Elizabeth Cady Stanton in 1848, the year she organized the first women's rights convention in Seneca Falls.

Chapter Thirty-seven

Women as Feminists

Whether from a guilty conscience, or in condescension,
or for lack of better to say, historians and orators
speak kindly of the role of women in American history -
pioneering, strong, caring, religiously devout,
willing to brave the dangers of...,
sharing the hardships of menfolk....
Actually, women were characterized by many of
the same vices and virtues as men and children;
women supplied as many opponents to raising the
status of women as did men.
A large proportion of women was incapacitated by
chiliastic religious ideology, waiting for
God to carry forward social reforms.

Another large proportion, not entirely overlapped by these others,
cowered under a domineering master,
who brooked no complaint of woman's role in life.

Against these facts one sets the large fact that
highly commendable deeds - besides keeping house,
bearing the young, sharing education, and amusing
the world around with sex, affection, and social intercourse -
were performed by women.

In the often ignominious struggle for equal rights, too, the Constitution, the nation's heroes, and the democratic system of government are excused, as if they were faultless, and the issue of women's rights dangles out in the social atmosphere by itself, as an anomaly in an otherwise just and righteous land. In fact, almost none of the nation's touted leaders were out in front for the rights of women before these were practically obtained. Name any ten top heroes of American history before 1915:
you will be lucky if one of them had a record of advocacy
of women's rights before these rights were
in some cases adopted.

It could happen naturally that a woman who was a feminist and educator might still write a book that proudly found "no examples of profligate females" or "of bold and criminal ambition".
Compared with England and France,
"..old and wily nations, the character of America
is that of youthful simplicity, of maiden purity;
and her future statesman will say, as he reads the story,
my country was the most virtuous among the nations".
Thus Mrs. Emma Willard, whose histories of the United States
sold 400,000 copies
between 1828 and 1860.

A political system that does not provide the possibilities of change is imperfect; if it does not encompass change that is needed to make it consistent with itself, it is disabled. Such could be said about the American system of government and the leadership it provided for a century and a half, for it could not manage to cope with the glaring inconsistencies of women's subjection, in a system
full of self-glorifying praise of equal rights.

A full philosophical equipage for winning women's rights,
that American women could use, was even then available. The Enlightenment philosophers had cleaned out human nature to provide room for nurture to equalize all persons regardless of sex.
Human rights were equally inherited.
The Declaration of Independence and many Bills of Rights
created all "men" equal but women knew that
here "men" stood for all humans, all of mankind.

That's what Locke and Rousseau meant.

At the same time women might look to romanticism and transcendentalism as showing the ultimate unity and harmony of all creation, women and men included indiscriminately. Many of the utopias were communitarian and socialist, as such providing the full bag of equal rights for women and men. Tasks were often apportioned according to logical, efficient and/or philosophically tenable rules that redefined workplaces.

The American radical sects established areas of sex equality, beginning with the Levellers of the seventeenth century in England, but now two centuries later strongly notable in Quakerism, especially the Hicksite Quakerism of Elias Hicks. Radical Protestant sects got rid of much of the clerical opposition to women's rights that had been ensconced in the ministries of the larger and more disciplined groups. Unitarians were prominent in the movement, too, they and their less intellectual brethren of the Universalist Church. The number of women leaders was perhaps a hundred in ten million women, yet one study of fifty-one feminist-abolitionist leaders revealed that 21 grew up in Quaker, Unitarian or Universalist households, and that another 9 of them changed from their early religion to one of these three sects in the course of their lives. Most apparent here is the tiny proportion of top elite among a great mass of people.

Intensity of the reform movement for women's rights rose sharply in the decades before the Civil War, and indeed brought forward most of the arguments and reactions to be experienced until the renewed agitation of the late 1900's. Like every other reform movement called in under the new umbrella of direct democracy, it was largely a failure. It raised consciousness and opened all cards on the table.

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Women of the age were asked to possess the virtues of piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity. The terms were and are clear enough. They bespeak religious conformity within one's family sect, the wearing of modest dress, abstinence from tobacco, and sexual confinement to the spouse or celibacy, obedience to the husband's wishes or to one's father, and contented devotion to

household maintenance and child-rearing.
The prudent woman pretended to all of the virtues.
If none of this brought the male into a corresponding
virtuous state, there was prayer.

By then an increasing band of women sought
not only more personal freedom but legal equality with men.
They pointed out with indignant perplexity that
the whole democratic movement, taking such pains
to apportion votes among the mass of White men, was
unconcerned with giving a vote to even a few women.
Nor did the vastly extended new White electorate
turn to a resolution of any other of the oppressions
weighing down upon women. For
women had many more grievances than men.

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But anyone, male or female, who dared to challenge the
fundamental virtues, was widely condemned as an enemy of God
and of the Republic. Religion, of course, was deemed to be the
proper sphere of women if they must leave the home for any reason,
and the reform movements that subtended from their church sects were
only sometimes tolerated. Margaret Fuller,
a prominent editor and literary critic, ran seminars for
upper class ladies on the subject-matter of feminism.
Her book, *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*
(1845), argued for erasing all
intellectual and economic disabilities of women.
She asked for the fulfillment of women's powers
in every sphere. She was hardly permitted to
proceed with her activity.

The pecksniff was legion in American life. You needed not to rub a
magic lamp to evoke the crowd, the so-called public, Thomas
Jefferson, who was not always right, deemed women to be too
sensitive for politics, that they should be preserved from its rigors. But
he recognized the enemy:

"This country, which has given to the world the example of
physical liberty, owes to it that of moral emancipation, also;
for as yet it is but nominal with us.
The inquisition of public opinion overwhelms,
in practice, the freedom asserted by the laws in theory".

With women, as with slaves, children, foreigners, and just about every
other category of the population, the Bill of Rights of the Federal

Constitution did not provide ample protection for most
reform activities, nor even for cases at law;
neither did the states' bills of rights cover
a full range and, what was worse, were not
believed to apply to a great many circumstances where today
people would be shouting for a lawyer.
Freedoms of speech, press, assembly, religion,
movement, occupation, education, dress, and
association were often available, but only when the
shadow of a presumed public opinion did not
fall upon them.

Liberty could be nothing, ever and now, but the
freedom to act as one wished. Without moral guidance,
be it Jefferson's directives or the Gospels, or the
very devil, it was a lust, libinal and genetic,
stronger in some people than in others.
Like sexual lust or avarice or craving for dominance,
lust for liberty has no morals to begin with,
no restrictions in nature save impotence and impossibility,
but must be culturally defined, formulated, constrained, and
released according to cultural norms -
the metes and bounds of society working upon
the "yen to do whatever I want".

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The biography of any one of a dozen well-known agitators
would tell us much the same story of the feminist movement.
Sarah and Angelina Grimke, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Lucretia Mott,
Lydia Marie Child, and the aforesaid Margaret Fuller were
perhaps the most prominent and effective workers.

Englishwoman Harriet Martineau nearly belongs.
An economist, journalist, and feminist,
her visit to America in the thirties and the
publication of her three volumes on American civilization
brought the problems of women in themselves, and in the reform
movements, before the British and American publics.
It is a commentary both upon her conscientiousness
and the isolation of American centers of learning,
that not a single visitor from Britain had come
to the University of Virginia until 1835 when,
to the delight of professors and their families, she showed up there.
(One feels that she must be mistaken, that she believed those
indulgent Southern voices, hospitably exclaiming.)
Martineau was exceedingly kind to Americans.

She thought that the women were basically pretty,
if the prettiness were not spoiled by generally poor health
and a nasal twangy way of speaking.
She also sensed that they did not bathe frequently,
and wondered at the lack of sanitary facilities
aboard large steamboats. (Perhaps her acquaintances
were hoity-toity: common Methodists would have been cleaner.)

She found the hotel floors, boat decks, and walks slimy with
tobacco spit, but tried to overlook it and exclaimed instead over the
beauties of the empty countryside. She was appalled at the mob
spirit that would appear so quickly and do such extensive damage.

She particularly liked Cincinnati, a healthy city, she thought, with
many nice dwellings surrounded by fine gardens. The large number
of public school children impressed her here. (This would be even
before Massachusetts, and ahead of England and France.)

A rich and respected citizen, she says, told how he had come less
than fifty years ago when buffalo browsed among the cane brakes
and Indians outnumbered the one hundred Whites, but now over
30,000 people dwelled in the city, coming from several nations,
prospering in diverse industries, directing the teeming traffic of the
Ohio River. Land that was bought for a dollar an
acre brought now $40.

She described a later famous incident of anti-slavery crusading
that occurred during her visit. A committee of women
had called a meeting at the Hall of Liberty (Faneuil) in Boston,
there hopefully to meet William Lloyd Garrison,
editor and prominent leader of the anti-slavery agitation.
But posters had been plastered around the town
calling citizens to assemble and block the proposed meeting.
Hundreds of men came. Many women were kept from
passing through to the meeting. Abuse and filth were hurled at them.
The mob threatened to break in.
The mayor said he could do nothing.

The women nevertheless persisted in conducting a full meeting.
Meanwhile Garrison with his wife had been caught. A
rope was hung around his neck, and he was dragged through the streets.
Finally he was released when a burly stranger intervened with a
show of authority and escaped with him.

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An especially appealing character was Sarah Grimke.

She wrote books, carried on a heavy public correspondence,
organized meetings, lectured, pressured politicians, and
co-directed an advanced kind of elementary
school in New Jersey - coed, with a broad curriculum,
and pragmatic. In the late nineteen hundreds all
of these activities would be gladly tolerated, but in the early and
middle 1800's such feminists were
hassled by individuals, newspapers, and mobs;
abuse both personal and general
fell from every quarter.

Hardly had women begun their protests against slavery, and by
inference - because they were publicly assertive -
against the suppression of women, when the Council of
Congregational Ministers of Massachusetts issued a pastoral letter
denouncing their conduct as unwomanly and un-Christian. Prayer
for religious causes in religious settings is acceptable for women,
read the letter,

"but when she assumes the place and tone of man as
a public reformer... she yields the power which God has given her
for her protection, and her character becomes unnatural".
In other words, she deserves whatever happens to her -
along with other fallen women.

Grimke came from a leading family in Charleston, South Carolina.
She had every opportunity that one might then hope to have;
of course, she was not let to practice law, as she would wish.
Her younger sister Angelina was thoroughly sympathetic and,
while Sarah stressed feminism, Angelina pressed against slavery
before all else - never mind that her family owned slaves.
The sisters were the first female "professional"
agitators against slavery.

They were the only women in Theodore Weld's gang of seventy that
toured New England in the late thirties declaiming against slavery.
Born in 1792 and 1805, the sisters lived long, moved about in the
field less as they grew older. Over the years, Sarah was especially
concerned with the dreadful circumstances of working women. At
the ages of seventy-eight and sixty-five, in 1870, the Grimke girls
led forty-two women through a snowstorm to cast
ballots in an election. They were not let to vote, but
deposited their ballots and marched home.

In her *Letters on the Equality of the Sexes*, addressed to
Mary S. Parker, President of the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society, and
printed in William Lloyd Garrison's *Liberator*

before being published in book form, and
in other essays, Sarah struck at the deprivation of women
with regard to the full range of life's values. The total
dispossession of power was paramount in importance,
for with power, other values are more easily won.
The laws that practically seized a woman's property
and earnings on behalf of the husband were reviewed.
The unavailability of proper and sufficient educational
opportunities for women, the restrictions on their mobility and
occupations, and the suppression of their freedom of expression
were exposed.
Today most of this is an old story, yet many of the
vital facts stay unchanged.

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Of the goods of life, affection, love, is most independent of the
agglutinative effect observable, of the tendency of all values to
be enjoyed at a high or low level together: if you possess one,
especially if it is power, you are likely to gain the others. Except that
affection is semi-autonomous.

Giving and accepting love does not
explicate one's situation in regard to the other values. Into
exchanges of affection go various currencies. Grimke's
attitude to sex in marriage is an objection to the brute in the husband
(the American male was not then, at least, the world's greatest lover),
and to the male's purely exploitative use of his wife.

Sarah Grimke's position changed from minimalist to maximalist in
the course of her life, to use terms that were unknown then, but
bring her into current relevance. From a vision that is
male-centered, touting minimal sex-differences,
to a maximalist women-are-different gynocentric vision,
means that her earlier concerns were colored by
justifiable jealousy of male attributes
(Freud's concept of "penis-envy") and the
injustice of not being permitted to compete for and aspire to them,
whereas her later interests came to reside in the strength,
beauties, and bonds possessed by women.
Obviously, given one or the other of these dispositions,
the character of love and affection will be different

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But, also, these two visions of women logically
present more dichotomous dispositions toward the other values.

If the inherent position of woman is determined
at least in part by her identification with the Earth Mother
and a uniquely feminine model of fulfillment,
then her philosophy of life must be substantially
different from men's.

Statistically she can be measured as to her power, wealth, respect,
knowledge, and experience on any items that are proposed, but the
measures will be less reliable; the human meaning of the measures
will vary between the sexes. Properly construed, this would bring
about a much expanded and richer gamut of life's values, not so
male-defined and male-centered, but human-centered,
meaning universally variable in people .
Power, wealth, respect, knowledge would acquire
vastly broader horizons. And so affection.
For this situation a pluralist, yet truly individualist,
society would be convoked.

Thus one may pursue the logic of Sarah Grimke's ideas,
while admitting that the practical achievements of her movement were
disappointing. One may well ask:
What did the women's movement do wrong,
that prevented it from obtaining at least the vote for
generations to come?
True, as was said in rebuttal, they had not the vote in Europe.
Still, the suffrage reforms of America were generally
ahead of those of Europe, and were not Americans forever crowing
about the progressive nature of their society? Is it one more indication
of the fraudulence of Jacksonian democracy?

In 1848 at Seneca Falls, New York,
a conclave of women was called.
Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton were among its primary
sponsors. They prepared a "Declaration of Sentiments"
that followed the pattern and style of the
Declaration of Independence, detailing all
the wrongs of women and asking equality.

The document was more valid than the Declaration of Independence.
The signers were mostly of rural roots, with experience of
working on equal and reciprocal terms with men,
who typically engendered large households and extended families.
They might be distinguished from urban feminists who came to demand
equality in the course of their benevolent social work.

Soon the movement would take a back place to the abolition
movement. More should have been accomplished.

Did the failure originate in what was perceived as
the snobbery of the bluestockings,
that alienated Western and working class women?
Did the Catholic priests throw their weight
on the side of most Protestant ministers
against women's suffrage because they were
trained and disciplined to do so;
did they serve women faithfully only in order to make
the lot of the downtrodden male more bearable?
Was it the reluctance of the Southern belle to speak out
against discrimination, for fear that after women's rights would
come the rights of slaves?
Should not the movement have concentrated its
resources upon one state and
only the vote to begin with?

Did American males all this while nurse an unconscious grudge
against domineering Moms?

Reform movements in most cases began
in religious settings, the peculiar American Protestant scene, later
Catholic as well, where the congregation was the most important
bonding agent of half the population for community welfare
extending beyond rites and doctrine: did churchmen fear that women
would soon thereafter dominate church elections and
control church funds?

Was it the Civil War, that would ruin so many good things
or put them off for a long time?

These nine questions find their place
in the total explanation, with the answer always, "Yes!"

And what of the long-term effects upon women
of discrimination and their frustrated attempts to overcome it?
One would expect to discover the same psychic
phenomena as would be enhanced among all groups
suffering from invidious discrimination. Certainly there would
be bred in many women more than a modicum of resentment, an
undercurrent of aggression (including the use of children as
unconscious champions against men),
an unwillingness to respond to the prompts of men and society,
a higher than average paranoid quotient, and
some nasty internecine controversy among women
(frequently stirred up by men),
all of which would tend to compound the problem of
establishing a fair and affectionate relationship

among *(sic)* the sexes. So here is a tenth "Yes".

That only multiple causes suffice to explain
does not excuse the stubborn, sluggish, negative response.
Their consequences added up to a shameful social
condition and continuous failure of the American political system
that was to endure at least into the year 2000.
But while the system failed, it elicited instances of
civil courage of the highest order.

Comparing the records of the foremost fifty women with those of
the most prominent fifty males of American history in the nineteenth
century, and assigning scores for that precious quality of a republic,
civil courage, there can be little doubt that
the women would emerge with a higher average score.
