THE QUEST FOR CIVIC VIRTUE

Narrative

Frederick Douglass and Responsibility

☐ I can discuss the benefits of responsibility in civil society by analyzing the story of Frederick Douglass.

Essential Vocabulary

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<th>Vocabulary</th>
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<td>responsibility</td>
<td>Acting on good judgment about what is right or wrong even when it is not popular. Individuals must take care of themselves, their families, and their fellow citizens/others in civil society and a republic and be vigilant to preserve their own liberty and the liberty of others.</td>
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<td>gag rule</td>
<td>A regulation or directive that prohibits public discussion of a particular matter.</td>
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Narrative

At the age of 20, Frederick Douglass stepped onto a northbound train and into freedom. A previous attempt two years earlier had landed him in jail. But this time, the plans, patience, and allies he had gathered over the previous years — and at the root of it, the idea that freedom was possible, his to take — all culminated in this bold act.

This was no impulsive escape. It was years in the making, driven by the power of literacy, the lamp of knowledge that was denied to slaves. Historically, the slave-holding South banned enslaved persons from reading and writing. Slaveholders feared that their enslaved would become exposed to these ideas of freedom and resistance. In 1826, at the age of 8, Douglass was sent to live in Baltimore, his master’s kind-hearted wife began to teach him the alphabet and basic reading skills before she was chastised for doing so.

Yet Douglass was bright and determined. He secretly continued to pursue literacy, often in ingenious ways.

Douglass spent time with young people his age who helped him, often unknowingly, in his quest to read. Sometimes he shared his allotment of bread with them, and in exchange they would share “that more valuable bread of knowledge” by showing him how to read. Later on, Douglass would challenge boys to writing contests, claiming he could write letters of the alphabet as well as any of them — knowing full well he could not! After writing a few letters on a fence post, he’d observe how they formed other letters that he did not know.

Douglass acquired a copy of the Columbian Orator, a book of speeches that contained principles of liberty and anti-slavery. He also read newspapers and learned about Nat Turner’s...
slave rebellion and the efforts of John Quincy Adams fighting the gag rule in Congress. Douglass saw the importance of reading to recover his humanity. “From that moment, I understood the pathway from slavery to freedom ... The argument which he [his former master] so warmly urged, against my learning to read, only served to inspire me with a desire and determination to learn,” Douglass later wrote in one of his autobiographies.

In 1833, Douglass was sent back to plantation life, which he found intolerable. Escape was never far from his mind. Another slaveholder acquired him and sent him to a “slavebreaker” who was an overseer employed to break the wills and degrade the human dignity of enslaved persons. The slavebreaker, Edward Covey, crushed Douglass’s spirit and dehumanized him. Douglass wrote of his horrific experience: “Mr. Covey succeeded in breaking me. I was broken in body, soul, and spirit ... behold a man transformed into a brute!”

One day, Douglass found an inner spark to take responsibility for his dignity. He resisted and fought back after receiving a savage beating. Douglass battled Covey to a draw and was not beaten again after that. Douglass related the profound effect it had on him. “It rekindled the few expiring embers of freedom,” Douglass explained, “and revived within me a sense of my manhood. It recalled the departed self-confidence, and inspired me again with a determination to be free.”

Two years later, in 1838, Douglass was resolved to escape the clutches of slavery and become a free man. Douglass made his way to the North with the help of others in the Underground Railroad network. He enjoyed the rights and liberties of a free man. He took a new name and married. He secured a job and was ecstatic to earn wages and keep the fruits of his labor. He savored his freedom and eventually took up the mantle for the cause of abolition, putting his writing and oratory skills to use as an author and speaker. In his later writings, he asserted that “[g]reatness does not come to any people on flowery beds of ease. We must fight to win the prize.”

Caption: Frederick Douglass valued literacy, knowing its importance to his success. He worked tirelessly to advance the causes of education and equal rights for Black Americans until his death in 1895. Photo: Frederick Douglass National Historic Site, Washington, DC.

Douglass’s life was a testimony to taking responsibility for one’s freedom and equality. He escaped from an unjust system that systematically violated his rights and those of 4 million
other people. As an abolitionist and civil rights leader, he spent the rest of his life dedicated to ensuring that others enjoyed their natural and civil rights as well. He called on his country to live up to the principles of its Founding.

Analysis Questions

1. Historically, why had enslaved people been prevented from learning to read?

2. What important event took place when Douglass was 8 years old?

3. What were some of the more inventive ways Douglass worked to become a better reader? Would some of these options have been available to him if he had been less resourceful, or less humble? What principles did he learn from his reading and how did they shape his responsibility for achieving his freedom? Explain.

4. Douglass failed in his 1836 attempt to escape. Enslaved people were not permitted to leave their masters without permission, and fugitive slaves could be (and in some places were legally required to be) returned to their masters. In other words, Douglass’s attempt to escape was against the law. But was it virtuous? Explain.

5. Douglass fought back against the slavebreaker, Edward Covey. What effect did this have on Douglass’s views of his enslavement and freedom?

6. Douglass said, “If there is no struggle, there is no progress. Those who profess to favor freedom, and yet depreciate agitation, are men who want crops without plowing up the ground. They want rain without thunder and lightning. They want the ocean without the awful roar of its many waters. This struggle may be a moral one; or it may be a physical one; or it may be both moral and physical; but it must be a struggle.” How does this quotation help you understand the virtue of responsibility?

7. The Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution banned slavery, yet Douglass did not consider his work finished. How did Douglass continue to show responsibility to his fellow man throughout the rest of this life?


9. Slavery was a terrible injustice that ended in the U.S. after people worked for over a century. What is the responsibility of citizens in a constitutional republic to protect others’ rights?

10. Given your responses to the previous two questions, what is the relationship between civic virtue among citizens and the effective running of a republic?

11. For what in your life are you responsible? For what will you be responsible in five years?

12. How do — and will — you act responsibly in your daily life?