

Mothers To Us All
UUF

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They say, history is written by those who won the war. Maybe that's why God is a He. And why when we think of scholars and scientist, we tend to envision a man. And bus drivers and astronauts, and bosses.

We've been trained to think of men when we think of important people...like presidents. We've been taught to think of men when we consider powerful people who've made a difference throughout history.

Maybe, it's because men have largely been the ones who've documented the history we've learned.

How come, those who have given birth to every man in the world seem disproportionately left out of history, left off the front pages, figuratively kept in the kitchen, barefoot and pregnant?

How come women have been defined as the weaker sex? I've been present during child birth...there's nothing about that process a rational person could associate with weakness!

How come women in our culture and girls too, are taught there is always something just not right about them? They are either too talkative or won't speak up. They're too assertive or wimpy. Their eyes, cheeks, lips and hair needs something done to them...powder, rouge, lipstick, dye,,,something!

And their breasts. My goodness they get lots of attention. The world should either see more of them or less. They should be surgically enlarged or reduced. And goodness knows they should not be seen in public performing the function for which they were designed.

Perhaps we should be grateful to that small town school event in California that helped to give birth to Women's History Month. In 1987, the US government determined March was the month in which we would celebrate the contributions of women to history, culture and society.

That there exists, an identified month to celebrate their contributions is a double edged sword. On one hand, there is a recognition that women have been short-changed in our historic cultural narrative.

On the other hand, confining the primary recognition of women's contributions to a single month lessens the need to fully incorporate women into the fabric of American culture and history.

The same analysis is true for Black History month or Gay Pride month. It's a cultural head nod, often with little substance and virtually no commitment to change past practices.

Cultural change comes very slowly and only after it overcomes tremendous headwinds of resistance. Cultural dynamics that maintain the status quo are powerful forces. Oddly enough, the cultural dynamics that retain the status quo often affect both those who actively seek change and those who resist it.

I was an HR manager in a major computer company in the early 80's. We had some 120,000 employees worldwide, growing at 20%/yr and saw ourselves as having a new and different management and organizational structure.

I worked with an engineering group committed to promoting highly competent women. I sat in a succession planning meeting with Sr. managers talking about women supervisors who were ready to be promoted to managers.

Someone asked if they would be able to be successful at the next level? Would the engineers in their group follow their leadership? I was jarred by the question (the only black person in the room).

I pointed out, this was a conversation we had never had before when considering the promotion of male supervisors. I noted that employees who fail to follow managerial leadership are generally considered insubordinate and get terminated. If the engineers wanted to keep their jobs they would choose to be managed.

These Sr. managers, who valued the competence of these two women couldn't see they were using a different set of criteria for the promotion of women than they had for men. Even when we ourselves support change, as the right thing to do, we all too often see impediments to change as being "out there", about someone else.

Sometimes, the system requires conformity. There was a very bright, young accountant assigned to this same engineering department. She came to talk to me in confidence, concerned that she didn't seem to have the authority and clout her position deserved and needed.

We did some problem solving and talked about possibilities. She felt it was entirely possible that her age, gender and attire was at least as much an issue as engineers not particularly valuing record keeping and financial accounting. I agreed.

It was a difficult conversation. I suggested she might be at a point in her career where she would have to make the unfair choice between dressing as she chose, being seen for who she was... and being effective. It's a choice all too often women are forced to make. Do I choose to let the system define me as acceptable in order to be able to do my job?

That's a central psychological question so many people who don't fit the mold are forced to ask themselves. Even when they don't have clarity that that's the central question, they often understand there is a decision to be made.

It's a horrible decision to have to make. It's a hideously unfair choice to inflict on someone. Yet, it's not at all an unusual decision for people who do not fit the norm...someone else's definition of normalcy.

To my mind, it's imperative that more people who do fit the norm, people who are in a position of power and authority must begin to understand...it is their responsibility to help shift the normative structure. It's the job of those on the inside to open the doors to those on the margins.

It's not good enough to simply believe in fair play, to believe in equity, to believe in leveling the playing field. Those in power must take personal responsibility for leveraging their power and influence in order to make a difference.

All too often, those with the least amount of power are asked to take the greatest risk. Women who are harassed, abused, or mistreated are often blamed for not speaking up. "Why didn't you say something, why didn't you report it???" All too often women are shamed for not taking great risks to speak out.

The answer should be obvious. Fear. Embarrassment. Self-blaming. "What did I do to deserve this" is an all too familiar question one asks oneself. "Why did I not see this coming?" "Who are they going to believe, him or me?" "I might lose my reputation AND my job if I say anything".

That's why the person with the least power didn't say anything until it simply became too much to endure...didn't say anything until the internal pain was greater than the fear of the external.

We need to retrain the populace, especially the good folks, the caring people. We need to re-orient our responses to discrimination, to sexual abuse, to denigration, to oppression of any kind.

Those in power, those with relative power, need to re-program ourselves and each other. We need to learn to "center" the experience, the perspective of those on the margins, those with little or no power.

We need to ask ourselves, "why didn't I see this?" Why did I allow this to occur or go on?" "What can I do to help?" "What should I do?" Am I willing to stand up, put myself on the line for what's right?" "What am I going to do to make amends, to make things right?"

Those who are "woke" need to look at ourselves in the mirror. We, who have political power, must be willing to make a conscious choice about how to use our relative power, our visibility, our contacts, our leverage points.

We need to be willing to be uncomfortable. We need to risk being wrong, not waiting for incontrovertible evidence.

We need to be willing to sacrifice; to sacrifice our comfort, our sense of ourselves as the good guys. We need to be willing to change our point of reference, from it's all about them, to what part of this do I own? What **can** I do, what **will** I do to make a difference?

We need to ask ourselves, which side are you on??...which is the side of love? How do I stand on the side of love? What does standing on the side of love mean...here...now, for me?

Standing on the side of love is not easy...it takes self-reflection. It takes courage. Changing cultural norms is an uphill battle. It's hard work that needs to be done over and over again, over time, and with commitment. It requires help. It takes a community; it takes a village.

Systemic change, at some point, requires the work of those on the inside of the system. At some point, those with political, financial, moral power must be willing to leverage their influence in order to make a difference, in order to legitimize the new.

All change requires a willingness to let go of what is. Change requires a willingness to live with uncertainty, some level of dis-ease.

In the words of the Hopi Elders:

Here is a river flowing now very fast. It is so great and swift that there are those who will be afraid, who will try to hold on to the shore. They are being torn apart and will suffer greatly.

Know that the river has its destination. The elders say we must let go of the shore. Push off into the middle of the river, and keep your head above water....For we are the ones we have been waiting for!

Ashee and Amen