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Under the Lids of the Newborn Child, or in Partial Defense of the Humanities (text and audio)

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UNDER THE LIDS OF THE NEWBORN CHILD, OR IN PARTIAL DEFENSE OF THE HUMANITIES

It always seems to me when I am called upon to make a formal presentation at an occasion like tonight that what my real purpose ought to be is to convey a message that is very important to me and one that will be interesting and hopefully significant for the audience I address, and to do so in a manner that is both appealing and original within an amount of time that will do justice to the subject without boring my listeners. All in all, a rather formidable but worthy proposition (and one that has kept me at least mildly preoccupied since last May!) I had heard tales of early requests for titles so that was my first concern (although as it turned out the request didn't come until second semester) and yet one can hardly choose a title for a talk before settling on the content!

A number of years ago, I gave a formal presentation for the Phi Kappa Phi initiation dinner entitled "In Search of Humanity", and then three years ago I gave a presentation for the President's Convocation in the Fall entitled "In Search of Self". I found as I tried to choose a topic for my presentation tonight that what remains fundamentally important to me at this point in my life are the issues raised in those two talks, that is, the effort to define one's self and one's relation to others. I begin to view tonight's talk as the third installment in a kind of trilogy of talks representing my efforts to formally articulate, for my own benefit and that of friends and colleagues, my evolving view of self and other. The title that I initially settled upon was "Why the Humanities?" and I planned to discuss how the study of the humanities has offered me and offers all of us crucial personal insights as we pursue our search for self definition. It also provides us with a better understanding of the cultural tradition that we have inherited as members of Western civilization, a tradition that can enrich our lives enormously.

However, as I began to further develop my thoughts, it became clear to me that while formal study of the humanities certainly does offer this potential, it doesn't

always succeed. And I found myself wanting to share some of my concerns about how we might better integrate humanistic study with individual personal growth and with important social change. As I reflected, I also had to confront the fact that my efforts to define myself are often rendered enormously more difficult by certain aspects of our society, in particular by the male/female dichotomy that pervades our language and culture. I realized that my "search" for self identification and realization involves an almost constant effort to reconcile my own values, needs, and goals with the structures and values of a society that, whether I will or no, serves to shape and often to constrain me and those that I would communicate with and care for.

Tonight's talk, then, as a follow-up to my talk "In Search of Humanity" and my talk "In Search of Self" is a talk about my search, about what I hope will be our common search, for a future society that might offer solutions to current dilemmas and, perhaps most important, a new definition of humanity and society. It is a talk about the problems and potential of the humanities as a source of self knowledge and social change, about the limitations placed on all of us by a gender-bound society, and, finally, about my hopes for a future society that might offer greater possibilities for full self-realization. My hopes are for a future world in which technologies are chosen on the basis of their ability to further human and humane values and in which the word "progress" means human progress, that is, a higher quality of life for humankind in both social and moral terms. My hopes are for a future world in which to be male or female is to be fully human and in which to be human is to fully understand, embrace, and embody the finest of human traits with no gender association.

As I begin my comments this evening, I would like to mention some of the seminal experiences that have occurred since my last presentation, many of which have taken place just within this past year.

The first of these experiences was my participation as a team member in the Freshman Humanities interdisciplinary course subtitled "Self and Society" which I taught with a very dear friend, Jerry Stone. This course was a remarkable experience for me both as a teacher and as a learner. (Indeed, I think one probably remains a good teacher only by continuing to be an open and active learner.) It is in this course that I first taught the poet Adrienne Rich whose work will be a central focus of my talk tonight and whose poem, "The Stranger", provided the first half of the title for tonight's remarks, "under the lids of the newborn child".

Another important experience during the past couple of years has been my participation on the Humanities Task Force as I worked with a small group of colleagues in the humanities to try to reformulate the importance and mission of studies in the humanities here at Wesleyan. This responsibility was followed by my appointment as Director of the Humanities Division, a responsibility which has, of course, caused me to think even further about the role of the humanities both at Illinois Wesleyan and in American society and the relation of the humanities to my own life and definition of self.

Last June I also spent two weeks on the Princeton campus participating in a seminar sponsored by the Woodrow Wilson Fellowship Foundation. The theme of the seminar was "Reinterpreting the Humanities" and it was one of the most intense, most positive intellectual and personal experiences I have had in my adult life. In addition to all of the ideas generated by the workshop and the personal relationships fostered there, I came away particularly impressed by the strong emphasis on values that emerged and was sustained throughout the course of the workshop. We all seemed to agree that we do and must teach students to examine values and to formulate their own sets of values as we teach the humanities and that we are, whether we choose to be or not, models for our students of the value sets we ourselves have chosen to live out.

Last Fall I assumed yet another teaching responsibility as instructor for one of our Freshman Seminar sections. The topic of my seminar was "A Woman's Place: Women and Values in Modern Literature", and many of the thoughts that I will be sharing with you this evening received more coherent shape during my preparations for that course even though the specific issues and themes had been with me for years.

Finally, this past November, I attended a workshop on the "Human Side of High Tech" in Chicago which also stimulated my thinking about society, values, and the humanities and left some very powerful impressions. Of particular importance to me were a session on "Women and the Workplace" and a presentation by Leo Marx, Kennan Professor of American Cultural History at MIT, concerning the notion of progress and our modern tendency to define progress in technological rather than human terms.

I also want to mention here Carol Gilligan's book In a Different Voice which has provided a new structure and perspective for many of the thoughts and feelings I have had for a long time about women and society and particularly about women's behavior and attitudes in relation to others and to moral decision making. Gilligan suggests that there exist two distinct modes of moral reasoning and that men tend to adopt one mode while women tend to adopt the other due to early childhood conditioning that leads us to define self either through connection with or separation from others.

These, then, are the experiences that have led me to where you find me tonight. They have served to further shape my thoughts and values, to help me define who I am and would like to be, what I would most like my students to learn and to value, and how I would hope to change our world.

As a teacher and faculty leader in the humanities, I have become convinced that we must make a greater effort to relate the study of the humanities in meaningful ways to daily human existence and interaction. I fear that, on the contrary, we often fail to live our learning and to help our students do so. We teach them to

analyze the motives and dilemmas of fictional characters in fictional universes but do we help them to transfer that sensitivity and understanding to real life situations and to their fellow human beings? It has also become clear to me that we need to modernize, perhaps to revolutionize the traditional literary canon, that is, the works we choose to revere and to teach to our students. And we need to do so in two significant ways. First, we must revise the canon in order to purge it of prejudices based on gender, class, ethnic, and racial considerations. And second, we must review, revise, reinterpret, and reapply that tradition in relation to modern life and modern social dilemmas. We cannot afford to define the humanities as an intellectual tradition alone, as a collection of the best that has been thought, written, and created, as a sort of cultural "museum". We must bring humanistic values to bear on current social, scientific, and technical issues, problems, and decisions.

And finally, we must actually move beyond the canon; we must recognize it as an expression of what is to some extent a dead and fossilized culture, or, as Adrienne Rich might say, as "a book of myths in which our names do not appear". The new book of myths is one we must write together, in a new language that we have yet to formulate. The alternative is to go through life realizing only half of our human potential and finding even that half diminished in the bargain.

As an educator and as a woman I have seen our modern struggle to recognize, define, and embrace what is wholly human beyond the definitions of what is male and female threaten to turn men against women, women against men, and, what is perhaps most devastating to me personally, women against women. I have lived and worked as a "new" woman, a "liberated" woman, a "professional" woman, the "juggler" par excellence of multi-colored spheres representing personal and professional roles and responsibilities. This new woman is bilingual and bicultural. She speaks male and female and she moves between two worlds. She struggles to function effectively in the dominant "male" culture without betraying her cultural origins and her own voice

and values. She makes no concessions to her motherhood, demanding of herself a complete professionalism. She tries to carve out a management style that is open and honest, one that allows her to be genuinely sensitive and responsive to the needs and concerns of others, but, in doing so, risks being labeled weak, emotional, or indecisive. She nurtures the growth of others but in doing so risks having her time, energy, and concern exploited or being labeled once again as "weak". She responds to these dangers by adding some "toughness" to her style and finds that she has suddenly become "aggressive". And so she agonizes: Has she dared too much and been too bold? Will she be defeated in the end like the once-proud figure in Adrienne Rich's poem "Afterward"? Let me share the poem with you. The "you" in the poem is the woman whose proud hopes have been dashed and who now rejoins her less hopeful, less daring sisters.

Afterward

Now that your hopes are shamed, you stand
at last believing and resigned,
and none of us who touch your hand
know how to give you back in kind
the words you flung when hopes were proud;
being born to happiness
above the asking of the crowd,
you would not take a finger less.
We who know limits now give room
to one who grows to fit her doom.

Has the new woman trusted or mistrusted too much, a question posed in a dialog between a man and a woman that is contained in another Adrienne Rich poem entitled "From an Old House in America".

But can't you see me as a human being
he said.
What is a human being
she said.
I try to understand
he said.
What will you undertake
she said.

Will you punish me for history
he said.
What will you undertake
she said.
Do you believe in collective guilt
he said.
Let me look in your eyes
she said.

Yes, let me look into your eyes.

And yet what are the alternatives to blundering ahead as best one can, stumbling into a half dark future with a flashlight, a de-magnetized compass, and an obsolete map? Certainly going back is no solution, and yet moving forward holds no certain promise either. Adrienne Rich provides us with two powerful images of the sterility and inhumanity of our traditional gender roles in her poems "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers" and "The Knight". The first poem is a brief but eloquent description of an older traditional woman totally dominated by her husband who is referred to only as "Uncle", the universal patriarch. Despite "Uncle's" dominance and her own fear and frailty, Aunt Jennifer nevertheless manages to express an enduring sense of pride and self worth in the needlework she creates.

Aunt Jennifer's Tigers

Aunt Jennifer's tigers prance across a screen,
Bright topaz denizens of a world of green.
They do not fear the men beneath the tree;
They pace in sleek chivalric certainty.

Aunt Jennifer's fingers fluttering through her wool
Find even the ivory needle hard to pull.
The massive weight of Uncle's wedding band
Sit heavily upon Aunt Jennifer's hand.

When Aunt is dead, her terrified hands will lie
Still ringed with ordeals she was mastered by.
The tigers in the panel that she made
Will go on prancing, proud and unafraid.

In the second poem, Rich offers us an unforgettable image of the stereo-typical dominant male as our society has made and entrapped him - "The Knight in Shining Armor". Imprisoned in his armor of apparent invincibility, the male knight cannot show his pain or weakness and must ride boldly into combat again and again until unhorsed in total defeat or released from his armor and restored to human frailty, vulnerability, and emotion by a shift in society's expectations of him that would restore his full humanity.

The Knight

A knight rides into the noon
and his helmet points to the sun,
and a thousand splintered suns
are the gaiety of his mail.
The soles of his feet glitter
and his palms flash in reply,
and under his crackling banner
he rides like a ship in sail.

A knight rides into the noon,
and only his eye is living,
a lump of bitter jelly
set in a metal mask,
betraying rags and tatters
that cling to the flesh beneath
and wear his nerves to ribbons
under the radiant casque.

Who will unhorse this rider
and free him from between
the walls of iron, the emblems
crushing his chest with their weight?
Will they defeat him gently,
or leave him hurled on the green,
his rags and wounds still hidden
under the great breastplate?

While critiquing traditional roles, Rich also warns us against expecting too much from our painful efforts at personal and social change in her poem "Prospective Immigrants Please Note". She recognizes that a desire for change in and of itself is not sufficient. Even finding the courage to take the next step doesn't guarantee where that step will lead.

Prospective Immigrants Please Note

Either you will
go through this door
or you will not go through.

If you go through
there is always the risk
of remembering your name.

Things look at you doubly
and you must look back
and let them happen.

If you do not go through
it is possible
to live worthily
to maintain your attitudes
to hold your position
to die bravely

but much will blind you,
much will evade you,
at what cost who knows?

The door itself
makes no promises.
It is only a door.

And yet I must continue to hope and to stumble forward toward a new personal vision and a new world view, for I have shared the pain of socially imposed gender limitations, of misunderstanding and being misunderstood, with male and female

colleagues and friends, and we have worked together to find solutions. And I have watched my husband shrug off his armor to share with me his secret fears, feelings, and dreams. And I have experienced his pride in me and his support of my professional goals and ambitions. I have also received the support and encouragement of countless others as I struggle to be true to my own inner voice. And so I do believe that this vision that I have of the future is more than chimera, that it can be reality, if not for my own generation then for that of my son and my newborn child.

And yet, as I listen to David, our almost-three-year-old son, I realize with distress that he is already internalizing the gender dichotomy. "It's OK if Sarah cried," he reports in returning from Moppet Junction, his afternoon Day Care Center, "cuz she's a girl." "It's alright that Katy took Jason's doll; he doesn't need it cuz he's a boy." So my own search for a voice and vision that would free me of such stereotypes has become a search for the sake of my children as well. And as I have prepared for the arrival of our new baby in just a matter of days or weeks, I have tried to imagine a world that would allow this tiny new being to be not him/her but fully human, a tiny androgyne.

When he first learned of the baby, David insisted that it was "a boy and a girl" but he has now taken to calling it "she" and is firmly convinced that it will be a little sister. And I, too, realize that I am dead-culture-and-language-bound as I sort baby clothes into piles of his and hers. And yet couldn't this soon-to-be newborn child be a truly new beginning? "I am the androgyne," says Rich in "The Stranger", "I am the living mind you fail to describe in your dead language/the lost noun, the verb surviving/only in the infinitive/the letters of my name are written under the lids of the newborn child/.

What will we do to build a better future for this new androgyne "every child", to allow it to be called by its own name? Will we ask not to know the baby's sex so we won't be tempted to color code it pink or blue and to buy it toys that teach it who and how to be or to discriminate against its full humanity in a thousand more

subtle ways? And how will we change the diapers without revealing all? Will we live out androgynous behavior in our family lives at home so that the baby's models will be merely human and not male or female? Will we move to an island so that no one else will whisper of "sugar and spice" or "snakes and snails?" How will we offer this child the opportunity to explore the entire range of what it is to be human when the only language we have to teach it to communicate denies full access to that potential by being hopelessly gender bound? Can we allow a son to play with dolls and play at dressups in mommy's clothes? Can we allow a daughter to be grimy and aggressive and run naked on the beach after age five? Can we set this child free to pursue its full becoming or will we chain it to plow in the ruts of our past history?

As a teacher, as a wife, and as a mother, I have begun to realize that to achieve the sort of future I envisage for my "every child" we must be led and inspired not only by the best that has been thought, written, and created, but by the yet unthought and unspoken - potentials and undreamt options to come. We must be open to the future and to change. Not bound by canon or credo. Free to embrace the answers that wait for us all "under the lids of the newborn child."

Sue A. Huseman
Century Club
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