

# Looking Back, Looking Forward

BY URSULA M. FRANKLIN

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*Dans cet article l'auteure discute de sa perception du rôle de mentor comme d'une extension de la relation mère biologique/fille/sœur qui débouche sur une véritable réciprocité de la solidarité chez les femmes.*

This brief article, submitted for the *Canadian Woman Studies*' anniversary issue, was originally presented as an address to women engineering students at a conference entitled, "More Than Just Numbers," held at the University of New Brunswick in 1995. Of course, it addresses spiritual rather than biological daughters but I think that the extension of the biological mother/daughter/

sister relationship into a genuinely reciprocal solidarity among women—transcending age, race, and class—is one of the great gifts of feminism.

I think it is important, particularly in the present political climate, to stress that feminism implies a re-ordering of human relationships away from the patriarchal models; feminism also implies the acknowledgement that the well-being of one group of women significantly depends on the well-being of all other women. I think that feminism extends and deepens all that is good and creative in mother-daughter relationships by enlarging the circle of reciprocal inter-generational giving and receiving of care and knowledge.

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"Having been asked to look forward as well as to look back, I would like to reflect on how we got to where we are now, so that we might see more clearly the path ahead and find out what needs to be done next.

As a point of departure I would like to take you back to the murder on December 6, 1989, of the 14 young women who were students at L'École Polytechnique in Montreal. This event has become a benchmark for all of us—because so much changed in the wake of this tragedy; it changed perceptions and interpretations of the climate and the realities of life for women not only in engineering, but for women everywhere.

In light of the sudden, horrible realization of what had happened in Montreal, it became possible—likely for the first time in Canada—to say, "this could have happened at *our* university, it could have happened in *my* class." There was a quantum leap in reality recognition across this country.

I remember how my son who, like most sons, did not appear to have much interest in what mother was doing, phoned Peter Gzwosky's *Morningside* to share his feelings on hearing the news of the murders and Marc Lepine's hit list. He suddenly understood that, at another engineering school, it could have been *his* mother's name, on the hit list.

The shock of the events was, of course, particularly strongly felt within the engineering profession—and out of this atmosphere of profound upset it became possible to act, to inquire, to map the reality of the lives of women in engineering. The resulting soul searching did not only bring inquiries and the commission for recommendations; it brought also for many of us the first opportunity to name and specify what has been going on. It became possible to speak publicly about the chilly climate, about bias, sexism, misogyny, and patriarchy. These concepts could be used and understood in the emerging discourse, a discourse that looked for ways and means to rectify the unacceptable conditions in the study and work environments of women around the world.

Subsequent to the Montreal massacre, the process of identifying the obstacles in the path of women in engineering in particular, yielded a number of significant results; it responded to the publicly expressed need of the engineering professions to see more clearly what was going on in their own house; it allowed to separate specific obstacles and suggest remedial measures.

The report "More Than Just Numbers" provided not only recommendations based on statistics and well-documented evidence, but it also insisted benchmarks, tangible evidence of change, and on accountability. Thus the report expresses clearly that fixing a few things behind closed doors is not good enough; what women are pressing for was, and is, equal participation in engineering opportunities *and* transparent processes of selection and decision-making in appointments and promotion.

These insights link the struggle of women in engineering to the fundamental issues in the general struggle of women for equal opportunities everywhere; there is always the same concern for justice and the same concern

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ways the same concern for justice and the same concern about the lack of respect afforded to women and the often implicit downgrading of their abilities.

I remember well a funny incident that happened to me not too long ago. It was the first week of term and I was going into my office, when I saw a young student, his arm full of books, trying to negotiate the heavy double doors of the Wallberg Building in the Faculty of Engineering at my university. Obviously, he was a first-year student

making his way into the halls of the Faculty. I held the first door open for him, then the second door; he thanked me politely and then asked: "Do you work here?" "Yes," I replied. "Are you a secretary?" "No. I'm a Professor of Metallurgy." "Holy Cow" was his instantaneous response—quick and uncensored. It was a quite natural and uninhibited reaction, expressing disbelief and surprise at the possibility of a woman being a professor of metallurgy.

Surely, I am not the only one who remembers being the sole woman in a class, remembering professors asking whether one was not in the wrong lecture or

lab. All such incidents illustrate our double grievance related to both the lack of justice and the lack of respect for our potential that runs through all our lives as women.

There have been two basic directions in which the rectification of such grievances has been approached: One approach was systemic, the other more case-specific and directly addressing women. I used to call the latter "weight lifting the girls" and I have never been very enthusiastic about it.

Though I understand full well and the need to encourage young women to enter engineering, as well as other male-dominated occupations and professions, and to support them personally in every possible way, hardening them against the chilly climate may change the problematic aspects less than one might think. The approach also put the prime burden of change on the disadvantaged—which is never a very good idea. Truly, it is not just a question of numbers, it is a question of structural, institutional, and cultural changes—systemic changes that have to involve the traditional male bastions of power.

We should recognize and celebrate the real and significant changes that have taken place. The mind-set that considered sexist student newspapers, crude initiation pranks, and "girly" pin-ups integral parts of the education of university students, particularly male students, is no longer publicly acceptable; new codes of conduct have been issued, sexist language has been curtailed and criticized, and issues of gender sensitivity have been ad-

vanced—although we know how much more work needs to be done, especially in the area of gender sensitivity.

Central to the achievement of the years, since the Lepine murders, is the fact that the grievances of women in have become real and tangible—concrete issues about which something can and will be done, not figments of our imagination. Certainly, some issues will reappear in different guises: the girly calendars may be passé, but pornography on the internet and in the computer rooms is just coming at us and with it the "boys will be boys" and the anti-censorship arguments.

I am confident, though, that each new re-incarnation of sexism will find less acceptance and a clearer and faster rebuttal, because the climate has changed. Basically I would like to make engineering, as well as other traditionally male-dominated professions, fit for women, rather than women fit for engineering, or any of the other professions. I feel that the past exclusion of women has meant that some of the values that women have traditionally brought to their tasks, have been missing in the habits of work and thoughts in not only in engineering, but in all male-dominated fields.

I know that, when some of my women students objected to the bad manners of their peers, to the put-downs of women and "artsies," etc., they were told: this is what the real world is like, you better get accustomed to it. If you can't hack it, go into early childhood education...

My point, however, is this: There is nothing wrong with women and their values, including those that may make their professional advancement difficult. There is nothing wrong with caring, there is nothing wrong with *not* being aggressive and pushy. There is nothing wrong with expressing the hurt of being treated unjustly.

What *is* wrong is the put-down, the insensitivity, and the lack of justice and respect—not women's response to it. And I, for one, do not want to see women so "work hardened"—to use a good metallurgical expression—that they lose their acute sensitivity, when they or others meet discrimination or injustice. Nothing is served if we were to become mere substitutes of our traditional male peers.

Someone made the suggestion that in discussion of the mentoring program one might not want to speak about nurturing, but about coaching. I did not like this suggestion, because I don't think life is a football game and that coaching *the team to win the game* helps anyone in the end.

Language is very important—it expresses our values and we should not be afraid to use words such as nurturing, concepts such as caring, including the willingness to, if necessary, take second place on occasion. Nurturing, caring, and helping are the very attributes that our society so desperately needs—there is no point for us to downplay them—even at the risk of our own advancement.

How, then, do we proceed from here, you will ask, as we come together to celebrate achievements, to express our gratitude to those who have helped to bring them about?

For my answer, let me take you back to the central theme of my thoughts on "looking forward, looking

back,” the fact that when we deal with questions important to women, we are concerned with issues of justice and compassion. Our work is therefore embedded in the patterns of change within the larger society. How we, as women, conduct the next steps on the road towards our professional equality can be of considerable help—or of hindrance—to the advancement of our sisters in all fields.

Increasingly women are coming into positions of power and influence. I am profoundly convinced that the conduct of women in power must be

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guided and informed by the collective experience of women when they were powerless. In other words, none of us can forget women’s experience of exclusion and discrimination and tolerate or use practices of bias—bias not only on the basis of gender, but also on the basis of religion, ethnic origin, or sexual orientation.

We cannot condone generic put-downs of “others”—just as we do not condone these tactics when they are applied to women as a group. The use of such a reciprocal yardstick may be one of the most important contributions that women newly coming

into positions of power and responsibility, can make.

There is another concept, another relic of the patriarchal structures of hierarchy and power, that needs re-visiting and re-interpretation and that is the concept of “rank.” It is quite clear to me that women view rank differently from men. For us, rank is not a station in life or a figure of merit.

Rank is the social equivalent of a postal code; it tells others where we work and where our territory can be found. We rejoice, when one of our sisters gets a promotion, a new postal code, a larger area of responsibility because of the greater contributions she may be able to make.

But recognizing peoples’ rank is not like grading eggs and a promotion does not imply that someone who has been a Grade A small type has become, by some administrative miracle, a Grade A large one on July 1. Peoples’ human attributes do not change on a change of rank; they do not become better persons or better friends on promotion, nor do they become less valuable human beings if they were not promoted, if they have no rank to parade.

I think that it is really important for women, as they move into positions of responsibility and power, not to be frightened by rank and not to be hypnotized by it either. Each of us can help in the ongoing process of clarifying the notion of rank by extending our unchanging care and friendship to those of our sisters who are promoted, as well as to those who are not.

There is another facet to our discussion for rank and

promotion, that needs to be mentioned here, lest someone might think, rightful and unbiased promotion and advancement for women are now a rule.

Earlier I mentioned that some of the problems can resurface in new guises. Thus one finds that the gatekeepers of the old order may move from objecting to potential colleagues on the basis of gender, to questioning the legitimacy of their research interests.

In other words no one in his right mind will say anymore, “I don’t like women in the department.” Yet it is not uncommon for senior staff to insist that any new person hired has to continue the area of research that old Professor what’s-his-name had cultivated so faithfully over the past 30 years—effectively blocking the entry of someone who might want to do different research in a different manner. Gatekeeping regarding research fields happens and bears watching.

We need to be mindful of the danger that the present climate of cutbacks and retrenchments poses to the ongoing advancement of women. In this context it is again important to stress that women are not mere substitutes or clones of their male peers, but bring—as women—different perspectives and experiences to their work. All considered, it is certainly not yet plain sailing for women in our society.

My concluding remarks are addressed primarily to younger women.

First of all, if you have been helped by your mentors, don’t forget them now. They will be getting old and may need you as you have need them. Secondly, don’t forget your feminism and your solidarity with other women. Feminism is not an employment agency for women; feminism is a movement to change relations between people to more egalitarian, caring, and non-hierarchical patterns. Feminism provides a way of life that our society, I feel, desperately requires and that we need to practice.

And do remember that, even if the Marc Lepines of this world no longer haunt the engineering faculties of this country, violence in most societies is rising—and usually this means violence against women and children. Don’t be indifferent to their fate.

Those of us who have the privilege of working in an environment in which violence—verbal as well as physical—has become unacceptable, have to assure that such environments are not going to remain exceptions but become the norm.

Finally, be careful and conscientious about the language you use and the images your words evoke. Language is terribly important; it is the vehicle of thought and concept, the medium of learning and re-enforcement of images. Don’t make violence appear normal by using the language of organized violence; why speak about “target audiences.”

Surely, you don’t want to shoot your students or clients; you just want to reach those particularly interested. There really are no targets, no conquests, strategic plans, or deadlines—only interested groups, changes of attitude

There also remains the need to watch sexism in the language of social and political discourse. Sexism has not yet disappeared—just think of the different connotations of the terms “bagmen” and “bagladies.”

The society that we envisage and work for will care for the homeless—called bagladies—and have no place for the manipulators of power—called bagmen.”

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Some final thoughts that bring us back the *CWS/cf's* special twentieth-anniversary issue on mothers, daughters, and feminism. One of the great gifts of feminism, it seems to me, has been the extension of the concepts of Mothers and Daughters, Sisters and Forebearers from the merely biological and chronological into a much broader social and spiritual realm. Just as feminism broke down the rigid structures of hierarchy and clan with their pre-ordained roles and responsibilities, feminist perspectives have changed the relationships between women.

Feminism puts teaching and learning among women into a different light, illuminating strongly the reciprocal nature of caring and informing. This light has allowed me to see my women engineering students as my daughters or my younger sisters without feeling possessive of their achievements or dependent on their attention. What will remain, I hope, long after the time of daily contact is gone, is our shared knowledge that we are part of the same web, threads in the same fabric.

*Ursula Franklin, C.C., F.R.S.C., was Professor of Metallurgy and Material Science in the Faculty of Engineering, University of Toronto, until her retirement in 1989. As University Professor Emerita she is now a Senior Fellow at Massey College.*

## Mothers and Daughters with Joanne DeGasperi, H.S.C.

*I brush my hair, getting ready for the day, my reflection looking back at me. I stop to notice the shape of my face, my eyes, my nose, my mouth. These are very familiar to me. I have seen them before. I have seen them in the face of Gloria, my mother.—Joanne DeGasperi*

The relationship between mothers and daughters is a fragile one. Mothers see who they once were, or once dreamed of being. Daughters see who they will be, or may become. The choices we make will affect those around us, our daughters, our mothers. We may not always agree with these choices, however, it is so important that we “listen” to why these choices were made, and ask, “Why?” Mothers and daughters listening, speaking to each other, being open to understanding each other, will open the doors to accepting each other as we are.

Mothers and Daughters is a one-day workshop based on the movie, *The Joy Luck Club*. It is open to all mothers and all daughters. You may attend together, or you may wish to come alone, the choice is yours. The workshop will be held the last Sunday afternoon of every month.

October 25

November 29

December 27

1:00–5:00 pm

\$25 non-refundable deposit; \$60

Please contact Joanne at (416) 259-3944  
for registration details.

### ABOUT THE ARTISTS

**Kass Elan Morgain** is a mother. She is also a daughter. Over the years she has become both painfully and joyfully aware of all that the experiences of mothering and daughtering may involve. Still, she keeps on cutting and pasting, putting together the puzzle pieces of her life and art, seeking at-one-ment with mother/daughter/self, hoping to collage her way to a state of enlightenment.

**Nicole Peña** is a figurative painter who is interested in portraying individuals who are involved in ceremony, or who congregate for spiritual communion. She lives in Toronto.

**Rochelle Rubinstein** is a Toronto printmaker, painter, fabric and book artist. Her special interest is community art projects with women, the most recent of which were

the Women's Rights are Human Rights Banner and the Women Against Violence Project at the Irish Museum of Modern Art in Dublin.

**Audrey Ilah Scott-McKee** grew up in Hamilton and raised three children in Edmonton. She has since found her own special paradise in the Kootenay Mountains, in British Columbia. She is delighted to be the mother of Kass Elan Morgain and grandmother of Leah Eden Bennett.

**Audrey Shimizu** was born in Toronto and graduated from the Ontario College of Art. She has exhibited in various galleries, and participated in several group and juried shows, as well as publishing a book *On the Edge*. She is currently living and working in St. Catharines, Ontario.

**Jacqueline Treloar** is our cover artist (see page 2).