The Blessings of Liberty and Education

By Frederick Douglass

Ladies, Gentlemen ad Friends:

As I am a stranger among you and a sojourner, you will, I hope, allow me a word about myself, by way of introduction. I want to say something about the day upon which we are met. Coincident are always more or less, interesting and here is one such of a somewhat striking character. This day has for me a special interest. It happens to be the anniversary of my escape from bondage. Fifty-six years ago, to-day, it was my good fortune to cease to be a slave, a chattel personal, and to become a man. It was upon the 3rd day of September 1838, that I started upon my little life work in the world. It was a great day for me. With slavery behind me and all the great untried world before me, my heart throbbed with many anxious thoughts as to what the future might have in store for me. I will not attempt here any description of what my emotions in this crisis were. I leave you to imagine the difference between what they were and what they are on this happy occasion. I then found myself in a strange land, unknown, friendless, and pursued as if I were a fugitive from justice. I was a stranger to everyone I met in the streets of the great city of New York, for that city was the first place in which I felt at liberty to halt in my flight farther North. New York, at that day was by no means a city of refuge. On the contrary, it was a city in which slave-hunters and slavecatchers delighted to congregate. It was one of the best fields for that sport this side of Africa. The game once started was easily taken. If they had caught me, I should have been elsewhere to assist in founding an Industrial School for colored youth in Virginia. This is all I have to say on this point.

My first thought Germain to this occasion, and which must have some interest for us all, very naturally relates to noted place where we now happen to be assembled. Since the great and terrible battle with which its name is associated and which has now passed into history as the birth of many battles, no event has occurred here so important in its character and influence and so every way significant, as the event which we have this day met to inaugurate and celebrate. To find an educational institution for any people is worthy of note; but to find a school in which to instruct, improve and develop all that is noblest and best in the souls of a deeply wronged and long neglected people, is especially noteworthy. This spot, once the scene of fratricidal war, and the witness of its innumerable and indescribable horrors, is, we hope to be hereafter the scene of brotherly kindness, charity and peace. We are to witness here a display of the best elements of advanced civilization and good citizenship. It is to be the place where the children of a once enslaved people may realize the blessings of liberty and education and learn how to make for themselves and for all others the best of both worlds.

No spot on the soil of Virginia could have been more fitly chosen for planting this school, than this historic battlefield. It has not only the high advantage of forming an instructive contrast and illustrating the compensation possible to mankind, by patiently awaiting the quiet operation of time and events but suggests the battle to be waged here against ignorance and vice. Thirty years ago, when Federal and Confederate armies met here in deadly conflict over the question of the perpetual enslavement of the negro, who would or could have dreamed, that, in a single generation, such changes would be wrought in the minds of men that a school would have founded here, for the mental, moral and industrial education of the children of this same people whose enslavement was sought even with by sword? Who would have imagined that Virginia would, after the agony of war and in a time so short, become so enlightened and so liberal as to be willing and even pleased to welcome here, upon her “sacred soil,” a school of the children of her former slaves? Thirty years ago, neither poet, priest nor prophet, could have foretold the vast and wonderful changes which have taken place in the opinions of the American people on this subject since the war. The North has changed, and the South has changed, and we have all changed, and all changed for the better. Otherwise, we should not be here to-day engaged in the business of establishing this institution.

The liberality on the part of the people of Virginia, a typical State of the South, which has encouraged and justified the founding of this Industrial School, not only within her borders, but here on the very first great battle-field between the two great sections of our Union, is as much a cause of amazement, satisfaction and joy, as is the readiness with which the good people of the North have responded to the call for pecuniary aid and thus made this enterprise successful. Both circumstances are to-day causes of joy and congratulation. They show that the colored man need not despair; that he has friends in both sections of the Republic. In view of this school and the changes in public sentiment which it indicates, we may well exclaim with Milton, “Peace hath her victories no less renowned than war!”

When first invited to speak a few words in celebration of the founding of this industrial school, I was disposed to decline the honor, in favor of some of my younger and better educated brothers. But I am glad that I did not decline the honor. The duty devolved upon me, but which I then hesitated to assume, is, in every respect, an agreeable duty. I am glad that, at my time of life, the opportunity has afforded me to connect my name with a school so meritorious and which I can reasonably hope will be of so great and permanent service to a people so greatly needing it. It is in line with my relations to the negro. I have pleaded the cause of the oppressed against all comers, during more than fifty years of conflict. Were a period put to my career to-day, I could hardly wish for a time or place, or an occasion, better suited for a desired ending, than here and now. The founding of this and similar schools on the soil of Virginia, —a State formerly the breeder, buyer and seller of slaves; a State so averse in the past to the education of colored people, as to make it a crime to teach a negro to read,—is one of the best fruits of the agitation of a half a century, and a firm foundation of hope for the future.

The idea at the bottom of this Institution is rapidly gaining ground everywhere. Industrial education is, with me, however, no new idea. Nearly forty years ago I was its advocate,

and at that time I held it to be the chief want of the free colored people of the North. I was then editor and publisher of the North Star, a newspaper printed in Rochester, New York I saw even then, that the free negro of the North, with everything great expected of him, but with no means at hand to meet such expectations, could not hope to rise while he was excluded from all profitable employments. He was free by law, but denied the chief advantages of freedom; he was indeed but nominally free; he was not compelled to call any man his master, and no one could call him slave, but he was still in fact a slave, a slave to society, and could only be a hewer of wood and a drawer of water. It was easier at that day to get a black boy into a lawyer's office to study law, or into a doctor's office to study medicine, than it was to get him into a carpenter's shop to push a plane, or into a blacksmith's shop to hammer iron.

While I have no sympathy whatever with those who affect to despise labor, even the humblest forms of it, and hold that whatever is needful to be done it is honorable to do, it is, nevertheless, plain that no people, white or black, can, in my country, continue long respected who are confined exclusively to mere menial service for which but little intelligence or skill are required, and for which but the smallest wages are paid or received; especially if the laborer does not make an effort to rise above that condition. While the employment as waiters at hotels and on steamboats and railroads, is perfectly proper and entirely honorable, in the circumstances which now surround the colored people, no one variety of the American people can afford to be known only as waiters and domestic servants.

While I say this, I fully believe in the dignity of all needful labor. All honest effort to better human conditions is entitled to respect. I have met at Poland Springs, in the State of Maine, and at the White Mountains in New Hampshire, and at other places, as well as at the late World's Columbian Exposition at Chicago, many young white ladies and gentlemen, who were truly such, students and teachers in high schools and seminaries, gladly serving as waiters during their vacation, and doing so with no sense of being degraded in any degree, or embarrassed by such service. This would not have been the case with them, if society, by any law or custom, had decided that this service should be, for such persons, they're only calling and vocation in life. Daniel Webster used to say that New Hampshire was a good State to emigrate from. So, I say of menial service— it is a good condition to separate from, just as soon as one can find any other calling, which is more remunerative and more elevating in its tendency. It is not the labor that degrades, but the want of spirit to rise above it.

Exclusive service, or exclusive mastery, is not good for the moral or mental health of any class. Pride and insolence will certainly be developed in the one class, and weakness and servility in the other. The colored people, to be respected, must furnish their due proportion to each class. They must not be all masters, or all servants. They must command, as well as be commanded.

However much I may regret that it was my lot to have been a slave, I shall never regret that I was once a common laborer; a servant, if you please so to term it. But I felt myself as

much a man then, as I feel myself a man now; for I had an ambition above my calling, and I was determined then, as I have been ever since, to use every honorable means in my power to rise to a higher plane of service, just as soon and as fast as that should be possible.

My philosophy of work is, that a man is worked upon by that upon which he works. Some work requires more muscle than it does mind. That work which requires the most thought, skill and ingenuity, will receive the highest commendation, and will otherwise do most for the worker. Things which can be done simply with the exertion of muscle, and with little or no exertion of the intellect, will develop the muscle, but dwarf the mind.

Long ago it was asked, “How can he get wisdom, who holdeth the plow and whose talk are of oxen?”

The school which we are about to establish here, is, if I understand its object, intended to teach the colored youth, who shall avail themselves of its privileges, the use of both mind and body. It is to educate the hand as well as the brain; to teach men to work as well as to think, and to think as well as to work. It is to teach them to join thought to work, and thus to get the very best result of thought and work. There is in my opinion, no useful thing that a man can do, that cannot be better done by an educated man than by an uneducated one.

In the old slave times, they colored people were expected to work without thinking. They were commanded to do as they were told. They were to be hands—only hands, not heads. Thought was the prerogative of the master. Obedience was the duty of the slave. I, in my ignorance, once told my old master I thought a certain way of doing some work I had in hand was the best way to do it. He promptly demanded, “Who gave you the right to think?” I might have answered in the language of Robert Burns,

“Where I designed yon lordling’s slave,

By Nature’s law designed,

Why was an independent thought

E’er planted in my mind?”

But I had not then read Robert Burns. Burns had high ideas of the dignity of simple manhood. In respect of the dignity of man we may well exclaim with the great Shakespeare concerning him: “What a piece of work is man! How noble in reason! How infinite in faculty! In apprehension how like a God! The beauty of the world, the paragon of animals!” Yet, if man be benighted, this glowing description of his power and dignity is merely a “glittering generality,” an empty tumult of words, without any support of facts.

In his natural condition, however, man is only potentially great. As a mere physical being, he does not take high rank, even among the beasts of the field. He is not so fleet as a horse or a hound, or so strong as an ox or a mule. His true dignity is not to be sought in his arm, or in his legs, but in his head. Here is the seat and source of all that is of especially great or practical importance in him. There is fire in the flint and steel, but it is friction that

causes it to flash, flame and burn, and give light where all else may be darkness. There is music in the violin, but the touch of the master is needed to fill the air and the soul with the concord of sweet sounds. There is power in the human mind, but education is needed for its development.

As man is the highest being on earth, it follows that the vocation of teacher is among the highest known to him. To properly teach it to reduce man's potential and latent greatness, to discover and develop the noblest, highest and best that is in him. In view of this fact, no man whose business it is to teach should ever allow himself to feel that his mission is mean, inferior, or circumscribed. In my estimation, neither politics nor religion present to us a calling higher than this primary business of unfolding and strengthening the powers of the human soul. It is a permanent vocation. Some know the value of education, by having it. I know its value by not having it. It is a want that begins with the beginning of human existence and continues through all the journey of life. Of all the creatures that live and move and have their being on this green earth, man, at his birth, is the most helpless and the most in need of instruction. He does not know even how to seek his food. His little life is menaced on every hand. The very elements conspire against him. The cattle upon a thousand hills; the wolves and bears in the forest, all come into the world better equipped for life than does man. From first to last, his existence depends upon instruction.

Yet this little helpless weakling, whose life can be put out as we put out the flame of a candle, with a breath, is the lord of creation. Though in his beginning, he is only potentially this lord, with education he is the commander of armies; the builder of cities; the tamer of wild beasts; the navigator of unknown seas; the discoverer of unknown islands, capes and continents, and the founder of great empires, and capable of limitless civilization.

But if man is without education, although with all his latent possibilities attaching to him, he is, but a pitiable object; a giant in body, but a pigmy in intellect, and, at best, but half a man. Without education, he lives within the narrow, dark and grimy walls of ignorance. He is a poor prisoner without hope. The little light that he gets comes to him as through dark corridors and grated windows. The sights and sounds which reach him, so significant and full of meaning to the well-trained mind, are to him of dim and shadowy and uncertain importance. He sees but does not perceive. He hears but does not understand. The silent and majestic heavens, fretted with stars, so inspiring and uplifting, so sublime and glorious to the souls of other men, bear no message to him. They suggest to him no idea of the wonderful world in which he lives, or of the harmony of this great universe, and hence impart to him no happiness.

Education, on the other hand, means emancipation. It means light and liberty. It means the uplifting of the soul of man into the glorious light of truth, the light only by which men can be free. To deny education to any people is one of the greatest crimes against human nature. It is to deny them the means of freedom and the rightful pursuit of happiness, and to defeat the very end of their being. They can neither honor themselves nor their Creator. Then this, no greater wrong can be inflicted; and, on the other hand, no greater benefit can be bestowed upon a long benighted people than giving to them, as we are here this day

endeavoring to do, the means of useful education. It is aimed to make them both better and more useful in life and to furnish them with increased means of livelihood; to make of them more skilled workmen, more useful mechanics, and better workers in wood, leather, tin and iron.

It is sometimes said that we have done enough for the negro; that we have given him his liberty and we should now let him do for himself. This sounds well, but that is all. I do not undervalue freedom from chattel slavery. It was a great and glorious triumph of justice and humanity. It was the first of long years of labor, agitation and sacrifice. But let us look at this emancipation and see where it left the negro, and we shall see how far it falls short of the plainest demands of justice and of what we owe the negro.

To find an adequate measure of compensation for any wrong, we must first ascertain the nature and extent of the wrong itself. The mere act of enslaving the negro was not the only wrong done him, nor were the labors and stripes imposed upon him, though heavy and grievous to bear, the sum of his wrongs. They were, indeed, terrible enough; but deeper down and more terrible still were the mental and moral wrongs which enter into his claim for a slight measure of compensation. For two hundred and forty years the light of letters had denied him, and the gates of knowledge were closed against him.

He was driven from time to eternity in the darkest ignorance. He was herded with the beasts of the field, was without marriage, without family, without schools and without any moral training, other than that which came by the slave driver's lash. People who live now and talk of doing too much for the negro, think nothing of these things, and those who know them, seem to desire to forget them especially when they are made the basis of a claim for a larger measure of justice to the negro. They forget that for these terrible wrongs there is no redress and no adequate compensation. The enslaved and battered millions have come, suffered, died and gone with all their moral and physical wounds into eternity. To them no recompense can be made. If the American people could put a school-house in every valley of the south a church on every hill-top; supply with a teacher and preacher each respectively, and welcome the descendents of the former slaves to all the moral and intellectual benefits of the one and the other, without money and without price, such a sacrifice would not compensate their children for the terrible wrong done to their fathers and mothers by their enslavement and enforced degradation.

I have another complaint. It is said that the colored people of the South have made but little progress since their emancipation. This complaint is not only groundless but adds insult to injury. Under the whole heavens there never was a people liberated from bondage under conditions less favorable to the beginning of a new and free mode of life, than were the freedmen of the South. Criminals, guilty of heinous crimes against the State and society, are let go free on more generous conditions than were our slaves. The despotic government of Russia was more liberal and humane to its emancipated slaves than our Republic was to ours. Each head of a family of slaves in Russia was given three acres of land and necessary farming implements with which to begin life, but our slaves were turned loose without any thing—naked to the elements.

As one of the numbers of enslaved, I am none the less disposed to observe and note with pleasure and gratitude every effort of our white friends and brothers to remedy the evils wrought by the long years of slavery and its concomitants. And in such wise I rejoice in the effort made here to-day.

I have a word now upon another subject, and what I have to say may be more useful than palatable. That subject is the talk now so generally prevailing about races and race lines. I have no hesitation in telling you that I think the colored people and their friends make a great mistake in saying so much of race and color. I know no such basis for the claims of justice. I know no such motive for efforts at self-improvement. In this raceway they put the emphasis in the wrong place. I do now and always have attached more importance to manhood than to mere kinship or identity with any variety of the human family. RACE, in the popular sense, is narrow; humanity is broad. The one is special; the other is universal. The one is transient; the other permanent. In the essential dignity of man as man, I find all necessary incentives and aspirations to a useful and noble life. Man is broad enough and high enough as a platform for you and me and all of us. The colored people of this country should advance to the high position of the Constitution of the country. The Constitution makes no distinction on account of race or color, and they should make none.

We hear, since emancipation, much said by our modern-colored leaders in commendation of race pride, race love, race effort, race superiority, race men, and the like. One man is praised for being a race man and another is condemned for not being a race man. In all this talk of race, the motive may be good, but the method is bad. It is an effort to cast out Satan by Beelzebub. The evils which are now crushing the negro to earth have their root and sap, their force and mainspring, in this narrow spirit of race and color, and the negro has no righter to excuse and foster it than have men of any other race. I recognize and adopt no narrow basis for my thoughts, feelings, or modes of action. I would place myself, and I would place you, my young friends, upon grounds vastly higher and broader than any founded upon race or color. Neither law, learning, nor religion, is addressed to any man’s color or race. Science, education, the Word of God, and all the virtues known among men, are recommended to us, not as races, but as men. We are not recommended to love or hate any particular variety of the human family more than any other. Not as Ethiopians; not as Caucasians; not as Mongolians; not as Afro-Americans, or Anglo-Americans, are we addressed, but as men. God and nature speak to our manhood, and to our manhood alone. Here all ideas of duty and moral obligation are predicated. We are accountable only as men. In the language of Scripture, we are called upon to “quit ourselves like men.” To those who are everlastingly prating about race men, I have to say: Gentlemen, you reflect upon your best friends. It was not the race or the color of the negro that won for him the battle of liberty. That great battle was won, not because the victim of slavery was a negro, mulatto, or an Afro-American, but because the victim of slavery was a man and a brother to all other men, a child of God, and could claim with all mankind a common Father, and therefore should be recognized as an accountable being, a subject of government, and entitled to justice, liberty and equality before the law, and everywhere else. Man saw that

he had a right to liberty, to education, and to an equal chance with all other men in the common race of life and in the pursuit of happiness.

You know that, while slavery lasted, we could seldom get ourselves recognized in any form of law or language, as men. Our old masters were remarkably shy of recognizing our manhood, even in words written or spoken. They called a man, with a head as white as mine, a boy. The old advertisements were carefully worded: “Run away, my boy Tom, Jim or Harry,” never, “my man.”

Hence, at the risk of being deficient in the quality of love and loyalty to race and color, I confess that in my advocacy of the colored man’s cause, whether in the name of education or freedom, I have had more to say of manhood and of what is comprehended in manhood and in womanhood, than of the mere accident of race and color; and, if this is disloyalty to race and color, I am guilty. I insist upon it that the lesson which colored people, not less than white people, ought now to learn, is, that there is no moral or intellectual quality in the color of a man’s cuticle; that color, in itself, is neither good nor bad; that to be black or white is neither a proper source of pride or of shame. I go further and declare that no man’s devotion to the cause of justice, liberty, and humanity, is to be weighed, measured and determined by his color or race. We should never forget that the ablest and most eloquent voices ever raised on behalf of the black man’s cause, were the voices of white men. Not for the race; not for color, but for man and manhood alone, they labored, fought and died. Neither Phillips, nor Sumner, nor Garrison, nor John Brown, nor Gerrit Smith was a black man. They were white men, and yet no black men were ever truer to the black man’s cause than were these and other men like them. They saw in the slave, manhood, brotherhood, and womanhood outraged, neglected and degraded, and their own noble manhood, not their race hood, revolted at the offence. They placed the emphasis where it belonged; not on the mint, anise and cummin or race and color, but upon manhood the weightier matters of the law.

Thus, compassed about by so great a cloud of witnesses, I can easily afford to be reproached and denounced for standing, in defense of this principle, against all comers. My position is, that it is better to regard ourselves as a part of the whole than as the whole of a part. It is better to be a member of the great human family, than a member of variety of the human family. Regarding men as regarding things, the whole is more than a part. Away then with the nonsense that a man must be black to be true to the rights of black men. I put my foot upon the effort to draw lines between the white and the black, or between blacks and so-called Afro-Americans, or to draw race lines anywhere in the domain of liberty. Whoever is for equal rights, for equal education, for equal opportunities for all men, of whatever race or color, — I hail him as a “countryman, clansman, kinsman and brother beloved.”

I must not further occupy your time, except to answer briefly the inquiry, “What of the night?” Your young people have a right to ask me what the future has in store for you and the people with whom you are classed. I have been a watchman on your walls more than fifty years, so long that you think I ought to know what the future will bring to pass and to

discern for you the signs of the times. You want to know whether the hour is one of hope or despair. I have no time to answer this solemn inquiry at length or as it deserves and will content myself with giving you the assurance of my belief. I think the situation is serious, but it is not hopeless. On the contrary, there are many encouraging signs in the moral skies. I have seen many dark hours and yet have never despaired of the colored man's future. There is no time in our history that I would prefer to the present. Go back to the annexation of Texas, the Fugitive Slave Law times, and the Border War in Kansas. The existence of this Industrial School of Manassas is a triumphant rebuke to the cry of despair now heard in some quarters. Nor does it stand alone. It is a type of such institutions in nearly all of the Southern States. Schools and colleges for colored youth are multiplying all over the land. Hampton, Tuskegee, Cappa Hoosic, are brilliant examples. The light of education is shedding its beams more brightly and more effectively upon the colored people in the South, than it ever did in the cause of any other emancipated people in the world. These efforts cannot fail in the end to bear fruit.

But it is said that we are now being greatly persecuted. I know it. I admit it. I deplore it. I denounce it. Attempts are being made to set aside the amendments of the Constitution; to wrest from us the elective franchise; to exclude us from respectable railroad cars; to draw against us the color line in religious organizations; to exclude us from hotels and to make us a proscribe class. I know it all, and yet I see in it all convincing evidence of our progress and the promise of a brighter future. The resistance that we now meet is the proof of our progress. We are not the only people who have been persecuted.

The resistance is not to the colored man as a slave, a servant or a menial, or as a person. It is aimed at the negro as a gentleman, as a successful man and a scholar. The negro in ignorance and in rags meets no resistance. He is rather liked than otherwise. He is thought to be in his place. It is only when he acquires education, property, popularity and influence; only when he attempts to rise above his ancient level, where he was numbered with the beasts of the field, and aspires to be a man and a man among men, that he invites repression. Even in the laws of the South excluding him from railroad cars and other places, care is taken to allow him to ride as a servant, a valet or a porter. He may make a bed but must not sleep in it. He may handle bread but must not eat it. It is not the negro, but the quality of the negro that disturbs popular prejudice. It is his character, not his personality, which makes him an offense or otherwise. In one quality he is smiled upon as a very serviceable animal; in the other he is scorned as an upstart entirely out of his place and is made to take a back seat. I am not much disturbed by this, for the same resistance in kind, though not in degree, must be met by white men and white women who rise from lowly conditions. The successful and opulent esteem them as upstarts. A lady as elegant and splendid as Mrs. Potter Palmer, of Chicago, had to submit to the test. She was compelled to hear herself talked about as a "shoddy" upstart; the "wife of a tavern-keeper," and the like, during the Columbian Exposition. But the upstart of to-day is the elite of to-morrow.

A ship at anchor, with halyards broken, sails mildewed, hull empty, her bottom covered with seaweed and barnacles, meets no resistance. She lies perfectly still; but when she

spreads her canvas to the breeze, turns her prow to the open sea, and sets out on her voyage, the higher shall be her speed, the greater shall be her resistance. So, it is with the colored man. He meets with resistance now, because he is now, more than ever, fitting himself for a higher life. He is shedding the old rags of slavery and putting on the apparel of freedom.

In conclusion, my dear young friends, be not discouraged. Accept the inspiration of hope. Imitate the example of the brave mariner, who, amid clouds and darkness, amid hail, rain and storm bolts, battles his way against all that the sea opposes to his progress. You will then reach the goal of your noble ambition in safety.