

# Restlessness and greatness in the sea of society



## Highland Views

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“The remark is often made ... that there is no repose [rest] in America. We are said to be like the troubled sea, and in some sense this is true. If it is a fact it is also one not without its compensation. If we resemble the sea in its troubles, we also resemble the sea in its power and grandeur, and in the equalities of its particles” (Frederick Douglass, “Self-Made Men,” 1894).

Douglass spoke these words in an address at the Indian Technical School in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, less than a year before his death. Though he speaks of “Man” and “men,” Douglass was well-known as a human rights advocate and consistent supporter of Women’s Rights (along with his good friend, Elizabeth

Cady Stanton).

Emerson, who met Douglass in Boston in 1862, had lectured on “Representative Men” in the 1840s. It was popular for speakers and writers to lift up great personalities as examples of the best in humanity. Emerson himself said whenever we rise to our full stature as reasoning beings we become in a sense “Man [Humanity] Thinking.”

Jesus referred to himself as the “Son of Man” – a representative human being. That takes a certain amount of gumption and ego, but throughout history some have understood that they stand, in some way, for all people or they speak a universal message. And, as we know, since early days, the Church has emphasized the more dramatic, deifying and de-humanizing “Son of God” designation for the Man of Nazareth.

Frederick Douglass expanded his analogy of the sea to acknowledge the valuable role of each particle:

“[All] the oceans of this great globe go

through the purifying process of filtration. All their parts are at work and their relations are ever changing.” The droplets are carried by the wind to islands, continents and mountains, on a kind of “beneficent mission” to leave the “grateful earth refreshed, enriched, invigorated, beautiful and blooming.” Each drop “has its fair chance to rise and contribute its share to the health and happiness of the world.”

This couldn’t be better said by a naturalist or mystic.

Douglass completes this image by directly connecting the natural cycle to the human community. “Such, in some sort, is a true picture of the restless activity and ever-changing relations of American society. Like the sea, we are constantly rising above, and returning to, the common level.” No matter the social position or culture they are born into, the “self-made” person can rise up from anywhere at anytime to contribute their share “to the health and happiness

of the world.”

From his perspective, the former slave who rose as the conscience of the nation, just as the oceans of the earth affect everyone, so this picture is much more than merely an American story—it’s a world story. “[Our] national genius welcomes humanity from every quarter and grants to all an equal chance in the race of life.”

We are restless. Yet, we have the potential to rise to personal greatness and genius when we learn how to rest, and practice a generosity of goodwill toward others on the same seas.

All is to say, voices like Douglass’s wake us to our need to rest, to recharge and re-devote ourselves to finding our valuable part in the cycle – as essential particles in the ocean. “Self-made” doesn’t mean we go it alone without those in other “canoes.” It’s important to raise our voices, and to hear all others.

**See RESTLESS. Page 2D**