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A Strengths-Based Approach to the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave*

Douglass' *Narrative* offers a powerful backdrop to a strengths-based curriculum. Like all slave narratives, its protagonist employs his/her strengths to escape the capriciousness and brutality of slavery. (This feature of the slave narrative is evident even in works of fiction by African-Americans. Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, Wright's *The Long Dream*, Ellison's *Invisible Man*, Brown's *Man-child in the Promised Land*, Johnson's *Middle Passage*, William's *Dessa Rose*, or Morrison's *Paradise* provides good examples.)

Each chapter provides the reader with the moral, social, psychological, and political conflicts that can be overcome only by recognizing and drawing upon inner and outer strengths. The inner strengths—reading (academics), determination (power), decorum, integrity, respect, service, loyalty, empathy, creativity, and vision)—represent Douglass' essence. These strengths are enhanced by Douglass' willingness to join other communities (e.g., abolitionist) to eradicate slavery.

In addition, *Narrative* introduces students to the ill-structured problems and social issues that our students must come to grips with before doing direct service learning in non-profits. Each chapter examines powerful conflicts and themes that invoke reflection, reading, speaking, listening, critical thinking, analysis, synthesis, collaboration, and research skills. These are the skills that a strengths-based curriculum must engender in order to graduate competent and civic-minded students.

Following is a chapter-by-chapter list of critical issues or themes that confront Douglass. Please feel free to add, delete, re-arrange, or modify at any point. The list is a work-in-progress designed to facilitate teaching and connecting the text to a strengths-based and experiential curriculum. Any list item can be the basis for small-group or whole-class discussion, a pre-reading or writing assignment, a brief writing assignment, a formal expository or persuasive essay, a problem-solution essay, a short research paper, or brief oral presentations:

Preface: Written by Himself

- Who is William Lloyd Garrison and why does he stress that “Mr. Douglass has very properly written his own Narrative” and “that it is essentially true in all its statements”?
- What purpose does Wendell Phillips' letter serve?

Chapter I

- Unclear Ancestry
 - Why is Douglass uncertain of his age?
 - How does he feel about his uncertainty?
 - Who is Douglass' father?
 - What are the implications of men like Douglass' father upon slavery?
- (Slave) Mother-Child Relationship
 - What is the nature of the relationship between Douglass and his mother, Harriet Bailey?
- Rape, Power, and Capitalism
 - Explore the reasons behind Captain Anthony's brutal flogging of Douglass' Aunt Hester.

Chapter II

- Songs of Joy or Songs of Sorrow
 - Colonel Lloyd's main plantation is called the "Great House Farm" by the slaves. The ones "selected to go the "Great House Farm" went enthusiastically. On their way, they would fill the "dense old woods" with sounds of "the highest joy and deepest sadness," always interweaving references to the Great House: "I am going away to the Great House Farm! / O, yea! O, Yea! O!"

Explain Douglass' comment: "I have often been utterly astonished, since I came to the north, to find persons who could speak of the singing, among slaves, as evidence of their contentment and happiness."

Chapter III

- To Tell the Truth
 - Colonel Lloyd—hypocrite that he is—will not abide theft or lies by his slaves. What is the effect of his hypocrisy upon the physical, mental, and ethical well-being of the slaves?

Chapter IV

- What's in a name?
 - Compare/contrast the two overseers Mr. Gore and Mr. Severe (chapter II)

Chapter V

- Baltimore or Bust!
 - What meaning does Douglass assign to leaving the Great House to live with Hugh and Sophia Auld in Baltimore?

Chapter VI

- The Epiphany
 - What does Douglass discover to be "the white man's power to enslave the black man"?

Chapter VII

- The Classroom Without Walls
 - Explain in detail the methods Douglass uses to learn to read and write.
 - Do you find his methods credible, realistic for his time? (1800s)? Explain.
 - Do you think his methods have applications to today's youth? Explain.

Chapter VIII

- The Color of Slavery
 - Because Captain Anthony dies without a will instructing the dispensation of his property, Douglass has to return to Colonel Lloyd's plantation to attend the "valuation" of Anthony's property. He concludes: "At this moment, I saw more clearly than ever the brutalizing effects of slavery upon both slave and slaveholder."

List and react to the graphic examples Douglass uses to illustrate the above statement.

Chapter IX

- Religion and Dates
- 1 Timothy 6
 - 1 Let as many servants as are under the yoke count their own masters worthy of all honour, that the name of God and his doctrine be not blasphemed.
 - 2 And they that have believing masters, let them not despise them, because they are brethren; but rather do them service, because they are faithful and beloved, partakers of the benefit. These things teach and exhort.

In August 1832, Captain Auld experienced a religious conversion. Describe the effect of his conversion upon his views of slavery? Is religion used similarly today?

Chapter X

- From House to Field
 - Compare/contrast Douglass' experiences with Mr. Covey, Mr. Severe, and Mr. Gore
- The Escape
 - What inner and outer strengths does Douglass draw upon to escape to New York and finally to New Bedford, Connecticut?
 - Are his strengths still viable today? Explain.

Appendix

- Christianity
 - Douglass concludes,

What I have said respecting and against religion, I mean strictly to apply to the slaveholding religion of this land, and with no possible reference to

Christianity proper; for, between the Christianity of this land, and the Christianity of Christ, I recognize the widest possible difference—so wide, that to receive the one as good, pure, and holy, is of necessity to reject the other as bad, corrupt, and wicked.

- Imagine that you are a contemporary of Douglass (say, 1830s). Would you agree or disagree with the above statement? Now, consider Douglass' statement from your current perspective? Do you still respond to the statement the same way? Explain. Try to use contemporary examples to support your answer.