

TWO THINGS I'D CHANGE



East End Avenue, 1905*

Un peu légèrement peut-être, nous avons posé la question suivante à de nombreuses femmes à travers le pays: 'si vous deviez recommencer à élever une famille, quel deux changements y apporteriez-vous à partir de votre nouvelle conscientisation?'

Les réponses étaient moins légères.

CWS/CF sent out a letter to twenty women across the country asking them as feminists and mothers (over forty) what two things they would change in 'mothering' if they had that time to live again. We gave everyone the option of remaining anonymous and some women took it. We are printing three of their replies from the West Coast, the Prairies and Central Canada.

Dan Weiner

Although I have agreed to write briefly on the relationship between my experience as a parent and my experiences as a feminist, I find that I cannot respond to the question as it was set me. As it stands, 'If you had to raise your family again, what two things would you do differently because of your "raised consciousness"?' it is loaded, in the sense that 'When did you stop beating your wife?' is loaded. There are further pre-suppositions contained in the question that are worth considering. For example, is 'feminism' or 'raised consciousness' a state, or a discrete identity label (such that I can say, yesterday I was not, but today I am a feminist), or is it a process of being and becoming in a particular, historically specific social world? If I see feminism as a process, and I do, then what is the relationship between ideas or 'consciousness' and action: linear cause and effect or a dialectical process? The question also contains pre-suppositions about the nature of the parent-child relationship and the structure of power and authority within that relationship, as well as the possibilities of individual autonomous action within a relationship so inextricably connected to the larger body(ies) politic.

Within the context of these sorts of

questions, I can make the following personal statement: I am 50, the mother of two children, a son, 27 and a daughter, 18. The same personal experiences, actions, interests, struggles, desires, relationships and intellectual work (questioning and learning, within and outside of my profession) which are the parts of my becoming and being and transforming as a feminist were and are parts of my becoming and being and transforming as a parent. In the continuing process of my personal changes, I provided (a part of) a family context where two quite different children were able to develop themselves as strong, competent, resourceful, caring, yet independent, individuals. I did not 'make' them; they made themselves. They are not 'perfect'; they have their own individual problems and struggles, some of which are related to mine and some not. I learned from them, as they learned from me, as we learned together — sometimes from successful changes in consciousness and action, sometimes from failures.

I will give two examples of changes my daughter and I made, one a success, one a partial failure. A successful change: for eight years, from the time she was ten until the present, my daughter and I lived primarily in 'cooperative houses,' which formed a sort of network, within a university community. Interspersed were periods when we lived together, alone. Although the 'houses' in which we lived were more or less successful as 'living arrangements,' these experiences effectively opened out our mother-daughter relationship: — our ways of thinking about each other, our expectations, our options, our power relationships, our communication patterns, our duties and responsibilities, our ways of playing together, etc. I did not have this experience with my son, who was 'on his own' by this time, and who grew up within the more typical (for our society) isolated mother-father-child constellation. I am convinced of the benefits to all concerned of the 'opening up' of the nuclear family; there are, of course, other modes of opening than cooperative living, but

*This photograph is available for sale from the Baldwin Street Gallery, Toronto.

this was a successful and important experience that I would not change if I had my time over again; neither would my daughter, and our decisions to live cooperatively were, in fact, joint decisions.

A partial failure: my daughter and I have, and have had for the past eight years, an egalitarian relationship in which the 'ideal' is that we are equal partners — in the making of decisions, in the sharing of 'housework,' in the responsibilities of our life together, in the respect and care we give to each other. In fact, we have been partially successful in actualizing this 'ideal,' thereby avoiding much of the adolescent 'sturm-und-drang' and mother-daughter warfare. At the same time, in fact, there are many ways and areas in which we are not equal — in any of the myriad senses of 'equality' — and could not have been (and perhaps should not have been) no matter how many changes I made or attempted to make, given the society in which our relationship is embedded. So, our 'egalitarian' relationship contained and contains many contradictions, which I suspect I do not have the power to resolve; these I might well have struggled with differently and will continue to struggle with, not only in action but in analysis.

While this is not the place for an analysis of the problem of 'equality' in parent-child relationships and its connections with other feminist issues, it is important that women are speaking, openly and in public forums such as this one, about their life experiences and the changes they have made and need to make. Now, in 1979, as I work and play with the adults who are my children, it is crucial social change for me that I can hear the voices and share the strengths of other women, in a way that I could not in 1952 when I began my experience of motherhood, when I thought I was alone:

We need to imagine a world in which every woman is the presiding genius of her own body. In such a world women will truly create new life, bringing forth not only children (if and as we choose) but the visions, and the thinking, necessary to sustain, console, and alter human existence — a new relationship to the universe. Sexuality, politics, intelligence, power, motherhood, work, community, intimacy will develop new meanings: thinking itself will be transformed. This is where we have to begin. (Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born*, 1976, pp. 285-86).

Anonymous

The first thing that comes instantly to mind would be to have my daughter at a different age. I got pregnant in my second year at university. In those days, the late Fifties, abortion was virtually non-exis-

tent, and one simply got married to pay for the dirty deed.

So at the age of twenty, I was married with a small daughter. I knew nothing of marriage, homes, men, babies and especially myself. I had never lived alone, had a job/career, travelled or messed about, no sense of self or self achievement. I instantly hated the whole bundle. I felt as if I had been flattened by a giant landslide or a ten-ton truck. The marriage lasted eight years. Marriages didn't break up in those days. It was a nightmare, day and night — I remember virtually nothing of my daughter during this period. There was very little joy in me and thus none to give to her.

Only when the marriage ended and I tiptoed out into the world did I begin to think of her. And then it took five or six years to gain a sense of self and strength in being a woman and liking it, to get free of men and being dominated by them, to begin to love my daughter and help her, almost by osmosis, to be strong, joyful, happy, triumphant in being a woman!

So I would wish passionately to have had my daughter at about age thirty-five instead of twenty.

The second thing I would change is not so clear because the first is so overpowering, but I wouldn't bring her up in a traditional marriage (especially a bad one) — nor would I raise her alone, as I did for twelve years. I remember thinking often that neither she nor I would survive. God, how she rebelled and punished me for being only one parent, leaving her father, not having my own act together. She wanted and needed strength, direction, love and especially a model, a hero then of 'women/motherhood' to help guide her. And in those days, I only had my apologies and my guilt to give.

So I would choose now to have G. and bring her up with help, love and support from someone else, at least one other woman, and just possibly a man (although that would require much more thinking and explaining and soul searching than there is time for here). But I would wish one — many — creative, loving growing people to share and guide G.'s entry into womanhood.

Libby Oughton

When our four daughters were born in a period of six years, 1953-1959, I confess I had some ambivalent feelings. I had expected sons because my husband's family ran to boys (mine ran to girls!). I wanted sons because I usually found 'male' interests, in public affairs and 'how things worked,' more to my liking; because my father had always wished that I, his second daughter and last child, had been a son; and because although I am an average-sized woman (5'6") I, like countless other women, suffered from thinking I was too

big to be ideally feminine. My husband was 6'4" and I had visions of girls who would be big and brainy and therefore doomed to grow up feeling 'not O.K.' My own upbringing had been reasonably healthy and freeing in that I was not discouraged from tomboyish pursuits so long as they seemed healthy and natural. I was actively dissuaded from using makeup and having my hair permed for the same reasons — they weren't natural. I had a father who shared with me his work and his interests, and I had my parents' encouragement to attend university. But there the freedom stopped and the sex-typing began. My father had actually resisted my getting a summer job 'because he could afford to keep me,' and my mother did her level best to teach me ladylike behaviours and qualities. It was never questioned that I should stay at home with my children, raise them myself, and be the devoted super-mom.

Being super-mom was what I set out to do. No task around the house or garden was ever too much, until I developed blood clots in one leg after the third baby. I took upon myself the task of keeping everyone, including my husband, happy and busy, and asked for little in return. After all, I'd been told a woman's fulfillment lies in being a wife and mother, and I'd swallowed the entire package.

Years later, with my consciousness raised, and with hours of human relations lessons under my belt, I realized I gave my daughters the example of a woman who was rarely angry, who didn't tolerate conflict and angry feelings among children very well, who tried to solve everyone's problems, keep the peace, and put good meals on the table in a tidy, spotless house.

What would I do differently now? I think I'd have a more cooperative concept of housework and be more willing to go through the hassle of sharing the total load and the different kinds of work. I think I'd help both children and parents develop fuller ways of acknowledging our feelings. I'd be less inclined to try to solve everyone's problems, but try instead to help each family member learn to trust her own abilities to solve her own problems. I think I'd be more upfront with my husband in dealing with conflict situations so the girls could see a man and woman being equal in a healthier way. And I think I would have found more ways for them to be with other children and other adults much sooner in their lives, perhaps because I would be at work, at least part of the time.

All in all, I don't have great regrets because the consciousness raising came early enough for me to remedy much of the early stereotyping. I'm certainly not disappointed with the results!

Muriel Smith