

WHAT KIND OF ALLY WILL YOU BE?

Laura Smith Haviland and the Cost of Standing for Freedom

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What does it mean to be an ally in the fight for human rights?

Make a statement? Donate to a cause? Post on social media? Go to a protest? Put up a yard sign?

I think being an ally is much more than all of those important actions.

Allyship requires investing your privilege in the work to dismantle discrimination in an active and sometimes dangerous way, even and especially when that requires sacrificing your privilege for the sake of justice and equity for someone else.

What if the front steps of your very house became the doors to freedom? Would you be w

illing to stand as an ally while opening your very house to possible danger and threat?

Laura Smith Haviland was this kind of ally.

In the 19th century, she not only advocated for the abolition of enslavement, she opened the front doors of her Michigan farmhouse as the first stop of the Underground Railroad in Michigan.

Long before allyship had a name or academic description, Ms. Haviland embodied the grit and determination needed to fight for the freedom of thousands of enslaved men, women, and children.

Ms. Haviland's life asks us to imagine something heavier.

She traveled into slave states under false identity, once passing as a light-skinned Black woman's companion to reach a Kentucky plantation.

She went to Tennessee to retrieve the children of Willis and Elsie Hamilton, formerly enslaved parents whose children were still held by the family's old owner.

When the owner tried to force their return through legal threat and violence, Haviland and her neighbors stood between them and the Hamilton children until a sympathetic judge delayed the case long enough for the family to escape to Canada.

It made her a body willing to be spent in service of other people's freedom.

Allyship is a dance of knowing when to lead with your privilege and force open the doors of injustice, while also knowing when to step back and support people of color as they demand their own freedom.

Ms. Haviland knew how to do both.

When Ms. Hamilton working at the Freedom's Hospital in Washington, she became friends with Sojourner Truth.

One time, the two boarded a streetcar together, Ms. Truth stepped onto the car first, and when the conductor pushed her back, she told him plainly, "I am a lady, too."

At the next transfer, a passenger asked whether Black people were allowed to ride, and the conductor seized Ms. Truth by the shoulder to force her off.

Ms. Haviland took hold of Ms. Truth's other arm and told him he was not putting her out. The conductor turned to Ms. Haviland and asked if Ms. Truth belonged to her.

"No," she said. "She belongs to humanity."

Ms. Truth had already claimed her own dignity before Ms. Haviland ever spoke. Ms. Haviland's role was not to speak for her. It was to plant her feet next to a woman who had already spoken for herself, stand where the danger lands, and stay there.

That is allyship's real shape.

Ms. Haviland stayed in that posture for more than 60 years, through the war and past it, touring former plantations to collect the chains and irons used on enslaved people so white audiences who had never seen such things could no longer claim ignorance.

She died in 1898 in her late eighties. At her funeral, a choir of Black and white singers sang together, and Black and white pallbearers carried her casket to the grave.

Today we need the allyship of Laura Smith Haviland: stealth and strategic while also vocal and unafraid.

A Moral Feminist Witness understands that we need allies willing to open more than their mouths.

We need people willing to open their homes, their wallets, and their minds to how they must be part of dismantling the oppressive system.

We need allies who understand that human rights are protected through more than private conviction. They are protected when ordinary people decide that another person's freedom is worth the disruption of their own comfort.

The question is no longer whether we consider ourselves allies. The question is what our allyship opens.

Whose voice becomes harder to silence because we are standing beside them?

Whose freedom becomes more possible because we have placed our influence, our resources, and our bodies in the struggle.

And when someone is being pushed from the streetcar, removed from their workplace, seized from their neighborhood, erased from public life, or denied the right to exist freely and fully, will we plant our feet beside them and refuse to move?

When freedom comes knocking at our door, will we answer?