

## Chapter 10 FEMINISTS -- PERSONAL EXPERIENCES

**Sonia Johnson** was a committed member of the Mormons when she and some friends began looking into the Equal Rights Amendment of the United States which was opposed by her church (Johnson, 1989, 103ff). She was relieved when her church group was told that their stake president (an important church official) was coming to explain the church's position on women's rights. Little did she know the Big Jolt his speech would give her.

**Johnson's group contained three women with doctorates and three with master's degrees, so the women were nonplussed when the official stated that his remarks were based on an article he had just perused in *Pageant* magazine.** On hearing this, Johnson felt insulted for everyone in the room who had bothered to come to the meeting, "none of whom was feeble-minded." She writes that "a fury like none I'd ever felt before anywhere for anyone began to boil up inside me." She knew that if *men's* human rights were being considered, the president's presentation would have been thoroughly prepared. Women's rights, by contrast, were trivial so that "he did not feel any need to inform himself about them before going forth to teach and work against them".

The president went on to read the official church letter which stated that Mormon women were loved and exalted by their church. Johnson was so incensed by this patronizing statement that she suddenly realized that for all her life she had been duped about patriarchy. She went on to work for the Equal Rights Amendment which resulted in her expulsion from the church, up until that time the focus of her life. She gave public speeches, organized conferences, and wrote books. She continues to this day to work for the women's movement.

**Betty Baxter** became a feminist after she was fired in 1982 as coach of the National Women's Volleyball Team of Canada (Harris, 1992, 74). This was a Big Jolt because **her dismissal was not based on incompetence, but because she was a lesbian.** She writes, "It wasn't just anger and hurt at being fired that directed me to feminism but also my need to understand those mysterious injustices that kept women out of positions, like my former job, where they could effect change."

Baxter began to look at her life and at society with new eyes. She became a feminist and has made this, and a place for women in sport, a cornerstone of her life. She soon organized and ran a volleyball club where any girl or woman was welcome. She is "determined to create a place where women and young girls can experience sport in a positive way, learning about their physical, psychological and emotional strengths."

**Margaret Gillett** (b 1930) was a scholar rather than an athlete who grew up in Australia (Gillett, 1984, 409-10). She became a teacher in New South Wales after receiving her post-graduate Diploma in Education. Her first job was in Bourke, in the arid outback, where "the futility of trying to teach the required *Merchant of Venice* in that environment was overwhelming. But what was really aggravating about this, my first real job, was

that I was paid only three-quarters of what my male counterparts received. **The government salary scales announced the male/ female discrepancy blatantly**," she writes. This difference in pay scale was her Big Jolt. Both men and women worked hard to teach their pupils. How could it be assumed that the men would do a better job and therefore should be paid more?

In the face of such open discrimination, Gillett felt she had to act. She states, "I joined the Teachers' Federation and went as a delegate to a conference in Sydney where the issue was equal pay, and where we marched down Macquarrie street to the State Parliament to press our case." Despite the obvious unfairness of the wage scale, Gillett found that many of her colleagues approved of neither the means nor the ends of this protest. Even so, she knew she was right. She became in time a professor whose research has focused on women and on education. Her books include two about women who worked at and who attended McGill University where she taught. And the double wage scale for men and women was made invalid in Australia by the 1970s.

Another scholar, this time a scientist, was **Alma Norovsky** (a pseudonym) who had a checkered life becoming a theoretical physicist (Gornick, 1983, 90,92-3). Although she worked hard to earn her PhD and did good research, she was never accepted as an equal by male physicists. She married and had children but with little support from her husband, this held her back too. However, her problems always seemed to her like personal problems.

Then she talked to a woman in high energy physics. "We compared notes. It was astonishing how similar the pattern of our lives had been! For the first time it hit me that my life had developed as it had because I was a woman, and I'd made women's choices, and ended up where women in science end up. It hit me like a ton of bricks. All at once, I saw everything. From that moment on I became a rabid feminist. And I mean rabid."

Shortly after that her marriage fell apart, but she also landed a university position. Her personal life remains difficult. Norovsky says of her colleagues at the university, "They're very theoretical. People are always asking me how women are treated here. 'Women?' I answer. 'They're a theoretical concept.'"

My own story, that of **Anne Innis Dagg**, fits in well here. In the 1960s I had a master's degree in zoology and for three years taught part-time, one of two courses, at Waterloo College. The other two professors, both men, taught two courses each and were full-time. I asked if I could teach a second course too, and the men were delighted. "Then I would be full-time," I observed. The men were shocked. "No, no," they claimed. I would still be part-time and paid for only the two courses, receiving far less money than the men. This was my Big Jolt, to be expected to do the same work, but remain unequal to the men.

I loved teaching, so decided I would earn a PhD in order to have the best possible chance to become a professor. I earned my doctorate at the University of Waterloo, at the same time looking after my three children then all under six years of age. Then I obtained a full-time job as a professor teaching at the University of Guelph 25 km away. After four years of teaching I had "good" to "very good" teaching

evaluation from my students and 20 published papers, but I was denied tenure. One of the reasons given was that I had to commute to work. This second Big Jolt turned me into an activist feminist for academic women. (I had always been a feminist, believing that women were every bit as good as men, if not better.) For the next many years I spoke out openly about sexist bias and published various books and papers detailing academic discrimination. My books included *MisEducation: Canadian Women and Universities*, written with a student, Patricia Thompson. During this time I was deeply depressed by having no job and tried without success to find a position at the University of Waterloo. The Dean of Science told me that he would never give a married woman tenure because she had a husband to support her. And he never did. Nor could I get advertised jobs at Wilfrid Laurier University; when I inquired why I had not been allowed even an interview, I found that there had been no interviews; the jobs had simply been given to friends of the department members. The Ontario Human Rights Commission refused to allow me a hearing about this unfairness. Fortunately, I was finally hired by students of the Integrated Studies (now Independent Studies) program at the University of Waterloo where I have remained for many years.

Some women became feminist activists after attending women's meetings that inspired them-- a hearing, a women's caucus, consciousness raising sessions, an International Women's Day celebration. Several Jolts have activated **Gloria Steinem** at different periods of her life, but one of the biggest was attending events concerned with the abortion law (Pearson, 1994, 58ff). Steinem had been assigned to cover an abortion hearing for *New York* magazine in 1969. She says, "**The state was trying to decide about the abortion law and the review committee was slated to hear testimony from 19 men and one nun.** Some women had organized a counterhearing in an East Village basement, and I'd never seen anything like it in my whole life. I'd had an abortion but I hadn't told a soul. None of us spoke about things like that. And here was this room full of women telling their stories."

These revelations, and the fact that the official hearing was taking place without the input of any women who might have had an abortion, gave Steinem's life a whole new direction. As a founder of *Ms* magazine and a feminist activist and writer, she has never looked back.

**Rita MacNeil**, who would attend a Women's Caucus, grew up in poverty, one of eight children with an unhappy mother who did not want her daughters to marry and live as she did (Kostash, 1975, 126-8). When she was 19 and hoping to make a career in music, MacNeil became pregnant instead by a man who then left her. After the baby was born, she married another man and set up housekeeping in suburban Toronto. She soon felt depressed and trapped there, but she didn't know why.

MacNeil's life changed dramatically in 1971 when she attended the Women's Caucus in Toronto with a friend at what would become her Big Jolt. She had always felt supported by women, by her sister, her friends at school, her co-workers at Eaton's, so she was willing to take women seriously. She told an interviewer, "Oh my goodness, I'll never forget when I walked in there, I was so scared. **I didn't go out much or do many**

**things, and this whole roomful of angry women is something I'd never been in before.** Oh God, I'll never forget. It was so exciting. I came out of there all fired up. That sounds so stupid. Oh dear, it's like, before that I was one thing and after it something else." The group had talked about the need of access to abortion, an issue that was very real to her.

After this meeting, she went home and wrote a song. She didn't feel able to make speeches about women's issues, so decided that instead she would sing about them. As Myrna Kostash writes, "In due course, Rita MacNeil became an integral part of the Toronto women's liberation movement. Where feminists gathered, to protest, demonstrate, celebrate, there was Rita, in the sun, the wind, and the rain with banners flapping around her, singing against the hostility and jeers of passers-by, whipping up the energy and solidarity of the women, spreading out over those who would listen the glory of her voice joined with the momentum of her courage in letting it all out, telling her story, describing the rage and the pain, reviewing the growth of sisterhood and feminist politics, so that no woman who heard her could stay unmoved. Along with her own voice she had found one for all of us." MacNeil not only became an ardent feminist, but as a successful singer she would have her own show on national Canadian television.

**Yvonne Johnson** went to her first International Women's Day celebration because of her lover, not because she believed in feminism (Hughes, Johnson and Perreault, 1984, 174). She admired the style of one of the speakers, a woman of her own age who waved her arms around and cared passionately about politics and ideas-- she was making connections between loving other women and feminist analysis. Johnson assumed she must be an academic woman from a privileged background. But the speaker then began talking about her own life-- how poor she had been as she grew up, how she had been involved with men before she fell in love with a woman. Johnson realized that they had similar histories and liked her sense of humour. She writes, "**I was so surprised to discover a perfectly ordinary women (like me) who had managed to find something powerful and sustaining and reassuring in these ideas called feminism.** I actually walked into the room, sat down, and eventually asked about the group she belonged to. I mean what was there to lose? Women like that obviously had found something that made them happier and stronger-- and if it could make sense to a woman who was like me, then it surely could be good for me." Johnson subsequently became involved with feminist activism and co-authored the 1984 book *Stepping out of Line*.

**Birgit Voss's** (b1948) *Big Jolt* came from a group of women talking about themselves (Voss, 1988, 174). She left Germany in 1967 to come to England, married young, and soon had a daughter. She was always interested in religion and spirituality, questioning why things were the way they were.

For Voss, consciousness-raising sessions were pivotal in changing her perspective on life: "**I remember well the blinding fury, the brilliant anger, the sense of betrayal I felt and shared with many of my sisters when, through**

**consciousness-raising, we unravelled the patriarchal plot;** I remember the joy when we allowed ourselves to feel love for women instead of the negative feelings normal in a misogynistic society. Before we can find love, before we can share it and love others we have to find the love we have for ourselves. I believe that without a feminist perspective it is very difficult indeed for women to create this love for themselves."

Voss has continued her interest in religion, but now views it from a feminist perspective. For example, the ideal of Buddhahood appeals to her, but she has noticed sexist language in Buddhist publications that indicate they collude with the status quo. As well, she questions why there are so few women in the groups with which she is involved.

Three women became feminists because of three comments, one thrown out casually by a professor, one written by an eminent philosopher, and one made by a sympathetic dentist. The first example is quickly told (Driscoll and Thomson, 1991). **Marilou McPhedran** was jolted out of her complacency when, as a student at Osgoode Hall Law School in Toronto, she overheard a comment from her criminal law professor: **"Don't they know that girls are for fucking?"** The enormity of these few words hit her like a sledge hammer. Did this professor, and probably other professors too, care nothing about all the work women had done to be admitted to law school? Did they think that only a man could be a good lawyer? Was the cause of justice only a sham? McPhedran became not only a lawyer, but an ardent feminism who has worked hard for women in her profession.

The woman appalled and jolted by the few words of a philosopher was also an academic. She had studied philosophy for many years, but was astonished one day when **she chanced on a remark of Kant's that women should not worry their pretty heads about geometry-- that they might as well have beards** (Aisenberg and Harrington, 1988, 9). She noted, "I looked at this and said, 'What does having a beard have to do with...geometry?'.... It was such a revelation that this person...who seemed to question the most fundamental things, like causality, the self, time, space, could say something as idiotic as that and reveal this depth of stereotypical thinking. It just...overwhelmed me."

This philosopher went on to study the work of many great male philosophers, most of whom, she found, had made comments that demeaned or stereotyped women. It opened her eyes to the obvious bias in philosophy as a discipline, and affected her research from then on. She had become a feminist who would work to influence her students with her new ideas. She felt strongly enough about the issue to compile an anthology incorporating sexist quotes from great philosophers; unfortunately, the few publishers she sent it to were unimpressed, even the women editors, and the work was never published.

**Barbara Noël** received her Big Jolt from a pro-feminist dentist (Noël, 1992). Indeed it was because he was a man, rather than a woman, that she really listened to what he was saying. Noël had been sexually and medically abused by a world-renowned

psychiatrist for 18 years. While still undergoing therapy in 1982, she met a dentist, Dr Robert Wheeler, who was able to cure a chronic displacement of her jaw which had caused her years of pain. None of the many doctors she had visited earlier had recognized her problem.

He said to her, "We live in a male chauvinistic society, where people in the marketplace and men who are doctors tend to think women are crazy anyway. When a woman comes in and says, 'I have these terrible headaches, and my neck hurts,' and the doctor can't see any visible anatomical reason, he assumes she's stressed or crazy and says, 'Maybe we should medicate you with some Valium or you should see a therapist.'"

Until that moment, Noël had *never* heard a man say anything about sexism. She wrote, "**When Betty Friedan or other women said this sort of thing, I always thought they sounded so angry that it didn't get through to me.** Hearing a man-- and a doctor-- say it shook me up and jarred me into realizing the truth of what he was saying. I didn't realize at the time that the way I dismissed women and believed men was a dramatic sign of my own unexamined sexism, and showed how I had accepted the status quo without question." From that moment on, she was able to see the world through new eyes. Exactly the same message about sexual discrimination was disregarded by Barbara Noël when it came from women, but appreciated and accepted when it came from a man.

**Andrea Dworkin** became an ardent feminist because of her experience within the civil rights movement in the Deep South in the 1960s (Barlow, 1998, 19). Because a Black activist was missing, his colleagues dragged a local swamp to see if he had been murdered and his body thrown there. They found lots of bodies but they were all of women, Black and white. These corpses didn't worry the searchers-- they probably belonged to hookers they thought, and need not be reported. "These men who so readily dismissed what they had found were not local rednecks; they were her compatriots in the civil rights struggle." Dworkin was so horrified that she became "a raging prophet in the fight against the abuse of women for many years...." Her book *Women Hating* is an anthology of state and religious oppression of women through the ages which itself raised the consciousness of many other women.

### **Bibliography**

- \* Aisenberg, Nadya and Mona Harrington. 1988. *Women of Academe*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press.
- \* Barlow, Maude. 1998. *The Fight of my Life*.
- \* Dagg, Anne Innis and Patricia J. Thompson. 1988. *MisEducation: Women and Canadian Universities*. Toronto: OISE Press.
- \* Driscoll, Katie and Dave Thomson. 1991, Mar 29. McPhedran brings tales of professional sexism. *University of Waterloo Imprint*.
- \* Gillett, Margaret. 1984. "Next time,... Bargain Harder". In Margaret Gillett and Kay Sibbald, eds. *A Fair Shake*, pp 407-421. Montreal: Eden Press.
- \* Gornick, Vivian. 1983. *Women in Science*. New York: Simon and Schuster, pp 90,

92-93.

\* Harris, Pamela. 1992. *Faces of Feminism*. Toronto: Second Story. \* Hughes, Nym, Yvonne Johnson and Yvette Perreault. 1984. *Stepping\_out of Line*. Vancouver: Press Gang.

\* Johnson, Sonia. 1989. *From Housewife to Heretic*. Albuquerque, NM: Wildfire Books.

\* Kostash, Myrna. 1975. Rita MacNeil: Singing it like it is. In Myrna Kostash, Melinda McCracken, Valerie Miner, Erna Paris and Heather Robertson, eds. *Her Own Woman*, 109-133. Toronto: Macmillan.

\* Minor, Kathleen Mary 1994. Elizabeth: An elder Inuk remembers her life. *Canadian Woman Studies* 14,4: 55-57.

\* Noël, Barbara, with Kathryn Watterson. 1992. *You Must Be\_Dreaming*. New York: Poseidon Press.

\* Pearson, Patricia. 1994, Mar. Gloria Steinem turns 60! *Chatelaine*, 58-61, 88-94.

\* Voss, Birgit. 1988. The spiritual is the political. In Amanda Sebestyen, ed. '68, '78, '88, pp 169-174. Bridport, Dorset: Prism Press.