

TRUE ^{TO} OURSELVES

A CELEBRATION OF WOMEN MAKING A DIFFERENCE

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NANCY M. NEUMAN

A PUBLICATION OF THE LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS

TRUE TO OURSELVES



A CELEBRATION OF WOMEN MAKING A DIFFERENCE

Edited by Nancy Neuman

Foreword by Becky Cain, President
League of Women Voters of the United States

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A Voice of Our Own:
Leading American Women Celebrate the Right to Vote
edited by Nancy M. Neuman

TRUE TO OURSELVES



In Celebration of Bella Abzug (1920–1998)
for Making a Difference

To My Family

FOREWORD



THE LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS is proud to be a part of this remarkable book in celebration of American women. The essays collectively reveal the good and the bad, the flaws and the incredible strengths, of the American community. The women who share their stories have encountered that community on an intense and personal level, and they have changed it for the better. Some have faced daunting odds and crushing rejection—all have chosen to use their energy to make their world a better place. They are exceptional women who have accomplished exceptional things, but they also are “everyday people,” whom we can easily recognize from our own lives.

Although each of the contributors to *True to Ourselves* tells a uniquely powerful story, together they stand for the scores of heroines and heroes across the country who quietly, often anonymously, choose to make a positive contribution to their community. These are the Americans who really do believe in “we, the people,” who strive to use their challenges and opportunities to add, rather than subtract, value in their own lives and the lives of those around them.

This year marks the 150th anniversary of the first Women’s Rights Convention in Seneca Falls, New York. The women speaking to us from *True to Ourselves* acknowledge and celebrate those who went before them and brought them to the very doors they needed to open. It is important that we, in turn, now praise and celebrate these women on behalf of those who will follow and will benefit,

perhaps unknowingly, from the trials they have faced and victories they have won.

The League is grateful to Nancy Neuman, League of Women Voters national president from 1986 to 1990 and lecturer and writer on women in politics, for conceiving and editing this collection of thought-provoking essays, as well as its predecessor, *A Voice of Our Own: Leading American Women Celebrate the Right to Vote*.

The League of Women Voters is committed to the value of participation in public life. We believe that making democracy work is the day-in and day-out obligation of each one of us. The measure of our society depends on us. Our future as a democracy depends on us. We can find no finer models and teachers of what it can and should mean to be an American than the women who have contributed to this book.

June 1998

Becky Cain

President

*League of Women Voters
of the United States*

PREFACE



TRUE TO OURSELVES: A Celebration of Women Making a Difference is a unique collection of essays, written by a diverse group of women who are actively engaged in changing the world around them. It tells the stories of real people whose dreams and disappointments may not be so different from our own. Each author explains how she has sought solutions to problems or followed her aspirations, providing readers with models they can adapt for themselves.

Each individual, in our opinion, illustrates the central theme of the book: that the true measure of a woman is in her day-to-day commitment to something larger than herself. *True to Ourselves* is an exceptional portrait of the immense influence and expanding power of women in American public life during the second half of the twentieth century.

Every woman in this book has experienced a merging of her public and private life in the cause of protecting and nourishing those things she values most: her family, her community, her country, and her integrity. In the course of their journeys, these women have been confronted with choices that tested their principles and ethics. In her own way, each has discovered the meaning of being true to herself.

A Commitment to America's Promise

True to Ourselves is a cross-generational expression of external influences that shaped women's lives in the late twentieth century. In

different ways and at different times, the women's movement and the nation's civil rights struggles affected each writer and thus became an essential component of this book.

The impact of both movements is woven into the life experiences of the women in *True to Ourselves*. Several women recount the effect of race and sex discrimination on their lives and the tools they used to conquer both. At least half are the "first" in a particular endeavor, a phenomenon that is continuing, even though many people assume women long ago integrated every facet of American life.

Several contributors offer the perspective of women a generation after the activists of the 1960s and 1970s. Their opportunities, choices, and politics were shaped by feminists who came before them. Their aspirations expanded in hearing the messages of hope, opportunity, and equality spoken by leaders like Martin Luther King Jr., Cesar Chavez, and Robert Kennedy. But their optimism was shaken by the Vietnam War and the assassinations of King and Kennedy in 1968.

All the authors describe full lives combining family, career, and a commitment to public life, and share their concerns about a persistent backlash against the promise of the women's and civil rights movements. A recurrent theme is a call for every American to work toward a diverse, inclusive society in the twenty-first century.

Turning Points

Every life has turning points, positive and negative, that open up new visions of ourselves and steer us in new directions. We invited each contributor to consider an important turning point in her life that set her on a particular path.

These turning points are intensely personal experiences that have molded the individual in the past and continue to guide her in the present. If, as feminists claim, the personal is the political, the turning points in this book prove the point. The poignancy of these special moments will provoke a range of emotions in the reader, from tears, to anger, to a renewed motivation for political activism.

Most of the authors describe the influence of parents, grandparents, or significant childhood events in shaping their character, beliefs, and enduring commitment to something larger than themselves. Scholars characterize the way young people develop these values as *socialization*. Students of socialization will discover example after example of the phenomenon in this book. Most importantly, *True to Ourselves* offers them an opportunity to follow the process through adulthood in the stories of real women, and ascertain how each has applied her standards and principles to actual situations.

Honorable Lives

At a time of low voter turnout, high public cynicism, and a decline in civic participation, the League of Women Voters envisioned this book to stimulate interest in public involvement and teach by example. As a result, we recruited women who we believe have made special contributions to the community we all share as Americans.

As the editor of *True to Ourselves*, I hope this collection will inspire each reader to believe she or he can make a difference by getting involved in something that matters. In particular, I want the stories of these women to kindle the idealism of young women and men who are just beginning to consider their obligations to society.

My goal is to illustrate that a life worth living is a life of service to others—in the community, at home, and at work. The contributors to this book, in their own special ways, have been enriched beyond their dreams by their involvement, even if, for some, it has been thrust upon them by circumstance or tragedy. Their stories teach us that an accomplished, honorable public life typically is grounded in something very private: a strong ethical core.

We are very grateful that the contributors to *True to Ourselves* have been so willing to tell their stories for this collection. It is not easy to reveal your private thoughts, struggles, and dreams, even to a close friend or relative. How many of us wish our mothers and grandmothers, fathers and grandfathers, had shared these intimate

parts of their personalities and lives with us? Or wish we had listened when they tried?

Recruiting, nudging, and encouraging contributors is part of an editor's task. Few of us think our own lives are interesting enough to write about. We have gone over them again and again so many times in our own minds, they hardly seem exceptional, particularly to someone else. Every story, every turning point, every woman in this book is exceptional.

Overview of the Contents

True to Ourselves

The first section, "True to Ourselves," begins with the story of explorer Ann Bancroft, the first woman ever to reach the North Pole on skis. Months of harsh and brutal training, necessary for survival in the frozen wilderness, did not prepare her for her new role as pioneering first woman or for the resistance that her dream of leading the first all-woman expedition to the South Pole would engender.

Ellen Hume, executive director of PBS's Democracy Project, writes about the practice of ethical journalism. By trial and error she learned the value of trusting her own instincts and bearing witness to the truth.

Ruth Simmons, the president of Smith College, recalls the lessons of a wise and inspiring teacher. Simmons, who grew up in segregated Texas in the 1940s and 1950s, gives a profoundly moving account of how she learned the principles of self-worth, the dignity of work, and enduring grace from her mother.

Mary Crisp, founder of the Republican Coalition for Choice and former co-chair of the Republican National Committee, writes about her evolution to feminism as she faced personal and professional crises that challenged her principles and changed her life.

Woman Power

Rosalie Wahl was the first woman appointed to the Minnesota Supreme Court. Her readiness for a public role and the resurgent women's movement converged in the 1970s. Wahl brings to life the joys, pressures, and responsibilities that come with the position of being first. She cautions us to remember that no woman arrives at a place all on her own.

Bella Abzug, feminist and former member of Congress, fulfilled her lifetime commitment to women's equality and full political participation. Her essay, which she wrote just weeks before her death, is a call to action and testimony to the struggles of others to make possible the achievements of those women who followed.

The life of U.S. Senator Olympia Snowe was altered forever when her mother died of breast cancer. Her advocacy for changing public policy on issues related to women's health is in large measure a commitment to ensure that fewer children experience the premature loss of a mother.

Carmen Votaw, public policy director for United Way of America, takes us back to the day in 1978 when Bella Abzug was fired as co-chair of President Carter's National Advisory Committee for Women. Votaw, the other co-chair, had to make a critical choice that meant risking her future opportunities for advancement in politics. With this book comes a twentieth reunion of sorts. In addition to Carmen Votaw and Bella Abzug, Mary Crisp and I served on the National Advisory Committee for Women. Votaw's story is our story too.

Representative Eva Clayton of North Carolina wanted to be a medical missionary as a child. Instead, as she explains in her essay, community service and politics became the vehicles for implementing her mission to help the disadvantaged, especially the rural poor.

The Measure of Woman

In "The Measure of Woman" we learn about the commitment of four women to something larger than themselves. Kathleen Kennedy Townsend, lieutenant governor of Maryland, begins by defining the

measure of a woman as the extent to which her priorities involve values that transcend materialism and individualism. She calls for a renewed commitment by women and men in behalf of principles and causes that are worth fighting for.

Carol Moseley-Braun is the first African American woman ever elected to the U.S. Senate. She describes her arrival in the Senate and celebrates the efforts of her forbears who made that moment possible. Moseley-Braun calls on all Americans to work toward the elimination of artificial barriers to equality and justice.

Sarah Brady, the chair of Handgun Control, exemplifies a commitment to service in behalf of a cause worth fighting for. She explains what made her an activist. Although her interest in politics began at a young age, she was thrust into a public role she never anticipated.

Barbara Roberts, the first woman governor of Oregon, became a citizen lobbyist as a mother determined to protect her son at all costs. Without money or powerful connections, she worked her way from the grass roots to the highest political office in her state.

Turning Points

In "Turning Points," the authors write about events that changed the direction of their lives, challenged their integrity, or shaped their values and purpose.

Christine Todd Whitman, the governor of New Jersey, tells how she confronted the lie, betrayal, and boast of a key strategist in her first gubernatorial campaign.

Representative Patsy Mink trained to become a doctor, and like other women in *True to Ourselves*, ran head-on into discrimination. She writes about the turning point in her life that made her a leader in American politics.

Tipper Gore, the second lady of the United States, reveals how her mother's secret led to her advocacy on behalf of the mentally ill. Her husband's decision to run for Congress was a turning point for Gore, who had begun a career as a photographer.

Polly Baca, former Colorado state senator, is the first Hispanic woman ever to serve in the leadership of a state senate. She takes us on her public and private journey, candidly sharing her life's lessons and the stressful existence of a politician, activist, and single mother.

New Directions

In "New Directions," the final part of the book, five writers present ideas for the reader to consider as we head into a new millennium, century, and decade.

Political strategist and pollster Celinda Lake tells us about her first encounters with sex discrimination. She explores her findings about the gender gap and discusses its future influence on American political campaigns and the outcome of elections.

Angela Oh, an attorney and member of President Clinton's Initiative on Race, discusses the reality of America's multicultural future and the need to move beyond narrow definitions of race and racism.

CNN correspondent and author Maria Hinojosa tells us why she long considered herself an "other" growing up in America. Now her "otherness" is something she celebrates, and it informs her reporting as she gives voice to society's voiceless. She chose to be interviewed for her chapter, which also includes a description of her work as a volunteer artist in New York City.

Amy Simon is a pollster, feminist, and activist. When her mother died, Simon committed herself to social change. She writes about implementing her goal, beginning in high school. Simon gives an insider's perspective on the stresses and joys of young people who work in presidential campaigns and how she helped organize a young women's political network in Washington, D.C. Federal judge Vicki Miles-LaGrange discloses the pain of a personal encounter with the evils of racism and the parental guidance that shaped her character. She writes a plea for diversity, not as a shallow cliché, but as a genuine commitment to implementing the greatness of America's promise.

Acknowledgments

The League of Women Voters is very grateful to the contributors for their provocative essays and the time and energy they devoted to making this book possible.

My deep appreciation goes to President Becky Cain and the national board of the League of Women Voters for the confidence they gave me to implement my vision of a book that would embody the League's mission.

I owe immense thanks to Monica Sullivan, the director of publishing, and her former assistant Andrea Sharples in the League's national office for their patience, support, and advice. I am especially grateful to Alan Shrader, my editor at Jossey-Bass, for his wise counsel and trust.

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Nancy M. Neuman, editor