

“Legacies of Resistance”

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Edmund Everett Hale famously said, *“I am only one, but still I am one. I cannot do everything, but still I can do something and because I cannot do everything, I will not refuse to do the something that I can do.”* Today I want to tell you a story about a woman who embodied this quote: Lydia Maria Child, a nineteenth century author and activist. Although never had the right to vote, she influenced the direction of the entire nation. What she did have was a pen, a hard-won education, and a brilliant, creative mind.

Born in 1802 in Medford, Massachusetts, as an adolescent she briefly lived in Maine near the Abenaki and Penobscot Indians. This experience informed her first book, *Hobomok*, in 1824 as well as her much later “Appeal for the Indians” published after the Civil War in 1868. During the 44 years between these books, Maria’s life and that of the nation heaved, twisted, and turned.

As a young woman, Child was a widely known author of *Hobomok*, *The Frugal Housewife* (an advice book), and *The Juvenile Miscellany*, the nation’s first children’s magazine. But then she published *An Appeal in Favor of That Class of Americans Called Africans* in 1833. In doing so, she followed her conscience off a metaphorical cliff.

Simply put, her 1833 *Appeal* was too radical for most Americans. She not only called for an immediate end to slavery, but she also criticized Northern racism, writing:

“While we bestow our earnest disapprobation on the system of slavery, let us not flatter ourselves that we are in reality any better than our brethren of the South... Those who are kind and liberal on all other subjects, unite with the selfish and the proud in their unrelenting efforts to keep the colored population in the lowest state of degradation; and the influence they unconsciously exert over children early infuses into their innocent minds the same strong feelings of contempt.”ⁱ

In other words, denouncing practices of enslavement was not enough. Child also called for changing attitudes and actions that promoted social inequality—including teaching racial bias to children. For Child, the goal was to end the prejudices and racist ideas that undergirded the whole system of enslavement and injustice.

She knew she would face resistance to her ideas—writing as much in the preface to the *Appeal*. Still, she wrote her conscience and paid for it with loss of reputation and income.

More than three decades would pass from the 1833 *Appeal* to President Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation. Describing these Civil War years, biographer Lori Kenschaft writes,

[Northerners] rallied around the goal of emancipation, even if just a few years earlier they had been opposed or indifferent to it. For 35 years Child had lobbied for abolition, and many people now praised her foresightedness. Newspapers vied for her writings and she was considered one of the most influential shapers of Northern public opinion.ⁱⁱ

Finally, the public embraced Child's long advocacy to end the enslavement of people.

And yet, her larger plea for social and economic equality remained unwelcome as assumptions of racial *inequality* remained rampant in society and in government policy. After President Lincoln's assassination, President Andrew Johnson chose to be lenient to the defeated South in his post-war Reconstruction policies. For example, while Child advocated for allocating Southern plantations to formerly enslaved persons, most property was returned to their white owners. In this way, the reconstituted southern state governments reinstituted an agricultural system that strongly resembled slavery in all but name.

In Congress, the Republican majority fought to build more opportunities for the formerly enslaved persons against President Johnson. But, when Congress passed a Civil Rights Bill defining African Americans as U.S. citizens in 1866, Johnson vetoed it. After Congress overrode the veto, tension between Johnson and the 39th Congress erupted. As Kenschaft writes, "*Congress would pass laws over Johnson's veto, but Johnson would refuse to enforce them. His overt sabotage of congressional legislation led to the first impeachment of an American president.*"ⁱⁱⁱ Many of the impeachment charges against Johnson regarded his dismissal of Secretary of War Edwin Stanton, a leading Republican in the prior Lincoln administration. Johnson's dismissal of Stanton was seen as blatant disregard for Congressional authority who had recently passed a law—*over Johnson's veto*—that removal of executive officials must be approved by the Senate. Despite these many tensions with Congress, Johnson ultimately avoided removal from office by just one vote in the Senate.

Hearing this story helps to remind us that U.S. politics have a long history of very significant conflict. In the 1860's and in our time, national politics can challenge us to consider how to follow our conscience into action.

Lydia Maria Child engaged in the post-Civil War tensions in her own way—as an author. Publishing *The Freedman's Book* in 1865, Child sought to both promote literacy among the formerly enslaved persons and to prepare them for participation as full citizens in the nation. Unlike Johnson and others who would return the South to a system of racial hierarchy and white supremacy, Child imagined a world of multi-racial equality. And she did all this while living outside Boston in the little rural town of Wayland.

It's complicated, isn't it? In so many ways, Child's writing and editing shaped the nation towards a more just and equitable world. *And* in other ways, her advocacy and ideas failed to reach full fruition. A hundred years after the 1865 *Freedman's Book*, a second Civil Rights movement was needed and a different President Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act of 1965 to remove the accretions of racist law and practices. Sixty-years later, we have witnessed the dismantling of the Voting Rights Act as well as blatant support for white supremacy ideas and leaders at the highest forms of government. From national policies to interpersonal interactions online and in neighborhoods across the nation, still so much work remains to fulfill Child's plea for social and economic equity.

Perhaps her legacy of a decades long resistance can inspire our own choices in this moment.

In a 2018 book, scholar-activist Mary Frances Berry argues, *History Teaches Us to Resist*. In each of Dr. Berry's chapters, she traces the complicated ins and outs of multiple movements for social change. Each example of change is presented with an extraordinary detail of people, organizations, dates, and actions. An interlinking complexity emerges to illustrate how no changes happen in a flash, nor is there a straight path forward. Rather, social change emerges again and again from persistent, organized groups of people pressuring for change. Dr. Berry writes,

It's crucial to recognize that resistance works even if it does not achieve all the movement's goals, and that movements are always necessary, because major change will engender resistance, which must be addressed.^{iv}

The path to change is one of dedication *and* of setbacks. It is one of partial victories and ongoing work. This was certainly the experience of Lydia Maria Child.

By the time Child died in 1880, the 13th Amendment made slavery illegal, the 14th Amendment established the right to due process and equal protection under the law, and the 15th Amendment prohibited denying the right to vote because of race. *And* women would not receive the right to vote for another forty years, Native Americans would

continue to face violence as well as the loss of lands and rights well into the future, and the fight for justice still requires a persistent, organized movement to change minds and laws.

And so, here we are in 2025 facing a social and political situation unlike any other time in history. We remain watchful and fearful of the harm felt by many—all against the backdrop of a climate crisis that remains indifferent to who holds political power.

Reflecting about this moment in light of Lydia Maria Child and Dr. Berry's idea that history teaches us to resist, part of me feels like railing against injustice with prophetic anger. And another part of me just wants to weep for all the injustices and challenges that remain. But then I also feel amazed imagining what Maria Child would think about a *woman* minister with a doctorate from Harvard preaching at First Church while quoting Mary Frances Berry—a *black woman* with a PhD and a law degree who served in multiple Presidents' administrations?

We live everyday within freedoms of which Child only dreamed.

And so how do we live knowing our freedoms emerge from the dreams and legacies of our ancestors? How do we live knowing that social change is neither guaranteed, nor straightforward?

Perhaps, part of what may help us sustain our own engagement is remembering people like Lydia Maria Child who leave legacies of persistent resistance, of doing something they could do. Consider this closing passage from Kenscraft's biography which reads:

Child was not, however, superhuman. She was subject to depression and despair, and at times she could be outright cranky. Some years she felt as if she had accomplished nothing with her life. Her marriage was often troubled, and she always regretted that she had no children. Two things, however, distinguished her from the many people of her time who are now forgotten. First, she had an inexhaustible faith that liberty and justice are worth fighting for and that they will ultimately prevail. Second, she continuously acted on that faith, in large ways and small, even when she did not know whether her actions would succeed. She did not...embrace every enthusiasm that came along, but she did her best within each situation and repeatedly risked failure. After each setback, each disappointment, she nursed her wounds and then tried again.^v

"History teaches us to resist." In every generation, we each have the choice to risk, to fight for liberty and justice, and to join with others to become a movement for change. We are in

a moment that calls out for us to join the movement—for a democracy that respects the rights of all persons and for a planet capable of sustaining the life of its plants, animals, oceans, and skies.

In Kenscraft's biography, my favorite line states, "Even though [Child] remained in Wayland, and rarely ventured even into Boston, she helped form public opinion throughout the North."

From our own time and place, may we receive this humbling legacy of Lydia Maria Child to join the movements of our time, fighting as we can for life, liberty, and justice.

Amen.

ⁱ Lydia Maria Child, *An Appeal in Favor of That Class of Americans Called Africans*, quoted in Lori Kenscraft, *Lydia Maria Child: The Quest for Racial Justice*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 45.

ⁱⁱ Kenscraft, p. 95.

ⁱⁱⁱ Kenscraft, p. 96-7.

^{iv} Mary Frances Berry, *History Teaches us to Resist: How Progressive Movements Have Succeeded in Challenging Times*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 2018), p. 2.

^v Kenscraft, p. 113.