

RESPONSIBILITY

Frederick Douglass and Responsibility



At the age of 20, Frederick Douglass stepped onto a northbound train and into freedom. A previous attempt two years earlier had landed him in jail. But this time, the plans, patience, and allies he had gathered over the previous years—and at the root of it, the idea that freedom was possible, his to take—all culminated in this bold act.

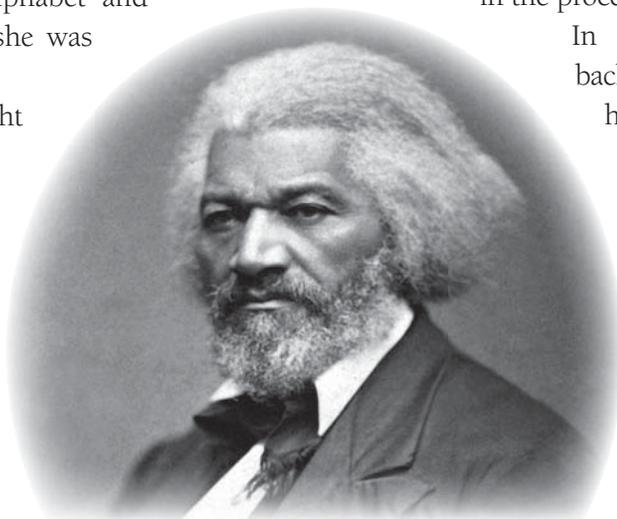
This was no impulsive escape. It was years in the making, driven by the power of literacy, the lamp of knowledge that was denied to slaves. Historically, slave-holding societies withheld reading and writing from slaves as a rule. In ancient Egypt, the scribe was second in power only to the Pharaoh, and few free Egyptians knew how to read or write. Slaves in ancient Rome were encouraged to study math and science for engineering and architecture, but reading and discussing philosophy and politics was the exclusive domain of freemen, lest the slaves become exposed to these ideas and revolt. Few things had changed over the centuries. In 1826, when at the age of eight Douglass was sent to live in Baltimore, his master's kind-hearted wife began to teach him the alphabet and basic reading skills before she was chastised for doing so.

Yet Douglass was bright and determined. The door to all doorways had been opened for him. Douglass lived in Baltimore for seven years, where he would first hear the term “abolition.” He observed differences between city-dwelling slaves, who were

given a chance to know the city while completing errands, and those back on farms and plantations, their bodies too exhausted by physical labor to have any time for thought. He secretly continued to pursue literacy, often in ingenious ways.

A city is rich in resources for any ambitious young man, and Douglass would find time to consort with young people his age who helped him, often unknowingly, in his quest to read. Sometimes he shared his allotment of bread with them, and in exchange they would share “that more valuable bread of knowledge” by showing him how to read. Along the way he would discuss the fundamental unfairness of slavery with them. Through these pleas and discussions, he fleshed out his anti-slavery ideas and won his first sympathizers. Later on Douglass would challenge boys to writing contests, claiming he could write letters of the alphabet as well as any of them—knowing full well he could not! After writing a few letters on a fence post, he'd observe how they formed others that he didn't know. He intentionally lost these dares, winning knowledge and skills in the process.

In 1833, Douglass was sent back to plantation life, which he found intolerable. Escape was never far from his mind. But how was he going to attain his freedom? Under the watchful eyes of callous masters and cruel overseers, Douglass stood out, and the tactics they would use to break his



spirit would lead to deep physical and mental suffering. There were moments when he wished he had never heard the word “abolition,” never learned how to read and write and think about the toll that slavery took on slave and master alike. The days at the farm became a miserable blur, and eventually, when he tried to lead a group in escape in the spring of 1836, it failed when their intent to break away was betrayed. Ironically, just after this attempt Douglass found himself in Baltimore again, as his suspicious master determined to hire him out to learn a trade—and perhaps isolate him from the plantation slaves.

Two years later, in 1838, Douglass again made plans to break out of slavery, this time determined to succeed. Through connections, he secured papers and a train ticket to New York, riding successfully away from the life of a slave. The world opened up to him, and it was a world of turbulence and joy. He took a new name with his new identity as a free man. He married. He found it difficult to find work and cast about for some time getting used to the new territory, uncertain of the way forward. However, he never questioned his original actions. He savored his freedom and eventually took up the mantle for the cause of abolition, putting his writing and speaking skills



to use as a speaker and author. There would still be battles within the abolition movement, and even in the northern states, free blacks felt the sting of discrimination. Douglass knew his mind and was armed for these. In his later writings, he asserted that “[g]reatness does not come to any people on flowery beds of ease. We must fight to win the prize.”

That time so many years before when he had been granted the power of basic literacy—and then determined to continue, driven by his desire for freedom—resulted in a distinguished role as an orator and warrior for the cause of abolition.

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Defining Civic Virtues: Responsibility

To strive to know and to do what is best rather than what is most popular. To be trustworthy for making decisions in the best long-term interests of the people and tasks of which one is in charge.

Discussion Guide



Directions: Discuss the following questions with your partner(s).

1. Historically, why had enslaved people been prevented from learning to read?
2. What important event took place when Douglass was eight years old?
3. What were some of the more inventive ways Douglass worked to become a better reader? Would some of these options have been available to him if he had been less resourceful, or less humble? Explain.
4. Douglass failed in his 1836 attempt to escape. Slaves were not permitted to leave their masters without permission, and fugitive slaves could be (and in some places were legally required to be) returned to their masters. In other words, Douglass's attempt to escape was against the law. But was it virtuous? Explain.
5. Douglass said, "If there is no struggle, there is no progress. Those who profess to favor freedom, and yet depreciate agitation, are men who want crops without plowing up the ground. They want rain without thunder and lightning. They want the ocean without the awful roar of its many waters. This struggle may be a moral one; or it may be a physical one; or it may be both moral and physical; but it must be a struggle." How does this quotation help you understand the virtue of responsibility?
6. He went on to say, "The limits of tyrants are prescribed by the endurance of those whom they oppress. ...Men may not get all they pay for in this world; but they must certainly pay for all they get. If we ever get free from the oppressions and wrongs heaped upon us, we must pay for their removal. We must do this by labor, by suffering, by sacrifice, and if needs be, by our lives and the lives of others."

The Thirteenth Amendment, Section 1 states: "Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction."

Did Douglass's ideas about responsibility become irrelevant with the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment? Or are they still true today? Explain.

7. George Bernard Shaw said, "Liberty means responsibility. That is why most men dread it." Why does liberty require responsibility? Why does Shaw say most men dread it? Do you agree with him?
8. Slavery was a terrible injustice that ended in the U.S. after people worked for over a century. What is the responsibility of citizens in a constitutional republic to protect others' rights?
9. Given your responses to the previous two questions, what is the relationship between civic virtue among citizens and the effective running of a republic?
10. For what are you responsible? For what will you be responsible in five years?
11. How do—and will—you act responsibly in your daily life?

Virtue In Action



Look around your street, your neighborhood, your school, and your community. Is there anything you can identify that needs improving? Define the problem, and then think about your responsibility as a citizen to take action to improve it. Issues to think through:

- Our constitutional system assumes that most issues are better solved by citizens working together voluntarily than through the use of government force.
- Before automatically developing a plan to petition government, be sure that the problem you have identified cannot be solved by your own words and actions and/or by the freely offered words and actions of others.
- If it cannot, determine which level of government (local, state, or national) has the power to address it.
- Before taking action, think about how the additional power that you and your fellow citizens would like to grant to government may eventually be used by officials who do not share your specific goals.

Sources & Further Reading

Douglas, Frederick. *My Bondage and My Freedom*. N.p.: CreateSpace Independent Platform, 2013.

Douglas, Frederick. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*. Unabr. ed. N.p.: Dover, 1995.

National Park Service. Frederick Douglass National Historic Site. <http://www.nps.gov/frdo/>

Virtue Across the Curriculum

Below are corresponding literature and art suggestions to help you teach this virtue across the curriculum. A sample prompt has been provided for the key corresponding work. For other suggested works, or others that are already part of your curriculum, create your own similar prompts.

The Gettysburg Address (1863)

How does Abraham Lincoln characterize the meaning of the Civil War? What responsibility does he place on the shoulders of Union soldiers and of all Americans? Why must they persevere in their fight?

***I Hear America Singing* by Walt Whitman**

Discuss or review nineteenth century growth and changes in the United States. What kind of changes and growth occurred? How is that conveyed in this poem? What sensory imagery does Whitman use? Name the sounds and their sources. How do these sounds convey responsibility? Describe the tone Whitman establishes through this imagery. How would you describe it? What class, or group, of people is depicted as adding to the “song”? Who does Whitman indicate is driving the growth, change, and “singing” in the United States during this time period? Describe how this poem conveys the relationship between individual freedom and responsibility.

***The Jolly Flatboatmen*, painting by George Caleb Bingham**

If students have not yet studied nineteenth century United States history, have them research the context of this painting. Do a close-reading of the painting based on the basic elements of art. Then, discuss: What time of day is it in this scene? What, in the painting, tells the viewer what they were doing previously? What are they doing now? How does this relate to what they were previously doing? How does the painting depict responsibility? How does this poem depict the relationship between individuals and society? Describe how this painting conveys the relationship between individual freedom and responsibility.

OTHER WORKS

Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl by Harriet Jacobs

David Copperfield by Charles Dickens

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight

