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LETTER FROM A TEACHER
OF FEMINIST HISTORY

I have been teaching a nine-week unit on “Women in History” at Kaukauna High School in Wisconsin since the fall of 1970. I was simply asked to teach what I wanted to teach, and so I began. Students chose to take this course, from among seven or eight others, for the usual reasons students choose courses: it looked easy, I was a new teacher, and they had some interest in the subject.

The first time I taught the course, I had students write papers on women from different periods, had the rest of the class read them, and supplemented this with lectures based on my own reading. The papers were remarkably good and the students enjoyed the course. We also read, in class, Maxwell Anderson’s Anne of A Thousand Days. They liked doing this also. What was communicated mostly, I think, was that there were women in history.

By the spring of 1970—the second time I taught the course—I had prepared four eight-page papers on women from different eras in history. The first, “Images of Woman,” was a study of how woman was thought of in the earliest religions and mythologies. I emphasized her sexual nature, the belief that she was originally considered to be fertile by herself, her role as Mother Earth, her various aspects as creator, craftsman, warrior, wisdom, and the Great Mother. The second paper, “Women in Primitive Societies,” argued basically that women were treated reasonably well in primitive societies because their labor was valuable to the survival of the family unit. The third paper, “Women in Ancient Civilizations,” explored the rise of patriarchy and suggested that the shift in economic power to men from an agricultural society in which women provided the necessities of life produced a change in the status of women. The fourth paper, “The Changing Status of the American Women,” traced the role of women in America, with major increases in opportunity coming to her as the result of various wars.

I also used a student paper on women’s liberation. Students were responsible for understanding the ideas in the papers as well as for an independent research project. I broke the classes into two or three groups for weekly discussions. I didn’t feel as good about the course this second time, but some of the women students indicated they really had gained from it an increased sense of their own worth.

Last year, I used the papers again, and an independent research project, but I also asked the students to choose any topic related to sexual roles that they were interested in and to prepare to lead a group discussion on that topic. I also tried to include more discussion on male roles and images, since the number of males in the class had increased.

The group discussions, I felt, were the most exciting: women and men really hammering at each other about abortion, behavior in the back-seats of cars, and equal job opportunities. I had to acknowledge that women’s liberation was not simply about women’s having jobs, but rather that women experience worth and dignity whatever they choose to do.

My department (social studies) was all male before I was hired, so that reaction to the course was, at least in part, also reaction to me. I experienced both interest and amusement. From the first, some male teachers have come into the class on various occasions. Since the issue we face is not only how women see and experience their roles, but how men see and experience theirs, I have become convinced of the need to deal as fully with the male role as with the female one. Only I can’t do it. Thus I see the importance of having male perspective presented. Four of us are now working on an umbrella course called “Search for Identity” which will provide the structure for examining both female and male roles.

I want to say an additional word about why I have taught this course. Being a woman has always been a problem to me. There was even a time when I felt I was the embodiment of the suffering of women during our time. Trained to achieve like a man, I was not accepted into a man’s profession (the Christian ministry). Called to become an individual, I failed as a wife. I feel I spent most of my married life absolutely torn in two between my desires to be a good wife (and always failing) and my search for personal fulfillment in a profession (never achieving it). Now, two years after a divorce that I was reluctant to seek, I have a sense of personal peace and perspective that would make it possible to be a wife again, if that should ever come about, though it is not necessary. I don’t blame my former husband nor my parents nor “society” for my past unhappiness. I was simply unable to define myself, make a harmony within myself. Now I can; and I feel I have much to give to my world, perhaps especially to other women.

Lois F. Yatzeck

NEW RESOURCE CENTER
ON SEX STEREOTYPES ANNOUNCED

NEWLY-funded by the Ford Foundation, a Resource Center to provide technical assistance and resources to teachers, schools, and school systems interested in working towards the elimination of sex stereotyping will be initiated by the National Foundation for the Improvement of Education. The establishment of this Center, located in Washington, D.C., represents an outgrowth of the National Education Association’s conference on sex role stereotypes.

Under the terms of the grant, The Feminist Press will be responsible for assisting in the development of curriculum materials.