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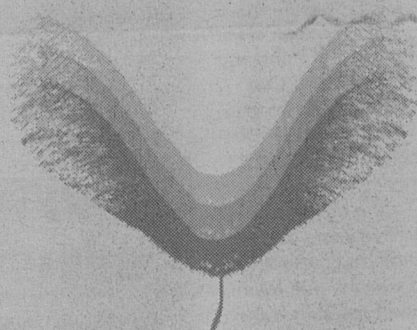
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On Feminism

BY LYNN MARTIN

WHAT IS A WOMAN IF SHE IS DEFINED BY women? This was what I thought the women's movement was all about. In early consciousness raising groups, we encouraged women to speak up and speak out. Implicit in such encouragement was a promise to listen. Feminist presses sprang into being. Poetry readings were held in every town. We all had subscriptions to Ms. and, at least, one other journal.

No doubt in the 60s feminism was my faith. I know I grabbed the books as fast as they were printed: Adrienne Rich, Audre Lorde, Paule Marshall, June Jordan, Toni Morrison, Margaret Atwood. And those that were history

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rediscovered: Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Anne Bradstreet, Emily Dickinson, Charlotte Bronte, Zora Neale Hurston. By god, we were women and we were going to "dream of a common language" and save the world.

I listened to Anne Bradstreet:

*I am obnoxious to each carping tongue
who says my hand a needle better fits,
a poet's pen all scorn I should thus wrong
for such despite they cast on female wit.
If what I do prove well, it won't advance,
they'll say it's sto'n, or else it was by chance.
Building on her anger and my own, I spoke up ...*

I was a child born, not into poverty, but certainly into the working class. There never was much money. What wealth we had was in family. I grew up surrounded by women: aunts, cousins, sisters, mothers, grandmothers. As a baby I was passed from arm to arm. One of my first learnings was, if one woman was too busy, go find another. My grandmother held me in her lap. She sang softly over my head. If she was busy, there was always an aunt; another lap, another song. Each woman sang a different song. A love for *women*, not just *a woman*, was rocked into my bones.

Out of this love, I became political at the age of ten. By insisting, despite teasing by a boy cousin, I *could so* talk to the birds. And by biting one bully on the arm and then running like hell. Living in a tenement, I identified with the many-voiced laughter of the streets. But I saw my destiny to be a wife and mother. I adopted two children, gave birth to another. Our family was Asian, Anglo and Afro. This was what it meant to me to be a woman, to celebrate diversity. And when women began to speak out, to write, to march, I was ready to go. My inner process and the Women's Movement were in tune. I was ready to seize the moment and demand equal pay, equal access to opportunity, the right of every woman to be heard. Adrienne Rich put words to it. Cris Williamson sang it. Audre Lorde declared it. We were going to change the world and we were going to do it right now.

But I didn't really change my world until I was in my 50s. It took me till then to go back to the shelf, as Margaret Atwood put it, and take up the being I was before marriage, before kids. High on feminism, I decided to go it alone. How I ever thought a 50-year-old woman who hadn't had a paying job in over thirty years was going to make it in the tight market of 1980 is beyond me. There is much you learn as a mother of kids, but much you don't. The business world is something "over there," and I hadn't been listening. I had also neglected to note that the "common language" was but a dream, and there was no real community of women out there to join. I leaped into the working world, and have been struggling ever since. Feminism as religion didn't work. Feminism as realism is what it is about today. I don't know about you, but I still believe. Because we women did change the world, and we didn't.

In the 21st century, we still struggle for equal rights. (Remember the Equal Rights Amendment?). We still struggle to have a voice. (What we never imagined was a Phyllis Shlafly or a Condoleezza Rice.) It has finally reached my consciousness that what I first saw as my own struggle was really a world wide struggle. The gay rights movement is more than achieving the right to marry. It's about the right to re-define the very concept of marriage. It's about being our own authentic self.

There is so much to do. Like Susan B. Anthony we need to keep coming back over and over again. Especially today. Diverting all the money to war is another way to keep us looking the wrong way. The anti-war movement is a civil rights movement, is a feminist movement, is a gay rights movement. It's all the same. There isn't anything else to do but keep on trying, one dream at a time, to create a better world. It will never be perfect, because we aren't perfect, but it can be better. ▼



Lynn Martin is a published poet who lives in Brattleboro.