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#### AMERICAN VALUES

## Sojourner Truth was the voice of reason against inequality and injustice.

Heroes display courage of conviction

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The greatness of the United States is not found in citizens born into privilege but in those who bucked the odds, punching their way through dense adversity. Often they have been more than great leaders — they've been leaders linked to a cause or even a movement.

Social movements are the currents that pull the events of history to shore. On that terra firma, Americans have built a society often regarded as the longed-for Promised Land for millions around the world.

Sojourner Truth was born in 1787, just before George Washington's presidency, in a Dutch settlement in upstate New York. She was one of 13 children of slave parents, who named her Isabella Baumfree. At 11, she was sold with a flock of sheep for \$100. She learned to speak English, in addition to her Dutch, in order to communicate with her cruel new master.

Forced to marry an older slave to whom she bore five children, she eventually managed to run away — but with only her infant daughter. She supported herself and little Sophia with domestic work until she had a spiritual revelation: from that time on, she traveled the country as an itinerant (if illiterate) preacher, declaring God's promise of eternity in heaven as well as justice on earth.

Isabella changed her name to Sojourner Truth as she spread the gospel. She cut an impressive figure: tall, poised, her hair wrapped in a bright turban. Her listeners were often unsympathetic, and she replied directly to their taunts. In Indiana, when someone called her a man in disguise, she bared a breast to the audience to refute the claim.

In the best American tradition of crossing boundaries, she took on as religious causes the fair treatment of women and the abolition of slavery. She petitioned Congress to grant former slaves land in the West and visited President Lincoln to offer her help.

During the war, thousands of slaves fled to the nation's capital, thinking they would be protected. But there was no housing or labor for them, and very little food. Sojourner worked with them at the Freedmen Hospital in Washington, riding the streetcars to work, defying segregation.

Maryland residents had been coming into Freedmen's Village and kidnapping black children. When parents complained, they were thrown in jail. When Sojourner went through the village, informing the parents of their rights, she was threatened with jail, too. She replied that if they tried to silence her, she would "make this nation rock like a cradle."

She later added temperance to her causes, given how alcohol often led to the destitution or terror of women and children. In 1872, she attempted to break the law by voting in a local election. And she was an outspoken critic of capital punishment, lobbying hard for prison reform.

Given the scope of her vision and the hardships of her life, it's no surprise that Sojourner's health was poor. In her early 80s, she gave up smoking her clay pipe. (A friend had told her the Bible said that "no unclean thing can enter the Kingdom of Heaven," to which she replied: "When I goes to Heaven I expects to leave my bad breath behind.")

Among many other problems, she had ulcers on her legs. At the end, her doctor reputedly grafted some of his own skin onto her leg. When she died at 85 in Michigan, a thousand people attended her funeral.

A century later, Sojourner Truth was inducted into the U.S. Women's Hall of Fame in Seneca Falls, N.Y., the birthplace of the women's movement.

Five years later, the U.S. government honored her with a commemorative stamp. And in 1997, a Mars probe bore her name.

The wisdom of Sojourner Truth is emblazoned on the American psyche today. Her gritty insistence on truth delivered with droll humor reminds us of another great: her contemporary Mark Twain. Like him, she captured the best in the American spirit: an impatience with the status quo and a impulse for pressing forward.

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### **THE WORDS OF TRUTH**

*"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? 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? I have borne thirteen children, and seen most all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain't I a woman?"*

*"Then they talk about this thing in the head; what's this they call it? (member of audience whispers, "intellect") That's it, honey. What's that got to do with women's rights or negroes' rights? If my cup won't hold but a pint, and yours holds a quart, wouldn't you be mean not to let me have my little half measure full?"*

*"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.*

*"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. ..."*

— Sojourner Truth, to the Women's Convention in Akron, Ohio, December 1851

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