

SLAVERY AND THE STORY OF AMERICA

THE ILLUSION OF AMERICA

One of the great lessons of history, and one that is rarely spoken about in a meaningful way, concerns the vastness of the theater of human life on earth. The more deeply one studies past civilizations, the more it is possible not only to recognize, but *to feel* that our own culture is but one of countless societies, cultures, nations and peoples that have existed and perished over the surface of our world throughout the uncharted reaches of time. And the more deeply one studies the past, the more one may see and feel the patterns of man's injustice to man, the incomprehensible suffering that human beings have inflicted upon each other out of fear, suggestibility and self-deception. Everywhere, in almost all the worlds of man, one sees behind the thin screen of religious and moral idealism the domination of hatred, the brutal exercise of power, the enormities of bloody war occasioned by paranoia, greed or the trivialities of pleasure, position, self-importance and fan-

tastic dreams of salvation or service. We need to situate the American crime of slavery within this picture. We need to penetrate beneath the surface of America's illusory belief that simply by its existence it stands above the laws of human barbarity.

Until we can free ourselves from the illusion of our moral uniqueness, our attempts to repair our crimes may never take us where we need to go. Even the passion with which our society is now struggling with the imperative of civil rights may lead us in the end only to new barbarities under new and deceptive covers—as has so often happened in the history of the world, where revolution and reform only change the names and the trappings of ignorance, violence and rank injustice.

We can begin by stepping back for a moment and viewing America within the immense scale of world history, much as one might view the planet earth itself within the scale of our universe of stars, galaxies and the unseen infinities of space. In this universe, the earth is but a tiny speck of a world circling one of countless billions of suns and cosmic entities of unimaginable size and age. Similarly, on the stage of world history, America is hardly more than a moment, a heartbeat in the life of man on earth. Consider the greatness of Egypt—a brilliant sun that blazed for who knows how many thousands of years; consider ancient Greece, whose sciences and philosophies transformed the Western world; consider the thousand years of Rome, its empire straddling half the earth; and China in the East, dynasty upon dynasty reaching across the millennia; and only begin to scan the globe for all the nations and peoples and languages and gods that have risen and fallen, and with them man's dreams of uniqueness and intimacy with his gods: consider the worlds upon worlds of tribal cultures on the continents of America: the greatness of the Aztec, Toltec, Maya; consider the human galaxy we now call India with its past reaching farther back than our eyes can see, and consider the visions of art and spirit that it conducted onto the earth; sweep northward to Tibet and its two thousand years or more of spiritual mystery; and northward yet to the immensity of Central Asia—and then westward to the culture of Russia; and then sweep southward from there to the great worlds of ancient Mesopotamia; and then forward in time

and meet the great civilization of Islam, millions of peoples, tribes, histories and ambitions under the umbrella of the religion of Mohammed; turn back again to the ancient world of Israel and consider how it lived; and only spin the globe in front of you and register in your mind the human worlds spinning before you: sub-Saharan Africa, with names upon it that only conceal the hundreds of tribal kingdoms, each with its own sacred customs and rituals; Australia with its 30,000-year-old aboriginal civilizations—then northward to the ten thousand islands and hundreds of millions of people in the Malaysian archipelago; and consider southeast Asia and the remnants of its ancient glories—the temples of Cambodia, Burma and Thailand; and northward again, to the world of Japan, its monarchs and warriors, its subtlety and its fire and energy streaking through the length of recorded history. Consider all this and more of the history of human civilization on earth and know that in all these worlds war and barbarity carved the lineaments of each nation and each people's destiny. Always and everywhere humanity has fallen prey to paranoia, hysteria and arrogance; always and everywhere, with hardly an exception, man has murdered and enslaved his fellowman. With all the evidence of the sacred, with all the monuments of spiritual truth that shimmer in the dark flood of history, humanity has been and has remained asleep to the call of conscience. And in that sleep, human beings destroy each other and degrade themselves and their own culture.

It is the human condition; and we need to accept that America lives under all the laws of human life on earth. The question is: can America offer the newness of hope for the world without deceiving itself about its own actual significance and uniqueness? If we are to re-mythologize the story of America, if America is to offer to the world something more than hypocritical and intrinsically unrealizable ideals of freedom and justice, then we must look with new eyes at the forces within ourselves that oppose these ideals, not imagining that we are literally a "chosen people" or that we are bringing something literally new and unprecedented to the world. The teachings of wisdom tell us—but can we hear them?—that in essence it has all happened before; "there is nothing new under the sun." Unless America can free itself from its illusion of uniqueness, it will be lost—as it is now

being lost—to the poisonous effects of this fundamental illusion: either an arrogance that courts its own destruction at the hand of man or nature, or a suicidal cynicism, despair and self-contempt that cast to the winds the very ideals that can show it the goal toward which it must strive, free of its megalomaniac illusions; or, finally, an external moral perfectionism that fails to attend to the real inner causes of human barbarity under the illusion that the improvement of outer conditions, imperatively necessary though that may be by all the laws of conscience, by itself will end or even diminish the crimes of man against man.

To look at slavery in America and its continuing echo of racial hatred and injustice is to see more than a condition that we are obliged to repair with all the moral and social energy that we can bring; it is also to see the inner human condition. It is to see that America, too—we, too, no less than the slavemasters of Egypt and Rome, no less than the blind, murdering armies of every nation in history, no less than all those millions who have pulled deadly levers and triggers, lashed and beaten innocent bodies and even scientifically engineered the destruction and degradation of millions—we, too, are asleep to conscience. The story of America, the very story that can bring hope to the world, must include the truth of the human condition, not only as it can be, but as it is now.

And when it accepts this truth about itself, how will the story change? That is our question now. In this new story, will our heroes no longer be heroes? Our triumphs no longer triumphs? Not at all. On the contrary. Yet, at the same time, something entirely new and necessary will fill every limb and cell of the story of America—and that "something" has a very precise designation: *humility and the need to experience the taste of genuine remorse*. The heroes remain heroes, but they are now also calling us to understand what in ourselves holds us back from all that they represent. Our triumphs remain triumphs, but now they are also reminders of the inner human qualities we need in order to sustain them. The normal human pride that comes from belonging to a nobly conceived nation now points us to the real meaning of self-respect, namely, that every human being has within himself the possibility and the capacity to search for what the Founders called Reason,

the real inner God of truth, love and freedom. Slavery and its omnipresent effects have the power to never let us forget that we have to become different beings as well as act according to the good laws of the land. Laws by themselves, the Constitution by itself, cannot bring justice.

Frederick Douglass Speaks

"Do You MEAN, CITIZENS, TO MOCK ME?"

On July 5, 1852, Frederick Douglass was the honored speaker at Corinthian Hall in Rochester, New York. Born into slavery in 1818, Douglass had escaped to the North at the age of twenty and had become widely respected for his courage and intellect as he traveled throughout the northern states speaking about the meaning for America of slavery and its horrors. The bitter irony, on this occasion, of a black man being invited to celebrate the Fourth of July was not lost on him—and he made certain it would not be lost on his audience. "Do you mean, citizens, to mock me, asking me to speak to-day?"⁹⁸

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What, to the American slave, is your 4th of July? I answer: a day that reveals to him more than all other days in the year, the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim. To him, your celebration is a sham; your boasted liberty, an unholy license; your national greatness, swelling vanity; your sounds of rejoicing are empty and heartless; your denunciations of tyrants, brass fronted impudence; your shouts of liberty and equality, hollow mockery; your prayers and hymns, your sermons and thanksgivings, with all your religious parade, and solemnity, are, to him, mere bombast, fraud, deception, impiety, and hypocrisy—a thin veil to cover up crimes which would disgrace a nation of savages. There is not a nation on the earth guilty of practices, more shocking and bloody, than are the people of these United States, at this very hour.

In this talk, as in many others he delivered during his long and influential life, Douglass shows his audience what the story of America looks like when seen from the perspective of the American slave. His great gift as a writer and as a speaker, and in the actions of his life, was not only to make white Americans feel the monstrosity of slavery, but also to represent to them, with unsurpassed insight and sensitivity, the meaning of the idea of America itself. He understood America and deeply embraced its ideals even as he recoiled at what America had become. We need to pay attention to this juxtaposition of understanding and outrage. It is a juxtaposition of mind and emotion that is all too rare among us. We have become accustomed to the love of America being joined only to the emotions of fervid and often blind patriotism or, on the other hand, the emotions of protest being joined to the wholesale rejection of the story of America and its heroic figures. We are accustomed, that is, to witnessing reason functioning in the service of emotional agitation. What is rare, and exceedingly precious, is to witness a calm, reflective mind joined to a breaking and angry heart. In such a man, appreciation of America is a thousand times more compelling than praise coming from the lips of the privileged or fortunate; and judgment against America is a thousand times more penetrating than the all-devouring rage and resentment of the afflicted. In such a man, one senses that he knows with both his mind and his heart and that?', he feels with both his heart and his mind. The life and thought of Frederick Douglass can do much to show us how the idea of America can be deepened, rather than destroyed, by looking at it through the lens of the crimes of slavery.

"Fellow citizens," says Douglass, "I shall not presume to dwell at length on the associations that cluster about this day":

The simple story of it is that 76 years ago, the people of this country were British subjects . . . you were under the British Crown. Your fathers esteemed the English Government as the home government; and England as the fatherland. This home government . . . although a considerable distance from your home, did, in the exercise of its parental prerogatives, impose upon its colonial children, such restraints, burdens and limitations, as, in its mature judgment, it deemed wise, right and proper.¹⁰⁰

It may be helpful to have a picture of Douglass before us—a man of great physical magnetism and personal charisma with his broad shoulders, his startling aquiline features and brilliantly lit eyes. Perhaps we can imagine what the people in the audience must be feeling as they watch him and listen to him. He is, after all, a "Negro" recounting America's own history to them in a way that reminds them that they, too, rose up out of rebellion against man's injustice to man.

But, your fathers . . . presumed to differ from the home government. . . . They went so far . . . as to pronounce the measures of government unjust, unreasonable and oppressive, and altogether such as ought not to be quietly submitted to . . . ,¹⁰¹

The audience listens approvingly, even as Douglass begins to introduce another dimension of the great story:

To say *now* that America was right, and England wrong, is exceedingly easy. Everybody can say it; the dastard not less than the noble brave, can flippantly descant on the tyranny of England toward the American Colonies. It is fashionable to do so; but there was a time when to pronounce against England, and in favor of the cause of the colonies, tried men's souls. They who did so were accounted in their day plotters of mischief, agitators and rebels, dangerous men. To side with the right against the wrong, with the weak against the strong, and with the oppressed against the oppressor! *here* lies the merit, and the one which, of all others, seems unfashionable in our day. The cause of liberty may be stabbed by the men who glory in the deeds of your fathers . . .¹⁰²

The audience, perhaps, is already beginning to feel a bit uneasy. Yes, the fathers of the country rose up in magnificent moral action; and we take pride

in that; we celebrate that. But, but. . . have we inherited their moral passion? Do we really imagine *we* are like *them*? Douglass takes his time:

Oppression makes a wise man mad. Your fathers were wise men, and if they did not go mad, they became restive under this treatment. They felt themselves the victims of grievous wrongs, wholly incurable in their colonial capacity. With brave men there is always a remedy for oppression. Just here, the idea of a total separation was born! It was a startling idea, much more so, than we, at this distance of time, regard it. The timid and prudent . . . of that day were . . . shocked and alarmed by it. . . . Fellow Citizens, [the] signers of the Declaration of Independence were brave men. They were great men too—great enough to give fame to a great age. It does not often happen to a nation to raise, at one time, such a number of truly great men. The point from which I am compelled to view them is not, certainly, the most favorable . . .¹⁰³

At this, perhaps the audience steels itself. But Douglass continues to go slowly, carefully allowing the development of a long, well-balanced thought.

. . . and yet I cannot contemplate their great deeds with less than admiration. They were statesmen, patriots and heroes, and for the good they did, and the principles they contended for, I will unite with you to honor their memory.¹⁰⁴

Douglass continues, gently introducing a new thought without dwelling on it—the idea that patriotism, even at its noblest, is not man's highest calling. Wisely, he only touches this idea, resonant as it is with a more inner and spiritual meaning of virtue, and goes on, following the momentum of his oratory:

[Your fathers] loved their country better than their own private interests; and, though this is not the highest form of human excellence, all will concede that it is a rare virtue, and that when it is exhibited, it ought to command respect. He who will, intelligently, lay down his life for his country, is a man whom it is not in human nature to despise.¹⁰⁵

Did the audience—do we?—stop for a moment at the word "intelligently"? What did Douglass mean? What kind of risk is he speaking of?

Your fathers staked their lives, their fortunes, and their sacred honor, on the cause of their country. . . . They were peace men . . . but they did not shrink from agitating against oppression . . . with them, nothing was "*settled*" that was not right. With them, justice, liberty and humanity were "final"; not slavery and oppression. You may well cherish the memory of such men. . . . Their solid manhood stands out the more as we contrast it with these degenerate times.¹⁰⁶

Having now introduced—again lightly and in passing—the word itself, "slavery," Douglass picks up the thread of the idea of intelligence that he had used to characterize authentic courage, risk and sacrifice:

How circumspect, exact and proportionate were all their movements! How unlike the politicians of an hour! Their statesmanship looked beyond the passing moment, and stretched away in strength into the distant future. They seized upon eternal principles, and set a glorious example in their defence. Mark them!¹⁰⁷

Having said this, having equated circumspection and exactitude and a sense of proportionateness with reliance on "eternal principles" and having, by implication, defined the great American ideal of courageous rebellion in its light, Douglass goes on—*for just a moment more*—to let soar the oratory of praise:

Fully appreciating the hardship to be encountered, firmly believing in the right of their cause, honorably inviting the scrutiny of an on-looking world, reverently appealing to heaven to attest their sincerity, soundly comprehending the solemn responsibility they were about to assume, wisely measuring the terrible odds against them, your fathers, the fathers of the republic, did, most deliberately, under the inspiration of a glorious patriotism, and with a sublime faith in the great principles of justice and freedom, lay deep the corner-stone of the national superstructure, which has risen and still rises in grandeur around you.¹⁰⁸

THE NEW STORY OF AMERICA

Having sung these praises, having sung the American story in tones that all who heard could accept—with just one or two sharp notes that were soon to reveal that the whole song was being rewritten in another key—Douglass begins his transition. Here begins the deepening of the myth of America:

Friends and citizens, I need not enter further into the causes which led to this anniversary. Many of you understand them better than I do. . . . They have all been taught in your common schools, narrated at your firesides, unfolded from your pulpits, and thundered from your legislative halls. . . .

I remember, also, that, as a people, Americans are remarkably familiar with all facts which make in their own favor. This is esteemed by some as a national trait—perhaps a national weakness. It is a fact, that whatever makes for the wealth or for the reputation of Americans, and can be had cheap! will be found by Americans. I shall not be charged with slandering Americans if I say I think the American side of any question may be safely left in American hands.¹¹⁰

A certain silence in the audience. What is the man saying about us? "My business," says Douglass, "is with the present. The accepted time with God and his cause is the ever-living *now*."

But now is the time, the important time. Your fathers have lived, died and have done their work, and have done much of it well. You live and must die, and you must do your work. You have no right to enjoy a child's share in the labor of your fathers, unless your children are to be blest by your labors. You have no right to wear out and waste the hard-earned fame of your fathers to cover your indolence. . . . It was fashionable, hundreds of years ago, for the children of Jacob to boast, we have "Abraham to our father," when they had long lost Abraham's faith and spirit. That people contented themselves under the shadow of Abraham's great name, while they repudiated the deeds which made his name great. Need I remind you that a similar thing is being done all over this country today? . . . Washington could not die until he had broken the chains of his slaves. Yet his monument is built up by the price of human blood, and traders in the bodies and the souls of men shout—"We have Washington to *our Father*,"^m

The great voice now lowers:

Fellow citizens, pardon me, allow me to ask, why am I called upon to speak here to-day? What have I, or those I represent, to do with your national independence? Are the great principles of political freedom and of natural justice, embodied in that Declaration of Independence, extended to us? . . . I say it with a sad sense of the disparity between us. I am not included within the pale of this glorious anniversary! Your highest independence only reveals the immeasurable distance between us. . . . The rich inheritance of justice, liberty, prosperity and independence, bequeathed by your fathers, is shared by you, not by me. The sunlight that brought life and healing to you, has brought

stripes and death to me. This Fourth of July is *yours*, not *mine*. You may rejoice, I must mourn. To drag a man in fetters into the grand illuminated temple of liberty, and call upon him to join you in joyous anthems, were inhuman mockery and sacrilegious irony. Do you mean, citizens, to mock me, by asking me to speak today?¹¹²

A NATION THAT HAS LOST ITS SOUL

And now Douglass comes to the *central idea* of his impassioned, yet precisely realized oration. This central idea shows America as imprisoned in man's eternal incapacity actually to will and to do what he knows to be right. The ancient warning of the Old Testament is sounded—with no trace of the tinny religiosity that so often renders recourse to the Bible powerless. The idea—*the fact*—that Douglass is bringing forth is the idea, *the fact*, that man, America, has lost its heart and its will in the contradictions it now embodies. There is no authentic unity in the so-called United States—as, of course, the coming war will soon show in blood and devastation. Like man, America imagines it is free, imagines it is one, imagines it prizes independence, liberty and justice—but in fact, like man, America swarms with contradictions held together physically rather than morally – economically and geographically, rather than through intention and purpose, as is the proper calling of man. But it is precisely because America was only yesterday conceived as an expression of humanity's greatest moral ideals that its contradictions and failure of will call out most clearly and most sadly. Other nations, other people, yes they too are only fallen, weak, oppressed and oppressing. But America swept into the world by rising in force and self-sacrifice above that all-too-human condition and sounded the eternal striving for freedom and compassion and the search for God within. It is America's greatness that makes its evil so clear and so shocking. Douglass is thus, in effect, calling upon America to become the most *morally shocked*, the most *metaphysically shocked* people on earth, the people who see and suffer most acutely man's failure to be man.

AMERICA MUST REMEMBER ITSELF

Of course, America must end slavery! Of course, it must repair this crime! And of course, today America must do everything it can to repair the consequences of this original crime. But America must also see and feel and sense, deeply in its heart and guts, that it is not what it thought it was; America must bow its head at the human condition it represents. Then, and only then, can a man, a people or a community really begin to repair its crimes; because only then through this process of remembering what it is and what it was meant to be, only then does it allow into itself the process by which it can repair its own spiritual and moral contradictions. *America must remember itself.* And it is the slave, the black man, living in chains, physically or otherwise, who is the instrument of remembering.

"I can today," says Douglass, "take up the plaintive lament of a peeled and woe-smitten people." And he recites the first verses of the 137th Psalm, the Psalm of the great Remembering:

"By the Rivers of Babylon, there we sat down. Yea! we wept when we hanged our harps-'upon the willows in the ^{"Remembered Zion.} We midst thereof. For there, they that carried us away captive, required of us a song: and they who wasted us required of us mirth, saying, sing us one of the songs of Zion. How can we sing the Lord's song in a strange land? If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her cunning. If I do not remember thee, let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth."

Douglass reminds his listeners of the fate that befell Babylon after its conquest and enslavement of the Israelites, how the crimes of Babylon, "towering up to heaven," led it to be buried in irrecoverable ruin. "O daughter of Babylon, who art to be destroyed," sings the Psalmist, "happy shall he be that rewardeth thee as thou hast served us."

Look at yourself, says Douglass to America, look at what you are and measure it against what you imagine you are and what your fathers, that is, your conscience, tell you you must be! Be shocked, America! Be stunned, be overwhelmed by what you see, and feel at the center of your being, the purifying fire of remorse!

Douglass is calling for that rarest of movements a human being can make—a fusion of inner opening and decisive outer action. Feel the truth of what you are, America, and at the same moment *do! Act!* Risk yourself for what you know is right and true. It was what Douglass himself discovered during his own life as a slave when, as a young man of sixteen, he did the unthinkable act of physically turning against his slavemaster.

FREEDOM FROM AMERICA

Without doubt, this episode must take its place In any renewal of the story of America. The background of the episode is as follows. Born a slave in 1818 at Holmes Hill Farm on Maryland's Eastern Shore, Douglass spent his earliest years under relatively protected conditions. He had been sent to live with his grandmother, whose job on the farm was to look after some of the younger children until they were old enough to work. Although he was not allowed to see his mother more than four or five times (and that furtively in the darkness of night), and had heard only vague whispers about the identity of his father (the manager of the plantation), Douglass did not think of himself as a slave during the first years of his life. He spent his childhood playing in the woods near his grandmother's cabin.

At the age of six, he began to learn that he was a slave. Saying that they were going on a journey, his grandmother abandoned the terrified child at the Plantation mansion, and from that moment on, he was fed, housed, clothed and worked like an animal among animals. One night he was awakened by a woman's screams, and peering through a crack in the wall of the kitchen, he saw the plantation manager (his rumored father) lashing the

bare back of a woman who was his aunt. Trembling with fear, he forced himself to watch the entire ordeal.

Douglass' autobiographies contain page after page of powerfully objective accounts of the degradation and barbarity of the life of a slave. More and more deeply, he realizes the horror of his situation—that he is owned, that he will be forever a man in chains, without freedom, entirely at the mercy of other men who will beat him or even kill him at their whim if he provokes them in any way or seems to them to fall short of his function as a working animal.

THE AWAKENING

At a very early age, Douglass began to *think* and to resolve, against almost everything that his world presented as possible, that one day he would be free. With hardly any concept of what freedom was or*meant, he knew it was his single goal.

It was forbidden to teach slaves to read, but through luck and through his own resolute mind, he found rare opportunities to learn some letters of the alphabet and, cleverly asking, talking, secretly poring over a few scrap pages of a Bible, by the time he was eleven he was able to read and write. He began to understand that there was a world of freedom and that the condition of slavery was an abomination unto God and man. The anguish of mothers seeing their children torn from them and sold to faraway slave-masters; the brutal and unjust punishments of whipping, mutilation and even murder; the invincible physical control and power of the white man; the impossibility of protest or even questioning the tyrants to whom one belonged—when even a slight hesitation in obeying an order could mean a flogging; the continual degradation of black men and women forcing themselves to act respectfully to masters they feared and often loathed; to pretend to be happy when they were in abject misery; to act grateful for a piece of rotten food or a trough of mush; to work their bodies to exhaustion and go

at night to a bed of cold earth under a scrap of cloth; or, for some, to be dressed up as circus monkeys serving at the master's mansion and, most horrible of all, taking their "privileges" as signs of their own intrinsic superiority to their comrades, when in fact they, like all of the slaves, were nothing but beaten-down, dehumanized and stunted men and women. More and more, as his miraculous self-education proceeded, Douglass grew shocked, stunned at the cloud of forgetting that enveloped the slaves, the forgetting of what it meant to be human beings; he was as repulsed by what the slaves took for their pleasure as he was by the cruelties they suffered from the masters.

And yet, at the same time, there was something else streaking through all this, something rising out of the self-forgetting and the oppression under the slavemasters — a deep, tender humanness would rise up, and suddenly the slave was seen by Douglass not only to have remembered his humanness, but to have opened himself to a nobility and purity that made the heart ache and rejoice at the same time. Douglass felt deeply the music and the religion of the slave — with its roots in both the mysticism of Africa, in which every movement of nature and the human body was sacred, and in the Christianity that they had transformed in the alembic of their own unending submission to a life of crucifixion.

EDWARD COVEY: BREAKER OF SLAVES

In 1833, at the age of fifteen, and clearly standing out for his intelligence and independent spirit, Douglass was rented out for a year as a field hand to the farmer Edward Covey, whose brutal treatment of slaves had earned him "the execrated reputation of being a first rate hand at breaking young negroes."

During the following months, Douglass was continually whipped until he began to feel that he was indeed "broken in body and soul." One hot August afternoon, he lost consciousness and collapsed in the field. Each time Covey ordered him to stand, he struggled for a moment to his feet and

then collapsed again, half delirious with pain and exhaustion. While he was down, the "merciless negro breaker" took up a stick and struck him a heavy blow in the head, causing the blood to flow freely, and saying, "*If you have got a headache, I'll cure you.*"

Covey finally turned away, and Douglass, bleeding and stumbling, found the strength to slip into the woods, where he finally made his way back to his former master, pleading with him to take him back and keep him from the monstrous cruelties of Mr. Covey. To no avail. Douglass was sent back to the "breaker of slaves."

On the day after his return, long before daylight, he was called up to go and feed, rub, and curry the horses.

In his despair, he had somehow brought his mind to a firm resolve "to obey every order, however unreasonable . . . and, if Mr. Covey should then undertake to beat me, to defend and protect myself to the best of my ability." Here is how Douglass describes what happened and what took place within himself:

AN AMERICAN REVOLUTION

Whilst I was obeying his order to feed and get the horses ready for the field, and when in the act of going up the stable loft . . . Covey sneaked into the stable . . . and seizing me suddenly by the leg, he brought me to the stable floor, giving my newly mended body a fearful jar. I now forgot my *roots*, and remembered my pledge to *stand up in my own defense*. The brute was endeavoring skillfully to get a slip-knot on my legs, before I could draw up my feet. As soon as I found what he was up to, I gave a sudden spring. . . . Whence came the daring spirit necessary to grapple with a man who, eight-and forty hours before, could, with his slightest word have made me tremble like a leaf in a storm, I do not know: at any rate, *I was resolved to fight*, and, what was better still, I was actually hard at it . . . and I found my strong fingers firmly attached to the throat of my cowardly tormentor; as heedless of

consequences, at that moment, as though we stood as equals before the law. The very color of the man was forgotten. I felt as supple as a cat, and was ready for the snakish creature at every turn. Every blow of his was parried, though I dealt no blows in return. I was strictly on the *defensive*, preventing him from injuring me, rather than trying to injure him. I flung him to the ground several times, when he meant to hurl me there. I held him so firmly by the throat, that his blood followed my nails. He held me, and I held him.

All was fair, thus far, and the contest was about equal. My resistance was entirely unexpected, and Covey was taken all aback by it, for he trembled in every limb. "*Are you going to resist, you scoundrel?*" said he. To which, I returned a polite "*yes, sir;*" steadily gazing my interrogator in the eye. . . .

Covey at length (two hours had elapsed) gave up*the contest. Letting me go, he said—puffing and blowing at a great rate—"now, you scoundrel, go to your work; I would not have whipped you half so much as I have had you not resisted."

The fact was, *he had not whipped me at all*. He had not, in all the scuffle, drawn a single drop of blood from me. I had drawn blood from him; and, even without this satisfaction, I should have been victorious, because my aim had not been to injure him, but to prevent his injuring me. . . .

. . . this battle with Mr. Covey . . . was the turning point in my "*life as a slave*." . . . I was *nothing* before; I WAS A MAN NOW . . . A man, without force, is without the essential dignity of humanity. Human nature is so constituted, that it cannot *honor* a helpless man, although it can *pity* him; and even this it cannot do long, if the signs of power do not arise.¹¹⁴

And now Douglass brings home the central meaning of his struggle with Covey, the meaning that illuminated his whole life and that enabled him later to illuminate for others the meaning itself of America:

He only can understand the effects of this combat on my spirit, who has himself incurred something, hazarded something, in repelling the unjust and cruel aggressions of a tyrant. Covey was a tyrant, and a cowardly one, withal; after resisting him, I felt as I have never felt before. It was a resurrection from the dark and pestiferous tomb of slavery, to the heaven of comparative freedom. I was no longer a servile coward, trembling under the frown of a brother worm of the dust, but, my long-cowed spirit was roused to an attitude of manly independence. I had reached the point at which I was *not afraid to die*. This spirit made me a freeman in *fact*, while I remained a slave in *form*. When a slave cannot be flogged he is more than half free. He has a domain as broad as his own manly heart to defend, and he is really "*a power on earth*." . . . From this time, until that of my escape from slavery, I was never fairly whipped. . . . Bruises I did get. . . . But the case I have been describing, was the end of the brutification to which slavery had subjected me.

Douglass had found—or, perhaps more precisely, was found by—the real Self within him. If this is not a spiritual fact, there is no such thing as the spirit—though, of course, there may be many degrees of it. And the risk that was required of him has absolutely no element in it of posturing or bravado or impetuosity; there is not a trace of foolhardiness or egoism about it. There is not even—if one looks closely—the element of anger or resentment in it. (The anger came before it, and it came later—but the force of Douglass' will at this moment consumes and transforms every kind of emotion that is the expression of one part of a man fighting against another part, a characteristic of ordinary anger.) Instead, what we see here is the risk one takes in those rare moments of life when the Self speaks to the self, and

one wholly and instantly submits, without bargaining with what the mind "knows" or with the way the world "appears," without bargaining with the fears or with the surface prudence that in our everyday manifestations form such a thick crust over our essential nature.

It is a revolution from within that is being spoken of here—from deep within the Self. And, as the ancient wisdom teaches, there is nothing, nothing at all in the world of appearances, the world constructed within the frame of the socially conditioned personality, that can resist the uncompromising will of the Self to manifest in human action. Satan himself—so the legends tell us—bows down and submits when the real Self steps forward.

Douglass interiorized the American Revolution. The Revolution arose and came to fruition within the crucible of this same quality of risk. Its outer results in the political, economic and societal realms had spread out, and as the country grew toward becoming the richest and most powerful nation on earth, the inner meaning of the events that gave it birth was forgotten and covered over. America was becoming rich and successful, but inwardly it was already dying and drying up. But the people it had oppressed and enslaved still contained the element that had brought the original fire to the nation. The crime of slavery (in both its broad and narrow meanings) was the outward expression and echo of the deeply human sin of forgetting the inner Self that is the only real source of power and virtue in a human being or in a group or in a culture.

It is sometimes said that slavery is the shadow side of America. Although there is great truth in that, it is equally true to say that America itself had slipped into the shadows of forgetfulness. The continuation of slavery was the result of this forgetting. And Douglass' rebellion is one of a thousand echoes—most of the others are lost in historical obscurity—of the process of remembering the Self that in the past had brought about the glory of the Revolution and was destined to bring about the agony of the Civil War, and which eventually led to Lincoln's decisive redefinition of the meaning of America, which became the basis of such hope for the world: the idea of a nation founded on the intrinsic sacredness of all men and women—in Christian language, the equality of "all souls."

THE SIN FOR WHICH THERE IS NO FORGIVENESS

After citing Psalm 137, the Psalm of Remembering, Douglass continues:

Fellow-citizens; above your national, tumultuous joy, I hear the mournful wail of millions! whose chains, heavy and grievous yesterday, are, to-day, rendered more intolerable by the jubilee shouts that reach them. If I do forget, if I do not faithfully remember those bleeding children of sorrow this day, "may my right hand forget her cunning, and may my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth."¹

What Douglass wants to say is that the whole nation must remember its origin and its higher nature. Through the perpetuation of slavery, America is forgetting what it is—and perhaps the word "forgetting" needs to be explained in a manner more explicitly consistent with its meaning in the wisdom traditions of the world: namely, to forget the Self is to deny the divine spirit within man, to deny the goodness of man, to deny the purpose of God's creation of man. In sum, although these are not Douglass' exact words, the perpetuation of slavery denies the intrinsic conscience of man. It is, symbolically, mythically, and perhaps literally as well, a manifestation of a towering and shattering idea that lies in the heart of the great wisdom. In Christian language, it is *the great and awful sin against the Holy Spirit, the one sin for which there is no forgiveness*.

Can a shadow of this idea enter into the re-mythologization of America? The words and logic of Frederick Douglass' July 5 speech—perhaps the greatest anti-slavery oration in American history—can show us the way. But we need to go slowly, for it is a long thought that is coming through Douglass, and it is necessary to meet his thought with our own need to deepen the story of America.

I do not hesitate to declare, with all my soul, that the character and conduct of this nation never looked blacker to me than on this 4th of

July! . . . America is false to the past, false to the present, and solemnly binds herself to be false to the future. Standing with God and the crushed and bleeding slave on this occasion, I will, in the name of humanity, which is outraged, in the name of liberty, which is fettered, in the name of the Constitution and the Bible, which are disregarded and trampled upon, dare to . . . denounce . . . everything that serves to perpetuate slavery—the great sin and shame of America!¹¹⁷

Douglass continues, pouring white-hot irony on the present America. The form of his speech is fire and storm. "The feeling of the nation must be quickened," he says; "the conscience of the nation must be roused." And he continues in passionate denunciation. But although the outer form of his speech is blazing fire, the essence of it is a sustained, slowly developing idea, all the more penetrating and shattering because of its objective, philosophical significance. We need to let in the fire that is carrying a great and ancient idea about the real nature of evil as the denial, not only of one's neighbor's humanness and human rights, but of one's own divinity, one's own cosmic and moral nature as a human being created by God. To do evil to another is, first and foremost, to deny the sacredness of man, and to deny the sacred dignity of man is to blaspheme against the Holy Spirit. It is the unforgivable sin—and in the ancient wisdom teachings, it is this sin, and no other, that inevitably calls upon man the wrath of God, with its destruction of human life and of any civilization that disallows the entry of the spirit into the life of the earth. Douglass is accusing America not only of rank brutality and injustice toward the slave, but of denying its own reflection of the idea of the Holy Spirit; of denying its own sacredness.

Like fallen man himself, America cannot see what it has become. It cannot see its contradictions; it *cannot feel that* it is not what it imagines itself to be. It does not feel or understand that, in the words of St. Paul, the good that it would, it does not; and that which it hates, it does. There is a screen, a tight network of self-deception that prevents America from being

shocked by itself; and it is a central aspect of Douglass' mission to help America free itself from these self-deceptions in order to suffer the fire of seeing its contradictions:

Americans! . . . You boast of your love of liberty, your superior civilization, and your pure Christianity, while the whole political power of the nation . . . is solemnly pledged to support and perpetuate the enslavement of three million of your countrymen. . . . You invite to your shores fugitives of oppression from abroad . . . but the fugitives from your own land you advertise, hunt, arrest, shoot and kill. . . . You are all on fire at the mention of liberty for France or for Ireland; but are as cold as an iceberg at the thought of liberty for the enslaved of America. . . . You can bare your bosom to the storm of British artillery to throw off a threepenny tax on tea; yet wring the last hard-earned farthing from the grasp of the black laborers of your country. You profess to believe "that of one blood, God made all nations of men to dwell on the face of all the earth," and hath commanded all men everywhere to love one another; yet you notoriously hate (and glory in your hatred), all men whose skins are not colored like your own.¹¹⁸

And now Douglass sounds the note that will bring to its final form the great thought he is carrying—namely, that the nation is denying the goodness of its own "scripture," its Declaration of Independence, its Constitution. The nation is slandering itself, forgetting what it is, denying its own sacred essence:

You declare, before the world, and are understood by the world to declare, that you "hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal; and are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; and that, among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness;" and yet, you hold securely, in a bondage which, according to your own Thomas Jefferson, "is worse than ages of that which your

fathers rose in rebellion to oppose," a seventh part of the inhabitants of your country.¹⁹

It is worth calling attention to more of Jefferson's words here, for the clarity with which he saw what we have referred to as man's fatal weakness of blindness to his own moral and existential self-contradiction. "What a stupendous, what an incomprehensible machine is man! Who can endure toil, famine, stripes, imprisonment or death itself in vindication of his own liberty, and the next moment . . . inflict on his fellow men a bondage, one hour of which is fraught with more misery than ages of that which he rose in rebellion to oppose."²⁰

Blind to its own contradictions, America's twisted perceptions, coldness of heart and brutality of deed amount to nothing less than a rejection and forgetting of its own essential nature, its own Self. The great initiative force that created America has met its counter-force, its principle of resistance equal and opposite to its sacred initiative. And so it has been through all the ages. In every nation and civilization, every active thrust toward the good has met its resisting force from within its own bosom. Every nation on earth, every people, every institution, secular and religious—by a cosmic law that requires great force to meet its opposing, denying principle—has seen its destiny shaped by the manner* in which it has understood this inevitable, lawful opposing force.

What we see in history as the obvious result of this clash is humanity's repeated descent into barbarism and violence. What is harder to recognize are the occasions in history when the opposing force is understood for what it is and where a third principle—in Christian language, the Holy Spirit—reconciles the two opposing forces. Such reconciliation is quiet and invisible and takes place behind the scenes in the hearts and minds of individual men and women. We need to understand that to a significant extent, the American Constitution was created to allow forces to confront each other in a manner that makes room for the appearance—the "descent from above," if one wishes to put it that way—of the reconciling principle that preserves and even deepens unity, union. This, continuing with Biblical language,

and echoing the same vision of peace as that of the American Indian, leads to the idea of the "peace that passes understanding," that which bridges two mutually opposing forces.

The deeper meaning of evil lies here. Evil is that which fatally obstructs the action of the inner reconciling force, which fatally obstructs the "descent of the dove," the Holy Spirit, in human life. To resist what is good is not in itself the unforgivable sin. What is unforgivable is to resist the reconciliation of the struggle between good and its antagonist.

In the ancient wisdom there exist two ideas of evil—that is, two words for the devil. One word, the Hebraic *satan*, means the "adversary," the resisting force. The other word, the word "devil," comes from the Greek *diabolos*, the "divider," and means the accuser, the slanderer, the liar. In its first form, as Satan, the devil is ultimately an instrument of God and in the end serves a holy purpose—as Christ says to Satan, "get thee behind me": that is, follow me, work for me. But in its second form, as that which divides off and denies the Holy Spirit, it is an unredeemable evil and must be destroyed. All the truly terrifying images of the devil are in one way or another rooted in the *diabolical*: that which hardens the division between good and evil and thereby compels man to forget his intimate bond with God—for example, to think of himself *only* as an animal (as in the horror story *The Exorcist*) or as a machine.

The crime of slavery, and all that it represents about America, shows us that America, like every other nation and civilization in history, is subject to the universal law that brings equal and opposite resistance to every great initiative. America, we begin to understand, must break free of the illusion that it is an exception to the laws of the universe that operate on earth in every era and in every people. With the crime of slavery—along with much else, of course—we see America slipping into barbarity on a massive scale. We see the danger of the resisting force—the force that resists love, freedom, justice—eclipsing the good and plunging the nation into the same degree of barbarism as it has witnessed in the nations of Europe with their internecine warfare and brutal oppressions. It is one thing to be a nobly conceived nation that, nevertheless, must inevitably contain within it massive currents of cor-

ruption and criminality; that cannot be avoided in the world as it is. But:: is another thing to see a nation destroyed through a widening fissure in its very essence. This fissure was and is slavery with all its implications and results. In the new story of America, in the re-mythologization of America, slavery appears as the deepest and most visible evil. The suffering and injustice inflicted on a whole people is a monstrosity. But it is not yet the "blasphemy against the Holy Ghost." The nation itself defines itself as that which cannot abide such injustice. The Constitution itself is to be understood as that essence of America which will allow the descent from above of the force that will bring reconciliation of white and black. This is the myth, that is to say, the sacred story, the sacred meaning that is echoed by the structure of the American nation. To deny this possibility, to assert that the essential mind and heart of America favor slavery, favor the monstrosity of evil—*that would be the unforgivable sin*, that would be the death of America.

THE SLEEP OF AMERICA

And so Douglass continues:

Fellow-citizens! . . . The existence «t slavery in this country brands your republicanism as a sham, your humanity as a base pretence, and your Christianity as a lie. It destroys your moral power abroad; it corrupts your politicians at home. It saps the foundation of religion; it makes your name a hissing, and a by-word to a mocking earth. *It is the antagonistic force in your government*, the only thing that seriously disturbs and endangers your *Union*.¹²¹

This antagonistic force, says Douglass,

fetters your progress . . . it fosters pride; it breeds insolence; it promotes vice; it shelters crime; it is a curse to the earth that supports it; and yet, *you cling to it as if it were the sheet anchor of all your hopes*. Oh! be

warned! be warned! a horrible reptile is coiled up in your nation's bosom; the venomous creature is nursing at the tender breast of your youthful republic; *for the love of God, tear away* and fling from you the hideous monster, and *let the weight of twenty millions crush and destroy it forever!*¹²²

Lest there be any doubt as to what lies at the heart of evil, Douglass concludes by utterly condemning the view that slavery, with its attendant evils, is *sanctioned* by the Constitution. This is the unforgivable sin against that spirit which emerged and flowered in Independence Hall in the summer of 1787 and which has since denned the essence, the Selfhood, of America. Be warned, says Douglass. Do not slander, do not live in the lie about what America is and must be by its very nature. Is one to say, asks Douglass ironically, that the Fathers of the Republic "stooped, basely stooped"

. . . and instead of being the honest men I have before declared them to be, they were the veriest imposters that ever practiced on mankind . . . But I differ from those who charge this baseness on the framers of the Constitution of the United States. *It is a slander upon their memory . . .*¹²³

THE SIN OF DESPAIR; THE REBIRTH OF HOPE

Douglass' final words can now show us yet another unexpected and essential aspect of the inner story of America. The unforgivable sin, the denial of the intrinsic goodness of God and man, of God in man, manifests itself inwardly as *despair*. The devil as the liar and slanderer is that which takes away all hope, all possibility, which denies God's power, which regards evil as equal or even stronger than the spirit. The masters of wisdom—in the Christian tradition and elsewhere—spoke of this as heresy, which means, in its serious interpretation, a fatally wrong attitude of mind which obstructs the action of God in one's own individual life or in the life of a people.

Hope—not foolish hope, not childish hope, but hope based on vision and consciousness—is necessary. And is this kind of hope the real, inner meaning of the story of America?

These are Douglass' words about hope:

Allow me to say, in conclusion, notwithstanding the dark picture I have this day presented of the state of the nation, / *do not despair of this country*. There are forces in operation, which must inevitably work the downfall of slavery. "*The arm of the Lord is not shortened,*" and the doom of slavery is certain. I, therefore, leave off where I began, with *hope*.

And here Douglass points not only to the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution—these elements which define the identity of America. He points as well to the forces of modernity, the changes in the world in which he sees the possibility of divine hope entering into the life of humanity. We need to mark well what he says here because it is America that has been the chief source of the spread of modernity—the new powers of technology commerce and communication. If America has become an empire, it is so not only because of its inspired concepts of government, but also because of forces that are far more ambiguous—the forces that trouble so many of us and that seem to carry seeds of a destruction that Douglass may not have been able to foresee. Or is he, in some sense we do not yet understand, more prophetic than it may seem? Is there a way of embracing the forces of modernity, which America has so powerfully fueled, that allows the action of the spirit to pour into the world through them? The question arises: can we live in a way that can manifest spirit in the ever-accelerating life of commerce, technology and the dazzling new instruments of communication?

Douglass has cited, and paraphrased, Isaiah 59, one of the Old Testament's most powerful evocations of the ultimate goodness and power of God or spirit:

Behold, the Lord's hand is not shortened, that it cannot save; neither his ear heavy, that it cannot hear.¹²⁵

And he follows this by reminding his audience that

Nations do not now stand in the same relation to each other that they did ages ago. No nation can now shut itself up from the surrounding world. . . . Long established customs of hurtful character could formerly fence themselves in, and do their evil work with social impunity. . . . But a change has now come over the affairs of mankind. Walled cities and empires have become unfashionable. The arm of commerce has borne away the gates of the strong city. Intelligence is penetrating the darkest corners of the globe . . . wind, steam and lightening are its chartered agents. Oceans no longer divide, but link nations together . . . space is comparatively annihilated. . . . The fiat of the Almighty, "Let there be light," has not yet spent its force. No abuse, no outrage . . . can now hide itself from the all-pervading light. The iron shoe, the crippled foot of China must be seen. . . . Africa must rise and put on her yet unwoven garment.¹²⁶

Throughout his long and illustrious life, Douglass was one of the most powerful forces in the struggle for racial equality in America. Through his words, wrathful and biting as they often were, and through his actions, he unfailingly brought a sense of hope and confidence in America's intrinsic goodness. But his place as a heroic symbol in the story of America has another dimension than that of a great warrior. He was what the ancient wisdom would call "the bringer of the question." To listen to Douglass and to be awakened in one's heart and mind to the depths of the crime of slavery is, inwardly, suddenly to stop, suddenly to come to an inner silence—even while outwardly one rightly senses the call to help, to act, to make things right in the civic and social sphere. But the bringer of the question does something else as well. He carries a force that acts in a completely interior direction: he brings us to the silence of remorse—a remorse completely beyond any plans of action, completely beyond any possibility of doing something. And yet it is there, in that condition of the encounter with conscience, that something beyond ourselves can appear, something that,

were it to be more enduring, could transform the life of man, far beyond any immediate but ultimately superficial remedy. Without the experience of genuine remorse, and without the intentional effort to return again and again to that experience, injustice and barbarism change only their name and form, but not their substance in the life of man and nations. So wisdom teaches and so history shows. America cannot be the hope of the world until it returns to learn that lesson.

And thus in the very last speech of his life, a life committed so energetically to improve the social and political conditions of the Negro—in a major address on September 3, 1894, at the dedication of the Colored Industrial School at Manassas, Virginia; in the midst of his eloquent words of encouragement and his wise articulation of the central importance of education in the life of black men and women, Douglass brings forth the following evocation, for all who have ears to hear, of the path of remorse:

{The Negro] was driven from time to eternity in the darkest ignorance, herded with the beasts of the field; without marriage, without family, without school, 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, in truth, 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; a church on every hill top in the South and supply them with a teacher and preacher respectively and welcome the descendants 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.¹²⁷

There is no end to the tragedy and heroism, the horror and beauty of the history of African Americans in our country. These few glimpses of the life and thought of Frederick Douglass are offered simply as evidence that the hope of America can never be renewed without allowing the entire reality of slavery and its consequences to speak to the mind and heart together. The language of the world's wisdom teachings is there, waiting to serve, waiting to allow the fundamental crimes of America to be seen in their universal meaning so that the moral action that is needed will be rooted in a deep truth about ourselves and not only in an anxious self-condemnation, or in an unfeeling cloud of self-justification, or in the futile dream of progress that has so blinded America to what it shares of the barbarism that has stained the whole fabric of human history.