

## Return of the weasels

Written by Marian Wright Edelman  
Wednesday, 18 June 2014 15:45

---



This column is not about the recent story making headlines in New York City on Mayor Bill de Blasio's proposal to lift a ban on pet ferrets. But it *is* about weasels. Age-old weasels still causing Americans pain and suffering and blocking progress towards a better, safer America for all. Sojourner Truth was a brilliant but illiterate slave woman, a great orator, and a powerful presence who possessed great courage. She challenged the racial and gender caste system of slavery by suing for the return of a son sold away from her. She got thrown off Washington, D.C. streetcars but kept getting back on until they changed the rules and let her ride. She stood up with fiery eloquence to opponents and threatening crowds who tried to stop her from speaking. When a hostile White man told her that the hall where she was scheduled to appear would be burnt down if she spoke, she replied, "Then I will speak to the ashes." When taunted while speaking in favor of women's rights by some White men who asked if she was really a woman, she bared her breasts and allegedly famously retorted, "Ain't I a woman?," detailing the back-breaking double burden of slavery's work and childbearing she had endured. When heckled by a White man in her audience who said he didn't care any more about her antislavery talk than for an old flea bite, she snapped back, "Then the Lord willing, I'll keep you scratching." And when decrying her exclusion from America's life and professed freedoms during a religious meeting where another speaker had just praised the Constitution, she told this story:

"Children, I talks to God and God talks to me. I goes out and talks to God in de fields and de woods. Dis morning I was walking out, and I got over de fence. I saw de wheat a holding up its head, looking very big. I goes up and takes holt ob it.

You b'lieve it, dere was *no* wheat dare? I says, God, what *is* de matter wid *dis* wheat? and he says to me, 'Sojourner, dere is a little weasel in it.' Now I hears talkin' about de Constitution and de rights of man. I comes up and I takes hold of dis Constitution. It looks *mighty big*, and I feels for *my* rights, but der aint any dare. Den I says, God, what ails dis Constitution? He says to me, 'Sojourner, dere is a little *weasel*'

## Return of the weasels

Written by Marian Wright Edelman  
Wednesday, 18 June 2014 15:45

---

in it."

The version captured here in an 1863 edition of the *National Anti-Slavery Standard* shares a flaw with many existing accounts of her speeches—they were often written down in the mock Southern dialect that 19th-century readers identified with all slaves, despite the fact that Sojourner Truth was born and raised in rural New York as the slave of a Dutch-speaking family, spoke Dutch as a child, took pride in speaking correct English as an adult, and reportedly sounded like White New York peers. But the point still comes across very clearly. Since Sojourner Truth's day, Black and White and Brown and other excluded and marginalized women—and men—have been trying to ferret out the unjust and greedy weasels still eating away at the core of the Constitution and the promise of equal opportunity in our national life, gain the rights and freedoms they know they have been promised, and build a just America for themselves and their children. The struggle for a fair playing field for all Americans and their children must accelerate and reach a mighty roar today when these core values are so much under attack.

America is still struggling to live up to its creed enunciated in the Declaration of Independence and overcome its huge birth defects built into the implementation of our political and economic system: Native American genocide, slavery, exclusion of all women and non-propertied men, including White men, from America's political process. We have come a long way but these deep-seated cultural, racial, economic, and gender impediments to a just union challenge us still. We must remain vigilant in rooting them out and moving ahead as many attempt to move us backwards.

As another July 4th approaches, can we finally tell every child born in 2014 that he or she was created with an equal chance to realize America's dream—or for tens of millions of children who are poor, illiterate, violence-ridden, hungry, and homeless will America's promise still feel hollow at the core? Children have only one childhood, and that childhood determines much of what they grow up to accomplish. This means we adults have only a very short window in which to make sure that all children, regardless of the lottery of birth, are nurtured and fed, physically and spiritually, and are educated and supported to grow up to be the best they can be. If America is to lead in the 21st century world, we must reset our economic and moral compass and do right by our children—all of them. God did not create two classes of children, the American Dream did not envisage two classes of children, and neither should we.

Marian Wright Edelman is President of the Children's Defense Fund whose *Leave No Child Behind* ® mission is  
to ensure every child a  
*Healthy Start*  
, a  
*Head Start*  
, a  
*Fair Start*  
, a  
*Safe Start*  
and a

## Return of the weasels

Written by Marian Wright Edelman  
Wednesday, 18 June 2014 15:45

---

### *Moral Start*

in life and successful passage to adulthood with the help of caring families and communities.

For more information go to

[www.childrensdefense.org](http://www.childrensdefense.org)

.