

## Women: The Evolving Educational Consciousness

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*Everyone repeatedly has to break through to a new vision if she/he is to keep living.<sup>1</sup>*

That women function within the realm of education, both as students and as educators, does not appear, at first glance, to be a unique or particularly volatile statement. Since the inception of formalized education in the United States, women have found a welcome refuge within the teaching profession; in recent years, educational opportunities for women have become more plentiful, and, in certain cases, more lucrative. However, I am concerned with the "educational consciousness" of women; that is, to what extent and in what manner do the layers of societal as well as personal expectations shape women's perceptions of themselves and their potentials to be educated as well as to educate? These issues and questions arise initially from situations within my own biographic experience, and it is within this personal context that I must begin my explorations of heretofore unexamined aspects of the nature of my educational experience. Only after attending to the complexities which have shaped my own present educational consciousness might I then move to examine the larger generalities of the underlying political, economic, racial and sexual situations which surely have influenced the educational consciousness of women collectively.

In attempting to find grounding for educational consciousness in my personal history, I initiate a critical step in connecting to the commonalities which link us all. I attach primary significance to the fact that

*...each of us achieved contact with the world from a particular vantage point, in terms of a particular biography. All of this underlies our present perspectives and affects the way we look at things and talk about things and structure our realities. To be in touch with our landscapes is to be conscious of our evolving experiences, to be aware of the ways in which we encounter our world.<sup>2</sup>*

Only recently have I become aware of the dichotomy within myself in terms of my work; only recently have I even questioned the tensions and confusions that I feel about my professional self, my personal self, and the seeming lack of cohesion between the two. In finally acknowledging the fragmentation which I have been experiencing in various forms for several months, I feel release in confronting the separation. Now, as I explore the underlying expectations which color my tensions, I become curious -- this tension, this fragmentation, on surface inspection, appears the result of pressures that characterize the lives of all who perform the daily tasks and routines that specific positions dictate. And so to work in one sense means to function within the restrictions of time, relationships, and responsibilities. The initial appraisal, then, of my specific situation would indicate that I am able to manage well the effects of these confines. I have taught school for ten years, and I now do work in curriculum for a private research institute; these facts alone would attest, some would say,

to a certain perseverance, a dedication, a freely chosen professional course.

I must delve more deeply, then, into the grayer recesses of my discomfort. I must trace the evolvment of my uneasiness in an attempt to understand its sudden surfacing, for, indeed, in terms of my professional life, the intensity of my feelings of a dichotomous self are somehow frightening in their immediacy. Could I have been unaware of such a fissure within myself for such a long time? Perhaps; but what appears more likely is that my changing perspectives about myself as a professional educator as well as a woman have allowed the slow unfolding of many of my own expectations for myself in my professional as well as my private world. As these layers of expectations -- my own for myself as well as my perceptions of others' for me -- are exposed, I perceive the bared root of the dichotomy: I am a professional educator and I am a woman. Historically, within the confines of society's roles and expectations, the relationship is neither consonant nor life-giving.

The protestations bubble to the surface; women always have found a place in education. Teaching has been an acceptable and desirable position for women. Today, however, I question the sources of such assessments. In tracing the evolvment of women's place in education, one notes that those men who first administered the schools pointed to the necessity of imposing the qualities of dutifulness, respect for righteousness, and obedience to existing social authorities upon the lives of children. In attempting to socialize large numbers of children into a life increasingly dominated by industry, and later, technology, American educators throughout the nineteenth and into the twentieth century have internalized the notion of subordination as a primary framework for behavior within the classroom.

*Whether the dominating concern was to create a literate and disciplined working class, to impose a middle-class and Protestant ethos, or to erect barriers against corruption and disorder, the expressed commitment was to 'social control'. Anti-social energies and appetites were to be tamped down; 'impetuosity' was to be subordinated to 'voluntary compliance.' The entire effort and the prevailing atmosphere were thought of as redemptive, humane, and benign.*<sup>3</sup>

And who better than women to project such ideals? Certainly, women could provide the gentility and the docility needed to maintain such an atmosphere, for, in the 1830s, with the rise of the common schools and the efforts to establish an effective public school system, women were in no position, economically or socially, to question their roles as dutiful and dependent subordinates.

In examining the role of women in education, I, of course, acknowledge that the situation has changed, in some aspects, from the subordinate roles that women played, not only in education, but also in their daily lives. Women today are gaining positions of leadership in educational administrations and organizations. However, these facts do not eradicate the dichotomy which I deeply feel. Somehow, even in the light of a professional career, of a position in which I may explore a variety of educational possibilities, I still am responding to a deeply internalized conception of myself as I "should be" within the world. It is not sufficient to merely acknowledge the historical antecedents of my perceptions of the roles that women play. I must go further to unravel the entangled layers of my expectations of myself as woman and to perhaps then understand why those personal expectations clash with those of my professional self.

As I remember and review my entry into the professional teaching world, I am aware that I came to teaching, like many others, I suspect, for a variety of reasons. As a newly married young woman, teaching seemed to offer reliability, security, and a chance to work with students -- certainly, to me, an exciting and rewarding prospect. Now, as I engage in the retrospective process, I further explore the basis for my conception of teaching as a rewarding endeavor. What was I seeking for myself and what did I hope to give to others? Although not conscious of this concept at the time, I realize now that an important vision of myself rests upon my ability to give to others, to do something, in some way to help, to enrich, to embellish others' lives. I could accomplish this in my relationships with my students. Through the giving of myself in the teaching process, through the sharing of the literature to which I so deeply responded, I could feel as though I were contributing and as though my work, and thus my life, were meaningful. Only now, in retrospect, am I able to expose the deeper concept around which such actions in my life are based: women's lives, in many ways, are organized around the principle of serving others.

*...women have been led to feel that they can integrate and use all their attributes if they use them for others, but not for themselves. They have developed the sense that their lives should be guided by the constant need to attune themselves to the wishes, desires, and needs of others. The others are the important ones and the guides to action.*<sup>4</sup>

This is not to say that dedicating oneself in the service of others is a negative action, *per se*; it is to say that, specifically for a woman, such action is colored by internalizations of her role as nurturer and server of others' needs. The act of giving is negatively internalized when women "...are forced to serve others' needs or when they are expected to do so because it is the 'only thing women are good for.'"<sup>5</sup>

In my biographical situation, teaching provided me with a supposedly positive outlet for such internalized expectations. I was able to fulfill my desire to serve others and, at the same time, was able to enlarge upon my perception of myself as a productive and worthwhile person.

The danger with such a perception of myself was that I had developed no personal, individual, unique way of perceiving and confronting my relationships to the world. I had, without thinking and without questioning, transferred an expectation of myself as woman, which largely was a societal creation, to my professional role. Although appearing as my conscious and free choice, the profession of teaching became a vehicle for positing many of my internalized, but unexamined, expectations for myself.

Thus, the dichotomy I feel even now, after working within a professional mode for twelve years, is partly the result of my inability to articulate those expectations for myself which I truly feel are appropriate for me. I struggle to identify the constructed realities of others which I falsely have identified as my own. As I attempt to extricate the vision of myself as I thought others might have defined me, and struggle, in its place, to construct a conception of myself which is grounded in my own wishes and goals, I must reconceive the very ways in which I approach myself and my world.

*Freedom is the power of vision and the power to choose. It involves the capacity to assess situations in such a way that lacks can be defined, openings identified, and possibilities revealed. It is realized only when action is taken to repair the*

*lacks, to move through the openings, to try to pursue real possibilities.*<sup>6</sup>

I merely have begun, then, to become aware of the countless ways in which I have internalized conflicting views of my professional and my private self. The dichotomy I express has much to do with my perceptions of myself as woman and as educator. I acknowledge that my work signifies one important way of taking action upon the world: "*Our attitudes toward work become the touchstone of what we do, since it is by means of work that freedom comes into being in individual lives.*"<sup>7</sup> I respond to the reality in which I may share my work with others. At the same time, I recognize that constant attention must be paid to the sources of my motivations. I have become conscious of the pervasive internalization of the conception of woman as helper, nurturer, subordinate "other".<sup>8</sup> I must now attempt to incorporate a new vision of myself, choosing freely among those characteristics which I feel will enhance my strength as an individual. As I work to bring the dichotomous self into a whole, I need not reject those characteristics or goals which may be regarded by some as feminine or as masculine. The task is one of redefinition within an awakened consciousness. I cannot turn back; I cannot settle for less than constant attention to the awakening of a self-definition that "*...might transform both men's and women's common world.*"<sup>9</sup>

In offering a vignette of some of the conflicts which characterize my experiences as a woman educator, I in no way attempt to transfer particular biographical observations to the collective experiences of women. Rather, by revealing a portion of my personal situation, I wish to emphasize the extent to which the unexamined consciousness may conform to forms and modes of action which are shaped by external factors and the extent to which unthinking compliance with prescribed images may lead to a dissonance that promises only further fragmentation and distance from oneself. Thus, the biographic vignette becomes a conceptual tool with which to examine underlying assumptions and expectations which guide the person who chooses to work as an educator; specifically, it allows the framing of a focus upon the processes by which women are educated and upon the manifestations of those educational processes within women who are educators. I maintain that the educational processes, if unexamined, may have debilitating consequences for all.

Thus, this work is an initial inquiry into the multi-faceted nature of women's educational consciousness. As part of larger work in progress, then, I wish to concentrate now upon implications of such work for teacher educators.

In earlier work,<sup>10</sup> I have envisioned a teacher preparation program which provides opportunities for future teachers to examine and define the context of their objective and subjective relationships and connections to their specific subject-matter disciplines as well as to their perceptions and projections of themselves in the role of teacher. The intent in my desire to reconceive the nature of a preparation program for teachers reflects my concerns with schooling, and specifically, with curriculum which involves students as well as teachers in the process of living. A thematic strand throughout the conceptual design, evolving in part from the critical thinking and philosophical tenets of Maxine Greene's work, is the creation of curriculum which is intricately bound together with the individual's search for meaning. The curricular design itself provides the contexts of a setting, a community, in which future teachers may explore the private, political, historical and social aspects of

teaching. Thus, by confronting one's assimilations of the role of teacher, and by becoming aware of the subjective and, at times, unconscious connections one creates between public role and personal expression, future teachers may conceive of their function within education in the broadest sense, "...as it refers to the multiple modes of becoming, of confronting life situations, of engaging with others, of reflecting, forming, choosing, struggling to be."<sup>11</sup> This quest for a preparation program which attends to both the subjective and objective realms of inquiry and of being is predicated upon the belief that before teachers can present vehicles and create atmospheres in which their students may explore and develop their connections to the active world, teachers first must have opportunities to perform their own explorations and create their own authentic ways of uncovering, reflecting, and acting upon the potentialities within their lives.

Obviously, such a curricular design for future teachers challenges complacent acceptance of existing norms in a time especially when attempts to further awareness of self are constantly juxtaposed against the demands of an advanced technological society. The incorporation of personal awareness into the dialogical relationships in which individuals engage becomes a difficult contemporary project, given the inundation of the back-to-the-basics proposals, with their accompanying competency requirements, minimum performance levels, and basic skills assessments. Thus, to encourage future teachers to delve into philosophical, psychological, and sociological considerations which underlie the myriad ways in which they may perceive themselves and their relationships with students and peers becomes a project to which many educators would assign lowest priority. It is exactly at this time, I would maintain, that we need programs which allow time for future teachers to experience those very processes, interactions, and materials that they, in turn, will expect and wish their students to experience. At no other time in the history of American education has the future teacher been crushed with such a plethora of external restraints, measurements and expectations. At no other time have teachers so needed the time and context in which to align their private selves into authentic relationships with their public selves and with others.

*If the teacher agrees to submerge himself into the system, if he consents to being defined by others' views of what he is supposed to be, he gives up his freedom 'to see, to understand, and to signify' for himself. If he is immersed and impermeable, he can hardly stir others to define themselves as individuals. If, on the other hand, he is willing to take the view of the homcomer and create a new perspective on what he has habitually considered real, his teaching may become the project of a person virtually open to his students and the world...He will be continuously engaged in interpreting a reality forever new; he will feel more alive than he ever has before.*<sup>12</sup>

### III

The task of "*interpreting a reality forever new*" becomes a particularly poignant one for the woman who hopes to teach others. She must try to demystify the myriad issues which characterize the state of the field in education; she must become aware of the historical forms and underlying assumptions which pervade her view of the roles and functions of teachers, students, and schooling institutions. However, before she is able to move into an analysis of

these complex situations which influence her actions as teacher, she first must examine the tenets of her perceived reality and the extent to which these tenets have been constructed from the overriding patriarchal nature of the generally accepted social reality. Thus, to "create a new perspective" becomes a two-fold endeavor for the woman educator. She first must attempt to uncover the layers of the hypothetical self to reach her own essence; only then is she free to begin explorations of the relationships of the private self and the public, professional self.

In truth, then, the woman is, as ever, one step behind her male counterpart. The man who wishes to prepare for a teaching career is able to examine role expectations and functions which have been created by a predominantly male vision; thus, as a man prepares for his career in education, he is less likely to perceive a dichotomy within his self image and his career image. He is moving into a realm which has been shaped by men, and which, to a large extent, continues to serve a function which is dictated by the controlling forces of society. Thus, as schooling continues to serve, in part, the assigning of individuals to their respective places within society, so men will continue to find positions of dominance within such a structure. Of course, a hopeful involvement here is that men who are encouraged to go through the self-reflective processes in a teacher preparation program may well reject the manifestations within themselves of a schooling system which maintains the dominant/subordinate framework.

However, in confronting the *status quo*, I hold that, as teacher preparation programs generally now are structured, a woman, if she is to become cognizant of her educational consciousness and its varied manifestations, must uniquely investigate her motivations, expectations, and conceptions for herself as teacher. A man may, and should, perform the same reflective processes; the difference for man and woman is that the underlying structures for conceptions of self and of self as educator evolve from separate sources.

The source for much of women's concept of self is the state of existing in oppression. Obviously the literature which focuses upon the nature and the roots of women's oppression is vast, and the varied theories are complex. However as Gayle Rubin notes, the issue is not a trivial one,

*...since the answers given it determine our visions of the future, and our evaluation of whether or not it is realistic to hope for a sexually egalitarian society;... the analysis of the causes of women's oppression forms the basis for any assessment of just what would have to be changed in order to achieve a society without gender hierarchy.*<sup>13</sup>

The causes of women's oppression are complex and call for extensive study and analysis beyond the scope of this particular paper. I do wish, however, to point to the place of such analyses within the context of programs for future teachers. Woman no longer can assume the comfortable confines of a teaching career without challenging the very sources from which her perceived role derives. To do so at this juncture is to insure the continuation of the "part of social life which is the locus of the oppression of women, of sexual minorities, and of certain aspects of human personality within individuals."<sup>14</sup> This part of social life, as defined by Rubin, is a "sex/gender system" which is the "set of arrangements by which a society transforms biological sexuality into products of human activity, and in which these transformed sexual needs are satisfied."<sup>15</sup>

Within the context of the conception of the prevailing "*sex/gender system*," then, I have been able to begin to scrutinize my need to nurture others, for example, in light of a prevailing sexually defined notion which derives not from my own self initially, but rather from a function culturally determined and obtained. I may choose to accept such a characteristic within myself as a positive strength; however, I may now do so in terms of my conscious choice, not in terms of my perceptions of what others expect of me. As I briefly have revealed biographical manifestations of socially organized values and role definitions, I wish to emphasize the nature of such self-reflective processes, the importance of such work to those working in education, and the scope of such an undertaking.

I find it necessary, in calling for an integration of analyses of the roles of teacher in terms of sex/gender as well as social, economic, and political systems, to heed the note of caution that Rubin applies to such analyses. In her attempt to construct a theory of women's oppression by borrowing concepts from anthropology and psychoanalysis, Rubin notes that the major theorists within these disciplines write from within an intellectual tradition produced by a culture in which women are oppressed. Thus, she recognizes the danger in her enterprise "*...is that the sexism in the tradition of which they are a part tends to be dragged in with each borrowing.*"<sup>16</sup>

So too must we acknowledge dangers inherent within analyses of the educational consciousness of men and women. As we work to discover the context and possibilities of our lived worlds, we constantly must attend to the structures which have shaped the very processes and methodologies which we utilize in the search. Particularly, as women seek to define themselves and their roles as educators, they must monitor the foundations upon which their present conceptions rest.

*The organization of sex and gender once had functions other than itself -- it organized society. Now, it only organizes and reproduces itself. The kinds of relationships of sexuality established in the dim human past still dominate our sexual lives, our ideas about men and women, and the ways we raise our children. But they lack the functional load they once carried. One of the most conspicuous features of kinship is that it has been systematically stripped of its functions -- political, economic, educational, and organizational. It has been reduced to its barest bones -- sex and gender.*<sup>17</sup>

The task is immense; the work must be extensive. We must expose the bases of the predicaments of women, as Maxine Greene so eloquently reminds us.<sup>18</sup> We must work to eradicate the feeling, as described by Simone de Beauvoir, in the closing lines of *FORCE OF CIRCUMSTANCE*, of being gypped as a woman: in looking back toward the young girl she had been, she measures her "*adult astonishment in remembering her illusions when she was sixteen.*"<sup>19</sup> We must attend to the implications of what some see as the dominant force of patriarchal consciousness and resulting human action -- the image and worship of death in its most violent forms.<sup>20</sup> We must perceive the meanings of the internalization of the concept that "*...it is not in giving life but in risking life that man is raised above the animal; that is why superiority has been accorded in humanity not to the sex that brings forth but to that which kills.*"<sup>21</sup>

Such profound and dramatic perceptions of life and of our attempts to move beyond the implications of imposed prescription upon our lives may serve as impetus for us all to examine the dichotomies within ourselves. We share the juxtapositioning of youth and maturity, the subjective and objective selves, personal and political identities. As educators, our responsibilities extend beyond ourselves to the lives of those who will internalize and extend the foundational perceptions which we as teachers have helped to shape. The particular nature of women in their roles as educators poses problems which are complex in their origins and in their manifestations. However, as women begin to define their educational consciousness as part of the conscious search for some kind of coherence, some kind of sense, they cannot help but suggest to others something of what it signifies to pursue or to understand.<sup>22</sup> Such work promises to liberate women, but, more importantly, to liberate the human personalities of us all.

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#### Acknowledgement

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#### FOOTNOTES

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5. IBID., p. 61.
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7. IBID., p. 252.
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20. Phyllis Chesler, ABOUT MEN (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1978), p. xx.
21. de Beauvoir, p. 72.
22. Greene, LANDSCAPES OF LEARNING, p. 3.