

READING

Speech by Frances Watkins Harper: “We Are All Bound Up Together”

In 1866, Black activist Frances Ellen Watkins Harper gave an address at the Eleventh National Women’s Rights Convention in New York City. The convention was held during a national debate about whether to grant the rights and privileges of full citizenship to newly freed Black Americans during Reconstruction. It also occurred during a major effort to secure the right to vote for women. In this excerpt from the speech, Watkins Harper addresses both issues:

I FEEL I AM SOMETHING of a novice upon this platform. Born of a race whose inheritance has been outrage and wrong, most of my life had been spent in battling against those wrongs. But I did not feel as keenly as others, that I had these rights, in common with other women, which are now demanded. About two years ago, I stood within the shadows of my home. A great sorrow had fallen upon my life. My husband had died suddenly, leaving me a widow, with four children, one my own, and the others stepchildren. I tried to keep my children together. But my husband died in debt; and before he had been in his grave three months, the administrator had swept the very milk-crocks and wash tubs from my hands...Had I died instead of my husband, how different would have been the result! By this time he would have had another wife, it is likely; and no administrator would have gone into his house, broken up his home, and sold his bed, and taken away his means of support....I say, then, that justice is not fulfilled so long as woman is unequal before the law.

- 1. What personal experiences shaped Watkins Harper’s beliefs on women’s rights?**

We are all bound up together in one great bundle of humanity, and society cannot trample on the weakest and feeblest of its members without receiving the curse in its own soul. ...This grand and glorious revolution which has commenced, will fail to reach its climax of success, until throughout the length and brea[d]th of the American Republic, the nation shall be so color-blind, as to know no man by the color of his skin or the curl of his hair. It will then have no privileged class, trampling upon and outraging the unprivileged classes, but will be then one great privileged nation, whose privilege will be to produce the loftiest manhood and womanhood that humanity can attain.

2. Based on the information in this paragraph, what do you think Watkins Harper means by the statement, “we are all bound up together in one great bundle of humanity”?

..You white women speak here of rights. I speak of wrongs. I, as a colored woman, have had in this country an education which has made me feel as if I were in the situation of Ishmael¹, my hand against every man, and every man’s hand against me. Let me go to-morrow morning and take my seat in one of your street cars-I do not know that they will do it in New York, but they will in Philadelphia-and the conductor will put up his hand and stop the car rather than let me ride...

3. What do you think Watkins Harper means by the phrase, “You white women here speak of rights. I speak of wrongs”? What are the “wrongs” that she has personally experienced as a Black women living in the United States?

...We have a woman in our country who has received the name of “Moses,” not by lying about it, but by acting it out- a woman who has gone down into the Egypt of slavery and brought out hundreds of our people into liberty.² The last time I saw that woman, her hands were swollen. That woman who had led one of Montgomery’s most successful expeditions, who was brave enough and secretive enough to act as a scout for the American army, had her hands all swollen from a conflict with a brutal conductor, who undertook

¹ Ishmael is a figure in the Bible who was banished to the desert by his father, Abraham.

² Watkins Harper is referring here to Harriet Tubman, who became famous as a conductor on the Underground Railroad, helping enslaved people escape to freedom in the North.

to eject her from her place. That woman, whose courage and bravery won a recognition from our army and from every black man in the land, is excluded from every thoroughfare of travel. Talk of giving women the ballot-box? Go on. It is a normal school³, and the white women of this country need it. While there exists this brutal element in society which tramples upon the feeble and treads down the weak, I tell you that if there is any class of people who need to be lifted out of their airy nothings and selfishness, it is the white women of America.

4. Why do you think Watkins Harper includes the story about Harriet Tubman in her speech? What purpose does it serve?

³ School for the training of teachers.