

# Mormon Women's Forum

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## Feminist Activism at BYU: A VOICE for Change

*Focus on VOICE: BYU's Committee to Promote the Status of Women*

**M**any people consider Brigham Young University, the Mormon-owned school, to be a haven for old-fashioned "family values." Perhaps it is. But BYU is also a haven for old-fashioned sexist ideologies and misogynist practices. That's why, in 1988, several women who were tired of second-class status organized a small discussion group to address women's issues. We called ourselves the BYU Committee to Promote the Status of Women. We boasted about fifteen members.

In 1989 we changed our name to VOICE: BYU's Committee to Promote the Status of Women, and in 1990 we became an official member of the BYU Student Association. During the 1991-92 school year, VOICE, now 150 members

strong, organized several events to call attention to the problem of violence against women. Most notably, we plastered BYU's campus with ironic notices announcing that, in order to curb violence against women, a curfew had been placed on men. Our attempt at consciousness-raising via turning the tables received national media attention, and we found ourselves the subjects of heartening praise and harsh criticism. In the following, five members of the BYU community who have been intimately involved with VOICE share their personal perspectives about women's issues and feminist activism at BYU: Kristin Rushforth, Mary Ellen Robertson, Lara Harris, Cecilia Konchar Farr and Mike Austin.

### A VOICE from the Margins

Kristin Rushforth

In September of 1988 I sat at a conference table with four other women discussing how and why women are marginalized at BYU. We talked about the hostility we felt from our peers toward feminism and toward us. Two hours flew by. The support we felt from one another was remarkable. I had been discouraged and depressed. Just that morning a classmate had asked me, "If you don't like it here, why don't you leave?" I was ready to. I had been accepted at the University of Utah and was preparing to transfer. But that evening, the idea of helping establish an official feminist organization at BYU gave me a purpose to stay. And the women there gave me the strength. We decided to meet again and call ourselves the BYU Committee to Promote the Status of Women (CPSW). In 1989 we added VOICE to our name, and in 1990 we became an official member of the BYU student association.

After one of our first meetings, I sat in a friend's apartment with six other women

talking about rape. As the conversation grew, abstract theory became harsh reality. A woman whom I had known for several months began to talk for the first time about how she was date raped in high school. Another friend embraced her and whispered, "I know what that pit in your stomach feels like. It happened to me, too." She told us what had happened that night (she even remembered the date) and how the man who held her hands down while she struggled called her the next morning to ask if she wanted to go skiing. We sat in a circle that night with our arms around each other, crying, laughing, healing. I was the only woman in that circle of seven who hadn't been assaulted or raped. That evening changed my life. I began to believe that as a woman who has never been sexually abused, molested, assaulted, or raped, I may be in the minority.

We decided that night to invite a counselor from the Rape Crisis Center to speak to CPSW. We set the date and filed the proper speaker-approval forms. The speaker was rejected. "Rape is a very controversial issue," we were told by John Stolton, then a university vice president. "You have to understand that we have

conservative contributors who wouldn't appreciate your approach." Our approach was to openly discuss the issues, to provide a forum for women to express their fears and concerns and to talk about their past experiences. We hadn't ever thought of rape as a "controversial issue" and had therefore completely overlooked the fact that our overtly anti-rape agenda might offend any of the university's benefactors who happen to be pro-rape. "If you want to talk about it" ("it" meaning rape—he never did say the word), "we have a campus policeman who can address your group," Stolton told us over the phone. We asked for the decision to be put in writing. He declined. And for good reason. The administration now says they "don't recall" the incident. Despite the administration's disapproval, we invited the speaker. We had a huge turnout that night.

This year when we chose rape prevention as our primary focus, we had no idea how many women would come to us to tell their stories. During a January speak-out sponsored by VOICE, women stood and said, without shame, "Yes, it happened to me." Karen, a single mom who contacted VOICE after our mock curfew proposal,



was the first to tell her story. "I was raped," she said, then paused. "And it wasn't my fault." She told how a BYU football player hid himself in her bedroom, brutally raped her, then threatened her baby daughter. Karen encouraged other survivors to talk. They did. Nine other women stood and told their stories of surviving rape and chronic sexual abuse. Most of the women who spoke were raped on a date or by an acquaintance and several women were raped here at BYU (though, as you'd predict, none of them were actually raped on campus).

Several other women spoke about still other consequences of female devaluation. One woman remembered passing two male students in the Richards Building on her way to ballet class. "Hey, I'd like a piece of that," one said to the other, as they watched her walk by. Objectification of this sort always leads to violence. In a paradigm where women are reduced to objects and men occupy the subject position, there is really no such thing as rape. Unless both partners are seen as equal, autonomous individuals with separate desires, rape cannot really occur. Because an object has no will. No power.

No voice.

In the woman-as-object economy, women never actually refuse sex anyway, as we learn from advertisement after advertisement. Women are always sexually ready and available—not only to their lovers, but also to their bosses, their professors, their colleagues, even to their fathers and brothers. If they resist sex, if they brush a hand away, or say no, or even kick or bite, it's all just a turn-on, a little tricky part to make the male conquest a bit more exciting. But in the end it's all okay and a man can call a woman the morning after he's raped her to chat about snow conditions and lift ticket prices because there's no such thing as rape. Women are simply objects, ready for the taking.

In a recent survey of undergraduate college men conducted by Ms, 91 percent agreed with the statement, "I like to dominate a woman," 86 percent agreed with the statement, "I enjoy the conquest part of sex," and 83 percent said that "some women look like they're just asking to be raped." How can a woman ask to be raped? By definition, rape means not asking for it. Again, in a paradigm where a woman can ask for (consent to) rape (non-

consenting sex), rape doesn't really exist. Rape happens because too many men foster these attitudes, not because too many women walk alone after dark. In order to stop rape, we must teach men to respect women as their equals. No can of Mace or whistle on a key chain will do the trick. By now almost everyone knows that only about 10 percent of rapes are committed by lurking strangers, yet blitz rape is still our primary focus. Rape prevention is always couched in terms of what women should and shouldn't do (always check the back seat, never walk alone), not in terms of what men should and shouldn't do (always listen to and respect women's desires, never treat women as sexual objects).

Last November after a woman had been attacked in broad daylight on BYU campus, we were offered the same old advice: "Women: Never Walk Alone," the Daily Universe front page headline read the day after the attack. As a dramatic departure from this approach of placing the responsibility for rape prevention on women, VOICE members decided to turn the tables. On November 20, 1991, we blitzed the campus with flyers reading:



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*Due to the increase in violence against women on BYU campus, a new curfew has been instated. Beginning Wednesday, November 20, men will no longer be allowed to walk alone or in all-male groups from 10 p.m. until 6 a.m.*

*Those men who must travel on or through campus during curfew hours must be accompanied by two women in order to demonstrate that they are not threatening.*

*Provisions have been made for men who need to be escorted home. Contact your BYU ward Relief Society Presidencies any time.*

We hoped that this would allow men an opportunity to walk for one imaginary moment in women's shoes. Yet some people felt that we had unfairly cast all men as rapists. That was certainly not our intent. Rather, we attempted a simple paradigm shift: imagine, as a solution to rape, telling all men to stay indoors after dark. Absurd? Exactly.

"First off," one man explained to me, "most rapes are date rapes, so what good would a curfew do anyway?" Now you're asking the obvious questions, I told him, the ones we should have been asking when it was suggested time and time again that limiting women's personal freedoms would solve the problem of rape.

Although there are, of course, legitimate safety concerns for women, a de facto female curfew is not a reasonable solution. The only real solution is to stop socializing men to be violent and aggressive. There is not, as one man told me shortly after the rally, "a fine line between sex and rape." His statement reflects the common but misguided assumption that sexual intimacy is inherently male-dominated and male-aggressive. We must stop sending men the message that sexual aggression against a woman's will is normal. It is not normal. It is rape.

Although it has been sadly subverted by the media, this was our only point. We realized at the outset that our methods were controversial and that we'd take some flak. But I was not prepared for all the hostility and hate that would come our way. We received hate mail, obscene phone calls, even death threats.

A few months ago, I stood in the Wilkinson Center next to the VOICE mailbox with a letter frozen in my hand. "I'll find you, bitch," the last sentence read. Scrawled on the page in sloppy handwriting were the most terrifying words I'd ever read. Sent all the way from Queens, New

York, where I'd spoken on a radio show, this threat of rape and murder found me, with only my name and "BYU, Utah," printed on the envelope. It occurred to me that I should send the letter to the police, but the thought made me cringe. I wanted to erase the words from existence, not acknowledge to strangers that they were real. The threats he made were about me, my body, raped and mutilated on the page.

As I stood there, against that cold brick wall, I realized why so many women don't report rape. They have to relive it again and again in front of incredulous onlookers. For centuries in France women were subjected to a courtroom gynecological exam in order to "prove" that they had been raped. Today, our tactics are only slightly less violating, as the William Kennedy Smith trial demonstrated. Patricia Bowman's underwear was waved before the jury, and her body parts were referred to again and again. And for what? For her to be told that although three other women say that they, too, were sexually assaulted or raped by this man, his word is more credible than hers. And as for the other women, we wouldn't even listen to their stories. Their testimonies were deemed "irrelevant." I had always thought that if I were ever in that situation, I'd be strong and powerful and tell the world the truth. But as I stood in the Wilkinson Center with that letter in my hand, I wondered. Why take it to trial and be victimized again, this time in public? I never sent that letter to the police.

The sort of hostility VOICE has encountered illustrates just what women are still up against. Perhaps now more than ever, people refuse to acknowledge that inequality exists. When members of VOICE stand and insist that it does, insist that things must change, even insist that men must take some responsibility in changing their behaviors and attitudes, we are derided by men and women alike who prefer to believe that things are fine just as they are and that, if there's trouble, it's only because a bunch of malcontented, unattractive coeds can't find husbands, as one journalist put it.

We have been especially reduced to this position within our own community. Because the Mormon Church generally and BYU specifically are strongholds of inequality where patriarchy is still held up as an institution ordained of God, our demands for change have been especially threatening. For four years I have tried, in various ways, to fight the injustices created by

patriarchy within a patriarchal system—a task which often seems akin to butting my head against a brick wall. After I helped organize a VOICE demonstration against the Miss Utah pageant three years ago, a professor told me disparagingly, "You need to work within the system if you want to effect change." Yet this sentiment seems to me, at moments, frighteningly similar to working within the Ku Klux Klan to combat racism.

Sadly enough, gender inequality seems to be a fundamental cornerstone of a church and a university which still preach patriarchy. Abuse and rape aren't aberrations in this institution of male privilege. They are its natural extensions. Thus, when we stand up and say, simply, "Stop rape, stop abuse, stop harassment," instantly the patriarchal powers that be set out to silence us. It seems clear to me that somebody else has recognized the connection. Somebody else must recognize that speaking out against rape, sexual abuse, spouse abuse, child abuse, and even eating disorders means speaking out against the male privilege engendered by patriarchy.

Thus, we are a threat. And because we are a threat (and burnings at the stake are no longer appropriate), we are diminished, belittled, patronized, and dismissed. After we drew attention to the fact that rape happens at BYU, letters reportedly swamped the administrative offices. People were outraged. But not by the fact that BYU had been covering up campus rapes or refusing to gather data about rape and sexual assault involving their students. They weren't outraged that certain counselors at BYU had been advising women to "repent" after date rape incidents. They weren't even outraged that there [was] no Women's Resource Center or like place for women to seek help, all of which VOICE pointed out. These contributors to the university, we are told, were outraged because BYU "allows" an openly feminist group to meet on God's campus.

Obviously, we're not popular with the people who run the show. When the university does feel it necessary to create task forces or committees to address women's issues, we are far from the bargaining table. Although members of VOICE had been addressing issues of inequality for three years, when a Women's Concerns Committee was finally established at BYU, the actual head of the committee was, of course, a male student. And the two female students appointed were both openly hostile to feminism in general and

VOICE in particular.

So as I prepared to graduate, I left BYU not with a sense of accomplishment, a sense of a job well done, but with a sense of alienation and lingering animosity. Though I probably devoted more total hours to VOICE than to any of my academic pursuits, sometimes I feel as if the only thing I have to show for it are the bags beneath my eyes. I don't know how long VOICE will survive at a university that is seeking desperately to rid itself of dissenting faculty and students and to actively recruit those who toe the party

line.

But I do know that BYU needs VOICE. I know because recently a woman sat in my living room and told me that VOICE was the only organization she knew to contact after she was raped by a fellow student. I know because, in a VOICE meeting, I heard a woman speak, for the first time, about the chronic abuse she had faced for years at the hands of her father, a counselor in a bishopric. I know because the night we talked about eating disorders, four women subsequently sought counseling who may not have done

so otherwise. BYU needs VOICE because BYU needs a safe place where women can throw their arms around one another and listen to other women's voices.

*Kristin Rushforth graduated from BYU in August 1992. An English major, she was the first BYU student to receive a minor in Women's Studies. Kristin was one of the founders of VOICE and participated in feminist activism throughout her college career. She is currently working towards a master's degree in Women's Studies at Ohio State University.*

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## Letters



Thank you for the Mother in Heaven issue. I am interested in how tenaciously some people hold on to religious teachings that others experience as confining, unexpansive, and even unhealthy, cruel, and unfair. Our traditional concept of God is such a teaching. I believe Paul Toscano was correct in saying that Joseph Smith, even having had the First Vision experience, shifted his concept of God throughout the years. Joseph Smith seemed to allow himself flexibility with doctrine, yet we insist on casting doctrine, including that of the Godhead, in stone. I am not convinced in reading scripture or the words of latter-day prophets that rigid interpretations serve us. Joseph Smith's religious concepts evolved, and various church teachings since his time have shifted in content or emphasis. I think we can learn much from the way scripture is written. The contradictions, inconsistencies, and the use of parables and stories leave much room for interpretation and keep scripture relevant and useful for each of us, no matter how different we are.

It used to disturb me that Christ taught in such a vague and indirect way. Why didn't he preach directly and succinctly so we wouldn't miss the point? I wasn't dumb and was eager to learn to grow spiritually, but his intentional obtuseness made me feel stupid, unperceptive and spiritually inadequate. Many times I turned to other's interpretations because either I didn't understand what Christ was saying or didn't know if my interpretation was correct.

With the abundance of Biblical interpretation from every religious corner, I've come to appreciate the way Christ taught. I find myself very uncomfortable with the

cocky assurance, sometimes zealous confidence and many times arrogance of TV ministers especially when compared to Christ's unpretentious teachings. The eloquence and broadness of Christ's teachings make General Conference seem prosaic and obvious. Christ tried to stretch people beyond their traditional ways of viewing things and get them to think for themselves. He wasn't trying to dispense answers. It was a far cry from McConkie's advice, "it is my province to teach to the Church what the doctrine is. It is your province to echo what I say or to remain silent." The Pharisees, I believe, greatly aggravated Christ because they were so entrenched in their narrow observance of rules and teachings and their slavish adherence to dogma that they were unresponsive to new circumstances, common sense, and more meaningful and humane ways of viewing things.

The need to be right in scriptural interpretation and doctrine gives us a sense of security. Yet it can also close us off from new possibility. So can following authorities unquestioningly. Even Brigham Young saw the danger in this: "Some may say, 'Brethren, you who lead the Church, we have all confidence in you, we are not in the least afraid but what everything will go right under your superintendence....' I do not wish any Latter-day Saint in this world, nor in heaven, to be satisfied with anything I do, unless the Spirit of the Lord Jesus Christ, the spirit of revelation, makes them satisfied. I am fearful they settle down in a state of blind self-security, trusting their eternal destiny in the hands of their leaders with a reckless confidence that in itself would thwart the purposes of God in their salvation, and weaken the influence they could give their leaders...." JD 3:45; 9:150.

Scripture and doctrine are not final authorities but springboards for releasing us from our insulated, narrow positions. As humans we are all Pharisees and need a reorientation from time to time. Christ talked about being reborn. It might be worthwhile to view rebirth as opening ourselves up to possibility. Rebirth may be learning to trust our sense of things and not depending solely on outside authority. Christ defied many of the notions of his day. Perhaps he established the precedent for giving us more space to think, probe, feel and trust our way to truth.

Carlan Youkstetter  
San Marino, CA

I am a subscriber to MWF. I and some friends have organized the first retreat for Mormon women in the Northwest, which will occur April 23-24. Those who will be coming will be a pretty mixed group, consisting of *Exponent II* and *MWF* readers, but also many who have never seen these publications and are just beginning to discover and examine issues which have been repressed.

Would it be possible for the Forum to contribute some copies of past issues so that we could make them available for the women to examine? I would be particularly thrilled to have copies of the last issue (3:3-4). My sister, two sisters-in-law and I were on the phone to each other within hours after receiving it. We couldn't put it down!!

Tell Lavina that there is a silent standing ovation going on!

Sue Phair  
Salem, OR

I received a copy of Mormon Women's Forum and would like to make just a comment or two. Of course, there is no such

# The Birth of a Feminist at BYU

Mary Ellen Robertson

As I've thought about the events that launched me into feminist activism, I've noticed that the most pivotal experiences happened while I was a student at Brigham Young University. I'm not sure whether this is a compliment or an insult to the institution, but it was the experiences I had at BYU that forced me out of apathy and helped me find my voice.

I can pinpoint several experiences that propelled me to become involved in women's issues at BYU. The first incident was an activity sponsored by the Sportsmen's Club. The club members were divided into teams and sent out to round up women for what they called the Sweetie Pie Scavenger Hunt. Qualities (such as hair color, darkest tan, or whether you're related to a General Authority) were assigned certain point values, and the Sportsmen sallied forth to accumulate women. The group with the highest point tally at the end won the game.

Under the guise of getting to know lots of women, this club was responsible for rendering women nothing more than objects to be scavenged, and calling such objectification "fun." My entire value as a human being was reduced to ten points, and I was

supposed to enjoy it? Try as they might, no one will ever convince me that I had fun at this activity.

Another situation occurred later the same year. A friend was enrolled in a marriage prep class and was having difficulty with the teacher's attitudes. During a discussion on divorce, he asserted that there are never reasons for divorce, only justifications. (Since she was divorced, this position was especially disturbing.) A discussion ensued which brought up abuse and rape. The professor said that in some cases of rape the woman is not responsible—for instance, if the attack is brutal or if she is attacked by a stranger—but cases of date rape are "another story." In a letter to the dean, my friend wrote, "In effect, [this] professor is singing yet another verse of the age-old song that holds a woman responsible for anything a man chooses to do to her." And thus we see negative gender stereotypes, misogyny, and tacitly condoning violence against women masquerading as part of this professor's ideas of preparation for marriage.

Another forum for perpetuating negative attitudes toward women and women's issues was our own campus newspaper. Headlines such as "Rape Seminars Planned to Inform Women" and "Women, Never Walk Alone" again place sole responsibility on women to prevent attacks while never

addressing males' roles in either the attack or in the prevention of attacks.

Numerous letters to the editor displayed a blame-the-victim mentality rather than offering any sympathy for those who survived such abuse. This was the case with a letter responding to an article on rape. "It's hard for me to have compassion for Allison's roommate who was raped," the letter read. "I have asked 17 persons about that article and 15 agreed with me: the roommate asked for it." The author went on to say that under the circumstances, this woman and others like her, "set the men on fire with their 'making out' and then they wonder why they get hurt. Sorry, I can't call this rape." With these kinds of attitudes pervading the BYU campus, it is difficult to get people to listen to another point of view, let alone to make inroads for change.

While these are rather blatant illustrations of the kinds of attitudes I've encountered at BYU, everyday instances of sexism and stereotyping are no less difficult to deal with. For example, when I decided to double major late in my academic career, it was, according to some, because I hadn't found a man.

I've encountered similar problems at my campus job as a writing tutor. After helping a young man get started on a paper, he praised my computer prowess—and then

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thing as unbiased journalism; an article will inevitably reflect the bias of the writer. Some of the "excerpts" and "quotations" in your chronology are obviously intended to persuade readers to accept your viewpoint, but I feel they misrepresent the original intent and are misleading.

First of all, I have been a Family Practice physician in the Army now for twelve years. I first made the acquaintance of Barbara Smith when her husband was serving in the Asia area presidency and they made frequent trips to Korea where I was stationed. I am a convert since 1975, but I was unaware of the statements you referenced about the military until she told me about them once in Korea in 1988 or 1989. She told me she made that statement after many visits to military bases around the world in the capacity of General Relief Society President in which she had been unable to meet a single LDS enlisted woman who had maintained her chastity. From what I have seen, I could not agree more, although I can only speak from my own experience in the

Army. Officers are able to maintain a certain amount of control over their environment and lives, but enlisted soldiers who must live in the barracks do not have such control. During my 3 1/2 years in Korea, we opened our doors to dozens of soldiers, either single or separated from their families, and I know that the pressure on both male and female members of the Church to abandon their standards and lifestyle is tremendous.

The Church's stand against the ERA is that it is a poor piece of legislation. There are already many laws present that are not enforced that address many of the problems, and other specific laws can and need to be enacted to address remaining problem areas. But the ERA is so broad and so vague that, if it were enacted, it would be followed by extensive litigation in which issues would be decided by judicial fiat instead of by the legislative process in which citizens can make a difference. I know of no LDS woman who is opposed to equal rights; we are only divided on the

question of the wisest means of obtaining those rights.

I think the First Presidency's statement on birth control makes it perfectly clear that each couple should make a prayerful decision concerning this while keeping in mind our basic goals. In keeping with that statement, I have never hesitated to plan my family or to prescribe for and counsel others to do the same.

I am an intelligent professional woman and I am concerned about social issues. I have never felt oppressed by the Church or its leaders. Far from it, I have seen the Church leadership do everything possible to help the Church adjust to its new role as a huge world-wide organization and to meet the changing challenges of society. It is clear to me that the tone of your journal is not one that is in keeping with my own opinions and ideals. Please take me off your mailing list. Thank you.

Janet K. Oneal, D. O.  
Kensington, MD

asked if I would like to type his paper for him, a request I doubt he would have made of a male tutor.

Campus wards tend to incubate gender stereotypes. For example, in a testimony meeting a fellow touted the benefits of service for everyone, "even the lowly Relief Society sisters." I told another guy in my ward that I was graduating soon, to which he replied, "Now you can start working on your real degree," meaning I ought to work on getting married. Unfortunately, attitudes outside BYU are not much better. The people in my home ward have always been more interested in my social life than they have been in my academic progress.

Though this list is not exhaustive, it does represent much of my BYU experience. Given this kind of treatment on an everyday basis, is it any wonder that I joined a group to promote the status of women? Since I've been involved in VOICE, I've been part of a wonderful network of supportive women and men whose purpose is described in VOICE's mission statement: "to eradicate the economic, social, and political oppression of women through service, consciousness-raising, and activism." Though our efforts have been criticized, our characters have been maligned, and our attempts to create open dialogue have been met with hostility, we have managed to make some progress. We do not have to resign ourselves to silence, and we've seen that raising our voices can be a powerful impetus for change. But our work is far from over. As Marie Curie said, "One never notices what has been done; one can only see what remains to be done." Let's keep up the good work.

*Mary Ellen Robertson graduated from BYU in August 1992 with a double major in English and journalism. In the summer of 1990, Mary Ellen served as an intern for the New Era magazine.*

## Subversions within the House: Is feminist activism possible at BYU?

Lara Harris

The title of this panel is "Feminist Activism at BYU: A VOICE for Change." Activism. Voice. Change.

Is change, or activism for that matter, really possible at BYU? Are illusions of change really self-delusions? Do we quixotically stand at the turn of the century,

swords raised, ready to fight for the rights of women, ready to reinstate woman as a fully-equipped citizen in man's state? Certainly this is how many see VOICE. They see us as wanting to reverse the hierarchies of power: to posit woman and her rights as the highest truth and the firmest good.

Certainly we are in a dilemma. To say nothing of the fact that there has never been a "we," there is and has never been one VOICE that we have all agreed upon.

Nevertheless, we are still in a dilemma. We, who are for the most part bio-logical women, claim to speak in the best interests of the majority of women at BYU—those voices still straining to sing the refrains of "Home, Sweet Home."

Have we come to a crisis in our theories? Are we no longer seeing? Or is it that we are addressing an audience for which we are only visible as a threatening speculum, an illusion of their worst imagination?<sup>1</sup>

We seem to be only two things for our audience, those established within the house—the "home, sweet home"; we are only same or different; and only different through a manipulation of the same.<sup>2</sup> We, as feminists, can only be liberal or conservative.

As conservatives, we are their enlightened wives, sisters, mothers, daughters, even their selves. We glorify true femininity and its accompaniment, masculine chivalry. We glorify the woman in the home, the woman close to nature, the "natural" woman: baking, mothering, cleaning, caring. We find true feminism in glorifying the strength and beauty of the feminine woman: the poetry, the majesty, the beauty, and the love ... thus the proliferation of sentimentalized mother and child paintings, thus the titillation of dead women folklore (the daughter who dies as a perfect child, the all-loving mother who dies in childbirth, her eyes fixed on eternal glory). The conservative feminist—who dares not call herself a feminist—fortifies the home. Who can find a virtuous woman, for her price is far above rubies? Conservative. Conserve the price of woman—conserve her as commodity.<sup>3</sup>

And as liberals? As liberals we glorify woman as equal to man. As liberals we are seen as tearing down the house—too many bad memories and nightmares—in order to build a new and improved replica. Woman will be in the center with man; woman and man will be master. Why fret and victimize ourselves? We are equal. We are men—gender unspecified, of course. Women will forge their way with their own institutes to

be approved of by men; we will be the necessary subsidiary to the grand university; we will have standards, a logic; we will be institutionalized.

And if we are radicals, for want of a better word ... we can no longer be. We can no longer be seen. We seem to be liberal and conservative, not consistent, not logical, not bio-logical women, perhaps bi-logical. We cause disturbances that can be explained only if we are reduced to the conservative/liberal paradigm, same or different. What is this position both inside and outside the house that we, who are voices for change, are attempting to occupy?

To break it down: this position involves a double reading. We are pragmatic historicists; which means that we are concerned with the actual day-to-day lived realities of women; we are concerned with issues involving pregnancy, childcare, employment, housing education, sexual abuse, domestic abuse, sexual harassment, racial and class discrimination. We recognize that our culture identifies women on the basis of their sexual organs—that gender is a primary identifier of self—and that being identified as a woman often carries with it negative, socially disenfranchising connotations. In other words, we posit that women are still oppressed, that they are continuing to suffer.

While we are pragmatic historicists who are unwilling to give up the importance of gender, we are also idealists. We are trying to imagine a space apart from patriarchal structures. We are trying to imagine ways of relating to each other that do not rely on the master/slave, man/woman, good/bad paradigm. We are trying to imagine a space outside of hierarchicized dichotomies while recognizing that we are thinking, for the most part, and being seen in terms of hierarchicized dichotomies.

In other words, we are recognizing our constructedness within the house. We are realizing that our selves have values within this culture only as mothers, daughters, wives, pseudo-men, hence as prostitutes, as women dependent on men. We can exist only within the house. And yet, we are dreaming of an outside. Sometimes we are almost there. We are trying to occupy both places at once. We are trying to negotiate. To maintain, for instance, feminism as a classical study, an institution, "and at the same time to ask radical questions which may endanger the program itself."<sup>4</sup> We are attempting a certain mimicry, in the words of Luce Irigaray:

There is, in an initial phase, perhaps only one "path," the one historically assigned to feminine: that of mimicry. One must assume the feminine role deliberately. Which means already to convert a form of subordination into an affirmation, and thus to begin to thwart it. Whereas a direct feminine challenge to this condition means demanding to speak as a masculine "subject," that is, it means to postulate a relation to the intelligible that would maintain sexual indifference.

To play with mimesis is thus, for a woman, to try to recover the place of her exploitation by discourse, without allowing herself to be simply reduced to it. It means to resubmit herself—inasmuch as she is on the side of the "perceptible," of "matter"—to "ideas," in particular ideas about herself, that are elaborated in/by a masculine logic, but so as to make "visible," by an effect of playful repetition, that which was supposed to remain invisible: the cover-up of the feminine in language.<sup>5</sup>

We were attempting this double reading, this mimicry, with our ironic curfew announcement. We attempted to point out the absurdity in the recent solutions to the problem of violence against women on campus by proposing our own absurd solution using their own logic.

Perhaps we came across as too strident and brazen; perhaps we could only come across as strident or brazen: whores or virgins, madwomen or angels. Remember this is a problem of seeing; we seem to be seen only as one or the other.

At any rate, in our explanation letter addressed to the BYU community, we tried to unveil the edict motivating and informing the reactions towards rape at BYU: men will be violent. Or, perhaps even stronger, we tried to point out that instructions to stay indoors, color-coded escort tags, elaborate maps, etc., all rely on sadomasochistic sexual relations that our society sees as normal and natural. "Society tells women that it is our responsibility to protect ourselves from the inevitable coercion of men who can't control their sexual urges." It lays the responsibility of rape on women while it "rewards men—sports heroes, politicians, businessmen—for being sexually aggressive," we wrote.

We tried to mime the logic: If men, for the most part, are the instigators of sexual violence, then men should be sequestered

in their homes. We were seen, however, as trying to reverse the hierarchy, as trying to have the rights of men, of trying to be men.

Could we have even gone further to suggest that the functioning of our society and, in particular, our own religious community, rely on this economy?—the active and strong man/the passive and weak woman. The eternally vigilant woman is titillating; it helps in the continuation, the reproduction, of this culture.

What would the continuation of our questioning involve? What if we were to question the underlying metaphor that connects Man (gender unspecified) to his surroundings ... the exploitation of the land, of women, of children, of "developing" countries, all metaphors of rape, the logical conclusion of patriarchy.

What might a radical critique imply? Might it imply that what has been considered deviant is really central? Might it imply that prostitution is not so unusual, that it might be the condition of woman, particularly of the woman within the patriarchal home? Might it imply that a certain type of male homosexuality, considered by many in this culture to be immoral and deviant, is really the characteristic of male relations within patriarchy?<sup>6</sup> That men within patriarchy really care about impressing and promoting other men within this society—that heterosexuality is merely the assignment of economic functions—meaning that women might act as men's commodities by which they win the approval and envy of other men. That patriarchy demands that this love for other men never, under any circumstances, be consummated? What would a radical critique imply?

We are back to our original question: Is change, or activism for that matter, really possible at BYU? Are illusions of change really self-delusions? If this radical critique, this double reading, cannot be seen, if our audience can see us only as trying to be pseudo-men, similar to men, or traditional women, different from men, then will we ever be able to change things? Perhaps this activism isn't possible. Perhaps we are in an egotistical self-delusion. Perhaps there is not an outside to the house.

After all, we are still left with the problem of woman's desire. We are still attempting to speak for a majority at BYU who desperately want their coveted and

cushioned positions in the traditional house. We are speaking for educated women who are willing to ignore statistics suggesting that the traditional home is the most dangerous place for a woman to be in terms of physical, sexual, and emotional abuse. And of course, we are willing to gamble against the odds, to play the game, in order to have our mansion on high and our little heaven on earth. We have been told that this will bring us the most happiness, and there is always a chance at self-fulfilling prophecies. There seems to be no other option. We are still left with the problem of woman's desires, her multiplicity of desires. We must still explore our fascination with that master/slave relationship, with being the matter upon which man lifts himself.

And there are more and more barriers to our activism, our double reading. These are perhaps more immediate barriers to our attempt to describe as well as think outside the house. If those with an investment in this house were worried, they should rest assured. BYU's bastion is fortified. We may see cracks forming elsewhere—racial riots, class uprisings—but not here. Those in power have two things in reserve, two things that can eliminate or silence anyone who wishes to subvert the dynamics of that power. Both work by means of terror.

The first is more direct and obvious. People are kept in line by the threat of excommunication, the decreditation, the effacing of challengers. This move ensures that any future attempt at subversion can be labelled antagonistic, against the Lord's work.

The second move is perhaps more pervasive, and often it is the precursor to excommunication. This move occurs when God and gospel are used as transcendental signifiers, as absolute and transparent knowables. Using feminism as an example, this sort of terrorism works this way: someone in some sort of authoritative position publicly denounces feminism because it is "antithetical to the gospel" or "leaves God out of the picture" (actual quotes). After this public denouncement, he or she goes on to suggest that certain vocal feminists at BYU are practicing this type of feminism. This equation of a person's activities with anti-God and anti-gospel, whether intended or not by the speaker, legitimizes subsequent acts of violence.

This is not a riddle. In a community

where God and gospel carry tremendous cultural weight, these words can be used as weapons to justify the academic suppression of anyone who questions and to justify more visible forms of physical and verbal violence. Death threats, slashed tires, rumors of heads rolling, keep many of us in line. Why do we continue to question the origin of this antagonism? Often the notes and threats mention that we are deserving of destruction because we are fighting against God's church, his will.

This threat of violence is not aberrant; it is not the exception. Violence is central to the functioning of patriarchy. Violence is the naturalized extension of living in, thinking in, hierarchicized dichotomies: man/woman, active/passive, good/evil, white/black.

So, is change really possible at BYU? Are feminist activists at BYU only as good as we are disposable? Is our activity beneficial only in that it allows others who seem to share our similar immediate and pragmatic goals to use us as their foil, to step in and say to those in power, "We aren't like VOICE, we don't like VOICE, we'll be your moderates, we'll be the compromise"?

Perhaps. Perhaps this is the risk of choosing to work inside an institution that cannot see our diversity, that cannot see VOICE as many voices. But perhaps that day will come, if we continue to imagine, that this house of ill-fame will crack and crumble. Perhaps we will someday begin to imagine places apart from patriarchy and from matriarchy, places where men and women, women and women, men and men can live without violence. Perhaps we will one day find refuge, on a very different type of mountain.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> This essay is influenced by Luce Irigaray's *Speculum of the Other Woman*, translated by Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), by her *This Sex Which Is Not One*, translated by Catherine Porter (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), and by a few of her later essays.

<sup>2</sup> Alice Jardine, *Gynesis: A Configuration of Women and Modernity* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 17.

<sup>3</sup> See Irigaray, "Women on the Market," in *This Sex Which Is Not One*.

<sup>4</sup> Jacques Derrida, "Women in the Beehive: A Seminar with Jacques Derrida," in *Men in Feminism*, edited by Alice Jardine, p. 202.

<sup>5</sup> *This Sex Which Is Not One*, 76.

<sup>6</sup> See Irigaray, "Commodities Among Themselves," *This Sex Which Is Not One*.

*Lara Harris is working on her master's degree in English at BYU with an emphasis on modernist literature. She is a member of VOICE and has focused on French feminist theory as a part of her literary studies.*

## Cecilia Farr Can't Say That, Can She?

Cecilia Konchar Farr

I've stolen my title from Molly Ivins, a wonderfully irreverent political commentator. As an outspoken feminist in "Bubba's" Texas, Ivins has a thing or two to say about overstepping arbitrary boundaries and asking questions when everyone else knows it's time to be silent. As outspoken feminists at Brigham's university, these representatives of VOICE have obviously had a thing or two to say about the same things.

I want to add to the discussion by elaborating on what VOICE has meant to me as a professor at BYU and as a feminist scholar. Let me begin with a quote that explains beautifully the position of a feminist academic. Sandra Shullman writes:

I do not consider work as a feminist scholar a job or a career. I see it from the perspective of being a way of life. The profes-

sional is the political. And to try to separate out myself as an intellectual feminist from a living feminist is a very, very difficult process—one that I see a lot of my colleagues struggle with. I don't think you can just think about feminism for periods of time without the fundamental process of recognizing that you are part of what you are studying.

It is naive to believe that you can be a feminist scholar and not be an activist, a supporter, and a political advocate for women. The [biggest challenge] that a feminist scholar [has] is the burden of raising expectations.... expectations of what it fundamentally means to deal with knowledge, to relate to another human being in the pursuit of knowledge, to mentor, teach, learn new knowledge.

In other words, you don't talk day in and day out about improving the quality of women's lives without feeling responsible to help institute the many, many changes that we so desperately need—at the university, in our communities, and in our broader societies and culture.

I was touched as I listened a few weeks ago to my colleague and friend, Dr. Tomi-Ann Roberts, a professor of psychology, talk about the inevitability of her feminist activism at BYU. Both of us arrived in the fall of 1990, new Ph.D.'s in hand and full of enthusiasm. It wasn't long before we discovered VOICE (in my case) or VOICE discovered us (in hers). As young feminist scholars, both of us were thrilled to find students already interested in and discussing the issues that were central to our teaching. And what a group of students they are! The walls of my little house in Provo still echo with the irrepressible voices of the organizers of last spring's Take Back the Night rally—Provo's first. The keys of my computer still spark with the energy that rushed around my office as we put together en masse last fall's curfew proposal. As Tomi-Ann said, "These students didn't need advisors to tell them what to do. They only needed someone to say, 'Good job. You're doing great. Keep going!'"

My work with these young women and men has been some of the most rewarding work of my life. How would my integrity ever allow me to be silent in the face of the injustices that my feminist theory had helped them to articulate so clearly? How could I back down on what I'd said to them when my colleagues confronted me or when a reporter put a microphone in my face? Being a feminist educator has most definitely made me a stronger feminist activist.

I've found over and over, especially in the past two years, that academic and political activity are anything but contradictory; they work hand in hand. The reason politics and scholarship are at issue now, with VOICE and with BYU's new statement on academic freedom, is because of the nature of the politics that we call "activism"—activism meaning the politics of social reform and, generally, change. Though those who popularize the "P.C." controversy and those who push for restrictions on academic freedom would have us believe otherwise, the politics we most often practice at BYU (and in the academy in general) are the politics of conservatism and status quo.

Political activity consists of much more than Take Back the Night marches and curfew proposals, as George Bush's "nonpartisan" speech at the Marriott Center last July should have demonstrated. The study of literature, of atoms, of legal cases, of scriptures—these are all inherently political in that our answers to questions about any of these things reflect our view of the world, how it operates and who operates it. Our dissemination of information to a community inevitably affects that community—

whether we inspire it to change or to stay the same. We don't all need to make laws. If we like things the way they are, we don't make waves. We approve. If we don't, we advocate change. That's democracy. Simply put, the quietist, the conservative, is as political as the activist.

Ironically for our Mormon community with its tradition of serious social change, the quietists at BYU can now support activism only when it enters the mainstream and is absorbed by conservatism. When Rosa Parks visited our campus last winter, I sat with a group of VOICE members just amazed at the enthusiastic reception she received from the BYU community. How would they have greeted Ms. Parks or Dr. King in 1955 or 1965, we asked each other? Would they have treated her with the same anger and disdain, the same virulence that greeted VOICE's efforts to bring to light the issue of violence against women in our culture?

The campus atmosphere is inevitably political, not just because of young, idealistic students, but because learning is a political activity. Professors are, as we say in theory, "always already" political. We have our agendas, our values, that we inevitably pass on to our students every day in our classrooms. There is no value-free learning. There is no "outside of" politics. The critic Frank Lentricchia has argued that the "inside/outside distinction is killing us." He insists that "to believe as university humanists that our political work can only be in the streets, or in the factories ... is to leave traditional cultural power to those forces that wish to engender in us the feeling that we are ineffectual angels." Learning and teaching, again, are as political as senate hearings and flag-burnings. Every day I advocate more compassionate consideration of women in our society. It doesn't matter if I do this in the classroom, in the Relief Society room, or in the Capitol rotunda.

The question that arises when I articulate my feminist politics at BYU, the question that arises when VOICE speaks, is not whether we should be allowed to express obviously political views, but whether the powers-that-be dislike our politics enough to silence us. This question should give all of us pause. Sometimes the politics that make us most uncomfortable are the ones we need most to hear—Martin Luther King's exposure of white racism, for example, or Christ's indictment of the wealthy. Others that sound inoffensive or patriotic at the moment may end up leading us to kill people or to let them starve in our streets.

For me as a feminist theorist, critic, and activist, "the point is not only to interpret texts, but in interpreting them, to change our society," to quote Lentricchia again. For this reason, I am proud to be an advisor to VOICE. Joan Hartman writes that "systems are not changed by those who ironically accept their constrained agency." Here is a group of students who refuse to accept violence against women as an inevitable fact of life, who refuse to accept arbitrary constraints on their free agency and free speech, who refuse to let red tape and administrative snarls discourage them from action, who refuse to be affected by ridicule from right-wing journalists and cartoonists, students, and faculty. And who insist relentlessly, hopefully, that when feminists are proudly political and when we refuse to be silent we can, indeed, change the world. Even at BYU.

*Cecilia Konchar Farr received her Ph.D. from Michigan State University in 1990 after which she became an assistant professor of English at BYU. She recently completed a book entitled *Emphasis Mine: Autobiographical Fiction and the Modernist Woman Writer*. In 1991 she became a faculty advisor to VOICE.*

## Me(n) and Feminism: On Being a Man in a (Post)masculinist Age

Mike Austin

The title of my remarks, "Me(n) and Feminism: On Being a Man in a (Post)masculinist Age," is specifically designed to beg two important questions: (1) that it is possible for a man to be something called a "feminist," and (2) that there is, or will someday be, something called a "post-masculinist age." Admittedly, neither proposition is certain. Many people, both in the feminist movement and out of it, reject both assertions; and I'm not sure that I disagree with their reasoning—hence the parenthetical qualifications in my title.

Debatable as these assumptions may be, however, they provide me with a usable framework within which to discuss two things that have become very important to me: my participation in VOICE and my relationship to the feminist movement—a political, social, and academic phenomenon that may someday be considered one of the twentieth century's most important contributions to the history of the world.

For the last year and a half, I have been an active member of VOICE, attending weekly meetings, writing for the newsletter, helping to plan activities, and regularly wearing, not one, but two of VOICE's most incendiary T-shirts. My participation in BYU's feminist club is not unique; men make up a full one-third of VOICE's total membership and are regularly involved in all of the activities. Along with the two hundred women who marched through the streets of Provo in April's Take Back the Night march were nearly a hundred men—men who, as husbands, fathers, brothers and sons, and as concerned, caring human beings, felt a moral imperative to support women in their demand for a physically and emotionally safe community.

To their credit, the women in VOICE have always welcomed the participation of the men in the club. I have never seen a single instance of exclusion or "male-bashing" among the members of VOICE (though I have witnessed numerous instances of VOICE-bashing among males), and even the men and women who occasionally come to VOICE to insult or argue with club members are treated fairly and are allowed to express their views. In my experience, VOICE has never been a closed society or a women-only club; it is exactly what it claims to be: an affiliation of BYU students who are concerned with the status of women in our community.

As a man in VOICE, though, I have often wondered what the extent of my contribution should be. On a deep philosophical level, I believe that men—that all concerned citizens—should have as their number one political agenda the full enfranchisement of every member of our society. Not only is this a requirement for ethical existence within a community, but it is also a good political investment. As Martin Luther King wrote, "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere," and the continued undervaluation of women within our society is a fundamental and potentially fatal flaw in our political system.

However, I also believe that, on some basic level, the concept of a "male feminist" is absurd. One of feminism's most valuable projects is to encourage women to speak for themselves and work to create spaces where they may do so. Perhaps the defining characteristic of patriarchy as we know it is the exclusion of women from its conversations, and feminism is valuable precisely because it is the only aesthetic or political discourse in history that has not

been dominated by male voices.

Thus the dilemma: How should men who share many of the concerns of feminism orient themselves within the feminist movement? The problem begins with finding an appropriate name for ourselves. A good friend of mine became slightly annoyed when I referred to myself as a feminist. "Men shouldn't call themselves feminists," she said. "It sounds like you're usurping the title. Instead, you should say that you are a sympathizer." Her objection raises a valid point: even the act of naming myself a "feminist" can be interpreted as an appropriation. However, with the memories of the McCarthy hearings still fresh in America's cultural memory, I doubt that the term "feminist sympathizer"—with the inevitable shortening to "fem-symp"—is destined to gain much currency in standard usage.

In attempting to deal with some of these issues, I have found invaluable the work of Toril Moi, a noted feminist literary critic. In her article, "Man Against Patriarchy," Moi offers both an invitation and a caution to men who want to work as feminist activists and theorists:

Feminism... is something more than the effort to express women's experience: it is at once a relatively comprehensive analysis of power relations between the sexes, and the effort to change or undo any power system that authorizes or condones male power over women....

Assuming that men's brains are not structurally incapable of grasping these issues, such analysis is available to men as well as women. Men can therefore be feminist. But—and this is crucial—they cannot be women.... This point has a series of important consequences. First of all, it follows that male feminists cannot simply repeat the words and gestures of female feminists. Speaking as they do from a different position, in a different context, the "same" words take on different meanings.... Miming the words of a female feminist, however earnestly, a man signals the fact that he has not considered the differences in power—and therefore in speaking position—between them.... The main theoretical task of male feminists, then, is to develop an analysis of their own position, and a strategy of how their awareness of their difficult and contradictory position in relation to feminism can be made explicit in discourse and practice.

Moi's analysis of the situation is perhaps the most cogent and helpful I have ever heard. Men can be feminists, but men can't be feminists in the same way that women can be feminists. The challenge for men, then, is to speak and act as feminists while, at the same time, acknowledging the fact that we have benefited all our lives from the very system which feminism is pledged to oppose. As Walt Kelley's Pogo might have put it, "We have met the enemy and he is us."

Despite the growing number of men—at BYU and elsewhere—who are concerned with the feminist project, there are very few models available. The kind of male feminism that Toril Moi speaks of—a dialogue in which men embrace feminism from their own position within the power structure—represents a fundamental shift in the positions that most men have taken, and its outline is just beginning to emerge in academic and political circles around the country. It is an issue that I find very important, and one that I have yet to resolve with any satisfaction; however, my experience with VOICE last year has given me some idea of the shape that a legitimate male feminism might take.

Above all else, perhaps, men in feminism should focus their attentions on listening. I have long thought that the men in VOICE should form an auxiliary with a name like "EARDRUMS" which devotes itself to trying to hear what our colleagues are saying. But sometimes this is more difficult than it would appear. Really listening to a woman's voice can sometimes be painful for a man, because she tells us that there are fundamental inequalities in our social systems from which all men, no matter how sincere, derive a benefit. It is far too easy to respond to this message defensively. Yet, as I see it, it is not an indictment that requires a defense, but a lesson that demands a pupil.

Unfortunately, however, I have found that, once a man decides that he is a "feminist," he stops listening to other feminists and says, "Now that I'm one of you, what are we going to tell those other men who just don't get it?" Such an attitude, I believe, misses one of the fundamental points of the feminist movement, namely, that women should do more speaking and men more listening. In almost every case, I believe, the most important contribution a man can make to the feminist movement is to sit still long enough to be taught.

Another way that men at BYU have

participated in the feminist movement is by helping to educate other men. One of the most valuable experiences I had last semester was being part of a discussion session at a VOICE-sponsored teach-in where men talked to other men about rape and sexual abuse. The panel focused on the ways that some common and unchallenged assumptions in our society actually support rape and sexual abuse. What I found at that discussion was particularly encouraging. Most of the men in the room, in good faith, were willing to take any steps necessary to end the threat of sexual violence. We just didn't know what to do. We weren't aware that things that we had always considered normal—and even chivalrous—were contributing to a serious problem.

What I'm trying to get at with these assertions is this: as a man involved in feminism, I have discovered that my main task is to learn about and try to change my behavior as a man. By this I do not mean that men should feel guilt-ridden or apologetic. Guilt and apologies are past-centered phenomena, and feminism, at its very best, is something that looks toward the future—a future which, for the purposes of this paper, I have chosen to refer to as a "post-masculinist age."

Which brings me to the second question I raised in my title: Will there ever be such a thing as a "post-masculinist age?" Another way to ask this question is, "Is feminism doing any good? Are we learning?" I realize that my answer may be considered optimistic, but I think that we are. At BYU, at least, where I have been since 1984, there has been a measurable difference from year to year in how students respond to feminist issues. I would venture to guess that few BYU observers would ever have expected to see three hundred students show up on a school night for a Take Back the Night march, or to find out that nearly every news service in the country last year carried a story about feminist activism at BYU, or even to learn that our on-campus club to promote the status of women would attract more people to its weekly meetings than do the College Republicans. These developments are truly remarkable.

Things are getting better, not only at BYU, but everywhere. And for me, it would be impossible to continue being a feminist unless I truly believed that things could keep getting better. Ultimately, my concern is not with labels or titles—with whether I am a "feminist," a "sympathizer," or just a "casual observer." My

concern is with helping to construct the kind of society where we can all raise our children without sexism, hatred, or domination of any kind.

Mike Austin received an M.A. in English from BYU in August 1992. He is currently a graduate student at U.C. Santa Barbara. He took an interest in feminist theory as part of his literary studies and was an active member of VOICE.

## Laurel Thatcher Ulrich rejected as Women's Conference speaker

Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, Pulitzer prize-winner author of *A Midwife's Tale*, was to have been the keynote speaker at the spring 1993 BYU Women's Conference, according to organizers of the event, but was denied official approval to do so.

Ulrich, a frequent contributor to *Exponent II*, had previously spoken at the Y.

Just who was responsible for the decision is unclear. BYU administrators first said that the decision had been made by BYU's Board of Trustees at a meeting in which the two women trustees were absent. Then the administration "corrected itself" and stated that the decision had been made by the university administration. No explanation was offered to the organizers or the public about why Ulrich was not approved.

## Church YW now more inactive than YM

Elder Carlos E. Asay, speaking at a regional priesthood leadership in Pittsburgh, Pa., said that more young women than young men are inactive in 9 out of 10 stakes in North America. This is a sobering reversal of statistics from two decades ago, when young women's activity levels exceeded those of their male peers.

## Farr, Knowlton "tenure" at Y in limbo

The official decision about the status of two outspoken BYU professors, Cecilia Konchar Farr (English) and David Knowlton (anthropology) has been delayed well beyond the normal time-frame for such considerations. The two are candidates for the BYU equivalent of tenure. (A follow-up will be provided in the next issue of MWF.)

## Book Review

### *Women Who Run with the Wolves*

Clarissa Pinkola Estés  
(Ballantine Books, 1992)

Reviewed by Barbara Bishop

Many modern religious women of Christian and Jewish backgrounds lament our culture's limited theological exploration of a feminine deity. But in the last ten years an increasing number of spiritual women trained as Jungian psychotherapists have been addressing this issue through their own professional discourse, coming about the problem "through the back door." Marion Woodman, Jean Shinoda Bolen and now Clarissa Pinkola Estés in *Women Who Run with the Wolves* examine the goddess energy that appears in stories, myths, dreams, meditations, and visions in convincing and empowering ways. Estés explores a specific goddess archetype, which she calls "Wild Woman," in her lengthy and spirited volume.

Beginning with the assertion that "wildlife and the Wild Woman are both endangered species," Estés links the disappearance of the wilderness, and the fear of wild animals such as wolves and coyotes, to a similar disappearance of wild goddess energy in modern women. By "wild," it should be noted, Estés does not mean out of control, but rather a "woman living a natural life" connected to her "innate integrity" (8). As a psychotherapist for over 20 years, Estés found woman after woman coming to her in a state of ennui because they were divorced from their creativity and forced into a "blur of activity" that held little real meaning for them. "Most of women's depressions," Estés maintains, "are caused by a severely restricted soul life" (274). She argues, however, that "women's flagging vitality can be restored by extensive 'psychic archeological' digs into the ruins of the female underworld" (3). In stories and myths, Estés conveys the exquisite beauty, appropriateness and power this underworld contains for women. A gifted *cantadora*, or storyteller, Estés' expert use of language makes us smile in recognition and wince a little too. In describing the naive woman as prey, for example, she says, "In hindsight, almost all of us have, at least once, experienced a compelling idea or semi-dazzling person crawling in through our windows at

night and catching us off guard. Even though they're wearing a ski mask, have a knife between their teeth, and a sack of money slung over their shoulder, we believe them when they tell us they're in the banking business" (48). While the entire book offers a delectable feast for the soul-starved, I found "La Llorona," "The Crescent Moon Bear," and the discussions of body talk and women's rage particularly irresistible. Estés shows us the connection from her characters' situations to the reader's in the careful dissections she includes after each story. These stories, she insists over and over, have relevance to the modern woman. "Bluebeard" delineates the predator in the psyche, for example, and explains how a woman transforms frightening dream figures into more positive animus helpers.

Although *Wolves* is expressly not a traditional self-help manual which details the psychological shortcomings of women, in stories such as "The Little Match Girl" and "The Red Shoes," Estés nevertheless underscores the ways in which women sabotage themselves. Throughout the book Estés carefully shows the multiple, often subtle ways in which our culture is inhospitable, even hostile to women's instincts, intuition and creativity. Everything from rampant materialism, a too-full political agenda, a good-girl mentality, paralyzing fear and a contempt for our bodies can deny the Wild Mother knowingness. The sheer amount of information on dream symbols, shadow energy, psychic plots and pitfalls, processes and progress makes Estés' book extremely useful. Her chapter about the animus, for example, explains its function, not as the inner God, as traditional Jungians would have it, but as the "merchant of the soul," an inner power who works on our own behalf to write those poems, paint those pictures, sing, dance, create (311). The soul of women, she asserts, is not "masculine and other," but "feminine and familiar" (310).

While Estés uses the terms "masculine" and "feminine," her descriptions do not necessarily adhere to traditional gender stereotypes. This is one book to savor. It will lift your spirits, make you unequivocally proud of being a woman and cause you to "unresign yourself and come out kicking ass" (321). Estés writes that "every woman is entitled to an Alleluia Chorus" (321). In *Women Who Run with the Wolves*, she has provided us with one.

*Editor's Note: Wolves has become a surprise best seller. I would like to hear your responses to this book.*

## Available papers, tapes, back issues

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**Tapes:** "How Shall We Worship God the Mother?" Forum discussion on September 7, 1991, featuring Carol Lynn Pearson, Rodney Turner, Paul James Toscano, Kathleen Woodbury. (\$10.00, 3-part tape)

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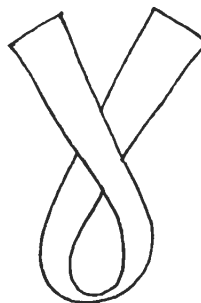
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Wear a white ribbon to publicly show your support for the idea that **"Women Need To Have A Voice In Their Church."**

The shape of the ribbon is that of the AIDS red ribbon worn at this year's Academy Awards, only upside down (a stylized "V" to stand for "voice").

*The White Ribbon Campaign is a grass-roots movement—it is not affiliated with MWF, VOICE, or other group.*

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