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September 15, 2010

Giants by John Stauffer

A Book Review

Published in 2008, John Stauffer's book, Giants: The Parallel lives of Frederick Douglass and Abraham Lincoln, makes some striking comparisons between the two men ranging from the physical to the philosophical. Stauffer allows the reader to see these similarities by alternating detailed descriptions of the stages in both men's lives. The format allows the reader to see clearly how both Douglass and Lincoln were continually reinventing themselves in a variety of ways.

One might not immediately think to compare Lincoln and Douglass' physical appearance, but it is worth noting that both men were large and tall relative to the time period in which they lived. Both men used their size and strength throughout their lives to help shape who they became later in life. Lincoln gained respect and admiration for his physical prowess as a fighter in 'rough and tumbles', a popular pastime of the era. Stauffer details the ways in which Lincoln used his intellect to avoid physical conflict, as well as to keep the brawls fair. This ability earned him great respect. Similarly, Douglass' very physical confrontations as a young man shaped who he would become later in life as a self-described agitator. In one such altercation between Douglass and his master, Edward Covey, Douglass resolved to fight back if Covey beat him

again. While Douglass was bigger and stronger and could have killed Covey, he did not, resolving to only defend himself and his dignity in the battle. Additionally, both men reinvented their appearance later in life, Lincoln by growing a beard to soften his appearance somewhat, and Douglass by growing his hair out and growing a goatee, altering his appearance as did many radical intellectuals of the time.

One of the most striking examples of how both Lincoln and Douglass reinvented themselves philosophically involves a dramatic shift in thinking for both men. Douglass changed his perspective on the Constitution, and thus his strategy regarding the abolition of slavery in the early 1850's. In his early days as an abolitionist, Douglass regarded the Constitution as a pro-slavery document and believed that participating in a government with such a racist document at its core was wrong. Eventually Douglass reinvented himself as an abolitionist, reframing the Constitution as an anti-slavery document, noting that slavery was never once directly addressed by the framers. He began instead to work toward abolition within the bounds of the Constitution through amendment.

Lincoln also shifted his thinking regarding the abolition of slavery. Stauffer writes that Lincoln eventually began to change his views about emancipation after the death of his son Willie in February, 1862. Lincoln, struck by the number of casualties of the war and the vast numbers of mourning parents, began to see emancipation as a way to save the Union and end the war. In the shift, Lincoln claimed that he was relying "upon the Divine arm, and seeking light from above." By March of 1862 Lincoln had written his first proposal for the gradual abolishment of slavery.

This shift in Lincoln's perspective was foreshadowed by a similar reversal in March, 1857. In Lincoln's first public addresses twenty years earlier, straight through to his campaign

speeches for Republican Jessie Fremont in 1856, Lincoln asserted that he favored 'man-made laws' of the Constitution over 'higher law', guided by morality or religion. He believed that the Supreme Court settled legal questions and that the Court's rulings were "supreme law" by which Congress and the president must abide. With the Dred Scott decision in 1857, Lincoln began to rely more on 'higher law' in his arguments, insisting that the Court did not understand that slavery was "an evil that needed to be contained", and that he would do what he could to see that the decision was overturned. This willingness to overturn the Court was in direct conflict with the beliefs upon which Lincoln had long campaigned.

In addition to the physical similarities and both men's ability to re-invent themselves, there are similarities in Lincoln's and Douglass' personal lives. Both men married women who were in a social class above their own. Both marriages had enormous impact upon the men's success. Finally, both men had intimate connections with other people which seemed more significant than their relationship with their spouses.

Douglass' wife, Anna Murray, was a free woman in Maryland and it was her freedom and money that helped Douglass to escape slavery. Both she and Douglass were accomplished musicians and connected mostly over music and their children, but not much else. Anna remained devoted to Douglass throughout their 44 years of marriage, but was often lonely and left to raise the children alone as Douglass pursued his career. Douglass had a close friendship with Julia Griffiths which is often speculated to have been romantic in nature. However, there is little evidence to support a physical relationship between the two. There are some accounts that Anna was jealous of Julia. Later in life, Douglass had an intimate friendship with Otilie Assing. While Douglass wrote little about their friendship, Assing wrote a great deal of their love for one another and they did spend large amounts of time together.

Douglass had a long-lasting marriage which seemed more practical than passionate and in this way, he and Lincoln were similar. Lincoln, who was first engaged to 2 other women, married Mary Todd in 1842. Mary was ambitious, having said more than once that she intended to marry a future president. Undoubtedly, Lincoln's political career accelerated after their wedding. The most intimate feelings Lincoln expresses, however, are about his friend Joshua Speed. These feelings are confirmed in the writings of Speed as well as Lincoln's son, Robert Todd. As with Douglass, there is little evidence to suggest a physical relationship, but the emotional intimacy between the two is well-documented. Based on the information presented by Stauffer, both marriages seem to be more practical than romantic in nature.

Stauffer's book is well-conceived and well-supported with historical information. The number of parallels between the two men's lives are striking. The author did well to lay out the many phases of these two historical figures' lives and allow the reader to draw the comparisons on their own. Little time was spent blatantly pointing out the many areas of overlap in their paths to greatness, and this is largely why I liked the book.

While the author was successful in laying out the facts which allow the reader to conclude how the men were similar, I would have liked to have read more about how the differences in their lives contributed to their philosophical similarities and differences. For example, the author points out that Lincoln was 'enslaved' in a sense by the laws of the time that required him to turn over his wages to his father and his father's willingness to rent him out much as one would rent out a slave. While this bears some resemblance to Douglass' upbringing, one cannot understate the difference between being raised a slave and being raised to be a free white man. As I read, I speculated often about how their formative childhood years impacted Lincoln's drive to compromise and Douglass' drive to agitate. I wondered how much Douglass' race and

standing allowed him the freedom to bloom into an uncompromising, outspoken abolitionist.

Conversely, I wondered about the ways in which Lincoln's political and social positions required him to temper his abolitionist beliefs. Was Lincoln a great compromiser because of the mix of adversity and privilege in his life? How much did the men re-invent themselves and how much did they keep hidden from public view for political gain? I would have liked Stauffer to examine some of these questions in his book.

Reading Giants has prompted me to explore the similarities and differences between the men with my fifth grade students. We are being encouraged in my district to spend more time encouraging students' critical thinking skills with compare/contrast activities in the area of English/Language Arts (ELA), while time spent on social sciences continues to be cut. This topic would allow me to address the letter of the directive of the district to spend time on compare/contrast activities in ELA, while also teaching my students about two compelling historical figures. To this end, I have begun to write a short biographical passage about each man. Both passages are written at a fourth or fifth grade level. I plan to encourage my students to use graphic organizers such as Venn Diagrams to think about how the men are alike and different. Through taking this course, and reading this book, I have found discovered a wealth of information that I may use during ELA activities which will support reading skills while teaching history. Reading Giants by John Stauffer was certainly an integral part of enriching the curriculum for my students.