

The True Meaning of Democracy: Eleanor Roosevelt, Marian Anderson, and Respect

- **Compelling Question**
 - How can Eleanor Roosevelt's demonstration of respect help us practice the virtue in our own lives?
- **Virtue:** Respect
- **Definition** – Respect is valuing yourself and others, and treating others as you want to be treated.
- **Lesson Overview**
 - In this lesson, students will learn about the respectful action of Eleanor Roosevelt towards Marian Anderson. They will explore how this show of respect helped shape her purpose and identity and learn how similar displays in their own lives can help them in like manner.
- **Objectives**
 - Students will analyze Eleanor Roosevelt's show of respect toward Marian Anderson in 1939.
 - Students will understand how being respectful can help shape their identity and purpose.
 - Students will apply this knowledge to pursue more respectful actions in their own lives.
- **Background**
 - Franklin D. Roosevelt became president in 1932 and was re-elected three times to an unprecedented four terms due to the crises of the Great Depression and World War II. African Americans made up an important block of Democratic voters who made up the "New Deal Coalition." Blacks switched their electoral allegiance from the Republican "Party of Lincoln" in honor of the author of the Emancipation Proclamation to the party of FDR.

President Roosevelt had a somewhat mixed record on race relations. He refused to support an anti-lynching bill in Congress, where much of his party's strength was comprised of Southern Democrats. Moreover, the New Deal programs had many instances of discriminating against African Americans in the distribution of relief. Nevertheless, many black sharecroppers were devastated by the Great Depression and welcomed the desperately needed aid. They felt they had a champion in the White House.

African Americans also felt as if they had another champion in the White House in First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt. Roosevelt had long been a crusader for the equal rights of workers, women, and blacks. In 1939, she took one of her most decisive and symbolically important stands for the equal rights of African Americans when singer Marian Anderson was refused an opportunity to sing because of her skin color. Roosevelt showed great respect for Ms. Anderson and for the rights of African Americans in general.

- **Vocabulary**
 - Unprecedented
 - Electoral
 - Allegiance
 - Crusader
 - Decisive
 - Symbolically
 - Great Depression
 - Lynching
 - New Deal
 - Sharecropper
 - Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR)
 - Dispossessed
 - World-renowned
 - Modest
 - Syndicated
 - Dignitaries
 - Comprised
 - Denigrated

- **Introduce Text**
 - Have students read the background and narrative, keeping the “Walk-In-The-Shoes” question in mind as they read. Then have them answer the remaining questions below.
- **Walk-In-The-Shoes Questions**
 - As you read, imagine you are the protagonist.
 - What challenges are you facing?
 - What fears or concerns might you have?
 - What may prevent you from acting in the way you ought?
- **Observation Questions**
 - Who was Eleanor Roosevelt and what was her relationship to Marian Anderson?
 - How did Eleanor Roosevelt show respect toward Marian Anderson?
 - How do you treat others with respect in your life?
 - What does Eleanor Roosevelt’s demonstration of respect reveal about her identity?
- **Discussion Questions**
 - Discuss the following questions with your students.
 - What is the historical context of the narrative?
 - What historical circumstances presented a challenge to the protagonist?
 - How and why did the individual exhibit a moral and/or civic virtue in facing and overcoming the challenge?
 - How did the exercise of the virtue benefit civil society?
 - How might exercise of the virtue benefit the protagonist?
 - What might the exercise of the virtue cost the protagonist?
 - Would you react the same under similar circumstances? Why or why not?
 - How can you act similarly in your own life? What obstacles must you overcome in order to do so?
- **Additional Resources**
 - "Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum." Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum.
 - "Marian Anderson and the Easter Sunday Concert, April 9, 1939." Rediscovering Black History. May 20, 2014.
 - "Exhibit: Eleanor Roosevelt Letter." National Archives and Records Administration.

Handout A: The True Meaning of Democracy: Eleanor Roosevelt, Marian Anderson and Respect

Background

Franklin D. Roosevelt became president in 1932 and was re-elected three times to an unprecedented four terms due to the crises of the Great Depression and World War II. African Americans made up an important block of Democratic voters who made up the “New Deal Coalition.” Blacks switched their electoral allegiance from the Republican “Party of Lincoln” in honor of the author of the Emancipation Proclamation to the party of FDR.

President Roosevelt had a somewhat mixed record on race relations. He refused to support an anti-lynching bill in Congress, where much of his party’s strength was comprised of Southern Democrats. Moreover, the New Deal programs had many instances of discriminating against African Americans in the distribution of relief. Nevertheless, many black sharecroppers were devastated by the Great Depression and welcomed the desperately needed aid. They felt they had a champion in the White House.

African Americans also felt as if they had another champion in the White House in First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt. Roosevelt had long been a crusader for the equal rights of workers, women, and blacks. In 1939, she took one of her most decisive and symbolically important stands for the equal rights of African Americans when singer Marian Anderson was refused an opportunity to sing because of her skin color. Roosevelt showed great respect for Ms. Anderson and for the rights of African Americans in general.

Narrative

In January, 1939, First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt had a decision to make. An African-American singer she knew was denied an opportunity to perform at an event in Washington D.C. because of her race. Roosevelt, and her husband, Franklin Roosevelt, were known for their advocacy for justice toward the dispossessed during the Great Depression. On the other hand, the controversy was sensitive and could have negative political consequences for the administration especially among southern members of their Democratic Party. Eleanor decided to make a stand for respect and the singer’s equal rights.

Marian Anderson was a world-renowned vocalist who had entertained heads of state all over the world. Arturo Tocanini once told her, “A voice like yours is heard once in a hundred years.” She had just accepted a relatively modest invitation to sing for an annual Howard University fundraiser on Easter weekend. The Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR) refused to rent its Constitution Hall auditorium in Washington, D.C. because Anderson was black. Anderson told the newspapers, “I am shocked beyond words to be barred from the capital of my own country after having appeared almost in every other capital in the world.”

Eleanor Roosevelt decided to take several public actions on behalf of Anderson. First, she invited Anderson to sing for King George VI and Queen Elizabeth at the White House. Second, she helped arrange a concert for Anderson at the Lincoln Memorial. Third, and most important, she resigned from the DAR.

On February 28, millions of newspaper readers across the country opened up their morning newspapers over their breakfast and coffee. Roosevelt’s syndicated regular column, “My Day” appeared in dozens of major newspapers. On this morning, readers were shocked to see Roosevelt resign from the DAR in protest of how the organization was treating Anderson. She wrote generally of the dilemma of staying in an organization with a policy that a member opposed versus remaining in the organization and attempting to change the policy. She concluded by stating, “They have taken an action which has been widely talked of in the press. To remain a member implies approval of that action, and therefore I am resigning.”

Most Americans responded favorably and supported Roosevelt. She received more supportive mail than for any other column that year. A Gallup poll showed that more than two-thirds of respondents approved of her action. Anderson was very thankful to Roosevelt for defending her dignity and that of all African Americans. She said, “I am not surprised at Mrs. Roosevelt’s actions because she seems to me to be one who really comprehends the true meaning of democracy.”

On Easter Sunday, April 9, thousands of Americans left their church services and went to the Lincoln Memorial to line up at least four hours early for a good spot to watch Anderson's special concert. A radio announcer thought it "fitting and symbolic" that she "should be singing on Easter Sunday on the steps to the Memorial to the Great Emancipator who struck the shackles of slavery from her people 76 years ago." At 5:00 p.m., the concert started. As Anderson looked out from the steps of the memorial, she saw 75,000 people from the steps of the memorial to either side of the reflecting pool and the Washington Monument looming in the distance. She sang "America" with special significance that day and then "Ave Maria" to commemorate Easter and a few Negro spirituals. She told the audience, "I'm just so overwhelmed today, I cannot express myself. You don't know what you have done for me." The audience was comprised of white and black people, dignitaries and common citizens, and thought the performance was brilliant. Anderson later said it "was more than a concert for me. It was a dedication It seemed everyone present was a living witness to the ideals of freedom for which President Lincoln died. When I sang that day, I was singing to the entire nation." In defending respect for all Americans of every race, Roosevelt had caused many to reflect on the meaning of the idea of America. She was at the Roosevelt home at Hyde Park for the Easter weekend, not because she lacked the courage to appear with Anderson, but because the First Lady tried humbly not to divert the attention away from the singer's moment.

A few months later, on Independence Day weekend, Roosevelt courageously continued to demonstrate respect for Anderson publicly. Roosevelt traveled to Richmond, which had been the capital of the Confederacy, to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) national convention. At the 5,300-seat Richmond Mosque, Roosevelt presented an address that was broadcast across America on NBC radio and its affiliates. The First Lady spoke generally about the challenges that African Americans faced. But if you feel that you have special difficulties, then you must indeed be proud of your achievement." She concluded by praising Anderson for developing "herself as an individual... and had the courage to meet many difficulties [with] great dignity."

For several critical months in 1939, First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt became a champion of the rights of Marian Anderson, and for all African Americans to enjoy the right to participate in American democracy. When Anderson's dignity and musical genius were denigrated, Roosevelt symbolically stood by her side and honored the vocalist's talents and rights as a fellow American and human regardless of race. During the affair, Secretary of the Interior, Harold Ickes, remarked that "Genius, like justice, is blind Genius draws no color line." Eleanor Roosevelt's actions demonstrated that she agreed with the truth of that statement.