

## **Finding Inspiration in the Life, Legacy, and Humanity of Lucy Stone**

**By Regina M. Edmonds, Ph.D.**

Welcome everyone and thank you for being here to celebrate the life and work of Lucy Stone on this 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of her birth. How wonderful it is to lift up – for all to see – the accomplishments of West Brookfield’s own “super star” and to contemplate the gifts Lucy has given to all of us as we work for justice and equality in our own times. My heartfelt thanks also go out to the West Brookfield Historical Commission for giving me the honor of presenting to you today some of my thoughts on the remarkable Lucy Stone. But before I start I would like you to join me in a round of applause for everyone who helped create this marvelous celebratory weekend – with a special thanks going out to Barbara Rossman, Dick Rossman, and Dan Hamilton as it was their vision and talent that made this weekend possible. Thank you!!!

There is no doubt that Lucy Stone grew up in tumultuous times as our nation struggled to define its identity and to put into practice the ideals enshrined in its founding documents. In reading about these turbulent times, one of the things that fascinated me most was – how did it happen that this particular young girl, Lucy Stone, growing up on a farm only a few miles from this very spot, became one of the most powerful voices in the anti-slavery struggle and, as she was called at the time, “The Morning Star” of the movement for women’s rights? What propelled this seemingly ordinary farm girl, the eighth of nine children, to embrace abolition, universal suffrage, and equality under the law for all when so many around her did not? Perhaps, as some say, her activism was handed down from her grandfather who had participated in Shays’ rebellion in 1787, or maybe it was her exposure to abolitionist views in the *Liberator*, an anti-slavery newspaper read in her family, that inspired her. Others cite Lucy’s motivation as deriving from the deep distress she felt in observing how her beloved mother submitted to all the wishes of her father, as was the custom and law at the time, and from watching her mother tiptoe occasionally into her father’s bedroom to procure a few coins from his purse, hidden under his pillow. Seeing a neighbor beaten regularly by her husband with no recourse also contributed to Lucy’s growing anger over the injustices women faced. I imagine all of these factors fostered, at first a childlike and later a highly sophisticated, approach to overturning these wrongs which flawed the foundation upon which our nation was built. Lucy was surely an extremely intelligent, curious, high-spirited, and determined child who read everything she could get her hands on and who decided at an early age to obtain the highest level of education possible so as to be prepared to argue with skill, knowledge, and dedication for those suffering oppression. Reading the words of Angelina and Sarah Grimké, the daughters of slaveholders who became abolitionists, and watching Abby Kelley speak on the horrors of slavery while calling for women to raise their voices in concert with those of men undoubtedly inspired this passionate young woman to dedicate her life to righting the wrongs she saw all around her. But isn’t it amazing that a child born right here in our still fairly rural, peaceful, and isolated town, became one of America’s most beloved and admired advocates for human rights?

Lucy Stone truly was one of the most inspirational orators anyone had ever seen. In 1848 she burst onto the stage astonishing those working to abolish slavery and by 1849 she began speaking passionately as well for the rights of women. Once her life as an orator had begun, it was hard to stop her, with only her death at the age of 75 in 1893 silencing her magnificent voice and message. In fact her last public address was made only five months before her death from stomach cancer at the Congress of Women at the World's Fair. To deliver this speech she traveled from Massachusetts to Chicago. How remarkable!!

Another question that fascinated me was - What made Lucy Stone so amazing as a speaker? What qualities of mind, character, and emotion brought audiences of sometimes 2000 or more to tears while listening to her words? In part it was the beauty of her voice itself which listeners likened to the sound of a "silver flute." Some said that once they had heard Lucy speak they never forgot her tender, musical, bird-like, voice. Another admirer, in a eulogy upon Lucy's death, described her voice as being like "the music of brooks in the ear of the thirsty traveler." Some have said that it was the contrast between her tiny stature, rosy complexion, and girl-like figure, and her powerful rhetoric that made her speaking so compelling, while others credited her persuasive power to her sincerity, humility, and heart-felt dedication to the causes she spoke about. Even near the beginning of her career one of the most senior and skilled abolitionist speakers claimed that Lucy "spoke with words replete with a rare eloquence" and with a "power that has never been surpassed and rarely equaled."

I think other factors too contributed to her success, including her quick wit and spit-fire responses to critics of the movement. For example, in a speech given before a committee of the New Jersey legislature, she answered the common concern that women were not rational enough to vote by saying, "No man would admit, even to himself, that his mother is not capable of rational choice. And if the woman he has chosen for a wife is a fool, that fact lies at least as much against his ability to make a rational choice as against hers" And in that same speech she challenged the credibility of the claim that women were not persons under the law by saying: "If all political power is inherent in the people, why have women, who are half the population of this state, no political existence? Is it because they are not people? Only a madman would say of a congregation of Negroes, or of women, that there were no people there."

Another highly effective aspect of her speeches were the heart-wrenching stories Lucy told to demonstrate her points. Hearing these stories often moved listeners to tears and sometimes caused Lucy herself to shed some as well. In these stories, which touched on universal themes such as a mother's love for her child, even when that mother was a slave, the profound concern Lucy felt for the oppressed could not be dismissed. In this way Lucy reached out from her podium to touch the hearts of her listeners and called them to act from the goodness she believed was present in every person's soul.

Lucy also had a truly remarkable way of turning on its head a criticism or angry outburst against her. Instead of rejecting the view of a critic speaking at the 1855 Woman's Rights Convention who claimed the movement was populated by a bunch of disappointed women,

Lucy embraced the concept of disappointment and said: "From the first years to which my memory stretches, I have been a disappointed woman. When, with my brothers, I reached forth after the sources of knowledge, I was reprov'd with 'It isn't fit for you; it doesn't belong to women.' ... In education, in marriage, in religion, in everything, disappointment is the lot of women. It shall be the business of my life to deepen this disappointment in every woman's heart until she bows down to it no longer." And in a most dramatic but similar kind of turnaround, namely using the anger of a mob to create the opposite effect, Lucy grabbed the arm of one of the protesters who was bent on throwing her and the other speakers from the stage. As one speaker ran from the platform he asked Lucy, who was not running, "Who will protect you?" and Lucy said to the club-wielding man whose arm she had grabbed: "This gentleman will protect me" and amazingly enough, he did.

In contemplating this story and others where Lucy not only calmly faced violence and rage but actually brought adversaries closer to her views, I tried to understand how she was able to touch even those feeling great anger. I am not sure, of course, but I think it was her ability to recognize the fear of change that many of her detractors felt and to resonate with that fear. My sense is that she was even able to extend to those threatening her the enormous empathy she felt for anyone in distress. She heard the fear and confusion in those railing against her and validated some of their feelings - thereby communicating an understanding of their concerns. Lucy's respectful response called out respect and admiration for her in return. And according to reports from the time, the man Lucy was sure would protect her not only put down his club, but also mobilized those remaining to at least listen to her speech and in the end those listeners contributed a total of \$20.00 to her cause.

We will never know for sure what made Lucy such an outstanding orator. I am sure her success resulted from the factors noted above and many others, but for me her ability to listen with warmth and to extend empathy toward any individual in pain, whether that be a slave, a woman with no personhood under the law, or even a rageful protester, was the overarching quality that made all the difference. Lucy's profound humanity and deep concern for others seemed to be embedded in her very nature and surely those qualities contributed to her unparalleled mastery of the art of oration. Lucy's humanity was also shown throughout her life in her relationships with family members, in her teaching of students, many of whom were initially angry about being instructed by a woman, and in her generosity toward others in the movement for human rights.

Lucy demonstrated what is often considered a quintessential womanly characteristic, namely giving selflessly to others. Therefore, as a psychologist by profession, I was especially interested in trying to understand how Lucy balanced her burning desire to create change in the world with her deep commitment and dedication to her family - both her family of origin and the family she created with her husband and child. How did she resolve the nearly impossible dilemma all working women face, even now, of creating a welcoming home for those we love while also making our mark in the outside world? Like many of us, Lucy did this at quite a cost to herself, but at the same time, my sense from reading about her life is that she would not have had it any other way.

On multiple occasions and at crucial points in her life, Lucy put her own dreams on hold to care for those she loved. In 1838, while saving money from teaching to support her planned entry into the Mt. Holyoke Female Seminary, Lucy's oldest sister Eliza died leaving two small children. Lucy made the decision to delay her entry into Mt. Holyoke in order to care for her now motherless nieces and to try to ease the grief of her own mother. A little over a year later, when Lucy had been at Mt. Holyoke for only one term, her sister Rhoda died and again Lucy returned home to try to provide comfort to her family. Years later, in 1850, when Lucy had begun her speaking career and was one of the principle organizers of the first National Woman's Rights Convention in Worcester, MA, which was certain to be an historic event, Lucy willingly abdicated many aspects of her role as convention organizer in order to travel to Illinois where her brother Luther lay deathly ill from cholera. Shortly after her arrival Luther died and Lucy remained in Illinois for several months to settle his affairs before beginning an arduous journey back to Massachusetts with Luther's pregnant wife Phebe. During the journey Phebe went into labor and delivered a stillborn baby. Lucy found a broken down hotel to stay in while nursing Phebe back to health as best she could but then Lucy herself fell ill with typhoid fever. For two weeks or so Lucy was near death but eventually recovered enough so that Phebe and she could continue their journey home to West Brookfield, arriving only days before the start of the Worcester convention. Despite her fragile condition Lucy went to Worcester and delivered an eloquent speech at the first National Woman's Rights Convention. This speech was said to have inspired Susan B. Anthony to decide to also become an advocate for the rights of women.

As is true for many of us, Lucy's care of others often took a tremendous toll on both her physical and psychological health. Lucy was prone to debilitating migraine headaches throughout her life and while none of us can know for sure what the cause of these headaches was, they did seem to become more frequent in times of personal or family crisis.

Perhaps the greatest challenge to Lucy's ability to work for social justice occurred in 1857, when, at the age of 39, she gave birth to her daughter Alice Stone Blackwell. Although Lucy had lectured actively throughout her pregnancy and planned to continue to do so, the realities of motherhood showed her that such was nearly impossible. In a moving letter written several months after Alice's birth to her dearest friend and sister-in-law, Antoinette Brown Blackwell, Lucy expressed her feelings upon returning from a lecture, writing that the lecture "was very inspiring and for the hour I felt as though all things were possible to me. But when I came home and looked in Alice's sleeping face and thought of the possible evil that might befall her if my guardian eye was turned away, I shrank like a snail into its shell and saw that for these years I can be only a mother - no trivial thing either." The following years were also very difficult with her husband, Henry Blackwell, away in the West for months at a time, leaving Lucy at home to care for the infant and to manage the household. Alice's care was also complicated by the fact that she was a "sickly child" succumbing to multiple childhood illnesses. In 1859, after uprooting the family by agreeing to Henry's wish that they move to Chicago, Lucy lost a son who lived only hours after he was born prematurely at seven months. About a year after this loss, Lucy was hit yet again with tragedy as her beloved mother died in 1860. During this time of devastating

losses and while confronting the realities of motherhood, Lucy seemed to lose her way. Again in a letter to her sister-in-law she wrote movingly about her loss of energy and confidence, saying: "I wish I felt the old impulse and power to lecture, ... but I am afraid and dare not trust Lucy Stone."

It took Lucy time to recover her passion and voice but even in those most difficult times she did not rest idly - holding a tax protest claiming that the property she owned should not be taxed because, as a woman, she was represented by no one in government - invoking the old "No Taxation without Representation" rallying cry of those declaring independence during the Revolutionary War. Later she founded the *Woman's Journal* which became one of the most important weekly magazines of the time. During the remainder of Lucy's life this journal never missed an edition and it continued to be published beyond her death, under the editorial guidance for many of those years of Lucy's daughter, Alice.

Lucy inspires me as I hope she does you. In so many ways, she was an ordinary woman like many of us, struggling to be the best daughter, sister, wife, and mother she could be, but she was also an extraordinary woman whose accomplishments were truly remarkable. She fought not only for the right to vote for women, but also for better educational opportunities for women, equal pay for equal work, the right to divorce an abusive husband, and even the right of a woman within a marriage to control when and if she would risk pregnancy. Among other things, Lucy was the first woman in Massachusetts to earn a college degree, she was among the first women in the U.S. to speak in person to a governmental body, and due to her strong views on abolition and women's rights, she was perhaps the first woman to be expelled from West Brookfield's own beautiful Congregational Church, just down the street from here. (By a vote of the congregation in 2017, Lucy was re-instated into the church).

On her deathbed Lucy whispered to her daughter Alice the words, "Make the World Better" and I think she would ask us today to do the same in our own tumultuous times. In her honor will you raise your glasses with me to celebrate the remarkable Lucy Stone, West Brookfield's shining star, beacon of hope, and example of love for all. May we find in our hearts the courage and generosity to create a more just world and thereby extend to all Lucy Stone's vision of a more perfect union. Thank you, Lucy. Thank you all for being here and for your kind attention. Enjoy the rest of this wonderful weekend and take Lucy's inspiring spirit, life, and work with you.