

**THE NINETEENTH JAMES BACKHOUSE LECTURE
1983**

**AN ADVENTURE INTO
FEMINISM WITH FRIENDS**

Sabine Willis

About the Author

Sabine Hedwig Willis was born in 1938 in Frankfurt NM, Germany and now lives in Sydney and the Blue Mountains. She studied drama, taught handicapped children, had two sons and studied history at Macquarie University and the University of New South Wales. She now lectures in politics at Macquarie in the area of women's studies and contemporary political issues. She has been involved with feminism through the Commission on the Status of Women of the Australian Council of Churches (N.S.W.), the Women's Electoral Lobby (WEL), Women at Macquarie (WAM), Women Against Rape (WAR), and the Women and Labour Conferences (1978-1982). She has researched and written on affirmative action, women and the church and women in Australian History. In 1982 at The Power of Hope: Peacemaking Confronts the Nuclear Evil gathering in Canberra she was part of a Commission presentation on women and peace which was put together by the Commission and called 'Pluto and Persephone'. From time to time she has been on the *Magdaline* (a christian newsletter for women) collective and has served on a number of Quaker committees. She worked with Quaker children for many years and especially enjoyed arranging plays with them.

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THE JAMES BACKHOUSE LECTURES

This is one of a series of lectures instituted by Australia Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends on the occasion of the establishment of that Yearly Meeting in January 1964.

This Lecture was delivered in Sydney on 9 January 1983 during the Yearly Meeting.

James Backhouse was an English Friend who visited Australia from 1832 to 1838. He and his companion, George Washington Walker, travelled widely but spent most of their time in Tasmania. It was through this visit that Quaker Meetings were first established in Australia. James Backhouse was a botanist who published full accounts of what he saw, besides encouraging Friends and following up his deep concern for the convicts and Aborigines.

Australian Friends hope that this series of lectures will bring fresh insights into truth, often with reference to the needs and aspirations of Australian Quakerism.

Ruth Haig
Presiding Clerk
Australia Yearly Meeting

ABOUT THIS LECTURE

Quakers have provided a unique place for women in their Society and yet they too have often reflected the patriarchal nature of the society in which they live and work. Feminists have challenged all aspects of this society which oppresses and exploits women. In this lecture Sabine Willis writes of her personal adventure into feminism with family, Quakers, and especially with friends. It is a journey which includes encounters with history, politics, the church and with people. It explores some of the areas traversed on this adventure, such as language and its power or the enabling strength of other women. It is above all a personal story, an attempt to share something of the joy and the risks, the celebration and awareness which feminism involves.

Advice

Having in mind that much Christian teaching and language has been used to subordinate women to men, bear witness to our experience that we are all one in the Spirit and value the special characteristics of each individual.

Remember that the Spirit of God includes and transcends our ideas of male and female, and that we should reflect this insight in our lives and through our ministry.

Query

Are you working, in all aspects of your life, towards a better understanding of the need for a different balance between the sexes in their contribution to our society? Do you recognise the limitations which are placed on women and men by assigning roles to them according to gender, and do you attempt to respond instead to the needs and capacities of the individual?

Do you recognise and encourage the many ways in which human love may be expressed?

From Quaker Women's Group
London 1982

AN ADVENTURE INTO FEMINISM WITH FRIENDS

Live adventurously. . . Do not be content to accept things as they are. . .
Work for an order of society which will allow. . .
WOMEN to develop their capacities. . .¹

I do not remember these specific advices from my early days amongst Quakers, nor indeed do I remember prescriptions as such. These words only came to have meaning for me much later as an expression of something I already felt to be of importance in my life. It is always an exciting experience to find written or spoken something which speaks to your condition or clarifies your own deliberations or experience. The religion of experience which Margaret Fell, the mother of Quakerism, demanded when she wrote ‘. . . we have taken the Scriptures in words and know nothing of them in ourselves’², is that religion which allows ‘none to profess what (she) is not’.³

I want to share something of my adventure into feminism, taking care as I do so to stay within the realms of my experience, which however mirrors in part the experience of others as it came to have a special meaning at different times in my life. As there is no particular point in proceeding chronologically, I will start in the middle with my discovery of the importance of history in my life.

More than ten years ago in the midst of doing some research on the formation of Australian attitudes towards China I discovered women in history. I came across a remarkable woman, Eleanor Mary Hinder, who was a member of the Young Woman's Christian Association in the 1920s and in that capacity went to China as a welfare worker among industrial workers, especially women and children, in the factories of Shanghai. An early graduate in Biology from the University of Sydney she became, first a school teacher and then a tutor in the Adult Education University Tutorial Classes. Her experience in the latter position awakened what was to be a lifelong concern with and for working people, especially women. Later she became the first Welfare Superintendent for Farmer and Company, a large department store in Sydney which employed hundreds of young women shop assistants.⁴

Two aspects sparked my imagination. Often in her writing she would refer to the great debt she owed to certain women. Two of special significance were a woman she met as a girl who became a lifelong friend, Madge Henson, and a

teacher who influenced her greatly as a schoolgirl, Agnes Brewster. The first was my own headmistress at High School and the second was the school's foundation headmistress! She wrote also of the great influence the Tutorial Classes had in her life. For me it was the inspiration of such classes in my twenties that led me to a course of full-time tertiary study. Of my own debt to women I will write later but in a real way this woman reflected part of my history and this was an exciting discovery to make after five years of studying traditional history at the university.

Why was this such an exciting experience? There are two reasons which only subsequently became clear to me. Hinder had an enormous knowledge of China, more than probably any other Australian at that time, but she was not considered for the position of Australia's first official representative in China in 1941, not even as an assistant, despite her expressed interest in the position. Her experience was not considered real because the 'real world' had been defined by a history experienced and written by men about themselves. Such male history has rendered women invisible to the point where even if their work parallels that of men, they are not even seen, in order to be considered. But perhaps more importantly patriarchal history has allowed a narrow definition of the world and what is important in it to emerge. With whom can women identify in such history, one which may become a history of nothingness because it excludes their own experience? As one woman professor said to me in discussion about such matters, 'when I graduated in history it was with a PhD in self-obliteration'.⁵ We need to know our history urgently for as people without a past we are like those suffering from amnesia.

It was also important to discover that reference to a 'false' past may be used to justify oppression, and that

The search for women's history is not simply a question of filling in gaps, of writing ourselves back into history to restore our *amour propre*. We need to know our past... by showing that the 'nature' and role of woman changes with each society we are helping defeat the argument 'that's how it has always been'. Since oppressive ideology is justified by reference to a false past it is important for us to show what the past really was, to develop an alternative to the distorted version still being used against us. Historical understanding is essential to our struggle. We must find the roots of our oppression to destroy it; we must know where we come from to understand what we are and where we are going, and we must examine the struggle of earlier generations of women to help us to win our own.⁶

Let me give a simple example of this. When I was a young mother the conventional wisdom was that every woman loved having babies, that this fulfilled her as no other role could fulfil a woman. My own doubts and unease had to remain hidden for a long time until with other women I shared our real past and discovered that many women had found it difficult. Such unease can also represent dis-ease for women. The long-fought rebellion of women against the constraints and dangers of child-bearing and wife-hood and patriarchy is now being discovered and uncovered by historians of women's experience. The story of lunacy, hysteria, infanticide, control of family size and the more modern 'nervous breakdown', may be the evidence of a passionate struggle by women to overcome their uneasiness with oppression. Recounting these experiences enables women to be themselves as never before.

A few years ago I became involved in a struggle to introduce a course in women and history at my university. There was considerable resistance: was it really a subject? Were there resources to teach this strange topic? If we introduced women and history, would we not also have to teach men and history? What of academic excellence, hard knowledge, objectivity and again, reality? In the long period of discussion about the introduction of the history of women and in the time during which we have taught, read and written in the area since then, many things have become clear.

In the first place, the perception of reality itself as expressed by many colleagues was a male perception of a male reality, and the knowledge and experience which provided the basis for this reality was male knowledge and male experience. And it was this experience, this knowledge, this reality which prompted our colleagues to question the reality of women's history. It fell outside the range of their experience. In just such a way social historians twenty years ago or more encountered opposition as they attempted to write the history of the working class, and black historians in the U.S.A broke out of the white constructs and wrote down their own experience, re-created their own reality. So long as the reality was being defined by white middle class males it was white middle class male reality, and therefore, power, under which we were all living.

I do not wish to become too abstract but the question of power is most important and to illustrate this I will use the example of late nineteenth century Australia. The story of this period has been written many times by men as one of emerging nationalism, of mateship, of discovery, of new boundaries, the great outback, the struggles of labour, political advances, social welfare and wars, but

most importantly of egalitarianism. The experience of women does not appear in these accounts, not because they did not do anything but because all those things considered important by men were those things which men did. And this gave them an extraordinary power not only to define what was happening but what *should* happen.

The doctrine of the rights of man applied only to men. It was promulgated at a time when we women were denied even the most elementary of rights: the right to ownership of property, to control over our children, to vote, or otherwise take part in the affairs of a developing nation, let alone have some control over these developments, especially as they affected women's lives. Mateship was (and is) for and between men and egalitarianism in so far as it existed at all also applied only to men. For Australian women nationalism meant loneliness, struggle, increasing isolation in suburbs, exclusion from a political and professional life which determined or defined our very existence. We were classed together with blacks, children, Chinese and lunatics as a lesser breed amongst the men.

These male accounts which we were offered as history we have since discovered were historical discrimination and we have all been conditioned by them. They have allowed men the power to define by reference to this false or limited past: man the doer, the creator, the powerful and the only possible bread winner. The latter meant that women who had to earn their own living (and they have never been less than 20% in our society), were given appalling wages and conditions and often still are. Women are the poor in Australian society.⁷ Even among the professionals it took, for example, the women teachers 50 bitter years to gain equal pay. Every advance that women made had to be fought for hard and long; those with power have never given it away easily.⁸

But power can be understood in different ways. A crucial and positive aspect of power is that which allows us to understand and define our own reality, and that power arises from our full participation in that reality. When we have achieved that we have achieved an authentic power to be ourselves, not a destructive power over others which is in reality, domination. Domination usurps, diminishes and demeans others as women have been usurped, diminished and demeaned and often still are. Rape is only an extreme example of this.⁹

The exciting discovery for me as for many feminists was that the journey towards the definition of our own reality gave us a power, not over others, but a power to be ourselves, to see ourselves, but also, importantly, other women as

beautiful, worthwhile creators. One of the most common accusations made of women who are on this voyage of self-discovery is that we are selfish, preoccupied only with self, but the reality is, in the language of Mary Daly, that 'in being so much oneself. . . there is no need for exploitation'.¹⁰ The journey is difficult; it requires courage and it depends a lot on the sharing you do along the way.

II

As a child I attended the Devonshire Street, Sydney Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends. It was then a Monthly Meeting and it was peopled with many interesting Friends, women and men who spoke at length in Meeting for Worship and who all seemed quite old. They were very kind to us children of refugee parents with no relatives and became in some ways our adopted, wider family. They were the earnest kind of people who are not terribly exciting to the very young. In fact one of the most exciting persons there was my own mother who, despite the somewhat non-aesthetic nature of Friends, produced many wonderful Nativity Plays, and fostered in me a lifelong interest in creative drama and poetry. At home she climbed trees with us, invented wonderful stories and created celebrations. I could not imagine some of those Friends at Devonshire Street doing this.

And yet despite periods of quietism there has been an element of celebration, of colour and life in Friends from the beginning. Writing in old age to protest against a new emphasis on plain dress, Margaret Fell exclaimed:

What! We must look at no colours, nor make anything that is changeable colours as the hills are, nor sell them, nor wear them: but we must be all in one dress and one colour. This is a silly, poor gospel.¹¹

A great joy in life is expressed here which I did not always perceive at Meeting for Worship.

I grew up in an atmosphere somewhat at odds with the wider society and for this I am enormously grateful for it has never worried me since to be at odds with the society if that seemed necessary. In my family girls were encouraged to develop their talents to the same extent as boys. Marriage was not regarded as the

only goal. Amongst Friends women and men gave the ministry and women were able to take part in the business life of the Society. There were of course some patriarchs and patriarchal attitudes within the Society of Friends, reflecting not only the wider society at that time but also something of a tradition amongst Friends. It is no accident that we hear much more of George Fox than we do of Margaret Fell or of William Penn than of Lucretia Mott. The struggles of Mott with the men of her time reveal a strongly held traditional patriarchal attitude that women were inferior.¹² Mott grew up in the independent atmosphere of Nantucket in the late 18th and early 19th century where the establishment of Quakerism had been due to one woman, Mary Starbuck, who set up a Meeting in her home in 1704:

Yet this meeting which came into being through Mary Starbuck's inspiration and care was formally approved in 1708 as a men's meeting since the initial application was approved by a visiting committee of men Friends.¹³

The women did however proceed to form their own Meeting which became the Women's Yearly Meeting in New England in 1764, because they would not give up what had been operating so effectively while the men were away whaling. Not all Quakers have operated in this defiant way!

My own experience of women Friends as a child was limited to those few who took an aunt-like interest in us and those who taught us Sunday School. Like all denominations the Friends allowed women to do the major part of the work with children. In 1886 Clara Hooper launched a Sunday School in Devonshire Street which became known as the Friends First Day Afternoon School for Children. The Adult School which had been started in 1879 to teach reading and writing to the working population was only open to youths and men.¹⁴ Later a Mothers' Meeting for local women and a Girls' Club were started by women Friends. The latter was the work of Mary Moginie whose exploits as a walker in the mountains recorded in Victorian and Edwardian photographs, inspired me as a child. I thought those women were so intrepid. Mary Moginie's Girls' group used to dance in the Meeting House, (an exploit I considered fairly daring) and I loved her for that!

Later other Quaker women were of importance to me but largely in retrospect. Dorothy Gregory talked with me about China where she had lived and this became a research interest; Margaret Watts always encouraged women to do and to act; her own example as a founder and activist in the Women's Peace Army

during World War I and as a worker amongst the post-war migrants in the Snowy Mountains pubs was inspiring to a young girl. Her words of wisdom and encouragement to a woman who had left her marriage were a radical acceptance not always found amongst Friends or friends.

There was no longer a separate Women's Meeting when I joined Friends though I believe it has often served a useful purpose. It has enabled women to learn and exercise skills in a way which would not have been possible in the wider world or in mixed company. At first these Women's Meetings were established to take responsibility for Friends in need or those in prison; later when Business Meetings for women and men were formalised women were given extra responsibilities related to welfare, education, employment, marriage and the behaviour and membership of women Friends in some cases. Men's Meetings tended to carry responsibility for matters of finance, property and disownment, though there were many variations.¹⁵ From Margaret Fell and her daughter Sarah, who was a bookkeeper, onwards women had learned to handle finances through control of the Women's Meeting accounts. In London in 1671

The Box Meeting. . . was composed entirely of women and got its peculiar name from the fact that it gathered money into a box and disbursed it for the relief of the poor and needy. . . It met once a week and was not accountable to any other body.¹⁶

William Penn actually borrowed £300 from the London Women's Meeting to help establish the colony of Pennsylvania.¹⁷

In a brief history of Friends in Australia. Charles Stevenson described the early Monthly Meeting of Women Friends in Melbourne from 1862 to 1875 as a 'cumbersome duplication'.¹⁸ But was it? Everything I have read of early women Friends and particularly those involved in reform movements leads me to conclude that in working together women gained strength and freedom to act in a way never entirely possible in mixed groups. Towards the end of her long and active life, Lucretia Mott suggested to the American Women's Rights Movement that separate meetings were better if much was to be achieved.¹⁹ Interestingly some women Friends today talk of women's groups again. In such groups they could be free to define their own needs and ideals and proceed to fulfil them.

My own experience working with women and in mixed groups leaves me in no doubt at all. It is difficult for women to express themselves freely in the company of men, especially if they are struggling to discover and establish their

own identity. One problem is that they are often not taken seriously in mixed meetings; their contributions are regarded as chatter. At a Council of Churches meeting in Canberra some years ago where the question of discrimination against women was being discussed, many of the men were either not listening, i.e. chattering amongst themselves, or they regarded it all with amused tolerance. Our late Friend David Hodgkin rose to ask why it was that such discussions provoked amusement; 'would we respond to questions of racial discrimination in that way?' he asked.

There is further a widespread belief, often asserted, that women speak too much. After the first enthusiastic wave of Quakerism in the 17th century, 'the seed-sowing time' when there was much openness to new ideas, signs of conformity began to emerge. Amongst other things this began to mean less freedom for women. Huber gives two examples of this: at Wandsworth in 1695 one Elizabeth Redford encouraged Friends to withhold taxes that would support the current war. Subsequently she was threatened with disownment because her judgement contravened that of the male ministers. Then in 1701 the men at London Meeting decided that women ministers were taking up too much time and that in future if they wanted to speak they would have to leave their names at the central office.²⁰ But do women really speak more or is that just the perception of the powerful? In mixed company, in classrooms, in discussion groups and in meetings it has been found that women are never heard to the same extent as men.²¹

Again, my own experience confirms this. During a faculty meeting to discuss a programme of affirmative action for women the following motion was put:

that care be taken to enable women to be heard to the same extent as men especially where oral participation forms part of the assessment.

This proposal, which was one of eight, had been formulated by a group of women concerned about discrimination against women staff and students at the university. Women students in one department had complained that tutorial participation counted for 30% of their assessment and that they were simply not able to make themselves heard in mixed classes. This particular motion came at the end of a long debate during which each motion had been moved, seconded and spoken to by a woman. It was introduced by its mover with the announcement that she had had a stop-watch on the whole debate and, 'despite the very special nature of this meeting, male speakers had taken up more time than women! The question of one's perception was also brought home to me by male students

complaining from time to time that too much time was taken up in Politics lectures with discussions of women; these lectures are taped and playbacks revealed that never more than ten minutes out of a sixty-minute lecture was devoted to the topic of women.

There is another aspect to Stevenson's reference to the Women's Meeting as a 'cumbersome duplication'. Why is it that the Men's Meeting did not constitute the cumbersome duplication? It did not and for the very reason that the Men's Meeting constituted the norm, the reality, and therefore it had the power to decide whether a women's meeting would exist or not,²² just as the London men decided whether women should even be heard. It is still the case in our society that men's activities are seen as the real activities and women's are real only insofar as they duplicate men's or are accepted by men. Women know that it is real praise to be told that they have argued just like a man, and that it is shameful to be told that they behaved just like a woman. And yet, as we discover our foremothers and define our own reality we can do more than just deplore our past exclusion, or rage about oppression, we can

vindicate the insights of this alternative tradition and use it to reshape' and enlarge the vision and life of. . . today.²³

III

My first experience of a new vision came about through anger. It is devastating to discover how little control we have over the shape of things even as they affect us directly, and how often we are regarded as lesser, or indeed disregarded altogether. Even the very language excludes us, in the church, the media, at work and in official documents. History has excluded us, language has excluded us, wherever there is power apparent in the society, women are not; women are poor and work hard and they suffer. Women are raped; it is not safe for women to walk alone; women are asked to raise children and then asked to persuade them and other men to be killed and to kill. Women are asked to be moral and to impart morals to others and then we are blamed for social immorality. It is our fault when there are no jobs for the young, our fault when men are tempted, and our fault when children go astray.²⁴

An anger erupts which leads to rejection, rejection of men, of their works and of their ways. It is not womanly to be angry! Only frustrated women reject men! But who has defined womanly? Who has defined frustration? Who said that when a woman of the nineteenth century took to her bed after her seventh and stillborn child that she was hysterical rather than sane? The early Friends knew about defining their own world, rejecting in anger the ways of church and king, and they were made to suffer for it by those who had power, just as the wise women called witches suffered at the hands of those in power; Friends defied the law as fast as those in power defined it. Once Penn asked a woman on trial for witchcraft if she had ridden through the air on a broomstick; when she replied in the affirmative he said he knew of no law against riding on a broomstick and ordered her discharge.²⁵ It would make a wonderful motto for feminists: 'There is no law against riding on a broomstick, so let's fly'.

And fly we did and do, but in company. The company of other women is important both as a source of strength and as a base from which to act even when I am alone. It validates me. My first company was a group of women from a variety of churches, a Commission on the Status of Women formed by some who were angry about what the more orthodox churches were doing to women. Together we explored women's liberation and the church, only to find that of all the patriarchal institutions the church was the most oppressive. We were excluded from all that was considered of importance. We filled the pews but we were not giving communion; we taught the children but we were not writing the liturgy or the theology. Where was our experience, our reality, reflected in the institutional and patriarchal presence of the church on earth? Even Quakers were complacent, reflecting the patriarchal society in which they lived. They did not always listen to the promptings of truth and love in our hearts but instead practised the tyranny of politeness. Often their language excluded women.

We explored the language and looked at ways of re-writing it to make it more inclusive. Language is a powerful tool; we have only to look at the disadvantages suffered by those in our society who do not speak the dominant language to realise what power language has. Language is history and dictionaries are one kind of history book. They allow us to discover in what way dominant peoples have defined language and communicated with each other and how they have promoted ideas. Language reflects the limit of our thoughts and one of the exciting discoveries made in the process of studying language and extending those limits is the discovery of the thought which accompanies that language or which is reflected in it. It is a way of entering the experience of those people who speak it and use it. What we also discovered is that in the Church, the masculine

language used reflects the patriarchal nature of the institution; the language of religion is sexist, it excludes the experience of women.

Let me examine the problems with a concept of God. Because of our language limitations we can only use human analogies to express the concept of God; the 'language' of the spirit is inexpressible, it is an experience, not a conversation. But the theologians, the religious of an earlier time tried to express this experience, and they were men and they expressed it in male terms to reflect their own experience of life. So God became he, or father, or master, or king, or lord and 'his' followers became sons and brethren. The problem is that male persons are also 'he', 'fathers', 'masters', 'kings', 'lords', 'sons', and 'brothers', and an earthly father can easily be confused with a heavenly one, especially when he (the earthly one) seems to have all the power in any given situation. The fact is that the terms used for God reflected a dominant ideology and were also used to promote that ideology. So female terms were the lesser and reflected the situation of females in the society at that time. The goddess, the mother, the queen, the daughter and the sister had much less power or status. Perhaps one of the clearest examples can be found in the concept of the heavenly master, it conjures up all that is powerful. But what of a heavenly mistress or indeed even an earthly one?

Our objections to the patriarchal language of religion were thus twofold, that it did not reflect or include our experience and it appropriated an area of life and language that should belong to everyone. The Bible has been much discussed in this respect, its language criticised and its interpretations called into question. I am not a Biblical scholar but

The masculinity of God and of God language is a cultural and linguistic accident, and I think one should also argue that the masculinity of Christ is one of the same order. To be sure Jesus Christ was a male but that may be no more significant to his being than the fact that presumably his eyes were brown. Incarnation is a great thing. But it strikes me as odd to argue that when the Word became flesh, it was to reinforce male superiority.²⁶

In any case a man cannot be our model but Jesus as a model-breaker may be able to fulfil that role.

The use of 'man' or 'men' to include women also bothered us:

. . . I take the matter of pronouns seriously. To many, such concerns seem trivial or ridiculous. They are not. Language is powerful. 'Generic' man is a real obstacle to the digested understanding and feeling of 'male and female created God them'.²⁷

Indeed when the authorised (King James) version of the Bible was completed in 1611 the Old English sense of man as a person of either sex was already becoming ambiguous,²⁸ and in our own day it is especially so. We are reclaiming and reinterpreting language to include and reflect the experience of women and in the process we regain and reinterpret power, or in other words, ourselves, the world, and our understanding of spirituality. We are discovering that what some have called the correct rules of the game are in fact just reflections of a given society at a given time and that as the society changes so must the so-called correct rules of language as well as of other types of behaviour. That which has been regarded as fixed and immutable is simply oppressive and transitory. And that too is an exciting discovery.

In the process of talking out our shared experience as women we learned to question everything and we learned too to reply to critical statements with searching questions. When told that we simply wanted the best of both worlds we wanted to know who had defined those worlds and the divisions between them; when we were told that the language just as it was included us, we knew it didn't and that if it hindered human becoming then it must be changed and we believed we had the power to change it. Now the incredible temerity and courage of the early Friends²⁹ began to mean something, for indeed they questioned everything they encountered in their 17th century society, including language. Early Friends 'followed the promptings of truth and love in their hearts', they looked to no outside authority! It is no wonder that the most radical of the early feminists emerged from the bosom of the Society, though by that time male Friends often found it hard to accept this challenge to patriarchal authority. Friends too have succumbed to many of the rigidities of a patriarchal world. But I found myself glad that I had grown up with Friends, and the more I learned of the history of Friendly women the more I wanted to know why they didn't appear more frequently in the pages of history books. And why didn't we learn about *them* in Sunday School instead of about the prophets, much of whose advice to women hardly suited our changed and more liberated times? This is historical discrimination against us.

But it is not only the stories told but how they are told. When I read about Caroline Chisholm, the friend and assistant of young female immigrants who came to the Australian Colonies in the middle of last century, she was always portrayed as a pillar of the domestic establishment who trained young women to become good wives, which in turn led to the establishment of proper family life in Australia. Well, that may be so, but Chisholm herself was an adventurer, she defied authority, she went on long journeys on horseback around the outback, camping en route with only a groom for company or protection and what was more, she often left her husband and children behind in order to accomplish her own work as did so many adventurous women Friends. So much depends on who tells such stories and for what purpose. The telling of stories is another important part of the feminist discovery or re-discovery. When as historians of women we began to collect the stories of our foremothers we so often encountered disbelief that anything they had experienced could be of vital importance to us or to history. This disbelief of men and women reflects the opposition and power of the patriarchy which has defined what is important.

Questions, interpretations and symbols. Friends have always rejected symbols and words are only symbols for meaning. If the meaning of those words is dead it is time we rejected them. When I read in the Quaker Advices and Queries to 'live in love as Christian Brethren' I do not feel spoken to, I feel excluded. For I have found in feminism that I am a sister, not a brother, a daughter, not a son, and as a feminist I know the old values to be painful and I cannot be passive or take part in what Adrienne Rich calls 'this culture of manipulated passivity'.³⁰ Passivity is the other side of passion, it is passion smothered, creativity suppressed. But it is only in creativity that I can act and be, that my energy can be released to reflect the goddess within me.

Bruno Bettelheim³¹ wrote of a group of prisoners, docile robots, lined up to enter the gas chamber in a concentration camp. The commanding officer is told that one of the women had been a dancer and he orders her to dance for him. As she danced, she approached him, seized his gun and shot him. She was immediately shot and killed but

Isn't it probable that despite the grotesque setting in which she danced, dancing made her once more a person? Dancing she was singled out as an individual, asked to perform in what had once been her chosen vocation. No longer was she a number, a nameless depersonalised prisoner, but the dancer she used to be. Transformed, however momentarily, she responded like her old self, . . . exercising

the lost freedom that not even the concentration camp could take away - to decide how one wishes to think and feel about the conditions of one's life - this dancer threw off her real prison. . . she was willing to risk her life to achieve autonomy.³²

And what a risk that is for women. We have apparently everything to lose - support, protection, familiar friends, lovers, children, parents, long held notions, agreed definitions, the praise for doing the right thing, the acceptance for behaving as expected, demanded, defined, manipulated. . . And how guilty women feel when we begin to question our allotted role; how to be good daughters, mothers, sisters, lovers and find our own way, we ask? And will he still love me if I do? Probably the answer is no, and not only that but you will be left with nothing that is sure:

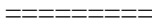
Becoming who we are requires the existential courage to confront the experience of nothingness.³³

At the university I teach women who are bright and intelligent, exciting women who have enormous potential but many of whom are crippled; they tell me they are stupid, they shouldn't be there, they can't cope, the children or grandchildren or parents or husbands need them. They put up with the most amazing range of insults from men and boys who so often regard them as objects, or disregard them altogether. If the women become angry they are called strident or aggressive, in the same situation men are called strong and powerful. 'We don't want to upset the men', these good women say, and allow themselves to be hurt over and over again until they either start re-discovering themselves or give up altogether, and that makes me angry.

Where is your sense of proportion, people ask, your sense of humour? Now these are curious attributes when one reflects on them. A sense of proportion merely relates to how much energy one chooses to allocate to different interests and ideas. Some women have spent twenty years or more denying themselves and are accused of losing their sense of proportion if they spend a day a week guiltily seeking to discover their own needs, and they are expected to laugh about it as well. However, there is nothing amusing about oppression and in particular, there is nothing amusing about the way in which we have been and are constantly forced into a culture which is not our own.

But the gains from taking a risk are enormous. Women are capable of everything and the joy of this discovery amongst us as we work together to

recover our history, our life and our loving is incredible. Our revolution is the festival of the oppressed and its reward is the ongoing celebration of awareness.



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21. Dale Spender, *Learning to Lose*, passim.
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