

# PAVING THE PATH TO THE FUTURE BY LESSONS FROM JOSIAH HENSON

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The adolescent black community of the 21st century has faced immense tribulation as it can be said that the worth of black lives has been forgotten. By forgetting our history, black youth have become susceptible to conforming to demeaning stereotypes of what it means to be “black”. In order to grasp the true depth of our identity, we must look to the astounding achievements of black Canadians over the past 150 years. With unwavering tenacity, our ancestors shaped history thus, by following their tremendous examples, we too will be able to shape the future for generations to come. Figures such as Josiah Henson teach us the importance of non-conformity and the essentiality of cooperation.

Having been born and raised a slave, Henson was expected to live an unfulfilling life of staunch submission to his master, however, his refusal to accept his identity as an undignified slave motivated him to seek freedom (Historica Canada). Upon arriving in Upper Canada, with the assistance of other abolitionists, he set out to provide refugees of slavery with the education and skills required to become self-sufficient (Ontario Heritage Trust, 2016). Thus, he established the Dawn Settlement, a community whose primary focus was allowing black Canadians to realize their full potential (Ontario Heritage Trust, 2016). Henson defied all odds by co-founding the British American Institute, which honoured his mandate to “cultivate the entire being, and elicit the fairest and fullest possible development of the physical, intellectual, and moral powers” (Ontario Heritage Trust, 2016).

Thus Henson’s endeavour to educate black Canadians teaches us the importance of not conforming to the societal ideals of what it means to be black. His ambitious actions reveal the necessity of refusing to submit oneself to belittling expectations imposed by a racist society. As a black man in the 1800s, he would have been expected to be simple-minded, docile, and reliant upon his master, yet Henson was a defiant, trailblazing leader.

The emphasis he placed on the intellectual abilities of black minds broke the mold and pushed the boundaries of how black people were viewed by others, and themselves. His efforts to educate the black community are an essential lesson that many young people of this generation must learn from. Black youth often acquiesce to the demeaning stereotypes that plague our community, telling us that we are less intelligent than others and cannot succeed intellectually past a certain point. It is not uncommon for black males, who are frequently marginalized, to negate the significance of education by disregarding school to get involved in drugs, hustling, and street culture. Eighty-seven black males recently told the Peel District School board that their “non-black teachers and peers [...] didn’t expect them to succeed academically” and “had lower expectations for their careers” (Gordon, 2016). The combination of indifference towards education and lack of support has resulted in a massive number of unambitious black youth who are prone to criminal activity, failing grades, and a life that inhibits one’s true potential. In this way, Henson’s contribution to the education of black Canadians encourages us to challenge the notion of what it means to be black by redefining our identity as intelligent, visionary individuals.

Furthermore, Henson’s creation of the Dawn Settlement reveals the essentiality of cooperation in order for the black community to thrive. The black community is commonly described as being unsupportive of one another as social media often depicts black youth as incendiary forces who fight against and slander their fellow black brother or sister. Moreover, black youth perpetuate colourism by playing into narratives that degrade individuals with a darker complexion. Black students are often the most oppressive forces against black students. Thus Henson’s ideologies of the importance of supporting one’s community is an imperative concept that black youth have been slow to grasp. For this reason, I became greatly involved in our school’s Black Society Club, which is a club that aims to create a stronger sense of unity amongst our school’s black population by empowering one other to respect the dignity of ourselves and others.

For we will only thrive when black youth realize that we are not our enemy and aim to obliterate the stigmas that plague our community. If our ancestors, such as Josiah Henson, were able to overcome slavery and persecution by valuing education and working together to free themselves from the limitations imposed on them by racist ideologies, what is to say that black youth cannot pave a brighter path for future generations to come by doing the same?



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