Farewell, Doris

MICHELE LANDSBERG

C'est une journaliste pigiste qui a travaillé avec Doris alors qu'elle était rédactrice en chef de Chatelaine qui raconte dans son "adieu à Doris" les années de travail partagé, les premières influences dans la vie et le travail de Doris, et les mêmes idées partagées sur leur féminisme respectif. Cet article raconte l'impact de Doris sur la vie des femmes à travers le pays ainsi que son influence marquante sur les luttes féministes au Canada.

Grace Paley has a poem, "People in My Family," about the political differences between generations:

> …the eighty-two-year-old people grew up
> It was 1914
> This is what they knew
> War World war War
>
> That's why when they speak to the child
> They say
> Poor little one…
>
> The ninety-two-year-old people remember
> it was the year 1905
> they went to prison
> they went into exile
> they said ah soon
>
> —Excerpt, "People in My Family"

In Paley's poem, the 92-year-olds cling to the hope of revolution; their times and the world they were born into shaped them, as we are all shaped.

When I think about the almost incredible contribution of Doris McCubbin Anderson, as celebrated in these pages, and as I rally my courage to write this piece poignantly dubbed by our editorial board as a "Farewell to Doris," I'm struck again and again by Canada's great good fortune that the "illegitimate" baby born to a single mother living in Calgary was a girl, that the year was 1921, and that all the circumstances, both generational and idiosyncratic, were perfect for forming that child into the woman who did so much to change the course of history for Canadian women.

Because Doris sprang from hardy Scottish and northern English pioneering stock, she inherited a physical energy and resilience that served her well. (Health and longevity are key attributes for someone who wants to change the world!) Because she was illegitimate and was handed over at birth to a rural foster mother, she seems to have had a small but lifelong emotional distance from her timid, conservative mother. Because she failed to thrive, and was taken back by her mother after several months, she was enabled to grow up in a loving home. Because her mother, her grandmother, and her aunts all managed to raise their 14 children well, without men, after death and abandonment left them stranded, she experienced a matriarchy as a natural and beneficial structure. Because her father reappeared on the scene when she was nearly five, she could remember the outrage of having a man suddenly give orders, act demanding and dictatorial, expect service and obedience, while doing nothing to deserve such hegemony. Still, this man was politically radical, atheist, and intellectually curious, and his constant puzzles, riddles, and rants were intellectually stimulating.

Most significantly, it was 1921. Doris had just time enough to experience the stability and warmth of life in her mother's boarding house before the Depression hit, and she was just old enough to feel and understand the contrasting hardship that fell on the family as times grew worse. There was never money for treats, indulgences, new clothes. Doris earned her allowance, from toddlerhood, by doing chores, and was expected to save. Worn-out shirts were turned into her rompers; underwear was made from Purity Flour sacks. Home remedies for illness, vegetables from the garden, walking instead of using the streetcar, a homemade yo-yo for a toy—all these left their mark on

First on the left, Michele Landsberg, second on the left, and slightly behind Michele Landsberg, Doris Anderson. Second on the left, in the back, Shelagh Wilkinson. Women of Distinction Awards, YWCA *Toronto, 1980.*

Doris's lifelong habit of sensible frugality. The Depression's crueler deprivations made her angry at social injustices. Even as a child, she was vividly aware of Calgary's class structure and the meanness inflicted on the supposedly "undeserving poor," especially among schoolchildren. She noticed when her unbelievably hard-working mother, volunteering to cook at her church's festivities, was patronized by the idle and affluent "ladies" of a better class.

Luckiest of all, in retrospect, was the accident of being the only girl sandwiched between two sets of boys—her much older brothers from her mother's first marriage, and her two younger brothers produced by the eventual marriage of her mother and her father, Tom McCubbin. (Doris was the only one born between the marriages.) Bright, disciplined, imaginative, and curious, Doris bitterly resented the restrictions forced on her by girlhood. In her own family, she could see the greater freedoms and expectations accorded the boys, merely by accident of sex. She could run, climb, play, and achieve in school as well as or better than any of the boys, but she knew that she was automatically second-class. Her mother scolded her, even at the age of six or seven, for being "too bold"; her father wanted her to be a docile little doll. In school, favouritism and advancement were showered on the boys; at university and in her entire working life, Doris was constantly balked, impeded, and discriminated against by male preference. The "glass ceiling" is much too pretty a term to evoke the kind of barriers that prevented female advancement; a "thicket of thorns" is more like it. Only the toughest and most determined could battle their way through.

And yet, once she gained her independence, she was both adventurous and fun-loving. Her account of her party-going life in Toronto, both before and after her brave solo sojourns in London and Paris, are exhilarating. Emerging into her hard-won independence during the Second World War and immediately after, Doris enjoyed those heady years of new optimism and carefree youth, underpinned and financed by her own sturdy work ethic and pragmatism.

All these influences shaped Doris into the person who would become Canada's leading voice for women's equality and opportunity through the whole middle and later twentieth century. Other leaders rose to play vital roles in different aspects of the women's movement but only Doris forged a vehicle to reach out nation-wide to a constituency of women; only Doris seemed to morph from one role to another to play a strategic part at the key turning points of the women's movement.

I dwell on Doris's early influences, and the era that shaped her, because it's only now, looking back after her death, that I am so struck by the significance of our different time-lines. Trying to account for Doris's enormous strength and her profound contribution to the feminist movement, I can see how her clarity of purpose formed in the Depression years. She grasped at an astonishingly early age, because of her peculiar family circumstances, that it was the supposed

power to earn money that gave most men the right to lord it so arrogantly over the women, despite the women's grindingly hard household and maternal burdens, not to mention the economic worth of their unacknowledged domestic labour. Her father's high-handedness blessed her with an early, lifelong, severe allergy to marriage. Even as a young woman, living with an English lover who seemed eminently suitable, she couldn't bring herself to the point of marrying him. She wanted, needed, to earn her own way and determine her own life, and everything had shown her that she would sacrifice her autonomy once she married. Only when she met David Anderson in her late 30s, and found him to be affably respectful of a woman's right to a career, did she agree to wed—mostly, I think, in order to have the children she longed for.

Fortunately for Canadian women, Doris did not marry until the very moment when she had fought her way, inch by inch, to the editorship of *Chatelaine* magazine and was poised to make it into a megaphone for women's equality. Had she married any earlier, it's almost certain that she would not have climbed so high up the editorial ladder. Had she not arrived in Toronto during the war years, it's highly unlikely she could have got her foot on the employment ladder in the first place.

I was born a generation after Doris—in 1939—and, despite the sociological differences, experienced a startling array of similar influences. It provokes me to consider how Doris and I, with similar influences, views and goals, were nevertheless slightly out of sync (though never out of sympathy) in our careers. It provokes me to consider our friendship in the light of our two separate generations, and how an era's dominant trends has more impact on our separate lives and seemingly accidental choices than we, in our individualistic culture, tend to realize.

I, too, had a timid, conventional mother who was determined to make me into a "little lady" and pleaded with me not to be "bold." I, too, had brothers, who were automatically given more freedom and the boon of higher expectations, while I was expected only to marry. I, too, developed an allergy to marriage because of my father's macho domination, angry outbursts, physical violence, and assumptions of male superiority, even though it was my incredibly competent and hard-working mother who financially supported the family. I, too, watched my beloved mother suffer the insults of wealthier women who looked down on her for having to work.

Since losing Doris, I've wondered how it was that although I always admired and respected her, and came to love her as I came to know her as an editor and then a friend, it was not until much later that I fully understood her significance in the feminist struggle. Unlike others writing in this Journal, who were thrilled to discover feminist thinking through Doris's leadership, I was a feminist long before I met her and failed to grasp her importance in the movement until later. Partly it was because she disclosed so little of her own thinking in casual conversation. She never rushed to trot forward her personal anecdotes, opinions, memories or past achievements. It was not until reading her memoir, for example, that I learned she had joined a union in a famous organizing struggle at Eaton's, and had actually belonged to the early CCF. She focused her attention and curiosity on those with whom she spoke and drew them out, eager to hear other viewpoints. Her feminism, too, was non-ideological and rigorously anti-schismatic. I don't think I ever heard Doris resort to an "ism" to explain an idea or categorize someone—she took ideas on their own merits, without regard to dogma. Her straightforward egalitarianism was part of her immense persuasiveness.

It was not until I was part of a group that celebrated Doris's 80th birthday at a huge gala that I stopped to look back and marvel at her far-sightedness, her pioneering feminism, the incalculable impact she had on generations of women growing up with *Chatelaine's* cheerfully forthright feminist analysis.

But also, our times were different. Post-war affluence lifted my family from the lower-middle to the almost-middle class; we moved to the suburbs, and the smothering, smug conformity of the 1950s goaded me into a sort of lone-wolf defiance of all the familial and societal norms. I saw myself as a permanent outsider: the only Jew in a gentile high school, the only poet among football fans, the only reader in my family, the only living feminist (to my knowledge) in the world. I experimented in 1952 with non-sexist language, wearing boy's clothes, smoking, declaring for "free love" (though with no interest in boys whatsoever), and trying to read the existentialists, which fortunately led me to Simone de Beauvoir.

Like Doris, I fought and worked to attend university; like her, I was discouraged from pursuing an academic career by an overtly sexist dean who barred my way. A key difference: although my parents' relationship and my own feminist analysis gave me a permanent cynicism and hostility to the institution of marriage, I was coping with a society in which people were marriage-mad. In the late 1950s, almost all my female classmates graduated from high school straight into a wedding. By the time I graduated from university and, at 22, was working at

Doris Anderson, awarded the country's highest honour, Companion of the Order of Canada, with Governor General, Ray Hnatyshyn.

the *Globe and Mail,* my parents had quietly agreed with relatives that I seemed fated to be an "old maid." I held out against proposals until I encountered one, at age 23, that seemed folly to refuse. To illustrate the expectations for women in that time, my chart at the hospital when I gave birth to our first child at the age of 26 labelled me as an "elderly primipara."

By then, I had waged war as a lone feminist for 15 years, and it was with a feeling of resentment that I watched the feminist movement finally arise and declare itself ("Where were you when I needed you?" I thought sourly to myself) while I was at home in the suburbs with three small children.

While Doris was blazing an astonishing trail in the editorials of *Chatelaine* all during the middle- and late-1960s, I was completely unaware of her innovations. I had read my mother's *Chatelaine* in my teens, and scorned it as a "woman's magazine"; too bad I never picked it up to discover the amazing sea-change during my busy stay-at-home years. By the time I went looking for work again and Doris reached out to offer me sustained freelance writing, plus the refuge of an office to work in, away from the little ones, I simply took Doris's feminism for granted. Even more comically, I had arrived at a point in my life when school reform, breastfeeding practices, children's literature, and left-wing politics were more central to my daily thinking than the feminist analysis which had dominated my mind for so long.

I loved Doris as a wonderful boss. She was so calm, centered, tolerant, ready to laugh, and receptive to ideas, but always with a clear and reasoned analysis of the magazine's purpose and its target audience. What a wonderful workplace for women! It was simply taken for granted that I, as staff writer, could take unpaid leave in the summer to spend with my children, or arrange paid holidays to overlap with school breaks. On the rare occasions I had to work from home, it was no problem.

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The lesson is to keep the historical context in mind when understanding how certain individuals emerge to lead us. And for every feminist to remember that there are new voices in every generation, but hardly any new thoughts: we owe a deep debt to those who have come this way before, and hacked a way through the thicket for us—whether we realize it or not.

Doris used all her gifts, her energies, and her time on earth to good purpose, tackling one cause after another with her characteristic steadiness and good humour. She served the legal interests of women and minorities as one of only two laypersons on the Ontario Judicial Council, worked hard to improve the Ontario Press Council as its chairperson, battled (during the '60s) to protect Canadian media from U.S. domination, even served for a time on the Trilateral Commission in the interests of protecting the ecology of the Great Lakes.

She was so unassuming about her own contributions that I didn't know, until I stood in her condominium after her death, how many honorary degrees she had, or that she had been awarded the country's highest honour as a Companion of the Order of Canada. I didn't know, either, how very much I valued her, not just as friend but as a marvelous human being. She was unique, arising from very particular circumstances, taking those influences into her own capable hands and shaping them into a supremely useful life.

Someone else will have to say "farewell." I can't bear to do it.

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