



Honoring the Struggles of Visionary Women

Prepared Remarks of Commissioner Kristine L. Svinicki On the U.S. NRC Observance of Women's Equality Day

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I am very pleased to be here today. I know almost every speaker begins that way, but in this case, I truly mean those words. The way I see it, there is no more important possession that each person has than her time and choosing how to spend that time, hour to hour, day to day, is one of the greatest powers in our possession. So, my objective, at the end of our brief time together today, is to have conveyed something that you will feel was useful and that your time spent here was a good choice. In order to increase my odds of succeeding in that goal, I will be talking a lot about, and using the words of, other women, smarter women, . . . visionary women.

Now, you notice that a moment ago I used the pronoun “her” in reference to choosing how to spend “her time.” Maybe pronouns aren’t something that you give a whole lot of thought to on any given day, but I will confess the obvious about myself – at least it is to anyone who pays attention to my votes. I accompany my votes with a lot of grammatical edits to the various orders and *Federal Register* notices, and other documents that come before me as a Commissioner. So, I am a little hung up on grammar and am self aware enough to admit it. I like to think that it is something that grows out of my love for the English language and language in general, because language is how we make ourselves understood.

Recently, I corrected recurrent incidents, in some document I was reviewing, of this particular grammatical issue. It was a response to public comments on a proposed or final rule and – in the response – the grammar used was “the commenter did not state their opinion.” This is an opportunity for me to identify kindred spirits in the audience, because some of you reacted just now by wincing a little bit because of course the sentence needs to read, “the commenter did not state his opinion” or “the commenter did not state her opinion.”

In our language, we default, normally, to the male pronoun. I don’t have any issue with that but pronouns can be powerful things and I’m not so grown up that I can’t have a little fun with it. For example, I enjoy making statements such as “A Senator must consider the views of her constituents” or “The operator must review the logbook before beginning her shift” or “A Commissioner must vote for what she believes is right.” I don’t consider myself particularly strident in advancing pronoun equality, but there is

power in the pronoun and frankly, it's fun to mix it up a little bit. We are, after all, about fifty percent of the population on the planet, so I encourage any of you who are so motivated to throw a few "shes" and "hers" into the pronoun mix. If I run across them in draft orders and *Federal Register* notices, I won't tell anybody.

To turn more directly to the topic of today, I always look at opportunities like today's observance as an opportunity to get smarter about something. Having heard about the online quiz about women's history that was mentioned in one of the announcements for this event, I jumped online and gave it a try. Did anyone else take the quiz? I didn't keep score on myself. Probably in an acknowledgement that I wasn't going to score high, I think I just scrolled down and read the correct answer to each question after reading the question. I did know that Wyoming was the first U.S. state to give women the vote.

Recognizing that I didn't know as much about the women's suffrage movement as I should, and taking this opportunity to learn more, I did some research at the library. I am going to recommend this book, "Not for Ourselves Alone: The Story of Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony," written by Geoffrey Ward and Ken Burns. It formed the basis for a three hour documentary they did on these two women and – in it – they have compiled some of the speeches and letters I will quote from today.

Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony were two of the primary organizers, speakers, and writers for the nineteenth century women's rights movement in the United States.

Most of us have heard of Susan B. Anthony – if in no other connection than the hapless piece of currency bearing her likeness. Has anyone ever encountered one of these dollar coins in circulation? I haven't. And now we are trying once again with another important woman in this country's history – Sacagawea. Based on how many of those coins I have seen in circulation, history may indeed be repeating itself.

One of the first quotes that had an impact on me, actually came at the back of this book. It struck me because I had to admit I saw some of myself in it. It is a quote of Susan B. Anthony, reflecting on the struggle to secure the right to vote, and goes as follows:

"We shall some day be heeded, and . . . everybody will think it was always so, just as many young people think that all the privileges, all the freedom, all the enjoyments which woman now possesses always were hers. They have no idea of how every single inch of ground that she stands upon today has been gained by the hard work of some little handful of women of the past."

Now, I won't say that I was unaware, but I certainly wasn't as versed in this history as I would like to be and some of what I learned, is what I would like to share with you today.

First, some historical context: When Elizabeth Stanton and Susan Anthony were working to advance the cause of women's rights, as noted "Not for Ourselves Alone":

“[W]omen in America had fewer rights than a male inmate of an insane asylum. Women were prevented from attending college, and barred from the pulpit and all professions. Those who dared to speak in public in this democracy were thought indecent. No women could serve on a jury and most were considered incompetent to testify in court. They could not sign contracts, keep or invest earnings, own or inherit property; they had no rights in divorce, including the custody of the children they bore. In fact, women were the property of their husbands, who were entitled – by law – to their wives’ wages and bodies. And the ballot by which women might have voted to improve their status was denied to them by law.”

In its earliest stages in America, the woman’s suffrage movement had its roots in the movement to abolish slavery. In fact, early women pioneers in the abolitionist cause are considered to have paved the way for Stanton, Anthony, and all the other advocates of women’s rights who came after them. Two sisters, Angelina and Sarah Grimke – who were daughters of a prominent slaveholding family in Charleston – wrote in their pamphlet entitled “Appeal to the Christian Women of the South” that “female slaves are our countrywomen; they are our sisters.” But when they began to insert the call for women’s rights into their anti-slavery messages, even some of their antislavery allies began to criticize them. They were accused of forgetting, “the great and dreadful wrongs of the slave in a selfish crusade against some paltry grievance . . . some trifling oppression, political or social, of their own.”

Angelina Grimke responded to this criticism as follows: “If we surrender the right to speak in public this year, we must surrender the right to petition next year, and the right to write the year after, and so on. What then can woman do for the slave, when she herself is under the feet of man and shamed into silence?”

Her sister Sarah’s response was, I think, even more forceful. “I ask no favors for my sex,” she wrote. “All I ask of our brethren is that they will take their feet from off our necks and permit us to stand upright on the ground which God has deigned us to occupy.”

So close were the two causes intertwined that the work of Frederick Douglass, Elizabeth Stanton, and Susan Anthony intersected. Frederick Douglass even observed, “The cause of the slave has been peculiarly woman’s cause.” At the first women’s rights convention in history, in Seneca Falls, New York, in July of 1848, there were in fact only a handful of women attending who had fully pledged their support to take up the cause of securing the right to vote for women. Nowhere on earth, at that time, did women have the right to vote and some participants thought that pushing for suffrage would make the convention – to use their term -- “look ridiculous.”

Stanton pushed forcefully for a resolution advancing suffrage but feared that she would not be able to persuade her listeners. Stanton’s good friend, Frederick Douglass, was in the audience and asked for permission to address the assembly. Without the vote, he told them, women would be unable to change the laws that treated them unfairly. He said:

“All that distinguishes man as an intelligent and accountable being is equally true of woman; and if that government only is just which governs by the free consent of the governed, there can be no reason in the world for denying to woman the exercise of the elective franchise, or a hand in making and administering the laws of the land.”

Frederick Douglass’s eloquence at the convention in support of the resolution was credited with having secured its passage.

Sojourner Truth was another legendary voice in the suffrage movement, as well as anti-slavery circles. A story is recounted of a group of women trying to hold a women’s rights meeting in Ohio in the spring of 1851 when they were drowned out by a “raucous band of jeering clergymen.” Sojourner Truth asked to address the meeting. She is said to have pointed a long, bony finger at the hecklers and began ridiculing their claims that women were too delicate to survive in the larger world beyond the home. Her words are recorded as follows:

“The man over there says 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 puddles, or gives me the best place – and ain’t I a woman? . . . 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 of ‘em sold into slavery, and when I cried out with my mother’s grief, none but Jesus heard me – and ain’t I a woman?”

Susan B. Anthony wrote that Sojourner Truth “combined in herself as an individual the two most hated elements of humanity. She was black, and she was a woman, and all the insults that could be cast upon color and sex were together hurled at her, but there she stood, calm and dignified, a grand wise woman who could neither read nor write, and yet with deep insight could penetrate the very soul of the universe about her.”

Elizabeth Stanton over the course of decades, crossed and re-crossed the country, speaking at gatherings large and small -- advancing the cause of women – spending eight months at a time on what she called the lecture circuit. Stories of her sharp responses to male hecklers in her audiences are amusing. In one story, reportedly occurring in a small town in Nebraska, an angry man interrupted Stanton by asking, “Don’t you think that the best thing a woman can do is perform well her part in the role of wife and mother? My wife has presented me with eight beautiful children; is not this a better life-work than that of exercising the right of suffrage?” Stanton reportedly looked the man slowly up and down before responding, “Frankly, sir, I know of few men worth repeating eight times.”

In 1892, after tireless decades advancing the cause of women’s suffrage and women’s rights, Elizabeth Stanton resigned as the president of the National American Woman Suffrage Association. She believed that her farewell speech, which she also delivered before the House and Senate Judiciary Committees, was – to quote her -- “the best thing I have ever written.” Susan B. Anthony was rumored not to have liked the speech at first,

principally because she thought it lacked sufficient focus on securing the right to vote, but she later called it “the strongest and most unanswerable argument and appeal ever made by mortal pen or tongue for the full freedom and franchise of women.”

Stanton’s speech goes on for some pages, but I wanted to close my remarks today by quoting this passage.

“The strongest reason for giving woman all the opportunities for higher education, for the full development of her faculties, her forces of mind and body; for giving her the most enlarged freedom of thought and action; a complete emancipation from all forms of bondage, of custom, dependence, superstition; from all the crippling influences of fear – is the solitude and personal responsibility of her own individual life.

“The strongest reason why we ask for woman a voice in the government under which she lives; in the religion she is asked to believe; equality in social life, where she is the chief factor; a place in the trades and professions, where she may earn her bread, is because of her birthright to self-sovereignty; because, as an individual, she must rely on herself.

“No matter how much women prefer to lean, to be protected and supported, nor how much men desire to have them do so, they must make the voyage of life alone, and for safety in an emergency, they must know something of the laws of navigation.

“To guide our own craft, we must be captain, pilot, engineer; with chart and compass to stand at the wheel; to watch the winds and waves, and know when to take in the sail, and to read the signs in the firmament over all. It matters not whether the solitary voyager is man or woman; nature, having endowed them equally, leaves them to their own skill and judgment in the hour of danger, and, if not equal to the occasion, alike they perish. . . .

“Nothing strengthens the judgment and quickens the conscience like individual responsibility. Nothing adds such dignity to character as the recognition of one’s self-sovereignty; the right to an equal place, everywhere conceded – a place earned by personal merit, not an artificial attainment by inheritance, wealth, family and position.

“Conceding, then, that the responsibilities of life rest equally on man and woman, that their destiny is the same, they need the same preparation for time and eternity. The talk of sheltering woman from the fierce storms of life is the sheerest mockery, for they beat on her from every point of the compass, just as they do on man, and with more fatal results, for he has been trained to protect himself, to resist, and to conquer. Such are the facts in human experience, the responsibilities of individual sovereignty. Rich and poor, intelligent and ignorant, wise and foolish, virtuous and vicious, man and woman; it is ever the same, each soul must depend wholly on itself.”

It would take another 28 years after Stanton delivered this speech before the 19th Amendment to the Constitution would be ratified in 1920, granting women across America the right to vote. I hope that you find the words of these visionary women and men as compelling as I do and their stories inspiring.

The poet Maya Angelou said, “One isn’t necessarily born with courage, but one is born with potential. Without courage, we cannot practice any other virtue with consistency. We can’t be kind, true, merciful, generous, or honest.”

The journalist Dorothy Thompson said, “Only when we are no longer afraid do we begin to live.”

Those who struggled so long and hard for our right to participate fully in this democracy – I think – would be encouraged to see all of us here today honoring their struggle, their vision – and their victory -- by committing to live as fearlessly as they did.

Thank you.