

Frederick Douglass Commemoration Lecture
University of Rochester
Rochester, New York
March 9, 1967

by

Samuel M. Nabrit
Commissioner
U. S. Atomic Energy Commission

"THERE BUT FOR THE GRACE OF GOD GO I"

INTRODUCTION

To speak in a University in a series commemorating the quest for freedom and identity by Frederick Douglass is indeed an honor and a privilege.

Douglass, as you know, was a mulatto who escaped from slavery, taught himself to read, and was forced to continue running even after having reached New England. He journeyed to England and finally returned to purchase his freedom through payments to his former owner and to dedicate his life to the cause of abolition of slavery. His was one of the voices which were active in awakening in America a consciousness which, though evident in its Constitution, nevertheless had lain dormant until the war between the States. His voice later echoed in Du Bois, James Weldon Johnson, Booker T. Washington, Walter White, John Hope and others who kept his faith in mankind and in America. Today, Martin Luther King, James Forman, Roy Wilkins, and Whitney Young are endeavoring to articulate the aspirations of the descendants of Douglass for the full heritage of American citizenship. Even the misguided voices which have brought about intra and inter-group splits in our ranks and an incipient backlash have not been accused of betrayal but rather of lack of wisdom

and a sense of timing in their drive to attain the objectives of Frederick Douglass.

I have been asked to outline in an autobiographical manner what it is like for the individual Negro of the first half of the twentieth century to attempt to fulfill his aspirations during the period of the second emancipation when it appears that the Negro's reach extends beyond his grasp. My role is to contrast the actuality of the present way of life with the promise of our heritage which was made possible in the 1865 Emancipation as a result of the efforts of Douglass and other abolitionists. I hope to indicate through my own experience some of the pathways I have followed in solving what at times seemed to have been the intractable problems which tended to bar the full realization of our goals during the revolution of the nineteen sixties.

I. DICE OF DESTINY

The hereditary information coded as gene loci in a section of a string of nucleotide pairs, and the role of DNA in activating enzyme-systems which act through RNA or directly upon responsive cytoplasmic areas and are distributed in a time-space sequence during our development, could not have been understood by my parents. I am sure that they were not the least concerned about particulate or molecular theories of transmission of hereditary traits. That seven of their eight children still survive, and the story that I propose to relate about these seven will be indicative of the fact that Lady Luck was riding with us when the dice of destiny were tossed. None of us had discernible congenital defects and all of us had an environment which made it possible for us to demonstrate the wide range of responsiveness of the healthy human brain when it is properly nurtured in a climate of high aspirations and expectancy.

With the exception of my maternal grandmother, I knew my grandparents quite well. All three of them lived until they reached the age of at least seventy.

My father's mother had learned the fundamental alphabet and had attained a very elementary reading skill while a servant-slave in her master's house. Records reveal that when Spelman College was founded in the basement of Friendship Church in Atlanta in 1881 my paternal grandmother was enrolled in the first class under her married name. My grandfather, her husband, was a skilled craftsman. He was a well digger and designer, and could erect the superstructure of the well from wood or stone. My father's brother learned to lay brick and to plaster from his father. It was my grandmother, though, who aspired for her son to be educated. When my father completed the elementary school, his mother took a job in the laundry at Morehouse College so that her son could go to high school and college.

II. PARENTAL AND HOME INFLUENCE

My father was a graduate of Morehouse College, a college which was founded in the parsonage of Springfield Baptist Church of Augusta, Georgia, in which my father served as pastor during nine years of my elementary and secondary school experience. Subsequent to its establishment in Augusta, Morehouse moved to Atlanta, where my father was born and where he studied.

Morehouse, like so many of the early colleges of the reconstruction era, was supported and staffed by the American Baptist Home Mission Society. Though these white scholars could not qualify for faculty positions in northern universities in most cases, they had had college education in the North. In addition, they sympathetically related to and lived

with these students and provided for them a sense of human worth and dignity that could not have been matched elsewhere. At this period of development all of these colleges had grade school and secondary school departments. They gradually evolved into colleges and my father was in the second college class which was graduated in 1898. He took advantage of the fact that the public schools closed in the spring and fall because of the cotton culture, and after walking twenty-five miles into the rural areas, he taught school for the summer months. On weekends in winter he was a baker.

My mother's father was half-white, his father having been his owner. Thus he was permitted to learn to read and write and given freedom of entrance and egress to and from the plantation at will. It is not surprising then that he owned a farm, a grocery store, a restaurant and a furniture store and served as the postmaster in his town on the public square in Cuthbert, Georgia. When I visited him as a little boy, I was impressed that each day he received the Atlanta Constitution and would not permit anyone to touch it until he had had a chance to read it. (This was always at five o'clock the next morning over his coffee.)

Whereas my paternal grandparents were devoutly religious and patient in their belief that God would make everything right in time, my mother's father believed that economic security was the basic ingredient in "getting along." He should have known better, because his white cronies would arrange mixed parties and during the prohibition era would provide him alcohol for toddies only to have others of their friends stage raids and exact a payoff. The next week they would deputize him to take a prisoner half-way across the country. As I look back now it is well that we spent so little time with Grandfather West, for we might have become a cynical lot rather than a family that was not easily taken in or beguiled by flattery or praise, or false friendships.

My mother was trained in the public schools and in Professor Henderson's private school which qualified her to teach in systems that required only an elementary school education. She married young and used all her talents in providing a home and nurture for her eight children. Sometimes she did plain sewing, but her income was largely the fees from weddings performed by my father who had become a minister. There was never an emergency when we could not borrow from her to tide us over. To me my mother was all that I believe any woman could be and more than any of us had a right to expect. There was nothing that her children needed that was not satisfied before she ministered to her own wants. The only time that we vexed her to the point of tears and a desire to swear, she blurted out, "You all make me so hell mad." For a long time you could have heard a pin drop anywhere in the house. (Eight youngsters can wear out patience!)

My grandparents came out of the period of slavery, the internecine war between the States, the reconstruction period and early backlash, without bitterness or rancor, with a feeling that our lot should be better than theirs, and a willingness to assist us in the broader struggles for liberation of the human spirit. They never suggested that they had ever heard of Frederick Douglass and the efforts of Negroes in the North or of whites in the North who promised freedom. After the Emancipation they frequently visited the descendants of their former masters and never reflected bitterness over their former lot.

The Father Figure

I was brought up in the southern region in which there is a matriarchy in the Negro family. This is in part due to the slave tradition of nonrecognition of family, partly to the broken home condition which is encouraged by support

programs for dependent children in the city (where children are not entitled to support if there is a male in the home), partly to the fact that unless a Negro male was educated to a professional level there was no special benefit to continue in school beyond the high school, and partly to the fact that only women existed as teachers in the public schools except occasionally as a principal in our day. "There but for the Grace of God go I." We were spared and had not merely a man in the house but a central figure in all of our lives - our father.

My father was an athlete, a really great baseball player - a catcher and a long-ball hitter. His college and semi-professional records were not nationally known because Negroes were not "good enough" athletes to make the professional leagues - at least that is what the press of our day told us. He played ball with his sons.

He was also a scholar. He read Greek, Latin and Hebrew with facility - as if he were reading English. He knew the Classics, and Algebra and Trigonometry were easy for him. He taught at Georgia Baptist College, at Walker Baptist Institute and was later president of the Baptist Theological Seminary at Nashville. He was pastor of churches in Americus, Augusta and Atlanta, Georgia; and in Memphis, Tennessee. He taught me Xenophon's Anabasis and Virgil in high school and thought that he had successfully launched me into the ministry.

We loved and respected him. We listened attentively to his sermons in church and observed his examples of Christianity at home. He was tolerant of my early discussions of evolution around the dining room table and often participated in our debates. We made the final choices about our careers but he provided a good climate for decision making.

III. SCHOOL

All eight children had some public school education - though it varied widely. One boy and one girl, the youngest, were graduated from public high schools, although the girl had been in a private school until the family moved to Nashville. Two of the girls went to private elementary schools while all of the rest of us had private secondary school education. This was not a sign of being in an affluent family - it was simply that Augusta and Atlanta, Georgia, provided no public secondary school education for Negroes until I was a junior in college. The fact of the matter was that upon graduation from church-related colleges all of us except one had to go north for graduate study. Today it appears that that was a fortunate coincidence - because in 1927 there were few southern graduate programs of great strength.

The one thing that I am quite sure of is that there was never a day in our lives when there was a question that any one of us would go to college. It was taken for granted that the three boys would go to Morehouse. Two of the girls went to Spelman; two to Fisk, and one to Talledega. There were two valedictorians, two salutatorians, and an honor graduate among the five girls.

After completing college and graduate work, one sister served as dean of students at Spelman College, and two boys served as deans of graduate or professional schools, one at Atlanta University and the other at Howard University School of Law. These two boys subsequently became college presidents, one at Texas Southern University, the other at Howard University. They also served the Federal Government, one as Deputy Ambassador in Chief to the United Nations, and the other as a board member of the National Science Foundation and as a member of the Atomic Energy Commission. The youngest boy served as religious education secretary to the colleges

of West Virginia, taught in two colleges and now has succeeded his father as a pastor in Memphis. He also holds the political appointment of deputy jury commissioner of Shelby County, Tennessee.

One girl married upon graduation from college, reared a son and served as a postal clerk. One girl is chief accountant and director of personnel for the Sunday School Publishing Board. She is married, and co-owner of a mortuary establishment. Another is a graduate librarian, head of the library at Knoxville College, a former English teacher, a mother of two by a deceased husband who was a surgeon. The fourth is a graduate professional social worker, directs a community center and has served as field supervisor for trainees in social work of Atlanta University's School of Social Work. She is married to a general practitioner of medicine. The fifth and eldest is a retired dean and history professor at Spelman College after forty years of service. She survives a deceased husband who was a haberdasher and a life insurance agent.

By some miracle our father was able to pay all of our fees through college. This was that something of value that was worth the sacrifices and strivings of the entire family.

IV. OTHER INFLUENCES

I had not consciously resisted the career that the family had assumed that I should pursue. In fact, I preached at every opportunity in our backyard to the other kids in the family and on our block. At the end of my high school studies I received a summer job as "porter" in the Southern Cotton Oil Regional Laboratory. The assistant chemist, Mr. Blackburn, lived on the next street so that his yard abutted ours at the rear. He gave me the job as porter and taught me to run about

thirty-three Kjeldahls daily for protein in seed and meals through nitrogen determinations. It was here that I learned about using a nickel-cobalt catalyst and how to hydrogenate the unsaturated bonds to make lard out of cotton seed oil. Despite the pleading of Mr. Blackburn and the glowing picture that he painted for me in chemistry through apprenticeship, my father packed me off to college. To his surprise I enrolled as a major in chemistry, with the idea of ultimately going on into medicine. The combination of life in the laboratory and the recruiting by the college for its first class to qualify for a B.S. degree in the then only building in any Negro college which was completely devoted to science were more than adequate to set my course. When educators speak of the desirability of coupling formal education with an on-the-job real life experience as a part of career preparation, I understand the full significance of it.

In my senior year I was recommended to a teaching position in biology in my own college, Morehouse. The president, in a kindly manner, advised me to accept for at least a year in order to ease the financial strain on the family due to my brother's senior year in law school that year. He further advised that after teaching a year I would have some money and be much sharper for medicine the next year. He incidentally firmly suggested that I spend the intervening summer months at the University of Chicago. Which I did.

Strangely enough, the Scopes trial was conducted that summer and H. J. Muller came to teach a course in genetics that I had planned to take. This was the summer that he completed the work on mutation in *Drosophila* (for which he subsequently won the AAAS one thousand dollar prize and later the Nobel Prize). It was my first opportunity to study under a teacher who had received a Ph.D. It was like starting from the top to be taught by one of the world's great scientists before formally beginning a program of graduate study.

The next summer at Chicago, Dr. Elliott, then a recent Ph.D. graduate of Chicago, taught me embryology and at the end of the course suggested that I go to Woods Hole the following summer to take the embryology course. My anatomy teacher at Chicago, Carl Moore, was editor of the Biological Bulletin which published my first research paper. The two summers at Chicago had a formative and a directive influence upon my future.

Woods Hole, in its lectures and its rigorous seminars, exposed me to a feeling that I had not before experienced for the structure of biology as a discipline. Here, for the first time, I sensed what it was that biologists did and followed them through from problem to hypothesis through evidence, to proof and to generalizations. I saw many examples of totally different conclusions which were legitimately reached from the same scientific evidence. I came to understand something of the kind of educative experience that unconsciously conditions efforts at disciplined subjectivity or attempts at objectivity. Here was a culture which had eluded all but a few Negroes and in 1927 much of the entire South. I went from Woods Hole that summer to Brown University and knew (within myself) that I could earn the doctorate.

Yet Brown did not wish to admit me because I was a Negro and the department was small and enjoyed a family-like relationship that a Negro might disrupt. Because of John Hope, a distinguished Negro graduate of Brown, who was then president of Morehouse, and because of his communications with President Faunce, Brown did admit me and I became the first Negro to be graduated there with a Ph.D.

My academic opportunities were unrestricted as a student but I created a problem by being requested to serve as a graduate assistant. Fortunately for Brown, because Brown was not ready to face the problem of a Negro instructor in 1931,

the General Education Board fellowship had assumed that I was studying full time and would be graduated at the end of my second year.

Being a newly-wed, I was not a social problem except in establishing departmental precedents. With the aid and encouragement of my major professor we successfully navigated troubled waters without a serious incident. Having married Constance T. Crocker, who was graduated with the highest average in her class at Boston University, provided me with a forty-year companion who has been an inspiration and a helpmate. She too taught at Morehouse and became the executive assistant to the president and assistant treasurer of Atlanta University.

I found at Brown a type of humanity in the faculty that transcended all expectancy. When Professors Walter and Wilson assured themselves that I was already a matured independent scholar in biology, they proceeded to share with me their rich interests in German language and culture and in symphonic and operatic music. They perceived that this kind of educative experience had not been available to me. This was their contribution to the education of the culturally deprived.

V. CAREER

As a teacher I endeavored to emulate and imitate these two men. My students were met where they were and I kept them until I was sure that they satisfied minimum standards in any master's degree program. My college majors could easily move into professional or graduate schools, and the opportunities afforded me have been multiplied many times through those provided my students. To have averaged at least one doctoral student for each year that I spent in the classroom was adequate compensation above the mere subsistence level received for teaching. The visible change in a youngster whom you lead

into discovery of knowledge is a remarkable experience to a devoted teacher.

When in 1944 the General Education Board gave me a third study grant to spend five months at Teachers College in science education, I developed new insights into training secondary school teachers for science and began to sense for the first time the great disparity in knowledge and techniques of ghetto teachers and those in suburban communities. We visited New Trier and Oak Park schools and compared those with teaching and learning in the inner-city schools. The experience motivated us in initiating the movement for the formation of the National Institute of Science. We were so isolated in professional life in the South in those days that we could not attend regional scientific meetings and exchange ideas about research and teaching. We hoped to provide opportunities for young Negro teachers to continue to grow by having forums for discussion of their ideas.

I entered administrative work after a visiting committee from the American Association of Colleges and Universities reviewed Atlanta University. They found that as useful and as important as it was for our students to know themselves, it was feared that we were preoccupied in our theses in sociology, education, literature, history and languages with relatively minor achievements of Negroes, and had probably permitted our students to fall outside of the mainstream of thought and the important movements in their special disciplines. They found the science and mathematics theses unslanted and suggested that a dean be named from one of those disciplines.

Since I had been one of the original faculty members as the head of the biology department in 1929 when the Atlanta University affiliation occurred, I worked with the faculty and trustees when they set out to provide, somewhere in the South, a graduate program which provided compensatory and developmental experiences for young Negroes. We wanted to be so

thorough in our training and education that our graduates could successfully continue toward their doctorate in step with graduate students from anywhere. This we achieved at a time when no southern white graduate school would admit a Negro.

I spent the semester of 1949-50 at the University of Brussels in research at the Medical School with Dalcq and Pasteels, and thereafter became so completely removed from research by the administrative camel that I was vulnerable for a presidency in a college that promised nothing but an opportunity to move it forward.

From 1955 to 1966 I served as president at Texas Southern University in Houston, Texas. I tried to develop there the kind of creative climate for faculty and students that I had learned to appreciate. I felt that it was possible to have a community of scholars and escape from the paternalistic pattern so often encountered in the smaller colleges. I had not fully succeeded in this, but we were moving in that direction when I was appointed to the Atomic Energy Commission as of August 1, 1966.

During my tenure at Texas Southern I saw twenty-six temporary buildings dwindle to three. I left the funds and the blueprints for replacing those. But it was largely in faculty strength, improved academic requirements, fiscal respectability and in that intangible, aspiration, that characterizes the University today where I found a measure of satisfaction.

VI. ASSESSMENT

To have been able to channel positively the rising aspirations in human rights and to assist in changing the patterns of discrimination in Houston were unanticipated

byproducts of involvement with my students who sat-in while we negotiated with the power structure of that citadel of conservatism about change. The alignment with the students in articulating the basic desires of Negroes for making a practical example of a functioning democracy in America was a most important experience and related me more to the students than anything that we had attempted to achieve in our formal educational adventures. Although the climate for change had been developed by arrests, law suits, student sit-ins, major efforts by the NAACP, CORE, the Urban League and other newer civil rights organizations in other communities, the major changes were brought about in Houston by Texas Southern students and by individuals in the power structure of the Negro and white communities without the direct action of these agencies.

One supposes that at different periods during the Negro's quest for freedom the emphases had to vary in terms of procedures that could eventuate in the attainment of the possible. The goals and objectives have always remained the same - full freedom with all of its rights and privileges.

Both Du Bois and Booker T. Washington saw education of the Negro as the important factor at the turn of the century. Du Bois advocated an elitist culture which could demonstrate the worthiness of acceptance of Negroes through literary and scientific scholarship. This cultured few, or talented tenth, would provide the indigenous examples about which racial pride could be developed and from whom leadership could be obtained, while at the same time these achievers could abolish the racial stereotype which had been used to justify slavery and discrimination on the American scene. Washington believed that, in addition, skilled artisans needed to be developed so as to provide a middle-class economic structure upon which America would depend and which could support a cultured class. They were not so different in their views that Washington could not

offer Du Bois a job at Tuskegee or assist him in obtaining funds for his researches and studies on the Negro during his first period of service at Atlanta University. Both attempted to obtain support for education of some kind. While Washington wished to have us "let down our buckets where we were" and be patient, Du Bois was one of the 1906 marchers at Harper's Ferry and one of the founders of the N.A.A.C.P.

Today, when we are concerned about identification and our cultural and historical roots which make us worthy of acceptance and an opportunity to move into the mainstream of life in America as Americans, Negro leadership still is groping for the proper strategy. It is not sufficient to have a few tokens, in individuals or families, of success in America. We cannot afford a caste system which equates race with unemployment, the ghetto, poor schools, underachievement, delinquency, crime, disease, and a high death rate. We have sufficient examples where a good head start, family aspiration and expectancy, and where opportunities for quality education at a cost level that can be afforded can provide the escape mechanism into a fuller life for the trapped masses at the bottom of our economic ladder.

If it is impossible for suburbia to understand or to care about the opportunities for education in the ghetto where the achievement level upon graduation from high school is from two to six years below the average expectancy, then it will be necessary to unify and galvanize the ghettos in action committees for change. This is quite likely to be a less well-disciplined approach to a solution than one could obtain through enlightened traditional community leadership.

Now that the laws have been enacted or clarified, joint, not separate, racial efforts should be exerted to improve educational opportunity for every American. Pre-school education is needed for many of our children. Involvement and understanding are necessary for many parents if they are to relate school aspirations to job success and vertical mobility

in the society. Continuing education for adults on processes and problems of the urban setting and upon job training is an essential. Assignment of the best teachers and larger per capita expenditures in the ghetto schools are necessary; understanding that cultural isolation militates against rapid assimilation of those traits and patterns of behavior that the larger community values, and that integration facilitates learning must be understood and become the goal of different levels of our governmental structure and a tolerated condition in our society. If we are not willing to spend more in the ghetto because it is necessary to spend more, then we must abolish the ghetto for all educational purposes. This can be achieved by educational parks and by a redistribution of students, or of students and their parents through changes in the housing pattern. Education is the most important factor in vertical mobility today. The opportunity for it must be extended to all.

The Federal Government must continue to enact those laws which direct the behavior patterns of our society into positive channels. The outlet for the underprivileged must not be restricted anti-social action patterns that provide only emotional release. The Negro who by the Grace of God has managed to escape should place his energies and experiences at the service of the masses with a willingness to relate with and assist in finding solutions to his problems. The Negro must not be alienated from those in the white community who can and are willing to assist in his liberation.

As Douglass did, we must believe in individuals and America until we are deceived. Then we must find the wisdom to distinguish between those who would use and abuse us, and those who genuinely wish to serve us and our society. We must not make the mistake of stereotyping all people because of inconsiderate action by the few. We must continue the quest and keep the faith with Frederick Douglass.