

Sojourner Truth

by Linda Baxter

"All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights"
Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights

The name Sojourner may be familiar to you. It was the name of the wheeled robot that was sent on the expedition to Mars in 1997 to explore the surface of the planet. The name was chosen after a world-wide competition, in which students were asked to choose a heroine, and write an essay explaining why her name should be given to the Mars Pathfinder. And Sojourner, which means a temporary resident or a traveller, was the winner.

But who was Sojourner Truth?

She was an African-American anti-slavery campaigner and a champion of women's rights. She lived during the time of the American Civil war, a time when African-Americans were seen as inferior to white people, and slavery still existed. At the same time, women were seen as inferior to men. They did not have the vote, and a 'real' woman was supposed to stay at home, be protected by her husband, and not have an opinion on issues of the day. As a black woman, Sojourner Truth experienced both types of discrimination, and she was one of the first people to make the connection between the rights of slaves and black people and the rights of women. And she was the first African-American woman to make public speeches about it.

A slave

Sojourner was born into slavery in 1797. Her parents named her Isabella. She was one of ten or twelve children but they were all sold as slaves except for Isabella and her older brother Peter. When she was nine, her owner died and his property, including Isabella, was sold. She had to leave her family and go to a new owner. When she was 14, she was forced to marry another slave called Thomas. They had children who were also sold into slavery. In 1826, she ran away to New York, just a year before slavery was abolished in New York State. After gaining her freedom, Isabella worked as a domestic servant, which was one of the only jobs that freed black women could do. She was always deeply religious and attended church regularly. An important part of her religious belief was a strong conviction that God had created all human beings as equals.

A preacher

In 1843, Isabella had a religious experience. She believed that God told her to change her name to Sojourner Truth, and become a travelling preacher. So that's exactly what she did. For a year she travelled around America, singing and preaching at prayer meetings. She supported herself with odd jobs, and slept wherever she could, often in the open air. After a year of preaching, Sojourner joined the Northampton Association. This was a predominantly white co-operative community, where property and resources were shared, and the members tried to find new and better ways of living together. The Northampton Association believed in liberal concepts such as the abolition of slavery, women's rights, freedom of expression, and socialism. Sojourner's eyes were opened and she began speaking publicly about the abolition of slavery and the rights of women, to mainly white and often very hostile audiences.

A speaker

Sojourner Truth was an impressive speaker and she soon became well known for her common sense, courage and quick sense of humour. Her experience of preaching was useful to her, and she was able to talk about her first hand experiences of slavery. Her physical presence was compelling too - she was over six feet tall with a strong deep voice. She was often accused of being a man dressed up as a woman. So, to prove that this was not the case, she once lifted her blouse and showed her breasts to the audience at a public meeting.

A writer

Sojourner couldn't read or write. But she dictated her memoirs to a woman friend, and they were published in 1850 as 'The Narrative of Sojourner Truth: A Northern Slave'. This was one of the first accounts ever published of the life of a female slave, and the book was a success. Sojourner was able to buy her own house and she

became even more popular as a speaker for the abolitionist cause, travelling around America through the 1850s.

A feminist

Sojourner was unusual in the abolitionist movement because of her insistence on the links between racism and sexism. In one of her speeches at the time she said:

"There is a great deal of stir about coloured men getting their rights but not a word about the coloured women's theirs. You see, the coloured men will be masters over the women, and it will be just as bad as it was before." That was a radical statement, both for the women's movement and the abolitionist movement.

The women's rights movement at that time was mainly middle-class and white. Sojourner spoke at women's meetings and conferences, insisting that black and poor women were 'women too', and that they had to be included in any vision of social reform. Her most famous speech (known as 'Ain't I a Woman?') pointed out that while white middle class women were trying to gain the right to work, Sojourner, and thousands of women like her, had known nothing but hard work and poverty all their lives.

A campaigner

Sojourner moved to Washington in 1863 when she was in her sixties. She worked to raise money for African-American Civil war soldiers, worked as a nurse and taught domestic skills to freed female slaves. She continued to be active in the women's movement, and also in relief associations for freed slaves. She was even invited to visit President Lincoln.

While she was living in Washington, her arm was dislocated by a conductor who refused to let her get on to a 'white' streetcar. She started and fought the campaign that ended segregated public transport in Washington.

Sojourner Truth died in 1883.

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