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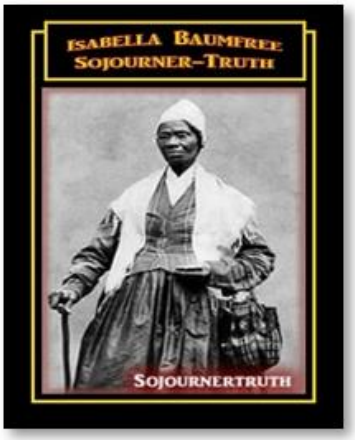
By Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence
Dr. Andrew Roth

Jack Gilbert



Who was Sojourner Truth?

Assuming you know who she was to begin with, the answer to that question is more complex than you might imagine.

If you don't know who Sojourner Truth was, well, she was a woman more than worth your knowing.

You'll recall that the subject of women's rights and the rights of African Americans feature prominently in my ***The American Tapestry Project***, the radio and podcast version of which can be found here, and on other podcast sites. In addition, I've explored "Freedom's Faultlines: Tales of Race and Gender" in previous ***Book Notes*** and in a number of programs at the Jefferson Educational Society and elsewhere. Last year, I examined the issue of women's rights in the "Sports and the Quest for Women's Rights" segment of "Americans and Their Games: Sports in American History and Culture" series; just this past March I surveyed "The Birth of the Women's Movement: 19th Century Women Who Challenged Their Times and Shaped the Future."

You'll recall that the prime movers and creators of the 19th century women's movement were overwhelmingly middle class and upper-middle class white women. Many were upper class. They bristled at being confined to the *Home*. But there were also working-class women in the textile mills of New England who fought for fair wages and better working conditions. Not so philosophically inclined, they were more pragmatic and concerned with the nitty-gritty of just surviving.

And then there were the enslaved women who had no voice until one escaped. Actually, more than one escaped, but most of the others disappeared into the tapestry of America's many stories subsumed by the image of Sojourner Truth, who gave both enslaved women and working-class women of all hues their voice in the women's movement.

Today, we'd say Sojourner Truth represents intersectionality – the intersection of multiple variables illustrating a common reality. She'd have intuitively grasped what we mean, but she'd prefer, I think, to say she stood for simple justice – the right of everyone to freedom, equality, and opportunity – the "American Trinity" – and the right of everyone to be treated with dignity and respect.

Simple, actually.

Simple, however, Sojourner Truth was not.

She was an unlettered woman, but a woman with a deep and innate understanding of marketing and self-promotion. As Nell Irvin Painter said, "Sojourner Truth, the itinerant preacher, created and marketed the persona of a charismatic woman who had been a slave, and it is precisely through her

marketing of herself, or, as she put it, her selling the shadow to support her substance, her name is known to us today." [1]

In short, Sojourner Truth, was a promotional genius. She used her genius to secure her own survival in a dangerous world and to promote her three most deeply held causes: the promotion of Christian virtue, the promotion of Black rights, and the promotion of women's rights.

Born Isabella Baumfree in 1797, Sojourner Truth was an African-American abolitionist, women's rights activist, and preacher who became one of the most iconic and influential figures of the 19th century. Born into slavery in Swartekill, New York – yes, New York – at first slavery was both a northern and a southern issue, but the Northerners systematically (and slowly) abandoned slavery beginning in the late-18th century. New York did not abolish slavery until 1827, when Isabella was already 30.

From a young age, Isabella endured slavery's brutality and dehumanization. First auctioned off at age 9 in 1806, she was sold several times and subjected to the cruelty of different slave owners. She experienced firsthand the horrors of slavery. She was whipped and raped, but she endured. She married a fellow slave, Robert. When her owner discovered the fact, he and his son beat Robert so badly that Robert fled. Isabella never saw him again. Mother of five children she could not protect, given slavery's realities, she also fled to freedom.

In 1826, she escaped with her infant daughter, fleeing to a nearby abolitionist family – the Isaac and Maria van Wagenen family – that offered her refuge. Later, the van Wagenens bought her freedom from the owner Isabella escaped.

This pivotal moment marked the beginning of her journey as an apostle for freedom and justice.

After New York abolished slavery, she eventually settled in New York City, where she found work as a domestic servant and became involved in the religious community. Throughout her life, Isabella was guided by her deep faith and her belief in the inherent dignity and worth of every human being. She embraced Christianity and became a devout member of the Methodist Church, where she found solace and strength.

She also fought for her rights. In 1827 through 1828, she learned that her 5-year-old son Peter had been illegally sold "down the river" to Alabama. She sued to get him back, taking the case to the New York Supreme Court. With the help of the van Wagenens (she used the name "Isabella van Wagenen") she got her son back, making her one of the first Black women to sue a white man and win. [2]

It was during this time that she adopted the name “Sojourner Truth.” The name means itinerant preacher. [3] It symbolizes her commitment to journeying in the truth and spreading her message of liberation and righteousness, which she spent the next 50 years doing. Born of her own horrific experiences, Sojourner Truth spoke out against slavery. She advocated for its abolition and the emancipation of all enslaved people. Her powerful speeches transfixed audiences with their raw emotion, eloquence, and moral clarity. Her own story of suffering and survival compelled listeners to confront slavery’s brutal realities and to join her in the fight for its abolition.

A pioneering figure in the fight against racial discrimination and inequality, she worked alongside famous abolitionists and reformers such as Frederick Douglass, Gerit Smith, and William Lloyd Garrison. She and Douglass, however, did not particularly get along well. They affected two very different personas. Douglass worked hard to develop his intellect, his verbal and written skills, and to present himself as cultured as any white man. Truth assumed – actually, it came naturally out of her experience – the persona of the archetypal, beleaguered but surviving working woman who had escaped slavery with all of its scars – both literal and metaphorical – and was now here to tell you her story and to demand her rights.

She neither asked nor begged. She demanded you recognize her. And in recognizing her, concede to her the inherent rights she possessed as an American woman – an African American woman.

During the Civil War, she volunteered as a nurse for Black Union soldiers, providing care and support to wounded troops and their families. After the war, Truth advocated for the rights of the formerly enslaved people and worked to address the social and economic challenges facing African American communities.

She traveled extensively, delivering lectures and speeches on topics ranging from women's rights to temperance to prison reform. Her determined efforts promoting justice and equality made her a legend. In 1864, President Abraham Lincoln greeted her at the White House.

But her “Ain’t I a Woman?” speech, delivered at the Women’s Rights Convention in Akron, Ohio, on May 29, 1851, is her signature moment. It remains a defining event in the history of the women's rights movement. Asserting her humanity, demanding recognition and respect for all women’s – Black and white – rights, Sojourner Truth challenged the era’s prevailing race and gender stereotypes and prejudices.

Some controversy, however, surrounds her famous speech.

She inarguably gave it, or some version of it; she inarguably said the things she said, or maybe not; and she inarguably stood for freedom for women and the enslaved, which she did.

But there are two versions of Truth's speech that exist today.

The original version of the speech was transcribed by the Rev. Marius Robinson, a friend and admirer of Truth's, who was in Akron and heard it. Truth collaborated with Robinson on the transcript before it was published. She approved his version. Robinson published it on June 21, 1851, in the Salem (Ohio) ***Anti-Slavery Bugle***. [4]

With her great theatrical sense, as E. Jay Ritter has it, ignoring the ridicule of the virtually all-white audience, Truth "arose (from her seat), walked up the steps to the platform, stepped to its front, removed her bonnet, and laid it deliberately at her feet. Hisses greeted her." [5]

Then she began.

It goes like this:

1. May I say a few words? I want to say a few words about this matter.
2. I am a woman's rights.
3. I have as much muscle as any man, and can do as much work as any man.
4. I have plowed and reaped and husked and chopped and mowed, and can any man do more than that?
5. I have heard much about the sexes being equal; I can carry as much as any man, and can eat as much too, if I can get it.
6. I am as strong as any man that is now.
7. As for intellect, all I can say is, if women have a pint and man a quart – why cant she have her little pint full?
8. You need not be afraid to give us our rights for fear we will take too much, for we cant take more than our pint'll hold.
9. The poor men seem to be all in confusion, and don't know what to do.
10. Why, children, if you have woman's rights, give it to her and you will feel better.

11. You will have your own rights, and they wont be so much trouble.
12. I can't read, but I can hear.
13. I have heard the bible and have learned that Eve caused man to sin.
14. Well, if woman upset the world, do give her a chance to set it right side up again.
15. The Lady has spoken about Jesus, how he never spurned woman from him, and she was right.
16. When Lazarus died, Mary and Martha came to him with faith and love and besought him to raise their brother.
17. And Jesus wept – and Lazarus came forth.
18. And how came Jesus into the world?
19. Through God who created him and woman who bore him.
20. Man, where is your part?
21. But the women are coming up blessed be God and a few of the men are coming up with them.
22. But man is in a tight place, the poor slave is on him, woman is coming on him, and he is surely between-a hawk and a buzzard. [6]

Powerful in its simplicity, the speech makes its point. "I am a woman, I can do anything a man can do, and, therefore, by what right do you deny me my rights?"

But the Robinson transcript is not the famous "Ain't I a Woman?" version. It does not contain the iconic phrase "Ain't I a Woman?" It is not the speech that has become legendary in both the civil rights and women's rights movements' histories.

In addition to containing the famous refrain, the "Ain't I a Woman?" version of the speech has historically been recorded as if it were spoken in the dialect of the southern slave quarter.

Except, as we noted, Sojourner Truth was from New York.

She never worked on a southern plantation; in fact, she never worked on a plantation in the North or South.

Her first owners were Dutch in the Hudson River Valley.

The first language she spoke was Dutch, not English.

All her life she spoke English with a Dutch accent.

So, why the southern dialect?

The second version, with which Sojourner Truth did not collaborate, was edited and rewritten by Frances Dana Gage. It was published years later in 1863 and 1881. The 1863 version was used to gain support for the Civil War in the North.

Gage's version includes the phrase "Ain't I a Woman?" repeated multiple times in a Southern dialect, while Robinson's version presents a more formal and less dialectical speech. Despite its racist undertones, Gage's version is the one that has gained historic prominence, although it is debated whether Sojourner Truth delivered it as Gage recorded.

(Trigger warning: The Gage version uses the N-word. Since I find the word offensive and do not desire to offend anyone, I have substituted "negroes" for it in the following text. For the record, the Sojourner Truth Project from which this version is copied uses the N-word.)

This is the iconic Gage version:

1. Well, chillen, whar dar's so much racket dar must be som'ting out o'kilter.
2. I tink dat, 'twixt de negroes of de South and de women at de Norf, all a-talking 'bout rights, de white men will be in a fix pretty soon.
3. But what's all this here talking 'bout?
4. Dat man ober dar say dat women needs to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have de best place eberywhar.
5. Nobody eber helps me into carriages or ober mud-puddles, or gives me any best place.
6. -And ar'n't I a woman?
7. Look at me.
8. Look at my arm.
9. I have plowed and planted and gathered into barns, and no man could head me.
10. -and ar'n't I a woman?
11. I could work as much as eat as a man, (when I could get it,) and bear de lash as well
12. -and ar'n't I a woman?
13. I have borne thirteen chillen, and seen 'em mos' all sold off into slavery, and when I cried out with a mother's grief, none but Jesus heard
14. -and ar'n't I a woman?

15. Den dey talks 'bout dis ting in de head.
16. What dis dey call it?
17. Dat's it, honey.
18. What's dat got to do with women's rights or negroe's rights?
19. If my cup won't hold but a pint and yourn holds a quart, wouldn't ye be mean not to let me have a little half-measure full?
20. Den dat little man in black dar, he say women can't have as much rights as man 'cause Christ wa'n't a woman.
21. Whar did your Christ come from?
22. Whar did your Christ come from?
23. From God and a woman.
24. Man had nothing to do with him.
25. If de fust woman God ever made was strong enough to turn de world upside down all her one lone, all dese togeder ought to be able to turn it back and git it right side up again, and now dey is asking to, de men better let 'em.
26. Bleeged to ye for hearin' on me, and now ole Sojourner ha'n't got nothin' more to say. [7]

So, who was Frances Dana Barker Gage?

A radical feminist, she was a 19th century American writer, women's rights activist, and abolitionist. Gage was particularly active in promoting women's rights, including suffrage, education, and equal opportunities. In addition, Frances Gage was a prolific writer and speaker. She wrote children's books and contributed articles to various newspapers and magazines promoting women's rights and addressing issues such as slavery and temperance.

Gage was also involved in organizing and participating in women's rights conventions, where she spoke passionately about women's rights, not just suffrage but also the law of coverture and other limitations on women's legal rights to an education, to employment, and to the custody of their children.

Gage chaired the 1851 Women's Rights Convention in Akron at which Sojourner Truth delivered her famous speech. She heard the actual speech and made notes for future newspaper and journal articles.

Why the changes?

Gage published her version in the ***New York Independent*** on April 23, 1863. It was at the height of the Civil War. Lincoln had just issued the Emancipation Proclamation, but the war was not going well. Gage sought to do two things: 1) increase Northern support for the Civil War cause and 2) to reinvigorate support

for the women's rights movement, which during the Civil War had begun to slip from public awareness.

Her version uses the more authentic mid-19th century "arn't I a woman," not "Ain't I a Woman." That change took place in a later version of the speech.

The controversy isn't whether Sojourner Truth gave the speech.

The controversy is about whether a white writer made her sound like a southern fieldhand when she was in fact a northern woman who spoke with a Dutch accent.

In our time, this is called cultural appropriation – when a member of one culture appropriates the cultural values of another to advance their own cause. But Truth and Gage supported the same causes and fought the same fights for the same rights. As the current cliché has it, "they were on the same page." So, it's not exactly cultural appropriation.

What it is, is a brilliant rhetorical tactic. That 173 years later we're still talking about it attests to its power.

From all accounts, Sojourner Truth was not offended by Gage's version. While they did not collaborate, Truth was aware of it and gave it her tacit approval. She understood the power of words. She'd have approved of whatever version of her words most powerfully advanced her cause.

And Sojourner Truth's cause was the cause of freedom for the enslaved and for women generally.

In her speech, Truth attacks the myth of female frailty – the notion that women are weak and must be protected from life's harsh realities. The myth of female frailty was one of the primary justifications for limiting women to the domestic sphere. In her speech, Sojourner Truth explodes that myth by using the example of her own life and struggles as proof of women's strength, as proof of women's right to freedom. From her vantage point, if Gage's rhetorical "enhancements" made the speech more powerful, more effective in driving home her message, then she accepted it.

Still, why?

Well, it's complicated, but as Karen Sanchez-Eppler says, Gage's version, which contributed mightily to the creation of "the legendary Truth is not (or not solely) an inauthentic appropriation concocted by others and in competition with the

more authentic historical persona. Rather the legendary Truth herself did much, quite self-consciously, to construct and exploit" this image of herself. [8]

As I said at the outset, Isabella Baumfree/Sojourner Truth was a marketing genius. And, this might surprise some, marketing is nothing more than applied rhetoric. Without using the jargon of rhetoric, she understood that if one wants to persuade anyone of anything, then you first must understand your audience, develop a persona acceptable to that audience and speak to them in terms and tones they understand and will accept.

Lastly, you must supply them reasons to believe (to agree with you). There are only three: facts ("I'm as strong as any man and have the scars to prove it"); trust (or truth, which means believe me because I have lived the truths I tell and can prove from the well of my own experience the truth of what I say); and, lastly, emotion (which is either love or fear). Truth shows her audience she is not afraid and loves them enough to tell them the truth. Which Aristotle said is the most powerful of all personas – integrity. How to project a persona of integrity? Tell the truth, which Sojourner Truth did by telling the irrefutable facts of her own life.

The persona she adopted blended her biography, the facts of her life, with a fictive reality ("her shadow" she said she adopted to earn sustenance to feed her "substantial," actual self).

Isabella Baumfree re-invented herself as Sojourner Truth.

Cunning, shrewd, and brilliant, her created persona made Truth's speeches (performances) irresistible. Her presence was so powerful, no one could deny the truth of what she said.

As Jean Harvey Baker says, Truth "was actively engaged in the process of creating her own persona. She supported herself by traveling throughout the United States selling for 25 cents the admiring … but inaccurate narrative of her life written by a middle-class white woman (Harriet Beecher Stowe); she spoke with power at abolitionist and feminist meetings; she preached self-help to freed people … she challenged … the white suffragists' increasing opposition to the Fourteenth Amendment." [9]

Truth, in many ways, represents the archetypal American – she invented herself. And her invented "self" became an American icon shape-shifting the American narrative.

Questions of authenticity completely miss the point.

Her authentic self ***was*** the blended personalities of Isabella Baumfree, survivor of slavery, and "Sojourner Truth," evangelist for Jesus Christ and apostle of equal rights for women and Black Americans.

It was/is one of the great performances in American history.

And one of the most important.

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You can hear the original Marius Robinson version of Sojourner Truth's speech here. Scroll down to the bottom of the page and click on the red arrow.

You can hear the Frances Dana Gage version, which has become the iconic version, here.

-- Andrew Roth, Ph.D.
Scholar-in-Residence
The Jefferson Educational Society
roth@jeserie.org

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"File: Women of distinction – Sojourner Truth.jpg" at **Wikimedia Commons** available here accessed April 28, 2024.
"File: Sojourner-Truth.jpg" at **Wikimedia Commons** available here accessed April 28, 2024.
"Marius R. Robinson.jpg" at **Wikimedia Commons** available here accessed April 28, 2024.
"File: Frances Dana Barker Gage.jpg" at **Wikimedia Commons** available here accessed April 28, 2024.

End Notes

1. Painter, Nell Irvin, *"Sojourner Truth's Knowing and Becoming Known",* in **The Journal of American History** V. 81, N. 2 (Sept., 1994), p. 470.

2. Painter, p. 463 and *"Sojourner Truth"* in **Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia**, available at here accessed April 28, 2024.
3. Painter, p. 462.
4. Truth, Sojourner, *"Ain't I a Woman?"* at **The Sojourner Truth Project** available at here accessed April 28, 2024.
5. Ritter, E. Jay, *"Sojourner Truth",* in **Negro History Bulletin**, V. 26, N. 8 (May, 1963), p. 254.
6. Truth, Sojourner, *"Ain't I a Woman?"* as transcribed by Marius Robinson and published June 21, 1851 in **The Anti-Slavery Bugle** at **The Sojourner Truth Project** available at here accessed April 28, 2024.
7. Truth, Sojourner, *"Ain't I a Woman?"* as reconstructed by Frances Dana Gage and published April 23, 1863 in the **New York Independent** at **The Sojourner Truth Project** available at here accessed April 28, 2024.
8. Sanchez-Eppler, Karen, "*Sojourner Truth A Life, A Symbol by Nell Irvin Painter, a review"* in **American Quarterly**, V. 50, N. 1 (March, 1998), p. 151.
9. Baker, Jean Harvey, *"Review of Nell Irvin Painter, Sojourner Truth: A Life, A Symbol"* in **The American Historical Review**, V. 102, N. 2 (April, 1997), p. 522.

In Case You Missed It

Jefferson's Early Childcare Investment Policy Initiative | Workforce Behind the Workforce: Early Child Care Conference in Erie written by **Court Gould**

The Wider World | Give Up the Grudge written by President of DC Analytics **Diane Chido**

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