

TALKING THE WALK, The Grassroots Language of Feminism

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Excerpt Part One, Chapter 2; pp. 21-24

CHAPTER 2

WHO IS THIS “WE?”

Hey! “Just who are you talking about when you say, we?!!” We’re all we. I’m we. Mature, middle class, Anglo Saxon female, whose ancestors arrived from Europe and the British Isles as early as the mid-1600s. German colonials in what became America; immigrants from the British Isles who became Canadians. As to the traces of Indian blood running in my veins, it rose up from the land where the Cree people live and in my case, probably Quebec. If I did not have my “informed urban” perspective on the topic of this “we” identity, then it would be that of a me who stood somewhere else. This is because I am accountable to myself as a woman and to other human beings on the level of my own competencies. I have a free will and use it to suit my mind, personality and the environment around me. This book is the story of that me, who is also “we.”

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When I was a child living in a remote town in Canada, Einstein had landed in the United States and my mother, aunts and their friends used to talk about him, “the most intelligent man in the world.” I was highly impressed by all this and formulated this thought: if Einstein is so brilliant, he won’t think he’s better than I am. I was six or seven at the time and this was my first hunch about equity and natural law. Then, growing up female, I matured into a society that belittled, suppressed, devalued—and cheated—women; and the philosophical forecasts implanted in my childish Einstein flash fueled a near total rejection of “what was expected” of me. After my insurrection, I marked time, inventing my own survival kit of savvy and surly, living on the precipice of getting sucked in, again, to what I had already escaped.

I could scarcely believe my lot when the women’s movement rolled around, giving voice to what I was trying to think. Hundreds, then thousands, created the news of women’s lives and told us about our losses and our cause. Participants and observers both, we were part of the flowering of women’s vision and the development of character and personality. We said, “I’m not going to live like this any more and must stop.” And so we did. That “we.”

Now, after decades, and living the legacy of that great social movement, I’ve learned to accept my autonomy for what it’s worth and live with gender indignation as just another part a life. Nothing’s perfect. What I do not accept is a society devoid of women’s self-controlled narrative and the speechlessness of women themselves. Nor do I accept the appalling idea that this contemporary women’s

knowledge should have to be invented all over again at sometime in the future because of fear, neglect and muteness. That we.

On Whose Authority?

Many claim the right to determine what women say in this world. This inevitably gives rise to the question, “Who do you represent and by what authority do you speak?” This presumes a hierarchical system in which I occupy an assigned rank and position.

In the sixties and seventies when my generation was blazing the feminist trails, we made everything up as we went along. There was no other choice. Except for a few texts and rampant rhetorical and political aspirations, it was the only way to escape the prejudices and obliviousness that decided the course of our lives. During those years, I constructed a worldview of problems as solvable, dreams realizable and possibilities available—as did thousands of others, for whom I do not speak. The movement captured the entire nation’s political consciousness. That was then.

It didn’t take long for the ideas to be first, reversed and worse, denied. The backlash to women’s power was swift and virulent. Feminists were vilified, concepts trashed. Feminism itself is now a theater of contention. Generations argue about “waves.” Factions argue about ideology—rejecting society, integration in the system, social reform, inner change or outer activism, and feminist purity (that from the feminist police), among many other things. One item I read even suggested that women “should moderate these days,” because not just feminists are listening! As if any feminist movement ever arose for any other audience but everyone in the first place. Then there is the “feminism is dead” cabal. These sorry funeralists confuse the waning of the movement with the ideas of feminism. Contrary to their dismal hopes, the latter are indestructible.

Feminists speak on their own authority. Feminism developed out of individual initiation, subjective experience and self-development. Feminists came up from across the spectrum of poverty, working-class environments, the middle-class and privileged circumstances. Regardless of their origins, they all bore the legacy of women’s historical underdevelopment—just like everyone else does. That we.

Feminists made it their business to discover the links between their personal lives and the oppression of women. As they did so, they grew stronger, personally and politically, in the environment and synergy of the women’s movement. They developed a particular way of seeing and assumed the responsibility of negotiating the myriad connections, juxtapositions and dynamics that turn on the pivot of sexism and the male agenda.

Feminists found they had a secret power. It was the individual and collective will to act and the willingness to take a stand and to speak about patriarchal power, subordination and misogyny; and to combat fear and opposition to the power of feminism to change minds.

This resulted in the construction of knowledge which is the result of the experience of being feminists and of living with that reality. The authority lies in this knowledge, this living reference. And with it comes the responsibility to provide the answers which have concluded in the enhancement of our lives and changes in society, to those who do not know what these answers are.

Feminists do not acquiesce to patriarchal policies that include the subjugation of women regardless of race, religion, group or community. If one's views on gender are complicated by these, tough. Deal with it. And if this creates antagonism among groups of women, then solutions to the problem will lie in women's development—not by attacking those who have broken the ground and cleared the path for advancement.

Feminism is not the domain of any male-identified authorization nor is it granted by anyone who imagines that they are in charge. There is only one authority and that is inside the head of the woman who puts herself on the line. Who walks the talk and talks the walk. The basis of its validity lies in the belief in individual liberty and participatory power in a free society. Informed, individual views in a free society are valid precisely because they come from within and not because they hold a preconceived or preconditioned authorization. We do not ask permission. Just as there is no "authority" appointed as the sole guarantor of women's interests, nor is the right to speak on behalf of women's interests bestowed or "granted" by some imaginary agency.

Authority lies in the experience of being a feminist and the knowledge that feminist thought broke the codes of patriarchal ideology and power. This self-sufficient, problem-solving genius, however, lay in human creativity whose most profound insight is that we all must straddle the road to wisdom and the path that takes us back to fairyland. That "we."

Many People, Many Paths

The leadership of the second wave grew out of necessity and where it was needed. Much of the leadership came from the grassroots. The movement was the mainstream; it didn't matter where you came from. People inspired others with ideas. Others volunteered where they were needed. There was no model for it. It was organic.

Thousands of projects were launched. Women established coalitions, collectives, safe houses and women's centers; published books, newspapers, magazines; organized

conferences, campaigns, demonstrations; fought for reproductive rights, against poverty. “. . . Set up battered women’s shelters, rape crisis centers, programs for women with substance abuse problems, tenants’ unions, neighborhood groups, day care and medical programs, afterschool programs and welfare rights groups.”

Over the years there is not one sector, field, issue, cause, need that has not been addressed by women. Their investment in time, money and creativity ranges from the basic—such as providing suitable clothing for underprivileged women entering the job market; to the spectacular—like readings of Eve Ensler’s *The Vagina Monologues* in hundreds of venues around the globe every year; to philanthropic—like the Liz Claiborne Foundation to help young girls maintain their focus while coping with destructive social pressure from interacting with boys; to the bold and volatile—like the group of Vancouverites struggling to establish a public memorial to the 14 women killed at l’Ecole Polytechnique in Montreal in 1989. (The project itself has brought death threats to the organizers.) There’s Emily’s List, a group which funds women’s political campaigns; and an organization in my neighborhood which lobbies city hall for women’s interests in housing planning. And the list goes on. This activism, which is occurring every day all around the country, is evidence of the success of feminist ideas and practice which drove the movement for women’s rights.

End Excerpt *Who is This “We?”*

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