

Sojourner Truth's "Aint I A Woman" speech disputes claims that men possess intellect superior to women

The Importance of Sojourner Truth's Ain't I A Woman Speech

By: R. Renée Bembry

Born into slavery in Ulster County New York in 1797, Sojourner Truth, in 1826, fled the home of her master taking her infant daughter but leaving her other three or four children behind. [The number of children she actually left behind is unclear because it is undetermined as to whether or not one of her children died at birth or some time during early childhood.] Although an emancipation order had called for freedom for all slaves born after 1799, Sojourner's older children would not reach full emancipation status until after they'd moved into their twenties and had completed their services as bound servants.

At the time of her escape, Truth called herself Isabella Baumfree (also spelled Bomefree), the name given her by her parents James and Elizabeth Baumfree. Following New York's abolishment of slavery and Truth's acquiring refuge with a family of Quakers, however; she renamed herself Isabella Van Wagener after the Quaker family. She would hold this name until 1843 when after immersing herself in religion and preaching along the eastern seaboard, she began to present herself as Sojourner Truth the "new" name she said God had given her.

Within a few years of adopting her newest name, Truth joined the abolitionist movement and the women's rights movement utilizing the speaking skills she'd perfected through preaching to the articulate on behalf of these causes. Although Truth grew up an uneducated slave, she was loaded with charisma, and her eloquent speech delivery style coupled with her knack of inserting parables into her orations more than accounted for the fact that she was illiterate.

Large crowds often stood before Truth as she spoke out against societal wrongs with dialectical prominence; and in fact Margaret Washington, a Cornell University associate professor of history and editor of "Narrative of Sojourner Truth" 1993 edition labeled Truth as one of the most quoted activists of her time placing her among Frederick Douglass and Susan B. Anthony.

Truth's "Aint I a Woman?" speech delivered in 1851 at a women's rights convention in Akron, Ohio was devised to dispute claims made by Protestant ministers suggesting men possessed intellect superior to women and therefore "deserved" greater privileges than women.

During the speech, Truth not only addressed the issue of men's supposed superiority over women, but she interweaved the issue of Negro (African American) equality into her oration including the fact that being a Negro didn't make her any less a woman than those supposedly "in need to be helped into carriages..." as she stated.

Truth made it clear that not only were men not intellectually superior to women, but that they needed to take heed as to what was going on around them because neither the issues of women's rights nor the issues of Negroes' rights were going to subside.

In her speech, Truth also managed to insinuate white male selfishness when she asked her audience of men wouldn't it be

mean for them not to share their quart with her if she had only a pint.

According to Frances D. Gage's rendition of the speech (written thirty years later), Truth even managed to obtain audience participation to get her points across.

In looking at the importance of Truth's speech, one must look beyond the speech itself because despite her eloquence, despite her ability to draw an audience, and despite her flair to insert listeners into her verbiage Sojourner Truth was a double-minority—African American and female—speaking at a time when slavery was still struggling to taper down; at a time when any white—including white women for whose rights she was fighting for along with her own—could have met her around the corner and taken her out without thinking twice about it; at a time when no female—nonetheless a black female had the “right” to publicly present a speech aimed at criticizing the white male. Women had their “place” back then; and that place did not include belittling men on platforms. The civil rights Truth was fighting for had yet to come into existence; and yet, coming up on 190 years later, the United States finds itself fighting many of the same injustices as we again fight for the rights of women, minorities, voting, equal pay, and decent pay to name a few.