

This One's for the Girls

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Mar. 7, 2010

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Once upon a time, as part of a junior high school project with who knows what pedagogical purpose, my sister created a construction paper booklet with the lyrics to Helen Reddy's anthem *I Am Woman* illustrated with pictures clipped from magazines. At Mom's suggestion, on the final triumphant spread Kathy slipped in one of her own school photographs. So there they were, the women of the times, Golda Meier, Jackie O., Barbara Walters, Billie Jean King, Gloria Steinem, Pat Nixon, Chrissy Everett, Phyllis George, Kathy Doege.

It was a touch of creative brilliance typical of Mom, such as had helped my sister and me win the National Book Week poster contest year after year back in elementary school; Kathy's teachers loved it. It was also emblematic of the times. *Virginia Slims* was telling women "you've come a long way, baby"; the phrase "latch-key children" was entering the national vocabulary, and **ERA** was gathering steam toward its ultimate defeat.

The clashing eras that rocked the 1970s in America shaped my childhood. In 1962 Mom had been given no choice other than to resign from her job because pregnant women, even married ones, were not allowed to teach second grade in Bloomington--or just about anywhere else. For more than a decade she stayed home with my sister, and then my sister and me, and eventually my sister and brother and me, while Dad went to work or graduate school each day. Even when Mom returned to work, it was as a substitute teacher, so she was at home mostly the same hours we were, and of course had all the same school vacations. For years we were, for all intents and purposes, a one career, one car, suburban starter house family with gender roles straight out of the nineteen-fifties.

And yet there was that picture of my sister, nestled among those famous, beautiful, powerful women. There, also, was our pediatrician, a middle-aged German woman who kept us healthy through the sheer power of her personality. "You will do this. You will not do that," she would say when prescribing a course of action. There, too, was the *Free to Be You and Me* record album playing in our Unitarian Universalist Sunday School classrooms. On that album Rosie Greer told us "it's alright to cry" and Carol Channing told us:

Remember, nobody smiles doing housework but those ladies you see on TV.
Your mommy hates housework,
Your daddy hates housework,
I hate housework too.
And when you grow up, so will you.
Because even if the soap or cleanser or cleaner or powder or paste or

wax or bleach
That you use is the very best one,
Housework is just no fun.

When the book followed the album Mom bought it for us and we read again and again what happens to a persnickety little girl who insists “ladies first, ladies first.” (They are the first ones on the safari eaten by tigers). We read again and again about William wanting a doll, and about Princess Atalanta agreeing to wed the winner of a foot race and then training in secret in order to win the race herself, because she had no desire to marry and no intention of doing so, either.

So it is perhaps not surprising that I grew up to follow a calling in to a profession still considered by many non-traditional for women. My sister, on the other hand, grew up to follow our grandmother and our aunt into one of the most traditional women’s careers--nursing. She’s done it with her own thoroughly modern and non-traditional twist, however.

When my niece, their first child, was a baby my sister was both more satisfied in her career and more highly paid than was my brother-in-law in his career. So Chuck stayed home with Claire and later both Claire and William, and Kathy became the primary and at times sole wage earner in the family. Chuck went to preschool story time at the library and ECFE classes. Kathy excelled in her position running the ENT clinic at the U of M, gaining respect and additional responsibilities, and regaling us with her tales of bossing the doctors around.

My sister and I flourished in the love of our family, the embrace of our Unitarian Universalist church and the burgeoning possibilities of our era--each in our own distinct way. Let me be clear. There were adolescent bumps and moods along the way, but the closest I ever came to feeling deprived or oppressed because I was a girl was when one of my high school English teachers refused to let me read one of the lead roles in *Inherit the Wind*. And to be fair, she had a point. They were male roles. When we got around to *The Barretts of Wimpole Street* I got the lead. I have little reason to believe Claire’s experience will be much different from mine. She has a strong role model in her mother, a supportive extended family, and attends UU church regularly where she sees gifted women running the religious education program, preaching, and directing the music program. She participates in Girls Scouts and goes to camp each summer. And she’s long been adept at bossing her brother and male cousins around. In fact, long before she’d reached double digits in her age my sister predicted that Claire would grow up to be the dictator of a small country.

But I do worry about her. I’ve worried her whole life, and as she turns thirteen today, I worry even more. And I worry about your daughters and granddaughters, too. You see, I’ve been familiar with Mary Pipher’s work for a long time. I’ve studied literature, theology, cinema, and the Christian scriptures with feminist professors. I’m well read and media savvy. I know that sixteen years ago, when Pipher wrote her book, things like sexting and pregnancy pacts weren’t even on the horizon. Having served for seven

years on the board of a YWCA residential chemical dependency program and domestic violence shelter, I've heard the stories and the statistic too many times. Beyond the stories and the statistics, I know my friends--the one who has been raped twice, the one who was beaten by a boyfriend, the one whose partner is rumored to have beaten a former girlfriend, the one who had to call the police for protection from her husband. Bright, educated, middle class women, not a "victim" type among them--yet all have been victims. The world is a dangerous place to be a girl and a woman. So I worry.

And I get angry.

And I seek out little and big ways to take action so the anger and the worry don't become debilitating or make me bitter. I stuck out my seven years on the YWCA, though it was through a rocky time in the organization's development and, as a first board experience, a bit alarming. Sticking it out was one action I took to combat the anger and the worry and the fear; it was also a terrific learning experience. Beyond the horrific stories and the disturbing statistics, I learned how many of the women who entered the chemical dependency program also had need of the domestic violence program and vice versa. I learned about the importance of tailoring treatment programs for women, and of providing services to their children as well. I learned about creating special opportunities and experiences just for junior high and middle school aged girls; opportunities and experiences focusing on the needs, gifts and talents of the young women combined with the undivided attention of role models from a variety of arenas.

Attending and giving financial support to V-Day events (which use Valentine's Day as a platform for speaking out about violence against women), offering workshops at an annual conference for adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse, providing church lawn space for a Week Without Violence display, walking in the Week Without Violence march, joining the annual Good Friday counter-protest/support demonstration at Planned Parenthood, giving my niece books with strong female characters and books about math written by a former child actress, paying attention when a friend says she's been commissioned to set music to a collection of delightful limericks about body image and girl power, and preaching here this morning are all ways I have taken action.

Perhaps my most significant action isn't an action at all. I simply live my life. Elsewhere in her book Pipher writes of the importance of surrounding adolescent girls (and adolescent boys) with androgynous adults. Androgynous in this context has nothing to do with losing or disguising one's femininity or masculinity. It means simply people who undertake tasks out of love or necessity without regard to gender. Women who change tires and men who change diapers, for example. And players in pigtails. Claire has seen me make lefse, preach, and instigate a whole slew of messy "projects" for her and my nephews. She has learned to cook from her father and watched her mother succeed in her profession. She is, I hope, absorbing the message that almost no task, job, or role in life is bound to a particular gender.

Many of you will be familiar with the witticism mistakenly attributed to Gloria Steinem: *a woman needs a man like a fish needs a bicycle*. In reality the declaration was the

brainchild of Irina Dunn, an Australian educator. I set out determined not to use it in this sermon because, while I intended to celebrate women this morning, I see no value in denigrating men or giving new life to the tired and misguided argument that feminism seeks to do away with the necessity of men. But then I did an internet search for quotes about women and was dismayed by the discovery that the majority of hits were not about women at all. Rather they were about women *in relationship to men*, at best, or, more frequently, women *in comparison to men*. It was enough to make me abandon my high ideals and long for a t-shirt emblazoned with the “like fish need a bicycle” slogan to wear here in the pulpit.

I want my niece to know, to her very bones, that she is who she is. Period. Not how she measures up against her brother or her male friends. Not the ways in which she is similar to or different from her male classmates. And I want your daughters and granddaughters and nieces and partners and friends to have the same core knowledge. On my birthday last year a colleague wrote on my Facebook wall, “I hope you are celebrating how great it is to be you!” That’s my wish for Claire today, and on all the birthdays to come.

Before I end, my brother is raising sons. My sister’s second child is a son. Almost all of my friends are raising sons, too. I worry about them, and about your sons and grandsons, just as I worry about the girls. The world is a dangerous place for them in different ways. One day I’ll preach that sermon. But this one, this one’s for the girls. Amen.

(Martina McBride’s *This One’s For the Girls*.)