

Feminist Follies: Facing Facts at Fifty

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"I certainly wouldn't want your life." This unsolicited pronouncement by one author's stay-at-home mother is the theme of the following mid-life reflection on feminism. After decades of living and defending the feminist ideals of the 1970s, over and against the traditional gender model of our upbringing, we are forced to concede that our mothers may, indeed, have had better lives.

Underlying the following critique is the recognition that life proceeds on two levels, the realm of ideals on the one hand, and realities on the other. Some people invest time and effort in the pursuit of imagined perfection, for example, egoless love, world peace, and—significant here—gender equity.

These quests take place amidst undeniable human shortcomings, conflicts, and injustices. If things were as they should be, dedication to ideals would be rewarded by the actualization of expected benefits. But often dreamers find themselves isolated and misunderstood in a society that refuses to change. Eventually visions must be assessed in the glare of reality. In this essay, we call attention to the empirical consequences of dedication to feminist ideals. We hope, thereby, to move beyond political correctness to an honest dialog about the gap between feminist promises and social facts.

We have been colleagues at our university for over a decade. Although from opposite sides of the country, with dissimilar personalities, and in very different fields (Wilson in economics, Kwilecki in religious studies), we discovered striking similarities in our lives. As young women, each of us chose to follow the feminist path to fulfillment, with parallel results in professional and personal life. We cultivated our strengths, self-consciously deviated from traditional female roles (perfectly enacted by our mothers), demanded equity and partnership with men, and expected thereby to attain satisfactions unprecedented for our gender.

Neither of us burned our bras, joined NOW, or specialized in women's studies. Rather, our feminism was the more insidious kind that shapes ambitions. We sought nothing less than excellence in a male-dominated profession. The possibility of compromising our objectives for traditional female satisfactions never occurred to us. It would be decades before we realized the impact of our choices.

In our late twenties, we earned our doctorates at prestigious universities. Tenured in our thirties, we accumulated a record of publications in reputable journals. We have performed the full range of university services and are assessed by students as highly effective teachers. We have managed mortgages, car loans and retirement funds—and know how to operate a power drill. From all

appearances, we have actualized the feminist ideals of self-determination and career accomplishment.

However, as they say, you can't judge a book by its cover. Facing fifty, we find ourselves ostracized and disinherited by our natal families, approaching old age without the support of spouses or children, and unrecognized and wounded at work. If only one of us were in this boat, she might consider herself unlucky.

However, we believe these circumstances are the natural, albeit unintended, consequences of feminist self-cultivation. Just as it is no accident that career accomplishments followed from youthful feminist commitments, neither are these common mid-life disappointments coincidental. Whatever satisfactions may come from being a self-sufficient, intelligent woman, the other side of the coin is life as a stray female, scrounging around for scraps of social reinforcement. We will address the discrepancy between the promises and products of feminism in three areas of life: family, romance and work.

The family fools

Feminist fantasy. We considered ourselves brave explorers, pushing beyond our homemaker mothers and female siblings. Any woman, we reasoned, could marry and have children. We aspired to a higher standard, and for this we expected the admiration of our natal families, particularly our mothers. We took for granted the same financial and emotional support as our siblings.

Facts. Instead, we were ostracized. Our mothers, whose approval we desperately craved, seemed to have no conception of, let alone appreciation for, the lives we

chose. When one of us excitedly

showed her PhD diploma to her mother, the latter promptly tossed it aside, declaring "a lot of good that'll do you." The other author, complaining to her mother about the burdens of chairing a factious personnel committee, was told, "Oh, I know what you mean. When I chaired the grade mothers, they fought over what kind of cookies to serve at the Christmas party."

For both of us, reports of tenure and publications were greeted with only a fraction of the joy and enthusiasm elicited by a grandchild's B in math. Our parents have repeatedly given extravagant gifts, financial and otherwise, to our siblings, while despite our similar needs and equal or better fulfillment of family obligations, we went empty-handed. One of us is slated to receive a smaller inheritance because she has no children.

Their dispensation of sympathy, praise and assistance suggests that our parents rank us beneath siblings with spouses and children. This, we believe, is not irrational favoritism, but rather a natural classification of offspring



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wherein those who generate traditional families are favored over "spinsters." We were wrong to expect feminism to alter this universal prejudice. Nearing fifty, we find ourselves left holding the "Old Maid" card—according to the rules of the childhood game, losers.

The fictional fellows of feminism

Feminist fantasy. In the traditional gender order, single childless women were pitied as victims or failures. Feminism, however, made marriage and motherhood options, indeed, potential dangers to fulfillment. Aside from physical intimacy, we didn't really need men. Still, relationships were allowed—with successful professional men attracted to an accomplished equal. We envisioned ourselves riding alongside these Prince Charmings on our own horses, off into the sunset of equally shared housework, child rearing, and fiscal responsibility. We would attract men not with our looks, but with our intelligence and achievements.

Facts. We need men and sometimes fall in love. But feminism has not significantly changed the game of romance. Still, to attract men, women must brush their hair, not brush up their resumes; eyeliner pencils, not wits, must be sharpened. How many men seek feminist partners? On a dating Website we surveyed, a number of them, listing qualities they considered *undesirable* in a woman, named "assertiveness"—a feminist mandate. Feminism seems to destroy female habits of mind, ingrained over millennia, still necessary to keep a man. Our experiences are revealing.

Initially, we sought the Fictional Fellows of Feminism. We met our fair share of successful, available professional men. However, in the end, they preferred women who were willing to follow them selflessly—a capacity we, as feminists, had lost. Both of us have ended engagements or marriage when forced to choose between becoming homemakers (in the words of one author's husband, "being a wife") or full-time professionals.

Men less educated and professionally successful than ourselves resented our achievements. They became uncommunicative and nervous when we related our personal histories centered on career pursuits or conversed about our work. Subterranean resentments inevitably erupted, from subtle insults to our intelligence to the blatant accusation, "you think you know everything because you have a PhD." Thus, again, we faced a choice—be ourselves and lose the relationship, or preserve it by assuming a false identity.

Eventually, tired of being alone, we experimented with suppressing the feminist persona we had assiduously cultivated. For intelligence and self-confidence, we substituted home cooked meals, Victoria's Secret lingerie and fake incompetence. Recently, on a first date, when asked her educational background, one author mumbled, "a PhD," adding apologetically, "degrees don't really count." From his unmistakable wince, she correctly predicted there would be no second date.

Our more enduring relationships have been with men at the opposite end of the spectrum from the Fictitious

Fellows of Feminism. "What do you mean, he doesn't have a job?" our mothers queried. "You're not coming for Thanksgiving because out-of-state travel violates his parole?" Despite the PhD phobia, these men moved in; while waiting for us to come home from work, cook dinner and don our lingerie, they watched TV and chatted with other women on the internet. We wouldn't have minded being the breadwinners; feminism had prepared us for this. Eventually, however, unable to tolerate financial dependence on a woman, these men left.

We can't help comparing ourselves unfavorably with our mothers and sisters whose traditional femininity won them enduring financial and emotional support from decent men. Who, we have to ask, is "empowered," that is, realizes her objectives in relationships with men? Contrary to the 1970s expectation, men still prefer submissiveness to self-assertion, adoration to acumen, in women.

The feminist fantasy of fame and fortune

Feminist fantasy. Above all, feminism promised a satisfying professional life—in higher education, unlimited growth in a community devoted to intellectual achievement. The demonstration of competence would earn respect. Gender discrimination? Not in academics, the vanguard of progress. But should it occur, other women would rally 'round.

Facts. When we met, one of us had recently won a bloody battle for tenure and the other had begun one—this, despite the fact that each of us well exceeded minimal university requirements. University politics shattered our naive faith that honoring and achieving academic ideals would be rewarded. Prudence prevents disclosure of the particulars in each case. Suffice it to say, that in both

instances, problems began when we failed to meet colleagues' (gender-related, we believe) expectations of mediocrity and passive conformity. We excelled and spoke out—and were nearly destroyed for it.

In both cases, the character assaults, malice and concerted efforts to remove us from our positions were outrageous enough to cause administrators to solicit outside mediation. It seems doubtful that such tactics of intimidation would have been deployed against a male colleague; the perpetrators apparently assumed that, frightened and helpless, we would simply give up. We didn't. Tenure was a Pyrrhic victory.

Each of us continues to experience the floating contempt of those disappointed by our survival. Moreover, the hope of support from female colleagues was dashed. Indeed, other women sided against us, exhibiting stereotypical female jealousy, backstabbing, and cunning.

The fad and the future

The feminism of the 1970s must now be assessed in light of its fruits in the lives of women who embraced it. Having done so unconditionally, we provide unambiguous cases. Are we, as feminists, better off than our moth-



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ers? As young women, they gave birth to children; our labor produced doctoral dissertations. They pleased husbands; we must satisfy administrators and editors. They followed recipes; we publish research. They cleaned their houses; we do too—and pay the mortgage. They face old age with familial support; we dread dying alone. Clearly, both paths require self-sacrifice and struggle. Either can be pursued heroically.

However, all things considered—and maybe we're just tired—we both have fantasies of swapping textbooks for cookbooks, the title of "Dr." for "Mrs.," and committee meetings for Tupperware parties. The traditional female exchange of independence for security, the deal our mothers brokered, seems like a bargain. Venturing alone into the jungle when we could have stayed by the hearth—what were we thinking?

What can we salvage of our youthful feminism? We would like to believe that the gender revolution we helped initiate progresses today. However, while there have been improvements in employment opportunities for women, the more difficult and critical task of changing gender perceptions seems to have been abandoned.

Our parents' generation and male peers continue to operate on traditional assumptions; apparently so does the upcoming generation. From informal classroom surveys and advising, most students embrace the gender roles of the 1950s. Young women limit career plans to a few years after college, ultimately seeking a man who will provide a diamond engagement ring, a new last name, and financial support for themselves and their children. As full-blown feminists, we find ourselves in a small, aging minority, holding a sputtering torch that no one wants to carry forward. Like the Charleston or the Twist, the feminism of the 1970s resembles a fad more than a revolution.

On the positive side, notwithstanding the failures of the feminist movement, we still maintain that women are as capable as men in every important arena. Quite clearly, behind this essay lies personal outrage that full-time pursuit of a career means sweeping sacrifices men do not have to make. We have evolved from fad-followers to life-long principled advocates of equity, a worthy ideal despite failed implementation. Whatever the reality, women are entitled to cultivate themselves as men have, without social penalty. As we inch toward the grave, we tell ourselves that self-determination is better than security. We have contributed to the world of ideas and the critical task of educating the young, *creating*, as opposed to *inheriting*, a path to fulfillment.

As pioneers, we have survived blizzards, getting stuck in the mud and losing the map. Stronger for the adventure, we nevertheless find ourselves far short of the Golden West, doubtful that anyone will ever reach it. Maybe the time has come to slaughter the sacred cow and get rid of the bull. *Feminists* need to engage in constructive revision, replacing fantasies with facts. Conservative Christians have pronounced feminism unwise and unworkable. Other than throwing in the towel, what are our options?

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