

from Sojourner Truth to Shirley Chisholm

by Betty Seiden

I am delighted to participate in a seminar on the feminist movement because I see our major problem in today's world as being not one of technology and space exploration but of understanding human beings and meeting human needs so any attempt to raise our consciousness about this human experience that we all share is a good thing. I was surprised to get a call requesting that I speak. Being quite absorbed in my responsibilities as teacher-in-charge of an educational program for pregnant high school girls, the question came immediately to mind, has there been any change in either the number of teen age pregnancies or in the career expectations of our students in the past few years? Planned Parenthood has been working hard on Prevention Programs through rap sessions. Surveys among college graduates show more serious career plans. The answer followed close upon the question--there has been no change. But that is to be expected. The militancy of most movements, The Feminist Movement, The Black Liberation Movement, The Indian Movement and The Gay Liberation Movement leaves many people unmoved and unaffected. Most potential beneficiaries of any liberation movement are more threatened and embarrassed by the extreme actions that seem necessitated by public apathy than they are inspired by the promise of enlarged opportunities. For example, when I mentioned to our school nurse that I might attend a conference on the Feminist Movement she asked "why do they burn their bras? She went on to say "I've always been liberated. I don't need to be liberated." That led me to ask then "Why didn't you become a doctor instead of a nurse?" She was taken aback to realize that it would have been easier to raise her family had she been a doctor. Despite the long history of the Feminist Movement most women still avoid fields of business, math, science and law. They are expected to become secretaries instead of lawyers, hygienists instead of dentists, nurses instead of doctors, and teachers instead of architects. To be fair to women however, we should point out that most men also avoid the rigors of professional responsibility and decision-making. There are many more men wasted on Skid Row than women. We would be deceiving ourselves too if we believed that men actually make the decisions that affect our lives. You all may have heard about the man who claimed his wife made all the small, unimportant decisions like where the family would live and who their friends would be while he made all the big, important decisions like whether President Nixon should be impeached. I suspect many members of Congress vote as their wives suggest. Some of the members of the academic community might recognize this job description:

The Dean

Leaps tall buildings in a single bound, is more powerful than a locomotive, is faster than a speeding bullet, walks on water, gives policy to God.

The Department Head

Leaps short buildings in a single bound, is more powerful than a switch engine, is just as fast as a speeding bullet, walks on water if the sea is calm, talks with God.

Professor

Leaps short buildings with a running start and favorable winds, is almost as powerful as a switch engine, is slower than a speeding bullet, walks on water in an indoor swimming pool, talks with God if special request is approved.

Associate Professor

Barely clears a Quonset hut, loses tug of war with locomotive, can fire a speeding bullet, swims well, is occasionally addressed by God.

Assistant Professor

Makes high marks on the wall when trying to clear tall buildings, is run over by a locomotive, can sometimes handle a gun without inflicting self injuries, dog paddles, talks to animals.

Graduate Student

Runs into buildings, recognizes locomotive two times out of three, is not issued ammunition, can stay afloat with a life jacket, talks to walls.

Undergraduate

Falls over doorstep when trying to enter buildings, says, "look at the choc-choc," wets himself with a water pistol, plays in mud puddles, mumbles to himself.

Department Secretary

Lifts buildings and walks under them, kicks locomotives off the tracks, catches speeding bullets in teeth and eats them, freezes water with a single glance, she is God.

Enough said on that point. It is often pointed out that the Feminist Movement is a white, middle class movement and certainly it was when John Stuart Mill stood in the House of Commons in 1867 to propose an amendment to the reform bill enfranchising women. And it is still a fairly accurate description today. Who else has the time to be involved? Color and class have much less to do with it than education and leisure. A few educated women were the first to challenge the position of women and their traditional roles of wife and mother. If the choice is between managing the home and taking a menial and monotonous job there's a much more challenging satisfaction in home management. Any movement requires time and energy whether one has the secure leisure of being in a position of not having to work for a living or whether one suffers the enforced leisure of being denied access to the job market. In 19th century America middle class women came together to realize their inequality when they formed abolitionist groups in the north and west. They were not without support from some slaves who had

escaped their servitude. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony and Francis Gage in their History of Woman Suffrage (Vol I pp115-117) give an account of one such former slave:

"When the leaders of a women's rights convention in May, 1851, saw a tall, gaunt black woman march toward the speaker's platform they did not know what to expect. Sojourner Truth, mother and former New York slave, had listened to male speakers state that women need not be given rights since they were mentally inferior to men. At her first word there was a profound hush, she spoke in deep tones, which though not loud, reached every ear in the house, and away through the throng at the doors and windows. "Well, children, where there is so much racket there must be something out of kilter...what's all this talking about? That man over there said that women need to be helped into carriages and lifted over ditches and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages or over mud puddles or gives me the best place." And raising herself to her full height and her voice to a pitch like rolling thunder she asked: "And ain't I a Woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! (And she bared her right arm to the shoulder showing her tremendous muscular power.) I have ploughed and planted and gathered into barns and no man could head me!

And ain't I a woman? I would work as much and eat as much as a man when I could get it--and bear the lash as well! And ain't I a woman? I have borne 13 children and seen them most all sold off to slavery and when I cried out with my mother's grief none but Jesus heard me! And ain't I a woman? Then they talk about this thing in the head, what they call it? (Intellect, whispered someone near) that's it, honey. What's that got to do with woman's rights. If my cup won't hold but a pint and yours holds a quart, wouldn't you be mean not to let me have my little half measure full?" And she pointed her significant finger and sent a keen glance at the minister who had made the argument. The cheering was loud and long. "Then that little man in black there, he say women can't have as much rights as men because Christ wasn't a woman. Where did your Christ come from?" Rolling thunder ~~couldn't have~~ couldn't have stilled that crowd as did those deep wonderful tones, as she stood there with outstretched arms and eyes of fire. Raising her voice still louder she repeated, "Where did your Christ come from? From God and a woman! Man had nothing do to with Him."

She ended by asserting, "If the first woman God ever made was strong enough to turn the world upside down all alone these women together (and she glanced here eye over the platform) ought to be able to turn it back and get it right side up again! And now they are asking to do it, the men better let them." Long continued cheering greeted this. Amid roars of applause she returned to her corner, leaving more than one of us with streaming eyes and hearts beating with gratitude. She had taken us up in her strong arms and carried us safely over the slough of difficulty turning the whole tide in our favor."

The suffragets, however, both here and in England, watched the working man get the vote, the former slave get the vote, the recent immigrant get the vote---all men, of course. And they felt humiliated to the point of wishing to deny their argument for equal rights.

Many of them fought the 14th and 15th amendments because those amendments failed to include women in the rights of citizens to vote. There was something prophetic in Sojourner Truth's words because it was at the end of World War I when women had taken over so many of the jobs formerly held by men that the right to vote was finally won.

From Sojourner Truth's day to this, one important difference has persisted between the Afro-American sub-culture and the general American culture. This is the amount of job discrimination, especially against males. Male unemployment is a much more important contribution to Momahan's description of the matriachal family than the institution of slavery ever was. Although more jobs have opened up in the last few years than were dreamed of only 20 years ago, it is still a fact that unemployment among males in the black community is more than twice that of the white community. White collar jobs and skilled labor have been slow to drop racial barriers, especially in the world of business, finance, plumbing and electricity. The result has been that a much higher proportion of women have held jobs. At least one-third of the households in the Afro-American community are headed by women. Another result is that since the doors to managerial and skilled laboring jobs were closed, more minority members have sought professional careers, including women. Consequently, the proportion of black women who are dentists, doctors, lawyers and ministers is much higher than the proportion of white women who are professionals. In summary there is a large number of working women in the black community--mothers, grandmothers, and single women--many of them professional, but most of them at the bottom of the pay scale. It is shameful that the plumber who comes in to repair your toilet can make \$50 an hour after hours and on weekends (25 dollars), he also has paid vacations, a health plan and retirement benefits while the lady who comes in to clean your bathroom gets \$2 an hour, no paid vacation, no health plan and what happens to her when she retires? According to Sylvia Porter 35 million American women are in the labor force, 45 percent of the total female population over the age of 16. Yet, four out of five of these women are confined to the bottom rungs of the job and pay ladders--as sales, clerical, domestic workers and the like. American women today hold only two in five professional and technical jobs, and the proportion of the female labor force holding such jobs annually has been declining. Moreover, women who do hold professional and technical jobs earn only 68% of the amounts men earn in these work categories. Women who are clerical workers earn only 63% of the amounts men earn. Today, in 1974, a female college graduate earns on the average little more than a male who has not gone past elementary school. Women now fill only 22.5% of the country's 255,000 full time college and university faculty positions and their pay averages \$2500 less per year than the average amount paid to male faculty members.

Only 2% of the engineers are women. Four per cent of the architects are women. One out of 20 of our lawyers and judges is a woman. Fewer than one in 10 of our physicians is a woman. The justification for the wage difference is supposed to be that women are only supplementing the family income, but the facts are that 60% of the women working are single, divorced, widowed or have husbands

who would have to support their family on incomes less than \$7000. More than one out of five households is headed by a woman, one out of three in the Afro-American community, and the median income of those families is less than half the median for families headed by men. These are the reasons why the Feminist Movement should not be only a white middle class movement. Any such tyranny works against the public good. Because we have all been acculturated to believe that men must be the breadwinner, take care of his family, be a good provider, etc. Afro-American women have been more concerned about their sons and husbands being able to fulfill that manly role. What my students want out of life is a husband with a good job, and that fact is not likely to change.

One of the most remarkable and inspirational sights in this decade was to see on the platform of a political convention a woman who was not standing behind or beside her husband, smiling and basking in his glory. She stood alone, unbossed and unbought, as a candidate for the Presidency of the United States. From Sojourner Truth to Shirley Chisholm the road has been long, rough and sparsely traveled. A few doors have opened a crack and too few have attempted to enter. At this historical time it seems important for the Feminist Movement to do two things:

1. Encourage and listen to the voices of dissent and apathy.
2. UnitE in a common cause.

Critics are important to any movement because they force one to sharpen one's thinking and clarify one's goals. It would be a mistake for the Feminist Movement to inadvertently belittle the mothering role. There's no job more important than raising children, and somebody has to do it. And some people enjoy doing it! More power to them. I'm not saying it's important because the world needs more children, far from it. But it does need children who will grow up to be kind, responsible, responsive and sensitive adults. In other words the time to prevent crime, delinquency, suicide and mental illness is during the first five years of life, not after the first symptoms of social disorganization appear. The time to worry about the prevalence of violence is when you first smack that 2 year old's hand and thereby teach him that might makes right. Mothering, or I should say parenting, is so vital a role that preparation for it should be part of the high school curriculum along with history, science and math. Our society's not in such critical need of women lawyers and doctors that a woman need apologize for being "just a housewife". At the same time no girl should grow up believing that she must fulfill her biological potential for motherhood. The value is not in the choice itself but in the freedom to choose. For example, I am less concerned about the masculine implications of words like chairman and spokesman than I am about the negative connotations of words like spinster and old maid. If we pity the spinster and despise the housewife we limit girls' choices as much as if we deny their entrance to law school. If we label one choice as good and one choice as bad we have limited freedom to make a choice. So, listen to the critics, clarify goals. What does the world need and what kind of world do we want?

Any change for the betterment of humankind requires more than cooperation, fellowship and coalitions. An ideal society requires

unification of all toward a common purpose. Any one's movement then can become everyone's movement--not just Gays for Gay Lib, Blacks for Black Lib, Women for Women's Lib but Humans for Human Liberation. If we were not so ethnocentric we could look at some other societies, both past and present where the inequities and the violence that exist today were/are not so prevalent. In Sweden, for example, the whole country is committed to equality of opportunity. Boys take homemaking, girls take shop and the school texts do not reflect the rigid sex roles that we are accustomed to. In the Soviet Union education is free to everybody and not just for either those who can pay or those who cannot. In China young people are selected to be educated to serve their people by their ability and dedication. Congress' move yesterday to equalize public school education facilities and curriculum may be a move in the right direction. Right now we are all competing like rival siblings. Affirmative action programs open the doors for some while they close the doors to others. It's not fair. We can close our eyes to sex, race, age and income and open the doors to ability and interest. That is fair because our goal is good doctors and dedicated lawyers, be they male, female, black, white, brown, yellow, red, pink, poor, gifted, or gay. If we can ever see ourselves as part of one human family we can save the world. Perhaps we can paraphrase what John Donne said 350 years ago "Any man or Woman's oppression oppresses me because I am involved in human kind. And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee."