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Sheila Tobias

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR: COEDUCATION?

ESTHER MANNING WESTERVELT: A MEMORIAL MINUTE

Dear Ms. Howe,

I am a junior at Hunter College High School, and am taking a social studies course entitled Women in American History. I am working on my term paper for the course American Women in Science and I came across your paper in *Women and Success: The Anatomy of Achievement* edited by Ruth Kundskin. I was particularly attracted by your suggestion of "separatism" in the schools, a means by which young males and females can meet with members of their own sex for consciousness-raising sessions.

Hunter High has been all female since the latter part of the 19th century. Just two years ago, it was ordered to go coed by the court. Since I am a junior, I am not affected by this decision (Hunter High consists of grades seven to twelve, with an entrance exam required to get into 7th grade), and have an excellent opportunity to observe the female in a separate and a coed learning environment. In my grade you will find (fairly) mature young women. Most (about 100%) of us plan to go on to college. I plan to become an M.D. or go into the physical sciences. I have never thought to myself: Can I compete with men? Yes, I do worry about competing with the geniuses of the world, but a "genius" never meant male to me. In fact, the smartest person I know is a girl my own age. (Her name is Stella Grosser. If you pick up *The Mathematics Student*, a high school math journal, you will find her name in there twice each publication, as someone who sent in the correct solution to a problem. She is also the only girl ever in there.)

I find that in my classes (all female), I have found an identity as a young woman, equal in intellectual ability to males, but not a man. And I know that I can pursue and succeed in any field I am interested in. Thanks to this social studies course I am taking, I know about Maria Mitchell and Susan Blackwell.

In the lower grade (coed) classes, the girls tend to be more passive. Many wear dresses, and talk of "who's going with who" prevails over the usual questions about math among the girls' talking circles. All the class presidents and vice-presidents are boys, all the secretaries are girls. Some of the girls were even against the ERA! Alas, these girls have been redominated by their fellow classmates. Doubtless, the Women in American History course will be discontinued in a few years. Betsy Ross and Pocahontas will be the extent of knowledge of women's contribution to history, and the Lowell girls . . . I need not elaborate.

What I'm trying to say is that I think separatism is a good idea. It really helps females understand what a woman is and can be. Yet I hesitate to recommend it as the ultimate solution, there must be some middle ground.

Yours truly,

Elizabeth Newman

As a colleague Esther Westervelt was a joy to work with. Her good looks, combined with her energy and her quick mind, put a lie to any stereotype one might have had about a successful woman of her generation. Long before I met her personally, I had already encountered her spirit through one of her students, a young woman who had not only been directed to a new career by Esther's teaching but who had learned to trust her own judgment by Esther's example.

It was probably the many-sidedness of her temperament that launched her several careers and her many careers that in turn gave Esther the flexibility and perspective we all admired in her. It was she among all her colleagues in the field of continuing education who first saw the promise in women's studies. It was she who taught us activists in the women's movement that, if our work is to endure, it must be evaluated systematically and not merely uncritically promoted. She was always groping for the next issue, preparing a research agenda, pushing us forward. Her capacity for high office was long since demonstrated, but she consistently turned down those who would have her be president. I always wondered about this, and was therefore particularly excited when she asked me to recommend her for a presidency of a midwestern women's college.

I remember recommending her for that position, delighted that at last I had the chance to say something publicly about the dazzling array of Esther's talents. I ended my letter, of which I sent her a carbon, with a phrase about the kind of college leadership she would provide "into the next decades." When she saw me again, she chided me affectionately about the term "decades." "How much time do you think I have left, Sheila?" she asked. I, thinking she was much younger than she was, was surprised that she did not believe she still had decades of work and accomplishment ahead.

But she did not. She died amidst much unfinished enterprise. She still had much to teach us and, because she was curious to the core, still much to learn.

There is a missing generation of women in American life. In my historical research, I have been trying to trace that group who but for the Depression, World War II and the feminine mystique of the 1950's would have been in positions of leadership and authority now and during the past ten years. Esther belonged to that generation, but unlike most, she survived the pressures not to succeed. For the women coming after, the women my age, there were few who could or would direct and inspire us. Esther was one of those few. It is because of that role she played in our lives that we shall especially miss her, and because her passing in no way diminishes our need for her, her wit, her wisdom and her warmth.

Sheila Tobias

