



BARBARA L. PEACOCK

SOUL CARE

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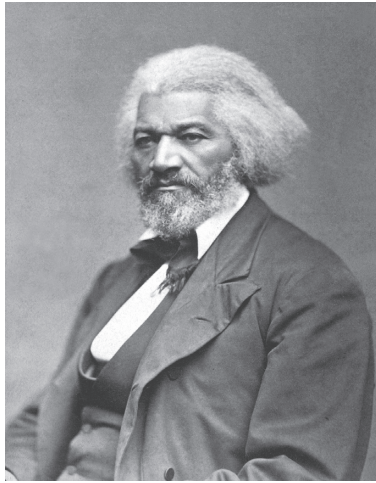
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DR. FREDERICK DOUGLASS

Spiritual Direction and Lectio Divina

*D*r. Frederick Douglass was an abolitionist, author, orator, statesman, reformer, and leader in numerous communities. He is well known, but he is not recognized as a spiritual hero who engaged in ancient spiritual disciplines.

For centuries, African American leaders have been tenacious in pursuing a relationship with Yahweh. This fight has led to the spiritual maturity of many in spite of persecution, obstacles, oppression, racism, degradation, segregation, and disappointment. Douglass was

a slave familiar with such challenges. Nonetheless his determination helped him overcome numerous slave norms—so much so that he learned to read with the assistance of his slave master’s wife.

As a young boy, Douglass grasped the idea of reading as he listened to his slave master’s wife, Sophia Auld, while she read the Bible to her sons. In his book on Douglass, William S. McFeely wrote, “Soon he could ‘read’ memorized passages on familiar pages.”¹ Noticing young Douglass’s zeal, Mrs. Auld took the time to read the Bible to him, and he meditated on and memorized it. From memory, he began to speak words he heard her say while they read together. The way they read the Bible together resembles the Latin reading process called *lectio divina*, a slow, thoughtful reading of the text with God’s presence in mind. One example from Scripture was the twice daily repetition of the Shema, recorded in Deuteronomy 6:4: “Hear, O Israel: the LORD our God, the LORD is one.” Such repetition is a form of *lectio*, as the Shema requires one to be attentive to the voice of God while listening.

Many of us can read deeply, even thoughtfully, without ever allowing the Word of God to penetrate our hearts or our lives.² Needless to say, this was not the case for Douglass, who took his Bible-reading time seriously. Not only was it an opportunity for him to learn to read, it was also a conduit for him to write the Word of God on his heart.

As a result of learning to read the Bible, Douglass became a well-known intellectual in his community and beyond. Reading was the fundamental skill that prepared him to live a life that transformed not only himself but also others. For him reading was not merely glancing over a text but meditating on what he heard, which eventually equipped him to impact millions.

Eugene Peterson, the translator of *The Message Bible*, advocated the value of *lectio divina* in engaging with Scripture. He defined it as “a way of reading the Scriptures that is congruent with the way the Scriptures serve the Christian community as a witness to God’s revelation of himself to us.”³ Douglass’s reading of the Scriptures empowered him to be God’s representative in the community.

Mrs. Auld also demonstrated to Douglass the importance of having spiritual leaders. According to McFeely, she constantly struggled with the state of her soul, which led her to seek out spiritual assistance. Douglass witnessed her seeking the guidance of a spiritual mentor in her effort to live a better life.⁴ Observing the impact her spiritual mentor had on her life, Douglass sought out a spiritual mentor for himself. As he observed her journey, he came to believe that if mentoring worked for her, it would also work for him. He saw the Spirit of God working in and through her, and therefore he did not allow society’s limitations based on gender or race to hinder him. He found three people to mentor him spiritually.⁵ Douglass had respected Mrs. Auld’s spirituality to the extent that he followed her spiritual example.

One of Douglass’s mentors, observing his progress and his propensity for leadership, noted that he would do exceptionally well in his lifetime. And indeed the mentorship he experienced is a powerful example of the benefits of spiritual leadership and direction. Because of Mrs. Auld’s inspiring example and his foundational years with her, Douglass did indeed become a prominent figure. During his lifetime he was known as “the most visible African American in the country.”⁶

God blessed Douglass with people who were attentive to his soul. And learning to read the Bible is soul care at its finest. The

Spirit nourishes the soul when we draw close to him, and God uses people to share and impart direction to us along the way. Douglass was blessed to have Mrs. Auld and other spiritual mentors in his life, as God used them to mold him into a world-renowned leader.

Douglass's spiritual life included what are now called the disciplines of *lectio divina*: prayer, spiritual direction, and caring for the soul. He did not allow the culture he was in to dictate or limit his ability to learn, grow, teach, and speak. He was an extraordinary man of faith and spirituality who overcame the slavery mindset by not allowing it to limit his God-given capacity.

Though God used Mrs. Auld in Douglass's formation, it was not a perfect journey. When Mr. Auld discovered the nurturing his wife was pouring into Douglass, he detested the very idea of slaves having such intellectual power. Consequently, Mrs. Auld ceased her tutoring. Nonetheless, God's hand remained on Douglass and God used numerous others to pour into Douglass's life.

God uses whoever and whatever is necessary to fulfill his purpose and plan for each individual. His destiny for us is not without obstacles; but when destiny calls, God assures that he will provide what is needed to complete the task that is set. No demonic force—not even slavery—can stop God from doing his work in the souls of his chosen ones. God uses difficulties for our good, and Douglass's spiritual journey is a marvelous example of how leadership, discipleship, and spirituality in the African American community can further God's work in the lives of individuals.

REFLECTION AND PRACTICE



Lectio divina happens to be one of my favorite spiritual disciplines. It can be practiced with many passages in the Bible and is especially effective for encouraging a reader or group to find deeper insights in a biblical passage. When I have sessions in spiritual direction, I often ask directees to prayerfully focus on a passage. One of my favorites is Psalm 46, and in particular verse 10. We will use it in this section to practice *lectio divina*.

Before we focus on the passage itself, let's first look at some of the stages, or steps, of *lectio*.

As you read the passage, be mindful to read it slowly. Spend some time praying the Scripture. As you reflect on it, see yourself embracing and embodying the passage. During this time, you are allowing the Spirit of God to develop a deeper union and greater intimacy between you and Jesus, the living Word; the God of the written passage; and the teacher of the Word, the Holy Spirit.

1. *Silencio*: Be still. Quiet yourself. Take some deep breaths as you inhale and exhale. It will help to sit back in your chair, put your hands on your lap, and gently close your eyes. Honor God's presence in your sacred space.
2. *Lectio*: Reading the Word of God is the second step in *lectio divina*. As you prayerfully read the passage, revere God's holy Scriptures. Slow down and listen in silence as you anticipate experiencing the awesomeness of his holy voice. Pray that God would speak to you in a way different from any reading encounter you've had in the past.
3. *Meditatio*: Meditation is the third step. Meditating on God's Word is similar to chewing on a passage. Through meditation, allow God's Word to be fully digested into your very being.

Imagine a cow chewing its cud. While chewing, the cow turns the food over and over in its mouth. In meditation we turn God's Word over and over in our mind. Your desire is that God's Word will touch you at a depth you have not experienced before.

4. *Oratio*: The prayer phase is the fourth step in *lectio divina*. Oh how precious is this sacred time! *Oratio* calls you to go even deeper in your discipline of sacred reading. During a loving, intimate conversation with your Creator, allow the Word of God to transform you from the inside out. Accept his warm and precious embrace during this time.
5. *Contemplatio*: Contemplation is the final step of your sacred reading. During this time, God is calling you to rest in his holy presence. Rest as you solely focus on his Word. Receive his divine Spirit of holiness during this process of transformation. Embrace the Word of his unconditional love. Let go of preconceptions. Let go of your own words, and embrace his Word. Settle down and enjoy just being with him. Rest. *Selah*.

Now you are ready for the exercise for this lesson, which can be done individually or in a group.

1. This is your time to still yourself, be silent, and wait on the Lord.
2. With reverence, approach the text of Psalm 46:10 and read it aloud slowly twice. Focus on a phrase in the passage that speaks to you.
3. Spend one to two minutes in silence. Read the passage again or have someone else in the group read aloud. Meditate on a phrase or perhaps a word that speaks to your life.
4. Read the passage, even slower, once more. Reflect on the text. As you think about the passage, focus on a word or phrase that caught your attention. What stood out during the sacred reading of the passage? Where do you sense God is leading you to take action?

5. Now be silent a bit longer, this time for two to three minutes.
Where does this reading touch your life?
6. Finish the following statements:
This reading touches my life _____.
I hear _____.
I see _____.
I sense _____.
Other reflection(s): _____.
7. Read Psalm 46:10 once again. Be mindful to read it slowly, clearly, and passionately.
8. Be silent a little longer this time, perhaps for three or four minutes. Reflect on the question, "What do you sense God wants you to do related to Psalm 46:10?" How does the passage speak to where you are now on your spiritual journey?
9. Answer the following:
I sense God wants me to _____.
I sense God calling me to _____.
Other reflection(s): _____.
10. Praise God for this sacred time with his Word. Take the time to pause for a *selah* moment. Settle into your space. What are you noticing? What else are you hearing from God?
11. End your dedicated and consecrated time in prayer.

Please feel free to customize this exercise as you see fit. I encourage you to practice *lectio divina* on your own or in a group as a means to slow down and more fully digest God's Word.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. When you look at the illustration of Jesus as the Good Shepherd, who do you see, visually and spiritually?
2. Can you see yourself embracing the art of stillness while you mediate on the illustration? Why or why not?

3. In what area or areas of your life do you sense God calling you to be still?
4. When is he calling you to be still in his presence?
5. How is he calling you?
6. Why is he calling you?

Talking with God. God, I thank you for this time of holy reflection on your Word. Only you can reveal the truths I need to embrace in order to grow closer to you. By faith I move forward to become more of the person you have called and ordained me to be. I fully accept your directives and thank you for the time we have shared together. It is now that I move forth, standing on what I have heard and now embody. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Hearing from God. My dear child, I have been waiting for you to slow down and just be with me. It brings me great pleasure that you have received my sacred invitation. Know that I look forward to spending this time with you more frequently in the future. Through times like these I am able to share my heart with you while you are free to share yours with me. As you sit with me, be mindful not to rush through this time we spend together. I am Abba, the lover of your soul.

Visio divina. Though the illustration of Jesus as the Good Shepherd is only a representation, that does not mean the scene captured is without emotional movement. However, for your reflection time, embrace the *stillness*. Use this image to reflect on being still and knowing that he is God.

Prayer. Take another moment. Move into a greater dimension of stillness. Take time to whisper your heartfelt prayer to God. I pray you are loving this time with Abba.

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