

Victoria C. Woodhull, "And the Truth Shall Make You Free" (November 20, 1871)

Victoria Woodhull delivered this speech about liberty and free love to a large audience at Steinway Hall, New York on November 20, 1871. As you read this excerpt from the opening of her speech, consider whether she reflected the older tradition of equal rights feminism or the emerging strain of feminism that argued for the more expedient enfranchisement of purportedly superior white, Anglo-Saxon women. How does she answer the question, "What is freedom?"

"And the truth shall make you free." A speech on the principles of social freedom, delivered in Steinway hall, Nov. 20, 1871, by Victoria C. Woodhull...

The Principles of Social Freedom.

It has been said by a very wise person that there is a *trinity* in all things, the perfect *unity* of the trinity or a tri-unity being necessary to make a complete objective realization. Thus we have the theological Trinity: The Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost; or Cause, Effect and the Process of Evolution. Also the *political* Trinity: Freedom, Equality, Justice or *Individuality, Unity, Adjustment*; the first term of which is also resolvable into these parts, thus: Religious freedom, political freedom and social freedom, while Religion, Politics and Socialism are the Tri-unity of Humanity. There are also the beginning, the end and the intermediate space, time and motion, to all experiences of space, time and motion, and the diameter, circumference and area, or length, breadth and depth to all form.

Attention has been called to these scientific facts, for the purpose of showing that for any tri-unity to lack one of its terms is for it to be incomplete; and that in the order of natural evolution, if two terms exist, the third must also exist.

Religious freedom does, in a measure, exist in this country, but not yet perfectly; that is to say, a person is not entirely independent of public opinion regarding matters of conscience. Though since Political freedom has existed in theory, every person has the *right* to entertain any religious theory he or she may conceive to be true, and government can take no cognizance thereof--he is *only* amenable to *society*-despotism. The necessary corollary to Religious and Political freedom is Social freedom, which is the third term of the trinity; that is to say, if Religious and Political freedom exist, *perfected*, Social freedom is at that very moment guaranteed, since Social freedom is the fruit of that condition.

We find the principle of Individual freedom was quite dormant until it began to speak against the right of religious despots, to determine what views should be advocated regarding the relations of the creature to the Creator. Persons began to find ideas creeping into their souls at variance with the teachings of the clergy; which ideas became so *strongly* fixed that they were compelled to protest against Religious Despotism. Thus, in the sixteenth century, was begun the battle for Individual freedom. The claim that rulers had *no right* to control the consciences of the people was boldly made, and right nobly did the fight continue until the *absolute* right to individual

opinion was wrung from the despots, and even the *common* people found themselves entitled to not only entertain but also to promulgate *any* belief or theory of which they could conceive.

With yielding the control over the *consciences* of individuals, the despots had no thought of giving up any right to their *persons*. But Religious freedom naturally led the people to question the right of this control, and in the eighteenth century a new protest found expression in the French Revolution, and it was baptized by a deluge of blood yielded by thousands of lives. But not until an enlightened people freed themselves from English tyranny was the right to self-government acknowledged in theory, and *not yet* even is it fully accorded in practice, as a legitimate result of that theory.

It may seem to be a *strange* proposition to make, that there is no such thing yet existent in the world as self-government, in its political aspects. But such is the fact. If self-government be the rule, every self must be its subject. If a person govern, not only *himself* but others, that is despotic government, and it matters not if that control be over one or over a thousand individuals, or over a nation; in *each* case it, would be the *same* principle of power exerted outside of self and over others, and *this* is despotism, whether it is exercised by *one* person over his subjects, or by *twenty* persons over a nation, or by *one-half* the people of a nation over the other half thereof. There is no escaping the fact that the principle by which the *male* citizens of these United States assume to rule the *female* citizens is *not* that of self-government, but that of despotism; and so the fact is that poets have sung songs of freedom, and anthems of liberty have resounded for an empty shadow.

King George III, and his Parliament denied our forefathers the right to make their own laws; they rebelled, and being successful, inaugurated this government. But men do not seem to comprehend that they are now pursuing toward *women* the *same* despotic course that King George pursued toward the American colonies.

But what is freedom? The press and our male governors are *very much* exercised about this question, since a certain set of resolutions were launched upon the public by Paulina Wright Davis at Apollo Hall, May 12, 1871. They are as follows:

Resolved, That the basis of order is freedom from bondage; not, indeed, of such "order" as resigned in Warsaw, which grew out of the bondage; but of such order as reigns in Heaven, which grows out of that developed manhood and womanhood in which each becomes "a law unto himself."

Resolved, That freedom is a principle, and that as such it may be trusted to ultimate in harmonious social results, as in America, it has resulted in harmonious and beneficent political results; that it has not hitherto been adequately trusted in the social domain, and that the woman's movement means no less than the complete social as well as the political enfranchisement of mankind.

Resolved, That the evils, sufferings and disabilities of women, as well as of men, are social still more than they are political, and that a statement of woman's rights which ignores the rights of self-ownership as the first of all rights is insufficient to meet the demand, and is ceasing to enlist

the enthusiasm and even the common interest of the most intelligent portion of the community.

Resolved, That the principle of freedom is one principle, and not a collection of many different and unrelated principles; that there is not at bottom one principle of freedom of conscience as in Protestantism, and another principle of freedom from slavery as in Abolitionism, another of freedom of locomotion as in our dispensing in America with the passport system of Europe, another of the freedom of the press as in Great Britain and America, and still another of social freedom at large; but that freedom is one and indivisible; and that slavery is so also; that freedom and bondage or restriction is the alternative and the issue, alike, in every case; and that if freedom is good in one case it is good in all; that we in America have builded on freedom, politically, and that we cannot consistently recoil from that expansion of freedom which shall make it the basis of all our institutions; and finally, that so far as we have trusted it, it has proved, in the main, safe and profitable.

Now, is there anything so terrible in the language of these resolutions as to threaten the foundations of society? They assert that every individual has a *better* right to herself or himself than any other person *can have*. No living soul, who does not desire to have control over, or ownership in, another person, can have any *valid* objection to *anything* expressed in these resolutions. Those who are not willing to give up control over others; who desire to *own* somebody beside themselves; who are constitutionally predisposed against self-government and the giving of the same freedom to others that they demand for themselves, will of course object to them, and such are the people with whom we shall have to contend in this new struggle for a greater liberty.

Now, the individual *is* either self-owned and self-possessed or *is not* so self-possessed. If he be self-owned, he is so because he has an *inherent* right to self, which right cannot be delegated to any second person; a right--as the American Declaration of Independence has it--which is "inalienable." The individual must be responsible to self and God for his acts. If he be owned and possessed by some second person, then there is *no such thing* as individuality: and that for which the world has been striving these thousands of years is the merest myth.

But against this irrational, illogical, inconsequent and irreverent theory I boldly oppose the spirit of the age--that spirit which will *not* admit all civilization to be a failure, and all past experience to count for nothing; against that demagogism, I oppose the plain principle of freedom in its *fullest, purest, broadest, deepest* application and significance--the freedom which we see exemplified in the starry firmament, where whirl innumerable worlds, and never one of which is made to lose its individuality, but each performs its part in the grand economy of the universe, giving and receiving its natural repulsions and attractions; we also see it exemplified in every department of nature about us: in the sunbeam and the dewdrop; in the storm-cloud and the spring shower; in the driving snow and the congealing rain--all of which speak more eloquently than can human tongue of the heavenly *beauty, symmetry* and *purity* of the spirit of freedom which in them reigns untrammelled.

Our government is based upon the proposition that: All men and women are born free and equal and entitled to certain inalienable rights, among which are life, liberty and the *pursuit* of happiness. Now what we, who demand social freedom, ask, is simply that the government of this

country shall be administered in accordance with the spirit of this proposition. *Nothing* more, *nothing* less. If that proposition mean *anything*, it means *just what* it says, without qualification, limitation or equivocation. It means that *every* person who comes into the world of outward existence is of *equal* right as an individual, and is free as an individual, and that he or she is entitled to pursue *happiness* in whatever direction he or she may choose. Now this is absolutely true of all men and all women. But just here the wise-acres stop and tell us that *everybody* must *not* pursue happiness in his or her own way; since to do so absolutely, would be to have no protection against the action of individual. These good and well-meaning people only see *one-half* of what is involved in the proposition. They look at a single individual and for the time lose sight of all others. They do not take into their consideration that every other individual beside the one whom they contemplate is *equally* with him entitled to the *same* freedom; and that each is free within the area of his or her individual sphere; and *not* free within the sphere of any other individual whatever. They do not seem to recognize the fact that the moment one person gets out of *his* sphere into the sphere of *another*, that other must protect him or herself against such invasion of rights. They do not seem to be able to comprehend that the moment one person encroaches upon another person's rights he or she ceases to be a *free* man or woman and becomes a *despot*. To all such persons we assert: that it is *freedom* and *not* despotism which we advocate and demand; and we will as rigorously demand that individuals be restricted to *their* freedom as any person dare to demand; and as rigorously demand that people who are predisposed to be *tyrants* instead of free men or women shall, by the government, be so restrained as to make the exercise of their proclivities impossible.

If life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness are *inalienable* rights in the individual, and government is based upon that inalienability, then it *must follow* as a *legitimate* sequence that the *functions* of that government are to *guard* and *protect* the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, to the end that *every* person may have the most *perfect* exercise of them. And the most perfect exercise of such rights is *only* attained when every individual is not only fully *protected* in his rights, but also *strictly restrained* to the exercise of them within his *own* sphere, and *positively* prevented from proceeding beyond its limits, so as to encroach upon the sphere of another: unless that other first *agree* thereto.

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