

Possibilities of Life: My Women's Movement

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this we were, this is how we tried to love,
and these are the forces they had ranged against us,
and these are the forces we had ranged in us,
within us and against us, against us and within us.

Adrienne Rich

SO, IT'S JUNE OF 2005. A dozen blocks from me stands an abortion clinic. Every drugstore in town will soon distribute a morning-after pill. Another woman was murdered by her male lover, husband, ex. Yesterday's Sunshine girl's breasts are bigger and higher and harder than imaginable. My friends are losing their breasts to cancer and their uteruses to chemotherapy. Almost a thousand Calgary women could dig up sixty bucks or so to hear Gloria Steinem speak for a Planned Parenthood fundraiser last month. Then the *Herald* printed a fierce critique of Steinem for praising Margaret Sanger's work on reproductive rights since Sanger was classist and anti-Semitic. Kuwaiti women fight for the vote and get it. How's feminism doing? Just fine, thanks. It's not yet run out of things to do. How are feminists? Depends on the generation, I suspect. And the particular trajectory of the speaking feminist.

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We used to call it “Women’s Liberation”; the media called it “Women’s Lib”; and others “Women’s Lip.” At the time that one annoyed me, but now I think it’s funny. The elemental cry, “It’s not fair,” informed our initial stirrings. We read *The Second Sex*. We wanted birth control. When a group of us tried to get the University of Alberta’s Student Health Centre to provide the Pill, we were told, “Keep your legs closed.” The Double Standard in allowable sexual behaviour was a big deal; unfair wages (still a big deal) and the respectful attention of men were issues. When I approached the Stanford University’s Free Speech Movement, the boys asked me if I could type. I had been careful not to learn, figuring that typing was not going to bring ME freedom of speech. Much influenced by the U.S. women’s movement—I was in Chicago in 1969—consciousness-raising meant that every aspect of one’s life and thinking was under scrutiny. We were so relieved to discover that women weren’t silly, weak, or pathetic but, rather, OPPRESSED, the realization fell upon us like sunshine. We could see the oppression, feel it, smell it, and, gift that consciousness was, resist it. That knowledge made us move. That knowledge made us move, often right into each others’ arms (remember Lesbian Nation?). We were the Women’s Movement, and we believed we could go as far as our imaginations could take us.

It took some of us right up against ideological imperatives: monogamy was a patriarchal plot; racism was something all good white women understood and abhorred; all women and no men were allies. We were merciless, believing then that nothing was free of masculinist poison and, if our hearts would not adhere to our values, then the hearts had been corrupted. We struggled ourselves into exhaustion. Meanwhile, women’s houses and co-ops formed a network that meant we could drive from Edmonton to Maine, staying with women all along our route. We carried scissors and left long swaths of women’s hair piled around in the kitchens. Short hair was liberation.

Women were changing laws, raising public awareness about pornography, violence against women, and female poverty. We began to name and claim our own experiences: date rape, sexual harassment, abuse. But things changed fast. Free Abortion on Demand became Freedom of Choice or Reproductive Rights. Women of Colour, who had been central in early activism and writing, challenged white women’s comprehension of racism. White women began to learn much more about their own racist assumptions, exposed thoroughly when Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa produced *This Bridge Called Our Backs*. White women’s focus necessarily turned inward while they grappled with a fractured view of themselves.

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Women could and would betray one other. We broke one another's hearts in manifold ways. Some of us learned we couldn't do everything. By 1975 some of us wondered if we were still feminists.

This musing is to appear in a scholarly journal and the university is the world in which I work; yet I've not mentioned the academy. Mary Daly's *The Church and the Second Sex* (1968) and Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* (1970) were among the first of the scholarly publications, but most feminist writing was not done in academic contexts. Women's liberation journals, including *Notes from the First Year* and *The Furies*, started publishing in the late 1960s. Toni Cade Bambara's *The Black Woman, An Anthology* and Robin Morgan's *Sisterhood is Powerful* were both published by mainstream presses in 1970 and remain essential for anyone wishing to understand what Canadian and American feminists were thinking about in the late 1960s. A quick google of "feminism" online shows that most sites are based institutionally, in colleges and universities. Still, *Off Our Backs*, feminist news journal, has continued to publish without a break since 1970. And the academic sites are heartening. The National Women's Studies Association is examining "Feminist Activism beyond the Academy," a new book called *Grassroots Field Guide for Feminist Activism* is selling reasonably well through Amazon, and *Radical Feminism: A Documentary Reader*, a recent collection of the essays and debates that electrified us, will make history live for a new generation of feminists. For many of us, however, it is a reminder that that degree of impassioned debate and urgent action is in the past.

The university has been the arena of any activism I've recently done. While individual women are continuing to be powerful or successful, women are still an economic underclass in universities. Even our greater numbers (over 50 percent students are female) will not translate into equitable spending on women's sports, for example, or labs, or starting salaries. Academic women still feel a little frisson of danger when rattling the cage, challenging the still ubiquitous oblivion of our male colleagues to notice female realities. And yet the university is a pretty good environment for many women. We don't have to take many risks to feel radical, if that's what interests us. We mostly get to do work we value. I think I must sound a bit sour about academic feminism, but I'm not the least sour about academic feminists. Naturally we are fraught with contradictions, but we make our world as tolerable as it can be for ourselves and the women we work with.

Feminism isn't likely ever to function as a master narrative. In particular times and places we'll find it working as a religion, a passion, and

ideology, a set of practices, a style, a world view, a way of life. More often it will surface in a woman's life as a specific task, allegiance, interest, career move, distraction, diversion. Through all this, feminism lives. I imagine feminism as an energy field modified by whatever its context is, whatever other forces are at work.¹ Whatever generates the impulse in women to connect with each other to protect themselves and their children and the earth will change the energy. Work, laughter, imagination, longing, outrage connect us. Will this force ever have the power to reconfigure the world geopolitically? Every day that work is being done, in some way or another. Do we know the outcome of our actions? We can't. Will we fight the same fights over and over again? No doubt. Will we continue to hear the refrain that Virginia Woolf heard so loudly: "Women have failed ... They have failed....They have failed" (140-41)? Of course.

A couple of years ago I had the opportunity to ask Adrienne Rich how she envisioned lesbian feminism now. She said she couldn't imagine a lesbian feminist politics, given how things are. We sat silently over our tea. Failures of imagination and vision and the fragmentation of our groups can paralyze us, paralyze hope. I think we have simply to refuse to surrender to failure. We might consider recycling the old visions: many of us are comfortable (or ecstatic) with the idea of a solid socialist democratic vision in which poverty is undone, violence against women and children eliminated, and race and class inequities eradicated. With such a vision, globalism might refer to consistent human rights rather than mobile capital and fluid exploitation of labour, environmental care would be enforced, and peace would break out everywhere. Perhaps the problem isn't one of vision at all, but of how change *can* happen. Will women unite in large groups to demand changes on any of these fronts? I see no reason to imagine that will happen again in the near future. Will we continue to connect across all the boundaries created by history and power? Will women of all passions and races and nations continue to work with each other in small groups to effect greater good for women and children? I see no indication that these practices will stop. Is this a revolution? Maybe, in the long run. It's not the ejaculatory politics of male-world revolutions that Robin Morgan warned us against long ago. But it is movement, and it is ours.

1 OK, I actually imagine feminism as a great ocean supporting myriad life forms, micro-climates, environments, always changing, not necessarily conscious of itself or the forces at work on it. Nevertheless, it will inexorably change whatever it encounters and no container can hold it.

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