

## Stanton on Self and Community

*Richard Cándida Smith*

Elizabeth Cady Stanton's apparently absolute defense of individual rights in her talk from 1892, "Solitude of Self," rests on a sober confrontation with mortality. She was seventy-six years old, still vibrant intellectually but facing the increasing physical limitations of old age. The feminist movement she had piloted since the 1840s was shifting away from a broad natural rights defense of women's equality in all areas of life into a narrower, more respectable campaign for the vote. Without question, she understood the importance of suffrage, for without the vote no person could participate in the great decisions of the day, in the decisions that affected the course of all lives. Stanton knew from years of experience that war and peace, slavery, immigration policy, definitions of moral and immoral behavior, or the course of economic development were not men's issues. The life of every woman was bound to the fate of her community. Suffering and success were inevitably shared. Stanton's defense of individual rights assumed the connections that tied people together. The work of her last decade presupposed the inextricability of self and community as she reasserted the simple proposition that every person needed to share responsibility for the fate of the world.

In "Solitude of Self," mortality is no longer knocking at Stanton's door. It walks with her wherever she goes. It challenges her with the question, What have you wrought? Was the life you shaped for yourself worth the sacrifice? The immediate response to the second question is yes!, but the first question is harder to answer when freedom, equality, and justice remain works in progress. Her image of the soul as pilot of a vessel heading into uncharted waters summarizes deftly the dilemma of all revolutionaries. A leap of faith is required to support the conviction that the future one intuitively will overturn the evils of the present. Yet in "Solitude of Self" Stan-

ton did not dwell on the bright world her daughters and granddaughters might inherit. She insisted instead on the uncertainty of the future. She based her claim for individual rights on the inescapable fact of ignorance. Her figure of the soul moving into uncharted waters symbolizes with crystal clarity the dilemma of free will. Why were humans blessed with the gifts of inquiry and choice if they can never know with certainty anything about their place in the structure of the world?

The question Stanton raised with its Calvinist overtones harking back to the religious education of her childhood must have resonated with all her listeners, the pious Christians as well as freethinking radicals. Stanton's answers, however, located the origins of free will in language that was aggressively positivist and social Darwinian. The struggle for survival stimulates intelligence and the acquisition of skill. Without the capacity for self-support, the individual is vulnerable to extinction. The finitude of individual existence does not support conservative religious instruction that a good Christian woman tames her will and submits to authority. Such passivity contradicted the laws driving biological and social development. The logic Stanton deployed insisted instead that survival required self-development, which in turn required self-sovereignty. The spiritual development of each person rested on freedom to exercise free will and to learn from the consequences of choices made.

This eclectic synthesis of liberal theology with increasingly popular scientific notions provided a rhetorical basis for long-standing arguments Stanton had made for the full extension of civil and political rights to women. Nonetheless, the word "self" used in the title of the talk presents a problem for contemporary readers. In the twentieth century, the self and self-actualization were such commonplaces for speaking of individuality that it is difficult to read the term independently of the psychological theories that did not yet exist when Stanton wrote "Solitude of Self." Indeed in 1892, "self" was still a new, indeed peculiar, term for signifying individuality. Stanton was part of a new movement that dates largely from the 1880s to talk about individuality in terms of self rather than character or will.

There were precursors to this development in transcendentalist thought, and certainly the word "self" existed in the English language long before the 1880s, but as a referential grammatical form rather than as a proper noun standing on its own and indicating an active agent. Stanton participated in this transformation of the subjective repertoires available to middle-class Americans. In this she was part of a movement that jettisoned religious ideas of personhood to develop new concepts of identity

that were secular and scientific. Still, Stanton's talk relied as much on the concept of the soul as of the self. She refused a fully psychological conception of the subject. Throughout her adult life, Stanton stood with modernity against dogma. She was a skeptic freethinker in all matters of religion. At the end of the nineteenth century, however, both established religion and modern science provided justification for the restrictions society placed on women's lives. The rising star of Darwinian thought led to a decline of the natural rights philosophy that had guided her understanding of politics since her youth. She was not about to reject modern science when it provided a powerful explanation for the universality of free will, but she could not accept the new theories that explained female inferiority in terms of their role in sexual reproduction.

She engaged in a delicate, difficult balancing act during the last decade of her life. She turned to religious ideas as needed to rebuke modernist misogyny but relied on the conceptual tools provided by modern science and higher criticism to battle religious orthodoxy. Her defense of self-sovereignty in "Solitude of Self" required a more complicated conception of inner life than the much later theories of self-actualization that most twentieth-century readers brought to the interpretation of Stanton's argument.

In the very first sentence of the talk, Stanton speaks of the "individuality of each human soul" as the basis for Protestant and republican ideals of conscience and citizenship. *Soul* presents a conception of individuality that rests on a relation with the eternal. Soul as a reflection of the divine transcends history and social relations. *Self* appears in the essay in contexts of action and agency. Self is thought that leads to action. Self summarizes learned abilities, but soul points toward the uniqueness of each individual.

Every woman must develop the capacity for independent judgment, Stanton asserted, but, despite references to the struggle for survival that every biological entity faces, the goal is intellectual independence. It is this focus on spiritual gains that undercuts the atomistic aspects of liberal individualism in Stanton's work despite the powerful rhetorical flourishes that make "Solitude of Self" appear to be relentlessly suspicious of community. Each life is led alone, Stanton told her readers, a voyage in which each person is navigator, captain, and engineer. The deepest personal feelings, hopes, ambitions, disappointments "are known only to ourselves," meaning that no matter how hard we try they can never be fully shared. Every individual ultimately is isolated as she faces the most fundamental facts of her existence.

Nonetheless, community and public engagement remain defining conditions for realized individuality. Stanton identified books, interests in the “vital questions of the hour,” “watching the consummation of reforms” as her own personal antidotes to the looming threat of senility. Engagement keeps the faculties of mind developed and in use. These engagements “mitigate the solitude that at times must come to everyone.” Stanton established a dichotomy that is central to her argument: each soul is absolutely and inherently independent, but vitality is measured by activity, engagement, concern, by self moving out into the world.

Social engagement notwithstanding, inner life contains a center, the solitude of self, that remains independent from social demands because it has another, more powerful interlocutor. “Solitude of Self” presents a dichotomy within each individual’s mental life that we can compare with William James’s relatively simultaneous idea of consciousness alternating between active and reflective modes. The active self, James wrote, is unaware of what it is doing or even who it is. The reflective self examines but cannot act without stumbling. Its inward glance prepares the individual for the next burst of activity, but the fully self-conscious being is incapable of doing anything.<sup>1</sup> What Stanton called the soul is the equivalent of James’s reflective self. An active, socially engaged self surrounds the soul, which stands forever apart from the social because it is connected to what she called the “the immeasurable and the eternal,” one of her terms for God. While James was ready to describe the innermost workings of spirit as natural processes, simultaneously social and biological, Stanton found “omniscience”—a term most of her audience would have heard as a synonym for God—entering into the innermost recesses of the self.

William James was one of the writers who introduced the conception of the self as an agency into the English language. In 1884 in an essay for the journal *Mind*, James enunciated one of his most central themes: the soul, the self, consciousness, *whatever* one might call mental states, are not things, but only words giving substantive form to activities. The self was simply a cultural construct, a process of reflection upon past activity, a definition inaugurating new approaches to subjectivity that in effect translated inner life out of a religious, theocentric realm into one of cultural and social interaction.

In 1890 John Dewey wrote “On Some Current Conceptions of the Term ‘Self,’” an essay appearing in *Mind* as part of an ongoing series of articles about the relation of “self,” “self-consciousness,” “soul,” and “mind” as categories for understanding mental action.<sup>2</sup> Dewey saw a growing interest in

phenomenology as the source of this new discourse of the “self” appearing in the 1880s. At the beginning of the essay, Dewey carefully noted that his argument did not deal with the actual nature of the “self;” an empirical problem he left to others. He proposed only to consider its formal attributes within the Kantian and Hegelian theories of knowledge, which he assumed had provided the source for the new terminology. This proved to be more than a methodological position, for his argument hinged on an assumption that for both philosophers, although for quite distinct reasons, the self was a contentless category, unknowable and lacking inherent character.

The category of the self as most widely used in late nineteenth century Europe and America derived from Kant’s definition of the transcendental self as the knower, as “the notion of knowledge in general.” It is a container or form for thought-in-general, a principle of unity and connection. Dewey demonstrated that Kant’s deduction of the self was an analytic proposition solely, a term using the law of identity to posit and discuss a personal consciousness of knowledge. Each individual consciousness was distinguished by its unique awareness of knowledge. The contents of consciousness were irrelevant, for “the identity of self-consciousness cannot be derived from knowledge of [its contents], for this knowledge presupposes that identity.”<sup>3</sup>

The self was an atemporal, logical term covering the proposition that an individual (however constituted) knows only the contents of its own consciousness.<sup>4</sup> The self is a name “for the incident in which our knowledge occurs.”<sup>5</sup> It cannot have a content beyond the “I think . . .” that the Cartesian turn had posited as the first condition of intelligent being. The self was not sensation, it was not reason, it was not will. Its contents comprised experience, but the self as such was only the possibility for reflecting upon events and transforming sensations into experience. The self is “an ideal which serves at once to organize and to reveal the incompleteness of experience.”<sup>6</sup> While pointing to real processes, it must be without content. At most, we can say the self is a potentiality for making representations, and recedes once an image has formed.

As writers in the late nineteenth century, including Stanton, increasingly engaged the concept of self, a historical question raises itself starkly: Why this need for a category that did not have a content? The turn to the self involved a turn away from prior conceptions of character, will, and soul that more adequately conveyed spiritual unity, prescriptive values, continuity, and substantiality. The answer cannot lie in a greater explana-

tory power of the “self” concept since a definitional proposition that individual consciousness knows individually was simply, as Kant had bluntly accepted, a tautology that allowed him to proceed to analysis of the categories inherent to pure thought irrespective of who or what the thinker was.

Stanton held tight to the category *soul*, but her comments in her memoir *Eighty Years and More* (1898) about her adolescent conflict with Charles Finney may help explain her motivations for adopting *self* as a useful concept. Finney, like most other early nineteenth century revivalists, put great emphasis on the development of what he called “character.” For Stanton, Finney’s understanding of character was rooted in a conception of natural depravity. Finney and his followers manipulated their listeners’ fears by insisting that sinful impulses would define them if they did not follow a narrow set of proper behaviors. In the aftermath of her encounter with Finney, Stanton embraced instead the very different assumption that the basic impulses of the soul were healthy and aimed toward growth. The concept of character was not needed as a stimulus for personal development. Indeed, it was negative because its power derived from fear of natural instincts, arbitrarily and falsely classified as depraved. “Good character” meant accepting uncritically the inevitability and the permanence of the social situation into which a person was born. The result of an emphasis on developing a “character” was persistent psychological depression, a malady that Stanton briefly but painfully experienced as a result of her efforts to be converted. She forcefully repudiated religious conformity for the rest of her life in part because it shut down interaction with the world and stunted personal development.<sup>7</sup>

The self provided an attractive alternative to character because it foregrounded curiosity, imagination, inquiry, creativity, and critical collaboration rather than restraint, discipline, fear, and obedience. After her brief exposure at school to Finney’s evangelical movement, Stanton’s appetite for knowledge and critical self-development was stimulated through reading and long discussions with friends and family. Social interaction restored her mind, she recalled, to “its normal condition.” The self began to emerge through questioning the social realities that the category of character led to accepting as absolute goods.

Stanton gave credit especially to her eldest sister, Tryphena, and her husband, Edward Bayard, for providing her an intellectual environment that encouraged her as a young woman to develop her own feelings and articulate them into opinions. Stanton also stressed the importance of

conversation with Lucretia Mott for learning how to express her doubts about politics, religion, and family. The self emerges in this contradictory picture through what her generation understood as the Socratic method, learning through questioning, dialogue, and identification of contradictions in arguments put forward. The process is neither individual nor even necessarily self-directed.<sup>8</sup>

While embracing the new concept of the self as a principle postulating active agency and engagement with the world, Stanton nonetheless resisted subordinating spiritual processes to social realities—even if the relationships were liberatory. The self is a function of community formation. Its inherent social character draws it back to existing social relations and hence to the bastions of the enemy—family, church, state, and finally science, all institutions that in Stanton’s lifetime largely supported conceptions of female intellectual inferiority. She retained and indeed favored the term “soul” to indicate the importance of an inner life that transcended historical relationships and which took form in the individual conscience. Her concept of experience develops in the dialectic between social engagement and the “chamber of Eleusinian mystery” where the soul is infused with the sublime and otherworldly. As with “omniscience,” Stanton’s language is careful to avoid an anthropomorphic figure of God. The encounter of soul and eternity allows an intuited but ultimately unknowable divine presence to erupt into social life as a transformative force, thanks to the ability of the soul to take on the transient form of a self whenever it enters into dialogue with other human beings.

In *Eighty Years and More*, Stanton presented her life-experience in disarmingly simple, direct terms. She started with the everyday activities that defined the lives of women of her class and race—education, courtship, marriage, motherhood, household management. Maternity in particular unites the deeply social with the most permanent aspects of existence. Having raised seven children, Stanton had the opportunity to develop a well-tested set of experiences on child rearing. She wrote with verve and confidence, stating simply that motherhood was a “department of knowledge on which I particularly pride myself.”<sup>9</sup> She emphasized the curiosity she brought to the task and a determination to get beneath appearances and find out the causes of problems. This was the self-image Stanton wanted to introduce to her readers.

“I never hear a child cry that I do not feel I am bound to find out the reason,” she wrote in a statement that uses child rearing as a pattern applicable to other social relations where conflict and difficulties have arisen.

“A child’s cry is telling you something hurts it,” she continued, “—do not rest till you find what it is. Neither spanking, shaking, or scolding can relieve pain.”<sup>10</sup> She followed this general statement with several accounts of how, while traveling on the train between speaking engagements, she helped many inexperienced young parents learn how to uncover the reasons their children were unhappy and take the necessary steps to restore family harmony. Experience in and of itself does not lead to understanding. Critical engagement that gets beneath superficial semblance is required.

In another anecdote, Stanton recalled how she intervened to stop drunken husbands in an Irish community near her home in Seneca Falls from beating their wives and children. Her account of relations with troublesome neighbors is rife with nativist assumptions about poor immigrants, suggesting the limitations of Stanton’s ideas for how best to develop ties of community between old and new Americans. Nonetheless, Stanton starts with the assumption that human life is a struggle against ignorance. The challenge for revolutionaries is to spark a desire to know more. Rather than imposing her will on people who she recognizes might well be suspicious of her because of the social and ethnic inequalities dividing her world from theirs, she hoped to cultivate good feelings by sharing the knowledge she had gained. She lent reading materials that might provide a glimpse of the broader world. She gave her children’s old toys to their children. She provided medical care and shared medicines she had made. As she described the relation, it was her willingness to share her critical engagement with everyday experience that turned her into a respected authority figure for her neighbors.

Her account certainly transforms the social capital she possessed as the daughter of a prominent jurist and landowner and the wife of a lawyer and political organizer into packets of knowledge that she could convey to the less fortunate. Expertise is operating in this account as unabashed social control. She was oblivious to the lessons she might learn from her neighbors, nor did she recognize the wealth and property of her family or her formal education as the bases for the deference exhibited to her, much less any traditions of patron-client relations transferred to Seneca Falls from rural Ireland or the Hudson River Valley. She described the key to her authority simply as her learned ability to synthesize from a broad range of experience lessons that could be applied to new situations.<sup>11</sup> The foundation for this ability was the “healthy discontent” that blessed her, an inner conviction that whatever confronted her was deficient in some

form, as well as a “sympathy and imagination” that could embrace the sorrows of others and “learn all the hard lessons of life from the experience of others.”<sup>12</sup>

Stanton provided a clue for understanding this productive relation of self and conscience in her highlighting in *Eighty Years and More* the powerful impact that Theodore Parker’s sermon, “The Permanent and the Transient in Religion,” had on her philosophy of life when she heard him deliver it in Boston in 1842. So impressed was she, she reported, that she traveled to another city simply to hear the sermon a second time. She noted that on reading it years later after Parker’s work was published, his ideas no longer struck her as radical. They were simply good common sense whose truth any inquisitive person could recognize.<sup>13</sup>

Parker’s sermon argued that Christianity had developed a fluctuating set of institutions and rites that had swallowed a permanent core of principles provided by Jesus’ own words. Ideas and practices bearing the same relation to Jesus’ teachings as “the phenomena of outward nature, such as sunshine and cloud, growth, decay, and reproduction, bear to the great law of nature, which underlies and supports them all” had corrupted Christianity.<sup>14</sup> The parables provide a demonstration of how to arrive at the truths to be learned through engagement. They describe the most familiar aspects of life in ways that encourage the truly faithful to feel a connection to the most permanent aspects of the universe. Parker questioned why the truths of Christianity should rest on the personal authority of Jesus, “more than the axioms of geometry rest on the personal authority of Euclid or Archimedes. The authority of Jesus, as of all teachers . . . must rest on the truth of his words, and not their truth on his authority.”<sup>15</sup> The truth is to be tried by “the oracle God places in the breast,” “the perpetual presence of him who made us and the stars over our head.”<sup>16</sup> “We never are *Christians* as he was the *Christ*, until we worship, as Jesus did, with no mediator, with nothing between us and the Father of all.”<sup>17</sup> In this direct communication, that which always is—the contact of God with the soul—reappears. The challenge is to cultivate the soul so that a person is ready to feel the divine presence.

The question implicit in Parker’s sermon posed one of the most important problems Stanton faced as a late nineteenth century, religiously skeptical social reformer who nonetheless needed to maintain the role of the eternal soul in opposition to the historically situated self. At the same time, she needed to adopt the dynamic and interactive concept of the self to oppose the passive conception of character. Actually, existing individu-

als are deficient, indeed to the point of having forfeited their individuality. Habit, custom, institutional prerogatives prevail over selfhood.

“Statecraft, priestcraft, the cupidity of moneyed interests, and the ignorance of the masses,” she stated, were all forces for evil separating human beings from divine and natural law and entrapping them in institutions that served the interests of one set of the population instead of all.<sup>18</sup> Precisely because all institutions governing everyday life are flawed, people are prevented from learning from experience even though they have the natural ability to engage their environment critically.

The process of constituting oneself as an individual begins with direct engagement with other persons who work together to develop critical detachment from all given institutions. They form a community of learning whose goal is the strengthening of each individual’s capacity to think critically about every aspect of the world. Civic and political rights are necessary for this unfolding, but rights are insufficient for they are constituted through engagement with the transient. The challenge for social activists is to create an environment where the individual is trained to trust her inner voice, where she is pushed along toward self-reliance.

Cooperative structures were needed to support the development of a person able to think for herself. Otherwise, she would be so confused by the vertigo of free thought or victimized by the conflicting demands made on her that she might return to the security of dogma. In the most practical terms, women needed to transform family life with cooperative households that would free them from the tasks that occupied all their time, without, however, divorcing them from the direct human contact, especially with children, which gave them a distinctive perspective on existence. Women cannot develop as independent thinkers within the family unless the state helps to ensure the conditions for their children’s growth.<sup>19</sup> To provide these resources, the system of economic competition that had developed through the nineteenth century needed to give way to socialism, which Stanton defined as the systematic organization of social resources along cooperative, scientific lines. Indeed, by 1898 suffrage had taken second place in her hierarchy of goals for the women’s movement. The chief goal had become replacing competition with cooperation as the principle guiding “industrial economics.”<sup>20</sup>

Stanton’s vision described in *Eighty Years and More* of the collective conditions for individual growth provides a stark contrast to the unshareable core of individual existence presented in “Solitude of Self.” To foreground either the individualist or the cooperative side of Stanton’s

thought is to ignore the dialectic principles embedded in her conception of self-development. Conscience served as a test of community for it provided the starting point for mutual evaluation of shared problems, which nonetheless were inevitably apprehended from distinct standpoints.

In her address delivered at Seneca Falls in 1848, Stanton insisted, in the course of arguing, that natural rights philosophy extended to women: "Man cannot speak for [woman], because he has been educated to believe that she differs from him so materially, that he cannot judge of thoughts, feelings, and opinions by his own. . . . The moment [moral beings] assume a different nature for any of their own kind, they utterly fail."<sup>21</sup> Men are unable to represent the needs of women because those needs have been defined as different, not because they actually are that way inherently or absolutely. Individuals who work to share moral standpoints can share their judgments and in the process grow as moral beings. This is not the same thing as interior life, however. Sharing does not eliminate difference but it creates a new form of social life through a process of reasoning, response, and negotiation. Conscience leads to comparison of findings, not to the withdrawal of each individual into his or her own private universe. In her 1875 essay, "Home Life," Stanton wrote, "The right of individual judgment in the family must of necessity involve discussion, dissension, division." Struggle within the family provides the dialectic conditions through which the family evolves as a group and the individuals within it continue to develop their distinctive capabilities.<sup>22</sup>

Stanton was clearest about the need to incorporate sexual difference into collective decision making, but her argument rested on a broader conception of dialogue. The encounter between any two people generates a continual puzzle of thinking through and learning from another person's experience. One has to work hard to make the lessons of the other meaningful, and this process of engagement keeps alive the process of growth that constitutes the self.<sup>23</sup> This position keeps Stanton in continuing communication with contemporary feminists who work on the intersection of gender with race, class, sexuality, and other social categories such as disability that combine into a complex hierarchy directly affecting each person's ability to contribute to a common life. Even though Stanton's ontology postulates an absolute differentiation of individuals before God, her epistemology of learning through engagement, dialogue, and working through the puzzle of difference puts a tension at the core of her thought that resists simple conclusions.

Difference may be inescapable but can be bridged if social organization

is based on sharing perspectives. Social life gains its authenticity from a process of testing and retesting both personal and collective assumptions. This was not mere tolerance, for “experience has fully proved, that sympathy as a civil agent is vague and powerless until caught and chained in logical propositions and coined into law.”<sup>24</sup> But the other side of Stanton’s perspective is awareness that law as an institution must remain in dialogue with the thoughts and dreams of those for whom it provides rules. Stanton did not believe that virtue could be based on fear of punishment and spoke of freedom and social harmony growing out of “unwritten law and public sentiment” in contrast to the horrors of the inflexible legal and theological systems.<sup>25</sup>

The lessons that a person draws from her experience are relevant to others only as a person becomes critical and self-conscious. Without that awakening, a person simply repeats what she has learned from the institutions that demean her. Stanton’s linkage of difference to self-development provides an important perspective on her frequent racist statements and reflects her own unexamined ethnocentrism. Stanton was scathingly critical of *all* community traditions and the resources they offered for change, those of her own class as well as those from other backgrounds. Women did not usually oppose their oppression because raw experience could not transform into positive lessons unless there was critical detachment from the dogma that united families into a community and provided a sense of personal identity.<sup>26</sup> Feminism became possible because modern thought allowed individuals to form new communities based on skeptical assessment of experience.

If tradition, whether popular or elitist, reinforces dominant ideologies rather than providing a bulwark for opposition, then the salience of difference changes. The critical thinker determines which differences are inherent to natural law and which have been falsely imposed by society. To the degree that differences are based in nature, social organization improves as those differences are recognized and incorporated into structure and function. Gender differences are a permanent feature of human life even though the interpretation of those differences varies, but class and race differences can be discounted as purely historical products of inequities that can be addressed only through a persistent emphasis on education and the encouragement of all to see what they have not yet experienced.

Stanton’s strategies for sharing experience were consistent with her ideas about critical dialogue as the foundation of self-development. The lack of systematic theory in her work is notable and inevitably leads to

depreciation of her contribution to the understanding of social organization, a devaluation that occurs before her ideas are analyzed. Lack of theory does not mean absence of abstraction, but lessons appear in a stream of charming anecdotes. Their casual form masks the ways in which they function as parables, that is, as redacted experience linking the everyday to conceptions of natural development. In her memoirs, we find the parable of the daughter who takes up the study of Greek and horseback riding to assuage her father's grief at the loss of his only son. Having won a prize for her scholarship, she rushes home with one thought alone:

“Now,” said I, “my father will be satisfied with me.” . . . I ran down the hill, rushed breathless into his office, laid the new Greek Testament, which was my prize, on his table and exclaimed: “here, I got it!” He took up the book, asked me some questions about the class, the teachers, the spectators, and evidently pleased, handed it back to me. Then, while I stood looking and waiting for him to say something which would show that he recognized the equality of the daughter with the son, he kissed me on the forehead and exclaimed, with a sigh, “Ah, you should have been a boy!”<sup>27</sup>

This deeply moving and personal account sums up neatly the emotionally self-destructive effects of gender conventions on both men and women. If we take this as a purely personal story, we miss the craft and concision that went into the telling of an *experience*, a welding together of ethical and social values into a single image that conveys a grounded judgment.<sup>28</sup>

This lesson was drawn from Stanton's own experience, but she found useful lessons for her readers in the lives of people she met during her many years of campaigning for women's rights. In the humorous parable of the congressman's wife who bought a stove for her house without waiting for her husband's approval, Stanton tells of a woman who in a simple act faced the fears that had long stymied her self-development. She learned a new mode of thinking and, in reward, deepened the love her husband felt for her. In both stories, the parable form allowed Stanton to present abstract conclusions through concrete examples that to be interpreted must be taken into the heart. *Eighty Years and More* is full of these anecdotes, but so are her writings throughout her career, including the multivolume *History of Woman Suffrage*. The trail of anecdotes leads readers past many stopping points for thinking and judging. The effort to abstract knowledge took the form of a dialogue shifting back and forth from community with other transient social beings to communion with

the divine and permanent. By emphasizing this form of communication, Stanton affirmed her conviction in the irreducibility of difference in the formation of community. Without different perspectives, there would be no need for language and communication. Parables showed paths to self-autonomy within a community that need not be engulfed by institution, privilege, and habit.

One may wish that Stanton had augmented her parables with a theorized model of gender, individuality, community, but she offered instead a pragmatic, narrative knowledge. "Concordance" is the word that Paul Ricoeur uses to characterize the results of narrative understanding. Stories provide a sense of harmony. Those who participate in events become who they are through their role in the action, or as Ricoeur puts it, "The composition of the action governs the ethical quality of the characters."<sup>29</sup> There are no a prioris, but there are finite and unchangeable conclusions that determine everything that must be confronted if a change of heart is to take place. Stories provide an "intelligibility" of praxis by providing a moral standard for evaluating the outcomes of social relations. The knowledge provided leads one to grapple with the contradictions and inconsistencies of active social life. Community is revealed as common action not despite but because of difference.

This part of her thought is still lively and provocative and needs recovery as we reconsider the legacy of the twentieth century's often deadly wars of theoretical systems. Stanton wrote with a strong belief in the ultimate triumph of knowledge. Eternity, she said in 1895 in "My Creed," was a "continual progress of development." In commenting on Bjorn Bjornson's novel *In God's Way*, Stanton was puzzled by Bjornson's title because the characters all come to sad ends, which was not consistent with her understanding of the divine promise made to the soul. People's treatment of one another, yes, that was usually awful. Social relations typically extinguished people's spontaneous spiritual aspirations. That was why the soul remained for her an inner reality that stood with the divine against the limitations of society and biology, but not against the limitations of law. The observance of laws, both physical and psychic, she wrote in *The Woman's Bible*, is essential to health. This may be why, while authority was an important word for her, will was not. The self that she envisioned was never a law unto itself imposing its fantasy upon its environment, but an intelligence that sought happiness by learning and obeying the laws of life that the soul could discern always in conjunction with others who are equally inquisitive.<sup>30</sup>

## NOTES

1. William James, *Principles of Psychology* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983; originally published 1890), 1:271.
2. John Dewey, "On Some Current Conceptions of the Term 'Self,'" *Mind* 15 (1890), 2–18.
3. *Ibid.*, 8.
4. The term "person" covered unity of consciousness across time.
5. Dewey, "Current Conceptions," 10.
6. *Ibid.*, 17.
7. An influential mid-nineteenth century writer on character was Thomas C. Upham. In his essay "Immutability of Moral Distinctions" (*Biblical Repository and Quarterly Observer* 5 [July 1835], 117–36), Upham defined "character" as a sentiment that emerges in reaction to an "immutable standard of right and wrong . . . when any particular right or wrong comes to our notice" (125). Character changed through the development of fixed habits.
8. Stanton, *Eighty Years and More: Reminiscences, 1815–1897* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1993; originally published 1898), 41–44, 48, 82–84.
9. *Ibid.*, 124.
10. *Ibid.*, 122–23.
11. *Ibid.*, 148.
12. *Ibid.*, 189.
13. *Ibid.*, 134.
14. Theodore Parker, "The Transient and the Permanent in Religion," in *Theodore Parker: An Anthology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1960), 41.
15. *Ibid.*, 49.
16. *Ibid.*, 51, 56.
17. *Ibid.*, 57.
18. Stanton, *Eighty Years and More*, 132.
19. *Ibid.*, 429.
20. Stanton to Susan B. Anthony, 27 April 1898; in Ellen DuBois, ed., *The Elizabeth Cady Stanton–Susan B. Anthony Reader: Correspondence, Writings, Speeches* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1992), 288.
21. Stanton, address to the Seneca Falls Women's Rights Convention, 19 July 1848, in DuBois, *Stanton–Anthony Reader*, 28.
22. Stanton, "Home Life," in DuBois, *Stanton–Anthony Reader*, 133.
23. Stanton, *Eighty Years and More*, 36.
24. Stanton "Address of Welcome to the International Council of Women" (1888), in DuBois, *Stanton–Anthony Reader*, 211.
25. Stanton, *Eighty Years and More*, 8, 33.
26. In this, she held a perspective shared by Marx and Lenin, who both argued that "spontaneity" only reinforced exploitation and oppression.

27. Stanton, *Eighty Years and More*, 23.

28. Ann Gordon's epilogue to the republication of *Eighty Years and More* carefully traces Stanton's craft in congealing her political points into well-honed vignettes.

29. Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984); see vol. 1, ch. 2.

30. *The Woman's Bible* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1985), 31.