

A Historic Distortion

HOWARD G. MATSON

*Some thoughts on childhood, feminism,
and the great universal awakening
that can heal our tortured planet*

These days I find myself doing what so many older folk do: reflecting on childhood. This contemplation of one's personal history resembles the way a nation or culture benefits from glancing back into its history; it explains what we are and how we got that way. As for myself, I realize now what I did not know then—that my parents were quite young and somewhat lost in a new country and culture. From the beauty of southern Sweden, the crowded Bronx was quite a change. I, too, was in a sort of never-never land—a smart kid who knew all the answers to all the world's problems, baffled by the old-fashioned ways of my parents. "Reaming out" your child for flunking exams not yet taken as a sort of preventive medicine seemed strange to me. There were other problems, too. In high school, I was embarrassed by my parents' old-fashioned dress. When my Uncle Al attended my high-school graduation, he came with shirt and collar stud but no collar! It would not bother me now, but it did then. Yet, in all this distress, I knew

one thing—that my parents loved me and I loved them.

In later years I have learned what was missing in my mother's "sermons." She always reminded me how hard my father worked, but she never mentioned how hard *she* worked. The thought never occurred to her—or if it did, she repressed it. True, she did say, "A woman's work is never done," but she accepted this as a law of nature. It never occurred to her that it was male domination. Nor did I think it strange, either. I knew my mother scrubbed the dentist's floor to pay for work on my teeth, but this was a natural part of mother-love. It was my father who was out there making the sacrifices.

This psychological blindness followed me into my youth. When I went to Harvard Theological School on a scholarship, I mailed my laundry home for my mother to do. This was during the Great Depression. I did not think of myself as an exploiter of women—it was just something that mothers did naturally.

Something else never occurred to me during the years I spent at Harvard, from 1929 to 1932. Not once did I think it

unusual that there were no women students or faculty around. It seems incredible now that I did not notice their absence: after all, women make up half of the human race!

Ellen Goodman is my favorite columnist. She recently attended her class reunion at Harvard. She was in the first class that included women at Harvard College. At the time, she felt at the margin of things. To her surprise, she felt the same way at her class reunion. She found it difficult to shake off the feeling of invading man's dominion.

I majored in ancient history at Harvard. I listened to the great scholars of the day speak on Sumerian, Assyrian, Egyptian, Babylonian, Phoenician, and Old Testament times—the religions and civilizations of the Fertile Crescent. I also studied the New Testament with its

Greek and Roman background. I recall my orals on the New Testament. The trick was to get the examining faculty arguing among themselves as to Pauline or Petrine influence. If you could get Arthur Darby Nock and Kir-sopp Lake arguing with James Hardy Ropes on Paul's or Peter's influence, you could sit back and relax for a pleasant twenty minutes of the hour-long oral.

It has been only recently that I have understood what was missing in the teachings of these great scholars. I discovered this from contemporary feminist historians—especially Gerda Lerner. What was missing was a full accounting of the submerged history of women. Women continually make history—yet much of it was and is ignored, and the rest misinterpreted. The result is distortion. For instance, it had been assumed that the appearance of private property was the reason for the early enslavement of women. But when feminist historians began taking into account the linguistic, archaeological, and anthropological evidence, they discovered that the process actually worked the other way around: it was the early enslavement of women which gave rise to private property. This also led to the concept that some men could be enslaved, too. Male scholarship has often confused the biological differences of the sexes with gender roles, but we have increasingly found that the nurturing of children is often a cultural concept rather than a biological one. In Sweden today, for instance, laws have been passed in many vocational areas permitting both men and women to take fully paid leave in order to carry out the early processes of child nurturing.

The historic depth of this distortion is the reason why so many women—as well as men—do not know that they are being oppressed or marginalized or trivialized. It is the reason my mother did not know that she was the victim of gender discrimination (as well as why my father and I did not know it). Bringing into the light of day the invisible history of women can be a prelude to the great universal awakening which will heal not only the fractured relationships between men and women but also our tortured planet itself. Gender discrimination varies in different cultures, from the actual enslavement of women that exists in Bangladesh today to the implicit slavery in much of Brazil, to the marginal and even trivial gender discrimination existing in advanced societies like our

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own. I am aware that even the perception of the problem is difficult for many; for others, the obstacles ahead seem almost insurmountable. But we have one thing going for us. The crises of our time—both nuclear and environmental—increasingly present us with an “either/or” choice for our survival: either a change must be made in the way we think about life (and others, and ourselves) or we cease to exist. And I am one who believes that such a shift has already started and that we are on the verge of rapid change.

I want to return to another childhood memory, this time of my father. He was a physically strong man, weatherbeaten from his life at sea. My father was a feminist of sorts, although he would not have accepted that description. It is odd that so many men shy away from it, which in itself is evidence of gender discrimination. My father was a feminist if we define that term as “a facilitator of humane values.” He could not stand domination over others. As supervisor of the channel-rail gang at work, he asked to be reduced to the ranks so as not to be separated from his workmates.

It was my mother who ruled the roost at home. I knew this even as a child. When a car salesman came to the door and asked for my father, I suggested he come another time and ask for my mother. He did so and we soon owned a Model T Ford on the installment plan. The car opened up to us a world outside the Bronx (including the inevitable trip to Niagara Falls). My mother knew her power but never really thought of herself as the head of the family. My father thought he was. Each defined their place as society defined it. I am sure my father felt himself a failure by the standards of the day. That was too bad, as he was a great human being. After his death, I recall walking down Wilshire Boulevard in Los Angeles and suddenly feeling I was my

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father—looking through his eyes and walking on his legs. It was a strange experience. When I read Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, I unexpectedly burst into tears. It was my father I was crying for as much as Willie Loman. I was also crying for myself.


I am convinced that a growing awareness on the part of both women and men as to the common web of their lives—as well as their uniqueness—is the great hope of achieving a sane society. I find this shift occurring in many of the places I have visited recently, such as the Soviet Union and Finland. In the Soviet Union, the fact that Raisa Gorbachev accompanies her husband to most official functions is an important

break with the past. In Finland, my wife and I had dinner with a woman who had just been elected to an important city council position. I asked her the ratio of men to women on the council. She smiled and said, "Now, thirty-four men and thirty-three women." The shift that is occurring in Finland has also been taking place in Norway and Sweden from some years.

I'm aware that, historically, women have held important public and policy-making roles. Queens have occupied thrones, but they have always reigned along patriarchal models. Now, something new is happening. Corazon Aquino has added a feminist perspective to her leadership, even though she has been forced by the fiercely macho military leadership to make some compromises, at least for the present. Prime

Minister Gro Harlem Bruntland of Norway has initiated programs to improve public health practices, the environment, and the status of women and children. And Benazir Bhutto, the Prime Minister of Pakistan, is the first Moslem woman so elected (her face is openly seen on television, a first in itself). In her inaugural address, Bhutto pledged to change the lot of students, workers, and especially women. As she has stated: "In the restoration of free debate . . . minds will automatically switch from guns to books."

That is the kind of shift taking place on many fronts in the world of social relations. Most of these new leaders have global outlooks and place heavy emphasis on the role of the United Nations.

If a united humanity really is emerging, I think the lurch toward nuclear disaster will stop; the national security and covert action mentality will go; our obsession with death will be overcome; and our destruction of forests, oceans, coastlines, and the atmosphere will cease. Instead of dominating others, we will empower them. The prerequisite for this awakening will be the raising of human consciousness. We must become awake to our potential; awake to the joy of empowering others; awake to our own real power. I find this most aptly expressed in the closing lines of Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*: "Only that day dawns to which we are awake. There is more day to dawn. The sun is but a morning star." 

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