

STRENGTH of a Woman

by Jessica McCurdy Crooks
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We look at a woman, and most of us notice her physical attributes: how she dresses, her hairstyle, or how she carries herself. On closer look, we realize that none of these are really her true embodiment. She is so much more than these outward expressions or signs ... yet the wise woman somehow seems to know that the two are inextricably linked.

For example, we see how the elaborate headdresses and colorful wraps of the African woman help to tell her story in a way that words cannot. When matched with her

traditional outfit, they denote pride and a fierce sense of self that compel you to look at her and respect her strength.

The strong, devil-may-care look of the iconic biker chick may scare some people enough to leave extra room on the sidewalk, yet there is no denying that her attitude is strong and fearless, and in this strength we see a certain beauty. She embodies the carefree and bad-ass attitude so many women only dream of, and perhaps are afraid to explore.

When a
woman is
standing in
her full wisdom
and grace,
she is power
personified.



The same can be said for the Rastafarian woman. Whether her locks are flowing or wrapped up above her head, it is easy to understand why she is often referred to as an empress or queen. The regality of her walk and mannerisms is compelling. Well-known Rastafarian women like Rita Marley, widow of reggae icon Bob Marley, who now fights for social change in impoverished parts of the world, and Toni Morrison, beloved author and professor emeritus at Princeton University, both present an outward image that is undeniably a reflection of their inner selves.

“So amazing how this world was made. I wonder if GOD is a woman. The gift of life astounds me till this day – I give it up for the woman”

Lyrics from:
“Strength of a Woman (Single) — Shaggy, 2002

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Perhaps when a woman truly knows who she is, only then is she free to adorn herself accordingly and live the fullest expression of herself. It's at this intersection of style and substance that a woman rises to take on her personal power, a force that can change the world.

The Women Who Fought for Human Rights

Since the beginning of time, wise women have exhibited a strength that was unexpected of them, often when facing violence, hatred and oppression. Were they born into it or forced by circumstance? We may never know. We do know that their courage, their wisdom and their truth stood up to oppression in many forms.

In her simple suit jacket and tie-neck blouse, Jeanne Manford looked every bit the typical middle-aged mom when she hit the national spotlight. Manford, blithely unconcerned for her safety or popular opinion chose to

walk with her son Morty in a Gay Rights parade in 1972, a time when homosexuals were widely considered “sick” and frequently met with violence and disgrace. (Morty himself had been hospitalized from a severe beating.)

In the process of supporting her son, she formed the group Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG). Manford's quiet yet public love and support for her gay son helped open the door for families and friends to begin to understand and accept the homosexuals in their own lives.

The SF Gate, in an article published on January 10, 2013, quoted San Francisco's Senator Mark Leno as stating that “for her to step into the street to declare support for her mentally ill, outlaw son — that was no small act ... But it was what a mother's love does.” This schoolteacher-turned-social activist was eventually awarded the Presidential Citizens medal in 2012 for her work.

“With her smile and her style, She'll protect you like a child – That's a woman”

"She'll put a smile upon your face And take you to that higher place So don't you under estimate The strength of a woman"

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Manford joined a long tradition of women who stood against injustice despite the risks. Rosa Parks, Dorothy Rogers Tilly and Eleanor Roosevelt join lesser-known names like Doris Derby, Yuri Kochiyama and Septima Clarke as women who pioneered the fight for civil rights.

Susan B. Anthony was just 17 years old when she was named state agent for the American Anti-Slavery Society in New York. She also actively fought for equal rights for women, getting arrested in the process. We've heard the names Harriet

Tubman and Harriet Beecher Stowe, Anne Knight and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, but do we really understand the bravery it took to stand strong in the face of oppression, armed only with words, passion and a woman's sense of what's undeniably right?

Warrior Women Through History

They fought alone or alongside their men for the benefit of their people. They were not afraid to face their foes head on or to use the tactical skills that their femininity gave them. The archetypal warrior woman has been a compelling feature throughout history, in every culture.

Queen Boudicca found herself thrown into conflict after her husband Prasutagus died in 60 AD, leaving a will that left his kingdom in conflict. She suffered flogging, the rape of her daughters, and financial ruin before rising to lead the Celtic Icenii forces in successful revolts against the Roman Empire.

Grace O'Malley, a Gaelic chieftain and seafaring leader, dared to demand and defend what was hers in the decidedly man's world of the late 16th century. Like many strong-willed women of her time, she was reviled for promiscuity that would have been overlooked had she been a man. It is not surprising that she reportedly had red hair to suit her fiery Celtic heritage.

Nanny of the Maroons or "Queen Nanny" — Jamaica's sole national heroine — was a fierce leader and master of guerilla warfare against the British Redcoats and was successful in her fight to keep her people, Africans who had escaped slavery on the island, from a return to oppression.

These historical women embody a certain warrior archetype and, while their stories may be vastly different, there is a familiar thread running through each of protecting one's own and standing for what's right.



"She can take you on a high Be your comfort when you cry But if you look into her eyes You'll see the strength of a woman ... Strength of a woman"

The Modern Day Woman of Style and Strength

Women do not have to be warriors or rulers to harness their strength and bring a nation to its emotional knees. During the Turkish riots in 2013, a powerful image emerged of a young woman being pushed back by the blast of pepper spray from heavily armed riot police. Due to the viral photograph that captured that shocking moment, Ceyda Sungur is now known as "The woman in the red dress," a reluctant yet unforgettable symbol of the Turkish resistance.

More recently, we witnessed the slender and graceful African American female leshia Evans, who serenely faced riot police

this summer in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, with a calm that belied her size and captivated our hearts. The simplicity of her flowing summer dress and her peacefully resistant demeanor showed determination and strength that has been captured and shared in that one iconic picture.

And the world will never forget the sweet, childish face of the Afghan teen who was shot in the head simply for wanting an education. Malala Yousafzai has gone through what few adults could have endured and has come out smiling and still wanting to help other women. This teen, in her Islamic dress and hijab, garners our utmost respect and attention in the same way that the female Kurdish fighters do. Like Malala, the Peshmergas fighting ISIS are ordinary young women with a desire to help protect other women, reportedly applying makeup before heading into battle. If they are going to die, they say, they want to die looking pretty.

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Early Summer (1951)

The Japanese master Yasujiro Ozu made films in which wisdom seems to slowly emerge from experience, tradition, and sometimes the landscape itself. In this quietly wonderful 1951 film, Ozu turns his attention to Noriko (Setsuko Hara, a Japanese star who died in 2015), a Tokyo secretary who lives with her extended family. At 28, she is already considered old for an unmarried woman. Her boss suggests she pair off with a successful older colleague, and the family approves of the idea — but we notice how well she gets along with a family friend, a widower. Adding a touch of melancholy: The widower knew her late brother, who died in the war. It's not Noriko's place to be assertive about this attraction, but she finds ways to modestly bring about the result she wants. Ozu plays this unsentimentally but with great feeling, finding time to cast a knowing eye at the community that surrounds his determined heroine. Noriko already seems prematurely wise; it's everybody else who needs to get up to speed. (DVD available on Amazon; streaming available on MUBI and Hulu)

MUSIC REVIEWS

by Joe Rodriguez / Freelance music writer

“One good thing about music; when it hits you, you feel no pain.” — Bob Marley



You Learn (Single) — Alanis Morissette, Jagged Little Pill, 1995

After years of being a child star for Nickelodeon's *You Can't Do That on Television* and becoming an award-winning pop diva in her native Canada, 19-year-old Alanis Morissette packed up and moved to Los Angeles to reinvent herself. With the help of music producer and songwriter Glen Ballard, Morissette cleansed herself of her sugary pop star tendencies and became rock's next big thing with her brooding, cynical, reflective lyrics and octave-skipping caterwauling vocals. “You Learn” was the first song she wrote for her multiple-Grammy-winning album *Jagged Little Pill*. The song starts with a simple hip-hop bass line and an electric acoustic guitar that lead into Morissette's breathy vocals. She wistfully recommends that living, loving, crying and losing are all part of learning. With each life experience big or small, we are gaining the wisdom and knowledge that enrich our lives. And she does it with a poignancy that is unforgettable.



Wisdom of Time (Single) — The Supremes, Floy Joy, 1972

The summer of 1972 was one of transition and difficulty in the world: The Watergate drama was unfolding, the Vietnam War was escalating, and the world was rocked by the tragedy at the Munich Games. It also ended a time of stagnation for The Supremes post-Diana Ross. “Wisdom of Time” is a hidden gem tucked away at the end of the erratic and uneven album *Floy Joy*. A shimmering spacey guitar and piano intro builds into a funky bass and drum line that lead into the angelic vocal duet of the Supremes' Cindy Birdsong and Jean Terrells. The main message of the song is of growth, change and hope that with time we can learn to heal and solve any of the issues the world can throw at us. It's just as relevant today to remind us all not to give into division and close-mindedness, but instead stand together with open minds.



Least Complicated (Single) — Indigo Girls, Swamp Ophelia, 1994

Why were things so much easier when we were young? On the Indigo Girls' fifth album, the folk rock duo takes a more reflective approach to song writing and become more personal with their lyrics. A great example of this new approach is the song “Least Complicated.” Beginning with a somber jangly guitar, singer Emily Saliers reflects on the scene below her second-story window as the kids walk by and reminisces on a time when everything was simpler and problems were easier to solve. The song asks why we make life so much more complex than it should be as we grow older, noting, “The hardest to learn was the least complicated.” Perhaps if we apply the simple wisdom we had as children to our “complicated” adult problems, we'd find a way to return to more simple pleasures. ♦

Everyday Women With Uncommon Strength

Style is unquestionably more than clothing and physical attributes; it is a presence, an essence of who you are as a woman. Readily coming to mind are the elegant Princess Grace of Monaco, the beautiful Queen Noor of Jordan, the lovely and loving Princess Diana, and the fierce and noble Grace Jones. They have a confidence that commands, “Look at me and see my truth.”

For many of us, it's the images of our mothers and grandmothers — those strong, solid pillars of the fam-

ily who disciplined with a stare or a gentle voice — that define a woman's style and strength. In my own life, these women were small in stature yet the sheer force of their will made them seem as giants. I can remember being quieted simply by the silent stare of my mom. No words were needed to get us to toe the line.

Was it their style that gave them this authority? Or did their authority — hard earned from life's lessons — give them their style?

When a woman stands in her strength, the two are inseparably intertwined. ♦

Read More:

Davis-Kimball, Jeannine, Ph.D. (2003). *Warrior Women: An Archaeologist's Search for history's Hidden Heroines*. Warner Books.

Fraser, Antonia. (2014). *Warrior Queens*. Random House.

Olson, Lynne. (2002). *Freedom's Daughters: The Unsung Heroines of the Civil Rights Movement From 1830 to 1970*. Scribner.

Shaggy. (2002). “Strength of a Woman” on *Lucky Dad* album. MCA Records.

Yee, Shirley J. (1992). *Black Women Abolitionists: Study In Activism, 1828-1860*. University of Tennessee Press.

For Them to Know: Continued from page 30

Others feel compelled to share their feelings at moments of great significance in their lives. Then-President-elect Barack Obama did when he was about to be inaugurated:

“These are the things I want for you — to grow up in a world with no limits on your dreams and no achievements beyond your reach, and to grow into compassionate, committed women who will help build that world. And I want every child to have the same chances to learn and dream and grow and thrive that you girls have. That's why I've taken our family on this great adventure.”

I've recently decided to begin writing to my sons, and I confess — this is hard work. I stared at the blank pages for a long time, searching for the right place to start.

“I've written you many letters since each of you were born, usually on your birthdays and often when you or I were leaving for a period of time. One of my favorite things to do was give you a parting envelope with a letter, for the plane, for the bunk on the first night of camp, for the occasion we wouldn't be celebrating

together because we were separated. When you were very little, I left little notes in your lunchboxes, randomly, so you'd be surprised, and subtle, so you wouldn't be embarrassed if a friend copped a view of our little secret. As I write this now, I am wondering if you remember any of this ...”

I give myself permission to mess up. I tell myself I can keep revising this as time goes on. I write, cross out, get tearful, laugh a little and write some more. The important thing is that I begin.

I'm not done writing my letter — it's a work in progress, and I've only just finished the introduction! I'm realizing just how much of a challenge this is, so I'm going to take my time. I'll print it out every now and then (just in case I don't get to finish it, my boys will find it in my final papers) and go back to it when I'm feeling inspired. I'm not worried about the length; I just want it to feel right — to somehow speak for me when I'm gone. Even though it's not always comfortable — I sometimes get emotional writing like this — I'm going to keep at it. This opportunity is too important to let it slip by. ♦

How to Write Your Own Ethical Will

Inspired to try your hand at leaving your thoughts for your loved ones? Here are some resources to help you along the way.

To access (free) Stanford University Life Review letter templates, go to <http://tinyurl.com/wise-stanford>.

Read President Obama's entire legacy letter to his daughters on the occasion of moving the family into the White House in *The Huffington Post* at <http://tinyurl.com/wise-legacy>.

If you prefer to be interviewed and recorded, you can find a comprehensive list of Life Interview questions at <http://tinyurl.com/wise-interviews>.

Sources:

Zaiman, Elana, Rabbi. (2013). “The Lasting Gift,” *LIV FUN*, Winter 2013, pp. 12-15.

Excerpts used in the examples in this story are from sample letters published in www.life-legacies.com.

“True love stories never have endings.”

— Richard Bach