

EXCERPT

IVP Books

A Sojourner's Truth
Choosing Freedom and Courage in a Divided World

October 9, 2018 | \$16, 208 pages, paperback | 978-0-8308-4552-1

Women Are the Unsung Heroes in This World

She gently touched my shoulder, then took my hand to lift me from the brown folding chair under the funeral-home tent. My eyes had been fixed on the steel silver bars as I watched strangers lower my mother's body into the ground. My Aunt Janet said to me, "Come on inside the church, Tasha. There are some things you just don't need to see."

I don't remember eating the meal provided at the church that day. I don't remember what I did before or after the service. I don't remember whether I wore my midshipman service dress blue uniform or a traditional black dress—it wasn't exactly a day for taking pictures. I do remember entering the old Baptist church, filled with family and friends, as songs of praise rang out from a full choir loft where my mother used to sing. Those black people, my mother's friends, stomped, rocked, and clapped their hands as they sang praises to Jesus. As I walked down the aisle, I worried about my immediate family: How would we make it without my mother? Who would love and lead us now?

My high school principal was one of the officials who carried the ceremonial flowers to the small gravesite outside, and she was allowed to sit in the front of the church until it was time to perform her duty. She called me several days later and said, "You know, Tasha, I watched you that whole service, and the only time you cried was when you looked at your immediate family. Somehow, you knew you were going to be alright because your mother gave you enough love to last a lifetime."

The truth was, I first experienced God's grace to me through the love and sacrifices of my dear mother.

The most difficult thing about her death was knowing that she would no longer share the important moments in my life. She would not be there to see me graduate from the United States Naval Academy. She would not be there to see me marry. She would not be present for the birth of my children—the son lost and the daughter who remains. My heart's deepest ache was not having an answer for the questions, *Who is going to love me like my momma? How do you define a home without her?*

I was sad and lonely. I poured myself into work. For years I bottled my emotions and did not sufficiently grieve. But when I thought I would emotionally die, God was gracious. He sustained my life by bringing other women who continued to show up when I needed motherly support.

When I returned to the Naval Academy and resumed college life, it was my mentor, Mary Thompson, who provided a haven for prayer, home-cooked meals, and a safe place for my many tears. When I graduated, it was my godmother, Mrs. Joyce Garrett, and her husband, Pop, who threw my best friend and me a graduation party because our lives, our accomplishments, and our new careers in the military were worth celebrating.

When I got married, it was my other godmother, Sister Linda Jones, who managed the wedding. I was not anxious because she was running the show. When my bridesmaids left my hotel room to head to the church, two of their mothers remained to help me get dressed and drive me to the church on that bright spring day. As my dear friends were

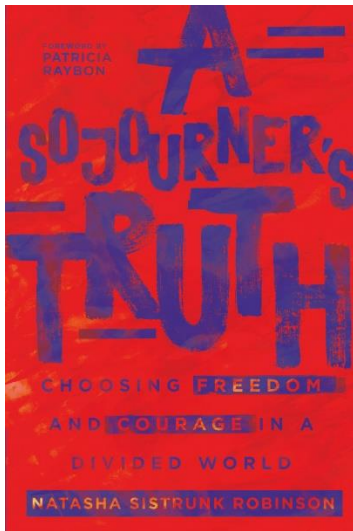


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preparing to stand as my witnesses, their mothers were taking care of me. I didn't ask them to do that; they just showed up. On that day there were no tears of sadness because I did not have my one and only mother. God in his grace had given me three.

One of Jesus' best friends, the apostle John, wrote of him, "From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace" (John 1:16 NRSV). This truth I know full well.

God's grace sustains us through our beginnings and endings. Losing my mom when I was twenty felt like the end of being a daughter and the beginning of being a mother to my younger siblings—my sister and brother. I grew up very quickly in the four and a half years between my mom's funeral and my wedding. I became more responsible for myself—and for my father and siblings as well. There is a weightiness to becoming a matriarch. So, I learned to fully embrace that I am a strong woman and a leader.

I don't wear the "strong woman" title as a badge of honor, as if I had a blue leotard with a Superwoman emblem on my chest and a red cape flying in the wind—not anymore, anyway. I used to be the StrongBlackWoman that Chanequa Walker-Barnes describes:

[She] is the woman who constantly extends herself on behalf of others. In her intimate and family relationships, on her job, and in her church and community, she is the "go to" woman, the one upon whom others depend when they need assistance, counsel, or comfort. Driven by a deeply ingrained desire to be seen as helpful and caring, she is practically incapable of saying no to others' requests without experiencing feelings of guilt and worthlessness. As her willingness to help repeatedly reinforces others' tendencies to ask her for help, her very nature becomes defined by multitasking and over-commitment.

I still multitask, but I have learned to say no by establishing boundaries, setting aside the responsibilities that do not belong to me, and asking for help.

I have also learned that strong is not always the opposite of weak. Strong is knowing your own power and exercising it humbly. In his book *Strong and Weak*, Andy Crouch writes, "What we truly admire in human beings is not authority alone or vulnerability alone—we seek both together." Being a strong black woman is knowing quite deeply that the two—strength and weakness, authority and vulnerability—can coexist. This knowing is often born out of much suffering and sorrow.

Strong is knowing your own power and exercising it humbly.

—Taken from chapter two, "Grace: Truth is, women are the unsung heroes in this world"



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An Interview with Natasha Sistrunk Robinson

What experiences in your life brought about *A Sojourner's Truth*?

Natasha Sistrunk Robinson: After nearly twenty years of being in higher education and diverse professional settings, I was motivated to write this book because of the systemic challenges I observed as both a woman and racial or ethnic minority. The injustices were the same whether I was leading in a professional space or ministering in the church, and I wanted to give a historical and cultural analysis that was both deeply personal or relatable, and deeply theological or spiritual. When these elements come together, I believe we are in the better position to embody the redemption of Christ to a broken world.

What is *A Sojourner's Truth* about?

Natasha: This book tells my story as an African American woman leader alongside Moses' and the Exodus narrative. It allows me to show how God raises up an ordinary person from a marginalized people group to equip and challenge them to live as citizens of a new kingdom.

What messages are at the heart of *A Sojourner's Truth*?

Natasha:

- If we want freedom from this fallen world and its brokenness, and if we want to take bold and courageous actions, then we must first learn to tell the truth!
- Reconciliation conversations that do not include convictions and repentance from racial and systemic injustices stop short of the kingdom of God.
- Listening, learning from, and honoring the contributions of people of color and women in the church allows for a deeper theological understanding and true unity in the body of Christ.
- The intentional personal reflection and transparent sharing of our stories with "the other" gives space for the spiritual, emotional, professional, and character-shaping moments that help a person realize who God is and what he has purposed and positioned them to do.

What do you hope readers clearly hear from you in this book?

Natasha: We need to hear more stories that originate with and feature the voices and experiences of people of color. We need to see more women and men working and leading together across generations to advance the kingdom of God.



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Natasha Sistrunk Robinson

I was born in South Carolina and raised in the small town of Orangeburg. My mother and father provided a loving, nurturing, and supportive home. Being the oldest of three children and an academic and athletic stand out, my leadership skills were recognized early. Even in high school, I loved working with my peers to accomplish a common goal. I enjoyed motivating others to reach their highest potential, encouraging teamwork, and managing projects. My peers and the "village" that raised me also cultivated important life skills, such as self-discipline, hard work, character, and integrity. These formative years prepared me to attend the United States Naval Academy (USNA).

At the Naval Academy, I earned a bachelor of science degree in English (2002). Highlights from my Naval Academy college experience include life-long friendships, opportunities for leadership and travel, and worshiping in the USNA Gospel Choir. These leadership, mentoring, and learning experiences and relationships have shaped me into the person I am today. The greatest change was growing in my faith. Although I grew up in the black church, I did not have a personal relationship with Jesus until I was mentored by an older and wiser woman of faith. The diverse experience of worshiping in a predominately African American gospel choir (which felt just like home) and being led by this white woman clarified my life's purpose and my perspective about reconciling diverse people groups. My life was made new in Annapolis.

Upon graduation, I was selected to serve as a US Marine Corps Officer. My occupational specialty was financial management, which included everything from budget development to executing several multi-million-dollar accounts, overseeing government contracts, and payroll management. After completing my duty at Camp Lejeune, North Carolina, I returned to the Naval Academy and eventually became the senior diversity admissions counselor in the Office of Admissions. This job gave me the opportunity to serve candidates on the entire East Coast, while offering leadership to our field officers and volunteer workforce all across the United States. I was grateful for this platform to teach and train leaders, engage the public, dialog with national influencers, counsel candidates, and mentor current students. I had the privilege of being part of the team that recruited the most racially, ethnically, and gender-diverse class in USNA history at the time. I was honorably discharged from the Marine Corps after six years of service and obtaining the rank of captain.

Following active duty, I continued public service as the director of finance and administration for the Department of Homeland Security, Science and Technology Directorate, International Cooperative Programs Office (where I worked for two and a half years). This opportunity expanded my professional experience to include the facilitation of international partnerships, the awarding of international grants, interagency agreements, and executive reporting to the White House.

At a time when I was advancing professionally, God was also granting me grace to teach Bible studies, lead small groups, and mentor others to grow in faith. I wanted to do all of that well, so I enrolled as a full-time student at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary Charlotte, where I graduated cum laude with a master of arts in Christian leadership (2014).

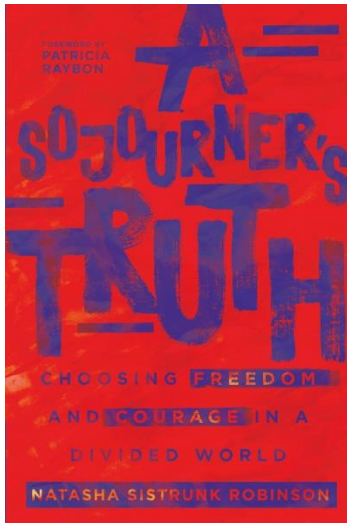


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While I was attending Gordon-Conwell, God began preparing my heart to write, so I started my blog, *A Sista's Journey*, and began publishing professionally in 2010. I specifically write about being a servant in God's kingdom with a focus on leadership, mentoring, reconciliation, and biblical justice. Attending seminary was personally transformative as I learned and practiced spiritual disciplines, explored the practical elements of mentoring and discipleship, and completed independent studies on the topics of prayer and fasting, racial reconciliation, and biblical justice.

Recent years have given me the opportunity to write regularly while serving my community and championing causes of passion. This work includes anti-human-trafficking advocacy, promoting education, and raising up the next generation of faith leaders. The latter work is a goal of Leadership LINKS, Inc., the nonprofit organization I founded with a team of like-minded friends and leadership experts.

When I am not working or ministering, you will find me at home living a slow and quiet life with my husband and little girl. My joys of solitude include reading, writing, watching movies, and spending quality time with family and friends. I also love dancing, celebrating theater and the arts, listening to life-giving music, having a great laugh, partaking in intelligent conversations, and eating delicious food!

Read more at NatashaRobinson.com. Follow her on Twitter: @ASISTASJOURNEY.

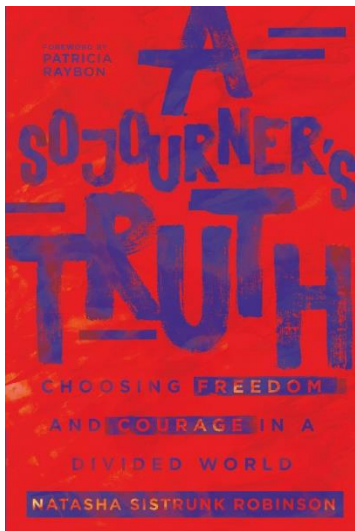


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ENDORSEMENTS



A Sojourner's Truth *Choosing Freedom and Courage in a Divided World*

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"Climb up from the mud and finally march."

"Raw, vulnerable, and bold, Natasha Robinson calls the people of God in Christ to honesty, courageous confession, and loving listening. Every Christian needs to read this beautiful and poetic call to restoration, reconciliation, and redemption."

—Tara Beth Leach, senior pastor of First Church of the Nazarene of Pasadena, author of *Emboldened: A Vision for Empowering Women in Ministry*

"In A Sojourner's Truth, Natasha Robinson weaves together three pivotal stories: her personal journey to freedom, the path of African Americans toward liberation, and the exodus experience of the Israelites. With a swift and truthful pen, Natasha calls the reader to examine their personal history while she excavates American history and the biblical narrative. As a leader, mentor, and prophetic voice of justice, Natasha has written a work that is a guidebook and a guidepost, pushing the reader toward courage, boldness, and hope."

—Amena Brown, spoken-word poet, author of *How to Fix a Broken Record*

"This message is right on time—and it couldn't come from a more trustworthy source! Natasha offers an innovative and liberating pathway to spiritual formation that will support all who seek to engage our divided world. Whether you are new to conversations around difference, division, and inequality, or a seasoned sojourner laboring under the weight of our divided world, Natasha's prophetic wisdom can guide you toward elevated and sustainable action."

—Christena Cleveland, associate professor of the practice of organizational studies at Duke Divinity School, author of *Disunity in Christ*

"In A Sojourner's Truth, Natasha leads us through the story of Moses and through the raw reality of her own journey. Then Natasha leads us further still: she invites us to engage with our own story and our purpose in the world. Her exposition is profound, her cultural analysis is incisive and truth telling, and her personal story is both searing and vulnerable. This book is a must-read but also a must-learn-from!"

—Jo Saxton, author of *More Than Enchanting*, cohost of the *Lead Stories* podcast

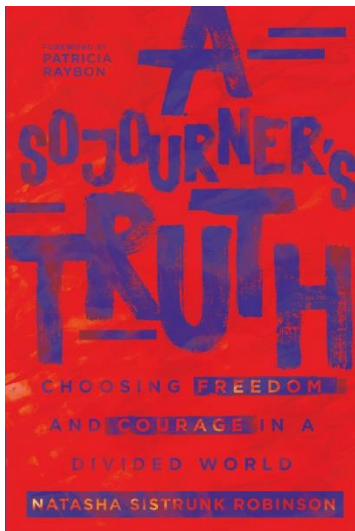


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"Natasha Robinson has lived it, experienced it, learned from it, and now through her writing, teaches us. The church needs truth telling. We are lost without the truth exposing secrets, lies, and false narratives. Natasha Robinson writes the truth that emerges from her own powerful narrative. She expresses the courage to speak the truth and to raise her voice. This is a voice the church needs to hear."

—**Soong-Chan Rah, Milton B. Engebretson Professor of Church Growth and Evangelism at North Park Theological Seminary, author of *The Next Evangelicalism***

"I love the way this woman writes! Guided by biblical insights, emotional honesty, and social relevance, Natasha Sistrunk Robinson does a masterful job of taking us on a journey that empowers us to lead others and ourselves out of the wilderness into the promised land of purpose, reconciliation, and real-life transformation. I highly recommend this book!"

—**Brenda Salter McNeil, author of *A Credible Witness* and *Roadmap to Reconciliation***

"Bold. Honest. Provocative. Wise. Natasha Robinson's voice brings all of these qualities to bear at a time when gracious but uncompromising truth telling is needed more than ever. Her personal story and biblical teaching connect us to God's heart on matters of compassion, justice, and leadership. She's the ideal guide for this tough but inspiring journey."

—**Edward Gilbreath, author of *Reconciliation Blues* and *Birmingham Revolution***

"I am grateful for this sister's journey and for her willingness to share it. I am also grateful for her hard-won truth and her courage in declaring it. Read it and find clarity and courage to 'act, change, live, and stay on the redemptive path!'"

—**Ruth Haley Barton, founder of the Transforming Center, author of *Strengthening the Soul of Your Leadership***

"A Sojourner's Truth is Natasha Sistrunk Robinson's love letter to a stream of Christian faith familiar with compassion yet less familiar with justice. Through personal stories, keen biblical reflection, and straight talk about public policy, Natasha invites readers to rethink Christian discipleship. Revealing more and more of the truth of Jesus with each chapter, she leads readers on a sojourn well worth the taking."

—**Lisa Sharon Harper, founder and president of Freedom Road**

"A Sojourner's Truth is an important book indeed. It is Natasha's story, but told on Natasha's terms. . . . For every ugly racial inequality still staining American soil and souls, she issues a battle cry to action. . . . In this brave volume, she invites us to kneel a while with her narrative and, as the saints of old used to say, to tarry there. Near her feet, humbled to look up and see God, we'll be inspired to do the right thing: to climb up from the mud and finally march."

—**From the foreword by Patricia Raybon, author of *Undivided***



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