



Happy birthday, Mr. Douglass!

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February 19, 2019

As a pre-teen growing up in Missouri City, Texas, I participated in my first leadership seminar: I read all three of Frederick Douglass's autobiographies.

Applying lessons learned from the 19th century slave-turned-abolitionist, I convinced my parents to drive me to Douglass's "Cedar Hill" home in Washington, D.C. (a distance of about 1,400 miles).

Imagine what an honor it was in 2003, later as an education policy analyst at the Cato Institute, I gave the keynote address to and joined the Frederick Douglass Memorial and Historical Association (FDMHA) as a member of the Board of Trustees of that home and Douglass's legacy.

Born a slave, Douglass wasn't sure of even the day or year he was born. He guessed Valentine's Day 1817, because his mother called him "My Little Valentine" (documents unearthed later revealed it was sometime in February 1818).

He "grew too big for my chains," escaping to freedom in 1838, then lived as a fugitive for almost a decade before friends purchased his freedom in a "ransom deal" after he fled to England to escape American slave-catchers.

From the humblest of origins, that former "piece of property" orphaned as a child became an internationally known abolitionist, newspaper editor, orator and best-selling author. He died on Feb. 20, 1895, hours after being applauded by a women's organization and shortly before he was scheduled to give a speech at a black church.

Many books have been written about Douglass, including two I read recently: Timothy Sandefuer's book "Frederick Douglass: Self-Made Man" (sent to me by the author) and David Blight's book "Frederick Douglass: Prophet of Freedom" (sent to me by Charles and Eben Appleton).

The books reminded me of a few quotes and ideas from Douglass that inspired a passion for liberty in me decades ago.

Adults around me as a youngster probably weren't surprised that the first lesson I locked onto from Douglass was about fighting back: "He was whipped oftener who was whipped easiest." Slaves, he wrote, who fought back were "neither whipped nor shot." I became a youngster who expected explanations about restrictions on his choices.

Second, educational freedom. Douglas wasn't allowed to attend public schools open to white children, but he learned to read anyway as a means to escape to freedom. He even illegally taught other slaves how to read.

As a fugitive slave he would even nail a newspaper to a wall to read while he did hard labor and took every opportunity to learn. "I have gathered scattered pages of the Bible from the filthy street-gutters, and washed and dried them, that in moments of leisure I might get a word or two of wisdom from them."

Third, use your skills to make a difference. When I'm at forums about North Korea and hear the inevitable well-intentioned but useless question "How can we help," I count to 10, then respond with something Douglass said: "The tools to those who can use them."

That is, examine, understand and use your skills, not ask others for one-size-fits-all suggestions. And when others don't like my approach, I'm reminded of Douglass dismissing critics. "They compliment me in assuming that I should perform greater deeds than themselves." Douglass the wordsmith was often quoted by others, but who did he quote? A favorite was Lord Byron: "Hereditary bondmen, know ye not; Who would be free, themselves must strike the blow?" That one gets me into trouble, because I still doubt there will be real change in North Korea until North Koreans rise up.

We can help North Korean refugees adjust to living outside of North Korea, send information into North Korea, and rescue escapees, but ultimately, North Koreans must strike the real blow against the regime.

And finally, two quotes about Douglass. James McCune Smith, also a former slave, said that Douglass was not fashioning "mere words of eloquence," but rather, "work-able, do-able words" that might forge a "revolution."

Douglass learned to read so he would be able to forge documents to get himself to freedom. The most "effectual sort of prayer," he said, was "DOING!" and not "saying." He added: "I prayed for twenty years but received no answer until I prayed with my legs." He counseled, "Action! Action! not criticism ... words are now useful only as they stimulate to blows" against an injustice like slavery.

In the introduction to Douglass's narrative published in 1845, abolitionist Wendell Phillips wrote: "You remember the old fable of 'The Man and the Lion,' where the lion complained that he

should not be so misrepresented 'when the lions write history.' I am glad the time has come when the 'lions write history.'"

In telling his story and writing his history, Douglass even inspired a youngster in Missouri City, Texas, into a career of increasing educational freedom, in both the U.S. and South Korea.

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