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“Do Unto Others as You Would Have Them
Do Unto You”:
Frederick Douglass’s Proverbial Struggle for Civil Rights

As a deeply religious person, Frederick Douglass (1818–95) relied heavily on biblical proverbs to strengthen the social and moral statements in his debates, lectures, and writings. But while the biblical proverbs provided religious authority to Douglass’s deliberations, he was also very much aware of the social significance of folk proverbs in his fight against slavery and for civil rights. The proverbs function as authoritative and collective statements, and they serve as important social and moral messages. As such, proverbs show themselves to be traditional wisdom well suited to becoming verbal weapons in the fight for freedom, democracy, and civil rights.

THERE IS NO DOUBT THAT FREDERICK DOUGLASS (1818–95) was the most visible and influential African American of the 19th century. Together with Abraham Lincoln he belongs to a select group of truly outstanding public figures of that age. Son of a slave and an unidentified White man, Douglass escaped from slavery in 1838 after learning on his own how to read and write. Lacking any formal education whatsoever, he nevertheless quickly became a driving force in the antislavery movement, impressing abolitionist audiences with his oratorical eloquence and imposing presence. He subsequently gained considerable fame both in the United States and in Great Britain as a vocal abolitionist, civil rights activist, and publisher of social reform journals. Nothing it seems could stop this vigorous crusader from fighting for a better world where people of both genders and all races could live together in harmony. His autobiography *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, Written by Himself* (1845; expanded twice in 1855 and 1893) became a classic in his lifetime, and the two sets of five massive volumes of *The Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass* (1950–75), edited by Philip S. Foner, and *The Frederick Douglass Papers* (1985–92), edited by John Blassingame, bear witness to his rhetorical skills and moral courage.

Frederick Douglass became one of the recognized voices speaking for many of the enslaved African Americans in the United States in the 19th century. He assumed their narrative identity, and when he spoke or wrote, his words were based on the authority of the Bible and the democratic ideals of the United States. He fought his valiant battle

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against slavery, not with the gun but with words before and during the Civil War and until the passing, in 1865, of the 13th Amendment outlawing slavery, and in 1870 of the 14th Amendment giving African Americans the right to vote. But even after these victories, he continued to raise his powerful voice for the causes of women's rights, various minorities, temperance, free public education, and other social causes. He was a social and political agitator in the best sense of that word, always arguing for the strength of morality, equality, and democracy.

Douglass's rhetorical prowess is legendary, but scholars have hitherto ignored one major element of that oratorical power, namely his repeated use of biblical and folk proverbs to add authoritative and generational wisdom to his arguments. For example, in the following list of rhetorical devices and techniques employed by Douglass, a direct reference to proverbs is sorely missed:

hypothesis, explanation, illustration, personal example, irony, definition, refutation, exposé, testimony from authority, personification, comparison-contrast, narrative, dramatic scenarios, naming names, denunciation, the rhetorical question, *catathesis*, *accumulation*, *anaphora*, *reductio ad absurdum*, antithesis, apostrophe, the pointed term, metaphor, analogy, visual aids [advertisements, wanted posters, books, ankle irons], slogans, invectives, the rhetorical jeremiad, and biblical and classical allusions. [Burke 1996:121]

Three unpublished theses dealing explicitly with Douglass's language and style also ignore his propensity for citing proverbs. They speak rather generally of his use of "figurative language, illustration, and analogy" (Hale 1951:46), "literal and figurative analogies" (Hinshaw 1972:260), and "figures of comparison and contrast such as analogy, metaphor, and antithesis" (Kinney 1974:254). Even when on occasion a proverb might be cited to illustrate the metaphorical style of Douglass, both literary and historical scholars seem to miss the obvious fact that the great orator is very consciously integrating proverbs into his oral speech and autobiographical, epistolary, and journalistic writings. William G. Allen, in a lecture on "Orators and Orations" delivered on 22 June 1852 in New York, quite appropriately spoke of "Douglass [who] is not only great in oratory, tongue-wise, but, considering his circumstances in early life, still more marvelous in composition, pen-wise" (Quarles 1968:101).¹ Surely Allen is not merely speaking of "wise" in the sense of "like" here but is also implying wisdom as well. And clearly he is proverb-wise as well, using proverbial wisdom wherever possible to advance his committed fight for justice and liberty.

In a lecture appropriately titled "The Decision of the Hour," delivered on 16 June 1861, in Rochester, New York, Douglass has perhaps unwittingly put forth his socio-linguistic *modus operandi*:

Men have their choice in this world. They can be angels, or they can be demons. In the apocalyptic vision, John describes a war in heaven [Rev. 12:7-9]. You have only to strip that vision of its gorgeous Oriental drapery, divest it of its shining and celestial ornaments, clothe it in the simple and familiar language of common sense, and you will have before you the eternal conflict between right and wrong, good and evil, liberty and slavery, truth and falsehood, the glorious light of love, and the appalling darkness of human selfishness and sin. [Blassingame 1985-92:vol. 3, 437; Foner 1950-1975: vol. 3, 119]²

At least to a degree, this “simple and familiar language of common sense” is what characterizes proverbs. As “monumenta humana,” as the Finnish proverb scholar Matti Kuusi has defined proverbs somewhat poetically, they contain the collected insights and experiences of people without representing a logical or universal system of philosophical thought (Kuusi 1957:52). Instead, proverbs very much reflect the dichotomies and contradictions of life, as Douglass has described them in the cited passage.³ Depending on the context in which they appear, they can take on different functions and meanings, and they may serve good as well as evil designs.⁴ Contrary to common belief, proverbs are anything but simple formulaic expressions, and Frederick Douglass’s use of them is ample proof of their importance as verbal strategies for social communication.⁵

“If you give a nigger an inch, he will take an ell”

Frederick Douglass is well aware of the ambivalent nature of proverbs whose wisdom can well be a double-edged sword. This becomes quite evident in his depiction of how slaveholders employ evil proverbs to justify the inhuman institution of slavery. A striking example is found in the very first paragraph of Douglass’s earliest recorded speech of October 1841, addressing White abolitionists in Lynn, Massachusetts:

My friends, I have come to tell you something about slavery—what *I know* of it, as I have *felt* it. [...] I have suffered under the lash without the power of resisting. Yes, my blood has sprung out as the lash embedded itself in my flesh. And yet my master [Thomas Auld] has the reputation of being a pious man and a good Christian. He was a class leader in the Methodist church. I have seen the pious class leader cross and tie the hands of one of his young female slaves, and lash her on the bare skin and justify the deed by the quotation from the Bible, “he who knoweth his master’s will and doeth it not, shall be beaten with many stripes.” Our masters do not hesitate to prove from the Bible that slavery is right, and ministers of the Gospel tell us that we were born to be slaves. [Blassingame 1985–92:vol. 1, 3]

Obviously, the vicious proverbial justification of slave beating is a willful misinterpretation of the gospel passage in Luke 12:13, where Christ the “Master” tells his “servants” that they should prepare themselves and wait for their lord:

But and if that servant say in his heart, My lord delayeth his coming; and shall begin to beat the menservants and maidens . . . the Lord of that servant will come in a day when he looketh not for him, and at an hour when he is not aware, and will cut him in sunder, and will appoint him his portion with the unbelievers. And that servant, which knew his lord’s will, and prepared not himself, neither did according to his will, shall be beaten with many stripes. [Luke 12:46–47]

The context makes it clear that the slaveholder is in fact the faithless servant who beats his own people and who, as a consequence, will be beaten for failing to follow God’s commands. But that did not matter to the shrewd class of slaveholders. They simply twisted part of the biblical parable into a precise utterance. The frequent verbal use of this passage, as well as the actual physical and painful performance of beatings, rendered it into a slaveholders’ proverb that served as a sagacious formula to control the slaves.

Douglass quotes this slavery justification proverb numerous times in his speeches of the 1840s, and he certainly recalled it when writing his widely disseminated *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, Written by Himself*:

I have said my master found religious sanction for his cruelty. As an example, I will state one of many facts going to prove this charge. I have seen him tie up a lame young woman, and whip her with a heavy cowskin upon her naked shoulders, causing the warm red blood to drip; and, in justification of the bloody deed, he would quote this passage of Scripture—"He that knoweth his master's will, and doeth it not, shall be beaten with many stripes." Master would keep this lacerated young woman tied up in this horrid situation four or five hours at a time. I have known him to tie her up early in the morning, and whip her before breakfast; leave her, go to his store, return at dinner, and whip her again, cutting her in the places already made raw with his cruel lash. [1845:53]⁶

This is a slightly more drastic rendering of the terrible scene with its emphasis on the running blood. It is, of course, always disturbing when a religious person, as Douglass's master Tom Auld claimed to be, would think he could justify his inhuman acts by misquoting the Bible. Worse demagogues, notably Adolf Hitler, have done the same with biblical quotations and proverbs trying to justify the killing of millions of people.⁷

Of special interest is also an hitherto unrecorded proverb which expresses the disregard for the life of a slave as well as his murdered body: "It was a common saying, even among little white boys, that it was worth a half-cent to kill a 'nigger,' and a half-cent to bury one" (1845:32). In his second autobiography *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855), Douglass explains this inhuman attitude further and calls it clearly a proverb, thus attesting to its widely held claim: "One of the commonest sayings to which my ears early became accustomed, on Col. Lloyd's plantation and elsewhere in Maryland, was, that it was 'worth but half a cent to kill a nigger, and half a cent to bury him,' and the facts of my experience go far to justify the practical truth of this strange proverb" (1855:204, 1893:516-517). In a short essay published in August of 1863 in his journal *Douglass' Monthly*, he returns once again to this telling proverb, recalling its popularized validity: "When a boy, on a slave plantation the saying was common: 'Half a cent to kill a Negro and half a cent to bury him.'—The luxury of killing and burying could be enjoyed by the poorest members of Southern society, and no strong temptation was required to induce white men thus to kill and bury the black victims of their lust and cruelty" (Foner 1950-75:vol. 3, 369).

There were, of course, many slaves who survived such pecuniary killings, but in that case the slaveholders tried to kill the minds of their "chattels." But such mind control did not always work, for naturally intelligent slaves outwitted their masters, as Douglass explains through a fascinating contextualization of a well-known proverb:

Ignorance is a high virtue in a human chattel; and as the master studies to keep the slave ignorant, the slave is cunning enough to make the master think that he succeeds. The slave fully appreciates the saying, "where ignorance is bliss, 'tis folly to be wise." [1855:172]

This formulation represents a fine example of Douglass's use of irony which easily turns the tables on the schemes of the slaveholders.⁸

And, to be sure, he knew from his own experience as a young boy what it meant to have one's intellectual growth stunted. In 1826, at the age of eight, he was sent to Baltimore to live with Hugh and Sophia Auld and serve as a companion to their two-year-old son Tommy. Things went very well at first, until Sophia Auld decided she would teach young Frederick the alphabet. Her efforts were stopped almost immediately by her husband, but not before she had convinced the young boy of the importance of learning how to read and write.

She very kindly commenced to teach me the A, B, C. After I had learned this, she assisted me in learning to spell words of three or four letters. Just at this point of my progress, Mr. Auld found out what was going on, and at once forbade Mrs. Auld to instruct me further, telling her, among other things, that it was unlawful, as well as unsafe, to teach a slave to read. To use his own words, further, he said, "If you give a nigger an inch, he will take an ell. A nigger should know nothing but to obey his master—to do as he is told to do. Learning would *spoil* the best nigger in the world. Now," he said, "if you teach that nigger (speaking of myself) how to read, there would be no keeping him. It would forever unfit him to be a slave. he would at once become unmanageable, and of no value to his master. As to himself, it could do him no good, but a great deal of harm. It would make him discontented and unhappy." [. . .] From that moment, I understood the pathway from slavery to freedom. [. . .] Though conscious of the difficulty of learning without a teacher, I set out with high hope, and a fixed purpose, at whatever cost of trouble, to learn how to read. [1845:37, 1855:217, 1893:527]

The "harm" of having been introduced to reading was already done, as Douglass states by interpreting Mr. Auld's perversion of the 16th-century proverb "give him an inch and he'll take an ell" to his own advantage:

From this time I was most narrowly watched. If I was in a separate room any considerable length of time, I was sure to be suspected of having a book, and was at once called to give an account of myself. All this, however, was too late. The first step had been taken. Mistress, in teaching me the alphabet had given me the *inch*, and no precaution could prevent me from taking the *ell*. [1845:40, 1855:223, 1893:531]⁹

His autodidactic education could no longer be stopped, and Douglass has narrated the fact that he learned a great deal from studying the Bible and the primers of White boys in the streets of Baltimore. And in 1830, at the mere age of twelve, he put his meager savings to good use and bought himself a used copy of *The Columbian Orator* (1797), a popular collection of speeches and dialogues compiled by Caleb Bingham for the purpose of rhetorical and moralistic instruction.¹⁰ He read and reread passages from this book, memorizing many passages to draw upon in later life. Here he encountered speeches by such great orators as Cato, Cicero, George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, and William Pitt, and he was introduced to all aspects of human rights. Of special instructional use was a lengthy introductory essay on "General Directions for Speaking—Extracted from Various Authors," which provided Douglass with the rhetorical skills for his later life as a public speaker.¹¹ Very much to the point, Booker T. Washington in his biography of *Frederick Douglass* (1907) speaks of the fact that these texts "gave to young Douglass a larger idea of liberty than was included in his mere dream of

freedom for himself, and in addition they increased his vocabulary of words and phrases" (1907:26). In fact, his deep rooting in the language of the Bible, together with his reading of such linguistically sophisticated excerpts by great minds, created a linguistic prowess in Douglass not often encountered by early abolitionist audiences who listened to his eloquent speeches. While he was also influenced by the sermonic and at times colloquial style of Black preachers and the rich traditional songs of the slaves,¹² Douglass refrained almost completely from employing the dialect of the plantation and its quarters. In his late pamphlet *Why Is the Negro Lynched?* (1894), Douglass makes the telling statement that "when a black man's language is quoted, in order to belittle and degrade him, his ideas are often put in the most grotesque and unreadable English, while the utterances of Negro scholars and authors are ignored" (Foner 1950–75: vol. 4, 507). Wanting to illustrate and prove that the intelligence of Black people can match that of Whites, Douglass very consciously chose to employ standard English and proved himself to be a master at it.¹³

Douglass's use of proverbs was primarily due to his interest in the Bible, as well as the sermonic style of Black preachers, a role that he himself took on during many Sunday mornings in church. Religious rhetoric has long been based on proverbial language, using both biblical and folk proverbs to reach and educate the congregation.¹⁴ The other reason might well be that he found them in that incredibly influential *Columbian Orator* which Douglass read so often that he knew many passages by heart. In a three-page "Extract from the Eulogy on Dr. Franklin, Pronounced by the Abbé Fauchet, in the Name of the Commons of Paris, 1790," he found, for example, the following high praise of proverbial wisdom: "The proverbs of 'Old Henry,' and 'Poor Richard,' are in the hands of both the learned and the ignorant; they contain the most sublime morality, reduced to popular language, and common comprehension; and form the catechism of happiness for all mankind" (Bingham 1998:56). And in the "Extract from Mr. Pitt's Speech, in Answer to Lord Mansfield, on the Affair of Mr. Wilkes, 1770," Douglass found the passage

My lords, there is one plain maxim, to which I have invariably adhered through life; that in every question in which my liberty or property were concerned, I should consult and be determined by the dictates of common sense. I confess, my lords, that I am apt to distrust the refinements of learning, because I have seen the ablest and most learned men equally liable to deceive themselves, and to mislead others. [Bingham 1998:145]

In a speech on 26 March 1860, in Glasgow, Douglass mentions that "common sense, common justice, and sound rules of interpretation all drive us to the words of the law for the meaning of the law" (Blassingame 1985–92:vol. 3, 349), and in an article on "Reconstruction" in *Atlantic Monthly*, December 1866, Douglass speaks quite similarly of "the plain, common-sense way of doing this work [of reconstruction]" (Foner 1950–75:vol. 4, 203). Doubtlessly, "Douglass impressed audiences with his sincerity, honesty, integrity, and common sense" (Hinshaw 1972:212) during "his war with slavery through language" (Sekora 1985:165).

"The crushed worm may yet turn under the heel of the oppressor"

When Frederick Douglass turned to proverbs to make his arguments against slavery, he could count on being understood by his audience. His use of folk proverbs in particular added a colloquial and metaphorical flavor to his arguments, and it is this figurative use of language that increased the general appeal of his serious messages. What follows is but a small chronological selection of contextualized proverb examples, in which each proverbial message represents Douglass's typical "common sense" philosophy. He could at times be a bit long winded in his argumentation, and some of his sentences are clearly run-on constructions, but proverbs help to focus or conclude such diatribes:

Negro pews in the church; Negro boxes in the theatre; Negro cars on the railroad; Negro berths in the steamboat; Negro churches and Negro schools in the community, are all pernicious fruit of a wicked, unnatural, and blasphemous prejudice against our God-given complexion; and as such stand directly in the way of our progress and equality. The axe must be laid at the root of the tree. This whole system of things is false, foul, and infernal, and should receive our most earnest and unceasing reprobation. [Foner 1950–75:vol. 5, 72; 10 March 1848]

The times create their own watch-words; and the watch-words of one generation may not always be appropriate to another. We would as willingly fight the battle of liberty and equality under the banner of "Free Sons and Free Men," as that of the Declaration of American Independence. "Deeds, not words," is our motto. [Foner 1950–75:vol. 5, 87–88; 1 September 1848]

The old proverb, "united we stand, divided we fall," has been fully and painfully illustrated by our antislavery experience, and it is quite time that we had learned its lesson of wisdom. Moral enterprises, not less than political and physical ones, require union of feeling, union of aim, union of effort. Too long, we think, has this important truth been underestimated. Why should the friends of abolition stand longer divided? Why should they not come together, and do their utmost to establish an abolition organization upon which all may honorably stand and labor together for the extirpation of the common evil of the country? [Foner 1950–75:vol. 2, 524–525; October 1860]

Happily, however, in standing up in their cause I do, and you do, but stand in defense of the cause of the whole country. The circumstances of this eventful hour make the cause of the slaves and the cause of the country identical. They must fall and flourish together. A blow struck for the freedom of the slave, is equally a blow struck for the safety and welfare of the country. As Liberty and Union have become identical, so slavery and treason have become one and inseparable. I shall not argue this point. It has already been most ably argued. All eyes see it, all hearts begin to feel it; and all that is needed is the wisdom and the manhood to perform the solemn duty pointed out by the stern logic of our situation. It is now or never with us. [Blassingame 1985–92:vol. 3, 494; 5 February 1862; Foner 1950–75:vol. 3, 215; 12 February 1862]

"Now or never"—that is indeed a proverbial slogan for the final military struggle against slavery during the Civil War. But as all of these references have shown, Douglass expresses his fears and hopes through proverbs, thus showing the humanity of this fight. Douglass is without doubt the agitator par excellence, calling things the way he sees them. And when he attacks the slaveholders of the South in ever new tirades,

he is even capable of a proverb sentence like “Honesty is the best policy even in dealing with slaveholders” to add a bit of biting satire to it all (Blassingame 1985–92:vol. 2, 400; Foner 1950–75:vol. 5, 247; 14 October 1852).

Even though he did not condone the idea of planning a militant uprising of the slaves, he uttered the serious warning that it might just come to this in an antislavery lecture delivered on 8 December 1850, in his hometown of Rochester. Here he integrates the 16th-century English proverb, “Tread on a worm and it will turn,” in the middle of his argument. The metaphor of the “worm” stands, of course, for the miserable life of the slave who has been reduced by the slaveholders to the lowest status of animal life:

I would warn the American people, and the American government, to be wise in their day and generation. I exhort them to remember the history of other nations; and I remind them that America cannot always sit “as a queen,” in peace and repose; that prouder and stronger governments than this have been shattered by the bolts of a just God; that the time *may* come when those they now despise and hate, may be needed; when those whom they now compel by oppression to be enemies, may be wanted as friends. What has been, may be again. There is a point beyond which human endurance cannot go. The crushed worm may yet turn under the heel of the oppressor. I warn them, then, with all solemnity, and in the name of retributive justice, *to look to their ways*; for in an evil hour, those sable arms that have, for the last two centuries, been engaged in cultivating and adorning the fair fields of our country, may yet become the instruments of terror, desolation, and death, throughout our borders. [Blassingame 1985–92:vol. 2, 271; Foner 1950–75:vol. 2, 148–149]

Anybody who experienced the civil rights marches and the serious struggles to keep them peaceful under the leadership of Martin Luther King and others will be experiencing a *déjà vu* here. This is a very precarious situation to which Douglass draws attention metaphorically and indirectly, but still clear enough for anybody to understand. Douglass noted well that his warnings and those of others were not necessarily being heeded. Seven years later, on 11 May 1857, in New York City, he felt compelled to draw on the “worm” proverb again to paint a very gloomy prophecy:

The time may come when even the crushed worm may turn under the tyrant’s feet. Goaded by cruelty, stung by a burning sense of wrong, in an awful moment of depression and desperation, the bondman and bondwoman at the south may rush to one wild and deadly struggle for freedom. Already slaveholders go to bed with bowie knives, and apprehend death at their dinners. Those who enslave, rob, and torment their cooks, may well expect to find death in their dinner-pots.

The world is full of violence and fraud, and it would be strange if the slave, the constant victim of both fraud and violence, should escape the contagion. He, too, may learn to fight the devil with fire, and for one, I am in no frame of mind to pray that this may be long deferred. [Blassingame 1985–92:vol. 3, 169–170; Foner 1950–75:vol. 2, 413]

Douglass indicates in this speech that his pacifist attitude has been stretched to the limit and that the philosophy of nonviolence might not be workable much longer. Three years later, the Civil War broke out without the occurrence of a mass uprising of the slaves. But little wonder that Frederick Douglass and his sons became staunch supporters of the war effort, helping to recruit Black soldiers of the North to fight for the

struggle to liberate the “crushed worms” of the South who could finally “turn” and stand up for freedom and human dignity.

Throughout his life’s struggles, Douglass never gave up hope that the lot of the slaves and then freed African Americans would improve with time and effort. To argue this point, he often returned to biblical proverbs to strengthen his authoritative argument that slaveholders will, in due time, be punished for their evil deeds. Now, the slaveholders might not simply wind up in captivity themselves, they might also die (at least figuratively) by the proverbial sword for their crimes:

The slaveholders are sleeping on slumbering volcanoes, if they did but know it; and I want every colored man in the South to remain there and cry in the ears of the oppressors, “Liberty for all or chains for all.” I want them to stay there with the understanding that the day may come—I do not say it *will* come, I do not say that I would hasten it, I do not say that I would advocate the result or aim to accomplish or bring it about,—but I say it *may* come; and in so saying, I only base myself upon the doctrine of the Scriptures, and upon human nature, and speaking out through all history. “Those that lead into captivity shall go into captivity” [Rev. 13:10]. “Those that take up the sword shall perish by the sword” [Matt. 26:52; Rev. 13:10]. Those who have trampled upon us for the last two hundred years, who have used their utmost endeavors to crush every noble sentiment in our bosom, and destroy our manly aspirations; those who have given us blood to drink for wages, may expect that their turn will come one day. It was in view of this fact that Thomas Jefferson, looking down through the vista of the future, exclaimed: “I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just, and that his justice cannot sleep forever.” [Blassingame 1985–92:vol. 2, 151–152; Foner 1950–75:vol. 5, 113–114]

It is of interest to note how Douglass in this piece of agitation circles quite literally around the idea of direct revenge by the victims on the perpetrators. But he does not commit himself to advocate real action. His dual biblical proverb message remains a sincere warning, and by adding Jefferson’s warning of a just God to it all, he argues that punishment will surely come in due time, expressed proverbially as “their turn will come one day.” This does, in fact, occur once the Civil War is in full swing. Now, the deserved punishment of the slaveholders has its justification, and Douglass cites merely the more violent “sword” proverb to seal the fate of the guilty slaveholders:

Slavery has chosen to submit her claims to the decision of the God of battles. She has deliberately taken the sword and it is meet that she should perish by the sword. Let the oppressor fall by the hand of the oppressed, and the guilty slaveholder, whom the voice of truth and reason could not reach, let him fall by the hand of his slave. It is in accordance with the All-wise orderings of Providence that it should be so. Eternal justice can thunder forth no higher vindication of her majesty nor proclaim a warning more salutary to a world steeped in cruelty and wickedness, than in such a termination of our system of slavery. Reason, argument, appeal,—all moral influences have been applied in vain. The oppressor has hardened his heart, blinded his mind and deliberately rushed upon merited destruction. Let his blood be upon his own head. [Foner 1950–75:vol. 3, 376; 16 August 1863]

Now the proverbial *leitmotif* rages military and personal revenge on the perpetrators, and Douglass shows no restraint or mercy as slavery is slowly but surely wiped out. This is not a pacifist speaking, but rather a man who has experienced slavery and who

knows of the evil deeds of the transgressors. The proverb has no figurative meaning any longer, but it must be acted out so that slavery can be destroyed.

“There is no peace for the wicked”

The path toward the Civil War was for Frederick Douglass “a moral revolution” (Blassingame 1985–92:vol. 2, 481; 10 May 1854); by getting involved in it as a great agitator and orator, he became “the moral leader and spiritual prophet of his race” (Miller 1968:220).¹⁵ In a speech on 3 August 1857, in Canandaigua, New York, Douglass expressed his moral philosophy in a succinct statement that continues to serve as a motto for any strife for civil rights:

Let me give you a word of the philosophy of reform. The whole history of the progress of human liberty shows that all concessions yet made to her august claims, have been born of earnest struggle. The conflict has been exciting, agitating, all-absorbing, and for the time being, putting all other tumults to silence. It must do this or it does nothing. 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 must be a moral one, or it may be a physical one, and it may be both moral and physical, but it must be a struggle. Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will. [Blassingame 1985–92:vol. 3, 204]

Several scholars have noted this passage, and Steven Kingston concludes his book on *Frederick Douglass: Abolitionist, Liberator, Statesman* (1941) by quoting its wisdom as the most appropriate composite description of Douglass’s life-long crusade for civil rights: “His life is the finest testimony to his own saying: ‘If there is no struggle, there is no progress.’”¹⁶ It is good to know that in 1980 this statement finally found its way into the 15th edition of John Bartlett’s *Familiar Quotations* (1980) as one of Douglass’s most significant formulaic statements (1980:556).¹⁷ It should survive as a quotation, and its concise parallel structure and fundamental wisdom might well turn it into a proverb yet.¹⁸ As Francis J. Grimké, mentioned in his “Obituary Sermon” for Frederick Douglass on 10 March 1895, in the Fifteenth Street Presbyterian Church at Washington, D.C., Douglass

possessed a mind of remarkable acuteness and penetration, and of great philosophical grasp. [. . .] With the skill of a trained dialectician, [he] knew how to marshal all the arguments at his command, in the form of facts and principles. [. . .] He had a strong, mighty intellect. They called him the Sage of Anacostia; and so he was—all that the term implies—wise, thoughtful, sound of judgment, discriminating, far-seeing. [Quarles 1968:123]

Frank M. Kirkland has aligned Frederick Douglass’s struggle towards enlightened progress with the idea of “moral suasion,” which he understands to be

the presupposition that the language of morality directly influences conduct. That is to say, moral suasion requires the belief that it can awaken, through rhetoric, moral sensibility and, as a consequence, motivate us to do what is good. Moreover, moral suasion is buttressed by Douglass’s affirmation

of Enlightenment ideas concerning a universal humanism, i.e., a singular human nature, and the sanctity of life, liberty, and happiness. [1999:244]

But what Kirkland does not mention is that folk proverbs in general, and biblical proverbs in particular, are by their very sapient nature expressions of moral suasion.¹⁹

Even though the conflict of slavery and liberty might not have been recognized in his day as a religious topic as such, Douglass repeatedly uses two biblical proverbs to argue that these ways of life are absolutely incompatible. In this first example from a speech delivered on 12 February 1846, in Arbroath, Scotland, his proverbial argument becomes the stronger since he is, in fact, attacking the organized churches for being on the side of the slaveholders:

I maintain to the last that man-stealing is incompatible with Christianity—that slave-holding and true religion are at war with each other—and that a Free Church should have no fellowship with a slave church;—that as light can have no union with darkness, Christ has no concord with Beelzebub; and as two cannot walk together except they be agreed [Amos 3:3], and no man can serve two masters [Matt. 6:24],—so I maintain that freedom cannot rightfully be blended with slavery. Nay, it cannot, without stabbing liberty to the heart. [Blassingame 1985–92:vol. 1, 159; Foner 1950–75:vol. 5, 23]

Fifteen years later he repeats the first proverb in a short essay on “Shall Slavery Survive the War?” in *Douglass' Monthly* and replaces the second text by a folk proverb:

Slavery and free institutions can never live peacefully together. They are irreconcilable in the light of the laws of social affinities. How can two walk together, except they be agreed. Water and oil will not mix. Ever more, stir them as you will, the water will go to its place, and the oil to its. There are elective affinities in the moral chemistry of the universe, as well as in the physical, and the laws controlling them are unceasingly operative and ir repealable. [Foner 1950–75:vol. 3, 143; September 1861]

One page later in the same essay Douglass feels compelled to return to this message, now pulling in the second biblical proverb after all:

Liberty of conscience, of speech, and of the press has no real life in a slave State, and can have none for any considerable length of time. It must either overthrow slavery, or be itself overthrown by slavery. “No man can serve two masters.” No society can long uphold two systems radically different and point blank opposed, like slavery and freedom. [Foner 1950–75:vol. 3, 144]

But not quite three months later, in a major address of 3 December 1861, in Boston, Douglass adds a third biblical proverb and an allusion to a fourth folk proverb to this by now standard argumentation: “The trouble is fundamental. Two cannot walk together except they be agreed. No man can serve two masters. A house divided against itself cannot stand [Matt. 12:35]. It is something to ride two horses going the same way, but impossible when going opposite ways” (Blassingame 1985–92:vol. 3, 465; repeated almost identically on 14 January 1862, in Philadelphia; see Foner 1950–75:vol. 3, 200; Blassingame 1985–92:vol. 3, 479). While the proverb allusion probably is a play on the proverb “When two ride one horse, one must sit behind” found in William Shakespeare’s *Much Ado About Nothing* (1598),²⁰ Douglass might well have thought of Abraham Lincoln’s famous “House Divided” speech of 16 June 1858 that secularized the proverb’s

message in light of the slavery issue, when he chose this biblical proverb to argue against the possible coexistence of slavery and freedom.²¹

Frederick Douglass always takes the high road of moral suasion, as can be seen from yet another powerful biblical proverb which appears for several decades in his sermonic prophecies that evil doings will surely be punished, for "There can be no peace, saith the God, unto the wicked" (Isaiah 48:22). Douglass's words are haunting and threatening, arguing with all his prophetic might that there is no escape from secular or divine punishment for one's wickedness.

While this nation is guilty of the enslavement of three millions of innocent men and women, it is as idle to think of having a sound and lasting peace, as it is to think there is no God, to take cognizance of the affairs of men. There can be no peace to the wicked while slavery continues in the land, it will be condemned, and while it is condemned there will be agitation; Nature must cease to be nature; Men must become monsters; Humanity must be transformed; Christianity must be exterminated; all ideas of justice, and the laws of eternal goodness must be utterly blotted out from the human soul, ere a system so foul and infernal can escape condemnation, or this guilty Republic can have a sound and enduring Peace. [Blassingame 1985-92:vol. 2, 259; 1 December 1850; Foner 1950-75:vol. 2, 139]

On 30 October 1854, in Chicago, Douglass declares his guilty verdict once again with satirical force:

Our parties have attempted to give peace to slaveholders. They have attempted to do what God has made impossible to be done; and that is to give peace to slaveholders. "There is no peace to the wicked, saith my God." In the breast of every slaveholder, God has placed, or stationed an anti-slavery lecturer, whose cry is *guilty*, GUILTY, GUILTY; "thou art verily guilty concerning thy brother." [Blassingame 1985-92:vol. 2, 548; Foner 1950-75:vol. 2, 323]

Here Douglass has turned the antislavery lecturer into the conscience of the slaveholder.

In March of 1862, in an essay on "The Situation of the War" in his *Douglass' Monthly*, Douglass quite predictably by now, drew on yet another proverb from the Bible to make the following prophecy: " 'Be not deceived, God is not mocked, whatsoever a man soweth that shall he reap' (Gal. 6:7). This is no dream of prophecy, but a clear reading of the philosophy of social and political forces, illustrated by no remote experience, but by the facts of the present hour" (Foner 1950-75:vol. 3, 230). A year later, at the height of the Civil War in April 1863, this time in an essay on "Do not Forget Truth and Justice" in the same magazine,²² Douglass queries "Shall we never learn that whatsoever we, as a nation, shall sow, that we shall certainly reap?" (Foner 1950-75:vol. 3, 340). On 20 November 1883, he connects the plant imagery of the proverb more directly with general ethical ideas of social politics in a speech in Washington, D.C., once again wanting to explain that all actions will have their results and that the price for wrongdoings will have to be paid:

I think it will be found that all genuine reform must rest on the assumption that man is a creature of absolute, inflexible law, moral and spiritual, and that his happiness and well-being can only be secured by perfect obedience to such law. All thought of evasion, by faith or penance, or by any means, must be discarded. "Whatever a man soweth, that shall he also reap," and from this there is no appeal. [Blassingame 1985-92:vol. 5, 139]

Toward the end of his third autobiography *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (1893), he returns once more to the same interpretation of this biblical proverb: "I recognize that the universe is governed by laws which are unchangeable and eternal, that what men sow they will reap, and that there is no way to dodge or circumvent the consequences of any act or deed" (1893:914). Only great moral values can lead to a better life for all people in hopefully more perfect societies, as Douglass has pointed out by means of one more biblical proverb:

Men do not live by bread alone [Deut. 8:3; Matt. 4:4], so with nations. They are not saved by art, but by honesty. Not by the gilded splendors of wealth, but by the hidden treasure of manly virtue. Not by the multitudinous gratification of the flesh, but by the celestial guidance of the spirit. [Blassingame 1985–92:vol. 3, 193–194; Foner 1950–75:vol. 2, 430; 3 August 1857]

"All men are created equal"

Throughout his long struggle for human progress, Frederick Douglass saw himself by his own definition "as an humble advocate of equal rights—as defender of the principle of human freedom" (Foner 1950–75:vol. 2, 121; 30 May 1850). Reflecting upon his own life on 21 October 1890, in a speech in Washington, D.C., he openly declared that some gains have been made and that there is hope for the future:

I have seen dark hours in my life, and I have seen the darkness gradually disappearing and the light gradually increasing. One by one I have seen obstacles removed, errors corrected, prejudices softened, proscriptions relinquished, and my people advancing in all the elements that go to make up the sum of general welfare. And I remember that God reigns in eternity, and that whatever delays, whatever disappointments and discouragements may come, truth, justice, liberty, and humanity will ultimately prevail. [Blassingame 1985–92:vol. 5, 456]

Among these great moral values, liberty seems to be the all-encompassing principle. Proverbially speaking, he chose the folk proverb of decisive and engaged action to argue for his comprehensive scheme of liberty: "Strike while the iron is hot. Let us have no country but a free country, liberty for all and chains for none. Let us have law, one gospel, equal rights for all, and I am sure God's blessing will be upon us and we shall be a prosperous and glorious nation" (Blassingame 1985–92:vol. 4, 31). These encouraging words were spoken on 12 April 1864, at Boston, while the Civil War was raging in full force.

Douglass never gave up on his fight for liberty of the slaves, and he chose the famous proverbial words of Patrick Henry from 23 March 1775, as his own revolutionary battle cry in an open letter dated 8 February 1854, in his *Frederick Douglass' Papers* magazine:

The inspiration of liberty must be breathed into them [the slaves], till it shall become manifestly unsafe to rob and enslave men. The battle of freedom in America was half won, when the patriotic Henry exclaimed, *Give me Liberty or Give me Death*. Talking of insurrection, yes, my friends, a moral and bloodless one. An insurrection has been raging in this country for more than two hundred years. The whip has been cracking and the chains clanking amid the shouts of liberty, which have gone up in mockery before God. The Negro has been shot down like a dog, and the Indian hunted like a

wolf, by our prayer-making and hymn-singing nation.—Yes, let us have moral insurrection. Let the oppressed and down-trodden awake, arise, and vindicate their manhood by the presentations of their just claims to liberty and brotherhood. Let them think and speak of liberty till their chains shall snap asunder; and their oppressors shall feel it no longer safe to ensnare and plunder them. [Foner 1950–75:vol. 5, 313–314]

Douglass wants to be absolutely clear that words must be followed by deeds if liberty is to be achieved at all. And if freedom is gained, there is always the danger, of course, that it might be lost again. To warn of such a fate, Douglass employs yet another famous quotation that has long become a standard proverb in common parlance. It originated with John Philpot Curran in his “Speech upon the Right of Election” on 10 July 1790, and not with Thomas Jefferson, as has been claimed by some. The precise wording was: “The condition upon which God has given liberty to man is eternal vigilance; which condition if he break, servitude is at once the consequence of his crime, and the punishment of his guilt” (Stevenson 1948:1388).²³

In Douglass’s time as well as today the shorter variants “The price of liberty is eternal vigilance” or “Eternal vigilance is the price of liberty” have become the common way of expressing this wisdom. Douglass employed the proverb the first time on 17 March 1848, in an essay on “The North and the Presidency” in his *The North Star* journal:

It is in strict accordance with all philosophical, as well as all experimental knowledge, that those who unite with tyrants to oppress the weak and helpless, will sooner or later find the ground-work of their own rights and liberties giving way. “The price of liberty is eternal vigilance.” It can only be maintained by a sacred regard for the rights of all men. [Foner 1950–75:vol. 1, 296–297]

This is a serious warning especially to all slaveholders. But in a speech of 28 December 1862, four days before Abraham Lincoln’s “Emancipation Proclamation” on 1 January 1863, Douglass directs the proverb to the slaves who are about to be freed. While he called his speech at Zion Church in Rochester, New York, quite appropriately “A Day for Poetry and Song” in eager anticipation of the day of liberation, he has to do a bit of good old preaching. And what a prophecy this sermon would become in due time:

This is no time for the friends of freedom to fold their hands and consider their work at an end. The price of Liberty is eternal vigilance. Even after slavery has been legally abolished, and the rebellion [i.e., the Civil War] substantially suppressed, even when there shall come representatives to Congress from the States now in rebellion, and they shall have repudiated the miserable and disastrous error of disunion, or secession, and the country shall have reached a condition of comparative peace, there will still remain an urgent necessity for the benevolent activity of the men and the women who have from the first opposed slavery from high moral conviction. Slavery has existed in this country too long and has stamped its character too deeply and indelibly, to be blotted out in a day or a year, or even a generation. The slave will yet remain in some sense a slave, long after the chains are taken from his limbs; and the master will retain much of the pride, the arrogance, imperiousness and conscious superiority and love of power, acquired by his former relation of master. Time, necessity, education, will be required to bring all classes into harmonious and natural relations. [Blassingame 1985–92:vol. 3, 544–545; Foner 1950–75:vol. 3, 311]

The ensuing period of Reconstruction proved Douglass right, and still today, several generations after the emancipation of the slaves, American society continues to reflect racial and social injustices.

It should not be surprising after what has been said about Douglass's effective use of the two proverbs "Give me liberty or give me death" and "The price of liberty is eternal vigilance" that he turned to yet a third famous quotation that quickly turned into a proverb. It was coined and penned by Thomas Jefferson in his "Declaration of Independence" (1776) that begins with the memorable statement: "We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." Douglass knew these phrases well, and he cited them repeatedly, especially the proverb "All men are created equal," in order to argue for equality and liberty:

It is a significant fact, that while meetings for almost any purpose under heaven may be held unmolested in the city of Boston, that in the same city, a meeting cannot be peaceably held for the purpose of preaching the doctrine of the American Declaration of Independence, "that all men are created equal." The pestiferous breath of slavery taints the whole moral atmosphere of the north, and enervates the moral energies of the whole people. [Blassingame 1985–92:vol. 2, 268; Foner 1950–75:vol. 2, 146; 8 December 1850]

You [the American people] 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. [Blassingame 1985–92:vol. 2, 383; Foner 1950–75:vol. 2, 200; 5 July 1852]²⁴

The following final example relating to the "Declaration of Independence" and its proverbial wisdom that "All men are created equal" shows a truly impressive trait of Frederick Douglass as a public agitator. He worked on his facts, and without any formal education, he did research to get the facts out before the public. There was a great deal of detailed knowledge necessary for Douglass to stand in Halifax, England, on 6 January 1860, to deliver these intriguing remarks about the manuscript development of Jefferson's document:

At first, the reference to slavery was very feeble [in it]. In the first draft of the declaration of American independence, there was a condemnation of slavery, and one of the charges brought against George III, was that he had forced upon the American colonies, by violence and cruelty, the inhuman traffic of selling men and women. It was in consequence of the power of slavery at that time that this passage was struck out from the original document. The declaration which was afterwards published appeared without these words. That declaration declared that this truth was self-evident; that all men were created equal, and had all an equal right to life, liberty, property, and the pursuit of happiness. The word *white*, which the modern abettors of slavery would interpolate, did not appear, but the passage said "all men," all kindreds, tongues, and tribes on the face of the earth. [Blassingame 1985–92:vol. 3, 301–302]²⁵

Those are words that should not be forgotten today as civil rights movements continues to fight for equal rights. The emphasis in the proverb “All men are created equal” is on “all,” and the word *men* may have meant, for Douglass, to denote men and women of all races and creeds. It should be no surprise then to learn that “All Rights For All” was chosen for the motto of the *Frederick Douglass’ Paper* weekly journal when it began publication in 1851 to spread the message of equality and liberty for all people.²⁶

“Be the architect of your own fortune”

For 30 years after the Civil War, Frederick Douglass had the opportunity to observe how the fate of African Americans would play out. What he saw would have crushed most any crusader for equality and justice. With the Civil War still raging, Douglass expressed fears for the future of his race in a talk on “The Mission of the War” on 13 January 1864, in New York City. He begins with an allusion to the proverb “Great oaks from little acorns grow” and then argues against the “universal” truth that “Revolutions never go backward”:

I know that the acorn involves the oak, but I know also that the commonest accident may destroy its potential character and defeat its natural destiny. One wave brings its treasure from the briny deep, but another often sweeps it back to its primal depths. The saying that revolutions never go backward must be taken with limitations. The revolution of 1848 was one of the grandest that ever dazzled a gazing world. It overturned the French throne, sent Louis Philippe into exile, shook every throne in Europe, and inaugurated a glorious Republic. Looking from a distance, the friends of democratic liberty saw in the convulsion the death of kingcraft in Europe and throughout the world. Great was their disappointment. Almost in the twinkling of an eye, the latent forces of despotism rallied. The Republic disappeared. [. . .] Though the portents are that we shall flourish, it is too much to say that we cannot fail and fall. [Blassingame 1985–92:vol. 4, 4–5; Foner 1950–75:vol. 3, 387]

This paragraph of his talk does not mention slavery in particular or the future of the slaves in general, but it is implied that much caution would be necessary once the war was over to insure that newly gained rights and privileges would not be lost again.

But it is racial prejudice, to the point of hate and murder, that occupies the fighting spirit of this champion of civil rights at every turn. The so-called color line is growing stronger instead of weaker during this period, while Douglass struggles with all of his verbal might to break it down:

Can this prejudice against color, as it is called, be accounted for by circumstances outside and independent of race or color? If it can be thus explained, an incubus may be removed from the breasts of both the white and the black people of this country, as well as from that large intermediate population which has sprung up between these alleged irreconcilable extremes. It will help us to see that it is not necessary that the Ethiopian shall change his skin, nor needful that the white man shall change the essential elements of his nature, in order that mutual respect and consideration may exist between the two races. [Foner 1950–75:vol. 4, 347]

In this passage from his essay on “The Color Line,” published in *The North American Review* in June 1881, Douglass alludes to the Biblical proverb “Can the Ethiopian

change his skin, or the leopard his spots?" (Jeremiah 13:23) to indicate the impossibility for Whites or Blacks to change their color.²⁷ All that is needed, he says, is "mutual respect and consideration."

But Douglass returns to the proverb that "A leopard cannot change his spots" in a major address on "The Nation's Problem" on 16 April 1889, in Washington, D.C. This time he makes the point that "pride" in both races might prevent them from having that "mutual respect." He wants equality, not superiority of one race over another:

But it may be said that we shall put down race pride in the white people by cultivating race pride among ourselves. The answer to this is that devils are not cast out by Beelzebub [proverbial expression from Matt. 12:24], the prince of devils. The poorest and meanest white man when he has nothing else to command him says: "I am a white man, I am." We can all see the low extremity reached by that sort of race pride, and yet we encourage it when we pride ourselves upon the fact of our color. Let us do away with this supercilious nonsense. If we are proud let it be because we have had some agency in producing that of which to be proud. Do not let us be proud of what we can neither help nor hinder. The Bible put us in the condition in this respect of the leopard, and says that we can no more change our skin than the leopard his spots. If we were unfortunate in being placed among a people with whom our color is a badge of inferiority, there is no need of our making ourselves ridiculous by forever, in words, affecting to be proud of a circumstance due to no virtue in us, and over which we have no control. [Blassingame 1985–92:vol. 5, 412]

Note, however, that Douglass is not saying that Black people should not be proud of their achievements as they carve out ever better lives for themselves. Pride should come from making progress, a typical point of view for Frederick Douglass. That is exactly what he had said about six years earlier in a lecture appropriately called "Our Destiny is Largely in Our Own Hands," delivered on 16 April 1883, in the nation's capital: "There is power in numbers, wealth and intelligence, which can never be despised nor defied. All efforts thus far to diminish the Negro's importance as a man and as a member of the American body politic, have failed" (Blassingame 1985–92:vol. 5, 65; Foner 1950–75:vol. 4, 359). The proverb that "There is power in numbers" together with its extension to include money and education expresses Douglass's dream for the Black race, i.e., to become independent, self-sufficient and respected members of American society.

Despite prophetic warnings, Douglass is always hopeful that there might be light at the end of the tunnel. Why warn of danger if there is no chance for avoiding it! During the troubled times of Reconstruction, Douglass returned to one of his major lectures, which he wrote and delivered for the first time in 1859 and read more than fifty times to audiences across the United States, Canada, and Great Britain. The address is called "Self-Made Men," and it contains a number of proverbs that stress the fact that Douglass's ideal of finding one's own way in life also applies to Black people. In March, 1893, Douglass repeated the speech in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, and it is in these comments he proposes his hope for a better future. The proverbial expression of "to pull oneself up by one's bootstraps" served the purpose of describing Douglass's idea of the self-made man:

We may explain success mainly by one word and that word is WORK! WORK!! WORK!!! WORK!!!! Not transient and fitful effort, but patient, enduring, honest, unremitting and indefatigable work, into which the whole heart is put, and which, in both temporal and spiritual affairs, is the true miracle worker. Every one may avail himself of this marvelous power, if he will. There is no royal road to perfection. [. . .] The lesson taught at this point by human experience is simply this, that the man who will get up will be helped up; and the man who will not get up will be allowed to stay down. This rule may appear somewhat harsh, but in its general application and operation it is wise, just and beneficent. I know of no other rule which can be substituted for it without bringing social chaos. Personal independence is a virtue and it is the soul out of which comes the sturdiest manhood. [Blassingame 1985–92:vol. 5, 556–557]

Obviously, Douglass believed the efficacy of his own words, for, as it was stated about him, “in the truest sense of the word, he became a ‘self-made’ man” (Hale 1951:101). Based on solid Protestant work ethics, Douglass developed a sort of “myth of success,”²⁸ but it must be remembered his “standard speech on ‘Self-Made Men’ accentuated the morality of success rather than its economics” (Martin 1984:256). Be that as it may, “self-reliance was the answer” (Huggins 1980:71) even if the path to success is difficult, if not treacherous. This is, of course, what he felt the proverb “There is no royal road to perfection” is meant to say.

Douglass’s reliance on proverbs in this speech, based on a pragmatic approach to live, does not end there. Wanting to stress that it was his opinion that African Americans should take responsibility for the success of their lives, he begins a subsequent paragraph with another proverb he explained as a sound piece of advice:

Necessity is not only the mother of invention, but the mainspring of exertion. The presence of some urgent, pinching, imperious necessity, will often not only sting a man into marvelous exertion, but into a sense of the possession, within himself, of powers and resources which else had slumbered on through a long life, unknown to himself and never suspected by others. A man never knows the strength of his grip till life and limb depend upon it. Something is likely to be done when something must be done. [Blassingame 1985–92:vol. 5, 558]

Douglass believed this was true for struggling Black people. He argued for hard work and self-reliance to improve the lot of African Americans, as yet another short paragraph based on two additional proverbs, one of classical and the other of 16th-century British origin, makes perfectly clear:

The primary condition upon which men have and retain power and skill is exertion. Nature has no use for unused power. She abhors a vacuum. She permits no preemption without occupation. Every organ of body and mind has its use and improves by use. “Better to wear out than to rust out,” is sound philosophy as well as common sense. [Blassingame 1985–92:vol. 5, 559]

But speaking of common sense, Douglass remembers a whole string of other proverbs and proverbial phrases to add to his sermon on success and progress. His audiences, well acquainted with these bits of folk speech and wisdom, must have been delighted with the following paragraph, hopefully taking heed of its serious advice:

As a people, we have only a decent respect for our seniors. We cannot be beguiled into accepting empty-headed sons for full-headed fathers. As some one has said, we dispense with the smoke when the candle is out. In popular phrases we exhort every man as he comes upon the stage of active life, "Now do your level best!" "Help yourself!" "Put your shoulder to the wheel!" "Make your own record!" "Paddle your own canoe!" "Be the architect of your own fortune!" [Blassingame 1985–92:vol. 5, 570]

And then comes another final paragraph with two proverbs where Douglass asserts that things will improve in America, where "self-made men are possible":

We have as a people no past and very little present, but a boundless and glorious future. With us, it is not so much what has been, or what is now, but what is to be in the good time coming. Our mottoes are "Look ahead!" and "Go ahead!", [sic] and especially the latter. Our moral atmosphere is full of the inspiration of hope and courage. Every man has his chance. If he cannot be President he can, at least, be prosperous. In this respect, America is not only the exception to the general rule, but the social wonder of the world. [Blassingame 1985–92:vol. 5, 571]

In the true spirit of the tradition of jeremiads, Douglass acknowledges that, for Black citizens, their past was horrid slavery, their present is problematic at best, but their future looks good because at least they have a chance. The struggle to become "self-made," exists for everyone, and so the march for civil rights and a "good life" based on moral principles goes on with hopeful self-assurance. Douglass agreed with the future-oriented worldview of Americans as an uplifting concept;²⁹ for him, the proverb "hope springs eternal" does indeed hold true.

"Do unto others as you would have them do unto you"

Morality and religion were one and the same thing for Frederick Douglass, and it should come as no surprise that the so-called Golden Rule of Christianity in the form of the proverb "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you" (Matthew 7:12) would become the perfect embodiment of human equality for him. It appears again and again for over fifty years in his speeches and writings, and it must be considered as Douglass's rhetorical and philosophical leitmotif. Having made this claim, it is of special interest how Douglass used it for the first time in only his fifth recorded speech on "The Southern Style of Preaching to Slaves" on 28 January 1842, at Boston. He repeated the following excerpt many times, and this satirical masterpiece has gone down as the "Slaveholder's Sermon" among Douglass scholars. In it Douglass ridicules the hypocritical behavior of preachers who in their preaching would pervert Jesus's word to justify the evil schemes of slavery:

But what a mockery of His [Christ's] religion is preached at the South! I have been called upon to describe the style in which it is set forth. And I find our ministers there learn to do it at the northern colleges. I used to know they went away somewhere I did not know where, and came back ministers; and this is the way they would preach. They [the southern ministers] would take a text—say this:—"Do unto others as you would have others do unto you." And this is the way they would apply it. They would explain it to mean, "slaveholders, do unto *slaveholders* what you would have them do unto you:"—and then looking impudently up to the slaves' gallery, (for they have a place

set apart for us, though it is said they have no prejudice, just as is done here in the northern churches); looking high up to the poor colored drivers and the rest, and spreading his hands gracefully abroad, he says, (mimicking,) "And you too, my friends, have souls of infinite value—souls that will live through endless happiness or misery in eternity. Oh, *labor diligently* to make your calling and election sure. Oh, receive into your souls these words of the holy apostle—'Servants, be obedient unto your masters.' (Shouts of laughter and applause.) Oh, consider the wonderful goodness of God! Look at your hard, horny hands, your strong muscular frames, and see how mercifully he has adapted you to the duties you are to fulfil! (continued laughter and applause) while to your masters, who have slender frames and long delicate fingers, he has given brilliant intellects, that they may do the *thinking*, while you do the *working*." (Shouts of applause.) It has been said here at the North, that the slaves have the gospel preached to them. But you will see what sort of a gospel it is:—a gospel which, more than chains, or whips, or thumb-screws, gives perpetuity to this horrible system. [Blassingame 1985–92:vol. 1, 16–17]³⁰

As can be seen from the shouts and applause from the audience, this must have been quite a performance by Douglass with plenty of sarcasm and mimicry: "His voice and the movements of his body drew everyone to him. The physicality—the sexuality—reached round to encircle the audience as he reached out to them and they to him, making complete this ritual of oratory said and heard [and seen!]" (McFeely 1991:100). Even though this was a memorable show by the young and eager abolitionist, Douglas was nevertheless very serious about his attack on the misappropriation of one of the noblest laws of life.³¹

Being thoroughly entrenched in the abolitionist movement for personal and humanitarian reasons, Douglass gave the noble cause a solid endorsement in his speech on 30 March 1847, at London, now even placing abolitionism on the basic truth of the Golden Rule:

When the history of the emancipation movement shall have been fairly written, it will be found that the abolitionists of the nineteenth century were the only men who dared to defend the Bible from the blasphemous charge of sanctioning and sanctifying Negro slavery. [. . .] It will then be seen that they were the men who planted themselves on the immutable, eternal, and all-comprehensive principle of the sacred New Testament—"All things whatsoever ye would that men should do unto you, do ye even so unto them"—that, acting on this principle, and feeling that if the fetters were on their limbs, the chain upon their own persons, the lash falling quick and hard upon their own quivering bodies, they would desire their fellow men about them to be faithful to their cause; and, therefore, carrying out this principle, they have dared to risk their lives, fortunes, nay, their all, for the purpose of rescuing from the tyrannous grasp of the slaveholder these 3,000,000 of trampled-down children of men. [Blassingame 1985–92:vol. 2, 32; Foner 1950–75:vol. 1, 217]

Looking at matters a bit more globally, Douglass exclaimed: "I despise that religion that can carry Bibles to the heathen on the other side of the globe and withhold them from heathen on this side—which can talk about human rights yonder and traffic in human flesh here. I love that which makes its votaries do to others as they would that others should do to them" (Blassingame 1985–92:vol. 2, 100; 24 September 1847).³²

But Douglass is certain that the slaveholders will pay for their sins in due time, and even if the law cannot touch them, he hopes they will be haunted by their own guilty conscience:

Verily there is a God to bring to nought the counsels of wicked men. They seek peace for the Slaveholder, but to the Slaveholder there can be no peace; his is a bad business; to him, while a Slaveholder, there can be neither peace of mind nor peace of conscience. If they could close up all Anti-Slavery Conventions, take all our Publications, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and the portions of the Bible which teach that men should do to others as they should wish to be done by, place them in the District of Columbia, set a match to them until the flames reached the sky; if they could have every abolitionist's tongue cut out, thus to procure their silence, they will not have obtained their object, for deep down in the secret corners of the Slaveholder's soul, God Almighty has planted an abolition sentinel in his monitor, the conscience. (Blassingame 1985–92:vol. 2, 465; 13 April 1854)

That is a true fire and brimstone sermon by a skilled orator and preacher. If only the slaveholders would have heard Douglass; but they did not attend the abolition conventions, of course. Nevertheless, if there was any decency left in them, their guilty conscience must have tormented them at night and on their deathbeds.

Douglass certainly agreed that after the Civil War ended and slavery had been abolished, the problematic era of Reconstruction brought at least some improvements to the lot of the former slaves. There was even progress being made in the field of human rights, but then, on 15 October 1883, the United States Supreme Court declared the Civil Rights Act of 1875 null and void, a great shock and disappointment to all who were struggling for universal equal rights.³³ Frederick Douglass reacted with his impassioned speech “The Decision Has Humbled the Nation” on 22 October 1883, at Lincoln Hall in Washington, D.C., right under the very eyes of the Supreme Court:

Social equality does not necessarily follow from civil equality, and yet for the purpose of a hell black and damning prejudice, our papers still insist that the Civil Rights Bill is a Bill to establish social equality.

If it is a Bill for social equality, so is the Declaration of Independence, which declares that all men have equal rights; so is the Sermon on the Mount, so is the Golden Rule, that commands us to do to others as we would that others should do to us; so is the Apostolic teaching, that of one blood God has made all nations to dwell on all the face of the earth; so is the Constitution of the United States, and so are the laws and customs of every civilized country in the world; for no where, outside of the United States, is any man denied civil rights on account of his color. [Blassingame 1985–92:vol. 5, 123; Douglass 1893:979–980; Foner 1950–75:vol. 4, 403]

Douglass believed, and had expressed many times, that social equality must be earned through hard work, and his idea of the “self-made man” had appeared in many of his speeches as well. But then, the Civil Rights Bill unfortunately was struck down by the highest court in the country. Civil equality is a fundamental right, as he states with plenty of frustration and satire in his voice. In fact, so agitated was he about this setback that he denotes an entire chapter to this debacle in his third autobiography *Life and Times* (1893), where he also reprints this particular passage.³⁴ This was indeed a major setback, and its effects led eventually to the Civil Rights Movement of the twentieth century under the nonviolent leadership of Martin Luther King. The “Golden Rule” proverb “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you” served Frederick Douglass and his various causes extremely well, and there is no reason why this most

humane wisdom should not continue to be the guiding light for civil rights in this country and throughout the world.

In closing, it might be well to return one more time to Frederick Douglass's famous lecture on "Self-Made Men" of March 1893. He begins it with an appropriate quotation from Alexander Pope's "An Essay on Man" (1733–34):

The saying of the poet that "The proper study of mankind is man," and which has been the starting point of so many lectures, essays and speeches, holds its place, like all other great utterance, because it contains a great truth and truth alike for every age and generation of men. It is always new and can never grow old. It is neither dimmed by time nor tarnished by repetition; for man, both in respect of himself and of his species, is now, and evermore will be, the center of unsatisfied human curiosity. [Blassingame 1985–92:vol. 5, 546]

Over 30 years earlier, in one of the first versions of this often repeated and varied speech entitled "The Trials and Triumphs of Self-Made Men" (1860), Douglass had called on a quotation of William Shakespeare to make a similar philosophical point: "To the great dramatic poet, all the world is a stage, and men but players; but to all mankind, the world is a vast school. From the cradle to the grave, the oldest and the wisest, not less than the youngest and the simplest, are but learners; and those who learn most, seem to have most to learn" (Blassingame 1985–92:vol. 3, 291; 4 January 1860). And Frederick Douglass was both a good student and teacher of mankind and the world. As an engaged participant on the stage of 19th-century America in particular, he heeded the advice of the Bible as well, as he states towards the end of his autobiography *Life and Times* (1893), beginning his reflections with yet another quotation from the Bible which, just as the two worldly quotations just mentioned, has long become a wise proverb among the people:

No man liveth unto himself, or ought to live unto himself. My life has conformed to this Bible saying, for, more than most men, I have been the thin edge of the wedge to open for my people a way in many directions and places never before occupied by them. It has been mine, in some degree, to stand as their defense in moral battle against the shafts of detraction, calumny and persecution, and to labor in removing and overcoming those obstacles which, in the shape of erroneous ideas and customs, have blocked the way to their progress. [1893:941]

Those are deeply philosophical, yet simple and humble words. Douglass does not even mention in addition to his constant battle for the Black race his fight for women and for civil rights in general. In all of these struggles, he was always the superb communicator. One hears talk today of that or the other national politician being a great communicator, but they do not even come close to touching the rhetorical and persuasive genius of Douglass. This unique man worked untiringly to serve his fellow men; he never lost sight of his goals; he even had a good sense of humor to deal with it all. During an interview on 6 September 1891, in Baltimore, the 74-year-old Douglass said with much vigor and proverbial wit:

I am unwilling to be an idler, but hope to exert whatever influence I may possess so long as my life lasts. [. . .] Mr. Douglass then said, laughing heartily: It is true I am now growing old, but I can say

like Dr. Jackson said to President Quincy, of Harvard University, when asked when he expected to die, "I shall die, I suppose, when I am in need of a doctor, when I am about ninety years old and not before then." But I certainly shall wear, and not rust out. [Blassingame 1985–92:vol. 5, 478–479]

So he ends with yet another folk proverb that has been in general currency for several centuries. At this particular moment he is using its wisdom for a good measure of humor, but both proverbs of the Bible and folk proverbs also served him extremely well as he made himself understood to people of all races, creeds, and genders through his engaged voice and pen. He believed in the rhetoric of common sense, and proverbs were the perfect verbal tools for his efforts. He never used the proverb "Progress never stands still," but his own formulation of "If there is no struggle, there is no progress" deserves to be entered into the annals of American proverbs. May the struggle for civil rights continue, and may it be based on Frederick Douglass's principles of morality, justice, liberty, humanity, and, last but not least, common sense.

Notes

¹See also Calloway-Thomas 1988:331.

²This particular quotation is also cited by Blight 1985:319 and reprinted in Blight 1989:110.

³For collections of proverbs and proverbial expressions in common use among African Americans in more recent times see Barnes-Harden 1980; Daniel 1979; Prahlad 1996; Smitherman 1986, 1994. See also the studies by Daniel 1973; Daniel et al. 1987; Roberts 1978.

⁴See Mieder 1993, 1997.

⁵See Burke 1941 and Seitel 1969.

⁶Cited from a volume that includes the three versions of the autobiography: Frederick Douglass, *Autobiographies: Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, Written by Himself* (1845), *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855), *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (1893). For a discussion of this proverb see Wohlpart 1995:186; Zeitz 1981:57–58.

⁷See Mieder 1997:9–38.

⁸For a short discussion of this proverb see also Thompson 1999:180.

⁹See the short comment on this proverb in Thompson 1999:186.

¹⁰See Blight's introduction to the bicentennial edition of Caleb Bingham 1998:xiii–xxxiii. Of much interest is also Ganter 1997:463–476.

¹¹Every biographer of Douglass refers to the influence that *The Columbian Orator* had on his intellectual and rhetorical development; see Blight 1989:89–91; Lampe 1998:7–13; McFeely 1991:34–36.

¹²For a discussion of songs see Stuckey 1990:32–38.

¹³For a discussion of Douglass's move from "the simple, concrete speech of the *Narrative* to the Latinate, polysyllabic, inflated rhetoric of the Victorian intelligentsia," see Piper 1977:189. Of interest are also Kibbey 1983:163–182; and Dupuy 1990–91:23–33.

¹⁴See McKenzie 1996 and Prahlad 1996.

¹⁵Originally published as Kelly Miller, "Frederick Douglass," in K. Miller. 1907. *Race Adjustment: Essays on the Negro in America*. New York: Neale Publishing.

¹⁶See also Hale 1966:100–111; and Blight 1998:xxvi.

¹⁷See Bartlett 1980:556 (No. 4). It should be noted that Douglass's statement that "Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will" has also become well known and is frequently quoted. However, it has not yet been included in Bartlett's collection.

¹⁸For how individual sayings might become general proverbs see Taylor 1931; reprint edited by Aurora 1984:1–38; Mieder 1985:34–43, 109–145.

¹⁹A few examples are cited in Hinshaw 1972:347–349. For collections see Champion 1945; Griffin 1991; Mieder 1990; Stevenson 1949; Templeton 1997.

²⁰See Mieder et al. 1992:312.

²¹See Mieder 2000:10–18.

²²For Douglass as a journalist, see Fishkin and Peterson 1990:189–204; Foner 1969:84–100.

²³See also Blassingame 1985–92:vol. 3, 544 (note 4).

²⁴This text is from one of Douglass's most impressive speeches entitled "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?" which he delivered as a bitter abolitionist attack in his native Rochester. For detailed analyses of this significant oration see Jasinski 1997:71–89; Kinney 1974:203–225; Lucaites 1997:47–69.

²⁵Blassingame claims that Jefferson's earliest "composition draft" of the Declaration of Independence charged the British crown with having "refused us permission to exclude [importation of Negroes] by law." His "original Rough draft" includes a much fuller and more bitter indictment of George III:

He has waged cruel war against human nature itself, violating it's [sic] most sacred rights of life & liberty in the persons of a distant people who never offended him, captivating & carrying them into slavery in another hemisphere, or to incur miserable death in their transportation thither. This piratical warfare, the opprobrium of *infidel* powers, is the warfare of the CHRISTIAN king of Great Britain, determined to keep open a market where MEN should be bought & sold, he has prostituted his negative for suppressing every legislative attempt to prohibit or to restrain this execrable commerce. [1985–92:vol. 3, 301–302; note 2]

²⁶See Foner 1969:88. The motto was proposed by Douglass's friend Gerrit Smith.

²⁷For discussions of this proverb see Prager 1987:257–279; and Massing 1995:180–201.

²⁸See Andrews 1991:4.

²⁹See Dundes 1969:53–72.

³⁰This paragraph reoccurs frequently in the Douglass scholarship; see Burke 1996:18–19; Foner 1950–1975:vol. 1, 50; Foner 1969:50; Hale 1951:32; and Quarles 1948:363.

³¹For a discussion of the proverb "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you," see Hertzler 1933–43:418–436; Reiner 1948:74–105, Soliva 1964:51–57; Templeton 1997:8–12.

³²This is most likely a reference to the refusal by the American Bible Society to distribute Bibles among those slaves who could read.

³³Blassingame provides the following explanation (note 1): "This law [the Civil Rights Act of 1875], generally regarded as one of the most radical to emerge from the Reconstruction era, instructed the nation that all persons, regardless of race or color, were entitled to full and equal access to public accommodations and facilities, particularly places of lodging, amusement, and transportation" (1985–92:vol. 5, 111).

³⁴For a short discussion see Meier 1967:141–142.

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