

Chapter 11 FEMINISTS – CHANGED BY OBSERVING

Johnnetta Cole was the first Black woman president of Spelman College in Atlanta, Georgia (Bateson, 1989, 45-46). She grew up in Jacksonville when Florida was much deeper in its Jim-Crow tradition than it is today. Racism was embedded in all parts of her life.

Cole became aware of sexism only when she visited Cuba with a delegation of Afro-Americans in the 1960s. Their aim was to discover possible racism in the country which had recently broken away from American influence. Her group, which travelled about asking how many blacks were hired in institutions such as hospitals and universities, was suspicious when no one wanted to answer their questions. Eventually they realized that **the Cubans did not organize their society in terms of colour, but in patriarchal and macho terms. Up until that time she had been unable to conceive of a society not stratified by race.**

It was a revelation to Cole to find that racism was not forever. But it made her sensitive to sexism which she had never noticed before, coming as she did from a background where all the women she knew were strong and worked outside as well as inside the home. She remembered racism in church-- all the faces in the stained glass windows were white, and she sang a hymn asking Jesus to wash her whiter than snow-- but she hadn't thought consciously that men held the places in the church hierarchy while women did not.

Once Cole became aware of sexism, she began to combat it as well as racism in her life and in society. But she believes that sexism will take longer to eliminate because it is so insidious.

Anne-Marie Pharand became an out-of-the-closet feminist not only because of the massacre of women at the Université de Montréal, shot by a man who did not think women belonged in engineering departments, but because of male and media reaction to the murders (Pharand, 1990). On December 6, 1989, a young man entered a classroom of the Ecole Polytechnique, ordered the men to one side of the room and the women to the other, and started shooting the women. His rampage continued until 14 women were dead, and ten women and three men wounded.

Pharand's grief at watching and hearing the news of this disaster was intense. She writes, "Little by little, my grief was replaced by a feeling of anger when I realized that the francophone media, and the journalists, whether from the TV, the radio, or the newspapers, the social workers, the male psychiatrists, the criminologists, were all denying the obvious. Almost all of them were arrogant in their attitude and words. They talked about the victims; they were hesitant to clearly state they were women. Several of them would not even link this massacre with violence against women."

Later, at the funeral, she noticed that **men took over the ceremony and advocated in their speeches that men and women be equal in society: "This in the Church which itself refuses to apply this principle by rejecting women from the priesthood and by denying them any real power in its structures. It is insulting and offensive!"**

Anne-Marie Pharand joined the women's movement and, as she says, will "be part of it until the day I die."

Other women became feminist activists after watching friends or relatives play out sexist roles, as if they were watching a film of the lives of these people. The content of these "films" changed the way they thought about men and women forever. For example, a now middle-aged Saudi Arabian princess (who remains anonymous for her own protection) became radicalized as a young girl when she observed the power of men to harm women, even those related to them (Sasson, 1992, 28,44). **Her Big Jolt came when she saw what happened to her older sister, Sara.** Sara was not only beautiful, but highly intelligent. She wanted to study art in Italy and be the first to open an art gallery in Jeddah. In her early teens she pored over art books of the great masters, making lists of the places she planned to visit in Florence, Venice and Milan. Her father, however, wanted a close tie with a leading merchant family so he arranged when she was 16 for her to be the third wife of a 62 year old man she had never met. She was drugged with tranquilizers so she wouldn't make a scene on her wedding day. Her new husband treated her with such sexual brutality that she tried to kill herself five weeks later. Her father then reluctantly agreed that she might divorce her husband.

Noting the horror of her sister's life, the princess resolved that women must have a voice in deciding whom they would marry, a decision that altered their lives forever (p 44). "From this time, I began to live, breathe, and plot for the rights of women in my country so that we could live with the dignity and personal fulfillment that are the birthright of men."

Following up her resolve, the princess formed a small group called Lively Lips made up of her stepmother, Randa, who was a year older than she, and two friends from wealthy families. The group's aim was to battle the silent acceptance of women's submissive role in society, in part by trying to prevent marriages of young women to old men. However, in a bid for freedom, the two wealthy young women were driven to desperate acts. They often had a driver leave them in the market, from where, fully veiled, they would go to a nearby apartment to pick up young men. Sometimes they went to a man's room and played sexual games, although never removing their veils or allowing sexual intercourse. Eventually they were arrested for their behavior and turned over to their families. One was married as a third wife to an old man who lived in a distant village, and the other was drowned in the family swimming pool while her relatives watched. The princess' father divorced Randa, his fourth wife, while the princess herself was chastised. However, she did not give up her work for women's rights. She later carried on the aims of Lively Lips by supplying the material to Jean Sasson for the best-selling book, *Princess*.

Another example of a "film" strongly affected **Gloria Steinem** who by the late 1960s had picketed for civil rights, against the United States involvement in Vietnam, and with migrant farm workers, but never for people like herself, white middle class women (Steinem, 1992, 24-25). She writes, "When blacks or Jews had been kept out of restaurants and bars, expensive or not, I felt fine about protesting; so why couldn't I take my own half of the human race (which, after all, included half of all blacks and half of all Jews) just as seriously? The truth was that I had internalized society's *unserious*

estimate of all that was female-- including myself. This was low self-esteem, not logic."

When Steinem was asked to go to lunch with a group of distinguished women at the Plaza's Oak Room, a public restaurant which only served men, she declined. The group expected to be refused entry, and then to picket and be interviewed by the media, which is what happened. Steinem argued that feminists should work first for more disadvantaged women who would never dream of eating in such an expensive place. She didn't want the image of feminists to become synonymous with middle class women. However, she writes, "**all the excuses of my conscious mind couldn't keep my unconscious self from catching the contagious spirit of those women who picketed the Oak Room.** When I faced the hotel manager again, I had glimpsed the world *as if women mattered*. By seeing through their eyes, I had begun to see through my own." She went on to become perhaps the most high-profile feminist activist in the United States.

Australian **Lynne Spender's** "film" also replayed in her mind the experiences of groups of women rather than individuals (Spender, 1984, 126-7). She became committed to feminism when she visualized women's experiences as a whole, rather than individual stories. This happened in Canada at a social event, where she noticed that the two sexes became segregated into two groups, just as happened in Australia; it wasn't just an anomalous trait of Australian men to be contemptuous of women, she thought, but of men of other nationalities, too. She realized that same night "that the men's conversation-- which for years I had felt eager to join on the premise that it was more intellectual and stimulating than that of women-- centred around boys' games-- politics, sport and dirty jokes-- while the women's conversation, from which I had divorced myself, focused on the social arrangements necessary for nothing less than the survival of the species. I have not been seduced since into considering men's values and men's discussions more prestigious than those of women."

In Canada she tested in her new-found self-esteem. While she was working in a garden, a male authority told her she should pull out a particular plant with a colourful blossom because it was a weed. They argued about what constituted a weed. **She was elated that she felt strong enough to keep the weed because she liked it, despite the man's insistence it should be destroyed.**

She writes, "From that time, 'who said?' has become a basic tenet of my philosophy as I re-evaluate the rules which have been presented to me in a male-dominated society. It is now part of my fabric that I do not have to accept that because men had said so, and because they have been saying so for centuries, their word is law." Lynne and her sister Dale remain two of Australia's most ardent feminists.

Some women became feminists not because of a short string of events in the lives of people they knew, but because of sudden images, either actual or pictured, that suddenly opened the door in their minds to a whole new concept of the social universe. **Sheelagh Conway** was brought up in rural Ireland as a strict Roman Catholic (Conway, 1987, 155,245). Catholicism was a way of life for her and her family; she loved as a girl to watch the priest at mass, the swish of his long robes, the resonance of the Latin. As

she grew older, she began to notice the discrepancy between the portrayal of the church as the champion of the poor and disabled and its callous treatment of women. And it was the feminist analysis of this discrepancy that enabled her to understand how the Catholic church perpetuates the oppression of women.

Conway's unease came to a head when Pope John Paul II visited Toronto in 1984 to address the Catholic clergy of Ontario. The service was televised. Conway writes, "Amid great pomp and ceremony, he [the Pope] walked down the red-carpeted aisle of the 136-year old cathedral like a monarch. He walked slowly, regally; he smiled and waved, and his white robes flowed around him. Then **in a wide-angle shot of the cathedral, viewers saw an extraordinary sight for the 1980s. The cathedral was full of men, a sea of men. There wasn't one woman present.** The male priests stretched out their hands to touch the pope's garments. This was their father. At that moment, I felt something give way within me. The death knell had been tolling for a long time now and the moment of realization had finally come. This was the end of the road for me as a Catholic woman. I was no longer willing to stay within a church that compromised my integrity and dignity as a woman."

Conway has remained a non-Catholic and an ardent feminist, fighting sexism at universities she has attended and writing a book about Irish women who have immigrated to Canada, *The Far Away Hills are Green* (1994).

Madeleine Parent (b 1918), union organizer, was politicized as a young girl by what she saw going on in the Roman Catholic church (Paris, 1975). She was given a traditional "church education", with dogma and religious instruction an integral part of her life. As a biographer puts it, "the trauma of the nuns was probably the most important experience of her entire life and the soil from which the particular shape of her future sprang. The memory of helplessness and powerlessness [at the convent school] has clung to her always, to be summoned forth, smelled, and tasted at will with the intensity of original terror."

It was not her own treatment that offended Parent at the time, but that of other girls. When she was about eight, she saw another little student at the school being chastised by the nuns because her bills weren't paid. This seemed wrong to Parent, but she wasn't sure why. She became the girl's only friend.

Later, when she was sent to a boarding convent school, she saw the horrible treatment given to the maids who were mostly from poor farming areas. She said in an interview, "They were second class on the lowest level. The nuns kept about 80 per cent of their wages to mail to their parents, and gave them one or two dollars a month as spending money when they were allowed out."

These observations showed Parent that the social practices of Roman Catholicism were very different from what the church preached. From that time on she became increasingly critical of the church and increasingly involved in social action, especially feminism. Organizing unions became eventually her full-time job.

Many women become feminists not because of something that happens to them or to other women, but because of books or articles they have read. **Vina Mazumdar**, for example, was a research social scientist in India. In the early 1970s she was asked to take over a government research project on the status since Independence of village women in India (Bumiller, 1990, 126-7). Mazumdar was not especially interested in women's issues, but she agreed to do so, despite warning from colleagues that it would divert her from her other larger academic concerns. As she began to go over the data already collected which portrayed the desperate condition of these women, she said in reminiscence, "The first thing I felt was shock. The second thing I felt was a tremendous anger-- 'Something has to be done. **Then I began to question why even a social scientist can remain so damn ignorant.**"

Her report, *Towards Equality*, showed that "social change, development and other trends under the heading of 'progress' had in many cases made the lives of women worse." There were far fewer jobs for them than there had been, their literacy rate was half that of men, and the custom of dowry which impoverished many families was increasing.

Her research changed Mazumdar's life. "My earlier work was only earning a living," she told an interviewer. Now her life was devoted to improving the status of rural women. She is now one of the matriarchs of the women's movement in India. She established a Centre for Women's Development Studies in New Delhi which affects government policy and helps organize and train village women. In return, she has learned from those in the village that women have a unique relationship with nature, that for a woman being equal to men does not mean being unfeminine, and that there is no shame in being different.

Research also jolted **Lorna Marsden** (b1942), past president of several Ontario universities. She started graduate work at Princeton in sociology rather than genetics because she realized, (this was in the late 1960s), that women had little hope of a career in science (Ries, 1992). She still believed, though, that if something discriminatory happened to her, it was her fault because she was somehow inadequate. She assumed that once she had a PhD, she would be hired as a professor and move up the ladder of success in the same way men did.

Marsden came to feminism when a male professor forced her, against her will, to write a paper on what actually happens to women with PhDs. When she read all that had been written on the subject, she no longer had any misconceptions. She says, "It was a very crushing term, because it became apparent that a) you don't get jobs, and b) when you get them, you don't get promoted and even if you do, you don't get paid equally and you don't have the same access to publication and nobody takes your ideas seriously and, in fact, you're not equal at all. It was at that moment that you can label me a feminist." She has continued to work on behalf of women.

For **Betty Friedan** (1921-2006), research into women's lives was a practical rather than a theoretical exercise. Although she is credited with being the mother of the second wave of feminism triggered by her 1963 book *The Feminine Mystique*, Friedan was not

a born feminist. Rather, she was moved to write her book because of experience she gathered from other women that tallied with her own (Friedan, 1985, 9,17). She married after world war II, when she had graduated from Smith College and become a journalist. She was disconcerted when she lost her job in 1949 because she was pregnant for the second time, but not unduly upset because she rationalized that maternity leave was annoying for an employer. She writes, "If you were a radical in 1949, you were concerned about the Negroes, and the working class, and World War III, and the Un-American Activities Committee and McCarthy and loyalty oaths, and Communist splits and schisms, Russia, China and the UN, but you certainly didn't think about being a woman, politically."

Friedan was forced to consider the status of women when she spent a whole year, 1956-57, asking Smith College fellow graduates from 15 years earlier about their experiences and feelings. **Their answers were unnerving, and the reaction to the article she wrote about her survey eye-opening.** *McCall's* turned down the article because the male editor didn't believe it, *Ladies' Home Journal* rewrote it to deny the evidence so she withdrew it, and *Redbook* noted in a shocked rejection slip that "only the most neurotic housewife could possibly identify." Their reactions propelled Friedan to the five-year task of writing *The Feminine Mystique* and being converted to feminism in the process. She has remained in the forefront of the women's movement in the United States.

Hanny Lightfoot-Klein had the unusual experience of being jolted by an article she read not only at the time, but 45 years later (Lightfoot-Klein, 1992, 54). When she reached puberty, she asked her parents a few tentative questions about sex. They replied so evasively and moralistically that she turned elsewhere for answers, including a popularized journal about medical matters sent to her father who was a doctor. One issue had an article by the anthropologist Ashley Montagu which dealt with the history in various parts of the world of male circumcision. She writes, "**The detailed anatomical descriptions and depictions of the loathsome horrors imposed on the penises of struggling aboriginal youths filled me with nausea....**"

When she was well past middle age, Lightfoot-Klein found out about female circumcision in Africa. She immediately recalled the article she had read 45 years before. She notes, "**A somewhat strange and terrifying event that had happened when I was 14 years old had lain deeply repressed in the recesses of my subconscious mind.** It leaped into instant awareness when I was first told about Sudanese female circumcision"

Lightfoot-Klein was so jolted by the reality and by her memory that she decided to work against this evil full-time from then on, making three year-long treks through Sudan, Kenya and Egypt to interview 400 women and men on this subject. She realized that female circumcision was not necessarily being stamped out, because it had come to one area in Africa 30 years before and since then had become fully entrenched; if it were not done, a woman could not marry (p 181). She wrote up her research in many scientific papers and in a book, *Prisoners of Ritual*.

Student **Juliet Sherwood** was jolted not by doing research, but by reading a book (Reid, 1989, 120). She was electrified by Virginia Woolf's confrontation with patriarchal authority in her *A Room of One's Own*. Woolf had been sitting on the bank of a river at one of England's oldest universities, lost in thought. Suddenly she had an idea which made her spring up in excitement and stride across a nearby grassy lawn. As she writes, "Instantly a man's figure rose to intercept me.... His face expressed horror and indignation. Instinct rather than reason came to my help; he was a Beadle; I was a woman. This was the turf; there was the path. Only the Fellows and Scholars are allowed here; the gravel is the place for me" (Woolf, 1929, 9). Woolf regained the path, but the incident had chased the idea from her mind.

Sherwood wrote, "The words elevated from the page. I understood. *A Room of One's Own* hit me in a way that a book has never affected me in my life before. I was so angry I became acutely aware of the injustice of being a woman. It was so simple that I wondered why I had never reflected upon it before." Her eyes had been opened so that she could see life from then on from a feminist perspective.

Lynne Fernie's life was also jolted, and altered for good when she read a book, in this case one by Germaine Greer (Harris, 1992, 68). She writes, "**I remember the distinct moment when I realized that I'd been had.** It was four a.m. on a Sunday morning in 1976, and I'd stayed up all night reading *The Female Eunuch*. That was the night I realized that I'd been taught to interpret my life through systematically instituted prejudices which are invisibly embedded in our culture."

Since then, Fernie's perspective on life has been a feminist one which has also helped her acknowledge race and class oppression.

Mary McCarthy (1912-1989) received her Big Jolt when she read Dos Passos' *The 42nd Parallel* about life in the United States. She writes (1985, 201): "I can cite a case-- my own-- of a young person's being altered politically by a novel, but I cannot explicate the process, let alone explain it in terms of the author's intention or literary strategies. I believe there is often something accidental in these things, as with love, which gives them a feeling of fatality."

Before she read this book she had read others-- "No doubt the fervor of emotion--an incommunicable bookish delight-- had been preparing in me for some time through other 'social' books, just as two mild bee-stings may prepare you for a third that is fatal." She had read books by Tolstoy, and Shaw's *The Intelligent Woman's Guide to Socialism and Capitalism*, but they had rolled off her, she said, like water off a duck's back. But then came Dos Passos's book about the United States that changed her life, as will be described in due course.

Elsbeth Wallace Baugh's life was changed forever on reading a magazine. Baugh went back to university after her six children were in school and eventually earned her PhD from Toronto's York University in clinical psychology (Baugh, 1987). During this busy time she gradually evolved from a traditional homemaker to a woman who sensed the negative consequences of this role. One lunchtime she chanced to read the first

edition of *Ms* magazine. She writes, "I became so engrossed that I almost missed my afternoon class. **There in print before my eyes was validation of so many ideas I had hardly dared voice to myself, let alone to anyone else.** In fact women of my generation usually shared their anger and distress in a form of black humor that had the underlying theme that we were coping, and did not expect change in the way our world was structured. We did not talk to each other honestly. I cannot say I became a feminist overnight but I travelled a thousand miles that day in my mind, and for the first time began to reflect on the role of women in society and to feel real kinship with other women."

What is important in this section, though, is that many women came up to her while she was signing books in a bookstore, or after one of her talks, to tell her "the most profound of all things a writer can hope to hear: **Your book has changed my life!**" They also had been sexually abused as children, but before reading her book they had been too afraid to come out and tell this truth to anyone; until they did so, they could not begin the healing process that would restore them to themselves. One woman read the book, phoned family members to tell them to read it too, and then felt her own burden lighten as they rallied to help her-- "where there had been silence for many years, her sisters and her mother were now talking honestly, supporting one another, and the future looked much brighter."

About 1848, a missionary woman, Miss Barnes, came to Ontario from the United State to preach to Indians and to anyone else interested in hearing from a "lady evangelist" (Youmans, 1893). **William Case**, or Elder Case as he was known, objected so much to a woman speaking in public that at first he would not sit on the platform while Miss Barnes spoke. She managed finally to convince him to listen to her, and in listening his prejudices were overcome. In fact, as Letitia Youmans writes, "his mind on this question became completely changed, and in a certain sense, he met with a change of heart, for he actually offered his heart and hand to Miss Barnes to walk with him this life. This proposal the lady graciously accepted, and they spent many happy, useful years together; a blessing to each other and a benediction to the world."

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