

Frederick Douglass and the Heart-Shaped Cake

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The month of February is dedicated to Love. And so it's all the more appropriate to tell a story about love and how it changed one life, and through it everything, right down to our lives today.

In the last two of his three autobiographies, Frederick Douglass tells the story of his enslaved mother visiting him when he was an enslaved child on the Lloyd plantation twelve miles away from a Mr. Stewart's plantation where his mother was rented out by their owner as a field hand. She brings with her a heart-shaped cake for him. This incident had a profound effect on Douglass, and as a consequence, on us today.

The system of slavery that had claimed the new world since Columbus, and which had evolved and perfected its dehumanizing

methods since that time had developed and calibrated methods that were proven to break down human will. These methods have been proven over the lifetimes of many people. And yet early on in his enslaved life Douglass rejects slavery and sees it as anathema to the Divine will of justice¹.

One way of reading history is to view happenings as if they stand alone and come out of nowhere, that they appear in the world completely out of thin air or out of the mind like Athena, the goddess of war, born fully formed and ready for battle right from the forehead of Zeus. Athena became a goddess of inspiration, and inspiration is often seen as something miraculous, from nowhere. But we know that in much of life, there are seeds that produce fruit, even if we can't see them or don't know they're there.

I believe the visit of his mother with the cake enabled Douglass to see beyond the world-consuming reality which slavery was at the time, to come to touch its edge in his mind, a reality which seemed to have no edge, and no parameters. Recognizing where slavery stopped and a greater reality emerged created in him the ability to deeply challenge slavery for the rest of his life.

The moment Douglass decides to learn to read in response to his master Hugh Auld saying, "Learning would spoil the best nigger in the world...It would forever unfit him to be a slave,"² has been discussed as a major turning point in Douglass's life. It was, and he says as much. But the earlier event where his mother visits him likely enables Douglass to hear

¹ Frederick Douglass, *The Complete Autobiographies of Frederick Douglass* 2017 Dancing Unicorn Books, *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass, 1881*. - 'Change of Location'

² Frederick Douglass, *The Complete Autobiographies of Frederick Douglass* 2017 Dancing Unicorn Books, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, 1845*, Chapter VI

and use Auld's words for his own benefit, because from that earlier event he sees himself beyond slavery's view as only a child slave, not yet a profitable adult male slave. He glimpses remarkably, what the slave system tried to keep him from seeing- the personhood of his mother and himself.

Douglass's childhood was brutal, and he faced constant hunger and the devastating effects of the elements. In his first autobiography, *Narrative of The Life of Frederick Douglass* he writes:

“I suffered much from hunger, but much more from cold. Hottest summer and coldest winter, I was kept almost naked- no shoes, no stockings, no jacket, no trousers, nothing on but a course tow linen shirt, reaching only to my knees. I had no bed. I must have perished with cold, but that, the coldest nights, I used to steal a bag which was used for carrying corn to the mill. I would crawl into this bag, and there sleep on the cold, damp, clay floor, with my head in and feet out. My feet have been so cracked with the frost, that the pen with which I am writing might be laid in the gashes.³”

In the middle of this kind of life, one evening his mother appears having walked the twelve miles from the Stewart plantation on which she was rented out as a field hand to come and see her son and to bring him a heart-shaped ginger cake. His mother saw him but a handful of such visits when she could manage the journey. When Douglass writes of the incident he says:

³ Frederick Douglass, *The Complete Autobiographies of Frederick Douglass 2017* Dancing Unicorn Books, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, 1845*, Chapter V

“And now, dear reader, a scene occurred which was altogether worth beholding, and to me it was instructive as well as interesting. The friendless and hungry boy, in his extremest need — and when he did not dare to look for succor — found himself in the strong, protecting arms of a mother; a mother who was, at the moment (being endowed with high powers of manner as well as matter) more than a match for all his enemies... That night I learned the fact, that I was, not only a child, but *somebody’s* child. The “sweet cake” my mother gave me was in the shape of a heart, with a rich, dark ring glazed upon the edge of it. I was victorious, and well off for the moment; prouder, on my mother’s knee, than a king upon his throne.⁴”

Against all the depth and breadth of power of the slave system that worked to keep him from it, Douglass realized here, through an act of love from his mother that he was “*somebody’s* child.” He stresses the importance of the word “*somebody’s*” by italicizing it. Through one of the only few times she could manage anything so grand as to work in the field, come up with a cake, walk the twelve miles to the plantation where her son was enslaved, see him, and then walk back those twelve miles to be ready for the days work in the field again, she defeated the practiced, calculated, honed, machinations of the enslaving system that existed to turn human beings into slaves. The visit, as Douglass says, was instructive. He sees

⁴ Frederick Douglass, *The Complete Autobiographies of Frederick Douglass 2017* Dancing Unicorn Books, *My Bondage and My Freedom, 1855, Parentage*

that he is the child of *somebody*. It isn't a leap from here to seeing himself also as *somebody*. And this is the idea that the slave system in all of its power had to disrupt within the slave.

About 140 years after this incident when Douglass realized, most likely in 1824, that he was the child of *somebody* and therefore on his way to realizing he was somebody, the idea "I am somebody," was still a necessary message for liberation, as Jesse Jackson famously led an African American audience in the chant in the 1960s when the experiences of black Americans were still widely such, that the conditions easily caused many black Americans to doubt this simple phrase and its implications.

The visit with the cake is the last time Douglass saw his mother. It isn't surprising that a person, under the strains his mother was under to bring him a cake even once, did not live long. And the condition of slavery meant that when he heard of her death, there was such a chasm between their lived daily experiences that Douglass recounts that he felt very little at the news. "I had to learn the value of my mother long after her death," he writes in *My Bondage and My Freedom*, "and by witnessing the devotion of other mothers to their children."⁵

Douglass doesn't at once find mental liberation from the enslaving system. Nor does he even understand what happened, why his mother visited, or even understand the love of a mother. He remembers the visit, and that his mother chastises the slave cook and caretaker who was withholding food from him as punishment at a time when he was in a state of perpetual starvation as the normal course. He does not, however, remember words from his mother that night, or what conversation passed

⁵ Ibid

between them. He laments after telling the story that he has, “no striking words of her’s treasured up.”⁶ Twenty-six years later with the publishing of his third and final autobiography, Douglass tells the same cake visit story but says it is a sorrow that he knew his mother so little, and “have so few of her words treasured in my remembrance,”⁷ which may signal a lifetime struggle, with perhaps some success, of trying to remember any of her words. When reflecting on her power in his life through this and only a few other visits he says, “The counsels of her love must have been beneficial to me. The side view of her face is imaged on my memory, and I take few steps in life, without feeling her presence...”⁸ He ends the chapter of the story:

“My mother died when I could not have been more than eight or nine years old, on one of old master’s farms in Tuckahoe, in the neighborhood of Hillsborough. Her grave is, as the grave of the dead at sea, unmarked, and without stone or stake.”⁹

And yet, Frederick Douglass’s mother, an unknown slave mother who died in slavery, through the celebration of visiting her child, even though through horrible realities, instilled in him his humanity. Many things in history go unremarked. The times when these unremarked events can be traced to and said to cause great positive change in the world are hampered by the fact that they are in the first place unremarked. But in this

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Frederick Douglass, *The Complete Autobiographies of Frederick Douglass* 2017 Dancing Unicorn Books, *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass, 1881, Troubles of Childhood*

⁸ Frederick Douglass, *The Complete Autobiographies of Frederick Douglass* 2017 Dancing Unicorn Books, *My Bondage and My Freedom, 1855, Parentage*

⁹ Ibid

case, having realized he was the child of *somebody*, his drive to escape slavery, and more, to end the slave system itself, connects to this realization. And as it would happen, Douglass's realization that he was somebody himself caused a great positive change toward ending slavery in the United States and the world.

The Telling of History

There is some controversy surrounding the story of Frederick Douglass's mother and the visit she paid him with a cake when he was a slave child on Lloyd's plantation.

Both Frederick and his mother were owned by the same man, Captain Aaron Anthony who was clerk and superintendent of overseers for Colonel Edward Lloyd. Anthony lived with his family in a house on Lloyd's huge Maryland estate close to the Wye River, known to Douglass as Lloyd Plantation.

Anthony had his own smaller farms and stock of slaves including Douglass and his mother. Anthony's slaves might find themselves in any number of places: one of Anthony's farms, at Anthony's employer's plantation, Lloyd's, or rented out to other locations.

Douglass, like many of Anthony's slaves who were children, passed when old enough from his birthplace on Anthony's Holme Hill Farm in Tuckahoe Maryland, to the Lloyd's plantation also in Maryland where Anthony was clerk and superintendent of overseers. Lloyd's was 12 miles

away from Mr. Stewart's plantation where Douglass's mother was rented out as a field hand to Mr. Stewart by Anthony.

The controversy over the story of Douglass's mother's visit with the cake is about what exactly happened with that incident: Was the incident a true memory, a delusion brought on by his dire situation, or a device created later in his life to further the abolitionist cause, and how might the visit have affected his life, including why he supposed February was his birthday month?

Douglass doesn't say exactly what events caused him to suppose his birth was in February in any source I've found. But in his last autobiography, *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, he says certain events caused him to believe that he was born in February 1817. In his autobiographies, he recounts some of the events through the years he used to guess his birth year. But I haven't found a source as to specifically why he chose February, or more specifically February 14th as his birthday. The only clue that comes close to explaining his landing on February and possibly February 14th is the story he tells about his mother bringing him a heart-shaped cake. But there is evidence that he did choose February 14th and that this was well known amongst black people in the United States during his lifetime when he was famous.

Douglass died on February 20, 1895. In the following year in 1896 various parties wished to celebrate his life and the achievements of black life. The *Washington Post* reported that Douglass chose February 14th as his birthday because "he liked the traditions surrounding that date."¹⁰ Mary

¹⁰ Scott Bomboy, The story behind the Frederick Douglass birthday celebration <https://constitutioncenter.org/blog/the-story-behind-the-frederick-douglass-birthday-celebration>

Church Terrell, the co-founder of the National Association of Colored Women, who created the motto for the organization, “Lifting as we climb,” suggested on January 12, 1897, that the school board for the colored schools around Washington D.C. institute February 14th as “Douglass Day,” citing Douglass’s chosen birthday.¹¹

Years later in February 1926, Carter G. Woodson, known as one of the great champions of African American history, chose the second week of February to institute Negro History Week, which has since evolved into Black History Month. He did this apparently because the second week of February includes the birthdays of two men important to the black community, Abraham Lincoln on February 12th and Frederick Douglass on February 14th, and these men and dates were already celebrated in the community by that time.¹²

Telling history is complicated in this way. Things get lost quickly. What was once common knowledge disappears so completely that people of a different time, often a not-so-distant time, swear that what was commonly known never happened. I have found no evidence from Douglass himself that he chose the 14th of February as his birthdate. But these second-tier references and his story of receiving a heart-shaped cake from his mother lead me to believe he may have.

The pain of Douglass’s story about his mother bringing him a cake at one of his most desperate hours is that he doesn’t know why she did this. He can only guess and wonder. There is an apocryphal story that Douglass

¹¹ Jennifer Morris, The Origins of Douglass Day
<https://transcription.si.edu/articles/origins-douglass-day>

¹² Daryl Michael Scott, The Origins of Black History Month;
<https://asalh.org/about-us/origins-of-black-history-month/>

chose Valentine's Day for his birthday because his mother called him her, "little Valentine." I have not been able to find any reference to this in Douglass's words, and it isn't part of his telling about his mother's visit with the cake in his autobiographies.

In his second autobiography, *My Bondage and My Freedom* he observed that slavery didn't allow for a slave mother to pass on her admonitions or benedictions when she was dying¹³. The economic equation didn't leave room for such human time. Douglass was not present when his mother died, and he notes as a consequence he had no "striking words of hers treasured up," and later in his third autobiography he laments that he has "so few of her words treasured in my remembrance." I have found nothing to say he remembered her calling him "her little valentine." A remembered phrase such as this would have cut years off of his struggle to understand and appreciate a mother's love. He mentions he had to come by over time to understand the value of his own mother and from, "witnessing the devotion of other mothers to their children."

Another consequence of slavery is that it stole from history the words and memories of many witnesses. And this bereft state of history means that some of humanity's most uplifting and empowering stories aren't verifiable.

Pulitzer-Prize-winning author and historian David Blight in his biography of Douglass, *Prophet of Freedom*, argues that the story Douglass tells about his enslaved mother as a rescuer and champion, the only story about her Douglass tells in his autobiographies, that of the night

¹³ Frederick Douglass, *The Complete Autobiographies of Frederick Douglass 2017* Dancing Unicorn Books, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 1855, *Parentage*

visit to him bringing a cake, is a false memory¹⁴. Blight credits Douglass's powerful imagination, aiding his survival through the brutal system of slavery for Douglass's invention of the story. It is unclear whether Blight believes Douglass was aware or not that the memory was false, but that regardless, Douglass harnessed the pain and deprivations of his childhood into a story that would play to his sentimental audience to win more people to the cause of abolition¹⁵. Blight notes that Douglass's narrative of the last time he saw his mother was in common with male slave narratives in that scenes of the last time the enslaved saw their mother were often told.¹⁶ Blight observes that Douglass converted the story into "both stinging anti-slavery propaganda and an unforgettable expression of the personal pain and loss at the heart of his childhood."¹⁷

I disagree that Douglass invented the story of his enslaved mother's visit, bringing him a cake after traveling twelve miles from the farm on which she toiled as a field hand, her only option to steal away in the night for a visit with her child, and then to travel back again to work the field at dawn.

Douglass's life and proven memories, as well as his temperament, suggest that neither subconscious dreaming or delusion, or a desire to further abolition were responsible for the birth of the story. The explanation that the story is true bears more alignment with who Douglass became. Instead of coming into being from thin air, it would be reasonable to take Douglass at his word, to root both his self-possession and his rejection of

¹⁴ Blight, David, *Frederick Douglass, Prophet of Freedom*, 2018, p.11

¹⁵ Ibid, p.12

¹⁶ Ibid, p.11

¹⁷ Ibid, p.12

slavery as a false system in something that cleared the way for these things to flourish.

The story is important to the use of history, and to show the way of survival, to draw our attention to how life refuses to be extinguished. It highlights the agency of enslaved women and their children. The story does so much more than provide yet another sad tale to cajole the sympathies and plead for action from the empowered in a systematically dangerous society.

His powerful memory supports the story's truth. The detail contained in the story supports its occurrence, and the way Douglass revisits and mentions the story and his mother throughout his life- this being the only story he writes about her in his autobiographies- supports it. The importance and power of his mother in his life support it. His admitted refusal to adjust the telling of his stories to more easily attract listeners to the abolitionist cause, a cause he was committed to beyond question, supports the story being true instead of a device to persuade.

The Power of Douglass's Memory

Douglass pieces together a timeline of events from which he supposes his birthdate is February 1817. This year and month are surprisingly close to the date of "Feby 1818" which in 1980 historian Dickson Preston finds written next to Douglass's name (Frederick Augustus) on a ledger belonging to Douglass's owner Aaron Anthony, on which slaves including Douglass are listed. But there are questions as to

what the ledger is. It doesn't appear to be a ledger that was kept by Anthony where he or someone in his employ chronologically listed each new slave birth at the time the birth occurred.

The ledger being constructed in real-time seems unlikely as the dates on the ledger span from 1765 to 1820 in the birth column, and the ledger looks as if it was written in one person's hand. The unified tempo and style of the writing throughout the document also suggest the ledger was written in one sitting or within a short interval. Death dates are missing even for those who are listed as deceased, indicating that the death dates weren't entered at the time they happened. The oldest date on the ledger is 1765 and the newest date is 1869, yet the 1869 date looks no newer than the 1765 one. Also, Dickson Preston, who found the ledger, believed the Feb 1818 entry was added later than Douglass's birth date¹⁸.

These issues, coupled with the fact that Douglass knew his former owners heard about his goings-on and had the chance to read and come across the words he delivered in freedom, suggest there could be a possibility that the information on the ledger was obtained later than when Douglass was born, and from Douglass's own work, the supplier of the information on the ledger perhaps remembering Douglass's landed upon birthday wrongly as 1818 instead of Douglass's supposed 1817.

Whatever the ledger is or isn't, whether the information on it was supplied solely from Aaron Anthony's information, or from Douglass's, the fact that the month is the same, and the year is so close indicates that Douglass wasn't delusional at the time he was growing up and putting together a timeline of events to discover his birthdate. Douglass's ability to

¹⁸ Scott Bomboy, The story behind the Frederick Douglass birthday celebration <https://constitutioncenter.org/blog/the-story-behind-the-frederick-douglass-birthday-celebration>

piece together information about his birth against all odds and when that information was being actively withheld is extraordinary and suggests he was keenly aware of his surroundings and that fanciful wishes, which perhaps would have been helpful in such dire circumstances, were not shielding him from his attention to reality.

If the information on the ledger was supplied by the Anthony estate and does not have its roots in Douglass's own work, that would highlight Douglass's attention to detail growing up in getting so close to information kept by Anthony. There is also the case to be made that Douglass himself had a stronger interest than his owner did in getting his birthdate as correct as possible. If one or the other year is correct, Douglass's 1817, or the ledger's 1818, perhaps it is Douglass's summation that is more accurate.

If the information on the ledger does have its roots in Douglass's own work, that would indicate that the Aaron Anthony estate had no better information to contradict it, again highlighting Douglass's attention to his surroundings as a child. These things indicate that the story Douglass tells about his mother's visit with the cake was not a delusion; they suggest the memory wasn't either false or a strong wish that clouded Douglass's memory of the time.

Douglass's Temperament in the Telling of His Own Story

Would Douglass invent a story about the last time he saw his mother to further the abolitionist cause? In arguably Douglass's most famous

speech, *What to the Slave is the Fourth of July*, Douglass states what he is not willing to do to win over an audience to abolition. He brings forth the arguments and suggestions of some of his supporters and then explains why he isn't willing to take those suggestions. He writes:

“Would you argue more, and denounce less, would you persuade more, and rebuke less, your cause would be much more likely to succeed. But, I submit, where all is plain there is nothing to be argued. What point in the anti-slavery creed would you have me argue? On what branch of the subject do the people of this country need light? Must I undertake to prove that the slave is a man? That point is conceded already. Nobody doubts it.”

Douglass says he is unwilling to argue and persuade the people of the country that the slave is a man. He argues that the laws the slaves live under already point to the society acknowledging that the slave is a “moral, intellectual and responsible being.” Laws such as forbidding the teaching of slaves to read and write tell the truth that the establishment well knew that the slave was human.

The country may have said it doubted the humanity of the enslaved, but the restrictions and laws exposed what was already known, that the enslaved were human, and consequently as such, it was already known the slaves were able to feel and grieve as humans do. And the country, both pro and anti-slavery knew this to be true. Douglass was aware that anything short of the admission of this truth furthered slavery and created a

false argument that stole time and energy away from the fight to end slavery. Useless, time-wasting, energy-wasting arguments meant to convince the population of things that were never really doubted, like the humanity of the enslaved, only served to waste, not to advance the energy of justice. Douglass says:

“What, am I to argue that it is wrong to make men brutes, to rob them of their liberty, to work them without wages, to keep them ignorant of their relations to their fellow men, to beat them with sticks, to flay their flesh with the lash, to load their limbs with irons, to hunt them with dogs, to sell them at auction, to sunder their families, to knock out their teeth, to burn their flesh, to starve them into obedience and submission to their masters? Must I argue that a system thus marked with blood, and stained with pollution, is wrong? No! I will not. I have better employments for my time and strength than such arguments would imply.”¹⁹

To sunder means to violently pull apart, to sever. Douglass isn't just listing crimes against the slave. He is listing crimes that his autobiographies bear witness to, that he experienced or saw. The story he tells about his mother visiting him with a cake is also the story of the last time he saw her, when his family, as it was, during his childhood was once and for all sundered by slavery.

¹⁹ Frederick Douglass, *What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?* July, 5, 1852

In the last of his three autobiographies, *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, Douglass goes back to visit the estate where he was enslaved. It is a powerful and poignant visit for him, and he is escorted through by descendants of Colonel Edward Lloyd, the Lloyd plantation owner in Douglass's youth. Mr. Howard Lloyd takes him around the property and at one point to the kitchen where Douglass last saw his mother. Through his recalling of his time on the plantation, he makes sure to say that the kitchen was where he last saw his mother. He is sure to address that as one of his memories of his life there. This signals how important the last time he saw her was in Douglass's life.

So the question is, would Douglass invent a story about the last time he saw his mother to further the abolitionist cause? Given his own words, I say no. Does Douglass need to use his words, his talents, and his ability to tell a story to convince a nation that it's wrong to separate a child from its mother, and a mother from her child? Does he need to explain that it's sad that a child's mother was enslaved twelve miles away from her son, and hardly ever got to see him, that when that child was hungry he was starved, that he lived under deprivation that contrasted with the loving image of a mother bringing a cake to her child? Everything about Douglass's autobiographies paints a sharp contrast between slavery and anything desirable.

And there is a difference between telling and shining a light on a thing and using sentimentality as a tool. The first is about life and taking what was hidden and therefore out of sight, out of mind, and beyond objection, and bringing it into the light to be seen and judged by the light. The use of sentimentality may work, but at its heart, it is about the hearer more than

the teller. The teller is serving the hearer something for the hearer's benefit, or to convince them to do something. The hearer is in the seat of purpose. But telling to expose something to light is about the teller. The teller is in the seat of purpose; the telling is about them and their own liberation.

Could it be that Douglass tells the story about his mother bringing him a cake because it's true? Could it be that his story mirrors "the last time a slave saw their mother" narratives because too many slaves experienced seeing their mothers for the last time? These narratives would have been important enough for the ex-slaves to tell those stories.