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“Gentle Student Bend Thine Ear To My Speech”  
An Essay About Sojourner  
Truth, Abolitionist and Feminist

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*Sojourner Truth provides a powerful model of advocacy for the social work profession. This paper offers an analysis of this important historical figure that centers around the implications of being a doubly oppressed minority. An analysis of the nineteenth century chattel slavery system sets the stage for understanding the social environment. A brief biography of her life and evolution from enslaved chattel to feminist activist will highlight her social, spiritual, and personal development. Her philosophy, which is compatible with the modern feminist movement, is outlined by an analysis of her speeches.*

Sojourner Truth is listed in most every reference book highlighting notable African-Americans. Historians agree that she played an important role in nineteenth century American history; however, the majority of data available do not analyze the implications and motivations of her work. This lack of scholarly research combined with the illiteracy of the subject presents a special challenge in writing this intellectual biography. Due to the virtual absence of personal papers, the writer must depend upon the accuracy of dictated narratives to which writers have added their own interpretations. The most valuable insight into this important historical figure's life comes from transcripts of her speeches. “Gentle student bend thine ear to my speech”, the title of this essay, are Sojourner Truth's words also chosen to title the 1853 version of her narrative.

Sojourner Truth demands the attention of social work researchers and historians because of her monumental accomplishments and her status as an enslaved African-American woman. Social work exists to serve oppressed groups and So-

journer represents two of the most brutally oppressed groups in our nation's history: African-Americans and Women. Both groups have been denied basic human rights by the United States Constitution. In spite of the legalized institutional discrimination she faced, Sojourner Truth had an impact upon her peers as well as those in power. It is the responsibility of the social work researcher to give serious attention to oppressed groups that have been virtually ignored in mainstream American history. To limit intellectual biographies only to those well educated scholars who left behind reams of papers would leave a huge gap in our knowledge of social history. Furthermore, social workers must understand the historical circumstances of oppressed groups in order to evaluate current conditions accurately. According to Painter (1990, p. 14), it would be unethical to "cede biography to subjects who had resources enough to secure . . . educations".

Sojourner Truth is a mainstream historical figure in the limited scope allowed to minorities. There are several juvenile biographies written about her and she makes regular appearances in school curriculums and in mainstream publications during Black history month. Fictionalized accounts of her life are "stylized and sanitized" (Painter, 1990, p. 13) and do not offer in depth analysis. The Women's Movement has seized the title of Truth's famous 1851 "Ain't I A Woman?" speech (Truth, 1851) and the phrase is seen throughout feminist writings; however, critical analysis of the speech is rare. This paper will attempt to capture the dichotomy of Sojourner Truth both as an African-American and as a Woman. Sojourner Truth, the abolitionist and the feminist, provided a model for advocacy which is yet unrivaled. If either perspective is omitted, the depth of understanding is compromised (Lerner, 1990).

This paper will analyze social conditions, document Sojourner's life, and examine her philosophy. An examination of the chattel slavery system and the legal status of women set the stage for understanding the social forces of nineteenth century America. A brief biography of her life and evolution from enslaved chattel to feminist activist will highlight her social, spiritual, and personal development.

### Historical Context

Sojourner Truth was born with the name Isabella to her parents, James and Elizabeth, in Ulster County, New York around 1797. The chattel slavery system did not recognize marriage in the slave community; hence, few records were maintained about the social lives of slaves making it difficult to determine surnames and to establish birth and death dates. When Isabella was freed in 1826, she took the surname of her last owner, Van Wagenen.

The New York State slave system, in which Sojourner Truth lived, differed considerably from the better known southern plantation system. Yet, New York had the largest slave system of the northern United States. The unique role of the urban slave had a definite Roman-Dutch origin. Shortly after the Dutch settled in what was then called New Netherlands, the West India Trading Company began importing slave labor to build the colonial economic system. The first slaves were imported in 1626. The early slaves included white indentured servants, imported African slaves, and enslaved Native Americans. Slaves maintained the stability of the labor force and played an "important role in transforming a shaky Dutch trading post into a rich and powerful state" (McManus, 1966, p. ix). The Dutch slave system was, nonetheless, an ill-defined economic system. Not all Africans were slaves and those who were free had some legal rights. There was a system of "half freedom" in which the slave agreed to provide labor but had the rights of a free person. Whatever form the enslavement took, the primary goal of the system was to insure an adequate labor force. The system came under English control in 1664 and by 1679, white indentured servitude was limited, Indian slavery was prohibited, and slavery was exclusively limited to those of African descent (McManus 1966).

Even though Isabella lived in what was considered the more "humane" chattel slavery system, her life was threatened and her potential was severely limited. Isabella, the youngest of ten to twelve children, lived in the cellar of a hotel with her parents. They lived in one room and slept on the floor. By the time she

was nine years old, only Isabella and one brother remained with her parents. The other children had been sold. Her mother often recalled the sad story of her five and three year old children being sold on the same day. Children were considered an asset as long as they contributed labor. However, too many children limited the labor of the mother, Truth (1853) recalled.

After the death of her master, at age nine, Isabella was sold for one hundred dollars. Her elderly parents, too frail to go to market, were released to fend for themselves. This common practice relieved the master of obligations to the elderly slave. When her father died, his former master gave him a "good funeral" which consisted of a painted coffin and a jug of whiskey for the family. This was the slave's reward for a lifetime of faithful service in a "humane" slave system (Truth, 1853).

Isabella did not fully perceive the blatant injustice of her situation since the slave's intellect was systematically "crushed out" (Truth, 1853). Education was not allowed for slaves and their perceptions were limited to what could be seen and heard. Abstract thought was difficult if not impossible for Isabella. Throughout her life, Isabella believed that in order for God to hear her prayers, they must be audible. She had no conception of time. She thought that God was a man that looked like George Washington and that when she found Jesus he would visit her at her home. It was a great realization to her when she was able to conceptualize her spirituality. She held no animosity towards her oppressors since her mother taught her that being loyal to her master was being true to God (Truth, 1853), a belief that was reinforced by the slavery system. While the system of northern slavery has been historically documented as relatively humane, basic principles of brainwashing existed to reinforce the system and to create in the slave a "false consciousness" not unlike their southern counterparts.

The brutal realities of the chattel slavery system are virtually inconceivable to the modern reader. The vocabulary used in writings of the time illustrate this point. Women of child bearing age were called "breeders." Masters would "drive" the slaves to market. A slave that was maimed or injured was in debt to the master for lost labor. Essentially, there was no part of this system that treated slaves as human beings (Truth 1853).

In addition to the status of enslaved Blacks, the status of women was a hotly debated topic of the mid-nineteenth century (Hole & Levine, 1971, p. 452). The leaders of the Women's Movement were well known, if not respected. Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton organized the first Women's Convention in 1848. This was the first public declaration of the Women's Suffrage Movement. Prior to this convention, the major focus of the movement was on broadening women's severely limited educational opportunities and increasing their economic independence. Women were not allowed to vote or to own property. Wives were considered the property of their husbands. In the event of the death of a woman's husband, his estate went to his closest surviving male relative. Constitutional rights did not extend to women, who were locked out of social and political systems. The leaders of the Women's Movement realized that the key to power was through politics and focused their efforts on gaining the right to vote (Hole & Levine, p. 1971, Stanton, 1884).

Most female activists treated the Women's Movement and the Abolitionist Movement as two separate issues. Often, Susan B. Anthony would speak on women's rights in the morning and advocate for the abolitionist cause in the afternoon. The Women's Movement consisted primarily of White, middle-class women. The abolitionist movement was dominated by Black men. Sojourner Truth, however, recognized that the two issues were inseparable and managed to combine them, breaking the racial and gender barriers of both social movements.

Truth has been described as the "nexus connecting the abolition and feminist movements" (Bernard, 1967, p. 7). She was a part of ardent women's rights supporters who opposed the suspension of the Women's Movement after the Civil War. Leaders in the movement felt that the abolitionist cause was the greater need and abandoned women's suffrage. According to Truth, "If colored men get their rights and not colored women theirs, you see the colored men will be masters over the women and it will be just as bad as it was before" (Truth, 1867). Even though she was illiterate, Sojourner Truth had insight that is still the subject of sophisticated research linking sexism and racism (Truth, 1851a; Beauvoir 1952; Hooks, 1984).

### The Life of Isabella

Between the ages of nine and eleven, Isabella experienced the most brutal side of slavery. Following her master's death, she was sold to the Neely family. Speaking Dutch as a primary language, she could not understand the instructions of her English speaking master. The Neelys, ignorant of the language barrier, thought Isabella was deliberately disobeying and she was beaten frequently. Using the informal communication network of freed slaves, Isabella's father arranged for her to be sold. She was purchased, along with a herd of sheep, by John Dumont for seventy-dollars. She was owned by the Dumonts until she gained her freedom in 1827 (Truth, 1853).

Eventually, Isabella married a slave named Thomas and had five children. Thomas was not a part of Isabella's life after she left the Dumonts and it is believed that he died shortly after she gained her freedom (Truth, 1853).

Isabella's spirituality evolved during her years with the Dumonts. In her narrative, she recalled the moment when she realized that God was omnipresent. She was scrubbing the sidewalk and looked up and said "Oh God! I did not know you was so big" (Truth, 1853, p. 66). This was an important event in her spiritual development that would eventually lead to her life as an itinerant preacher.

In 1817, New York state passed legislation that would grant freedom to all slaves ten years later. Isabella had an agreement with John Dumont that she would be freed one year early in 1826. However, she injured her hand and he refused to free her as he had agreed. He reasoned that, due to her injury, she had not contributed enough labor. After several months, Isabella left her owner of 17 years. She moved in with a Quaker family, the Van Wagenens, who had purchased her services for one year.

While she was with the Van Wagenens, Isabella learned that her son, Peter, had been sold to a plantation owner in Alabama. It was illegal to sell slaves across state lines and Isabella was determined to bring her son back to New York. The Van Wagenens helped her negotiate the court system and she successfully brought Peter home. Following her emancipation, Isabella stayed with the Van Wagenens until 1828 when she and Peter moved to New York City.

In New York, Isabella worked as household help for Elijah Pierson. Peter, who was constantly in trouble with the law, joined a merchant sailing vessel. During her time with Pierson, Isabella met Robert Matthews, whom she thought was Jesus Christ. Matthews, founder of the Matthias movement and a friend of Pierson, introduced Isabella to his religious sect. This massive religious movement lasted from the late eighteenth century until the late 1830's (Painter, 1990). The specific beliefs of the group are not well documented but there were strict behavior guidelines that had Calvinistic roots (Painter, 1990; Vale, 1835).

Matthews and Pierson established a religious commune in Sing Sing. Isabella joined the group as a full member, though she was responsible for most of the domestic duties. Following the mysterious death of Pierson at the commune, the Mathias movement dissolved. Although Isabella was suspected in Pierson's poisoning death, she had a powerful ally in Gilbert Vale, a journalist, who published a book about fanaticism that cleared her name (Vale, 1835). She then moved back to New York City and resumed her life as a household worker.

In 1843, Isabella had a religious vision that changed the direction of her life. In this vision, God told her to change her name to Sojourner and lecture people to "embrace Jesus and refrain from sin" (Truth, 1853, p. 98). Sojourner means temporary visitor, and she chose her last name because she would be a temporary visitor speaking the truth. Through her experience at Sing Sing, Sojourner gained understanding of the spiritual realm. She joined an established network of Quaker and Methodist women who traveled the country preaching the message of God. These women, denied positions within their traditional churches, formed their own itinerant movement (Painter, 1990; Smith, 1992).

Sojourner left New York and traveled the northeast. She stayed in taverns and various homes. She lectured at camp meetings and impromptu gatherings. She published her narrative in 1850 and sold copies at her lectures to support herself. While in Massachusetts, she became associated with yet another commune that would further change her life (Smith, 1992; Smythe 1976).



The Northampton Association was a commune of middle-class intellectual reformers who believed in racial and gender equality. It was at Northampton that Sojourner was introduced to the abolitionist and the women's movements. The commune was founded by George W. Benson who was a relative of William Lloyd Garrison. Garrison, a powerful and influential abolitionist, published an anti-slavery newspaper called the *Boston Liberator*. Frederick Douglass, another influential abolitionist and women's rights supporter, was a frequent visitor. Northampton exposed Sojourner to progressive, liberal political ideas. After her association with Northampton, her message became less religious and more political. Following the demise of the Northampton Association in 1846, Sojourner lived in the Bensons' household as she continued her lectures (Painter, 1990).

Sojourner Truth managed to break down the racial and gender barriers that existed in both the abolitionist and women's movements. The Abolitionist Movement, dominated by men, forbade women to attend the early meetings. One of Sojourner's famous lines, "Frederick, is God Dead?" was boldly spoken at an abolitionist meeting. Frederick Douglass was discussing the inevitable violence of Civil War when Sojourner interceded with her question (Truth, 1851d). The Women's Movement was made up of educated middle-class White women. Sojourner was the only Black woman present at the first Women's Convention in 1848. Her most famous speech, "Ain't I A Woman", was delivered at the Women's Convention of 1851. Sojourner Truth challenged the barriers and succeeded in being heard.

Having honed her oratorical skills as a preacher, Sojourner was a speaker who could "bear down a whole audience with a few simple words" (Stowe, 1863, p. 30). Her commanding figure and dignified manner challenged her listeners. Stowe described her as having a strong presence and an air of self confidence and ease. Her tall figure and Quaker style of dress added to her mystique.

Sojourner joined her fellow reformists after the Civil War and focused her attention on the newly freed slaves. She spent several years at the Freedman's Village in Washington, D.C. before returning to her home in Battle Creek, Michigan in 1875.

Over thirty-five years had passed since the "temporary visitor" left New York to begin her life as an activist. Her health was failing and her lectures had come to an end. She would not live to see women get the right to vote. Her work was not finished when she died in 1883 and it is still not finished one hundred years later. Sojourner Truth's simple words still serve as an inspiration for modern activists.

### Sojourner's Philosophy

Sojourner Truth's speeches are very brief yet her simple words carried powerful messages. Her speeches were mostly extemporaneous yet her insight and wisdom inspired her audiences.

Beginning with her "Ain't I A Woman Speech" in 1851, excerpts from her speeches will be examined for insight and modern implications. The reader will note that much of her philosophy is compatible with the modern feminist movement.

In 1851, Frances Gage, president of the Women's Convention, ignored protests from the audience and allowed Sojourner Truth to speak. The speakers preceding Sojourner were ministers of various faiths who claimed that men were superior to women and pointed to the fact that Jesus was a man to prove their point. The white middle-class women sat in stunned silence. No one dared challenge the ministers words. Unscathed by previous speakers, Sojourner Truth came to the podium and began her speech by posing the famous question, "Ain't I A Woman?" She proceeded to say that as a Black woman, "nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place! And ain't I a woman?" (Truth, 1851b). The fact that Black women were, and are still, excluded from the Women's Movement is an issue that is still debated within the modern feminist movement. Bell Hooks, along with other feminist writers, questions the White middle class domination of the feminist movement. Hooks asserts that "racism abounds in the writings of white feminists" and that feminist theory is based on the "plight of a select group of college-educated middle and upper class, married women" (Hooks, 1990, p. 33).

Sojourner also covered the topic of comparable worth with the following statement: "They talk about this thing in the head . . . intellect . . . What's that got to do with women's rights or negro's rights? If my cup won't hold but a pint, and yours holds a quart, wouldn't you be mean not to let me have my little half- measure full?" (Truth, 1851b). Modern feminists are demanding that the wage gap be narrowed between men and women by applying the principles of comparable worth. Simply stated, comparable worth values the work of women and allows both men and women to work to their fullest potential.

Finally, Sojourner had an answer for the minister who felt that women were inferior because Jesus was a man. Her answer to him was in the form of a question: "Where did your Christ come from? . . . From God and a Woman. Man had nothing to do with Him" (Truth, 1851b). Thus, Sojourner Truth in one simple sentence challenges the sexism of traditional religion. Mary Daly (1990), a radical feminist philosopher, has a similar quote: "As long as God is a man, men will strut around like gods."

Sojourner Truth defined her role in the Women's Movement as the catalyst, or the "one who stirs things up". She describes black women as being "thrown down so low that nobody thought we'd ever get up again; but we have been long enough trodden now; we will come up again and now I am here" (Truth, 1853b). She always stressed her role as a doubly oppressed minority and she spoke out when the movement lost its focus. She said, "I am sittin' among you to watch; and every once and awhile I will come out and tell you what time of night it is" (Truth, 1853).

Throughout her speaking career, Sojourner recounted her slave experience. Her powerful words captured the attention of her audience. As reported in the *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, "surely if there were any present whose hearts failed to beat in sympathy with her remarks, they must be a good distance from the kingdom of heaven" (July 11, 1863). She stated that "the evils of slavery could not be spoken, they could only be felt" (*National Anti-Slavery Standard* December 17, 1864). She had a unique perspective on the impact of change on the powerful group. She understood that "it is hard for one who has

held the reins for so long to give up; it cuts like a knife" (Truth, 1867). She had a perspective on the dynamics of oppression that many modern theorists lack.

### Conclusion

Sojourner Truth's contribution to modern social work practice is two fold. First, she highlights the characteristics and implications of being a member of an oppressed group. Social workers must understand the history and culture of the oppressed groups with whom they work. Appreciating the struggles of African-Americans and understanding the oppression of women are critical elements of the social work value system. Secondly, Sojourner Truth provides a model of advocacy. Many times she was the only voice speaking on behalf of women but that did not stop her from speaking. Social workers, too, must make their voices heard when others are afraid to speak.

Sojourner Truth was a woman of few words but when she spoke her words were powerful. Her words were simple and her speeches brief but her insight was exceptional. Harriet Beecher Stowe, like most others, recognized Truth's greatness and wrote, "I do not recollect ever to have been conversant with any one who had more of that silent and subtle power which we call personal presence" (1863, 23). That personal presence transcends time and continues to enlighten all who read her words.

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