Emerson Essay, Research Paper

Emerson?s idea of Self Reliance can be compared to the life of Fredrick Douglass. Douglass? life in captivity limited his choices for experience and kept him without material possessions. These are two factors considered by Emerson to be important in obtaining Self Reliance. Emerson?s Self Reliance can also be contrasted to the life of Fredrick Douglass. Emerson?s belief that all men should accept the place they were given in the world would not be true for Douglass. Fredrick Douglass himself, however, during his captivity used his own variety of Self Reliance to survive the violence and demeaning attitudes he was exposed to. Douglass needed to keep a clear view of his self throughout his captivity in order to keep his identity in tact.

“And so the reliance on Property, including the reliance on governments which protect it, is the want of self-reliance. Men have looked away from themselves and at things so long, that they have come to esteem the religious, learned, and civil institutions, as guards of property, and they deprecate assaults on these, because they feel them to be assaults on property. They measure their esteem of each other, by what each has, and not by what each is. . .. A political victory, the rise of rents, the recovery of your sick, or the return of your absent friend, or some other favorable event, raises your spirits, and you think good days are preparing for you. Do not believe it. Nothing can bring you peace but yourself. Nothing can bring you peace but the triumph of principles.” (Emerson).

This selection from the essay Self Reliance, stresses the importance of breaking away from material possessions in order to find what the function of the self truly is. Emerson believed that people were living a pre-formulated variety of life. People did not realize that the choices they had were really limiting them.? Men have looked away from themselves and at things so long, that they have come to esteem the religious, learned, and civil institutions, as guards of property,? These learned, and civil institutions included formal schooling and career choices.

Emerson believed that if people were not so distracted by the choices that already existed, they would be better able to find a path in life that was truly and uniquely suited for them.

According to the above excerpt from the essay Self Reliance, Fredrick Douglass, although not of his own choosing, would already be Self Reliant by the time he became a free man. Douglass? lack of material possessions and his basic need to rely on his own quick, logical mind to survive in the harsh world of his enslavement would be what leads him into his later career as an advocate for human rights. Though Douglass? captivity was not his only defining characteristic, looking at Douglass? life as a free man, Emerson would find some positive influence from his captivity. Once it was called God and now it has no name. If you cannot speak then chances are you cannot think and if you cannot think then nothing moves you. If nothing moves you, you have no passions. If you have no passion, you have lost yourself.

?Speak your latent conviction, and it shall be the universal sense; for the inmost in due time becomes the outmost,?(Emerson). Douglass? suffering and experience would follow him on the inside until he gained his freedom and was able to write about it. This shows that Douglass kept a clear view of his identity even though many choices were either made for him or forced on him. In his narrative, Douglass describes changing his name to signify his freedom, but he chooses to keep the first name of Fredrick. ?I gave Mr. Johnson the privilege of choosing me a name, but I told him he must not take from me the name of ? Fredrick?. I must hold on to that, to reserve a sense of my identity.?(113) Even though the name Fredrick was associated with his enslavement, Douglass chose to keep it. This illustrates Douglass? strong sense of self; his captivity was just as much a part of who he was as would be the rest of his life from here on. This did not mean that he would always need to be enslaved by the memory of his captivity.

Douglass not accepting the life he was born into, contrasts Emerson?s Self Reliance argument. It is obvious that Emerson was not considering the enslaved person. ?Accept the place the divine providence has found for you, the society of your contemporaries, the connection of

events. Great men have always done so, and confided themselves childlike to the genius of their age, betraying their perception that the absolutely trustworthy was seated at their heart, working through their hands, predominating in all their being. ?(Emerson). If Douglass had not defended himself in the many fights he was involved in, or attempted escape, he would not be as confidently outspoken as he became later in his life. Douglass? intellect and his discomfort with his life in slavery is what made his writings so persuasive. It was not easy for Douglass to keep the view that he deserved the rights that all men had while he was a slave. Even after he became free the memory was still following him. ?It was a severe cross, and I took it up reluctantly. The truth was. I felt myself a slave, and the idea of talking to white people weighed me down. I spoke but a few moments, when I felt a degree of freedom, and said what I desired with considerable ease.?(117) Douglass? fierce grasp on his identity while in captivity helped him to separate himself from that life, while he was living it and even after he became free.

Douglass himself used a different kind of Self Reliance during his enslavement. Douglass could not know who he could trust since most important information was kept from the slaves. This led Douglass to have a deep trust in himself. This trust would help him separate himself from the world of enslavement so he would not be doomed to live slavery as a dominant metaphor for his identity. Douglass writes in his narrative: ?I date the entertainment of a deep conviction that slavery would not always be able to hold me within its foul embrace?(43). This is proof that even as a slave, Douglass did not believe his identity was enslaved.

Douglas describes the type of personal information that was kept from the slaves: ?By far the larger part of slaves know as little of their ages as horses know of theirs, and it is the wish of most masters within my knowledge, to keep their slaves thus ignorant.?(19) This selection shows that he could not trust the plantation owners and overseers to even give him basic information about his identity. The logic here must have been that if the slaves knew little of themselves they would not have aspirations to be something better than a slave. Douglass had to find out this sort of information on his own, by being alert and suspecting that something was wrong. ?The nearest estimate I can give makes me now between twenty-seven and twenty-eight years of age. I come to this from hearing my master say sometime during 1835, I was about seventeen years old.?(19).

Douglass also needed to believe he was worth enough as a person in order to defend himself in physical fights. Many slaves did not defend themselves because the consequences were either to be beaten, killed or to be sold to another plantation, far from family and friends. Douglass was not even content enough in his life as a slave to not risk these horrors. After the first particularly brutal fight Douglass describes, he writes: ?My long-crushed spirit rose, cowardice departed and bold defiance took its place; and I now resolved that, however long I might remain a slave in form, the day had passed forever when I could be a slave in fact.?(83). This passage shows that Douglass has vowed to protect himself from the violence he did not think was fair against him. He did not believe that in his future he would continue to be a slave, so from this point, he stopped thinking of himself as a slave. This was an important step in Douglass? realization of his self. In comparison with Emerson?s concept of Self Reliance, Douglass was casting aside the

path that was chosen for him. Though he did not yet have the freedom to fully take control of his own direction in life, from this point he knows he will get there. ?Men have looked away from themselves and at things so long, that they have come to esteem the religious, learned, and civil institutions, as guards of property, and they deprecate assaults on these, because they feel them to be assaults on property.?(Emerson) In Douglass? case the ?thing? was his attitude toward his enslavement.

Self Reliance, as Emerson wrote of it can not be used in the case of every life. The enslaved person seems to have not been considered in Emerson?s concept of Self Reliance. Though some aspects of Emerson?s concept can be related to the life of Fredrick Douglass, there is a different kind of self-reliance that must be followed in order to survive in captivity as a slave. Douglass needed to rely on his own senses and his own mind to carry him through his ordeal and end up with a sense of identity.