The spirit of a free man

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THE life and writings of Frederick Douglass are far from forgotten. For the last 30 years, the figure of Frederick Douglass has been a textbook staple. Every schoolchild can be presumed to have heard the dramatic story of the runaway slave become abolitionist leader, to have gazed upon his leonine visage, and read at least a boxed excerpt from one of his three autobiographies. In the better high schools, Douglass's first autobiography, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, is often assigned as supplementary reading (sadly, even when high schools assign primary texts, they are viewed as supplementary, not primary). Moreover, while it is fashionable to draw attention to the clay feet of other American greats (to the point of slinging mud onto them if need be), Frederick Douglass still receives the hero's treatment.

Yet institutionalized reverence, even when fully deserved, can be deadening. Douglass now has something of a George Washington problem. Students have heard the same old stories intoned piously year after year—a fact I learned when I started to give a talk on Douglass at a Baltimore public high school, only to be greeted with sighs and groans of "not him again." A century and more ago, the case was otherwise; then Douglass was encountered first by way of live testimonials. In "The Intellectuals and the Boston Mob," Booker T. Washington described the galvanizing effect:

> Even before I had learned to read books or newspapers, I remember hearing my mother and other coloured people in our part of the country speak about Frederick Douglass's wonderful life and achievements. I heard so much about Douglass when I was a boy that one of the reasons why I wanted to go to school and learn to read was that I might read for myself what he had written and said.

Douglass, however, was not part of the curriculum. As Wash-

ington pointed out, "the stories we read in school were all concerned with the success and achievements of white boys and men." Regardless of race, Washington confessed that he always took "a great deal of satisfaction in the lives of men who had risen by their own efforts from poverty to success. It is a great thing for a boy to be able to read books of that kind." Nonetheless, the inspiration to be drawn from such stories was vitiated by racism and self-doubt. When the youthful Washington spoke of emulating white heroes ("what others had done some of us might also be able to do"), his schoolmates discounted the possibility, citing white hostility to black achievement. Washington's unanswerable rejoinder was Frederick Douglass.

Washington sought out Douglass's autobiography on his own and read it over and over. It had the power to offset all of the negative forces—forces that Washington in no way minimizes. Indeed, he insists on their deleterious impact:

> It makes a great deal of difference in the life of a race, as it does in the life of an individual, whether the world expects much or little of that individual or of that race. I suppose that every boy and every girl born in poverty have felt at some time in their lives the weight of the world against them. What the people in the communities did not expect them to do it was hard for them to convince themselves that they could do.

With the weight of the world on one side of the scale and the example of Frederick Douglass on the other, the balance managed to tip toward self-confidence and hope.

W.E.B. DuBois, Booker T. Washington's rival for leadership in the early years of the twentieth century, agreed with Washington about at least one thing: the weightiness of Douglass. In his essay "The Talented Tenth," DuBois says:

> There was Purvis and Remond, Pennington and Highland Garnett, Sojourner Truth and Alexander Crummel, and above all, Frederick Douglass—what would the abolition movement have been without them? They stood as living examples of the possibilities of the Negro race, ... —they were the men who made American slavery impossible.

This knowledge ought now to be the common possession of all Americans. The mainstream neglect of Douglass, typical of the historiography of the first half of the twentieth century, has been remedied. At mid century, when Philip S. Foner sought a publisher for his path-breaking multi-volume edition of Douglass's journalism, speeches, and letters, no university or

commercial press was interested. International Publishers, the official Communist publishing house subsidized by the Soviet Union, brought the volumes out. Today, all three of Douglass's autobiographies are readily available in numerous editions and the Library of America has brought them together, as certifiable classics, in one well-produced volume.†

Like the curricular inclusion of Douglass, this canonization represents both a great gain and a real danger—the danger of petrification. The Communist publisher, Alexander Trachtenberg, was wrong if he thought that Douglass could be mustered on the side of "Amerika," but he was right to feel the challenge in Douglass's words. The challenge is still there, in part at least because—despite the civil rights revolution—racial tensions, troubles, inequalities, and memories are still with us. As Douglass put it: "The destiny of the nation has the Negro for its pivot." So long as that remains true, knowledge of the principles and statesmanship of Douglass can serve as a standard by which to judge current policies and contemporary race leadership. Liberals, in particular, need to confront Douglass's astringent arguments against the cultivation of black race pride and his compelling insistence on the duty of self-emancipation and self-elevation. One shouldn't admire the life, and then dismiss as out-of-date the convictions that would make such a life achievable by others.

DuBois had predicted in 1903 that "the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color-line." His prediction must now be extended to the new century. Yet, even if the twenty-first century were to fulfill millenarian hopes of racial harmony, Douglass's writings would still have the power to provoke and enlighten, for they contain profound reflections, quite beyond race, on the meaning of human freedom, on the paradoxes of opportunity, on the recognition of Providence, and on the strange pathways of true learning. Washington was right: "It is a great thing ... to be able to read books of that kind."

Three Lives

Born into slavery on Maryland's Eastern Shore (c. 1817), Douglass fled north to freedom in 1838, becoming within a few years a powerful and popular speaker on the antislavery

† Frederick Douglass, *Autobiographies: Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave; My Bondage and My Freedom; Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*. The Library of America. 1,126 pp. $35.00.

lecture circuit. His oratory was soon so accomplished that audiences began to doubt his claimed slave origin and fugitive status. How could such a magnificent intellect, bodied forth in such commanding language, have arisen out of the soul-destroying institution of slavery? Precisely to avoid these sorts of suspicions and puzzlements, Douglass's white abolitionist mentors had advised him to stick to simple narration and, they cautioned, "better have a *little* of the plantation manner ... 'tis not best that you seem too learned." Douglass, however, could not tamp himself down: "I must speak just the word that seemed to *me* the word to be spoken *by* me."

With the aim of proving his credentials, Douglass then published his *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845), revealing names and places of his former life. It established him as the genuine article, but also left him dangerously exposed to recapture. (He accordingly spent the next two years lecturing throughout the United Kingdom, returning only after English friends purchased his freedom.) The *Narrative*, though a mere 87 pages, did much more than name names. With intense economy, it documented the horrors of slavery in the supposedly mild upper-south.

Ten years later (1855), Douglass published *My Bondage and My Freedom*. Along with a vastly expanded treatment of his life in slavery (121 additional pages, more than doubling the initial *Narrative*), this second autobiography contained 50 pages of new material on his life in freedom, and another 50 pages of extracts from his speeches. Although the title and structure of the volume suggest a life radically divided by opposing circumstances, what emerges most strikingly is the integrity and consistency of Douglass's character. His bondage and his freedom were both distinctively *his*—and in that quite unlike the ordinary experience of those conditions.

The trajectory toward independence, which Douglass had been on all his life, continued during his early career as an abolitionist. After returning from his overseas tour, Douglass resolved to launch his own antislavery newspaper, the *North Star*, against the wishes of William Lloyd Garrison, publisher of *The Liberator* and leader of the abolitionist movement. Douglass's colleagues, who seemed to regard themselves as his "handlers," were not happy about either the paper or his relocation from the Boston area to Rochester, New York, perhaps fearing the independence of mind that would accompany Douglass's independence of action. And it was true that this physical break did culminate in a more substantive, doctrinal

break, when Douglass rejected the essential Garrisonian dogma that the U.S. Constitution was a proslavery document. According to the Garrisonians, the Constitution was "a covenant with Death and an agreement with Hell" under which no opponent of slavery could, in good conscience, either vote or hold office. Moral purity was all in all to the Garrisonians. As radically apolitical pacifists, they demanded the dissolution of a corrupt Union, insisting moreover that disunion be accomplished by moral suasion alone, not force of arms.

It is impossible to overestimate the significance of Douglass's about-face on this question of constitutional interpretation. (Garrison, unable to credit an honest difference of opinion, denounced Douglass's "apostasy" and "treachery.") Once Douglass came to view the Constitution as "a glorious liberty document" that might "be wielded in behalf of emancipation," he became a very different sort of abolitionist from the no-government types who regarded slavery as just the most visible form of the violence endemic to the state. As he shifted from foe to friend of the regime, Douglass developed a powerful new rhetoric, calling not for disunion but for an America true to its own founding principles. Many subsequent black leaders have understood the appeal of a reform-minded patriotism. Witness the language of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech: "When the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir." Douglass pioneered the combination of praise for the fathers' principles and vitriol for the sons' practice. For a sustained demonstration, of which the following is a small sample, see "The Meaning of July Fourth for the Negro" (1852):

> Fellow-citizens, I will not enlarge further on your national inconsistencies. The existence of slavery in this country brands your republicanism as a sham, your humanity as a base pretense, and your Christianity as a lie. It destroys your moral power abroad: it corrupts your politicians at home. It saps the foundation of religion; it makes your name a hissing and a bye-word to a mocking earth. It is the antagonistic force in your government, the only thing that seriously disturbs and endangers your *Union*. It fetters your progress; it is the enemy of improvement; the deadly foe of education; it fosters pride; it breeds insolence; it promotes vice; it shelters crime; it is a curse to the earth that supports it; and yet you cling to it as if it were the sheet anchor of all your hopes. Oh! Be warned! Be warned!

In the third autobiography, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, published in 1881, the section on slavery was scaled back by 20 percent, and 200 pages were added covering the years from 1855-81. The new realism made possible by Douglass's rejection of Garrison's pacifism and nonresistance is much in evidence here, as Douglass's arsenal of weapons against slavery and second-class citizenship enlarged to include both bullets and ballots. Douglass openly defended the natural right of slaves to kill their masters; Jefferson, of course, had admitted the right as well. Douglass secretly funded John Brown—opposing, however, the raid on Harper's Ferry and pleading with Brown to return to his original plan of running off slaves by means of guerrilla infiltration of the South. And Douglass welcomed the war when it came.

The third volume contains valuable material on Douglass's activities during the Civil War, especially his campaign for the black man "to get an eagle on his button, a musket on his shoulder, and the star-spangled banner over his head." Once blacks were admitted as soldiers, Douglass worked as a recruiter for the first colored regiments, the 54th and 55th Massachusetts (signing up his two sons first). At the same time, Douglass pushed for equal treatment of black soldiers with respect to wages, rations, equipment, promotion, and protection (e.g., Douglass called upon the North to insist that captured black soldiers be part of prisoner-of-war exchanges, despite the Confederacy's threat to treat them as felons).

In urging black enlistments, Douglass was thinking as much about the future incorporation of blacks into the polity as he was about their immediate contribution to the war effort. It was essential that blacks be objects of respect rather than simply objects of pity. Soldiership would help to wipe away the taint of servility, in the minds of both blacks and whites. Of the assault of the 54th on Fort Wagner (the final scene of the movie *Glory*), Douglass wrote: "In that terrible battle, under the wing of night, more cavils in respect of the quality of negro manhood were set at rest than could have been during a century of ordinary life and observation." Moreover, Douglass was certain that access to the cartridge-box would culminate in access to the ballot-box and jury-box: "He who fights the battles of America may claim America as his country—and have that claim respected." After the war, Douglass insisted on that claim of citizenship—"Old Man Eloquent" was indispensable to the adoption of the Fifteenth Amendment.

Among the wonderful moments in the third autobiography

are the accounts of Douglass's interviews with President Lincoln. It's delightful to think of these two—the most superior men of the nineteenth century—meeting and conversing. Along with detailing their policy discussions (and disagreements), Douglass comments on Lincoln's personal manner: "Mr. Lincoln was not only a great President, but a GREAT MAN—too great to be small in anything. In his company I was never in any way reminded of my humble origin, or of my unpopular color." This was unlike the reception Douglass sometimes received from presumably ultra-progressive types, who would say things like: "Mr. Douglass, I will walk to meeting with you; I am not afraid of a black man." Of such acute color-consciousness, Douglass quipped that a man may "stand up so straight as to lean backward." One is reminded of liberal faculty members who, with the professed aim of exploding stereotypes, call upon students to fill a blackboard with noxious lists of racial and ethnic characterizations, or who expect minority students to serve as racial spokesmen.

Liberation theology

Douglass offers a model of how to handle discrimination, of both the well- and ill-intentioned varieties. Always he sought to "expose the absurdity of this spirit of caste," but he pursued that end in different ways, ranging from humor to verbal protest to physical resistance. Given the amount of traveling that Douglass did, he frequently encountered prejudice and proscription in railcars, steamboats, stagecoaches, and public houses (in addition to mob violence during his years as an abolitionist speaker). His refusal to submit to Jim Crow exclusions led at times to "extremely rough" treatment but also to surprising acceptances and breakthroughs (e.g., integrating the Rochester public schools).

More important than Douglass's technique is the example of Douglass's large spirit. Although he admits, "the lash of proscription ... has a sting for the soul," he seems psychically unscarred by those experiences. Speculating about the sources of his resilience and cheerfulness, Douglass notes the abiding presence of friends both white and black and a belief that "I had on my side all the invisible forces of the moral government of the universe." His conviction that race was transient—while humanity was permanent—insulated him. He rejected victimization: "'How do you feel,' said a friend to me, 'when you are hooted and jeered on the street on account of your

color?' 'I feel as if an ass had kicked, but had hit nobody,' was my answer."

This was one of the prime lessons Booker T. Washington absorbed from Douglass: "In the face of discouragements and difficulties the Negro must ever remember that nobody can degrade him ... The individual himself is the only one who can inflict that punishment." In Washington's view, the deepest harm was done not by the oppressor to the oppressed but by the oppressor to himself; hence, Washington sincerely pitied racists. Witness the following passage from "Democracy and Education" (1896):

> The Negro can afford to be wronged; the white man cannot afford to wrong him. Unjust laws or customs that exist in many places regarding the races injure the white man and inconvenience the Negro. No race can wrong another race simply because it has the power to do so without being permanently injured in morals.... It is for the white man to save himself from his degradation that I plead.... Physical death comes to the one Negro lynched in a county, but death of the morals—death of the soul—comes to the thousands responsible for the lynching.

No materialist could fathom this statement. The creation of a "beloved community," about which Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke, entailed something of this same care for segregationists. King always stressed that the end of a boycott was reconciliation and redemption, not racial spoils or the extortion of color-coded jobs. King implied that materialists and atheists could not be true practitioners of nonviolent resistance, since the method required a belief that "the universe in some form is on the side of justice."

I suspect that the contemporary phenomenon of angry middle-class blacks derives in substantial part from the erosion of both Bible-based faith and faith in Progress. Charitable and hardy souls have been replaced by suspicious and fragile selves, hypersensitized to perceived slights and perpetually aggrieved. While Douglass was critical of the sort of Christianity that taught political quiescence to blacks (thereby underwriting white power), he possessed a strong sense of God's providential care. For Douglass, the existence of God was enough to "Keep Hope Alive." (Douglass would, I think, find Jesse Jackson's mantra to be misdirected, since hope is not self-willed but rather the gift of a higher wisdom to us.) Douglass never allowed his faith in better days ahead to preempt his labors in that direction. For him, divine providence and human responsibility went hand in hand. Accordingly, Douglass inveighed

against the "emotional, shouting, and thoughtless religion" that instead of adding virtue to faith tended to "substitute faith for virtue," thereby becoming "a deadly enemy to our progress." Fellow abolitionist Martin Delany was even more insistent about the need for theological reform among African-Americans as a precondition for worldly success and happiness. Perhaps it is time once again to ask whether there is a connection between "a misconception of the character and ways of Deity" and bankrupt political strategies. One might start with a critique of the Reverend Jesse Jackson, the Reverend Al Sharpton, and Minister Louis Farrakhan.

Douglass updated the third version of his autobiography once more in 1893, with an additional 100 pages, but otherwise the text was unaltered. Whereas the two early books had sold well (15,000 copies of *My Bondage and My Freedom* in the first two months), both the 1881 and 1893 editions sold poorly—perhaps a small sign of the nation's backsliding. By this time, the evidence of white degradation was all around: the disfranchisement of African-Americans, the virtual slavery of sharecropping and peonage, Jim Crow, "lynch law," and Supreme Court decisions that gutted federal enforcement of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments (*Reese*, *Cruikshank*, the 1883 decisions declaring the Civil Rights Act of 1875 unconstitutional, and finally *Plessy* in 1896). Douglass continued till the end to act on the advice he is said to have given to a young man inquiring what he should do for his people: "agitate, agitate, agitate." Douglass's last truly great address, "Why is the Negro Lynched?," was published just a few months before his death from a sudden heart attack in February of 1895.

Bondage and freedom

One of the advantages of having all three autobiographies in one volume is the ease with which they can be compared. Naturally enough, the section on Douglass's life in freedom expands with the passage of time; in later editions, he does not extensively revisit this material, other than generally tightening his prose style in the 1881 version. However, there are interesting shifts—some marked, some subtle—in Douglass's presentation of his experience as a slave, particularly between the 1845 and 1854 versions.

Autobiography depends upon knowledge and memory. Douglass, however, is forced to write a narrative without a proper starting point, for he had no accurate knowledge of his

age or his paternity, and very slight remembrance of his mother, having seen her only a handful of times. Slavery, he says, left him "without an intelligible beginning in the world." Ignorance of one's origin, deliberately enforced by masters, was the norm. "I do not," Douglass writes, "remember to have ever met a slave who could tell of his birthday." Although Douglass's father was assumed by many to have been his master, Aaron Anthony, and assumed by all, then and now, to have been a white man, Douglass could never verify these hunches: "Slavery does away with fathers, as it does away with families." Even his mother was taken from him, hired out as a field slave on a neighboring farm (an almost insurmountable 12 miles distant), while he was given over to the care of his grandmother. Douglass presents the separation of mothers from infants as another routine practice of slaveholders. The separation (and impairment of natural affection) brought on by "hiring out" could be quite as profound as that resulting from the actual sale of mother or child.

After the painful declarations of ignorance and absence that fill the opening pages, the first detailed memory that Douglass relates is of a whipping. The incident took place shortly after his transfer, at about age six, from his grandmother's isolated cabin to the slave quarters of Wye House, the home plantation of the Lloyd family. Douglass's master was the chief overseer for Col. Edward Lloyd V, three-time Maryland governor and U.S. Senator, whose vast empire included 21 farms, 10,000 acres, and 500 slaves. Aaron Anthony and his family, owners of 600 acres and 30 slaves of their own, lived in a small house on the Lloyd property. It was there that Douglass witnessed the beating of his aunt Hester.

Awakened by her screams at dawn, he found her stripped to the waist, her wrists bound and suspended from a ceiling hook. She stood upon a stool, her arms stretched up their full length, while "old master" whipped her mercilessly with the "blood-clotted cowskin": "The louder she screamed, the harder he whipped; and where the blood ran fastest, there he whipped longest." Her crime was to have been caught in the company of a young man (Lloyd's Ned). Douglass tells us that his aunt was "a woman of noble form, and of graceful proportions," without equal among the local women, black or white. Whether young Frederick was aware of the sexual implications of what he was witnessing is unclear, but the mature Douglass makes the situation abundantly clear to his readers. Of Aaron Anthony's motives he says: "Had he been a man of pure morals himself,

he might have been thought interested in protecting the innocence of my aunt; but those who knew him will not suspect him of any such virtue."

The opening chapter of the *Narrative* is thus entirely about slavery's perversion of domestic life. Douglass reminds us that the ownership of other human beings involves control over reproduction as well as production, sexuality as well as labor. As an institution, slavery was hostile to family formation and family-based identity among slaves. Along with documenting the effects of sexual despotism on slaves, Douglass observed the effects of the master's sexual license on his lawful family:

> The master is frequently compelled to sell this class of his slaves [mulatto children], out of deference to the feelings of his white wife; and, cruel as the deed may strike any one to be, for a man to sell his own children to human flesh-mongers, it is often the dictate of humanity for him to do so; for, unless he does this, he must not only whip them himself, but must stand by and see one white son tie up his brother, of but few shades darker complexion than himself, and ply the gory lash to his naked back.

In the 1854 version, the material on Douglass's parentage and his initiation into the horrors of slavery remains, but does not appear until chapters three and five. Intervening are his earliest memories of life with his grandmother, Betsey, her longstanding partner Isaac Baily (a free man), and his numerous siblings and cousins (offspring of Betsey's daughters—Douglass referred to five, scholars now conclude nine). Living distant from the communal slave quarters, with adults who both worked on their own account, it is not so surprising that Douglass could say, "It was a long time before I knew myself to be *a slave*. I knew many other things before I knew that." Above all else, he knew freedom. Douglass's description of his early childhood is a Rousseauian idyll:

> The first seven or eight years of the slave-boy's life are about as full of sweet content as those of the most favored and petted *white* children of the slaveholder. The slave-boy escapes many troubles which befall and vex his white brother. He seldom has to listen to lectures on propriety of behavior, or on anything else.... Thus, freed from all restraint, the slave-boy can be, in his life and conduct, a genuine boy, doing whatever his boyish nature suggests;.... He literally runs wild; has no pretty little verses to learn in the nursery; no nice little speeches to make for aunts, uncles, or cousins, to show how smart he is;.... His days, when the weather is warm, are spent in the pure, open air, and in the bright sunshine. He always sleeps in airy apartments; he seldom has to take powders, to cleanse his blood, or to quicken his

> appetite. He eats no candies; gets no lumps of loaf sugar; always relishes his food; cries but little, for nobody cares for his crying; learns to esteem his bruises but slight, because others so esteem them. In a word, he is, for the most part of the first eight years of his life, a spirited, joyous, uproarious, and happy boy.

Douglass perhaps generalizes his own carefree experience too readily, although he does acknowledge the damage that cold and hunger, if too severe, can do to youngsters. Even if latitude of action and exemption from artifice were quite typical, slave children otherwise situated would not have shared in his privilege of innocence. The terrible spectacles that Douglass eventually witnessed were part of their lives much sooner. Even Douglass had forebodings of what was to come. He had learned that his grandmother and all the children belonged to a mysterious and fearsome personage called Old Master and that each child in turn would be delivered up to him, never to see Grandmammy again. Douglass calls this new knowledge "something to brood over."

Father of the man

The pattern that emerges in these first chapters—relatively privileged circumstances alternating with sudden exposure to the full rigors of slavery—continues throughout Douglass's years in slavery. Whereas his first telling of his life, the *Narrative*, emphasized the most generic and brutal features of slavery, his second telling gives a better sense of the special interplay of character and circumstance that conspired to create Frederick Douglass. His earliest memory was not of his aunt being flogged, but his own enjoyment of freedom. Douglass claims that "the idea of being a freeman some day," which came to dominate his thoughts once he was well aware of his enslavement, was "an inborn dream of my human nature." I would not be the one to gainsay mankind's natural love of liberty, but Douglass's share of that love seems to have been greater than that of others, whether by natural endowment or fortuitous cultivation.

It is breathtaking how much the mature man can be glimpsed in the child, maybe especially in those destined for greatness. Winston Churchill's first memory (dating to age four) is similarly revealing:

> I remember my grandfather, the Viceroy, unveiling the Lord Gough statue in 1878. A great black crowd, scarlet soldiers on horseback, strings pulling away a brown shiny sheet, the old Duke, the formidable grandpapa, talking loudly to the crowd. I recall even a

> phrase he used: "and with a withering volley he shattered the enemy's line."

The memory encapsulates Churchill's life: his love of martial victory, his sense of history (both familial and national) and its judgments, his capacity for rhetoric and poetic statesmanship. In Douglass, what predominated from the beginning were the twin loves of freedom and learning, accompanied by qualities—in particular, physical courage and humanity—that made those loves effectual, that translated them from interior to exterior.

After a cruel separation from his grandmother, Douglass spent two years at the Lloyd plantation. Being still too young for field work, he found his leisure filled with the many delightful sights and adventures offered by what was, in essence, a self-sustaining city. There were "barns, stables, storehouses, and tobacco-houses; blacksmiths' shops, wheelwrights' shops, coopers' shops ... kitchens, wash-houses, dairies, summer-houses, green-houses, hen-houses, turkey-houses, pigeon-houses, and arbors," plus the Great House itself. There were lawns, lanes, game parks, a creek with fish, crabs, clams, and oysters for the taking, and most wondrous of all to Douglass's curious mind, a windmill and a sailing sloop. Basing himself upon his joy in beholding "this elaborate exhibition of wealth, power, and vanity," Douglass makes the remarkable declaration, "these all belonged to me, as well as to Col. Edward Lloyd." Indeed, at one point, he goes even further, saying of the Great House that "they occupied it; *I* enjoyed it." Douglass's ownership extended beyond his free run of the place; the objects around him, both natural and man-made, were his because he was mindful of them, because he learned from them. It was not in him to feel dispossessed. I think Douglass eventually brought something of this same aptitude for appropriation and appreciation to the U.S. Constitution.

Douglass's stance toward the world contrasts sharply with that of Malcolm X, expressed in his famous speech "The Ballot or the Bullet." Malcolm X would have bluntly dismissed the slave-boy's sense of belonging:

> Well, I am one who doesn't believe in deluding myself. I'm not going to sit at your table and watch you eat, with nothing on my plate, and call myself a diner.... Being born here in America doesn't make you an American.... No, I'm not an American. I'm one of the 22 million black people who are the victims of Americanism.

Unlike Douglass, for whom the world was his oyster, Malcolm

X was a literalist—the world is not an oyster, only an oyster is an oyster and he wanted his. Douglass would not have gone so far as to say that freedom of the mind is absolute, or that in contemplating the prison walls one is free. He could not rest content with mindful observation, since much of what he observed outraged his sense of justice. But he did understand that a measure of real freedom was available to the bondsmen and, correlatively, that a measure of real slavery was the lot of the master. Having seen the loosed and odious passions that tyrannized the tyrants, Douglass felt no envy of their riches. He concluded: "The slave is a subject, subjected by others; the slaveholder is a subject, but he is the author of his own subjection. There is more truth in the saying, that slavery is a greater evil to the master than to the slave, than many, who utter it, suppose."

Education of the mind

Perhaps because of the young Douglass's leisure for exploration, he developed a very thorough knowledge of the workings of slavery on his own and neighboring plantations. Douglass notes that the seclusion of the Eastern Shore led to dark practices more typical of the Deep South than of the rest of Maryland. His precise accounts of the slaves' scanty provisioning and the barbarism of overseers are shocking. In Solzhenitsyn-like fashion, he documents cases of the unpunished murder of slaves. When the decision was made to transfer him to the more civilized precincts of Baltimore, he greeted the event "as a special interposition of Divine Providence," rescuing him from the dehumanization that would soon have been his lot. He found himself situated in a home new to slaveholding, where his task was to watch over the small son of a gentle and pious mistress. For the first time in his life, he was adequately fed, clothed, and sheltered (having been dressed only in a long coarsely woven shirt until then—that is to say, without a bed, shoes, socks, jacket, or trousers regardless of season).

What is probably the most well known story about Douglass dates from this time. When Douglass (about age nine) manifested an interest in the Bible-reading of his mistress, she undertook to instruct him; however, once the tutoring sessions became known to the husband, he forbade any further instruction, railing that

> learning would spoil the best nigger in the world ... it would forever unfit him for the duties of a slave ... if you learn him

> how to read, he'll want to know how to write; and, this accomplished, he'll be running away with himself.

Douglass described this as "the first decidedly anti-slavery lecture" he had heard, for it sketched out "the direct pathway from slavery to freedom." It also revealed to him the source of the white man's power, which had been a nagging mystery. Douglass had already rejected the idea that black enslavement was in accord with God's plan or a result of disproportionate natural endowments. But if all men were by right free, what enabled one race to keep another in submission? Douglass now had his answer: a system of enforced ignorance.

On his own, Douglass completed the project of enlightenment his mistress had begun. The details of his ingenuity are charming (tricking neighboring white youngsters into sharing the secrets of writing and spelling; stealing copy-books; picking up castoff papers from the gutters), but what is most interesting is the energizing role played by hostility and prohibition. Douglass frankly acknowledges these negative inducements:

> The very determination which he expressed to keep me in ignorance, only rendered me the more resolute in seeking intelligence. In learning to read, therefore, I am not sure that I do not owe quite as much to the opposition of my master, as to the kindly assistance of my amiable mistress.

I wonder what impact this insight would have on pedagogical practices today? Again, one is reminded of Rousseau, who recommended placing the skill of reading tantalizingly just out of reach. Desire is the foundation for acquisition, but desire can't be assumed as a given. I am not suggesting that we make education more desirable by making it less available or by spreading the view that white devils are keeping it for themselves. I do, however, think we might discover ways both to awaken discontent over one's ignorance and to present education as the answer to that discontent. We could do with less focus on the self-esteem of students and the material resources at their disposal (for instance, the recently ballyhooed right to Internet access) and more straightforward talk about "the direct pathway" from dependency to freedom. Belief in the transformative power of knowledge must be restored. When that is present, the most meager of resources suffice. Douglass had a copy of the Bible and *The Columbian Orator* (a school text on the art of forensics, essentially an anthology of the rhetoric of

liberty); Lincoln had the Bible, Shakespeare, and Euclid. Is it really better to catch youngsters up like flies in the world-wide cobweb? Maybe there is still something to be said for a few good books—a web of one's own selection through which one can move knowingly as the spider.

Education of the spirit

The master was right about the incompatibility of literacy and slavery. With knowledge, Douglass became increasingly sullen and seditious. His brooding was further aggravated when he found himself, after seven years in Baltimore, back on the Eastern Shore, subject once again to hunger and violently prevented from establishing a Sabbath school, where other slaves might learn to read the Gospel. His situation worsened again when he was farmed out for a stint with the noted "Negro-breaker" Edward Covey. Covey's reputation for returning the fieriest spirits *"well broken"* enabled him to get his land tilled at minimal cost, since desperate slaveholders were willing to charge low rates in exchange for "his happy management."

The lesson Douglass drew was not the one intended, however. He did learn that literacy alone is not enough. Literacy might "unfit" one for slavery, but it did not guarantee actual release. Douglass's favorite selection from *The Columbian Orator* was a dialogue between a master and a slave, in which the slave's articulate condemnation of slavery wins him his freedom. Life with Covey demonstrated that this vision of bringing about the end of slavery through rational dialogue was utopian. (Douglass had been encouraged as a youngster by the conversations he had had with white boys, many of whom shared his understanding of natural right and sympathized with his plight.) For the first time in his life, Douglass was regularly worked and lashed to the very limit of his endurance. Within a few months, Douglass says, he was "completely wrecked, changed and bewildered":

> I was broken in body, soul and spirit. My natural elasticity was crushed; my intellect languished; the disposition to read departed; the cheerful spark that lingered about my eye died; the dark night of slavery closed in upon me; and behold a man transformed into a brute!

Covey's "mistake" was to push Douglass *beyond* what he could endure. With Douglass collapsed and ill from sunstroke,

Covey demanded (with kicks and lashes) that he rise. Unable to do so, Douglass welcomed death. Although his noncompliance was a result of physical incapacity more than mental resolve, it had the effect of fortifying him for deliberate noncompliance. After a fruitless appeal to his master to rescue him from Covey's savagery, Douglass determined "to obey every order, however unreasonable, if it were possible, and, if Mr. Covey should then undertake to beat me, to defend and protect myself to the best of my ability." Douglass was recalled to himself not by a book, but by a beating. When Covey next sprang upon him, attempting to hog-tie and whip him, Douglass fought back, "strictly on the *defensive*," striking no blows of his own, but rather blocking and parrying. These self-adopted rules of engagement did not, however, prevent him from hurling Covey to the ground or squeezing him by the throat. Covey was unable to win the two-hour, hand-to-hand skirmish. For the remainder of his year with Covey—indeed for the remainder of his time in slavery—Douglass was never flogged again.

Years earlier, the observant child on the plantation had noticed that "he is whipped oftenest, who is whipped easiest; and that slave who has the courage to stand up for himself against the overseer, although he may have many hard stripes at the first, becomes, in the end, a freeman, even though he sustains the formal relation of a slave." While still a teenager, Douglass achieved this status for himself. The secret to what Douglass calls his "resurrection" was a willingness to die: "I had reached the point, at which I was *not afraid to die*. This spirit made me a freeman in *fact*, while I remained a slave in *form*." There is an important insight here into classical liberalism's trinity of rights ("life, liberty, and property"). They are not truly triune. During the period of his brutification, Douglass thought only of staying alive. As he admits, "in thinking of my life, I almost forgot my liberty." To put life above all else makes one slavish. In order to reclaim his humanity, Douglass had to think much less of staying alive. To secure liberty, he had to set life at hazard. In later years, Douglass never tired of citing his favorite lines of verse:

> Hereditary bondmen, know ye not
> Who would be free, themselves must strike the blow?

The blow is struck against the master but also against one's own overmastering desires for preservation and comfort. Not

that those desires are contemptible; as Douglass says, "life is not lightly regarded by men of sane minds." Nonetheless, there are situations in which liberty demands that life be ventured.

The battle with Covey enabled Douglass to set certain terms to his enslavement. Over the next four years, his ability to carve out a sphere of freedom for himself increased. When he was sent to work for Mr. Freeland (a truly decent master, whose goodness only quickened Douglass's longing to be his own master), he established a flourishing Sabbath school, with upwards of 40 scholars. And, with four compatriots, he plotted escape. When their attempt was foiled, Douglass was at considerable risk of being "sold South," but astonishingly, he was instead sent back to Baltimore to learn a skilled trade. There, he eventually negotiated the privilege of hiring his own time (a fairly common practice in Baltimore and New Orleans). He was to find and contract for caulking jobs on his own; pay for his own lodgings, clothing, and tools; and, in addition, turn over three dollars each week to his master.

> This arrangement, it will be perceived, was decidedly in my master's favor. It relieved him of all need of looking after me. His money was sure. He received all the benefits of slaveholding without its evils; while I endured all the evils of a slave, and suffered all the care and anxiety of a freeman. I found it a hard bargain. But, hard as it was, I thought it better than the old mode of getting along. It was a step towards freedom to be allowed to bear the responsibilities of a freeman.

Despite the onerous conditions, Douglass saved money, mingled with free blacks at the "East Baltimore Mental Improvement Society," and within four years of the battle with Covey, Douglass shook off the lingering form of slavery with a daring flight north.

Douglass today

Douglass's long journey toward full freedom is a vivid reminder that freedom cannot, properly speaking, be granted; it must be wrested and won. We tend today to talk much of opportunity—equalizing it, providing it, extending it. But perhaps opportunity is like freedom, not a thing to be given but rather a self-made thing, created out of imagination and keenness. What constitutes an opportunity? Douglass was forbidden to read; that ban became a spur to a remarkable and lifelong process of self-education. Douglass was savagely beaten; that mistreatment roused him to an act of courage that be-

came the first of many acts of self-emancipation. Were these opportunities? It would seem perverse to say so. Perhaps "opportunity" is just not a very apposite term. Etymology reveals that it means "toward harbor." Opportunity is too safety-conscious a conception, too untrue to the curious twists and turns of life. It might be better to retrieve two terms that have fallen out of fashion: providence and character. Of providence, Douglass says:

> The allotments of Providence, when coupled with trouble and anxiety, often conceal from finite vision the wisdom and goodness in which they are sent; and, frequently, what seemed a harsh and invidious dispensation is converted by after experience into a happy and beneficial arrangement.

On "character," Douglass is even more eloquent:

> What we, the colored people, want, is *character* ... A change in our political condition would do very little for us without this. Character is the important thing, and without it we must continue to be marked for degradation and stamped with the brand of inferiority.... Industry, sobriety, honesty, combined with intelligence and a due self-respect, find them where you will, among black or white, must be *looked up to*—can never be *looked down upon*. In their presence, prejudice is abashed, confused and mortified.... The offensive traits of character imputed to us, can only be injurious while they are true of us. For a man to say that sweet is bitter—that right is wrong—that light is darkness—is not to injure the truth, but to stamp himself a liar; and the like is true when they impute to us that of which we are not guilty. We have the power of making our enemies slanderers, and this we must do by showing ourselves worthy and respectable men.
>
> We are not insensible to the various obstacles that throng the colored man's pathway to respectability....
>
> The fact that we are limited and circumscribed, ought rather to incite us to a more vigorous and persevering use of the elevating means within our reach, than to dishearten us. The means of education, though not so free and open to us as to white persons, are nevertheless at our command to such an extent as to make education possible.

Douglass was as willing to speak forthrightly about the shortcomings of his own people as to castigate the evildoers among the white population. Such criticism is rarely welcome, but done as Douglass does it, truth-telling can be bracing. By contrast, in our attempts to avoid "blaming the victim," we often end up stripping individuals of all responsibility and agency over their lives. Already in 1889, before sociology made matters even worse, Douglass worried about the loss of self-

knowledge brought on by always blaming others: "We have been so long in the habit of tracing our failures and misfortunes to the views and acts of others that we seem, in some measure, to have lost the talent and disposition of seeing our own faults."

While Douglass demanded strong federal enforcement of civil rights, he was wary of aid, whether governmental or private, that enfeebled the recipients. He recognized the do-gooders' temptation to paternalism and urged solicitous whites to pursue the sterner course of justice:

> I think the American people are disposed often to be generous rather than just. I look over this country at the present time, and I see Educational Societies, Sanitary Commissions, Freedmen's Associations, and the like, —all very good: but in regard to the colored people there is always more that is benevolent, I perceive, than just, manifested towards us. What I ask for the Negro is not benevolence, not pity, not sympathy, but simply *justice*. The American people have always been anxious to know what they shall do with us.... I have had but one answer from the beginning. Do nothing with us! Your doing with us has already played the mischief with us. Do nothing with us! If the apples will not remain on the tree of their own strength, if they are wormeaten at the core, if they are early ripe and disposed to fall, let them fall! I am not for tying or fastening them on the tree in any way, except by nature's plan, and if they will not stay there, let them fall. And if the Negro cannot stand on his own legs, let him fall also. All I ask is, give him a chance to stand on his own legs! Let him alone!

How insulted Douglass would have been by policies like affirmative action and minority set-asides.

The request to be let alone did not signal an acceptance of segregation, either voluntary or enforced, on Douglass's part. Quite the reverse. Douglass meant that blacks should be able and willing to circulate freely—attending schools, gaining employment, buying homes, using public transport and accommodations, all without reference to color. Since it has become axiomatic today that color-blindness is impossible, we rely instead on mandated color-matching (every so many of these must be diversified by a few of those). Again, Douglass would have been saddened by the degree to which Americans are selling themselves short. Douglass had faith in the capacity of whites and blacks alike to defeat prejudice, thereby becoming indifferent to the difference of color. Complexional institutions—black churches, schools, benevolent and literary societies—were, for Douglass, temporary expedients only. He advised his breth-

ren "to occupy memberships and stations among white persons, and in white institutions, just so fast as our rights are secured to us." Douglass's vision of the American future was integrationist to such an extent that he regarded the amalgamation of the races as inevitable, eventually. We are still an awfully long way from a fully blended nationality, but interracial unions are increasing in number and certainly no longer cause the sort of stir that greeted the widower Douglass's own marriage, late in life, to a white woman.

American race pride

Finally, Douglass warned against promoting "race pride." Since color is the "gift of the Almighty," Douglass argued that it is not a legitimate source of either pride or shame. Pride should follow upon achievement. Moreover, for blacks, race pride was not only false but dangerous as well. Douglass explains why in an 1889 speech entitled "The Nation's Problem":

> What is the mountain devil, the lion in the way of our progress? What is it, but American race pride; an assumption of superiority upon the ground of race and color? Do we not know that every argument we make, and every pretension we set up in favor of race pride is giving the enemy a stick to break our own heads?
>
> But it may be said that we shall put down race pride in the white people by cultivating race pride among ourselves. The answer to this is that the devils are not cast out by Beelzebub, the prince of devils. The poorest and meanest white man, drunk or sober, when he has nothing else to commend him, says: "I am a white man, I am." We can all see the low extremity reached by that sort of race pride, and yet we encourage it when we pride ourselves upon the fact of our color.

The mountain lion is still in our midst, awakened by the disintegration of the struggle for civil rights into the movement for Black Power. In an era when black is thought to spell entitlement, an unapologetic, indeed truculent, reassertion of white power (or at least white anger) by those unversed in history was entirely predictable. One way to send the mountain devils of race-power back to their respective lairs is to press into service those trusty weapons of American idealism and constitutionalism. Douglass summoned blacks and whites to "enjoy together, in the same country, under the same flag, the inestimable blessings of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, as neighborly citizens of a common country." I know we have grown more cynical, but I can't believe that

national pride coupled with appeals to principle will not trump race pride (black or white). Ideals and symbols still matter intensely.

In June of 1863, on the eve of the Battle of Gettysburg, Douglass could look forward to living together "under the same flag," the flag of Union with its promise of liberty and justice for all. It is a national disgrace that, in the year 2000, the flag of the treasonous Confederacy still flies on the State House grounds of South Carolina and Georgia, in defiance of the deaths of half a million soldiers—sacrificed in partial payment of the blood drawn by 250 years of slavery. If we were to listen again to Frederick Douglass, perhaps we could learn how to ransom the future from the sins of the past. The first step would be to recover the hope that it might be done, and to insist that we live under and by the same standards, which is to say the same flag and the same laws.