

Watching the images of Nazis and white supremacists marching with torches in Charlottesville, I found myself unbelieving, that this could be happening in the US. I heard the marchers chanting, 'Blacks will not replace us!' and 'Jews will not replace us!', and I felt sick to my stomach---and then anger. If any ideology has earned the right to be tossed on the burning 'trash heap of history', surely the Aryan-fascist-Nazi-white-supremacists of the 20th Century sealed their fate?

A couple years back I was commissioned to write a piece of theater, for Christ Cathedral Church on the subject of the 'prophetic tradition'; I chose Frederick Douglass as my subject, my model for an American Prophet. I created a concert-theatrical adaptation of Douglass' first, and most famous work, 'Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave: as told by himself', published in 1845, the story of a self-educated slave, who had escaped to freedom, and then been discovered by the abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison. It was so revolutionary, so brilliant and so damning of the American institution of slavery, and especially the white southern christian church that supported it!--- Douglass had to flee the country for his life.

Douglass would return from his diaspora to become one of the greatest American figures in the 19th Century, a supremely gifted orator with a soaring intellect, Douglass became an important literary figure, editor, confidante to President Lincoln, advocate for black regiments in the Civil War, women's suffragist, diplomat, Marshall for the District of Columbia!

I can't help but think, 'what would Douglass make of this latest rise in the rhetoric of hatred'? Douglass felt that his generation had defeated the forces of slavery and institutional racism in America, and seemed, to not fully accept the depravity of Reconstruction, and how it would fall upon another generation of brave Americans, to further the work of freedom, the work of Douglass, Sojourner Truth, Lincoln and so many others. Could Douglass have imagined the civil rights movement of the late 20th Century, and the murder of another great American prophetic force in Memphis?

Douglass, at 66 years old, after 44 years of marriage to Anna Murray, mother of his 5 children, married Helen Pitts, a secretary in the Women's Suffrage Movement, 20 years younger than him and more scandalously...she was white. In 1884, a mixed marriage was almost unheard of and opposed by virtually everyone, black as well as white.

Douglass coolly pointed out that his first marriage had reflected his African-American heritage, and his second marriage reflected his European heritage. The fact that his European heritage was the product of slavery, and a culture that condoned rape, was not lost on him. One only has to read the story of his witnessing, as a child, the beating of his Aunt Estha, to understand his grasp of the horror.

Douglass was born the property of Colonel Lloyd, one of the wealthiest men on the Atlantic seaboard in the mid-19th Century; Lloyd is believed to have owned over a thousand slaves on the Eastern Shore of Maryland. Before Douglass died, he had returned to the Great Farm to meet with 'family' members and bring about a kind of

peace, as several of the great-grandchildren of his old Master were enamored of Douglass and eager to meet their (in all probability by Douglass' reckoning) famous blood relative. In addition to this, not long before Douglass passed, he was busy designing a Summer cottage on the banks of the Chesapeake River, facing the Eastern Shore where he had been born in bondage. He wanted to gaze across the shores of the land, the nation, he and others had changed forever...or so it seemed?

Frederick Douglass saw an America that had not yet evolved. He spoke of full women's suffrage, and equal pay for equal work, in 1848. He did not accept Lincoln's equivocation over slavery early in his presidency, and made it clear that slavery was an unmitigated horror. In the years after Lincoln's death, Douglass was disappointed that despite his support of the Republican cause, that he was never offered a cabinet position. He 'knew' that there would be a time in the future, when his qualifications would ensure such a position, a position based on merit.

Douglass would have seen the march on Charlottesville, and would have recognized the sentiments. He would have denounced these voices of evil in no uncertain terms. He might have offered a number of creative ways to respond to the white supremacist marchers; perhaps prayer, perhaps singing, or perhaps simply ignoring these disturbed individuals.

I think he would also believe that we must not 'obsess' over these ashes floating above the burning trash heap of history, to not give them too much legitimacy. This vision of America projected by these marchers waving their torches and hateful banners, pathetic if not so perverse; this is not, after all, the America we must look to. We must see, as the Prophet sees, a time of justice, a time of healing, and set our compasses towards this future. We must not fall back and repeat the bloody and misguided actions of the Past. We must look across the waters at the birthplace of injustice, just as Douglass planned to do before he died, and see the shores of a more perfect union.