

Frederick Douglass Knew That Racial Identity Is No Antidote to Racial Injustice

Frederick Douglass, the greatest of all American abolitionists, possibly the greatest American champion of the cause of equal rights, was born 200 years ago in February 1818.

Perhaps the infant Douglass arrived on Feb. 14, as he liked to think, remembering a morning in his boyhood when his mother, enslaved as he was, walked miles to bring him a modest cake and called him her “little valentine.”

By this now-customary dating, we commemorate Douglass’ 200th birthday Feb. 14 as an opportune moment to reflect on his life, thought, and legacy.

Raised in what Booker T. Washington would call “the school of slavery,” Douglass was a battler.

“To live is to battle,” he believed, according to his writings. “Contest is itself ennobling.”

In particular, the age-old contest for liberty against the forces of tyranny. He presented his own physical battle, as a teen, against the cruel slave master Edward Covey as a great turning point of his life.

“I was a changed being after that fight,” Douglass wrote. “I was nothing before; I was a man now.”

He called his act of resistance to tyranny a “resurrection.”

It was not, however, by means of physical force that Douglass chose to do battle over the course of his great career. The battle with Covey was not the only battle, nor the only moment

of rebirth, that he recounted in his autobiographies. No less profoundly formative was his battle for literacy and education.

When another of his slave masters, Hugh Auld, scolded his young wife Sophia for beginning to teach young Frederick how to read—such learning, Auld said, “would forever unfit him for the duties of a slave”—the alert boy received this lesson as “a new and special revelation.”

From this unwitting instruction, he learned that “‘knowledge unfits a child to be a slave’ ... and from that moment I understood the direct pathway from slavery to freedom.”

It was a lesson he never forgot. In the last major speech of his life, delivered in 1894 at the dedication of an industrial school for the children of former slaves, Douglass advised his audience: “Education ... means emancipation. It means light and liberty.”

Education meant emancipation, for Douglass, because education properly conceived consists in the perfection of our faculties of reason and speech. The degradation of those faculties is instrumental to tyranny and their cultivation is indispensable to liberty.

It is by the possession and exercise of those faculties that we are, and know ourselves to be, free and equal by nature, the bearers of natural and unalienable rights. By the possession and exercise of those faculties, we learn of our own distinctiveness and also of the distinctiveness of the singular nation whose Founders dedicated it at its birth to those fundamental moral truths—the “eternal principles,” the “saving principles,” Douglass called them—in the Declaration of Independence.

This is what Douglass meant, at bottom, when he affirmed, “great is the power of human speech.” Thus armed with the power of reasoned speech and the truths he discovered by it,

he went forth, in a career extending over half a century, to do battle with those who would replace truth with falsehood and liberty with tyranny as the foundations of American government.

That meant defending the anti-slavery, pro-liberty legacy of the declaration against all who would distort or discredit it. Douglass' primary adversaries, of course, included those we might now call defenders of the "old regime," the regime of slavery and its successors, dedicated to the principle of white supremacy or black subordination.

"Slavery," Douglass remarked presciently a month after the end of the Civil War, "has been fruitful in giving itself names ... and you and I and all of us had better wait and see what new form this old monster will assume, in what new skin this old snake will come forth next."

As Douglass well understood, the declaration's principles needed defending not only against the old regime but also against its misguided opponents. Among the latter were some of his old colleagues, followers of his early mentor William Lloyd Garrison, whose abolitionist zeal moved them to renounce not only the U.S. Constitution and the federal union but also, in some cases, to deny the legitimacy of any human government.

No less misguided, in Douglass' view, were those of his black compatriots, emigrationists and other black nationalists, who sought a remedy for race-based injustice in the affirmation of racial identity.

In that final major speech, "The Blessings of Liberty and Education," Douglass had this to say about such appeals:

We hear, since emancipation, much said by our modern colored leaders in commendation of race pride, race love, race effort, race superiority, race men, and the like. One man is praised for being a race man and another is condemned for not being a race man. In all this talk of race, the motive may be

good, but the method is bad. It is an effort to cast out Satan by Beelzebub. ...

I recognize and adopt no narrow basis for my thoughts, feelings, or modes of action. I would place myself, and I would place you, my young friends, upon grounds vastly higher and broader than any founded upon race or color. ...

To those who are everlastingly prating about race men, I have to say: Gentlemen, you reflect upon your best friends. It was not the race or the color of the negro that won for him the battle of liberty. That great battle was won, not because the victim of slavery was a negro, mulatto, or an Afro-American, but because the victim of slavery was a man and a brother to all other men, a child of God, and could claim with all mankind a common Father, and therefore should be recognized as an accountable being, a subject of government, and entitled to justice, liberty and equality before the law, and everywhere else.

It is a great and perhaps tragic misfortune of our own day that many of the loudest voices professing opposition to race-based injustice make the same “great mistake,” along with related others, that Douglass denounced.

At the present moment in our country’s history, the anti-racism cause is infused with doctrines of the moral primacy of racial identity, the pervasiveness of racism as a congenital and indeed permanent evil in America, and the need to combat it by the radical transformation of American institutions, including by the suppression rather than the expansion of freedom of speech.

Now no less than in his own day, the nation would do well to attend the wisdom of Frederick Douglass.

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