

Douglass: Education Will Subvert the Slave System

On Dec. 1, 1850, Frederick Douglass gave a speech called “The Nature of Slavery,” in Rochester, New York, in which he emphasized that the slave who had been bestialized by his master, was still a man, and that one of the great weapons that could be put in the hands of that slave, was the right to learn.

“The slave is a man,” said Douglass, “ ‘the image of God,’ but ‘a little lower than the angels’; possessing a soul, eternal and indestructible . . . and he is endowed with those mysterious powers by which man soars above the things of time and sense, and grasps, with undying tenacity, the elevating and sublimely glorious idea of a God. It is *such* a being that is smitten and blasted. The first work of slavery, is to mar and deface those characteristics of its victims and which distinguish *men* from *things*, and *persons* from *property*. Its first aim is to destroy all sense of high moral

and religious responsibility. It reduces man to a mere machine. It cuts him off from his Maker, it hides from him the laws of God, and leaves him to grope his way from time to eternity in the dark, under the arbitrary and despotic control of a frail, depraved, and sinful fellow-man. . . .

“Nor is slavery more adverse to the conscience than it is to the mind. The crime of teaching a slave to read is punishable with severe fines and imprisonment, and, in some instances, with *death itself*. . . . The great mass of slaveholders look upon education among the slaves as utterly subversive of the slave system. . . .

“It is perfectly well understood at the south, that to educate a slave is to make him discontented with slavery, and to invest him with a power which shall open to him the treasures of freedom; and since the object of the slaveholder is to maintain complete authority over his slave, his constant vigilance is exercised. . . . Education being among the menacing influences, and, perhaps, the most dangerous, is, therefore, the most cautiously guarded against. . . . As a general rule, then, darkness reigns over the abodes of the enslaved, and ‘how great is that darkness!’ ”

comprehension, and had little idea of the use to which I was capable of putting the impressive lesson he was giving to his wife. He wanted me to be a slave; I had already voted against that on the home plantation. . . . That which he most loved I most hated, and the very determination which he expressed to keep me in ignorance only rendered me the more resolute to seek intelligence.”

The full story of Douglass’s struggle to learn to read—how he collared white boys on the streets of Baltimore asking them to spell out words for him, and the other stratagems he used—can be found in *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*. But just as Douglass was not interested in being turned into someone’s beast of burden, he was also not *learning for the sake of learning*. Douglass was incapable of keeping his knowledge to himself. Even knowing the risk that he as a slave ran if he were to teach other slaves—he could be sold farther South to the hideous Mississippi or Louisiana plantations, or legally murdered—he taught other slaves when he was sent back to Maryland’s Eastern Shore.

Speaking Out

At the age of 13, Douglass purchased out of his own pocket money *The Columbian Orator*. The great oratory he found in that 50¢ book was to give Douglass the basis for being able to speak publicly against slavery when he escaped North in 1838.

The 1820s and 1830s was the age of great oratory in America. These were the decades of such expert speakers as Daniel Webster, John Quincy Adams, and John Calhoun. The

issues before the American republic were profound: slavery, and the danger of secession by the U.S. South in the late 1820s. *The Columbian Orator* became a bible for the young man, who was searching for words to express his thoughts. It was a book designed for those who wanted to learn to speak out, in the manner of the great orators, on issues which affected the souls of men. It was a book for those who wanted “to impart profound and impassioned conceptions respecting man and nature,” as the English poet Percy Bysshe Shelley would have said. And that was precisely what Douglass was impelled to do.

He wrote: “The reading of these speeches added much to my limited stock of language, and enabled me to give tongue to many interesting thoughts which had often flashed through my mind and died away for want of words in which to give them utterance. The mighty power and heart-searching directness of truth, penetrating the heart of a slaveholder and compelling him to yield up his earthly interests to the claims of eternal justice, were finely illustrated . . . and from the speeches of Sheridan I got a bold and powerful denunciation of oppression and a most brilliant vindication of the rights of man.”

Concluded Douglass: “Light had penetrated the moral dungeon where I had lain, and I saw the bloody whip for my back and the iron chain for my feet, and my *good, kind* master was the author of my situation. The revelation haunted me, stung me, and made me gloomy and miserable. . . . I saw that slaveholders would have gladly made me believe that, in making a slave of me and in making slaves of others, they