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It is said that white Americans cannot know what it is like to be an African American. There is something true about this. No human being can fully understand the unique experience of another person. We cannot fathom the deepest wellsprings of the joy known by others or the depth of their grief. Slavery has affected black consciousness in ways unknown to white Americans, the descendants of immigrants who came here freely. White male drivers do not know the “worry of driving while black,” and white women shopping in an upscale store do not worry about being followed throughout the store.

This realistic limitation, however, does not excuse white citizens from trying to understand better the experience of our black brothers and sisters. Our current national soul-searching over racism has spawned violence that only hurts the cause of justice, but it has also generated significant progress and opened up opportunities for greater racial understanding. As white citizens, we can seize the moment by a renewed effort to understand something of the distinctive experiences of African-Americans.

In this regard, the outstanding black leader Frederick Douglass (1818-1895) provides a glimpse of the cruel, oppressive world of slavery as well as the struggle to overcome its destructive consequences. We know of Douglass from the three autobiographies he wrote and from numerous biographies, most recently, the almost 900-page Pulitzer Prize-winning *Frederick Douglass: Prophet of Freedom,* by David Blight. Douglass was born in February 1818, on a plantation in Talbot County, Maryland, the son of a slave, Harriet Bailey. As part of a common strategy to break up black family life, he was separated from his mother and seldom saw her. David Blight thinks his father was “almost certainly white” and could well have been his mother’s owner, Anthony Aaron.

By the time Douglass was born, slavery was woven into the fabric of American life. The whole sordid history began in 1619 when 20 Africans, kidnapped from the Portuguese colony of Angola, were brought to Virginia and sold as slaves. Our Founding Fathers, including Washington and Jefferson, owned slaves. Religious and academic institutions were involved in slavery. For example, in 1838, Georgetown University sold 272 enslaved persons owned by Jesuits for the equivalent of $3.3million, which secured the survival of the institution. This transaction came to light in 2016 when the University apologized for its involvement and granted preferential treatment to the descendants of slaves seeking admission to the

university. The Constitution counted each slave as three-fifths of a person in determining the number of representatives each state could have in Congress. Although all the northern states abolished slavery by 1804, the southern states relied on the backbreaking forced labor of slaves (almost 4 million when Douglass was a youth) to make the cotton industry extremely profitable.

When Frederick was around twelve, he was sold to Hugh Auld in Baltimore. Contrary to law and custom, Auld’s wife secretly began teaching Frederick the alphabet, but when discovered, joined in the effort to keep him illiterate, the common southern strategy to keep slaves compliant. Despite these efforts, Frederick found clever ways to learn how to read and surreptiously used a Sunday school-like setting to teach a group of more than 40 slaves to read the New Testament. Later, he wrote: “Knowledge is the pathway from slavery to freedom.”

When he was 15, Frederick was sent to Edward Covey, a man with a reputation as a “slave breaker,” who beat him regularly for almost a year, which Frederick later admitted temporarily “broke his body, soul and spirit.” As Douglass tells the story in his autobiography, *Narrative of the Life* *of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845), he subsequently defeated Covey in a bruising fight, after which his master left him alone. Frederick introduced the story of the fight: “You shall see how a slave was made a man.”

Around the age of 19, Frederick met and fell in love with a freed black woman, Anna Murray, who supplied him with borrowed papers and seaman’s clothes, enabling him to escape by train and steamboat on a 24-hour dangerous journey that landed him in New York on September 3, 1838. He was one of about two percent of the many slaves who succeeded in escaping. Escaped slaves often feared that paid slave catchers would find them and return them to bondage, a fear intensified by the 1850 Fugitive Slave Law requiring citizens of free states to cooperate in returning slaves to their masters. Douglass himself lived with this fear until friends purchased his freedom in December, 1846. Less than two weeks after arriving in New York, Frederick married Anna, who provided a stable home for him and their five children for 44 years until her death in 1882.

Not long after his escape, Frederick was befriended and mentored by William Lloyd Garrison (1805-1879), a leader of the abolitionist movement and the editor of the influential newspaper *The Liberator*. Garrison and his many followers were convinced that the whole American system was irredeemably racist, including the Constitution itself, which he called a “covenant with death” and ”an agreement with Hell.” His strategy was using “moral suasion” to convince the American public to “deunionize,” which involved refusing to participate in the political process, including voting. He enlisted Douglass in the cause, getting him started on a lifelong career as a dedicated lecturer, who traveled all around the country and the British Isles promoting the abolitionist cause. As time went on, Douglass began distancing himself from Garrison, starting his own newspaper, *The North Star,* and eventually embracing a political version of

abolition that saw the Constitution not as a proslavery document but as a “Glorious Liberty Document,” with principles “hostile to the existence of slavery.”

Furthermore, he became convinced that the churches could be reformed to serve as advocates for equal justice and that the ballot box could be used to eliminate slavery. Douglass remained grateful to Garrison as his early mentor, but developed a more nuanced and pragmatic approach to ending the evil of slavery. Douglass pursued his career as a popular public speaker to the very end of his life, drawing large crowds, enduring arduous travel, straining his voice, incurring racial insults and spending long periods of time away from his home and family.

In his famous 1852 speech delivered to 500 white northerners, “What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?,” Douglass pointed out that the “great principles of political freedom and of natural justice embodied in the *Declaration of Independence* do not extend to American slaves, adding that for a slave, July 4th is “a day that reveals to him, more than any other day in the year, the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim.” He blasted the Christian churches that “convert the very home of religion into an engine of tyranny and barbarous cruelty.” However, Douglass went on to exhort his audience “to cling to the principles of the Declaration,” confident that Divine Providence does govern human affairs. Linking biblical faith with enlightenment principles, he insisted that “intelligence is penetrating the darkest corners of the globe” and slavery will come to an end because it cannot hide from the light of justice and equality. This most famous speech of the master orator is especially relevant in our own times when we are striving to maintain hope in the ongoing struggle for racial justice.

Frederick Douglass had a complicated relationship with President Abraham Lincoln. He supported him as the Republican anti-slavery candidate in the 1860 presidential election, declaring that his victory “taught the North its strength, and showed the South its weakness.” Later, he accused Lincoln of representing “American prejudice and Negro hatred” and claiming he was “far more concerned for the preservation of slavery and the favor of the Border Slave States, than for any sentiment of magnanimity or principles of justice or humanity.” After Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation January 1, 1863, Douglass became more positive about Lincoln, assuring people that the president, though slow, “cautious, forbearing and hesitant,” would indeed reinforce the proclamation.

In a White House meeting with Lincoln, August 10, 1863, Douglass urged the president to improve the treatment of African American soldiers fighting for the Union and to support efforts to recruit more black soldiers. About a year later, Lincoln invited Douglass to a second meeting, seeking his advice on how to help freed slaves in the rebel states. Later, Douglass wrote that the president at that meeting demonstrated “a deeper moral conviction against slavery than I had ever seen before in anything spoken or written by him.” In the 1864 election, Douglass initially supported the abolitionist John C. Fremont, but when Fremont dropped out, he publicly backed Lincoln.

After his second inaugural address, Lincoln sought out Douglass to tell him how much he valued his opinion before asking what he thought of the address. At that moment, the orator replied it was “a sacred effort“ and later wrote that the president in that brief speech had united in his own soul “the united souls of all Hebrew prophets.” In his eulogy after the assassination of Lincoln on Good Friday, April 15, 1865, Douglass praised the president and insisted that his blood would be “the salvation of our country.” Frederick Douglass, who remained a staunch Republican all his life, did not hesitate to criticize the party leaders, even the best of them, which can serve as a warning to us today against a blind and uncritical loyalty to a political party.

During the Reconstruction era (1863-1877), Douglass worked tirelessly for the welfare of his people. In his speeches, especially one entitled “Self-Made Men,” he often repeated the line that the freed slaves could make it on their own and that we should “just let them alone,” a quote still used today by opponents of affirmative action programs. However, David Blight compellingly argues that this is an unfair appropriation of Douglass, who also with equal vigor demanded governmental help for former slaves in securing a good education, fair wages, workplace protection and equal rights, especially to vote. His constant theme during Reconstruction was: “Slavery is not abolished until the black man has the ballot.” The right to vote provided crucial protections against the ongoing efforts of segregationists to control the freed slaves.

In February 1866, Douglass met in the White House with President Andrew Jackson, a southern white supremacist, who supported the Black Codes enacted by Southern state legislatures restricting the right of blacks and who consistently tried to block the whole Reconstruction project. After Douglass made the case for black suffrage, the president replied that this would lead to “a war of the races” and that the only viable solution was “colonization,” sending blacks back to Africa. Douglass ended the contentious meeting by insisting, quite the opposite, that the only way to avoid such a race war was to enfranchise former slaves.

When Congress passed the 15th Amendment in 1869, stating that voting rights could not be denied “on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude,” Douglass rejoiced in the progress, but noted some of its limitations, especially failing to outlaw qualification tests. He also noted the exclusion of women’s suffrage, a cause he fervently supported for years but set aside for political reasons during the struggle to pass the Fifteenth Amendment, which angered feminist leader Elizabeth Cady Stanton and estranged him from Susan B. Anthony. Later, Douglass again vigorously supported the right of women to vote and apparently

reconciled with Anthony, who gave one of the eulogies at his funeral. Douglass had his own blind spots, including an unexamined prejudice against Native Americans and an unenlightened bias against Catholicism as a superstitious religion. Although in his relationship to women he did not always rise above the patriarchal attitudes of the times, he did indeed have a genuine respect for women and did a great deal to secure the franchise for them.

In 1877, Douglass visited his former slave master, Hugh Auld, who was seriously ill but not dying, as Frederick thought. Three decades earlier, he had published in his paper an open letter to Auld, directing his rage at him as a symbol of the cruelty of slave owners and challenging him to imagine his own daughter being sold to “the brutal lust of fiendish overseers.” Now, as an older man, he came to Auld not to vent his anger, but to seek a measure of inner peace, to “exercise some forgiveness,” as David Blight explained it. In their emotional twenty-minute encounter, the two men talked about the past and their current situation. Frederick apologized for a false charge of cruelty made in the past against Hugh. From the former master, he learned he was born in 1818, a year later than he thought. He asked Auld what he thought about his escape and the former owner said: “I always knew you were too smart to be a slave.” Recalling their tearful good-bye, Douglass later wrote: “He was no longer a slaveholder” and “I regarded him as I did myself, a victim of the circumstances of birth, education, law and custom.” He added: “Even the constancy of hate breaks down before the brightness of infinite light,” which could remind us of the spiritual dimension of our current effort to achieve racial harmony.

Our effort to understand more of the black experience through the words and deeds of Frederick Douglass provides a glimpse of both the depth of human cruelty and the resilience of the human spirit. It could also encourage us to do our own limited but important part in working for equal justice under the law. 2288