

“Resistance to Tyranny is Obedience to God:” Women’s Suffrage Turns 100
February 16, 2020

Meditation Including words by Sojourner Truth

As women sought the right to vote, one woman born into slavery, Isabella Baumfree – who changed her name to Sojourner Truth – gave a speech in Akron, Ohio as part of the Women’s Rights Convention. Reflecting on the reasons men name for denying women suffrage, she challenges these arguments from her experiences as a Black woman and counters other arguments on religious grounds. Her famous “Ain’t I a Woman” speech¹ was a prophetic affirmation of living as a woman and a Black person in America.

This morning, we recall excerpts from her speech as we also consider the obstacles placed before many trying to reach the ballot box in our own time. As noted by journalist Mandy Velez,² although citizens of all ethnicities and gender identities have the legal right to vote, recent laws shortening polling hours, cutting the number of polling places, changing geographic voting lines and requiring IDs challenges the realistic ability of the marginalized – the poor, people-of-color, the disabled – to exercise their rights. Although women won the right to vote 100 years ago, their gender remains an obstacle to having a full voice in the democratic process.

In 1851, Sojourner Truth proclaimed:

That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place! And ain't I a woman?

Caregivers are frequently unable to vote. “Women make up 69 percent of unpaid caregivers to older adults. If they’re caring for someone, unpaid, that means they don’t necessarily have the means to buy documents needed to obtain an ID, pay for a car or taxi to get to a polling place, or even take the time to step away from their person in need.”

¹ <https://www.nps.gov/articles/sojourner-truth.htm>

² https://www.salon.com/2018/01/13/the-surprising-ways-voter-suppression-particularly-hurts-women_partner/

Sojourner Truth said:

Look at me! Look at my arm! I have ploughed and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man - when I could get it - and bear the lash as well! And ain't I a woman?

“There are more women living in poverty than men...If voting already impacts people with less means to legally cast their vote...women will bear most of the burden...If a woman works an hourly job, she doesn't have the luxury of getting paid if she misses a day or leaves work early.”

Sojourner Truth said:

Then that little man in black there, he says women can't have as much rights as men, 'cause Christ wasn't a woman! Where did your Christ come from? Where did your Christ come from? From God and a woman! Man had nothing to do with Him.

“Voter ID laws alone account for an estimated 34 percent of women who could be turned away from the polls for not having the right documents...Because 90 percent of women change their names when they get married, they often have different names on their identification documents.”

Sojourner Truth said:

If the first woman God ever made was strong enough to turn the world upside down all alone, these women together ought to be able to turn it back, and get it right side up again! And now they is asking to do it, the men better let them.

Approximately 3 million disabled people are disenfranchised and 40 percent of those who tried to vote reported problems voting...Women who are disabled are also impacted by poverty, sexism or lack of

access...Women can't vote if they can't drive, don't have assistance with forms or computers and if the polling places aren't...accessible.

While more women than men have voted in the last three elections, the restrictions could have a larger impact on smaller communities, many of them in rural or Southern states that...have most of the voter suppression laws.

As Mandy Velez observes, America can't say it guarantees the right to vote to all citizens, if at least 50 percent of its people face more obstacles than their [peers.]

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The Rev. Heather Janules

I woke before dawn, carefully walking through the dark room, the floor lined with people in sleeping bags. As I got ready, I dressed for cold weather: thermal pants, jeans, two pairs of socks and two long-sleeved shirts. I was getting ready to sit outside for many hours in January.

I did not look forward to enduring hours of cold but could not imagine doing anything else. It was January 20th, 2009. Later that day, our nation would inaugurate its first African-American president. As a US citizen incredibly proud of this historic moment and as a minister serving a DC-area congregation that provided hospitality to inaugural attendees, I got up early to lead the group to the subway and claim a place on the National Mall before the crowds arrived.

When I think back to that day, it was cold. But my primary memory was the growing excitement, the joy, of the occasion. No matter whom you voted for in 2008, the inauguration of the first Black president was something that transcended the personhood of Barack Obama. Later, in the way poets distill powerful ideas into a few simple words, inaugural poet Elizabeth Alexander summed it up best: “Say it plain: that many have died for this day.”³

³ <https://poets.org/poem/praise-song-day>

This was not the last time I put on special clothes to be part of a historic moment. On November 8th, 2016, I woke with plans to visit my polling place before coming into work. Scrolling through my Facebook feed, I learned that many friends were wearing white to go to the polls, in honor of the suffragists. Women were bringing their daughters, too young to vote themselves but old enough to witness their nation electing its first woman president. It was a near-certain conclusion. Photos of suffragist Susan B. Anthony's headstone revealed places where people visited her grave and affixed their "I Voted" sticker to the granite. Elizabeth Alexander goes on in her poem: "many have died for this day. Sing the names of the dead who brought us here."

It was November and I didn't have a long-sleeved white shirt so I wore a white t-shirt over another shirt. While the t-shirt did not have a political message, it featured a depiction of figures along a table, echoing Da Vinci's "Last Supper." But instead of Jesus and his disciples, the figures were famous female religious leaders: Mary of Nazareth, Edith Stein, Teresa of Avila. Beneath this image was an ironic phrase – "Women's Work."

No matter whom you voted for in 2016, the heartbreak of Hillary Clinton's defeat also transcended her personhood. Just as the women suffragists had to work and wait over decades for their society to recognize them as equals at the ballot box, we who identify as women learned we had to work more and wait longer for society to recognize us as equals in political potential.

As today's meditation makes clear, even though all citizens 18 and over have the legal right to vote, de facto restrictions prohibit vulnerable populations, including women, from fully using their voice in politics. For those of us who believe in "the right of conscience and use of the democratic process," there is more work and more waiting ahead before true equality at the voting booth prevails.

While it is easy to give into cynicism and despair, remembering how far our nation has come can return us to hope. Women claimed the right to vote 100 years ago this year and the organization born of this revolutionary change, the League of Women Voters, is also celebrating its centennial. This past Friday, February 14th, was the actual anniversary, a valentine to voting. This morning, with the support of many League of Women Voter members who are also members of the WUS community, we recall the women's suffrage movement and reflect on the current

mission of the League so we may consider how we will engage in “the democratic process” in this high stakes election year.

As the women’s suffrage movement was almost 100 years long, this is but a brief review: Culturally, women have long been relegated to the domestic realm. Yet, in the 1820’s, women began to organize around a number of social reforms. Along with assuming leadership roles in churches, short of ministry, women advocated for temperance from alcohol and abolition of slavery.⁴ These efforts culminated in the Women’s Rights Convention in 1848 in Seneca Falls, organized by Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott. The Convention featured Sojourner Truth’s powerful speech and words by Frederick Douglass. Delegates called for the right to vote for both African-Americans and women, ideas radical in their day. Thus quests for racial and gender justice began entwined.

While the outcomes of the Convention were mocked by mainstream society, the movement advanced forward. Susan B. Anthony joined Stanton and Mott in organizing women’s rights meetings. Their efforts were interrupted by the chaos of the Civil War.⁵

With the end of the war and the emancipation of African-Americans, the women’s suffrage movement split along racial lines. This schism was illustrated through the estrangement of two former allies and dear friends – Susan B. Anthony and Frederick Douglass.

While both leaders believed in universal suffrage, proposal of the 14th and 15th Amendments, granting Black men citizenship and the right to vote, revealed irreconcilable ultimatums between them. Anthony declared “I will cut off this right arm of mine before I will ever work for or demand the ballot for the Negro and not for the woman” while Douglass argued that the civil status of African-Americans was a more urgent need than women’s pursuit of suffrage: “When women, because they are women, are hunted down,” he said, “When they are in danger of having their homes burnt down over their heads, when their children are not allowed to enter schools; then [women] will have an urgency to obtain the ballot equal to our own.” I infer here that Douglass is referring to white women.

⁴ <https://www.history.com/topics/womens-history/19th-amendment-1>

⁵ <http://suffrageandthemedial.org/source/one-woman-one-vote-pbs-documentary/>

Alienating both their African-American allies and fellow suffragists who supported the 14th and 15th Amendments, such as Lucy Stone, Stanton and Anthony formed a separate suffrage organization.⁶ Lost was the intersectional understanding of oppression revealed in Sojourner Truth's "Ain't I A Woman?" speech; both the struggles for racial justice and women's rights were thus deprived critical support through these betrayals and impasses.

In 1872, Anthony and fifty other women registered to vote and cast ballots in the presidential election. Anthony was arrested and brought before judge and jury in a highly-publicized trial. As such, the trial was a sham, with the judge writing his verdict in advance and directing the jury to find her guilty. He fined Anthony \$100, which she never paid. Anthony responded to the verdict by affirming, among other things, that "resistance to tyranny is obedience to God," grounding her civil disobedience in divine authority.⁷

In 1896, Black women organized and formed the National Association of Colored Women's Clubs. Similar to other female-led organizations, the NACWC centered on reforms benefitting women and children, including women's suffrage. Of its nine named objectives, the Association sought "to obtain for African-American families the opportunity of reaching the highest levels of human endeavor." Mary Church Terrell was its first President.⁸

The next generation of suffragists included Carrie Chapman Catt who became the leader of the National American Woman Suffrage Association, a union of the organizations led by Stanton and Stone that split over the enfranchisement of men-of-color. Catt adopted a state-by-state approach to foster a tipping point towards federal endorsement of women's suffrage. One by one, states – primarily in the west – granted women the right to vote in their constitutions. Regretfully, organizers in Southern states actively marginalized Black women in order to court the favor of lawmakers in the former Confederacy.

Harriet Stanton Blatch, daughter of Elizabeth Cady Stanton, was also part of this next wave of advocacy. Another division within the movement centered around

⁶ <https://2020owovfest.org/susan-b-anthony-and-frederick-douglass/>

⁷ <https://www.nolo.com/legal-encyclopedia/content/anthony-vote-speech.html>

⁸ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National_Association_of_Colored_Women%27s_Clubs

strategy, with activists such as Alice Paul adopting tactics from suffragists in England that some found “unladylike” such as direct confrontation and open-air speeches.⁹ Paul is remembered for going on hunger strikes and enduring torture, being force-fed by her jailers.

It was the British suffrage movement that inspired suffragists to wear white. In 1908, Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence chose the colors for their campaign: white for purity, purple for dignity and green for hope.¹⁰

In 1913, a Women’s Suffrage Procession 8,000 strong, mostly segregated by race, marched down Pennsylvania Avenue in Washington D.C. the day before Woodrow Wilson’s inauguration. This was the first large-scale political march through D.C. Security was wanting; the parade disintegrated into a near-riot and led to about 200 people to be injured. While the women did receive some support from spectators, others yelled and spat on them.¹¹

With the onset of World War I, the nation asked women to support male soldiers in battle. While many accepted this gender-based expectation, the suffrage movement also continued in wartime. Women picketed the White House six days a week. 168 protestors were arrested and subject to terrible conditions in jail.

Through lobbying by Carrie Chapman Catt, Woodrow Wilson eventually endorsed women’s suffrage. An initial bill before the Senate failed by two votes. A later bill before the House passed and then passed the Senate by two votes. This victory was the result of some legislators coming to vote under extreme circumstances, with one carried in on a stretcher as he was seriously ill and another leaving his wife’s bedside as she lay dying.¹²

The 19th Amendment then required ratification by the states. In brief, it came down to Tennessee and in the state legislature, it came down to one vote by Harry Burn. Burn opposed ratification but, as the story goes, his mother wrote him a letter that inspired him to vote otherwise: “Don’t forget to be a good boy and help Mrs. Catt put the ‘rat’ in ratification,” she wrote.¹³ He voted

⁹ <http://suffrageandthedia.org/source/one-woman-one-vote-pbs-documentary/>

¹⁰ <https://www.history.com/news/woman-in-white-hillary-clintons-suffragette-tribute>

¹¹ <http://suffrageandthedia.org/source/one-woman-one-vote-pbs-documentary/>

¹² Ibid

¹³ <https://www.history.com/topics/womens-history/19th-amendment-1>

yes...and the 19th Amendment was ratified. With the right to vote finally won, Carrie Chapman Catt founded the League of Women Voters.

100 years in, the League of Women Voters, a decidedly non-partisan organization, is composed of chapters across the country. Current objectives include fighting the voter suppression tactics referenced in the meditation, reducing the influence of money in politics and redistricting for fair representation.¹⁴

It has been a joy, planning this service with members of this community who are involved with the Winchester chapter of the League of Women Voters. I especially thank Patty Shephard who pointed me to many articles about League and suffrage history that informed today's reflection.

Through conversations in-person and on-line, I engaged our friends on these questions: How did you first get involved? Why is the work of the League of Women Voters important to you?

I was inspired by the stories I heard. One member joined the League in 1969, simply because the right of each person to vote is important to her. Another member turned 18 the year the voting age was lowered to 18. This motivated a great number of young people to go to the polls, numbers that have since decreased. Another wrote, "The [League] registered me to vote...as a senior in high school....And, they also taught me how to use a voting machine...the registration event was key to my civic engagement because it hadn't occurred to me to register on my own, and I'm not sure I would have figured out the voting machine..."

Thinking back to past victories, our friends observed that it was the Winchester chapter of the League that raised awareness about the vulnerabilities of voter machines, leading the League to challenge their widespread use. On another matter, one wrote that when Governor Charlie Baker announced a regulatory review "the [League] was a voice in...calling for public hearings and a public process in this...review. Marilyn Mullane wrote a letter to...the Winchester Star on behalf of the [League] and one of my first interactions with Marilyn at WUS was thanking her for writing the letter." She continues, in all caps: "IT WAS A RELIEF TO KNOW SOMEONE WAS PAYING ATTENTION!"

¹⁴ Research by WUS and LWV member Vicky Coccoluto, sent by email. "Priority Issues of the LWV."

I also asked why so many League members are also at WUS. Our friends observed that both communities are places where women can thrive in leadership and grow as individuals. Here and in the League, women are assured that believe in “the worth and dignity of every person” is actively practiced, that their voice will be heard.

I appreciate how the League of Women Voters now takes an honest view of suffrage history. Last year, at the 99th anniversary of the 19th Amendment, with an eye to the current political situation, Virginia Case, National CEO of the League, spoke to the need for solidarity. She writes:

As we celebrate this great achievement, we do so with recognition that women’s suffrage was not perfect. Progress towards a more perfect democracy is often messy, but we can’t allow the ends to justify the means, especially if [it] perpetuates oppression...Let us seek out ways to ensure all eligible voters have their voices heard and their votes counted.¹⁵

The joy I felt at Barack Obama’s inauguration has long faded away, through the passage of years and sobering shifts in the health of our collective civic life. The road ahead, towards a time when we have faith that every person’s voice, each “light within,” is recognized seems long and uncertain.

Yet, if there is any lesson we can learn from the suffragists and the work of their descendants, the League of Women Voters, it is that resilience is rewarded. Maybe not in our lifetimes but another world *is* possible. As Universalist suffragist Olympia Brown, one of the first women ordained in America and one of the few suffragists of her era who eventually cast a ballot said of convictions, “do not demand immediate results but rejoice that you are worthy to be entrusted with this great message.”

And I also find inspiration in the final words Elizabeth Alexander read on that bitter January day:

In today's sharp sparkle, this winter air,

¹⁵ <https://thehill.com/blogs/congress-blog/politics/458778-this-womens-equality-day-stop-romanticizing-the-19th-amendment>

Any thing can be made, any sentence begun.
On the brink, on the brim, on the cusp,
praise song for walking forward in that light.¹⁶

¹⁶ <https://poets.org/poem/praise-song-day>