

REFLECTIONS FROM WOMEN ALUMNAE

Fields of Labor

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The intrepid pioneer of women's education in the 19th century, Mary Lyon, regularly challenged her Mt. Holyoke students by saying, "When you choose your fields of labor, go where nobody else is willing to go." The lives of the women gathered here, to a remarkable degree, offer a testimonial to Mary Lyon's charge to "go where nobody else is willing to go":

whether in starting the Children's Defense Fund,
undertaking path-breaking research,
initiating the Natural Resources Defense Council,
starting up a business,
breaking the gender barrier as the first female
president of Duke, or
creating the Liberty Hall Foundation or the First Light
Program for kids.

You, Yale alumnae, and female faculty of this institution are an inspiration. I thank you for being here. But more importantly, I thank you for the work you do.

I was asked by the Women Faculty Forum to offer a few observations about Yale and how gender matters. I am someone who has had an uncommon combination of experiences at the University—having been a student, a long-time civil servant and a Yale trustee. I do believe Wendy Martin had it right in her anthology about women writers when she said, “We are the stories we tell.” My story begins in 1974 when I arrived at Yale Law School at a time when there was only one tenured female faculty member, no women on the Yale Corporation and only 21% of my classmates were women.

Now women comprise 48% of the entering class of the Law School, which is just about the overall University average. The number of women on the Law School faculty has grown from two in my day to 22. And four of Yale’s sixteen trustees are women.

So there has been real progress. In my first years on the staff here, I could go for a month and not have any meetings with another woman. Last week, I left a meeting in the President’s Office where he had been counseled by five individuals—all women.

While there is much progress to commend, we recognize that there remain many unrealized opportunities to reinforce both *that* gender matters and *how* gender matters. And we need to be vigilant to ways in which this institution can provide leadership in assuring that women’s equality is fully achieved.

I offer as a homily this story to reinforce that institutional good will is not always enough. You may know about the founding of Vassar College, which was a pioneering institution for women’s higher education. James Renwick, famed for his gothic St. Patrick’s Cathedral and norman Smithsonian Institution, was the architect. The intention of the founders to provide quality education for women was most admirable. However, it was only after Vassar College opened in Poughkeepsie with its magnificent 12-foot corridors and splendid quadrangle that the underlying design for this educational community for women became evident. When the women students moved into their rooms, there were no wardrobes for their clothes. When pressed for an explanation, it became clear that the architectural design for Vassar was

precisely the one that Renwick had used for a mental asylum. So even Mr. Vassar’s bold vision of expanding opportunities for women to pursue higher education was literally encased in structures that showed ambivalence about the enterprise.

I offer that story as a reminder for those of us who work most closely with Yale, either in teaching or in supporting the enterprise. It suggests that a certain humility is required in terms of our thinking that we have it right. I hope the story also reinforces the lesson of the value of embracing multiple perspectives by those who care. In this case, our women graduates.

In sifting through the stories about the University’s history in my role as Tercentennial coordinator, I have come across several others which also reinforce the same sense of humility required by those of us who are administrators of this place. I opened my remarks by quoting one president of Mt. Holyoke. Less than a century ago, Yale honored another president of Mt. Holyoke, the renowned Mary Woolley. Yale had already given her an honorary Master’s Degree in 1914 and then bestowed upon her an honorary doctorate in the 1920s. When she received the Doctor of Laws degree, the formal introduction included the following: “Nine years ago, we gave Ms. Woolley the degree of master’s of art and the results have been so gratifying that we have requested her to return. A woman with two Yale degrees is certainly the equivalent of a Yale man.” And isn’t it even more astonishing that when the admission of women to Yale College was advocated by the then Dean of Admissions, Yale’s President Griswold penned this poem:

“By keeping in step with the male,
we proceed at the pace of a snail
said the Dean of Admissions
“Let’s shift our positions
and get some fast women at Yale.”

I offer these historical vignettes, one about Ms. Woolley from the 1920s and one about President Griswold from the 1950s—as an exercise in administrative self-awareness that our good intentions may sometimes fall short of the optimum course of action.

Let me turn now to my own responsibilities as the Yale officer responsible for serving as liaison for alumni relations. This Convocation has demonstrated that the women graduates of Yale are a powerful resource for the University itself. Yale has much to gain, and much to learn, from listening more attentively to Yale's women graduates who have in many cases been distant from the institution. Some of us have been active with our own Yale professional school or with Yale College reunions, but never had a sense of contributing—or connecting—to the larger enterprise of the University. Many of us who were in a professional school had little contact with the College, for example. Yale has not done a good job at reaching out to the remarkable resources within the alumni body represented by the women graduates of all of its schools. There will be many legacies of this conference but I hope especially that there is an interest in having real attention devoted to creating a women's network of Yale graduates, with Yale faculty and students. The insights you alumnae can give to the institution as a whole, and the mentoring you can offer to Yale women students provide a potential resource of enormous magnitude for Yale.

I would like to leave you with the thought that a Yale women's network could do much more than help Yale gain your counsel or enlist your help in the mentoring of students. I speak now not as an officer of the University, but as a sister alumna. I have an idea which I know is audacious. We've heard for so long about the "old boys' network." Could we imagine a "new sisters' connection," one that had such a robust inventory of the resources Yale women represent (our experiences, talents and interests) that we could call upon one another to help address the larger issues facing our society? Let me be more concrete. Marion Wright Edelman and I had lunch in the last year—which is always a treat. She sketched out a new initiative for the Children's Defense Fund which would try and launch a legislative initiative in every one of the 50 states to have a "children's first" set of public policy objectives as a companion piece to new Federal legislation. Large numbers of citizens in all 50 states would need to be mobilized to

offer support and to lobby their legislators. Marion and I spent the morning brainstorming about where you would find the array of women volunteers who might be eager to support such a venture. Might there be some women who are professionals in public relations; are there some women out there who could be enlisted with statistical background; are some proficient in fundraising; are there scholars who could help do research; are there talented women who would be willing to devote a day going to Capital Hill to press the case for giving children a higher priority in our national agenda? We scribbled a list of names and some ideas about how a cadre of women might be enlisted. But is it preposterous to think that we might have a way to tap into the talents of the women represented by a Yale women's network of both faculty and graduates, some of whom might, as volunteers, feel inspired to contribute to a worthy cause?

Similarly, I bet Frances Beinecke in her role as Executive Director of the Natural Resources Defense Council has a number of projects where a Yale women's network might respond to help advance some of the most important projects to protect our precious but precarious natural environment.

I can imagine that there must be scores of our women faculty members who are undertaking research projects where the help of Yale women graduates—and the doors they could open—can be invaluable. The old boys' network seemed to focus on providing a personal advantage by way of the association: entrée into a country club or references for a job where the individual was the beneficiary. I am wondering whether there are ways in which a Yale women's network could connect some of us to service for others. In our state, there has been a modest example of women from all walks of life coming together to support women candidates for elected office. But there seems to me no reason why the Yale connection may not even have more potential than the geographical one.

These musings are rooted in the enormous inspiration I have had from the conversation in the last day and my hope as the University Officer responsible for alumni relations that this

not simply be a single occasion but rather the beginning of some periodic assembling of the women of Yale.

I turn now to offer a series of heartfelt “thank yous.” The first go to our panelists and presenters. The Corporation authorized a striking of a Tercentennial medal for those who were the major presenters throughout the Tercentennial, and it is my honor to award a Tercentennial medal to each of our speakers during this conference.

But there is another set of thank yous I have to offer. Alison Mackenzie will undoubtedly be thanked again before this event is over; however, her attentive planning to every detail over the last year and her good company in the Tercentennial Office have been remarkable gifts in themselves.

One of the great joys of the Women Faculty Forum is that it has been a continually growing group with additional members and additional energy. It is a group that has worked through consensus and with an ever-widening group of leaders. It goes against the grain of that team model that I undertake one pre-emptive action. I do think that all of the members of the Women Faculty Forum will recognize that there have been three of their number who have been most engaged for the longest time in developing the Forum and in the Tercentennial programs culminating in this symposium. It is my honor to convey three additional Tercentennial medals to: Dolores Hayden, Judith Resnik, and Nancy Cott.

I must ask Nancy to remain for one moment. I do not need to tell anyone here that Yale is blessed to have a stunning array of faculty members whose reputation is worldwide and whose scholarship is renowned. So many make a lasting mark on their discipline and a profound impression through their research. But there are only a few who do that and who have a profound influence on this place.

Nancy Cott is one of those. For 26 years, she has stood for women’s studies at this institution. She was already a phenomenon on this campus by 1978 when I audited one of her courses. But more importantly, she has been architect for the elevation of women’s studies and its larger manifestations in the current

department. It is harsh for many of us to recognize that she feels the need to go and improve that place Harvard—for what we will hope will be only a temporary sojourn—but I know I speak for everyone on the Women Faculty Forum and for the thousands of students and others of us inspired by Nancy to extend our heartfelt thanks for serving Yale and all of us so remarkably.