
Frederick Douglass: Words of Wisdom for All Centuries

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Frederick Douglass

Words of Wisdom for All Centuries

Maria Sanelli and Nathaniel Williams

While some individuals like to study a particular subject simply for their love of learning, others purposely study the past to inform them about the present. The life and times of Frederick Douglass is certainly a formidable subject of study in its own right, but his words have special application and meaning for adolescents and young adults today. There are many human examples that give us glimmers of light and hope for the future, and Frederick Douglass is one such example.

Frederick Douglass was one of the most significant writers and philosophers of the 19th century. Born a slave, Douglass began developing his literacy skills after the wife of his owner taught him part of the alphabet when he was a child. With this foundation, he learned to read and write on his own (Douglass, 2003). After escaping slavery at age 20, Douglass eventually traveled north to live in freedom. For the next three decades, he traveled throughout the northern United States, speaking out in support of abolition (Douglass, 2003). His fight against slavery became a life-long pursuit. Once forced to leave the country in fear of his life and freedom, Douglass went on to act as advisor to Abraham Lincoln, became federal marshal in 1877, and served as minister to Haiti in 1889 (Douglass, 2003).

People the world over can learn from the life and words of this great man. However, adolescents in particular have much to learn from Frederick Douglass's words because of the unique challenge they face as they transition to adulthood,

that is, balancing their individual needs with societal barriers. Arising from biological changes and social expectations, developmental tasks account for individual needs and identify the best “teachable moment” for each particular need (Rice, 1990). Cosner and Larson (1980) identified three areas in which the adolescent deviates from the larger adult society: “the development of the romantic orientation” (intimacy development); “an increased concern for meaningfulness” (autonomy); and “a preoccupation with one’s own identity” (identity development) (p. 101). Specifically, Frederick Douglass’s words have an amazing application to help adolescents and young adults navigate autonomy, identity, and intimacy development.

Autonomy

Autonomy, a state of independence and freedom, was important to Frederick Douglass and is an important task for a young adult discovering oneself. Douvan and Adelson (1966) described three types of autonomy pertaining to adolescent development: emotional, behavioral, and value. Emotional autonomy refers to the degree to which the adolescent has separated from the unconscious and infantile feelings toward the family. Behavioral autonomy refers to the degree to which the adolescent is able to make decisions and take action toward a desired goal. Value autonomy refers to the degree to which the adolescent can mold his or her own perceptions about reality without reference to convention. The messages in Douglass’s writing speak both to individuals breaking the chains of slavery, as well as adolescents and young adults breaking away from parental control and becoming independent. Frederick Douglass’s insight about the mind being held captive, giving power to the truth by speaking out, and combating institutions of control are three particularly applicable lessons to young adults today.

DO NOT ALLOW YOUR MIND TO BE HELD CAPTIVE.

I now understood what had been to me a most perplexing difficulty—to wit, the white man’s power to enslave the black man. It was a grand achievement, and I prized it highly. From that moment, I understood the pathway from slavery to freedom. (Douglass, 2003, p. 41)

There are many respectable colored men, fathers of large families, having boys nearly grown up, whose minds are tossed by day and by night with the anxious inquiry, “what shall I do with my boys?” (Douglass, 1999, p. 218)

The first step had been taken. Mistress, in teaching me the alphabet, had given me the inch, and no precaution could prevent me from taking the ell. (Douglass, 2003, p. 44)

Frederick Douglass believed that captivity had more than one source. Both a person's body and mind could be held captive. A slave was considered the physical property of the person who had paid for him or her upon entering the country. When children were born to those slaves who had been purchased, the captivity that came with slave ownership applied to them as well.

Slaves were held captive by their belief in their captivity. Not only were they forced to live in ignorance; they were also inducted into a society that stressed their captivity. Children of slaves brought to the United States were raised in slavery, never knowing what it meant to be anything other than a slave. Without knowledge of anything other than how they lived their lives, the children of slaves became even more firmly entrenched in this institution. Douglass recognized this relationship between physical enslavement and mental enslavement, acknowledging that both were equally powerful. During his activities as an abolitionist, Douglass admitted that he had discovered the answer to a problem that had confounded him for some time. He finally understood how it was that the white population had been able to enslave both the Africans and the children born to them in their new country: the children simply developed the belief that they were slaves. In gaining that understanding, Douglas stated, he had gained a highly prized and "grand achievement," which he felt could point the way out of slavery toward freedom (Douglass, 2003, p. 41).

Because he had reached this understanding, Douglass was able to devise a method for defeating slavery, both for himself and—potentially—others who suffered under the institution. His method for defeating slavery was nonviolent and yet subversive. Douglass demanded both freedom of the body and freedom of the mind for his people, suggesting that education frees an individual's mind, which in turn enables that person to seek an end to injustices that a previously enslaved mind once accepted simply as fact.

In part, southern slaveowners kept their slaves' minds captive by promoting their illiteracy. Individuals who are unable to read and write are also prone to what Harris, Kamhi, and Pollock (2001) refer to as "functional illiteracy": the inability to use certain resources that society provides for the convenience and the success of its inhabitants (p. 6). While the slaves might not have had access to the technology that is used in the authors' example, they were kept from accessing the technology of their times, being limited to the physical labors and primarily unskilled household tasks to which their masters assigned them. Illiteracy also kept these slaves from participating in society and learning of things that might have freed them from slavery had they known about them. This kind of captivity was effective in that a person who does not know of a way to free himself will not strive to do so. By enslaving minds as well as bodies, slaveowners were able to keep their slaves with relatively little effort, given the lack of hope for freedom on the part of many slaves.

Illiteracy issues, however, are not simply things of the past. Although illiteracy rates in African Americans have dropped in the past 100 years, illiteracy remains a problem in the African American community. Harris, Kamhi, and Pollock (2001) state that “literacy is intimately linked to education, and, therefore, any discussion of literacy must take education into account” (p. 6). The authors indicate that before slavery ended, only a handful of African American children were enrolled in schools, largely in northern states. This estimate is far different from 1991 figures, which indicated that approximately 70 percent of African American children completed a high school education (Harris, Kamhi, & Pollock, 2001). Regardless of this dramatic increase in the number of African Americans receiving an education, we are left to question the quality of that education, given the disparities that still exist in urban schools in comparison with suburban schools. The lack of literacy in so many modern African Americans still leaves the African American population “enslaved.” Although the physical chains are gone at last, the failure of so many children to graduate with a degree of literacy that will ensure their success in the adult world leads to a perpetuation of the problem.

In addition to keeping slaves illiterate, slaveowners also perpetuated the idea of slavery. The perpetuation of ideas is a common method for keeping people from believing something outside of the preponderant belief system. This same process can be seen in extremist religious cults, which perpetuate the belief that their leaders are supernaturally in tune with “Truth.” In such cases, followers are brainwashed into believing that any other belief than that which is preached is false and detrimental to their social and spiritual well being. In a way, many young contemporary African Americans are brainwashed into believing certain stereotyped attributes about themselves and must face beliefs being perpetuated under the guise of “culture.”

There is perhaps no clearer example of perpetuated negative African American stereotypes than the contemporary music scene. Parker (2006) speaks out on this topic, stating that African American music has been “hijacked by one-dimensional caricatures who stand to significantly retard, if not outright roll back, the progress African Americans have made in the past half-century” (p. 1). Parker goes on to protest “modern-day minstrels” he likens to the Pied Piper, leading African American children “further into ignorance, poverty, and self-destructive behavior” (p. 1). He states that by tying themselves to role models that include celebrities, African American children miss the opportunities to learn from educated people and intellectuals, instead of those who perpetuate the “expansive cancers of gun violence and economic illiteracy” and create a modern stereotype of the “thug-updated ‘Black Savage’” (Parker, 2006, p. 2). Although it is clear what motivated slaveowners to perpetuate their message of hopelessness, it is difficult to pinpoint the motivation for those who continue to perpetuate that message today. Douglass (1999) once commented on the “respectable colored men” (p. 218) who

suffered from the concern over what they would do with their sons. Clearly, the concern for future generations is of as salient, if not more pressing, in the 21st century as it was during Douglass's lifetime.

GIVE POWER TO THE TRUTH BY SPEAKING OUT

The salvation of the country, by the inexorable relation of cause and effect, can be secured only by the complete abolition of Slavery. (Douglass, 1999, p. 530)

These were choice documents to me. I read them over and over again with unabated interest. They gave tongue to interesting thoughts of my own soul, which had frequently flashed through my mind, and died away for want of utterance. The moral which I gained from the dialogue was the power of truth over the conscience of even a slaveholder. (Douglass, 2003, p. 45)

The first article and ninth section is a full, complete and broad sanction of the slave trade for twenty years. In this compromise of the Constitution, the parties to it pledged the national arm to protect that infernal trade for twenty years. (Douglass, 1999, p. 132)

Slavery was pervasive in American society, particularly in the South. Silence was, for the slave, a way of survival. According to Jones (2005), American slaves once had a saying that “a still tongue makes a wise head” (p. 4). Jones goes on to explain that American slavery “required” that literacy remain a privilege reserved for white slaveowners, in contrast to the “immediate orality and subordinate silence required by the African American slave” (p. 5). Jones (2005) further states that:

For centuries, Europeans had associated literacy with reason, and reason with humanity. By denying African-American slaves literacy, their masters could falsely consider them to be non-rational, and therefore sub-human, creatures whom, they rationalized, would benefit from the peculiar institution of slavery. (p. 5)

Douglass (1999) made it clear that he considered slavery as both “cause and effect” for society's perception of the slave as an inferior being, which could only be resolved by “the complete abolition of Slavery” (p. 530).

Jones (2005) makes the argument that “orality”—that is, “speaking out”—is the first step that Douglass used to become free. Jones goes on to explain that Douglass later used orality, as well as bits of bread for bribes, to convince poor white children to teach him how to read and write (p. 6). Douglass's first steps outside of his master's home took place when he forged travel papers with the knowledge he gained through subterfuge.

In the past, slavery and Jim Crow laws purposefully marginalized the African American from American society. The Harlem Renaissance, a movement of the early 20th century, allowed many African Americans to give public voice to their creativity for the first time, permitting them to make an attempt at re-establishing a culture that had previously been lacking or had been forbidden to them. While this renaissance, springing up from the ghettos of New York, emerged from a still-marginalized quality of life, it “offered a kaleidoscope of literary, political, and hedonistic activity unmatched anywhere in the United States” (Watson, 1995, p. 3).

Today’s “cultural revolution,” however, offers rap musicians and football players in the place of Harlem Renaissance icons such as Langston Hughes and W.E.B. Du Bois. Watkins (2005) describes hip-hop culture as a positive force that in the 1990s became “a prominent trendsetter and cultural sign of the times” (p. 52). However, with the violence and misogyny that are present in today’s rap and hip-hop lyrics, it seems as though African American youth feel as disenfranchised as they did 100 or more years ago.

COMBAT INSTITUTIONS OF CONTROL

I have observed this in my experience of slavery—that whenever my condition was improved, instead of increasing my contentment, it only increased my desire to be free, and set me to thinking of plans to gain my freedom. (Douglass, 2003, p. 87)

Let us now turn away from the Church, and examine the anti-slavery movement in its branches, for divisions are here, as well as elsewhere. (Douglass, 1999, p. 323)

The fact that he gave me part of my wages was proof, to my mind, that he believed me entitled to the whole of them. (Douglass, 2003, p. 89)

Slavery was considered an economic necessity. If plantation owners were to maintain their ability to sell their crops for a reasonable fee, then they needed to use unpaid labor. Slavery, however, was as much of an institution of control as it was of economic benefit to slaveowners. The institution of slavery, through its ability to remove all aspects of the slave’s control over his or her own life, was the method by which the slaveowners were able to maintain their economic benefits. Even when slaves had relatively good living conditions and experienced various freedoms in comparison with other slaves, these conditions did not mean that they were free in any sense of the word. Frederick Douglass, in fact, observed that whenever he experienced improved living conditions, his desire to experience freedom grew more acute, heightening his desire to escape his slavery (Douglass, 2003, p. 87).

Institutions of control exist everywhere in modern society, as they did in the past. An institution does not necessarily have to have negative motives to be controlling. Douglass, for example, spoke out about the church, as well as about the motives of the various factions in the abolition movement, suggesting that different groups might have different agendas for pursuing the same end (Douglass, 1999, p. 323).

The church does not have as much of an influence today as it did 100 years ago. Many of the institutions that left African Americans powerless have disappeared or have been challenged by modern laws. However, American media collectively comprise an extremely pervasive institution that keeps African Americans under a continued state of control. The media, through various negative representations of the African American culture, and particularly negative portrayals of African American men, create a prison for today's youth that is nearly as confining as the institution of slavery (Fujioka, 2005, p. 452). Sixty-two percent of African American respondents participating in a study for Fujioka (2005) stated that they "felt upset at least once a week with news coverage about Blacks" (p. 454). These respondents also indicated that "news media presented Blacks in only two extreme ways, either good, the rare token, or bad, the more common, reflecting the same dichotomy of the house Negro or the field Negro in slavery" (Fujioka, 2005, p. 454). Autonomy from institutions of control, as well as from dominating individuals, continues to be a struggle in the American experience.

Identity

Adolescence and young adulthood are periods during which individuals are constantly involved in evaluating new information and integrating it into their emerging identity. The transition from middle adolescence to late adolescence is characterized by the ability to break away from the strong influences of significant others, coupled with the compelling need to reflect upon one's own ego identity and self-identity development. This is when young adults begin to focus on achieving a sense of meaning or purpose in life. Late adolescents and young adults are in the process of making commitments to their identity (Newman & Newman, 1988). Adolescent identity development is characterized by the formation of an ideology, a perception of self, and the achievement of a sense of meaning in life. The words of Frederick Douglass can inspire young people to seek out new knowledge and understanding, as well as to be determined in all that they do.

SEEK KNOWLEDGE AND EDUCATION

The paper became my meat and my drink. My soul was set all on fire. Its sympathy for my brethren in bonds—its scathing denunciations of slaveholders—its faithful exposures of slavery—and its powerful attacks upon the upholders of the

institution—sent a thrill of joy through my soul, such as I had never felt before! (Douglass, 2003, p. 99)

We go farther, and express our conviction that all political rights which it is expedient for man to exercise, it is equally so for women. All that distinguishes man as an intelligent and accountable being, is equally true of women, and if that government only is just which governs by the free consent of the governed, there can be no reason in the world for denying to women the exercise of the elective franchise, or a hand in the making and administering the laws of the land. (Douglass, 1999, pp. 102–103)

They came because they wished to learn. Their minds had been starved by their cruel masters. They had been shut up in mental darkness. (Douglass, 2003, p. 75)

If the institution of slavery was the method by which slaveowners maintained control over their slaves, ignorance was a primary component of that institution. When African slaves first reached American soil, it was simple to keep them in the depths of ignorance. However, as the first generation of slaves was born in this country, the slaveowners formed attachments to the offspring of their slaves, children whom they had watched mature throughout the years (Kolchin, 2003). Some families, sympathetic to their slaves, gave them some rudimentary education, sufficient to conduct the tasks to which they had been assigned. Having the ability to read was intoxicating to Douglass (2003), who wrote that “The paper became [his] meat and [his] drink,” which “set his soul on fire” with its attack on slavery and its proponents (p. 99). For Douglass, the institution of slavery was what had been holding him back.

Today’s African American children face different impediments to learning. According to statistics reported in the *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* (JBHE), the percentage of African American youths between ages 16 and 24 years without a GED or a diploma, who are also not enrolled in school, is nearly twice that reported for white youths in the same demographic: 11.8% as opposed to 6.8% (Vital Signs, 2005). The JBHE also reports comparative statistics for African American and white children ages 15 to 24 years who dropped out of high school in their junior or senior years; however, these showed less variance: 5.7% for African American children as opposed to 3.7% for whites (Vital Signs, 2005). Although these numbers seem insignificant in their difference, the truth is that other statistics reflect the seriousness of this issue. Maxwell (2004) reports that African American men graduate at a rate lower than any other reported population group (par. 3). In addition, he quotes a 2003 issue of the *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* that states that a total of 757,000 African American men were in prison during 1999, 25% more than were being educated in colleges or univer-

sities (par. 5). It is necessary to question what has changed from the post-slavery years in which Douglass reported that slaves flocked to institutions of learning out of a desire to be educated, because their masters had caused them to be “shut up in mental darkness” (Douglass, 2003, p. 75). Without education, African American youths stand a poor chance of breaking cultural chains that bind them to poverty and violence.

BE PERSISTENT IN THE EFFORTS TO EXACT CHANGES

The world has literally shot forward with the speed of steam and lightning. It has probably made more progress during the last fifty years, than in any five hundred years to which we can refer in the history of the race. (Douglass, 1999, p. 360)

My case, is the case of thousands; and the case of my sisters, is the case of millions. I have no doubt, there are hundreds here to-day, that have parents, children, sisters and brothers, who are now in slavery. (Douglass, 2003, p. 109)

Of the existence and power of the anti-slavery movement, as a fact, you need no evidence. The nation has seen its face, and felt the controlling pressure of its hand. You have seen it moving in all directions, and in all weathers, and in all places, appearing where desired least, and pressing hardest where most resisted. (Douglass, 1999, p. 312)

It is impossible for major changes to occur overnight, particularly when these changes involve a social and economic institution of the scope that slavery once represented. Frederick Douglass chose to speak out against slavery for the first time when he was in his 20s and continued to fight it throughout his lifetime. Before his death, Douglass (1999) praised the changes that had been made and the speed with which they had occurred, claiming that more changes had occurred in his lifetime “than in any five hundred years to which we can refer in the history of the race” (p. 360). Even so, he acknowledged that many persons remained in slavery and that the fight for change must continue.

Today it is also questionable how quickly changes can be made. Cultural influence, the media, and other factors all interact in such a way that no single solution is clear. The subtitle of Casserly’s 1998 work asks: “Can education alone change the status quo?” While Casserly reports that there has been a rise in the number of African American women earning diplomas and degrees, it remains unclear how the earning power of these women will be impacted (p. 57). Mariel Concepcion (2007), reporting in *Billboard* magazine, states that Al Sharpton and other African American leaders planned to march against “profane” rap lyrics on the late singer James Brown’s birthdate in an effort to get record companies to ban demeaning lyrics from rap and hip-hop music (par. 3). Adolescent and young

adult identity development is greatly affected by the media. The process of self-discovery occurs within cultural and historical contexts.

Intimacy

As the adolescent matures emotionally, individual needs and readiness for intimacy also change (Paul & White, 1990). Expressions of intimacy can be communicated in many ways, including the development of new and more mature relationships with peers as well as sexual experimentation. The rate of development of intimacy has been correlated “first, to the degree of cohesion and adaptability in the adolescents’ family and second, to the adolescents’ gender” (Romig & Bakkan, 1992, p. 335). The family is expected to provide the “emotional bonding and nurturing” as a foundation for future adolescent intimacy and identity development (p. 326). Unfortunately, family displacement is as important an issue today as it was in the 19th century. Frederick Douglass’s words call all of us to action to fight displacement and emphasize the importance of gaining intimacy with our families.

FIGHT DISPLACEMENT OF THE FAMILY AND OF FAMILY VALUES

The ties that ordinarily bind children to their homes were all suspended in my case. I found no severe trial in my departure. My home was charmless; it was not home to me; on parting from it, I could not feel that I was leaving anything which I could have enjoyed by staying. (Douglass, 2003, p. 37)

The family relation which has had no real existence under the region of slavery, will remain to be established, schools for the education of the dusky millions will be required, and all the elevating and civilizing institutions of the country must be extended to these people. (Douglass, 1999, p. 523)

For what this separation is done, I do not know, unless it be to hinder the development of the child’s affection toward its mother, and to blunt and destroy the natural affection of the mother for the child. This is the inevitable result. (Douglass, 2003, p. 18)

The displacement of the family was one method used by slaveowners to keep their slaves from forming strong attachments. Families were often split up before leaving Africa, and once they reached North American shores, they faced separation once again. Kolchin (2003) explains that “newly imported slaves rarely lived in families; indeed, they often lived in segregated barracks. Although many Africans eventually found spouses and produced children of their own, their opportunities for family formation remained limited” (p. 50). The European slaveowners, according to Kolchin, were unconcerned about the emotional welfare of their

slaves, in particular their African slaves, because they appeared strange to them. However, slaveowners showed more concern for the children of those slaves who were brought over from Africa (Kolchin, 2003).

Even as families were permitted more cohesion, the threat of a family member being sold away from his or her family persisted. Douglass himself grew up separated from his family. Quarles (1948) explains that the duties that Douglass's mother had as a slave "required her presence at a point twelve miles distant from her young son. Douglass saw her only a few times before she died when he was eight or nine. His father remains anonymous" (p. 2). Douglass (2003) commented on this issue, stating that he failed to understand the reasoning behind separating a mother and her children, unless it was to prevent a child from developing attachments to his or her mother and "to blunt and destroy the natural affection of the mother for the child" (p. 18).

Today's African American youths face similar issues in their inability to form attachments. Young African Americans often find themselves raised in single-parent households or raised by grandparents or foster parents. Dunlap, Golub, and Johnson (2006) indicate that in these less-than-ideal conditions, the family unit itself is not stable enough to sustain emotional attachments. The fluidity of family boundaries leads to confusion about who actually comprises an individual's family unit (Dunlap, Golub, & Johnson, 2006, p. 1). Statistics from the U.S. Bureau of the Census in 2004 indicated a drop in the percentage of married African American women aged 15 and older, from 62 percent in 1950 to 36 percent in 1998 (Dunlap, Golub, & Johnson, 2006, p. 1).

These declines may arise from social policy or from the perceived undesirability of African American men as husbands. Although single-parent families led by women often employ (or have employed) multi-generational or multi-family households to sustain their economic viability, under today's conditions it is possible that these households are "being overstressed in the face of increased teenage childbearing, illicit drug use, a menacing teen culture, persistent poverty, and welfare reform" (Dunlap, Golub, & Johnson, 2006, p. 5). Douglass (1999) spoke out about re-establishing family relations that had eroded during the era of slavery (p. 523); however, it seems that these relations still need to be firmly established in the modern era.

Conclusion

Douglass was a man ahead of his time. Throughout his remarkable life, he spoke out against slavery and in favor of equal rights for all people. His work, groundbreaking for the time in which he lived, has special meaning for young people today, reminding them:

- To not allow their minds to be held captive
- To fight displacement of the family and of family values
- To give power to truth by speaking out
- To combat institutions of control
- To seek knowledge and education
- To be persistent in their efforts to exact changes

While various developmental tasks need to be accomplished during different stages of life, Fredrick Douglass's words can bring special meaning to adolescents and young adults experiencing major life changes.

Why should we spend a little more time teaching about Fredrick Douglass in our classes? His words give us a much keener insight into our past than merely transmitting the sanitized re-telling of the "facts" of American history. The power of his words, in particular, brings history alive in the classroom, and has significant applications to the present.

While many textbook companies have begun to provide educators with CDs containing samples of Frederick Douglass's work, in the Appendix that follows this section we conclude with a list of Internet resources and lesson plans to provide a means to immerse students in the words of Frederick Douglass. Rather than superficially "covering" as many topics as possible within a particular curriculum, delving into the words of Frederick Douglass in depth will prove to be a more effective way of making an impression on students in the long term. There are many paths to human truth and meaning, and certainly the ageless wisdom of Frederick Douglass's words leads us to a meaningful look at modern society.

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