

**SARAH AND HILLARY AND SUSAN B. AND MATILDA:
REVISITING OUR HISTORY TO RENEW OUR DEMOCRACY**

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Keynote address at the National Network for Educational Renewal Annual Conference

Sponsored by the College of Education, University of Texas at Arlington

Theme: *Looking to the Past to Inform the Future*

September 20, 2008

I LIKE SARAH PALIN. She is our victory, as Gloria Steinem pointed out in her recent *Los Angeles Times* Op-Ed piece. Hillary punched 18 million holes in the glass ceiling of the White House and the anti-feminist right wing, recognizing how politically powerful women have become, pulled Sarah Palin through it.

I admire Palin's honesty. "I haven't really focused much on the war in Iraq." she answered when questioned about it. She admitted, "I still can't answer that question until someone answers for me: What is it exactly that the VP does every day." This is not a smooth politician; this is a fresh voice, the voice of a working-class white woman. And I feel bad for her when she's publicly humiliated because of her obvious lack of knowledge and preparedness.

I like her on a personal level, too. She's plucky and gutsy, and resourceful; she's not affected and she's very self-confident. She's not going to be pushed around, but she's going to disarm with teasing and flirting, not strident attack. Even the cheap shots the Bush scriptwriters put in her mouth during her acceptance speech came out sounding sweet, not snarky. When she opens her mouth and that kind of strained nasal "gonna" and "gotta" comes out, it is the voice of my mom and my aunts and all the women in my home town of Aberdeen, South Dakota. She got pregnant at 17, unmarried, in a little town and so did I. When I saw her up there on the Republican stage, courageously making her debut in front of a national audience, and there sat her family -- the Down Syndrome baby's hair stroked by his not much older sister, the virginal-looking pregnant 17 year old with her boyfriend, the son about to go off to war, the part-Native dad -- all looking on adoringly, I thought of how much it took to keep it all together and how far she'd come from that 17 year old unmarried pregnant and unformed girl. I confess I got tears in my eyes. Life knocks her down and she picks herself up, brushes herself off and comes out smiling. I relate to her naturalness, her down-home-iness, and her up-and-at-'em spirit at a very human level.

She represents the liberated woman, who can have a family and a career; who can be whatever she chooses, on her own terms.

And that is why Sarah Palin is the most dangerous woman in America.

She has the trappings of the liberated woman. And that's the problem. The liberated woman and women's liberation have always been enemies. "Feminism has never been about getting a job for one woman," (Gloria again). "It's about making life more fair for women everywhere." "We don't think it's much to break a glass ceiling for one woman and leave millions of women behind," said Eleanor Smeal, president of the Feminist Majority Foundation. No woman is liberated until every woman is liberated.

Nor is women's liberation about women getting a piece of the American pie. As Flo Kennedy used to say, that pie is shit. It's about baking a new pie.

Sarah Palin is the face of false feminism and worse. She wears a mask of feminism to hide her God and guns and glory commitment to the old boy's club: She doesn't support environmental protection or alternative energy development. She is against sex education, birth control, abortion, freedom of speech, and most importantly, the separation of church and state. How ironic is it that Hillary, the first woman to have a real shot at the presidency – although women have been running since Belva Lockwood campaigned in 1884 on the Equal Rights Party ticket – the first woman to get close to the presidency had to wear an old boy's club mask to hide her feminist soul.

How do I know that Hillary has a feminist soul? When I briefed her during “Celebrate ‘98”, the 150 anniversary of the first woman's rights convention in Seneca Falls, I told her the story of the Woman's Declaration of Rights. In 1876, during the nation's centennial, the radical wing of the woman's rights movement declared that they had more cause for revolution than the men of 1776 – ruled as they were, not by a foreign despot but by their brothers, their fathers, their husbands and even their sons. They illegally presented a Declaration of their rights at the official July 4 celebration at Independence Square in Philadelphia, -- knowing they would probably be arrested. They did it, they said, for the daughters of 1976, so they would know that their mothers of 1876 had impeached the government for its treatment of women. When I finished the story, Hillary's entire staff stood and applauded.

But we don't need a personal narrative to know that Hillary stands for women's rights. Her record speaks. She favors pay equity, sex education, reproductive rights, freedom of speech and a new pie: environmental protection, alternative energy development. Most importantly, she doesn't believe that she has the right to impose her personal religious beliefs on the country – nor does anyone else have that right. Hillary supports maintaining the separation of church and state.

Even with Hillary out of the race, these are the two poles against which women are centering themselves now. How could *Newsweek* then come out with a cover questioning, “What Women Want?” Why isn't Sarah Palin's anti-woman agenda as patently clear as Hillary's pro-woman agenda should be?

Explore with me that one possible reason is our absence of a history that speaks truth to power. If history provides the pegs upon which we hook the threads of our existence and weave them into a tapestry of mutual understanding, then weak pegs aren't going to hold the richness of our collective experience, and the fewer the pegs, the thinner our knowledge of who we are.

By the mid 1980's the cultural cooptation of the second wave of feminism was pretty well along – some argue it was complete – and the idea of the liberation of half the population had been diverted into the service of a system that justifies inequality by making it an individual problem with individual initiative the solution. The liberated woman had won. You can be anything you want to be, we lied to our girls, never telling them that the playing field was not level. And so, when they tripped over the bumps in it as their eyes were on the stars we had taught them to reach for, and they fell on the face, they understood their failure to be their own individual shortcoming. They had learned to hate feminists by then -- femi-nazis – and distanced themselves as far as possible from the solution to a problem they had never learned still existed.

We didn't teach them that, while they could strive to be anything they wanted to be, they would have to band together to set up the conditions that would allow them to do it. And we didn't teach them that if they failed, it was the culture's failure to allow it, not their failure to do it.

My Honors students at Syracuse University are disbelieving when they hear that women don't earn the same as men. Well, you can twist statistics anyway you want, they resist. It couldn't be true. If it was, they would have learned it before they got to university. When they are finally convinced of the truth of it, they are furious – at you. Why didn't their teachers teach them this?

Let's imagine a scenario. A fourth grade classroom is studying the suffrage movement. Instead of one more boring ballot exercise, they put up replicas of slogans from women's rights conventions in the 1850's. EQUAL PAY FOR EQUAL WORK emblazons their classroom wall, as it did at the early woman's rights conventions. They read speeches in which women – and men – denounce unequal pay – women make only half the wages that men make. And then in Math, they have a problem. If women made 50% of the amount men made for the same work in 1850 and today they make about 75% of what men make, how many years will it take for women to achieve pay equity in the United States? Their learning is integrated. They research what pay equity looks like in the rest of the world and find that we are way behind most of the industrialized world. They speculate about a question: If I am the employer and I give this guy working for me \$1.00 and I give this woman \$.75, where does the other quarter go? With this backing in history, they examine where the presidential candidates stand on the issue of pay equity.

They learn that Sen. Obama is a co-sponsor of the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act and the Paycheck Fairness Act, legislation to end wage discrimination against women. Sen. McCain, on the other hand, opposes the Fair Pay Act.

This isn't taking sides politically. This is educating the future voters to be responsible citizens in a democracy, to know the history of the issues in order to evaluate them today. Going to the heart of pay equity leads to an understanding of why the economy is the most important single issue to women voters. It becomes obvious: given economic discrimination, we are the most vulnerable economically.

Pay equity is a pretty tame issue, though. The most frightening part of this election goes deeper, threatening to rend the very fabric of our democratic society. I want to take you back to 1876 to revisit two women; both lost to history, women that I think we need to know about.

One of them is the architect of the campaign of non-violent civil disobedience for the vote. Matilda Joslyn Gage argued that women already had the right to vote in a Republic, that unique governmental form based on the consent of the governed. Consent was given by the ballot, so women as citizens had the right to vote. Women voted by the hundreds around the country, saying the lawbreaker was not them, but the federal government which failed to protect their right to vote against the states which wouldn't let them. And they refused to pay their taxes. Women were taxed and not represented. No taxation without representation rang as true in 1876 as it had in 1776. Gage co-authored the Declaration of Rights of Women with Elizabeth Cady Stanton. She presented it illegally with Susan B. Anthony. The three women – Gage, Stanton and Anthony – were the triumvirate of the woman's rights movement. Impossible, you say, I've never heard of her. You're right. You haven't heard of her. And because of that,

you are missing a major historic peg.

The other woman, Francis Willard, received a visitation from God during that same year of 1876. He told her she had to work to get women the right to vote in order to put Him in the constitution. Stanton, who always had the best lines, quipped: "If the Constitution can't recognize women, whom it has seen, how can it be expected to recognize God, whom it has not seen?" Willard became the head of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union – an organized army of Mother Love for God, Home and Country. Building on the ravages alcohol had wrought on the American family, the WCTU sought to take away the right of anybody to drink any alcohol. But deeper than that, they were part of the Prohibition Party, a right-wing fundamentalist movement which had as a goal to turn the United States into a Theocracy by putting God in the constitution and installing Jesus Christ as the head of the government, along with prayer in the public schools. Women, being more conservative religiously, were a key part of the plan. Getting them the vote would ensure victory. Willard was independent, self-confident and charming. You just liked her. The mask she wore hid a powerful retrenchment at a time of social change. Women were becoming independent, breaking away from the religious sanction that they should obey their husbands. Willard promised to reshape that agenda to give it a new lease on life. She was the face lift patriarchy needed.

Susan B. Anthony had increasingly come to believe that the early feminists should stop trying to make all the changes they envisioned – from a woman's right to control her own body to equality in the workplace – and all come together to focus on the vote.

Matilda Joslyn Gage and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, on the other hand, saw the vote as just a tool. "Society is based on this four-fold bondage of woman--Church, State, Capital and Society--making liberty and equality for her antagonistic to every organized institution," they maintained. The ballot only had meaning as a means to end that bondage. It was not an end in itself. It was not even half a loaf of bread, Stanton maintained, just a crumb.

Anthony wanted the vote. Bring everyone together around this single issue, get a victory, then work on the other issues, she thought. The organized woman's movement could count at that time only about 25,000 active advocates while Frances Willard's organized army of mother-love had about 250,000 ground troops. Anthony made a coalition with Willard. Gage, who unsuccessfully tried to stop it, saw this focus on the vote with conservative, fundamentalist support, as the death of the movement. And the charismatic Frances Willard as the most dangerous woman in America. If religious freedom in the country was lost, it wouldn't matter who voted, Gage believed. Along with the founding fathers, she reasoned that freedom would be at an end. A coalition with Christian fundamentalists could only lead to the infusion of conservative politics in the woman's rights movement. Yes, women might win the vote, but at what price? By 1920, when it finally passed, the woman suffrage amendment had the support of the Ku Klux Klan, who responded to the appeal to give women the right to vote because it was a way to maintain white, native born supremacy since white, native born women outnumbered both "Negroes and immigrants."

Knowing about Frances Willard, let's take another look at Sarah Palin. Palin is a

member of one of the most fundamentalist Christian sects in American -- "The Assemblies of God". Her church believes that all Jews must take Jesus as their personal savior. Sarah Palin is an extreme right wing, evangelical, Christian. She has toyed with book banning. She believes Creationism should be taught in the schools. She opposes same-sex marriage. She opposed sex education in public high schools. She says that if one of her daughters were impregnated by rape or incest, she should bear the child. She wants that to be the law of the land. The Alaska governor opposes abortion except in the case of a threat to the mother's life. She believes it is "God's will" that America is fighting the war in Iraq and God is also busy on that pipeline up in Alaska. Sarah Palin has God on her side.

If the McCain-Palin ticket is elected, Sarah Palin will be one heart-beat away from the presidency. And that heart beats in a 72 year old body that has endured cancer three times.

Frances Willard is a major peg upon which we need to hang a thread as we weave our understanding of Sarah Palin. Are we ready to teach and discuss publicly the history of Christian fundamentalism's long-ranging assault on United States freedom? The future of our nation may well rest in our answer to that question.

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