

an open letter

Many changes have happened for women

over the last thirty years. This would seem to be an obvious statement. Yet, as testimony to achievement, for members of generations who do not remember a more restrictive time, the extent—or practical applications—of social change can be dizzying to fully comprehend and appreciate, and so, sometimes, the obvious deserves repeating.

When I tell women who are around thirty-years old or younger the following two tales, they always marvel at how much difference a few years of change can make, and how much they have taken for granted in their own lifetimes.

My first brush with activism came in grade school, after realizing that only my brother got to show-off on Field Day. At my school, only boys were allowed to play sports (girls "exercised" with kickball). Twice a year, a day was set aside for families to do nothing but cheer-on their boys engaged in team sports. Hating my brother getting all the "good" attention, I started a struggle in school that eventually led to the creation of a girl's sports program there. I had left that school by the time the program was really rolling in the seventies, so I never fully participated. However, every time the television cameras caught girls cheering-on the Women's U.S. Soccer team in 1999, I cheered, too.

In college, the extent of feminist activist representation on my Midwestern campus was a mention in the Counter Culture chapter of my 1970's Abnormal Psychology text. Photos of marching and bra-burning, presented as a fashionable, female (con)temporary insanity that should probably pass, upon my return to school in the late 1980's, had transformed from the two-dimensional into an academic program called Women's Studies, with an open Women's Resource Center on campus.

Then there are those changes in thinking, living and working which have given myself and other women pause for thought. From these changes arise tales which are more complex and still unfolding.

In the seventies, I was among those women who repeated to friends of both genders that rape was an act of power and control, until they became convinced and agreed. Finally this became a dictum. A decade later, I

decided that violence and sex were too inextricably intertwined in modern society to still believe all rape was solely about power and not about sex, too. I am aware that other women are rethinking this also, but I don't find many discussions on this issue now, outside of a focus on pornography.

In the early-eighties, my editor at *Detroit Women's Voice* asked me nervously if I wanted my name attached to an article on lesbians and alcoholism. She said, writing about lesbians was radical; what I wrote would follow me for life, and this was not a good start for a career. Wasn't it enough that I was a militant Black woman?

I assured her I could handle it, then went home to plan in earnest to lead a disenfranchised life, first ghettoized by wanting to write for feminist publications, then radicalized within feminism for wanting to write about something other than how middle-class, straight, white women could best support the Democratic Party. I had just kissed good-bye, forever, any aspirations to Pulitzers and pretentiousness!

Then, over the last two decades, the growth of Women's Studies programs, and the larger number of women entering the camps of academia and the mainstream press created a new Feminist Writer. Female Intellectualism (not our parent's intellectuals) constructed its own Feminist Intellectual Icon. The *de facto* barriers to a feminist writer earning kudos, and a living, outside of the readership of the grass-roots feminist press are no longer: Hurray, right? But wait. While some touted icons are better communicators than others, many remarkably resemble the previous male species, replete with oft-quoted (by the non-feminist media) theory-speak and indecipherable published writing.

And, what about that ugly period, glorified within the non-feminist arena, which gave the media-formed, feminist icons their boost to stardom, when they accused the Women's Movement of gathering women under the banner of "Victim"? This rhetoric mimicked the *laissez faire* attitude of the white male politicians of this period in America: Stop whining. This society is working for me, why isn't it working for you?

The way this was expressed was the same, I thought, as popular rhetoric

like: Poor people in America are poor because they won't work, or, People of color in America create their own discrimination.

One good thing that came from this was that women who considered themselves "lapsed" feminists were offered the opportunity to reassess their lives, and what they perceived the strengths and weaknesses of the women's movement to have been. It was actually a blessing in disguise for conscious women, frustrated and infuriated by the fall-out, to be reminded of, A) how the mainstream media will jump all over anything that smacks of feminism's self-destruction, and, B) how many women thought of themselves as "lapsed" feminists.

Some of the most striking changes involving women over the years, happened within the movement. Withstanding decades of criticism from the outside made us learn not to fear critical evaluation from within (even when it seemed to be coming from without). We learned that rallying is good, but on-going discussion is better. A major breakthrough the movement has made is acknowledging that we are not all one woman, coming from the same place. We are better now at hearing what women say they are seeing in their own lives and in their own environments.

We need all of these women at the tables of discussion; those that feel alienated from without the movement and those who still feel alienated within it. Fearless discourse (which does happen) regarding scholarly work, public statements, and issues like racism and neocolonialism, helps strengthen women's commitment to working together to understand each other, our lives and our worlds.

What is keeping women apart now?

Now that we can see one another better than ever before, why does it seem we are moving farther apart? We need to remember what we learned in other movements. First, a movement has yet to rise that is monolithic and quarrel-free. Second, when members of a movement feel that the complex

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dynamics within are not being rigorously addressed, the movement begins to resemble a segregated, hierarchical microcosm of the larger, oppressive culture which members wished to change. Look at "Black Power," the "Radical Left," or "Gay Liberation." How many members of these "movements" became frustrated, embittered and eventually distanced themselves from the core?

Understanding this, and knowing how far we have come toward being an inclusive movement wherein not just one kind of woman has a voice, even some 'conscious' women still feel more comfortable following a paradigm of group separation. Yet, when we factionalize, we become distracted by our own machinations, and we forget that no one group of women is more (or less) valid or significant than another.

Something else to remember is that not every woman reader is a scholar. Non-academic feminist publications should keep balance in mind when publishing. A woman who has difficulty reading writing that concerns her well-being is a woman who does not know that she is represented in it or being courted by it.

It is also true that not every woman writer is a scholar. Women who are not on the Pulitzer or tenure track have voices that need to be heard, too. The loss of feminist papers and journals that are open to all women writing is devastating to women on both the personal and political levels. Women need to be able to read their lives. How many women became interested in feminism by reading something written by another woman that she saw was like herself? How many women became writers through reading other women? Does anyone not know a woman who came out as a lesbian after finally recognizing herself in print?

I am aware of the financial heartaches and extraordinary commitment of time and passion necessary to pull together and keep going a women's publication, but what of the publications that have survived? Those which have ceased publishing non-lesbian writers have silenced voices. Including, as I understand this policy, those of bisexual women and those of non-lesbian women whom are womanist. Of course, the problem is not the existence of lesbian-written only publications; I am grateful

for the enormous lesbian-power (offered in the name of *all* women) that went into keeping going the feminist/womanist publications I have read over the decades. The problem is the dearth of spaces open for all women to gather.

All of us owe a debt to the people, organizations and publications that we grew with and that came before us. I salute the women who have been a part of *off our backs* for their commitment to women. I also salute *oob* for continuing to urge all women to participate in this open, radical feminist forum for news, activism and analysis of both.

What feminists need to do is (re)grasp our

roots. We need to remember how each feminist wave began in the past. There were always women providing written commentary on the plight of women, but with this came calls for action, too. Movement. Remember when MOVE was the operative part of the word movement? We forget that there have *always* been women weaving new realities from imagination, creating what did not presently exist inside their own lives and given environments. These were women who were Being and Doing what we have come to call feminism. What would have happened had Sojourner Truth decided to wait for a unifying, consensual theory before acting upon all of her beliefs?

We need another raising of consciousness. Reproductive rights could be the key rallying issue for this. The national furor quieted much too quickly over the state-sponsored "welfare" abortion cuts. Why was that? Poor women are always the first test cases for humiliating and invasive legislation. Does the movement think they don't know this? Rural women, who tend to be against government intrusion in personal life, are being isolated from choice because providers are frightened. Both sets of women are being squeezed by unseen forces, and although it is they who have borne the brunt of the constrictions so far, I find that the subject of abortion rights is now the only issue that truly rouses the most privileged women I meet from their own complacency.

Privileged women are very interested in issues that affect their personal welfare or are about privacy. As technology advances, many privileged women will become more active in personal/privacy rights type issues, if only to protect themselves from the intrusive effects of the computer age.

A movement needs to know how to integrate whatever is currently unfolding sociologically into a specific political discussion for the purpose of activating the larger population to consciousness. Since conscious women already know that attempting to control women's reproductive lives is an attempt to control women as individuals, it is up to the movement to translate this information to other women using any jargon they will understand, so they will realize that the far-range consequence of loss of vigilance around this issue is to lose woman's basic right to control her own person.

Another thing feminists need to do is to help all women move into this technological age. Not all women are in the throes of cyberphoria; some are part of the computer literacy gap. I remember when it was considered irresponsible (counter-revolutionary) to assume that every woman could avail herself of the exact same things another could. It was not even assumed that all women—outside of the secretarial pool—had access to a typewriter. It should not be assumed now that all women have access to a computer or know how to use one. Computers are culture-altering and thus expensive, because if everyone could equitably participate in the knowledge from its inception, oppressive divisions would be harder to maintain.

Therefore we need to share information. We need to make sure that women outside of office environments know how to find computers for public use, such as at the public library and, sometimes, bookstores. What about cooperative computer use among women in rural areas?

We need to sponsor and volunteer to facilitate at free computer education sessions at our bookstores/social centers or homes. Remember when we did almost everything from someone's home? We had fun and got things done, didn't we? If you are a woman on faculty or a member of a business association, try suggesting that your university or association sponsor

short introductory sessions that are open to the public. A friend of mine signed me up for just such a free session, through her business community.

We know that the internet is an important way for women around the world to communicate what is happening to women where they are. We should be organizing computer drives, much like clothing or food drives, to (re)distribute this resource throughout this country and others. Any woman who has already successfully done so should be sharing information with others on the ways and means by which she accomplished the task.

Last but not least, we must encourage young feminists not only to write but to desire to be press editors and publishers as well. Women who have worked at small or grassroots papers should network with excited young women whenever they meet them.

I have a wish for the new millenium. It

is that women and girls learn their self-worth. I don't mean worth as learned by digesting media and internet images of women or some future pop candy such as Grrrl Power. I don't even mean self-worth as something reflected back to us in the eyes of a parent or partner.

I mean the kind of self-worth that emanates from a woman's very core and radiates her belief in her value as a human being; the kind that allows the bearer the self-assurance to act on her own behalf without questioning her own instincts or asking for permission; a self-worth that will not allow her to be manipulated by others who want to sell her a weak or distorted self-image; the kind of self-worth that a potential abuser can sense and is thus repelled by.

No one fights for a life that is not valued. Women who do not value themselves do not fight for their own lives. How can a woman make the necessary connection, or leap of logic, between fighting for reproductive freedom and her human right to self-determination, when she is hesitant to name what is hers because she does not feel deserving of it?

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It sounds preposterous, but in order for some women to see shapes, it may be necessary to continue to draw hokey comparisons between women and men with the same old questions like: "Do you think men would stand for sperm legislation, or circumscription of personal movement to avoid violence from women? Why do you feel these circumstances are acceptable for you?"

We are coming
through the
"feminism is dead"

phase. Feminism is about choice. It is about the self-empowerment of women, women's self-actualization—a woman's right to define herself as a person and her path in this world as a human being. If a woman's safety can still be quanti-

fied by rape and abuse statistics and her freedom of choice is qualified through legislation, feminism will still be in movement. As long as women's choices mean choosing between career and motherhood, and the choices involved in structuring work outside the home with work inside the home are few or poor—feminism will still be in movement.

Our daughters are born into a world that uses the female form to sell consumer goods, and to demean and demoralize women in their own eyes and those of our sons, thus perpetuating the cycle. Feminism is still a movement but it is not yet a practice.

With this next wave of feminism, I hope there is an ebb that brings with it reminders of the lessons learned from yesteryear and from yesterday. As we work to better understand each other, while we redesign today, we can envision generations in the future fully practicing feminism.

by suzanne