

Numinous Encounters in Frederick Douglass's Autobiographies

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Scholars of many disciplines have used the three autobiographies of escaped Maryland slave Frederick Douglass as valuable tools to help understand both slavery and the status of African Americans in post-emancipation United States. This essay employs the insights of analytic psychology to assess Douglass's reflections in his autobiographies of pivotal movements on his path to freedom. In particular, "numinous" experiences recounted in these autobiographies will be shown to have had profound psychological influences that propelled Douglass forward on his journey to becoming a free man.

Theologian Rudolf Otto first discussed the idea of the holy or numinous in his classic *The Idea of the Holy* (1923) to describe the "gradual shaping and filling in with ethical meaning . . . of what was a unique original feeling-response" that can be experientially encountered within or without religion (p. 6). Otto proceeds to describe the nature of these encounters with divine wisdom or inner knowing as:

[A] mental state . . . irreducible to any other; . . . it cannot be strictly defined. There is only one way to help another to an understanding of it. He must be guided and led on by consideration and discussion of the matter through the ways of his own mind, until he reaches the point at which 'the numinous' in him perforce begins to stir, to start into life and into consciousness. (p. 7)

Incidents in Douglass's life as a slave in which he experienced moments of profound, mystical insight are evidence of the divine at work in his life and these encounters have a numinous quality. It is this awakening that Douglass reports as he begins comprehending the facts of his situation as a slave and developing a faith that he is destined by a higher power for freedom that were psychologically pivotal numinous events. These experiences are critical for his individuation as a free man and the abolitionist he becomes as he works towards his and other enslaved persons empowerment.

Numinous encounters with the divine require a particular understanding of faith that is grounded in ontological being. It is faith that is discovered in a belief that one matters. Theologian Paul Tillich describes the idea of faith in this way: "Faith is the state of being grasped by the power of being-itself. The courage to be is an expression of faith and what 'faith' means must be understood through the courage to be" (1952). The kind of faith that is under discussion here is inextricably linked to numinous encounters because these are interior experiences provoked by external circumstances that demand the acknowledgement that one's humanity matters.

Jungian analyst Leslie Stein (2019) has written extensively about numinous encounters and describes the sudden and overwhelming nature of these experiences as resulting in the consciousness being altered by "a truth that cannot be denied . . . that submerges the individual in the deepest aspects of their psyche: the archetypes of the collective unconscious, wherein a truth is revealed."¹ These incidents can be understood as numinous experiences: sudden, an overwhelming experience of archetypal energies emerging and piercing conscious awareness that

¹ Stein, 73

results in a shift or change to the conscious mind that leads to individuation. Douglass records numinous experiences in his autobiographies as turning points in his decision and journey toward being a free man. He was on a path of self-actualization—a process that culminates with individuation.

Individuation is a term developed in the work of late psychoanalyst Carl Jung (1875–1961), founder of analytical psychology, who disagreed with Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) over the centrality of sexuality and instincts that drive psychological development. Jung (1958) believed that archetypes of the collective unconscious contain latent energies that carry the possibility for psychological and spiritual awakenings, which in turn promote emotional healing. Because their power is always a potential point of discovery, they have the capacity for manifesting “astonishing cures or religious conversions” within human consciousness (para. 594). Douglass’s enduring belief in freedom and the experiences that were central to this growing awareness possess clear numinous quality. In his autobiographies Douglass recounted and reflected upon ontological arguments, which produced insight into the nature of the internal state of being enslaved for his readers—a process by which he became a self-actualized person who developed an individuated sense of self. The nature of his existence eventually roused him to action toward self-definition in order to relieve the internal conflict produced by the “peculiar institution” as he and other abolitionists often referred to it.

By invoking Jungian thought to examine Douglass’s autobiographical accounts as numinous experiences, it is important to recognize and address the implicit bias of Western philosophy that Jungian psychology is informed by, in order to better understand its theoretical orientation toward race and racism in the United States. Jung’s limited personal encounters with racism of the early twentieth century led him to formulate a theory of the personality that was essentially color-blind, while simultaneously identifying African Americans with the negative contents of the shadow archetype in the individual person. Jungian analysis has been accused of not incorporating a multicultural approach and thereby acting as if structural racism, inherent to the political and social organization of the United States, was non-existent and irrelevant to therapeutic work. Fanny Brewster in *African Americans and Jungian Psychology* (2017) enumerates this perspective throughout her exposé of the implicit racial bias in analytic psychology. In particular, she points to the timing of Jung’s visit to America in the early 1910s and juxtaposes this to the intensifying racism of the Progressive Era to explain Jung’s ignorance of the trauma encountered by African Americans, as influencing his cultural biases. Brewster articulates this interpretation succinctly when she states:

Jung delved into the historical facts and developed his theories oftentimes based on current events or present-day collective needs. The contemporary American life that Jung visited, though he never resided in it, was one of racial bias, active racial bias, and an American consciousness that was still extracting itself not only from slavery, but also from the belief that slavery was and should be an acceptable aspect of American life (p. 16).

Therefore, Jung’s theory falls well-short of standards for multicultural competency expected by today’s practitioners. Jung’s personhood is problematic due to his own internalized racism that in turn caused him to make negative associations of primitiveness with Blackness in his scholarly work. Even though Jung, as a person, was blinded to racism, his framework still holds great utility for theoretical understanding of numinous encounters with the divine. Jung discusses the numinous

in terms of the way that it taps into an inner knowing that is reflective of an indwelling of the divine. When this power is engaged in internal dialogue with the self, then opportunities for mystical experiences expand due to human potential to engage uncertainty and the unknown. Despite this important shortcoming, Jung’s theory is intuitive, like all classical learning and theology that is embedded in heteronormative knowledge, because it provides a paradigm from which to understand the inner knowing that Douglass frequently refers to as Providence.

Jung believed that individuation is the culmination of human development that leads to a state of wholeness experienced as a sense of personal integrity and integration resulting from the awareness of the Self at the core of self—an ontological ground of being—that exists as existential security. Individuation was a product of the integration of archetypes emerging from the collective unconscious that are *a priori* to our personal existence. These archetypes emerge from dreams and are represented symbolically across cultures in the arts, literature, and religion. They operate below our awareness and the task of individuation is to resolve underlying conflicts, which these present, in order for the inner truth of oneself to be known. The archetype *Self* in Jungian theory is the ground of human existence and is central to numinous encounters—divine, supernatural forces associated with spirituality and sometimes religion—that emerge from the collective unconscious and become known to the personal self by a working through of the layers of personality consisting of the *persona*, the *shadow*, and the *anima/animus*.

In his classic work *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious* (1968) Jung describes *archetypes of transformation* that are “situations, places, and means, that symbolize the kind of transformation in question” (para. 80). Jung argues the quality of the unconscious is for human nature to perceive it as seemingly non-existence and non-directive, but nonetheless containing the potential for healing and wholeness that draws upon a kind of collective culture inherently essential to our humanity and our existence. He says:

We call the unconscious “nothing,” and yet it is a reality *in potential*. The thought we shall think, the deed we shall do, even the fate we shall lament tomorrow, all lie unconscious in our today. The unknown in us which the affect uncovers was always there and sooner or later would have presented itself to consciousness. Hence, we must always reckon with the presence of things not yet discovered. These, as I have said, may be unknown quirks of character. But possibilities of future developments may also come to light, perhaps in just such an outburst of affect which sometimes radically alters the whole situation (para. 498).

Douglass’s life exemplifies Jungian individuation. Archetypal energies emerged as spiritual awakenings and insight at pivotal points during Douglass’s life, which he recounted in his autobiographies. Numinous encounters with the divine, which Douglass recalls experiencing as an inner knowing, were central to his becoming a free man. These seem to reflect transformative processes that crystalized a subjectivity that oriented his thoughts and personhood toward birthing an experience of self-actualization. Douglass’s personal journey to freedom reflected the archetypal *hero’s* journey. His lifelong passion for equality before the law and liberation from tyranny is evidence of a developmental pathway that is representative of a desire for wholeness and Jungian individuation.

These numinous encounters with the divine were transformational in that they describe Douglass’s thoughts while still a slave turning toward the idea of escape to the North. These broaden understanding of Douglass’s desire to be free, know himself, and be regarded as a

freeman. These ideas found in existentialist thought regarding freedom, choice, meaning, and death date back to nineteenth century theologian Søren Kierkegaard. Similarly, Timothy Golden, George Yancy, Lewis Gordon, and Melvin Hill² have explored the existential underpinnings of African American literature, including runaway slave narratives such as Douglass's autobiographies. Golden (2016) points out that "what Kierkegaard discusses in theory, Douglass lives in practice; a practice in which, through his defiant despair, he becomes a self" (p. 17).

Frederick Douglass's autobiographical writing is insightful and articulates an inner examination of life that allows for present day reflection upon the spiritual dimensions of his life. Douglass describes to his reading audience his early childhood innocence of slavery's many forms of violation of its victim's very autonomy, and of the incidents that awoken him to the horrors of that very "peculiar institution." In his second autobiography, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, Douglass offers a recollection of his early childhood as surprisingly blissful: "In a word, he [the young Douglass] is, for the most part of the first eight years of his life, a spirited, joyous, uproarious, and happy boy, upon whom troubles fall only like water on a duck's back. And such a boy, so far as I can now remember, was the boy whose life in slavery I am now narrating."³ Doubts immediately arise about the accuracy of his accounting of his childhood, possibly to wonder if he is exaggerating his recollection to articulate the nature of how his awareness of his state of being a slave was introduced to him.

The profound emotional scarring caused by helplessly witnessing the brutal beating of his Aunt Hester by his owner is graphically described in all three of Douglass's autobiographies. In the *Narrative*, Douglass labeled that event as "the blood-stained gate, the entrance to a hell of slavery, through which I was about to pass. It was a most terrible spectacle. I wish I could commit to paper the feelings with which I beheld it."⁴ Douglass similarly describes the confusion and deep sense of loss when, as a seven-year-old child, he felt as though he had been abandoned without any warning by his principal caregiver, his grandmother Betsy Bailey, at the Wye House Plantation where his enslaver Aaron Anthony worked as head overseer-owner. Deeply wounded by this unfathomable loss, Douglass recalled crying himself that night to sleep, a "balm [that] was never more welcome to any wounded soul than it was to mine." Now acutely aware of the vulnerability of his situation, he labeled this incident "my first introduction to the realities of slavery."⁵

Douglass's self-reflecting capacity enabled him to develop an awareness, which permitted him to trust his inner voice and eventually have the fortitude to escape slavery. There are many examples of such noetic moments in which he describes his intuition, or a sense of his own destiny. Many times, he refers to these as Providence. These include his selection as a slave child to be sent to the Baltimore home of his master's brother-in-law, watching the ships sailing North on Chesapeake Bay, his victory in the well-known fight with Covey, the slave breaker, and his first attempt at escape in 1835. All of these numinous experiences contain transformational archetypal energies.

In 1826, the young Douglass, a slave on the Wye House Plantation on the Maryland Eastern Shore, was chosen by his owner's daughter, Lucretia Anthony Auld, to be sent to live in her brother-in-law, Hugh Auld's, household in Baltimore. In his *Narrative*, Douglass instead preferred to credit a higher power that defied human comprehension as responsible for his good fortune in line with numinous thinking. He wrote:

² See references for these authors.

³ *My Bondage and My Freedom. Douglass Papers*, ser. 2, 2:26. 26.

⁴ *Narrative. Douglass Papers*, ser. 2, 1:16.

⁵ *My Bondage and My Freedom. Douglass Papers*, ser. 2, 2:30.

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It is possible, and even quite probable, that but for the mere circumstance of being removed from that plantation to Baltimore, I should have to-day, instead of being here seated by my own table, in the enjoyment of freedom and the happiness of home, writing this *Narrative*, been confined in the galling chains of slavery. Going to live at Baltimore laid the foundation, and opened the gateway, to all my subsequent prosperity. I have ever regarded it as the first plain manifestation of that kind Providence which has ever since attended me, and marked my life with so many favors.⁶

Douglass clearly recognizes that his residence in Baltimore was essential to his gradual recognition of the possibility of a life outside the confines of slavery. In 1838, at twenty-years of age, he successfully emancipated himself by escaping to the North and opening the door to his full human potential. He ruminated further on whether his youth’s good fortune could be traced to divine intervention:

I may be deemed superstitious, and even egotistical, in regarding this event as a special interposition of divine Providence in my favor. But I should be false to the earliest sentiments of my soul, if I suppressed the opinion. I prefer to be true to myself, even at the hazard of incurring the ridicule of others, rather than to be false, and incur my own abhorrence. From my earliest recollection, I date the entertainment of a deep conviction that slavery would not always be able to hold me within its foul embrace; and in the darkest hours of my career in slavery, this living word of faith and spirit of hope departed not from me, but remained like ministering angels to cheer me through the gloom. This good spirit was from God, and to him I offer thanksgiving and praise.⁷

One of the most oft-quoted passages in Douglass’s *Narrative*, one that is lyrically expressed so well that he also quoted it verbatim in his later two autobiographies: Douglass recalls sitting brooding along the shores of the Chesapeake Bay, having been sent back to the Eastern Shore from Baltimore to be trained more effectively in his role as a slave. He observes sailing ships passing on their way northward and experienced what can be labeled a significant numinous experience. Numinous experience is both a pathway to divine intervention and an opening to the divine by virtue of its position to experience. Again, in Douglass own words:

My thoughts would compel utterance; and there, with no audience but the Almighty, I would pour out my soul's complaint, in my rude way, with an apostrophe to the moving multitude of ships:—You are loosed from your moorings, and are free; I am fast in my chains, and am a slave! You move merrily before the gentle gale, and I sadly before the bloody whip! You are freedom's swift-winged angels, that fly round the world; I am confined in bands of iron! O that I were free! O, that I were on one of your gallant decks, and under your protecting wing! Alas! betwixt me and you, the turbid waters roll. Go on, go on. O that I could also go! Could I but swim! If I could fly! O, why was I born a man, of whom to make a

⁶ *Narrative. Douglass Papers*, ser. 2, 1:30.

⁷ *Narrative. Douglass Papers*, ser. 2, 1:30.

brute! The glad ship is gone; she hides in the dim distance. I am left in the hottest hell of unending slavery.⁸

Douglass was in a state of deep despair at having been returned from Baltimore to rural Talbot County, Maryland. He could not adjust to the expectations of his owner Thomas Auld, who had inherited Douglass on the death of his wife, the more benevolent Lucretia Anthony Auld. Seeking to have Douglass accept his status as a slave, Auld hired him out to a local White farmer, Edward Covey, who maintained a reputation as a “slave-breaker.” Douglass was placed under the total control of Covey, who had acquired a significant measure of cunning insight into methods of breaking down the self-worth and any sense of independence in the slaves placed in his charge. Douglass recounts how within six months Covey had left him, according to the *Narrative*, “wearied in body and broken in spirit”⁹ and, as described in *My Bondage and My Freedom*, “humbled, degraded, broken-down, enslaved, and brutalized.”¹⁰ In an epic battle inside a farm barn with Covey, the young slave successfully resisted all efforts by the slave-breaker to whip him. This fight was a truly transformative experience for sixteen-year-old Douglass.

This was Douglass at his absolute low point as a slave and as a human being, but his numinous “resurrection” was at hand, which typifies the way in which archetypal energies in the unconsciousness manifest into awareness as intuition. Jacobi (1959), a student of Jung’s, similarly describes these as “phenomena, sometimes interpreted as ‘miracles’ and sometimes as ‘pure chance,’ in which inner perceptions (forebodings, visions, dreams, etc.) show a meaningful simultaneity with outward experiences” (p. 62). Jung (1960) describes these occurrences as synchronicity—as being “meaningful coincidences . . . that seem to rest on an archetypal foundation” (para. 846). Jung’s meaningful coincidences of synchronicity is illustrated by Douglass’s belief that Providence guided his life’s trajectory. Jung says in his work *Synchronicity* (1960) that one category of events that he calls “synchronistic” is a “psychic state with a corresponding, not yet existent future event that is distant in time and can likewise only be verified afterward” (para. 984). Douglass frequently refers to believing as though he was meant to be free and recalls moments of insight into his enslaved condition, which he describes throughout his autobiographies. Douglass reflects upon the role of Providence that guided him during his pivotal fight with Covey the slave-breaker quite similarly in each autobiography, but in no place better than in the *Narrative*, the account closest to the actual event:

This battle with Mr. Covey was the turning-point in my career as a slave. It rekindled the few expiring embers of freedom, and revived within me a sense of my own manhood. It recalled the departed self-confidence, and inspired me again with a determination to be free. I felt as I never felt before. 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.¹¹

⁸ *Narrative. Douglass Papers*, ser. 2, 1:49-50. Quoted in *My Bondage and My Freedom. Douglass Papers*, ser. 2, 3:98.

⁹ *Narrative. Douglass Papers*, ser. 2, 1:52.

¹⁰ *My Bondage and My Freedom. Douglass Papers*, ser. 2, 2:127–28.

¹¹ *Narrative. Douglass Papers*, ser. 2, 1:54. See also *My Bondage and My Freedom. Douglass Papers*, ser. 2, 2:141.

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The reasons that Douglass did not collapse in fear when confronted with Covey, and instead contemplated freedom is elaborated upon by Yancy (2002) who argues essentially that because Douglass forgot the color of the slave-breaker Covey when he was fighting him, that “Douglass was no longer fearful of (or seduced) by whiteness” (p. 311). Douglass simultaneously seems to have lost the fear of death. Yancy argues, that via “his act of challenging Covey’s white authority, Douglass is living the existential credo that one *becomes* a human being . . . realize[s] that the price of his ontological freedom is death; for he refuses to be treated as an object” (pp. 310–11). Douglass does more than exist, he is his existence. The temporary loss of the fear of death gave him the power for self-definition. He felt imbued with a sense of empowerment that allowed him to become free of his fear of the slaveholder and, in fighting for his life, became the one who held power over his life, not the slaveocracy.

Douglass describes his thoughts turning to the possibility of freedom in 1835, following his fight with Covey, a year-and-a-half before he will be sent to Baltimore once again, and finally escapes from bondage. In the *Narrative* he writes: “On the one hand, there stood slavery, a stern reality, glaring frightfully, —its robes already crimsoned with the blood of millions, and even now feasting itself greedily upon our own flesh period. On the other hand, a way back in the dim distance, under the flickering light of the north star, behind some craggy hill or snow-covered mountain, stood a doubtful freedom—half-frozen—beckoning us to come and share its hospitality.”¹²

Douglass’s desire for freedom was justifiably immeasurable. His feelings and thoughts about selfhood can be understood from a Jungian framework in which individuation, reflects themes related to the idea of God in Douglass’s autobiographies. Individuation is a process of making unconscious factors conscious that is bounded by archetypal structure. As the archetype of the Self becomes “perceptible to the conscious mind” like Douglass’s premonitions of freedom, there is an “*introspectively recognizable form of a priori psychic orderedness*” that Jungian Jacobi (1959) explains as the primary principle that organized psychic structure according to Jung (p.64). The Self has an integrating tendency that organizes “a process of psychic development that aims at the broadening of the field of consciousness and a maturation of the personality . . . which appear regularly in the material of the unconscious, e.g., in dreams, visions, fantasies, and which compel the individual to come to terms with them” (1959, p. 133). Reading Douglass’s autobiographies, one can imagine how his lifelong intuition of his destiny to be free influenced the actions he recounts, as theses seemed to be pushing him forward to make choices that were inevitable and would result in freedom.

The concept of numinous encounters sheds light on Frederick Douglass’s psychological development as he emerged from slavery and became one of the nation’s leading champions of emancipation and civil rights. His search for selfhood impacted his religiosity and shaped his views on slavery and abolitionism. This is especially evident in his body of work produced over the course of his lifetime as he continued to develop his thoughts regarding the abuse of fundamental Christian principles in the “slave-holder’s religion.”¹³ His autobiographies and many speeches contain not only scathing criticism of the hypocrisy of this religious mind-set, but also numinous

¹² *Narrative. Douglass Papers*, ser. 2, 1:64

¹³ Some examples of numinosity in Douglass’s antislavery oratory include *Douglass Papers*, ser. I, 1:35; 2:482; 3:169; 3:463; *Douglass Papers*, ser. 2, 3:429.

encounters indicated by his sense of destiny and relationship to “providence.”¹⁴ Douglass’s being seemed to draw upon an inner reservoir of wisdom that was on full display in his eloquent and powerful oratory, and that guided him until death in 1895 between speaking engagements at a woman’s rights convention. In his final moments his last breath was drawn not for just himself but for all of humanity, and his timeless message of freedom and equality continues to resonate for all of us.

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¹⁴ This brief article suggests that scholars can gain more insight into Douglass’s subjective experience by examining the ways that the numinous interconnection of significant turning points in his life influenced his perception of the meaning of human freedom.

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