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# Susan B. Anthony: Pioneer of Freedom

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We are apt to wonder at times why so many obstacles are put in the way of our personal plans; why there are so many obstructions to overcome; why we cannot have smoother sailing instead of having to battle incessantly against adverse winds and opposing tides. The answer may be found in the fact that nature has provided, wisely enough, no doubt, that not in the smooth and rose-lined paths of ease but only out upon the rugged road of trial and adversity is character developed, vision clarified, ambition inspired and success achieved.

Shakespeare has said :

Sweet are the uses of adversity,  
Which, like the toad, ugly and venomous,  
Wears yet a precious jewel in his head.<sup>1</sup>

Most of the men and women honored in history for their service to mankind were acquainted with the uses of adversity, and they achieved immortal fame only because the difficulties they met and the opposition they encountered, far from thwarting their designs, developed their latent energies and powers and aroused within them the conquering determination which carried them far beyond their coveted goal.

Susan Brownell Anthony, whose whole heroic life was one continuous struggle against ignorance and prejudice, one unceasing battle to overcome seemingly insurmountable obstacles, was born in South Adams, Mass., in 1820. Her father was a member of the Society of Friends and the owner of a cotton factory in which Susan found her

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<sup>1</sup> From *As You Like It* (1599), Act 2, Scene 2.

first employment. It would be interesting to know to what extent the environment and experience of the factory worker influenced the mental process and shaped the career of the Quaker lass who was destined to become the bold pioneer, the dauntless champion, the militant and uncompromising leader in the great struggle soon to begin for the enfranchisement of the world's enslaved and degraded womanhood.

Susan B. Anthony was born in an era that gave birth to a galaxy of extraordinary political, social and moral leadership. John Brown and Elijah P. Lovejoy, the first martyrs to the abolition movement, arrived with the new century, the former in 1800 and the latter in 1802, the year which those two magnificent women, Lydia Maria Child and Harriet Martineau were also born. The stars under which these heroic spirits, these passionate lovers of freedom, these fanatical haters of slavery, were ushered into the world augured ill for the vile institution which the new republic had taken to its bosom and which had inoculated with deadly virus every fountain and stream designed to bless its life.

In 1804 William Lloyd Garrison, founder of the abolition movement, was born; in 1809, the immortal Lincoln; two years later, in 1811, Wendell Phillips, the matchless orator of the movement, and in the same year, Charles Sumner, its leading statesman, and Horace Greeley, its bold and incorruptible journalist.

The following year, 1812, brought Harriet Beecher Stowe, whose great novel was destined to awaken the conscience of a nation and set a world aflame; three years later, in 1815, Elizabeth Cady Stanton was born, just in time to serve as the elder sister and the lifetime comrade-in-arms of Susan B. Anthony, one of the greatest souls in history, whose eyes opened upon the world in 1820. Mary A. Livermore followed a year later, in 1821, and Ulysses S. Grant, the soldier in the final bloody conflict, two years later, in 1822.

Such were the militant spirits among whom Susan B. Anthony was born and among whom she was to take foremost rank in the great struggle to abolish slavery, clothe a million human chattels with the dignity of citizenship, enfranchise the womanhood of the nation, and further the cause of freedom and justice, of democracy and civilization throughout the world.

Miss Anthony received her school education in Philadelphia, and when she was seventeen began teaching in the State of New York, at which she continued during the following fifteen years. There is little

doubt that her experience as a teacher at a time when the crime of being a woman was penalized by half pay and by even harsher measures, preceded by her apprenticeship in a cotton factory, sowed in her young heart the seed that was to germinate in revolt against the whole iniquitous system which condemned one set of human beings to political servitude because of their sex, and another to industrial servitude because of the color of their skin. She had herself not only tasted the wormwood and gall but had drained the cup, and all the blood in her veins ran riot with resentment.

Susan B. Anthony was being moulded by the invisible hands of destiny for her tremendous task and her immortal career. The factory girl became the school teacher; the school teacher the non-conformist; the non-conformist the rebel; the rebel the revolutionist. The flaming spirit of the crusader shone from her eyes; the lightning flashes from her indignant soul leaped to her tongue and the orator of the suffrage movement was born. Susan Anthony had served her apprenticeship, found her metier, was charged with the burning message of emancipation, and was now ready for her tremendous undertaking.

An incident, in itself of seemingly small moment and yet to her and her future of vital consequence, occurred when she was still a girl. She had become interested in temperance work. By sheer force of her splendid personality she led in whatever she undertook. To her surprise and indignation she was denied admission to a convention of temperance workers on account of her sex. This happy circumstance, as it proved to be, aroused her to call a convention of women, and henceforth the battle was on in which there should be no truce while servitude was the badge of her sex.

From her very childhood this magnificent woman sympathized with the weak, the unfortunate, the poverty-stricken, the sorrowing and suffering, regardless of their color, creed or sex, and put forth all her efforts to alleviate their distress and improve their condition. She pleaded with the school authorities to equalize the wages of the women teachers, who were so shamelessly discriminated against, actually robbed, on account of their sex, and it was while engaged in these almost fruitless efforts that she came to realize the fundamental necessity of the political franchise for women before they could hope to command a decent hearing and secure their common rights. She pointed out the bitter injustice suffered by the working class in the miserable wages they were forced to accept, the humiliating and degrading unemployment to which they were subjected, their wretched

housing conditions, their poverty and squalor, and their lack of opportunity to live decent lives; she espoused the cause of the chattel slave.

The first Woman's Rights Convention was called by Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott and held at Seneca Falls, NY, in July, 1848. When adjournment was had it was to meet in the month following in Rochester, the home of Miss Anthony, and when the call came to her it found her ready for the leading role in the great drama which was to fill in complete measure all the years of her life and all the powers of her consecrated soul.

Miss Anthony's "Entrance Into Public Life" shortly following the launching of the woman's movement for equal rights, is presented in dramatic detail by her biographer and confidential friend and adviser, Ida Husted Harper, in her excellent *Life and Work of Susan B. Anthony*. Says Mrs. Harper:

The year 1849 saw the whole country in a state of great unrest and excitement.... The admission of Texas into the union had precipitated the whole force of the slavery agitation.... Threats of secession were heard in both the North and the South.... The abolitionists were still a handful of radicals, repudiated alike by the Free Soil Whigs and Free Soil Democrats....

It was a period of grave apprehension on the part of older men and women, of intense aggressiveness on the part of the younger, who were eager for action. It is not surprising then that an educated, self-reliant, public-spirited woman who had just reached 30 should chafe against the narrow limits of a school-room and rebel at giving her time and strength to the teaching of children, when all her mind and heart were drawn toward the great issues then filling the press and the platform and even finding their way into the pulpit. Miss Anthony's whole soul became absorbed in the thought, "What service can I render humanity; what can I do to help right the wrongs of society?" \* \* \*

The year 1850 was for her one of transition. A new world opened out before her. The Anthony homestead was a favorite meeting-place for liberal-spirited men and women. On Sunday especially, when the father could be at home, the house was filled and 15 or 20 people would gather about the hospitable board. Susan always superintended these Sunday dinners, and was divided between her anxiety to sustain her reputation as a superior cook and her desire not to lose a word of the conversation in the parlor. Garrison, Pillsbury, Phillips, Channing and other great reformers visited at this home, and many a Sunday the

big wagon would be sent to the city for Frederick Douglass and his family to come out and spend the day.... Every one of these Sunday meetings was equal to a convention. All were Garrisonians and believed in "immediate and unconditional emancipation."

Miss Anthony first met Elizabeth Cady Stanton at Seneca Falls, NY, in 1850, whither she had gone to hear William Lloyd Garrison and George Thompson, the English abolitionist, who were then stirring up the people against slavery and who in turn were being jeered, insulted, threatened and mobbed by the law-abiding (!) defenders in the North of the "peculiar institution" in the South. From the moment they clasped hands these two great women were friends. Intuitively each recognized in the other a comrade, an ally, and for 52 years, until death intervened, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony worked together hand in hand in the broad field of the common good and maintained an intimacy of relation, born of mutual confidence and love, almost without a parallel in history. They seemed to have been created each for the other and they certainly were one in every crisis of their heroic lives.

Soon after her meeting with Mrs. Stanton, Miss Anthony met Lucy Stone for the first time, also at Seneca Falls. Lucy Stone, two years her senior, a pioneer abolitionist and advocate of woman's rights, eloquent and fearless, was already one of the recognized leaders of the day, with whom Miss Anthony formed a bond of unity that endured unbroken through all the stormy years that followed.

People of the present day can have little or no conception of the difficulties these pioneer women encountered, of the brutal prejudice that prevailed against the cause they battled for half a century ago, the cause now popular enough to command the plaudits and support of the heirs of the very politicians, pulpiteers, and other reactionaries and time-servers who reviled and insulted Susan B. Anthony and her brave coadjutors and who would not have objected to take, if indeed they did not take an active hand in driving them from the community. They were accused of being "infidels and atheists" and of seeking to remove God from the universe; they were charged with being "free lovers," with advocating sex immorality, and with being bent upon undermining the sacred institution of marriage, breaking up the family and destroying the home — the false and ridiculous indictment which has long since been transferred to and is now doing the same kind of duty against the socialist movement.

The great newspapers reflected in their columns the vicious prejudice with which they had inoculated the public, and some of these papers would today, though even more prostituted now than then, blush scarlet with shame to be confronted with the false and filthy editorials that disgraced their columns in their dastardly attempt, at the behest of their rich and eminently respectable owners, to discredit and destroy in its infancy the woman suffrage movement.

As a specimen of such journalistic vituperation, of which many are quoted in Mrs. Harper's biographical volumes, the following editorial which appeared in the *New York Herald* of September 12, 1852, in comment upon a Woman's Rights Convention held at Syracuse, is certainly illuminating at this time:

How did woman first become subject to man, as she now is all over the world? By her nature, her sex, just as the negro is and always will be to the end of time, inferior to the white race, and, therefore, doomed to subjection; but she is happier than she would be in any other condition, just because it is the law of her nature....

What do the leaders of the Woman's Rights Convention want? They want to vote and to hustle with the rowdies at the polls. They want to be members of Congress, and in the heat of debate subject themselves to coarse jests and indecent language.... They want to fill all other posts that men are ambitious to occupy, to be lawyers, doctors, captains of vessels and generals in the field. How funny it would sound in the newspapers that Lucy Stone, pleading a cause, took suddenly ill in the pains of parturition and perhaps gave birth to a fine bouncing boy in court or that Rev. Antoinette Brown was arrested in the pulpit in the middle of her sermon from the same cause, and presented a "pledge" to her husband and the congregation; or that Doctor Harriet K. Hunt, while attending a gentleman patient for a fit of the gout or fistula had found it necessary to send for a doctor, there and then, and to be delivered of a man or woman child — perhaps twins.<sup>2</sup> A similar event might happen on the floor of Congress, in a storm at sea or in the raging tempest of battle, and then what is to become of the woman legislator?

This and much more or the same idiotic and disgusting drool was the stock argument of the public press, the "representative" journals of the day against abolition and woman suffrage at the time Susan B.

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<sup>2</sup> No one of these ladies was married. —EVD.

Anthony and her band of devoted associates began their crusade for the enfranchisement of their sex and for the overthrow of chattel slavery! But the leaders of this movement were not to be daunted by insults or silenced by slander. They were of the type born to lead, to stand and withstand, to brave the taunts of the ignorant and the threats of the malevolent, to preserve inviolate their principles, to face all opposition unafraid, and finally to immortalize themselves in the triumph of their cause.

The Syracuse convention in 1852 proved to be historic in its bearing upon the suffrage movement and especially in determining Miss Anthony to devote her life to the furtherance of its objects and the fulfillment of its mission. In commenting upon the personnel of the convention and the results of its labors Mrs. Harper says:

No more brilliant galaxy of men and women ever assembled than at this Syracuse convention, and the great question of the rights of women was discussed from every conceivable standpoint. \* \* \* Miss Anthony came away from the Syracuse convention thoroughly convinced that the right which woman needed above every other, the one indeed which would secure to her all others, was the right of suffrage.

Henceforth her mind was made up and her duty clear. With dauntless courage and resolute determination she entered upon her work. Early and late, in and out of season, she planned and studied, traveled and lectured, wrote and counseled to one purpose: To free her sex from the trammels of servitude and see woman take her place side by side with man, his equal as a human being and as a citizen, was now the ruling passion of her life. From state to state, from city to city, and hamlet to hamlet she carried her message and made her appeal to the people. Her patience was inexhaustible, her courage supreme, her endurance marvelous. She mastered every detail of the movement, scanned the situation daily, hourly, and studied the opposing forces as a general does upon the field of battle. Facts and figures without end were at the tip of her tongue. She was ever on the alert for an opening for her propaganda, and she was never caught unawares by the enemy. She had the argument and knew how to use it. She was in deadly earnest, yet always calm, kindly and dignified. She had temper in plenty but under perfect control. She never lost her head. She was armed for attack of whatever nature and from whatever source. She met ridicule with reason; anger with patience

and argument; insults with forbearance and dignity. She was the incarnation of the gospel she preached, the principles she stood for, and for more than fifty years this great, heroic, unselfish woman gave her life, day by day — every heartbeat — her very blood, drop by drop, to the cause of the poor, the weak, the defenseless.

In February, 1879, I first met Miss Anthony personally. She was on a western lecture tour and came to Terre Haute to fill an engagement under the direction of a literary club with which I was then connected. I had always favored equal suffrage and had long admired Miss Anthony as the champion of her sex. From Lafayette I received a message from her asking me to meet her on arrival of her train. Instantly I recognized her as she stepped to the platform and I was proud and happy to escort her to her hotel. She impressed me at once as a woman of strong character and commanding personality. She was exceedingly kind and gracious in manner. She was dressed quietly without any attempt at style. It was apparent that she had little interest in the "latest in bonnets." She had more serious business in mind.

The prejudice against her in the community was bitter and relentless. In the eyes of the conservative, the respectable, the conventional, the reactionary, the great bulk that always stands for what is and against what is to be, and is ever ready to apply the branding iron to the thinker and tie the faggots to the feet of the reformer — in the eyes of these self-righteous and self-complacent people who have in every age been the enemy of progress and crucified the world's saviors, or stoned or imprisoned or despised them, Susan B. Anthony was, of course, "unwomanly" — she was a "bold and brazen creature," a positive offense to her sex. I felt it keenly on her account, but she did not seem to be even conscious of it. At least she gave no outward sign. She towered too far above her lilliputian detractors to be disquieted by their petty prejudices and their silly reproaches. She knew that they did not know enough to know she was their friend and deliverer in spite of themselves, and she pitied them accordingly.

Mrs. Ida Husted Harper, who then resided in Terre Haute, met Miss Anthony on this occasion for the first time. Mrs. Harper took an active part in arranging Miss Anthony's meeting and this was the beginning of a friendship which ripened into an intimacy that ended only with Miss Anthony's death. Mrs. Harper became not only Miss Anthony's confidential friend but her biographer as well, spending several years at the Anthony homestead collecting the material and



writing the three large volumes comprising the *Life and Work of Susan B. Anthony* and covering practically the entire history of the suffrage movement in the United States.

Miss Anthony's audience at Terre Haute was not large but her speech was great. She had an amazing array of facts and figures, but these were not dry or uninteresting to her listeners. She held them from first to last by her intense earnestness, her deep sincerity, the clarity of her reasoning, and the convincing force of her argument. She made it clear in that early day, when a female orator was still a freak or at least a curiosity, that a woman could be quite as much at home on a public platform as in a private kitchen. She disarmed prejudice and cleared the atmosphere for the more enlightened public sentiment which has since swept Indiana into the number of equal suffrage states.

Almost 25 years passed before I met Miss Anthony for the second and last time. It was in her home city of Rochester and this time she sat in the audience I addressed. The years of trial, persecution and incessant struggle had left their ruthless impress upon her noble features. She had reached four score, and the sands of life were slipping away. She waited until the close of the meeting and as I approached her she clasped my hands in both of hers. "You remember me?" she queried with the modesty so characteristic of her. "Remember you," I answered, "how could anyone ever forget Susan B. Anthony?" The sweetest smile lighted up her venerable countenance as she pressed my hands and said, "How glad I am to see you after all these years!" We chatted about the days that were gone, about the progress that had been made, and about the work yet to be done. She laughingly remarked: "Give us suffrage and we'll give you socialism," to which I answered in the same spirit: "Give us socialism and we'll give you suffrage." She was not enthusiastic over the results of her work. I endeavored to reassure her but she gravely shook her head and was plainly disappointed that the half century of bitter struggle in which she bore so commanding and honorable a part had not been more fruitful of results and that she must pass away without realizing the fulfillment of her lifelong dream.

Soon after this Susan B. Anthony passed from earthly scenes to the realms of rest. Again I returned to Rochester to address another meeting. A mass of red roses and carnations decorated the stage. At the close of the meeting it was decided to visit Miss Anthony's resting place and decorate her grave and the grave of her beloved sister and

guardian angel, Mary, with the flowers. On the following morning under escort of the women comrades we repaired to the cemetery, covered the graves of “Aunt Susan” and “Sister Mary” with our red roses and carnations, and paid to their memory the tribute of our love and tears. We then visited the An-thony homestead and were shown from room to room, the once busy haunts that now seemed so strangely still.

I thought of the great woman, the luminous soul who had reigned in that historic and hospitable old home, of the many sacrifices she had made, the many burdens she had shouldered, the many lives she had touched, the many sleepers she had awakened, the many sorrows she had assuaged, the many prejudices she had dispelled, the many hopes she had inspired, the many obstacles she had overcome, the many crosses she had borne, the many pitiless persecutions she had suffered, the many battles she had fought, and the final glorious triumph which had crowned her noble life.

Susan B. Anthony lived for humanity and wrought for the ages. She made her name synonymous with the cause of human freedom and equal rights; she was a moral heroine, an apostle of progress, a herald of the coming day.

*Edited by Tim Davenport*

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