



“Frederick Douglass on Personal Responsibility in Founding Ideals”

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2021 SUMMER INTERN, THE JAMES MADISON INSTITUTE

Editor’s Note: In recent years, the state of Florida has distinguished itself by requiring a course in civics education, commemorating a Celebrate Freedom Week focus on the ideals founded in the Declaration of Independence, and launching a new speech and debate initiative to help Florida students articulate America’s founding principles. Going forward, it will be increasingly important for students to see that many of our nation’s most distinguished African American leaders embraced our country’s founding ideals (while simultaneously acknowledging our failure to, at times, live up to these ideals). This article looks at one such African American leader: Frederick Douglass.

As I walk around my university campus, I cannot help noticing the Frederick Douglass statue. It holds its place amongst those of George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and Ronald

Reagan. It also sparks a question in my head: What does Frederick Douglass have in common with these Americans? While his origins are certainly distinct from these men, his belief in the American experiment,

specifically the Constitution, joins them all. Despite growing up as a black man during the sin of slavery, he still maintained that America's Constitution put forth the true essence of the American experiment. His interpretations of the Constitution led to the doctrine that slavery was essentially against the Constitution's core principles, and with this notion, he endeavored to fight the institution of slavery his entire life. He fought for the claim that "all men are created equal" was true in and of itself (rather than only for white males), and that equality meant every man and woman should have the opportunity to pursue a career and life of their choosing and making. A necessary characteristic for recognizing this goal was personal responsibility -- the ability to decide for oneself -- and he both demonstrated and advocated for this.

Frederick Douglass' life as a slave, recorded in his *Narrative*, portrayed the span of horrors that came from slavery and permeated into every facet of the African-American life.¹ The physical beatings and punishments that slaves endured were part of the larger move to destroy any kind of cultural, historical, and personal history that they might possess. These efforts were directed at breaking spirit and identity, and as Timothy Sandefur says in his biography of Douglass: "Those who desired freedom had to prove themselves worthy of it by struggle and self-determinism. To be fully human means to command oneself and to hazard life for the reward of living."² However, Douglass stands out as being able to rise above those struggles and create a life for himself. Obviously, this was despite numerous injustices, but the

rise came from within him and his sense of agency in the circumstances. Whether it was outsmarting other boys into teaching him to write and read or plotting escape attempts, Douglass sought ways to carve out individual skills and abilities. While this is an extraordinary example of personal responsibility, he demonstrated a desire for independent identity that erupted from his spirit, and that same personal responsibility is something all should seek.

While in Baltimore with his slave owner, Thomas Auld, Douglass worked at a shipyard and bargained his way into a salary, which he used to plan future escapes. This small salary would give hope to Douglass.³ It provided the obvious chance at freedom, but it also served as something unto its own; he went out and worked and achieved something that he could hang his hat on at the end of the day. The principle of a hard day's wage served as a cornerstone to his political philosophy on equality, which he believed to be founded in the Constitution, and which would set up his famous "Self-Made Man" speech. What Douglass had taught himself about reading eventually bore fruit when he got his hands on a copy of *The Columbian Orator*: "...inspir[ing] in Douglass a passion for liberty. It taught him to view slavery as wrong in principle-- not merely a personal fate, but a systematic evil."⁴ In fact, the very language of systematic evil over personal fate demonstrates Douglass' belief that it was something that could be altered and not an inevitable fate. His initiative to learn to read and write led to this understanding and started his career as a speaker and advocate for the abolition of slavery. After recognizing the responsibility

that he possessed as a man, he was able to rise and achieve success.

Another such example of the grasping for independence that Douglass displays is recorded in his essay, “The Last Flogging.”⁵ Within the literal revolt against his master, he regains the independence and agency that was taken from him during his years as a slave. However, during the entire essay, he carefully dictates a view that simultaneously embodies revolt and personal responsibility; he recognizes that he must act to change his fortunes, which starts with taking responsibility for his actions. Consider the narrative: “Covey [the master] soon cried out lustily for help; not that I was obtaining any marked advantage over him, or was injuring him, but because he was gaining none over me, and was not able, single handed, to conquer me.”⁶ His ability to stand up for himself completely counteracts everything that Covey does and throws off the typical order of the plantation. After accounting for the horrible physical harms done to him, Douglass resolves to resist any further harms, and when he fights back at the next instance, he is able to win and assert himself. Douglass’ victory causes him to recount: “He can only understand the effect of this combat on my spirit, who has himself incurred something, hazarded something, in repelling the unjust and cruel aggressions of a tyrant.”⁷ His actions led to a lifting of his own spirits, despite the hardships and injustices that he faced, and these actions formed that platform that enabled him to later escape from slavery. This kind of episode characterizes the value of personal initiative and action that Douglass placed on the black man. His vision for his people

was that they “stand upon [their] own legs, work with [their] own hands, and eat bread in the sweat of our own brows.”⁸

In a lecture entitled “Unspeakable Truths about Racial Inequality Recent in America,” Dr. Glenn Loury of Brown University echoed Frederick Douglass’ emphasis on the “self-made man.” Invoking language that mirrors many of the sentiments of Douglass, Loury declares, “The right idea—if only fitfully and by degrees—is to carry on with our march toward the goal of ‘race-blindness,’ to move toward a world where no person’s worth is seen to be contingent upon racial inheritance.”⁹ This kind of race-blindness stands out in Douglass as well. In his comments on the Preamble to the Constitution, Douglass said, “Its language is ‘we the people’; not we the white people, not we the privileged class, not we the high, not we the low, but we the people... .”¹⁰ This fundamental truth that Douglass articulates, that African Americans are equal citizens, requires a striving toward American virtues of full citizenship. This sense of citizenship eliminates prejudices in favor of a people united behind common virtues and goals. Douglass believed in the intentions of the Constitution to stand against slavery implicitly and considered the proper fulfillment of the document to be one of anti-slavery.

During a time when communities of all types are quick to assign blame to others, Douglass and Dr. Loury provide a reminder of every individual’s responsibility and agency. Between these two men, there is a wealth of personal experiences of racism, and both are quick to acknowledge the persisting issues within the country.

Nevertheless, both refuse to allow all issues to be a product of a culture of systemic oppression. Instead, their call is simple: Each of us should accept responsibility for the consequences of our personal choices in addition to fighting against discrimination in society and politics. Both Douglass and

Loury emphasize the impact such a world view will have on the creation of a strong, personal American identity, and through this there can be a true revival of citizenship and reconciliation over the wrongs of slavery, and racial discrimination.

REFERENCES

- 1 Timothy Sandefur's biography on Douglass demonstrated many of the principles using the Narrative.
- 2 Frederick Douglass: Self-Made Man, 24.
- 3 Frederick Douglass: Self-Made Man, 27.
- 4 Frederick Douglass: Self-Made Man, 16.
- 5 The Last Flogging, "My Bondage and My Freedom."
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 "Oration in Memory of Lincoln."
- 9 Loury, "Unspeakable Truths...", 18.
- 10 Cohen, "The Changing View of Frederick Douglass", 249.