Frederick Douglass and Identity: Resurrection to the Heaven of Freedom

- **Compelling Question**
  - To what extent are you cultivating the identity necessary to achieve worthy goals such as enhancing freedom in your own life and the lives of others?

- **Virtue: Identity**
- **Definition** – Identity answers the question, “Who am I?”

- **Lesson Overview**
  - In this lesson, students will examine events in the life of Frederick Douglass, studying a turning point in his life when he determined not to remain a slave.

- **Objectives**
  - Students will understand how Frederick Douglass rejected the identity of “slave” and determined to take on the identity of a free man.
  - Students will analyze their own actions, goals, and ambitions to determine how identity contributes to achievement of worthy goals.

- **Background**
  - Frederick Douglass one of almost four million slaves who lived in the antebellum South. Slavery was a violent system of repression that forced African Americans to work for white owners who reaped the reward of their labor. The system of owning another human being and their labor took away slaves’ inalienable rights and their dignity and identity. Slavery thus reduced people to the status of a thing or property. Because so many institutions of Southern society reinforced the control and de-humanization of slavery, it took an incredible amount of courage for slaves to find ways to recover their freedom, self-worth, and individual identity. Frederick Douglass successfully achieved his freedom and sought to lift all slaves out of bondage.

- **Vocabulary**
  - Antebellum
  - Bondage
  - Slave-breaker
  - Languished
  - Brute
  - Stupor
  - Malaise
  - Underground Railroad

- **Introduce Text**
  - Have students read the background and narrative, keeping the “Walk-In-The-Shoes” question in mind as they read. Then have them answer the remaining questions below.

- **Walk-In-The-Shoes Questions**
  - As you read, imagine you are the protagonist.
    - What challenges are you facing?
    - What fears or concerns might you have?
    - What may prevent you from acting in the way you ought?

- **Observation Questions**
  - Describing his experiences under Edward Covey, Douglass later said, “…the dark night of slavery closed in on me, and behold a man transformed into a brute.” What do you think he meant by "the dark night of slavery?" What would it mean for you to be “transformed into a brute?”
  - What series of events led Douglass to recover the spirit of manhood and fight for his freedom and dignity?
  - In what ways did Douglass’s experiences as a slave contribute to his ability to fight for the freedom of others?
• **Discussion Questions**
  o Discuss the following questions with your students.
    - What is the historical context of the narrative?
    - What historical circumstances presented a challenge to the protagonist?
    - How and why did the individual exhibit a moral and/or civic virtue in facing and overcoming the challenge?
    - How did the exercise of the virtue benefit civil society?
    - How might exercise of the virtue benefit the protagonist?
    - What might the exercise of the virtue cost the protagonist?
    - Would you react the same under similar circumstances? Why or why not?
    - How can you act similarly in your own life? What obstacles must you overcome in order to do so?

• **Additional Resources**
  o Douglass, Frederick. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave: Written by Himself.* New York: Penguin, 1986 (Orig. published, 1845)
  o History.com: Frederick Douglass [http://www.history.com/topics/black-history/frederick-douglass](http://www.history.com/topics/black-history/frederick-douglass)
  o NPS.gov: Frederick Douglass [http://www.nps.gov/frdo/learn/historyculture/people.htm](http://www.nps.gov/frdo/learn/historyculture/people.htm)
Handout A: Frederick Douglass and Identity: Resurrection to the Heaven of Freedom

Background
Frederick Douglass one of almost four million slaves who lived in the antebellum South. Slavery was a violent system of repression that forced African Americans to work for white owners who reaped the reward of their labor. The system of owning another human being and their labor took away slaves’ inalienable rights and their dignity and identity. Slavery thus reduced people to the status of a thing or property. Because so many institutions of southern society reinforced the control and de-humanization of slavery, it took an incredible amount of courage for slaves to find ways to recover their freedom, self-worth, and individual identity. Frederick Douglass successfully achieved his freedom and sought to lift all slaves out of bondage.

Narrative
Frederick Douglass led the sad existence of one who knows little about his own identity. He did not know when his own birthday was and did not know his age. He also did not know who his father was, though he guessed it was one of the white men on the plantation. He did not really know his mother, who was separated from him by many miles, and he only visited with her a few times before she died when he was a little boy. Finally, like almost all slaves, he was not taught to read as a boy and did not have any known talents to develop or hopes for the future. Douglass was born a slave, and that brutal system had stripped away his identity.

In 1833, because he was seen as difficult to manage and planned an escape, his master sent Douglass to a “slavebreaker” named Edward Covey. The title meant exactly what it implied – Covey broke the bodies and spirits of slaves. Within a week, Covey whipped Douglass savagely. “Mr. Covey gave me a very severe whipping, cutting my back, causing the blood to run, and raising ridges on my flesh as large as my little finger,” Douglass later reported. Covey beat Douglass at least once a week.

The de-humanizing routine of violence stripped Douglass of his human dignity and reduced him to the existence of an animal. “Mr. Covey succeed in break me. I was broken in body, soul, and spirit. My natural elasticity was crushed, my intellect languished, the disposition to read departed, the cheerful spark that lingered about my eye died; the dark night of slavery closed in on me; and behold a man transformed into a brute!”

Douglass fell into a stupor and could not shake his malaise. One day, he was mentally drained and physically ill, and had to stop working because he was weak and dizzy. Covey discovered Douglass lying on the ground and thought him lazy. Covey gave the slave a “savage kick in the side, and told me to get up.” He tried several times to rise and was beaten harder with every failure, including a blow to the head with a hickory stick, “making a large wound, and the blood ran freely.” He mustered up the courage to defy Covey and walk seven miles to his master’s house to relate what Covey had done. The master turned him out and sent him back to Covey. Never had Douglass felt more powerless and less like a man. He hid out for a day for relief but finally returned.

The following day changed Douglass’ life forever. Covey sought to tackle Douglass and beat him, but Douglass actually fought back. “At this moment – from whence came the spirit I don’t know – I resolved to fight; and, suiting my action to my resolution, I seized Covey by the throat.” Covey desperately solicited the help of another white man, whom Douglass kicked in the ribs and knocked down. Douglass told Covey, “Come what might; that he had used me like a brute for six months, and that I was determined to be used so no longer.”

In the heat of the battle, Covey ordered another slave to intervene, but the man refused and left the two to finish their battle. Douglass thought the fight lasted for nearly two hours until finally it ended in a draw. As they stared at each other, panting frantically, Douglass noted with satisfaction that he had been neither bloodied nor whipped, but that he had bloodied Covey. For the next six months, Covey did not lay a finger on Douglass in anger. Douglass even ignored Covey’s threats and warned the slavebreaker that, if he tried to strike Douglass again, he would get a worse beating than the first.

For Douglass, it was the turning point in his life. He found his identity and had recovered his manhood and his dignity. “It rekindled the few expiring embers of freedom,” Douglass explained, “and revived within me a sense of my manhood. It recalled the departed self-confidence, and inspired me again with a determination to be free.”
Douglass’ spirit and humanity was restored, destroying any hold that slavery might have over his soul. Indeed, he was a slave in name only and would no longer live in fear or submission. “It was a glorious resurrection, from the tomb of slavery, to the heaven of freedom. My long-crushed spirit rose, cowardice departed, 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.”

Douglass eventually did escape to the North and freedom through the Underground Railroad. He married and started earning his own money, keeping the fruits of his own labor. His work and marriage contributed to feeling the human dignity to which he was entitled and which he had won in his struggle with Covey. “I was now my own master. It was a happy moment, the rapture of which can be understood only by those who have been slaves. It was the first work, the reward of which was to be entirely my own.” Douglass was now a man with a strong sense of self-worth and identity who devoted himself to ensuring equal rights for all Americans in the abolitionist and women’s suffrage movements.
Handout B: Journal Prompts

Answer the following questions in your journal, as you prepare to voluntarily share some of your responses in a class discussion.

1. To what extent did Douglass’s performance align with his purpose? In what ways does your performance align with your purpose?
2. To what extent and in what ways do your unique characteristics enable your pursuit of a life that is on track to achieve your purpose?
3. To what extent and in what ways does your performance align with your identity and purpose? What are you doing this very day to cultivate skills and interests that will connect today’s purposes with your long-term opportunity to enhance and protect the life and liberty of others?