



Profiles in Nonviolence:

Sojourner Truth

Most people who have studied the history of civil rights in the United States of America are familiar with Sojourner Truth. She was a pivotal figure in the history of the abolitionist struggle and in the history of the continuing fight for women's equality.

Her iconic “ar'n't I a Woman?” speech is taught almost universally to elementary school children, but her legacy often stops there. In fact, Sojourner may never have uttered those famous words.¹ Her speech was not, as it is so often portrayed, an impromptu outburst from an amateur attendee at a women's suffrage meeting. By the time she stood to speak in that meeting, Sojourner was already a famous activist, spiritual teacher, and orator known throughout the northern states. She was, by all accounts, an electrifying speaker who could command a room and capture the rapt attention of all who could hear her. Her life, recounted many years before her death in “The Narrative of Sojourner Truth,” was a striking expression of a what we now know are the basic tenets of Principled Nonviolence. Decades before Gandhi began to discover these principles, Sojourner followed her internal guiding voice and spirit, her God, and lived a life of nonviolent activism.

Isabella/Sojourner

Sojourner's given name was Isabella. Like most slaves, her last name changed to that of her master as she was sold from family to family. When she was finally freed, her name was Isabella Van Wagenen, named for the family who gave her her freedom. She was to have been freed by New York state law in 1827, but her penultimate master, John J. Dumont, had promised to give her her freedom one year early. When he recanted, Isabella left of her own accord and found her way to the Van Wagenen's. When Dumont came to find her, the Van Wagenen's bought the balance of her time, and effectively gave her her freedom. She took their name in place of Dumont's last name in a gesture of thanks for their actions. In doing so, she set a precedent for choosing a name as an act of symbolism and self expression, and would do so once more several years later.

The choosing of a name is commonly symbolic and in view of her personal history Isabella's final name change is quite powerful. After leaving the Van Wagenen's, she moved to New York City. After many years, Isabella felt a strong spiritual calling to give up her current life and “go east.” It was at this point she changed her name to Sojourner Truth. She did not explicitly explain what had inspired the choice of “Sojourner Truth,” but it coincided with her decision to leave New York and travel as a pilgrim with no certain destination. Her life was to be a journey, and to call her self a “sojourner” makes perfect sense.

¹ See exercise at the end of this profile for consideration of the speech.

What does the word **Sojourner** Mean?
What might Isabella have been trying to say in taking this word to symbolize
her identity and mission in life?

In 1853 she explained her choice of name to Harriet Beecher Stowe:

“And the Lord gave me 'Sojourner' because I was to travel up an' down the land, showin' the people their sins, an' bein' a sign unto them. Afterwards I told the lord I wanted another name, 'cause everybody else had two names; and the Lord gave me Truth, because I was to declare the truth to the people”²

Isabella had taken on the very identity of a “Seeker of Truth” both in name and in deed. She attributes this to divine inspiration, a spiritual calling. In fact, that truth was the highest of all moral obligations was something she had ingrained in her soul from a very young age. In her *Narrative*, she discusses her early moral development:

“In obedience to her mother's instructions, she had educated herself to such a sense of honesty....Yet Isabella glories in the fact that she was faithful and true to her master; she says, “It made me true to my God”- meaning, that it helped to form in her a character that loved truth, and hated a lie, and had saved her from the bitter pains and fears that are sure to follow in the wake of insincerity and hypocrisy.”³

The word “yet” implies that there is a caveat here. Her devotion to honesty here is attributed to her master. The ghost writer of Sojourner's *Narrative* was an abolitionist and is simply acknowledging that it is problematic to extoll the practice of slave masters instilling the ethics of honesty in their slaves. This was done as a tool of repression, to keep slaves obedient and furthered their oppressed state. However, as we will see later, Sojourner was not one to follow blindly, and despite the origin of her commitment to honesty, she viewed the truth as the highest calling from God, according to her own life and observations.

Why did masters emphasize the importance of honesty when educating
their slaves?
Why is it a problem to credit the master with educating Sojourner in the
importance of being honest?
What does the word YET tell us about the author of this passage and what
he thinks?
How can you use connecting words in your own writing to tell the reader
subtle information without writing it all out?

Soon after she left her final master, Isabella had a religious epiphany. Her experience at this point in her life was the very earliest step that lead her towards her eventual calling as a traveling lecturer and spiritual guide. She realized that she had only called on God when she needed something, made many promises, but never kept them when her life began to go well. She saw herself as a liar, and therefore unworthy of the God she had always assumed to be her protector.

“she says that God revealed himself to her, with all the suddenness of a flash of lighting, showing her “in the twinkling of an eye, that he was *all over*”- that he pervaded

² Mabee, *Sojourner Truth*, 44-45.

³ *Narrative*, 21-22.

the universe- “and that there was no place that God was not.” She became instantly conscious of her great sin in forgetting her almighty Friend ... All her unfulfilled promises arose before her, like a vexed sea whose waves run mountain high; and her soul, which seemed but one mass of lies shrunk back aghast from [it].. “What!” said she, “shall I lie again to God? I have told him nothing but lies; and shall I speak again, and tell another lie to God?”⁴

While the *Narrative* does not explicitly state the logical opposite, that one should be truthful in all one's actions and promises, she expresses rejection of her lies so forcefully one can assume that this was the conclusion she came to.

Sojourner's quest for the truth was not limited to divine inspiration, but was a principle she allowed to guide her life daily. She was very curious about the Bible, and had it read out loud to her, often asking that the reader re-read passages repeatedly until she felt she had a satisfactory understanding. She wanted to form her own opinions about the words, and was frequently frustrated by other adults who inserted their own opinions about the texts as they read to her. She solved this problem by asking children to read to her, and was able to hear the words purely as they were written. She was always questioning the world around her and forming her own opinions. This ever questioning instinct in part led her to her calling to travel through the north east (and ultimately the entirety of the United States) to proclaim her message. At one point it was said of her that “although she had learned nothing of the great doctrine....[ie, *the bible*] she had learned much man had never taught her”⁵

Her *Narrative*, the document that describes many of the experiences that lead her to consider that truthfulness was of paramount importance, was written later in her life. She did not take the name Sojourner until she was 43, therefore we can see that this choice of name was the culmination of a lifetime of experience. Clearly, Sojourner had always valued honesty above all, and as she experienced religious enlightenment on several occasions throughout her life, truth as the bedrock of her spiritual principles endured.

Having established that the choice of the name Sojourner Truth was an expression of Sojourner's new identity and mission, we can look at this first striking overlap of Sojourner's values and those of Nonviolence. While working in South Africa, Gandhi eventually decided that he needed a new name for the nonviolent resistance he and his fellow Indians were practicing. “Passive Resistance” was an unacceptable name, since Nonviolence is anything but passive- it is active, just not *violently* active. He eventually chose the word “Satyagraha” as embodying what it meant to be a nonviolent resistor. *Satyagraha* means “firmness for the truth” and was also translated idiomatically by Gandhi as “truth-force,” “love-force,” and “soul-force”⁶ Gandhi's commitment to truth as the highest form of divinity is well documented in many of his writings. In one eloquent example, he states “I have come to the conclusion that for myself, God is Truth. But two years ago I went a step further and said that Truth is God.”⁷

Purely through the internal guidance of her conscience, Sojourner Truth came to the same conclusion as Gandhi, that truth was the ultimate expression of God. She fashioned herself as a “seeker of truth” and decades before Gandhi coined the phrase “Satyagraha,” Sojourner truth was already a Satyagrahi.

4 *Narrative*, 49-50.

5 *Narrative*, 90.

6 Gandhi, R, *Gandhi*, 113-114.

7 Gandhi, M, *Truth is God*, 16.

Hate the Sin, not the Sinner

An integral aspect of Gandhi's Nonviolence, as we call it now, Principled Nonviolence, is the practice of non-hatred. Every human being is a divine being, and not deserving of anyone's hatred, even tyrannical oppressors who perpetrate violence against others. Instead, one should learn to hate the Sin, or the action, but not the human being behind the action. Sojourner practiced this in the most extreme possible situation: that of her relationship to her master. In 1849 her daughter informed her that her old slave master, Dumont, had decided to move west, and had taken some of Sojourner's old possessions with him. Upon hearing this, and learning that he had repudiated Slavery, her response is (recorded in her *Narrative*) as follows:

“Nevermind,' says Sojourner, 'What we give to the poor, we lend to the Lord.' She thanked the Lord with fervor, that she had lived to hear her master say such blessed things! She recalled the lectures he used to give his slaves, on speaking the truth and being honest, and laughing, she says he taught us not to lie and steal, when he was stealing all the time himself, and did not know it! Oh how sweet to my mind was this confession! And what a confession for a master to make to a slave! A slaveholding master turned to a brother! Poor old man, may the Lord Bless him, and all slave-holders partake of his spirit!”

Sojourner ends one edition of her *Narrative* with this quote, this pure, joyful forgiveness of the man who had owned her, betrayed his promise to free her early, and as a slave master, literally stolen her own life from her. There could not be a clearer example of hatred of the practice of slavery, but forgiveness of the man who had perpetrated this atrocity against her.

Can you think of a time in your life when someone you love did something you hated? What happened?
Can you see how you may have experienced hating the action but not the person?
What might happen if you tried to repeat that experience, but in a situation where you did not already love or like the other person?

Rejection of Material Goods

While she was living in New York, Sojourner was able to save money for the first time in her life. She worked as a domestic servant and managed to earn quite a bit of money, considering her position in life. She eventually lost most of it to a bad investment, but started to save again as she had before. It was a short time after this that she decided to leave New York to follow her calling to speak and travel. Her view of economics and money was a direct factor in her decision to leave the city, which she saw as a corrupt second Sodom. She came to the conclusion that “the rich rob the poor and the poor rob each other,” and she viewed the entirety of the economic system in which she lived as “one great system of robbery and wrong.”⁸

One experience she describes in her *Narrative* helped to inspire this opinion. Occasionally, her employers would give her a small sum of money to use to employ a pauper to sweep snow from the front steps of the house, but Sojourner would get up early and do the job herself and keep the money, paying herself to do the job. On at least one occasion, she was approached by a poor man and he scolded her for having done the job herself. He said that he was worse off than she, and she should have used the money as intended, to pay him to do the

⁸ *Narrative*, 78.

job since he was poor and had a family. She defended her actions saying that she was also poor and had to support her family, justifying her actions to him and to herself. She eventually came to see her actions as unacceptable however, and agreed that she was, in a sense, robbing the man she was to have paid by depriving him of the opportunity to do the job. Her thoughts on the matter:

“she thought of all the misery she might have been adding to, in her selfish grasping, and it troubled her conscience sorely; and this insensibility to the wretched poor she now saw, as she never had done before, to be unfeeling, selfish, and wicked. These reflections and convictions gave rise to a sudden feeling in the heart of Isabella, and she began to look upon money and property with great indifference, if not contempt.”⁹

When Sojourner set out to travel east through Long Island and New England, she rejected money unless strictly necessary. She put her faith in God as a provider, and was able to find lodging and food as she needed it. She occasionally took temporary domestic work, but only accepted the payment she absolutely needed, and refused more. This is a practice that Sojourner would continue for the rest of her life, only accepting money as she needed it and donating much of her various earnings to causes that she supported.

Gandhi's views on material goods and excess are well known, and it is easy to see where Sojourner's economic principles overlap with those of Gandhi. It was quite early in his career, when he was doing his work in South Africa, that he declared his rejection of material goods. He also consistently rejected money and gifts, even on behalf of the members of his family. At one point, he required his wife to forgo a gift of extravagant jewelry, and his sons to return gifts given to them at the same time. He instead placed the value in a trust for the community, demonstrating with his own actions his commitment to living a simple life and rejecting material wealth.¹⁰ This was a constant throughout Gandhi's life, as he rejected the use of British imports in favor of domestically created goods (like fabric).

Gandhi's economic principles were shared by Sojourner Truth. Income inequality struck both of these activists deeply. Gandhi said “What happened to the families of the numberless poor in the world? Why should I not count myself as one of them?”¹¹ This quote exactly reflects the sentiments that Sojourner expressed as a result of her interaction with the poor men who were to have swept the snow away from the gate. They each came to see people as interconnected, saw no difference between themselves and those with less money, and came to the conclusion that money itself was the problem.

Courage

The biggest misconception many people have about nonviolence is that it is a weak form of resistance, one that runs away from conflict rather than standing to face it. This is certainly not the case. Nonviolent resistance requires facing violence head on *without* resorting to violence. This, in fact, takes great courage. Gandhi's quotes to this effect are numerous but the following is a straightforward example: “Nonviolence is not for cowards. It is for the brave, the courageous.”¹² As an ex- slave who simply walked away from her master one day, who in one instance fought tirelessly within the legal system to get her son back from an illegal trans-state sale, and who chose to leave her life in New York to walk across the US, Sojourner's bravery and

9 *Narrative*, 79.

10 Gandhi, R, *Gandhi*, 87.

11 Gandhi, R, *Gandhi*, 103.

12 *Ibid*, 197.

courage are easy to see. One event however, related in her *Narrative*, demonstrates the strength of her spirit like no other.

After leaving New York and traveling as a speaker through Long Island and New England, Sojourner settled in Northampton, Massachusetts. The community she joined was a religious one, and held large prayer camp events. They were similar to modern music festivals, where featured religious leaders would speak on stages and attendees would camp out for several days in a field. Sojourner was attending one of these camps and one night, a group of rowdy young men came to the camp with the intention of disrupting the events and causing mischief. When the camp members became frustrated and threatened the young men, they responded as if attacked, and collected a group to attack the camp. They accosted speaker's platforms and disrupted prayer meetings by shouting and threatening to burn down the camp. As one of the few, if not the only black person at the camp, Sojourner reports being afraid for her life and running into a tent to hide behind a large trunk. It was at this point that she had another epiphany:

“Shall I run away and hide from the Devil? Me, a servant of the living God? Have I not faith enough to go out and quell that mob, when I know it is written- 'One shall chase a thousand and two put ten thousand to flight'? I know there are not a thousand here; and I know I am a servant of the living God. I shall go to the rescue and the Lord shall go with and protect me. “Oh,” said she, I felt as if I had *three hearts!* And that they were so large, my body could hardly hold them!”¹³

Sojourner then proceeded to leave the tent, alone, unable to persuade anyone to come with her. The noise and disruption were described at this point as being “terrific.” She walked to the top of a small hill and began to sing. Every report of Sojourner's public presence as she spoke or sang emphasizes her power, that she was mesmerizing, utterly captivating.

As she sang on the hilltop under a full moon¹⁴ the young men disrupting the camp began to gather around her, drawing so near that she ended up standing in the middle of a tight circle of men armed with clubs. They all collected around her, up to 100 or more, and stood listening. She stopped singing for a moment to ask why they would attack her, a peaceful woman singing. They responded that they were not planning to attack, but had come to listen to her sing and would prevent any who wanted to attack her. They called out to her to sing or to speak of her experiences, and Sojourner did. She spoke as she would in prayer meetings, or to those who wanted to hear of her faith and her opinions. She sang again, and after she had been speaking and singing for a long time, she asked the mob, if she sang one more song, would they go home and leave the campers in peace? They agreed, and after one more song the men dispersed. There was some dissent, as some did not want to honor their word, but the men who wanted to leave were more persuasive, and the camp was left in peace.

For a woman, of a race that was in many places considered to be less than human, to quell a violent mob of over 100 men, to walk out of her place of safety and *sing* in the face of such a threat of violence, this is as pure a demonstration of nonviolent courage as could exist.

Nonviolent Direct Action

Most Americans are familiar with the major events of the Civil Rights Movement and the de-segregation of the south. Sit ins, freedom riders, Rosa Parks and the bus boycott are all commonly known events. Long before the 1950's however, there was still segregation in the north. One phase of Sojourner's life was dedicated to dismantling the system of segregation in

¹³ *Narrative*, 94.

¹⁴ *Narrative*, 94.

Washington DC. The public transportation system in Washington was of course segregated, but had been recently de-segregated by law. Laws did not have a direct impact on people's actions however, and blacks were frequently denied entrance onto trains and horse cars, or physically thrown off. Since she knew that she had a legal right to ride all public transportation, Sojourner began a determined campaign to change the reality on the streets.

There are numerous examples of her work in this regard. On at least two occasions where a conductor passed her by, she chased the car down and demanded to be taken on. She used civic disruption by shouting to the point of upsetting traffic on the entire street, or chased the car all the way to the next stop and entered with other passengers. In another example Sojourner was out with a white abolitionist friend and they flagged a passing street car. The conductor allowed her white friend to board, but started moving before Sojourner could board. She did not run after the car in this case, but actually grabbed the side of the car and held on, allowing herself to be dragged by the cart until her friend convinced the conductor to stop. After they reported the incident, the conductor was fired. There are many more instances of Sojourner's actions on the Washington street cars, all nonviolent, and all making use of the legal protection recently extended to blacks riding public transport. She brought a high profile lawsuit against one conductor for assault, and her cause was catapulted into the media. Her message was heard, as she won this lawsuit, and more conductors were fired as people reported attempts to maintain segregation. Within a year of Sojourner's initiation of nonviolent resistance to segregation, we have reports of blacks and whites regularly riding cars together on public transportation without altercation.¹⁵ The desegregation of streetcars cannot be attributed solely to Sojourner, however this paper is concerned with the action as it reflects on Sojourner herself. It is an example of nonviolent direct action in opposition to an entrenched system of oppression and inequality.

Principled Nonviolence requires action that is more than symbolic- action that has direct results and consequences in the real world. This campaign is a perfect example of Sojourner engaging in nonviolent obstructive action. There was a real consequence in her life to riding public cars, and each time she insisted on riding, there was a concrete result in her life, and in the lives of those riding in the car with her. She faced violence directed at her person on numerous occasions, but never responded with violence, only persistence. She used legal means to make her point, and was willing to lay her physical well-being on the line when it was necessary. These are all examples of actions that are integral to obstructive action in principled nonviolence. Her actions had real, concrete consequences: she faced violence in carrying out these actions, she did not respond with violence, but was willing to put her safety at risk as the threat increased.

Constructive Work

Perhaps her most passionate cause later in life was Sojourner's tireless work on behalf of recently freed slaves. Although she practiced nonviolent resistance and obstructive work against segregation, she actually spent most of her time in Washington working to help freed slaves build sustainable lives for themselves. There were many government supported camps full of freed slaves in Washington at the time, and Sojourner wanted to see the ex-slaves supporting themselves and taking full advantage of their freedom. She worked in the camps, teaching women how to sew and encouraging everyone to find work.

Since there were many hundreds of ex-slaves, it became clear that in order to find work, they would have to be relocated. Sojourner made use of her connections in upstate New York, and (having since moved from New England to Michigan) in Battle Creek Michigan. She

¹⁵ Mabee, *Sojourner Truth*, 135.

traveled to and from these locations, setting up jobs for the ex slaves, and then personally escorting them to their new places of employment. This was not a straightforward task however. She encountered obstacles at every turn, ranging from bureaucratic red tape to the very task of convincing the ex-slaves to leave the government supported camps to work for themselves.

Although her efforts had limited success, she worked on this project for many years in her later life. One of the most powerful tools of Nonviolence is called Constructive Programme. Becoming independent by nonviolent means requires more than resistance, it requires constructive work from within the community. This is precisely what Sojourner was advocating with her relocation efforts. She wanted the blacks to work and make their own living. She saw that the practice of relying on government refugee camps was not a sustainable way of life, and worked for years both to train ex-slaves when they needed to learn new skills and to find them places of employment. A repressed group can only be truly independent when they do not rely on their oppressors for survival. Sojourner understood this, and made it her mission free her brothers and sisters from this dependence.

Conclusion

Sojourner Truth was trained in the nonviolent theories of the day, specifically those of William Loyd Garrison. However, she was not exposed to his theories until later in her life, certainly after she left New York. This essay focuses on aspects of Sojourner's life that embody the foundations of principled nonviolence. Her life clearly demonstrates a reflection of these principles, and in many cases, they were organic, internally inspired life choices dating from before her exposure to Garrison's theories.

As her *Narrative* implies, Sojourner was a deeply introspective woman who constantly questioned the world around her. She sought internal divine guidance and once she had an answer, she followed the edicts of her conscience determinedly. Her observations and her own moral compass lead her to many of the same conclusions that came to Gandhi, and her life clearly demonstrates that she lived in accordance with Principled Nonviolence.

Class Exercise: Ar'n't I a Woman?

The speech Sojourner Truth is most famous for having given (though as we have seen, it was only one of many speeches she gave in her career as a traveling evangelist) happened in a Quaker Meeting House in Akron, Ohio in 1851. She is very likely never to have said the famous "Ar'n't I a woman" however. Following are two reported versions of the speech. Consider the context of each speech, and then think through the questions at the end of the passage.

The famous version of the speech was actually written and published by Frances Gage 12 years after the speech was given. Gage herself admits that it was not written down until that late date, and that it was a "faint sketch" of the speech.¹⁶ Gage was the presiding officer at the meeting in Akron, and was therefore present for the speech. While Sojourner was already a well known speaker at the time she gave the speech, she was even more well known 12 years later.

"Nobody eber helps me into carriages, or ober mud puddles, or give me any best place;" and, raising herself to her full height, and her voice to a pitch like rolling thunder, she asked, "And Ar'n't I a woman? Look at me. Look at my arm," and she bared her tight arm to the shoulder, showing its tremendous muscular power. "I have plowed and planted and gathered into

¹⁶ Mabee, *Sojourner Truth*, 68.

barns and no man could head me- and ar'n't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man (when I could get it), and bear de lash as well- and ar'n't I a woman? I have born thirteen chillen¹⁷ and seen 'em mos' all sold off into slavery, and when I cried out with a mother's grief, none but Jesus heard-- and ar'n't I a woman?¹⁸

In contrast, four other accounts of the speech were published immediately after the Akron meeting. The longest report was published in the *Bugle*. It is much less dramatic, and contains several ideas that Sojourner was known to discuss repeatedly in her frequent public appearances. The report itself also says that it would be impossible to transfer the speech exactly to paper.

“May I say a few words?” Receiving an affirmative answer, she proceeded: “I want to say a few words about this matter. I am a woman's rights. I have as much muscle as any man, and con do as much work as any man. I have plowed and reaped and husked and chopped and mowed, and can any man do more than that? I have heard much about the sexes being equal; I can carry as much as any man, and eat as much too, if I can get it. I am as strong as any man that is now.

As for intellect, all I can say is, if a woman have a pint and a man a quart- why can't she have her little pint full? You need not be afraid to give us our rights for fear we will take too much-- for we won't take more than our pint'll hold. The poor men seem to be all in confusion and don't know what to do. Why children, if you have woman's rights give it to her and you will feel better. You will have your own rights and they won't be so much trouble.

I can't read, but I can hear. I have heard the bible and have learned that Eve caused man to sin. Well if a woman upset the world, do give her a chance to set it right side up again. The lady has spoken about Jesus, how he never spurned woman from him, and she was right. When Lazarus died, Mary and Martha came to him with faith and love and besought him to raise their brother. And Jesus wept-- and Lazarus came forth. And how came Jesus into the world? Through God who created him and woman who bore him. Man, where is your part?

But the women are coming up blessed be God and a few of the men are coming up with them. 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.”¹⁹

Questions:

1. What ideas are in both reports of the speech? What could this tell you about the words that Truth actually spoke?
2. What ideas only appear in one speech? Why might there be a difference?
3. Do you think it is possible to really know what words were spoken?
4. Speculate about the motivations for Gage: why she was writing? Speculate about the *Bugle* reporter- why was he writing?
5. What can you guess about the two authors of the different reports?
6. After reading these two speeches, do you feel like you know more about Sojourner Truth or about the people who wrote the speeches down?
7. What do you think Sojourner Truth's speech was really like?

17 Sojourner Truth is not known to have had more than 5 children.

18 Mabee, *Sojourner Truth*, 76.

19 Mabee, *Sojourner Truth*, 81-82.