

The Task of Sisterhood
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March 30, 2008

At the end of the Civil War, one of America's greatest unsung heroes, William Lloyd Garrison, found himself alienated from several of his closest friends and staunchest abolitionist-allies. For 35 years, Garrison had labored ceaselessly and passionately for the immediate and complete emancipation of all slaves, and when the North finally won, Garrison proposed a resolution declaring victory. His proposal prompted a sharp debate led by his long-time ally Wendell Phillips, who argued the mission of the American Anti-Slavery Society would not be totally completed until black Southerners gained full political and civil equality. Garrison argued that while complete civil equality was vitally important, the special task of the American Anti-Slavery Society had ended, therefore the work at hand would best be handled by new organizations and leadership.

Garrison resigned as president of the American Anti-Slavery Society, and Phillips continued its work for another five years until the 15th Amendment to the Constitution was ratified. It wasn't until 1873, while working with the American Women's Suffrage Association, that Garrison was finally reunited with his long-time abolition friends and allies, Fredrick Douglass and Wendell Phillips.

I am interested in this story because I see a correlation between the place in which *Garrison-the-dedicated-abolitionist* found himself in 1865, and the place *I-the-dedicated-feminist* find myself in 2008. Don't get me wrong, I am not comparing myself to William Lloyd Garrison. But I do find myself wondering if, for example, the very first legal purchase of a package of birth control pills or the passage of the long-awaited Title IX legislation should have been cause enough for feminists to issue a written proclamation of victory.

Post-modern feminist scholar Sharon Welch writes, "What do we do when old enemies disappear, when we win? What happens when we finally gain the power we have been struggling for? Many of us who have had to fight our way into positions of power only feel radical when we are embattled and struggling with an enemy who does not share our agenda for social justice." I agree with Welch that it is often difficult to shift from radical opposition to coalition building for institutional change when people only feel radical and alive when there is a clearly defined enemy.

The founder and president of the American Anti-Slavery Society, William Lloyd Garrison, had been working closely with Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Lucretia Mott, Lucy Stone and other activists, and he intended for women to participate fully in the society. And at some point around the start of the Civil War, the female leaders of the suffrage movement made the strategic decision to move their agenda aside and throw their political energy into the abolitionist cause. But lo and behold, not all the abolitionist leadership was happy with this more formalized political alliance with the feminists.

The ideas and presence of these women were seen as too controversial by a majority of the society's members so two brothers, Arthur and Lewis Tappan, left the AAS and formed a rival organization, the American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society, which did not admit women.

When the feminist leadership decided to put their energy into the cause of abolition in 1861, it was with the tacit understanding that activism for woman's suffrage would be reciprocated by the male abolitionists immediately following the war. On the surface, the Reconstruction period started out hopeful.

Beginning with the passage of the 13th Amendment in 1865, gender equality was, either deliberately or inadvertently, written into history because the wording makes no distinction between male and female. It reads, "Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude ... shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction."

And again, the idea of gender equality starts out well in the 14th Amendment where in Section 1 it reads, "All persons born or naturalized in the United States and subject to the jurisdiction thereof, are citizens of the United States, ...no state shall make or enforce laws that deny citizens their privileges and immunities; or deny life, liberty or property without due process and equal protection of the law."

But in Section two of the 14th Amendment, specific gender exclusion language appears in the section about voting rights and electors, "...the number of such *male* citizens, and.....the whole number of *male* citizens..."

In the 15th Amendment of 1870, the language reads, "The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude." Even without the exact words *male-only*, the explicit understanding was: voters are white and black males only.

At one point, Supreme Court Justice Noah Swayne remarked, "Fairly construed, these amendments may be said to rise to the dignity of a new Magna Carta." Maybe so, but it was crystal clear to the feminists and their allies that greatness was still an all-male domain – women not allowed.

Even though powerful allies like William Lloyd Garrison and Unitarian Minister Theodore Parker did not renege on their promise of support at the end of the war, the cause of women's suffrage did not just automatically slide into the national agenda's top spot like Stanton and Anthony had bargained for. And then the movement itself became embroiled in internal disagreements.

The most famous rift in the leadership was between Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton. Anthony was convinced the right to vote was the most important goal. She maintained that with that basic right secured, women would have real power to effect change in the numerous other issues confronting women; for example, recourse from

drunken, abusive husbands; employment and education opportunities; and sovereignty over their own reproductive organs.

But Stanton, on the other hand, didn't seem to have the same kind of faith in 19th century women. She believed a vast majority of them were captive to the *ideology of domesticity*. She argued this ideology propagated the belief that from birth, women are actively socialized into a gender role; the normative concept being that God made women to be mothers, nurturers and helpmates to their husbands; that females are the emotional, irrational and dependent *other*. Stanton couldn't disagree more, she did *not* believe that if you are born female, it is a given that you are only capable of domesticity.

She and other radicals grew alarmed as organizations such as the evangelical Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) joined the suffrage ranks and demanded that women's political power be used to increase the power of institutional churches and church teachings in the state. The WCTU and other orthodox allies did not believe in radical individualism. Instead of moral equality between females and males, they believed women are morally superior to men because they are born with a fundamentally different nature -- a nature that is naturally more pious, selfless and sensitive. Therefore, women's increased power in the state was to be used to correct the imbalance of a world in need of "motherly" love.

Firmly supported by the premises of evangelical Protestantism, the Christian suffragettes did not claim the institutions of home and church should be revolutionized; rather, they worked to ensure the women's place in the home was made more secure and powerful and that Christian values ultimately would be codified into the state. This position alarmed the radicals profoundly, especially Stanton, who was increasingly convinced that such religious beliefs were the very foundation of women's oppression.

In the *Woman's Bible* she authored, Stanton reveals how Christianity's creation myth shows woman essentially being created as an afterthought, so the male would have a helpmate and not be lonely. Christianity's prototype wife, Eve, models a woman who does not have an independent existence apart from her man. Her identity and worth is arrived at through her husband; she does not have an unmediated relationship with God. Many 19th century feminists agreed with Stanton when she asserted the story of Genesis teaches women that their primary goal in life, their best path to salvation, is to sacrifice their own interest for a man and his children.

But Stanton was not a-religious. She believed in God and was interested in Quakerism and Unitarianism. The theological influence of Unitarian Minister Theodore Parker is apparent in her work. Parker had rejected the cold rationalism of the old-school Unitarians by stressing the potential for growing closer to God by nurturing the divine within the individual self. By employing reason and an innate moral sense, humans could grow closer to God through self-development, or, as Parker stated, "... through experiencing what growth of manhood or womanhood is to a girl or boy." Thus, God is not a supernatural force, but a component of the human soul.

Along with Parker's Unitarianism, Stanton drew upon the belief held by radical Quaker women that both men and women are infused with an "inner light" and therefore capable of intuiting God's will. Stanton's radical theology directly contradicted the popular Christian dogma that women are not the moral equals to men.

As early as the 1848 Seneca Falls Convention on Women's Rights, the radical feminists had asserted that God created women as the moral equals of men, therefore women had the same duty to work toward self-development and salvation. Their appeal was based on their belief in the essential equality between moral beings with immortal souls who all have been created in God's image.

And so, the enemy Elizabeth Cady Stanton and her allies were battling was not a loving God. It was not their fathers, husbands and brothers. It was not their evangelical Christian sisters. Their true enemy was the false authority which had been vested in laws, customs and the patriarchal church. By invoking their understanding of God as the highest authority, this visionary feminist leadership, comprised mainly of Quakers, Unitarians, Transcendentalists and Universalists, created the basis for radical reform firmly grounded in liberal theology.

One cannot talk about Elizabeth Cady Stanton without paying tribute to her prophetic voice. Throughout her whole life, Stanton assumed that women's political rights should be used to support radical change within the state, the church and the home. Premised on a moral belief that individuals must work constantly to dismantle barriers to self-development, her feminism encompassed what we regard today as a very secular sociological and psychological analysis of the barriers and constructs which conspire to keep women – and I would add, all marginalized people – subordinate, docile and disenfranchised.

Contemporary feminist scholar Nancy Cott contends a distinction can be drawn between modern feminism and its antecedent, that which I like to refer to as "classic feminism" as defined by those issues targeted by the radical 19th century feminists for reform. Cott maintains the tipping point for the paradigm shift is August 18, 1920 – the day the 19th Amendment to the constitution was ratified. The day the radical feminists won.

So here we are today -- a mere 88 years later. Did the feminists really win the war? Has the enemy disappeared? What are women in general doing with their hard-won power?

My answer is maybe/maybe not, but probably. I say this because I believe we are still in danger -- danger of losing our historical memory of the feminist struggle and its hard-won lessons. For example, I think there are too many children today who do not fully understand what I mean when I tell them my own grandmothers were born without the right to vote. That their own great-grandmothers were considered to be unworthy of a college education. That their own grandmothers, in the time of television sets, were expected to be married and have a family by their mid-twenties or be considered old maids; and when these young women did marry, they became Mrs. John Doe because it

was considered a good thing to give up your very own birth name because you had found a husband.

There are too many children of this generation who do not fully appreciate what it means when I tell them that I, like many of their own mothers, went into junior high having to wear a dress because *girls wear dresses and boys wear pants*. That until Elvis Presley and the Beatles came along, dancing in your own space and following your own lead just wasn't done because girls *should wait to be asked to dance by a boy and then he should lead*. That less than one short generation ago, women were at long last granted legal sovereignty over their own reproductive systems, but in the blink of an eye, that legal right is being taken away.

Did we win the war? Yes, maybe, but surely we didn't win everyone's hearts. When a 20-something female college student is interviewed about her choice of candidates in the current primary elections and she says, "I really want to vote for Hillary, but I am a Christian woman, therefore I believe it is my duty to vote for Governor Huckabee." I think, oh no! How many other votes does she represent?

I worry that our children are vulnerable to the backlash – backlash as articulated by the likes of Rush Limbaugh and his hateful characterization of the daughters of Elizabeth Cady Stanton as *femi-nazis*. To the backlash of conservative Christians who have successfully banned books such as *The Diary of Ann Frank* from public schools and sponsored book-burning bonfires fueled by Harry Potter.

And when my latest round of tears has been shed, my most recent bout of worrying and fretting has run its course, slowly but surely my hope begins to creep back in.

I start to remember that both of my grandmothers died after having voted in every election since 1930. I start to remember all the wives who have been able to divorce abusive husbands without the stigma of being a *divorced woman* and even having a shot at economic independence.

I start to feel good knowing that *I* was in Elvis's *rock and roll army* -- that when I finally mustered the courage to ask a boy to a dance, neither of us had to lead! It feels good knowing that I had the choice not to pursue an *M-R-S.* degree in college. I celebrate every single day that I have sovereignty over my own body. And every time I see a dad walking down the street, baby in the backpack and diaper bag over his shoulder – I always stop and send a little prayer of thanks to the spirits of my grandmothers.

And now, this very day, I have a real chance to see a woman elected to the Presidency – an intelligent, educated, politically astute, strong, liberated woman! Take that, Rush Limbaugh!

And so we've won – sort of. Women and men do have a new kind of power thanks to classic feminism. And what are we doing with it? How much are internal arguments and strategic disagreements distracting us from the new work at hand? Are we using our

power in imaginative and visionary ways? Or are we falling into the same traps we've watched our adversaries succumb to for too long now?

I for one am drawn to the innovative ideas of feminist scholar Sharon Welch, who calls for *politics of meaning*, beginning with a significant shift away from the traditional dualistic way of framing the world that we have inherited. Instead of winning and then having to ask what do we do now, Welch asks the question, "How do we work for social justice without the assurances of eventual victory?"

Another key element in shifting old paradigms is new vocabulary words. We need new words that capture composite wholes: stand-alone terms that convey the coexistence of things like power and chaos; contingency and change; and of good and hope. Welch also calls for a new set of cultural metaphors that symbolize power and vitality to help us move *within* the chaos of social change -- symbolic metaphors that cue us into responsive and flexible relationships -- relationships that sound and feel like the motion of jazz.

Welch also challenges us to find ways to exercise new forms of power that are informed by a deep awareness of our limits and of our potential for error and harm. The shift away from a culture of conquest masked as benign and beneficent progress will move us toward an equally vital culture of living with limits and ambiguity, and with a self-critical recognition of our own potential for abusing power.

Welch contends that the place to start these radical changes is critical humanism. Critical humanism is a conceptual place. It is the place where a different understanding of that which prevents injustice and cruelty can be named. In this place a radically different construction of order, and new ways of engaging chaos and of viewing that which sustains creativity and community is found.

I like to think of critical humanism as a new way of envisioning the bountiful space that came into being when Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony parted ways back in 1865. This is one of those powerful conjuring places where all of everything -- the good, the bad; the right and the wrong, the certain and uncertain -- all exist not in competing opposition, but rather in a composite relational wholeness.

This is that very place where -- jazz makes sense.