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Letter to Douglass

Max Robinson

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By Max Robinson

I have worked very hard in my life to attempt to say a few basic simple things. But simple things in life aren't always so simple.

I have written a letter to Mr. Frederick Douglass, and I will read you parts of it. I will try very hard to directly communicate to the members of the Class of 1984. I speak not to the world. I know it is a tradition when you occupy this hallowed platform to speak to the world at large.

I thought about talking about the importance of playing by the rules after a certain reporter became very, very very well publicized when he reported on a certain presidential candidate during an off-the-record conversation. I thought I might tell you that I have always in my life attempted to play by the rules, and the rules say you do not report on off-the-record conversations.

I thought I would tell you that trust with a journalist is the most important trait we can develop. And I would tell you that today it is the most important trait that any of you can develop and that is the trust of your fellow men. If you cannot preserve your integrity, you cannot preserve yourselves.

And there will come a time when you think there will be a choice between your job and your integrity. I know the importance of a job, having a family to feed. But I will always warn you that you will always live well with the choice of integrity, because jobs you can always find. Once your integrity is lost, you can never get it back.

The more I started to think about Frederick Douglass, the more I started to think about the importance of integrity. I wrote to Mr. Douglass — I don't want the members of the Class of 1984 to think this peculiar. I hope you will not go back and tell your friends that at your commencement you heard from a rather strange man who wrote letters to dead people. Because in many ways, Frederick Douglass is very much alive and here today.

Dear Mr. Douglass:

I have always felt a special relationship with you since I first encountered your words in a book. While still a boy I was transported across the years which separated us, as you recounted your struggles during slavery, and I could remember thinking about how manageable my problems were by comparison. It was also abundantly clear, Mr. Douglass, from your writings that you had great hopes for your people in this land.

And, oh Mr. Douglass, you would be so proud of your children this morning at Howard University. Can you believe it? This is Howard's 116th commencement, Mr. Douglass.

I doubt very seriously if you would recognize Howard these

days, or Washington for that matter. Oh Mr. Douglass, there is a Black mayor here in this city and a majority Black City Council here in this city. I doubt very seriously if you would recognize Howard extended the city of Washington these days. At first glance, it might appear that we had finally won the battle for justice and equality in this country.

You should see the horseless carriages some of the students are driving around these days. We call them cars and automobiles now, Mr. Douglass. I can't begin to tell you about all the changes that have occurred since you left us. I'm sure you would be stunned.

Incidentally, I got here yesterday in less than an hour-and-a-half by what we call a jet plane that flies through the air. At one time, yes, Mr. Douglass, it was even frightening to me, but thousands of those mechanical birds crisscross America every day, not to mention all of the others that transport millions around the world.

This country, after sending men to the moon and bringing them back, is now sending what's called a space shuttle into orbit around the earth. We split the atom, releasing a new kind of energy, nuclear energy. We've been transplanting hearts and livers and kidneys and all other kinds of organs from living or dying donors who donate to patients who might not be alive today otherwise.

Oh yes, Mr. Douglass, there's this thing called television. I mention that because I'm a journalist like you, but I'm a television journalist. Now you will have to forgive me, Mr. Douglass, but to explain that to you in the time I have this morning, would be very, very difficult. It's difficult sometimes to explain it to people who are here with us what a television journalist is, and sometimes it is difficult for television journalists to understand what they are. But just let me say and put it this way – I've appeared nightly in millions of American homes telling some of the major events of the day around the world, communicating those events as you watch me in a box with a little screen on the front.

Now most Americans get their news almost exclusively from television. That's a problem, Mr. Douglass, and I'm very concerned about that problem as I speak . . . because as we watch more and more television in this country, we read less and less books. And as we read less and less newspapers, magazines, and books, we become thereby less educated.

In fact, just about everybody in this country, Mr. Douglass, has a television set, even the most or the very poor. In fact, the poor in this country watch more television than any other group of people, because they don't have the money for other diversions. And the sad part of that is that if television takes them away from their books, it also takes them away from the key to their salvation.

We must read more, Mr. Douglass, because we have found out since your time that education remains the key for upward mobility in this country. Many Black Americans have understood that. Just a couple of years ago, the last statistics available, we graduated more than 16,000 Black physicians in this country. Almost 16,000 lawyers. More than 42,000 engineers. You'd be stunned by those figures. Almost 350,000 teachers.

Mr. Douglass, when I went to find out how well we were doing when you passed away in 1895, there were no statistics. But I think you'd agree, Mr. Douglass, that we weren't doing nearly so well when you were here. Despite the good news, however, I must tell you that though Black college enrollment from 1965 to 1980 increased by 270 percent, compared to white college enrollment that was less than 70 percent, we still remain behind in this society that is yet to reach justice and equality.

All too often, Mr. Douglass, a Black person with a degree will not get the job [that] a white person without one [can get]. It's called racism, Mr. Douglass. It's still alive today.

And there are troubling political trends. We have this president. His name is Ronald Reagan, Mr. Douglass. And his appeals to the good old days of the past are somewhat frightening, to say the least.

All due respect to you, Mr. Douglass, as much as I would love to meet you, I'd rather do it in 1984. Things weren't too good for our folks during your time. I'd not like to have to go back to your time. That's why you were so busy, Mr. Douglass, because things were so bad. Well, Mr. Reagan at times seems to think that things were just fine.

I sometimes wonder what it would be like to have a meeting between your Mr. Lincoln and Mr. Reagan. You know there are similarities. Both Republican in name, at least. Both excellent communicators, though something tells me the words of Lincoln will endure a lot longer than the wit of Reagan. Both could be quite folksy in their own way. And, oh yes, before I forget, Mr. Douglass, both like to chop wood. I think the similarities end there, Mr. Douglass. I think these are times that lack vision, and that concerns me. . . .

There is more to that letter. It goes on and on. And perhaps on future occasions I will continue to read excerpts from a letter that I will continue to write to Mr. Douglass, because I find it consoling.

But perhaps I can end by giving you a few words — I can't say wisdom — but I can say some things I think I found out

that may serve you well. I don't have to tell you about the uncertain world you are facing now. I don't have to tell you that though we in the business of journalism should always have the goal of being fair, all too often we are not. I don't have to tell you that, all too often, this country is not fair, and it's especially unfair to people of color. I can tell you that we are doing better. I can tell you that you must make it better still.

Too many students have said to me or asked me, "Max, tell me what jobs are available for Black people today?" And I would suggest to you that you must never approach your life in that way. Don't ask what's available to you. Don't ask what you are being allowed to do today. Simply develop the way to break down those doors that may happen to be closed today.

If we have a failing, and I think we have a few as a people, one rather serious failing is our lack of confidence, and we must deal with it. We must deal with it by working hard, because you don't suddenly say I'm better and therefore feel better, though some of us like to try to do that.

When I say confidence, I'm not talking about cool. You know what cool is. Unfortunately, all too many of us know what cool is. I don't think we need to be cool, because I frankly think cool is a mask to hide weakness. Cool keeps us from communicating.

And you know what I'm talking about. I've walked into parties, especially with the younger generation, where you meet cool, excuse the expression, in spades.

"How you doing? Good to see you. It's OK bro. Right on, man. Tell it like it is, you know. Don't abit more care."

I have news for you. Mr. Cool is Mr. Dead. We must wake up and be about the business of building on what our parents gave us to build on. And that means we have enthusiasm. That means, though we have fear, we no longer give in to it.

My mother told a journalist not too long ago the truth about me when I was growing up. And she said, "Well, one thing you must understand. Maxie Jr." — which is the name I was born with — "wasn't too confident when he was growing up, you know. He really wasn't. He didn't feel a great deal of confidence."

I had to struggle for it. And I found what an old person once told me very useful at some points when I would walk in to get a job — and you know what I'm talking about — when you sort of stiffen up and you put your shoulders back and you say I'm going to do this if it kills me. I must not be nervous. And I was nervous. And I sat there and thought about that old statement, "Fake it until you can make it."

And when you go looking for that job, understand one thing — almost no one in this country hires you because you need a job. Nobody. As a matter of fact, if they find out you really need it, chances are you will never get it. And that's serious.

So what you must show them is that they need you. All right. Once you show them that they need you, they want to hire you, because all of us who hire people have one agenda — that is to keep our jobs. I found that fundamental.

I came to this city, [Washington] almost 20 years ago with five dollars in my pocket — and dreams. And, as they say, a strong back. And dreams — because my mother and father taught me that I not only had a right to dream, but I had a duty to dream. I not only had to dream about what I might do with my life, but I owed it to everyone else to make sure those dreams came true.

But if you don't dream, you can't be there on the morrow. If you haven't dreamed that you will get there, you will not think about ever taking the steps to be there. So first you must dream, and I've heard people say, "Stop dreaming, child." When you stop dreaming, you die.

But also understand this — you've got to do more than dream. There are some people I know who are still dreaming today. They are still dreaming and still saying "that good job is going to come along. I know it is. It's going to be here one day."

I would also ask you to find your own way. Find your own way. Too many people have asked me how I did whatever I did. It's not important how I did it. It is important that you find your way of doing it.

I'll tell you what I did find when one student asked me what my secret to success, if indeed I ever had any, was. I said I found out a very interesting thing. If you would do more than is required of you on your job and in your life, you have to succeed, because most people look at the clock and only do what's required. If you do more than is required, you will be noticed by this society. I can assure you in my business, members of the class in the field of communications, if you do more . . . you would be noticed, you will succeed.

But there are no tricks. There are no shortcuts. You must think hard about what you are to do. And make sure you never walk in anyone's office and ask them about what the job that you applied for is all about. Do your research. Do your homework. And thereby you will show that you deserve and should have that job . . .

In the business of television news, no one asks about how well you do when everybody else is doing his or her job. It's how well you do when nobody else is doing their jobs.

And I can remember an occasion when I came on the air out of Washington. And I was the only anchor that night on [ABC] "World News Tonight." And five seconds before I started to say good evening, through my ear I could hear, "Go to page nine, Max." That meant page one wasn't ready. And so I grabbed page nine and, of course, looking like this is the way we planned it, did page nine and toward the end I was told, "Bettina Gregory is not there, Max, go to page three." And so I said "We'll have Bettina Gregory in just a moment, but first . . ." and we went with a lead to Sam Donaldson. And before it got to Sam, Jeff Gralnick, my producer said, "Max, I'm really sorry. We don't have Sam. Go to page seven." And, of course, this was all arranged. I had to make it look that way. Finally, mercifully, I was told, "Max, go to commercial. We're burning." And I did . . . "We'll be back in a moment."

And I've been told by many, many people that "your job's easy, I can do that anytime." I always did understand that the day my job looks difficult is the day I lose it.

Finally, I want to say something about the use of language . . . I agree that Black English should be respected and that we should understand when a child comes in speaking out of that linguistic idiom, language, whatever you will call it, that we should have respect for that child, and through that language teach that child another language that will be more useful in this society.

But beware, because if you do not understand how to use it well, you will make much less money in the marketplace. That's a fact. And I'm not just talking about communicators.

I remember a night on a certain college campus talking to many Black students about the importance of studying hard and working hard and having dignity and appreciating the culture of Black people. And these were communicators. These were majors in communications. Many wanted to be reporters. Quite frankly, I heard the language butchered, "We bees there," and . . . well, you know, we don't have to go through that do we? And I was forced to tell them that we have to be harder on ourselves. No one does you a favor when they take it easy allowing you faults. No one does you a favor. And you must be hardest on yourselves, because the world awaits you with a rather unprejudiced view, if you can show that world that you are ready.

Don't ever assume a restricted or narrow or provincial place in this world. Too many Black people think that only certain kinds of music, certain kinds of plays, certain kinds of books are for us. That is provincial nonsense.

Of course, we must know about our culture. Of course, we must appreciate it. But we must also appreciate other cultures. We must also live in this world and not retreat to some special, what we would consider safe, corner of it.

I remember a young man saying to me, when I asked him if he liked classical music, symphonic music, "No. I don't like that stuff. You know, it's weird." And I asked him if he had ever been to a symphony, he said, "No, nah, I haven't done that." And I said, "Why?" And what I got from him was that he'd never been, and he never really knew, and he was really afraid to find out, so he would never know. And I said, "come with me." And what I found out was that he did enjoy it — once he opened his mind and understood that he lived in the whole world, and that he could enjoy all of those things that are for us to enjoy in this world.

I leave you with a story told by the late Fannie Lou Hamer, the great civil rights leader — about a wise old man and two young men who thought they could fool this wise old man. And they went up to him and said: "Old man, we have a puzzle we know you can't solve." And the old man said, "What, young men, is it?" And they said, "We have a bird in our hands, and we want you to tell us if it's alive or dead." And they'd already said that if the old man said, "Well, the bird's alive," they would crush the bird to death and prove the old man wrong. And, of course, if he said the bird was dead they would let the bird fly free, and again the old man would be wrong. The old man looked at them for a long time and said: "It's in your hands, it's in your hands." □

The above was excerpted from a commencement oration May 12, 1984.