

Douglass on discrimination



Highland Views

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Columnist

When was the last time you heard a stirring speech that lifted you from your seat to cheer, cry or both, as you witnessed the inspirational power of the human voice? I've heard very few with great rhetorical skill who knew how to shape the art of public speaking to move the hearer.

Now and then a voice will rise, and not always from expected corners of the community.

When I think of great speeches, my mind doesn't necessarily call up images from political platforms or preachers' pulpits, though some are memorable. I recall the evening an unhoused woman trembled before a packed sanctuary as she softly described how it felt to lose her family and home, finding herself living outside that very "sanctuary" in the cold and rainy holiday season.

I think of a young painter and poet standing before a congregation to tell her story of living in a van behind a church while producing colorful art.

The voices that most resound and move us are rarely soothing or comforting — they can be alarming in their honest truth-telling. The great abolitionist orator Frederick Douglass may not have left us his voice to ring in our ears, but his voice still has a way of echoing in our collective conscience.

Born a slave in Maryland in 1818, he did not escape slavery until 1838 when he was 20. When he stood to tell his horrific story before a Massachusetts anti-slavery meeting in 1841, few could have known that this young black man

would become a great writer, publisher and lecturer for human rights over the next 50 years, until his death in Washington, D.C. in 1895.

Friend of freethinkers and reformers such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Douglass became a preacher of the "gospel of freedom," and not only for African-Americans.

His "Narrative," first published in 1845, led to "My Bondage and My Freedom" in 1855, the same year another radical book appeared, "Leaves of Grass" by Walt Whitman. The former slave's autobiography led Frederick Law Olmsted to declare, "What would

Frederick Douglass have been had he failed to escape? What has he become since he dared commit the sacrilege of coming out of bondage? All the statesmanship ... has done less, in fifty years, to elevate and dignify the African race, than he in ten [years]" (1856).

In raising up his people and their cause, he was clear: "I feel that I have a right to speak, and to speak strongly. Yet, my friends, I feel bound to speak truly." (Lecture in Rochester, 1850).

Once bound in body, his mind was never restricted.

Douglass shook the foundations of both racial and religious institutions. One of his first speeches, in 1841, centered on "The Church and Prejudice," telling the story of his personal experience in Northern and Southern churches.

In the South, his master would pray morning, noon and night before whipping Frederick and his cousin while quoting passages from the Bible.

As a freeman in the North, he experienced a different form of discrimination. For communion, "the white people gathered around the altar, the blacks clustered by the door." The white be-

lievers were served the bread and wine, then the minister called the black believers forward since, "you know God is no respecter of persons!"

Douglass dryly concludes, "I haven't been there to see the sacraments taken since."

In another church, Douglass saw a "great revival of religion" with many converts and baptisms. A little black girl was baptized "in the same water as the rest," but when she took communion, drinking from a common cup, a white girl sitting next to her stood and walked out of the sanctuary.

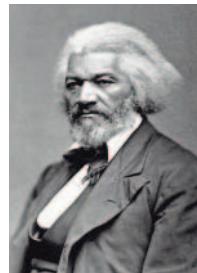
For his "Reception Speech" at the Finsbury Chapel in England (1846) his prophetic voice was sharp and resonant:

"But you will ask me, can these things be possible in a land professing christianity? Yes, they are so ... While America is printing tracts and bibles; sending missionaries abroad to convert the heathen ... the slave not only lies forgotten ... but is trampled under foot by the very churches of the land. What have we in America? We have slavery made part of the religion of the land."

Sounding like a prophet for our own times, he continued: "I love that religion ... which makes its followers do unto others as they themselves would be done by. If you demand liberty to yourself, it says, grant it to your neighbors. If you claim a right to think for yourself, it says, allow your neighbors the same right."

Frederick Douglass left a well-polished mirror on the podium or pulpit for us to see ourselves as we really are, and to re-consider the ancient words, "the truth shall make you free."

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Frederick Douglass, circa 1879. GEORGE K. WARREN/NATIONAL ARCHIVES