although many people think that these efforts have been on a large scale and that the nation is fully engaged, only a small, faltering beginning has actually been made. Laws can be and are being ignored, and one and a half billion dollars in anti-poverty funds is a drop in the bucket. Present efforts are totally inadequate to the problem at hand.

T. S. Eliot has written:

"Between the idea
and the reality,
Between the motion
and the act,
Falls the shadow."

As a nation, we are now in that shadow of inaction, that twilight zone between recognition of the problem and making the enormous effort in money and resources to do something about it. White America must step out of the shadows of indecision and act.

The fetters that bound the Negro to slavery were shattered a century ago. The fetters of apathy, indifference and despair which kept him in silent suffering, resigned to powerlessness and exploitation, are now being shed. In their place is a new spirit of determination and strength.

The Negro citizen is no longer resigned to being, as Ralph Ellison called him, the "invisible man," ignored and unseen by society. He will not be satisfied until he can claim his fair share in America.

Once again, in speaking of today's revolution for equal rights, we must turn to the words of Frederick Douglass in an earlier struggle. In 1876 Douglass said:

"We must either have all the rights of American citizens, or we must be exterminated, for we can never again be slaves; nor can we cease to trouble the American people while any right enjoyed by others is denied or withheld from us."

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