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Advancing Women In Leadership

Conversation and Voice: Feminist Mentoring for Social and Political Change

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...the books have become our personal intertextual guideposts in our mentoring conversations about why we speak out in defense of others when we would choose to remain silent, and how we perceive ourselves as intermediary guides for others in the academic milieu of tradition and power.

Although women have studied and written about their positions in the academy for some time, it is only through ground-breaking work of Belenky, M. F., Clinchy, B. M., Goldberger, N. R. & Tarule, J. M. (1986), that we have formally acknowledged that women learn, construct, and process knowledge and events differently from men. They determined that women learned in relation to one another, that collaborative learning superseded competition, and that females perceived teaching and learning in relation to self. That research in turn has led to further understandings of power æ power in relation to what is valued as the legitimate construction of knowledge and what is valued as knowledge per se. Campbell (1997), Gore (1993), Lewis (1993) and others have commented articulately on the need to view women's education as different in one way or another, yet recognize that such apperception, if accepted, concomitantly supposes a shift in power relations.

Aisenberg and Harrington's (1988) seminal work, *Women of Academe*, note that "women academics who do receive helpful career advice or direction often receive it from other women. But then there is another, sadder dimension to the role of the woman mentor in contributing to the advancement of younger women and that is the relative weakness or insecurity in many cases of the mentor's position" (p.49). This paper further explores the position of academic women and their need to mentor and support one another in a re-definition of what is acceptable as

“scholarship” and as “academic writing”. It looks at current university power relationships as they affect females’ scholarship, or what is considered “sanctioned knowledge,” within the “acceptable processes” for knowledge modes.

We accept the research on women’s ways of knowing (Belenkey, et. al., 1986), and suggest that women not only revisit academic restraints on their writing within academe, but seek out ways of encouraging authentic and accepted writing voice through women’s traditional ways of interacting with each other- as multi-rolled individuals: friends, mothers, wives, lovers, daughters, teachers, as well as scholars. In our paper we depict our coming together as colleagues and friends. We then explore the ways in which we intermingled that relationship with our mutual interest in children’s literature in order to dialogue about women’s scholarship that may be different from, but equal to, the norms for “acceptable” academic writing.

In my, Kathy’s, case, I completed a doctoral program as a single woman with grown children. My first position was that of a new-but-seasoned Assistant Professor— newly credentialed but with years of K-12, college teaching and administration behind me. I arrived with knowledge and experience, but without the recognition that it would not be valued as I was 1) a woman and 2) and older woman (Sernak, 2000). My expectations of open dialogue, collaboration, and mentorship did not materialize. Although the Dean of the School of Education and the Associate Dean of Research were female, and although they used the rhetoric of feminist organization and pedagogy, they were held captive by the highly bureaucratic organization and expectations for administrators of university programs and schools. The rhetoric confounded me, for I wanted to believe it but saw and experienced the traditional models of top-down-authority and acquiescence to rules and norms that belied the language.

Having had very little mentoring in the doctoral program, I sought a mentor within my university. Jill stood out because she seemed to share a similar philosophy about teaching, learning, and education with me, and willingly spoke out for her positions in faculty meetings and to colleagues. She enacted the rhetoric I heard from others æ but not towards me. We were congenial, I felt I had her respect, but she wrapped a shield around herself that allowed me to get only so close. We were on committees together, and I believed we each admired the other’s willingness to speak out in public meetings within the newly formed School of Education. But, we remained solely polite acquaintances.

I, Jill, taught in the Department of Education when it had been a part of the Liberal Arts program at the University; I was the primary author of the School of Education’s accreditation document when the Department became a School. As a full professor who had taught children’s literature within Education for the past twenty years, I knew that things changed very slowly in the Education program. While I had hoped that a female dean might allow for more dynamic open discussions about gender issues, societal needs, and a strong philosophical base within the soon-to-be revised program, I quickly discovered that this was not to be. The administration in this new school made unilateral decisions based upon the perceived power base of various tenured faculty members.

Aisenberg and Harrington (1988) note that women aspiring to administrative positions are educated to be competitive and to function in the bureaucratic tradition. Female leaders, they observe, are aware of the need to identify and use the established power bases in order to make the changes necessary to reconceptualize and reconfigure the balance of power. There are, however, inherent problems with attempts to make change from within. Change takes time and patience. Despite an intellectual understanding, female staff often expect a new female administrator to address the power differentials directly and immediately, not realizing-or accepting-the need to maintain the delicate balance between gaining the support of those with established power, and simultaneously, opening spaces to provide opportunities for others to use their power. Unfortunately, a woman in administration is often expected to represent the wants and needs of all the females in the unit.

There also is the danger that the female administrator may become ensconced in the present imbalance of power. With the pressure to succeed as a woman in leadership, what begins as a unilateral decision to meet the expectations of those (usually male) above her so she can garner the necessary backing to accomplish her agenda, becomes the norm to meet their continued, escalating, and, often, implied demands. Change from within carries with it the very real possibility that the leader will unknowingly adapt to the institution as she uses its tools, rather than effecting the changes she initially envisioned (Greene, 1988; hooks, 1981). I felt that was happening in our new school.

I was aware of the chances that Kathy took each time she cautioned the School about plans for change or voiced an objection about a proposal. However, I did not immediately approach her about my concerns, for my position was not altogether safe.

Once at this university, I procured a position as Visiting Assistant Professor that was not unlike the current trend of hiring adjunct professors. I taught in this capacity for several years, having no input into the classes I taught. Furthermore, I could be called to teach as late as five days before the semester started. A woman supervised the school media program, of which I was a part. However, she did not possess the qualities that Kathy described in *School Leadership: Balancing Power with Caring*. Kathy argues for academic leadership that prefixes a sense of spirituality in caring, and writes, "To be a steward is to be accountable for the outcomes of the school or society without defining its purpose for others, or controlling, demanding compliance, or taking care of them" (Sernak, 1998, p.160). As an illustration, my administrator applied for and was given a grant to televise my course in children's literature. However, I was not consulted about or involved in writing the grant. Her limited caring surfaced again when she realized I was pregnant with my second daughter. To this day I feel her frustration with me as she exclaimed, "If you are just a baby machine you can't make it in this academic world!" I admired Kathy's work and her willingness to take risks, but as an outsider myself, I felt that she would probably fit best with those who were more directly established in Education.

As females working in academe, we know that relationships of interdependence and caring form the fundamental basis of both the private and public lives of women. Blount (1993), Gilligan (1982), Grimshaw (1986), Noddings (1984), and Tronto (1993) have already spoken about these issues in their professional writings. Further, we understand that women's education has continually been viewed as something that fulfills a different purpose. Nancy C. Parrish's (1998) recent study of Hollins College pinpoints some of the early differences between the knowledge advocated for women and for men in colleges. In her discussion of the early movement for women's colleges, Parrish noted that as a member of the Southern Women's Educational Alliance, Hollins alumna Eudora Ramsey Richardson spoke out against the narrowness in curriculum at women's colleges in 1930. When Richardson looked at the women studying in men's universities, she dubbed them "step-sisters for whom life is rendered as intolerable as possible" (Parrish, 1998, 18).

Throughout the early and mid-1900s women's institutions in the south were largely controlled by white, middle- to upperclass men who conceived what the proper women's curriculum would be. Thus, in 1957 Hollins President John R. Everett published "Neglecting the Wife Can Prove Dangerous" in the Hollins Herald. He warned, "A woman must be prepared to move with her husband, and she must be wise enough to raise the children properly. The complexity of this modern world will not allow feminine ignorance to live with masculine learning" (p.31). He argued for "a feminine ideal æ as opposed to a feminist one" (p.31).

By 1988 feminism had gained strength in the academy, changing the perception of the aim of formal education for females. Margaret L. Anderson (1988) observed that programs of women's studies were formed around two goals: "to build knowledge and a curriculum in which women are agents of knowledge and in which knowledge of women transforms the male-centered curriculum of traditional institutions" (p.38). Anderson suggested that women had largely been excluded from the process of creating the formalized canon of knowledge considered essential for undergraduate and graduate studies in the university, that a balanced curriculum could not simply add women's voices to the already established male canon. She suggested that feminism should look carefully at the unarticulated paradigms "that govern what and how we teach, even when we are unaware of these ruling principles" (p.53). The dismissal we experienced from our colleagues for our independent attempts to change the knowledge in each of our courses and for the ways in which we taught eventually served as the "tie that binds," connecting us and our ideas.

We sensed our mutual dissatisfaction with the status quo in our university community. We perceived that the administration held control of the faculty through a powerful negative dialogic framed around consensus and team leadership. We independently watched a new female leader enact a bureaucracy that practiced discriminatory punishment against some of the most productive scholars because they dared to question decisions made in the leadership team. We realized - Jill from past experiences and Kathy from continuous setbacks - that each time we voiced concern we risked reprimand: Jill might not be allowed to direct Ph.D.

studies or design graduate level courses in Children's Literature; Kathy might be denied tenure and promotion even if she had committed herself to the development of a strong professional record.

We were both continually denied material and human resources to support projects that created dialogue about, understanding of, and the potential for social justice activism, and were buoyed only by the empty rhetoric of those with positional power.

Our involvement in the School's reform was dynamic and committed. At one point Jill served as the Chair of the Faculty Affairs Committee and later as coordinator of Elementary Education; Kathy acted as facilitator for several Elementary Education retreats on collaboration and change and chaired the committee on Multicultural Education. Yet, we recognized that our ideals would not see fruition in the final revised program; rather, they were dismissed without serious consideration. We realized that though we had a woman as our leader, her leadership style was not supportive. In fact, she supported the ideal of factional discord. As a scholar educated in critical theory and who had no other faculty in her division, Kathy was isolated in her discussions. As a professor who believed that critical theory, philosophy, and literary analysis were basic components to effect any positive change in Education, Jill was viewed as inept in reconstruction discussions. Our vocalizations of caution and concern about the change gradually drew us together.

As we reflected on the literature and on our past experiences, we considered what we learned about women who are successful in academe and how the ways in which they thrive may affect junior faculty, particularly. Dealing with setbacks, factional discord, and gaining voice are dependent upon building support among one's colleagues. Kathy assumed that because of her past experience in higher education that she had the credibility to put forth ideas she knew were well-thought out and had contributed to successful curricular reform in her former institution. That, however, was inaccurate. There were two problems. She had just received her doctorate, which put people in the mindset that she was new to academia, despite their knowledge of her ten years of work in a teacher education program, five of which were spent as chair. She also did not realize that because her voice was heard and respected previously, that the same acceptance in her new position was not guaranteed. Key to that lack of awareness was her failure to note that females, Benedictine sisters, lead the college where she first worked, while men held virtually all of the key positions at her current university, with only a small percentage of women holding deanships in the various colleges. Female voices were heard and respected among the religious sisters (despite inequities in salaries between lay women and men). At the university, those voices were suspect and subject to male approval. The latter was clear when a panel of female full professors spoke to female graduate students and untenured female assistant professors on how to survive in the university. The advice, generally, was that because most women would be working for men, do as you're told, don't question, and don't challenge until you have tenure, and then only if you know you can win. For Kathy, the question was not solely survival, but change: what would it take to change the university so that women's voices were heard as readily as men's, and that women's ideas, scholarship, and research were taken as seriously as their male

counterparts'? Those questions gave her the impetus to continue to open the door for dialogue with Jill.

Early Conversations

We began to meet in one or the other's offices where we talked about our curriculum ideals and pedagogical practices, comparing our views to those of the "reformers." We began in the gossipy ways described by German sociologist Jörg R. Bergmann (1993) or feminist critic Patricia Meyer Spacks (1985). Bergmann explains that the "purest form" of gossip happens "either in a café or at a home in a living room" as the gossipers share "coffee and cake" (p.71). We began to meet over coffee at each other's homes, and eventually, to cook and talk together.

Many of our conversations began by bemoaning the plight of students who would come under this "reformed" program. We talked negatively about the current jargon of the leadership team, laughing conspiratorially about words such as "stakeholder" and "collaboration." Jill suggested that a stakeholder in this case often resembled Joan of Arc on the stake rather than someone with a stake in the process. Kathy struggled to collaborate with colleagues who consistently viewed her as the "Multicultural Ed. Person" who taught a required course to all undergraduate elementary education students, but who had no legitimate connection to colleagues, each of whom belonged, unquestioningly, to departmentally recognized and sanctioned programs.

We were aware of beginning our conversations negatively æ we needed to ventæ but also knew we would ultimately turn our attention toward the philosophical questions and underlying pedagogical and theoretical concerns that the larger community refused to acknowledge. Those get-togethers eventually led to the serious function of gossip that Spacks (1985) identifies when she asserts, "Its participants use talk about others to reflect about themselves, to express wonder and uncertainty and locate certainties, to enlarge their knowledge of one another" (p.5).

Our first year of "gossip" opened our private and public spheres to each other and created a foundation for trust. Our conversations increasingly focused on the professional learning and knowledge we brought to our discussions. Jill wanted to sit in Kathy's graduate class on caring and power, and Kathy asked to read a copy of Jill's book. We shared ideas, readings, and questions that generated a synergy of ideas resulting in personal and professional energy and growth. We learned we had both written about minorities in literature and education, thought extensively about the role of women in contemporary society, and wondered about their roles as feminist educators. What did that mean? How did one practice feminism in academe? What effect did it have on the larger population?

We finally had begun to examine how our one woman-to-woman mentoring relationship was changing our attitudes about women's roles in academia. Our insights were based on the recognition that our mentorship was reciprocal. We each informed the other; knowledge was not constrained by rank or disciplinary alliances. From the first, however, we acknowledged our frustrated experiences in

academic institutions. Throughout, our feminist mentorship centered on the need to transform the academic social and political climates from ones where women are imaginably considered equals as academics, but are allowed to speak only within the already established confines of male scholarship, into a feminist dialogue about women's intellectual work. Our hope was that reflection on women's writing and "gossipy" practices could define a healthy dialogue about the academic female community's habit of informal reading and discussions that might ultimately shape our ideals for women in academe.

At first, children's literature, as it portrays issues relating to gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, and social class, was the catalyst for our conversations about our roles, goals and frustrations as females in the university. However, our conversations soon veered beyond books for a younger audience. We began to consider three questions: 1) How did our reading, re-reading, and sharing of those stories about women æ written by women æ living in academia or in a paternal environment shape our individual perceptions about woman-to-woman mentoring in academia? 2) From the ensuing dialogues, how might we come to understand power in the academy as it relates to women's perceived roles in society? 3) What is the significance of conversation and voice in intellectual thought and research practices?

This paper is the result of many discussions æ intellectual, gossipy, griping, but always productive to our intellectual reflection and growth. During this past year, we have begun to find stories that might help us comprehend how our professional ideals could be webbed into the larger public attitudes about women as intellectuals and artists, but we are still far from framing a feminist stance for social and political change.

Our discussions have not been framed by the works of critical theorists, though we have turned to women who write feminist theory as our conversations evolve from the informal, unfocused position of "gossip" to the reflexive readings of the stories by women we had earlier read on our own. We wished to re-read women who had written both for themselves and a popular audience of women. We hoped that this reading might define how women's roles are shaped by the popular press, in books and movies, and even in the classrooms at American institutions of higher learning. We wanted to discover how women describe women; what roles female fiction gives to older women established in society as compared to younger women who are being mentored by males and females; if the stories we remembered and wanted to share contained a feminine voice advocating social and political change.

Changing Our Venue

We began to realize that while Jill could not move from Purdue University Kathy would probably need to find a new professional home where others shared her interests. Jill encouraged Kathy to seek a position where her skills as a graduate student mentor would be used, and Kathy accepted a job in Rowan University's graduate program in Educational Leadership. Prior to Kathy's leaving for her new position, we agreed to read books by female authors of children's, adolescent, and adult fiction. Our initial negotiations of texts and authors happened via e-mail after

Kathy's departure. It soon became apparent that we didn't want to first turn to children's or adolescent literature. Our focus became women's writing that discussed women's roles in society.

By the time we met for three "working days" in October we had identified several stories we hoped to share: Virginia Woolf was identified by Kathy. Jill suggested reading *A Room of One's Own* and *The Voyage Out*. Kathy wanted to re-read Chopin's (1972) *The Awakening*. Jill added Charlotte Perkins Gilman's (1973/1899) *Yellow Wallpaper* and Sarah Orne Jewett's (1997) *White Heron* and *Country of the Pointed Firs*.

Once Kathy and Jill had agreed to meet in October, they began planning. Kathy wrote:

I took out a video from our library of a British actress "giving" Woolf's *Room of One's Own* address. You and I definitely need to watch that together. It is incredible. . . . I would very much like to read *The Voyage Out* and *Yellow Wallpaper*. I've been keeping notes as I read *The Awakening* and will do so with the others. Will get Gilman's *Concerning Children* as well¹.

Kathy and Jill had toyed with adding Zora Neal Hurston and other minority writers to their list, but then Jill wrote back:

At this point I'm willing to deny my right to judge A-A female writers until I understand earlier women more like me better and what they say to us about ourselves. So, I'm definitely going to read Gilman on children, and I will bring the book of criticism about Chopin when I come. I've come to a conclusion that American women writers at the turn of the century faced a different literary and social venue than the women in England at the same time. I'm not sure if that would hold beyond Woolf, and I have to remind myself that she is later than the other women. I guess we could look at something by another English woman in an earlier time, but who? Jane Austin? I'm sick of the "family" stories she writes. Maybe we could watch an old movie of *Pride and Prejudice* and see if I'm wrong, but I think the reasons she has been popular with both men and women for so long and been accepted more solidly on the canon have to do with the fact that she is light and she writes about romance and her heroines always end their stories happily-ever-after--in marriage. So, maybe we could consider George Eliot's *Mill on the Floss*? We can talk about it when I get there. I'll bring Woolf, Chopin, some [Emily] Dickinson, Gilman and perhaps Hurston.

Kathy was balancing the rigors of a new job in a new location, and she informed Jill,

ave not read as much as I wanted, but I have been swamped with the new reading material for my courses I've been asked to pitch hit while the prof is in Malta. Will tell you more about that when you get here. Have read *A Room of One's Own*, and *The Awakening*. Am in the midst of

A Voyage Out and hope to get to *Yellow Wallpaper* before you arrive. Don't have time to address your questions now as have meetings and classes all day.

Personal Voices within Literary Conversations

Our process for guiding our mutual reading began in a manner congruent with Sara Mills's (1995) discussion of feminist stylistics:

First, we need to make a close textual analysis of the text, identifying certain features of form - literary conventions, syntax, lexis, genre and so on: the clues to interpretation. Second, we need to make some generalized predictions about groups of readers' background knowledge - of language, of literary conventions - and of their models of the world. By uniting these two kinds of information, it should be possible to build up a picture of how specified social groups might read a text. (p. 35)

Kathy picked Jill up at the airport and drove her home. We became engaged in a conversation centered on the use of first person narrative and the dilemma of older women as mentors. We turned to Virginia Woolf (1991/1915). Kathy confessed that she did not enjoy reading *The Voyage Out*, that she had not been able to finish it. Jill had brought her copy of the book, and she had marked several passages that she wanted to talk about with Kathy. However, we both realized that we weren't willing (or ready) to discuss this book.

Kathy had rented the film version of Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (Shepherd, 1995), and we watched the film together that first night. We began an animated conversation about Woolf's ideal of a room of one's own. Kathy suggested she was not personally a part of the feminine intellectual ideal if one had to have independence and money to study and to write; she had always lived with little money. Jill commented that having a good husband who made enough money to buy the room would not allow women to become scholars; in her experience, woman's work as housekeeper had to be finished prior to sitting at one's writing desk. As we talked about Virginia Woolf, we sensed that she had experienced these same frustrations. Both Kathy and Jill thought that Woolf was not telling her audience that she, as a woman who had been writing, had a room of her own. Rather, she was bemoaning that the room she describes is an idealized place she hopes for, not one she had ever experienced. Still, we sensed that the enclosed atmosphere contained duplicity in its imagery. Woolf (1957/1929) writes,

The rooms differ so completely; they are calm or thunderous; open on to the sea, or, on the contrary, give on to a prison yard; are hung with washing; or alive with opals and silks; are hard as horsehair or soft as feathers æ one has only to go into any room in any street for the whole of that complex force of femininity to fly in one's face. How should it be otherwise? For women have sat indoors all these millions of years, so that by this time the very walls are permeated by their creative force, which has, indeed, so overcharged the capacity of bricks and mortar that it must needs harness itself to pens and brushes and business and politics.

But this creative power differs greatly from the creative power of men. (p. 87)

Woolf asks her reader, "Ought not education to bring out and fortify the differences rather than the similarities?" (p. 88). We immediately noted Woolf's use of description: woman as an isolated artist; the confines of the room; the constancy of woman's place in-doors. At the same time, Woolf allowed us to pause and consider what "that complex force of femininity" was had caused the very walls to be "permeated by their creative force" (p. 87). And we acknowledged that our "rooms" had been very different, both during our youth and once we were married.

Our conversation lasted long into the night. We turned from Woolf to Chopin (Jill didn't like the woman in *The Awakening* and couldn't sympathize with her as a character; Kathy found the portrayal honest. Then we bounded off to read part of Gilman's *Concerning Children* since Kathy hadn't had time to read it before Jill arrived. Kathy was struck by Gilman's discussion of education. She began to wonder if Gilman had influenced John Dewey. She had recently read something in Dewey that she felt sounded "almost like plagiarism." At the end of the night, Kathy took her dog for a walk to have some singular time to think while Jill wrote in her journal:

Are there "roles" that set our imagery of women up?

Journals of the same period?

Books on Victorian reading?

How do women write for a female audience?

Letters, diaries, etc. of

Gilman

Chopin

Jewett

Woolf

How do these people fit in today's literary studies?

Journal articles? (when?--70s, 80s)

Presentations at MLA, MMLA (issues with topics)

Norton anthologies

Women's studies programs

Are there mirrors in the stories that are timeless, universal?

for instance, "fashioning women to fit into society"

In the morning we began our conversations all over, this time spending a long time discussing why we might view particular characters in divergent ways. We used the background knowledge of our private and public experiences to discuss our worldviews, and read and discussed portions of the literature we had gathered to enhance our knowledge of ourselves as both intellectuals and artists in the academy.

The process for our project is not linear. Some of it has come from remembrances of our initial tentative contacts, the gentle experiments in trust, the growing awareness of a developing mentoring relationship, and the meandering of our hearts and minds as we tried to understand how we were teaching. We have come

to realize we are informally mentoring each other about both our personal and professional ways of researching and writing. We have traveled beyond our common interest in children's literature and extended our interests to women authors who contributed not only to our professional relationship, but also to our particular explorations of women's place in academia. During our first extended "work"² session at Kathy's new venue, we admitted as we drove to Kathy's new university that we hadn't had so much intellectual fun in years. We confessed that though we had really used our brains and talked about women in society we actually felt as if we had been playing rather than working. Although we acknowledged that we could not sustain such "playfulness" for great lengths of time, we did realize that the work we did revitalized us. Our shared interest in children's literature enabled us to see our work and "hardships" in a different light. We began to view our work as a continuation of that of women writers before us. We were not victims, but women carrying on the work for a different scholarship and a parity of acceptance with males within the academy.

Reading and Reflection

"To educate women to take themselves seriously at all is, in itself, a subversive act" (Aisenberg & Harrington 1988, p.139). Perhaps that is why we felt out of place in our university: we taught each other to take ourselves and our ideas seriously, and to see ourselves as legitimate members of the academy, despite the values we held counter to it. As good teachers know, however, learning a concept is far from internalizing it. Practice in living what we intellectually believed was necessary. Through that need to try on in order to wear comfortably, we learned the importance of women-mentoring-women. There was not the need to explain ourselves to each other, or to rationalize our gossiping. We knew the code and the culture of womenspeak.

Our mentorship began simply. We found soulmates in our mutual delight and admiration for children's literature. We shared our favorite stories, ones that we particularly liked when our own children were young; we debated the merits of past and current Caldecott and Newbery Award winners. Weaving in and out of those discussions were periodic wonderings about female children's authors, the kinds of books they wrote, and the effect those stories had on children and their perceptions of gender and diversity. From those shared "office dialogues," we shifted the place of our conversations into the social world.

Our gossip became more intimate as our focus became less academic discussion and more sharing of our professional lives through personal lenses. Little by little we exposed bits of our inner-selves, beginning to trust that the other would hold those pieces with gentleness and respect. Our private and the public lives shifted, one or the other foregrounding, but both always present. There was no need to explain or defend. Our talk was natural, the process understood, accepted, and expected.

The intimacy of our homes eventually emerged as our gathering place. We shared meals together, cooking, and gossiping. We opened the private spaces of our

persona via our homes, as well as through our conversations both at work and in leisure. Trust resulted. The personal and the professional merged as we began to understand our need to be connected through more than the academic. It became crucial to comfortably discuss the mundane aspects of our lives as well as the intellectual that was critical to our academic life, for the former inspired our interpretations of the latter. The relationship, which we cognizantly watched grow into friendship, had evolved into academic mentorship as well.

Questions pertaining to the importance of women mentoring women, not solely for success in the university, but as sponsors who advocate taking women's creativity and conversations seriously, surfaced in our discussions. In Chopin's (1972), Jewett's (1992, 1973/1899), and Gilman's (1996, 1997) writings, we found poignant examples of women's mentoring relationships. We specifically noted mature, experienced women aiding women on the cusp of a not-quite-conscious desire to extend the sexual and relational self, fostered by social encouragement, to include the intellectual, active self, aspects not revered by the prevailing social and institutional norms for change (Aisenberg & Harrington, 1988). We noted that artisans often mentored younger women, but the former were viewed by those young heroines with neutral skepticism since they had isolated themselves from the worlds of family and social power. We realized that more traditional older women often pushed younger women into conventional feminine roles. We have begun to acknowledge that women can change other women in both negative and positive ways.

Our year's work has caused us to form many new questions:
What sessions do we choose to attend at professional conferences?
When and how do we empower others?
How do women's experiences that are personal and reflexive become professional?
How do we activate our readings?
How do we value the men in our profession?

To ask how one might practice feminism in academe seems like an oxymoron. Yet, after many discussions concerning our experiences as teachers, writers, and researchers, and our attempts to make sense of our experiences within the framework of our feminist³ beliefs, we realize that is our question. Note that our concern does not revolve around discussing or debating feminist theory and precepts, but around enactment of them. How do we carry out our beliefs? How do we equate those based on the legitimate value of caring, nurturing, interdependency, within our understandings of self in relation to others? How can we create and sustain a sense of community where individuals are no more important than the whole, and at the same time recognize the whole derives its meaning from the individual? How could women's mentoring fit within a system entrenched in hierarchical relationships, sexual exploitation and silencing of women and other non-hegemonic persons, and the other myriad of taken-for-granted power-as-control relations?

Through our writing and research, through our teaching, and through the business

of our departments we have wrestled with the telling of complicated themes of power that disagreeably affect women, people of color, persons with disabilities, homosexuals, and those dealing with multiple discriminations. We have sought to go beyond simply re-telling our experiences, and to use our work as a catalyst to do shared acts of deconstruction. At the same time, we realize that we are not yet ready to seek ways of constructing communities that are nurturing and interdependent within the academy. In the end, we hope to use our newly-founded acts of feminism as models for legitimating difference both within and outside the walls of academe. At this point we are not ready to enact a code. We feel a need to explore more feminine works.

Mentoring for Change

We began by returning to our literary backgrounds, by choosing stories written by women that suggested ways that women mentor each other in a banal social and/or political setting where interaction is controlled by rules of the already established power base. We have returned to fiction, reading and re-reading in order to see what the authors suggest to us about change within our private, social, and professional situations. Often, however, we find more questions within the texts than answers, and our conversations return to individual experiences, possible ways of changing our views about academia, and new ways of reading old traditions. Our reflections on the stories and lives of women we read about have suggested that women's sphere is multi-layered and circuitous: both the intellectual and the emotional touch when we talk.

As we returned to the women who had earlier affected one of us through their writing, we have come to realize that our readings are not always the same. As we explore those similarities and differences, we realize that our conversations have mentored us to new actions and caused us to pose new questions. These fictional stories do not provide concrete answers about women's place in academic. Rather, the books have become our personal intertextual guideposts in our mentoring conversations about why we speak out in defense of others when we would choose to remain silent, and how we perceive ourselves as intermediary guides for others in the academic milieu of tradition and power. While our conversations have not established a particular agenda for social and political change, they have shown us that our interactions on women's fiction can guide our interpretation of how the personal feminine voice - both the written and the spoken - might transform current professional ideals for feminine mentorship within academe.

Footnotes

¹ E-mail conversation is recorded as sent. As such, it is often colloquial in style. This writing has become an informal activity that allows our immediate ideas about our mutual readings to flow rapidly and regularly.

² Our "work" consisted of dialogue and discussion about the readings mentioned above; independent writing about our personal/professional understandings about

the female characters, the writers' intents about them, and ways in which we came to better understand our positions, women's mentoring women, and our scholarship within a university; dialogues about our writings; and questions to pursue regarding our work together regarding women's mentoring and scholarship. Through our belief in social activism to change the place of women and their writing in the academy, we worked to enact Dewey's ideas of freedom, not just for self, but for the community: "Éthe basic freedom is that of freedom of mind and of whatever degree of freedom of action and experience is necessary to produce freedom of intelligence" (quote in Greene, 1988, p.43). In essence, however, our work blended our personal and professional lives, the former providing a lens from which to view and understand the latter. Our work resulted in two conference presentations and two papers, accomplished together. We continue to explore traditional ways of learning and how they affect women in academe and their scholarship.

³ We conceptualize feminism and social activism within the framework of Freire's notion of conscientization, the possession of critical consciousness, understanding and addressing the reality one lives, having the consciousness of that reality, knowing that society can be made and remade by human action and organized groups, and transforming school and society away from authoritarian relations and undemocratic, unequal distribution of power (Lankshear, 1993; Schor, 1993).

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