Can Consciousness be Lowered?

Judith Stitzel

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4. To disseminate needed information to all agencies engaged in teaching, research, and action programs for women's studies.
5. To organize conferences periodically to carry forward the awareness and momentum generated by the first National Conference.
6. To organize specific action programs for the development of women's studies perspectives in different disciplines, and for the development of appropriate indicators for measuring women's participation in social and economic development.
7. To mobilize the necessary services and resources, with a view to strengthening the access of women to develop their talent as scholars and writers, etc.
8. To assist institutions seeking to develop programs of teaching, research, and action for women's equality and development.
9. To take all action necessary to bring about a change in social values with a view "to eliminate attitudinal, conceptual, and class biases that hinder an understanding of the role and situation of women and their movement toward equality."
10. To collaborate with institutions and agencies working for similar objectives at the national and international level.

Note: A more detailed report of this National Conference, including some of the talks and papers, will appear in the first issue of the new International Supplement to be published by the Women's Studies Quarterly beginning this fall (see below for further details).

WOMEN'S STUDIES INTERNATIONAL NETWORK AND RESOURCE CENTER

The idea has begun to become reality now that The Feminist Press and the Women's Studies Quarterly have received word from the Ford Foundation of the award of a grant with which to begin the research and collection of information and materials about women's studies internationally. We will describe the project at length in the Fall issue of the Quarterly. All members of the NWSA and subscribers to the Quarterly will receive the first issue of the International Supplement free of charge. Future issues will be available at reduced rates to those who are interested in international women's studies and in cross-cultural studies.

One urgent project we have been asked to work on by women in many different countries is a collection of course syllabi, and an annotated bibliography of especially good texts and articles on Women and Development. If you teach such a course, or have such a useful bibliography, or wish to recommend particular sources, please write to the Women's Studies International Network and Resource Center (WSI/NRC), Box 334, Old Westbury, NY 11568.

Can Consciousness be Lowered?
by Judith Stitzel

You've been working as part of the women's movement since 1968. It's changed your life and the lives of the people you have touched. The job you have probably didn't have a name ten years ago. You're a women's studies coordinator, a rape and domestic violence counselor, an affirmative action officer. You are more involved in women's issues than ever before. You wake up planning strategies and go to sleep drafting rationales. You subscribe to more journals—in spite of inflation—not only to support them, but to buoy yourself up. But something is wrong. There is a new sound in the air.

The sound of the seventies wasn't the Beatles or the BeeGees, not Carly Simon or Holly Near. Not even Margie Adam or Cris Williamson. The sound of the seventies was—the click. Do you remember how it went? Those castanets of connection? The air was full of them. Not all the same length. Not all the same pitch. But each one immediately recognizable and a cause for rejoicing. "The privilege of having the door held open costs approximately $4,000 a year." "Most women are only one man away from welfare." The click was the sound of connection, of someone leaping beyond the isolation of the personal to the potency of political analysis, of someone moving from depression to anger, the sound (magnified perhaps) of someone hugging herself or her sister. I understand; therefore I am. Ready. The problem that had no name was finding its tongue. The clicks were exhilarating. No sooner did you hear one within yourself than you recognized it as the sound you had been hearing all around you. With a leap of imagination, you were
part of a symphony.

I still hear occasional clicks, but they are dampened or drowned out by other sounds—sounds that I hear in the strangest places—with friends, with colleagues, with people I've known—or thought I knew—for a long time. Sometimes, most disconcerting of all, they even seem to be coming from inside. Instead of ah ha, it's uh oh! The sound of disconnection, of the step backwards, the sound of retreat from analysis and anger to the slough of nostalgia. The sound of lowered consciousness. Clunk!

I became particularly aware of it on a Christmas visit to my family in New York. Waiting with my mother in the vestibule of B. Altman's for the store to open, I scan the two main windows, a stylish mannequin, a frilly blouse, sure to need ironing, and the slogan, flourished in script, "Return to the solace of femininity." I point it out angrily to my mother who says that probably the material only looks as though it needs ironing and that I shouldn't get so upset. When I tell my friend, a psychologist, about the slogan over lunch, she says that she finds the current reduction of woman to consumer less offensive than the more subtle pandering to the career woman. In any case, she says, she doesn't think advertising has that much effect on people. When I get home that evening, my mother gives me a Christmas letter from my cousin, Ellen Guttmann, a physician (part-time), married, with four children. I stare at Ellen's comments on the enclosed family picture: "That little boy in Ronnie's lap is heir to the Guttmann family name. The girls are Ronnie's harem." The frilly blouse flashes before my eyes again and my stomach turns. The craziest part of all is that the little boy in Ronnie's lap is heir to the Gutmann family name. The girls are Ronnie's harem. What has clouded my cousin's vision so dangerously? Would she have had that fourth child if the third had been a boy?

For days after I return from my visit, these events lie at the bottom of my mind, pulsing with dull insistence. Back home, I am at a meeting of the University's Council for Women's Concerns. Several people aren't there who should be. The excuses are legitimate. It is the end of the semester and there are conflicting demands. Yet it feels wrong and I share the chairwoman's annoyance. We are choosing a theme for the next semester's conference. The topic getting the highest number of votes is "handling stress." Toward the end of the meeting, the discussion becomes more general and the fate of the ERA comes up. "If the ERA fails, we will have to start all over again," says one of the white women, sounding strangely pleased. She's 45, a little older than I. "No, no, no," I want to say, "Not all over again. We'll just have to continue." I don't say it. Something about her tone silences me. It is familiar and disarming. But it is not until the next day sitting at my desk, that, with a wave of nausea, I recognize it. Trying to write a rationale for our fledgling women's studies program at a time of budgetary and political conservatism, feeling sorry for myself, I realize what it was that I heard in my colleague's voice (and feared in my own). Self-justification. Withdrawal. Relief.

At first I reject the notion. Relief. It is impossible, shameful. I must be imagining things. It is not until a few days later, talking with another colleague, a Black man, my age, about what the Reagan right-wing victory means that I begin, with his help, to understand.

"Of course," he says, "there's going to be more and more resistance; the battle lines are being redrawn, pretty damn close to where they were before racism and sexism became temporarily unacceptable. Things are getting tough again," he continues, "and when that happens people begin pulling back, especially those likely to suffer least in the return to earlier boundaries. Those still on the edge will know that there is really no choice but to hang in there and fight. But the others . . ."

The others. We look at each other and admit with a nod that neither one of us is free from the danger of being among them. We would not have been where we are and who we are were it not for the sixties and seventies, and we are simultaneously more vulnerable and stronger because of it. But still, we are relatively comfortable and safe.

Because of our financial security, because though female, I am white; because, though Black, he is male; because I am married and he shares his life with a woman, neither of us is as immediately or obviously threatened (or threatening) as those whose race and sex, whose economic situation or sexual choice leave them with fewer illusions and fewer options. And as disturbing as it is to admit, for him and for me—and for others like us—retreat from full commitment is easier. And since it is easier, we must learn to recognize the hum of guilt that signals it, for what happens next can happen quickly and without our full awareness. Failing to acknowledge, as we might quite legitimately, that we are tired and afraid, we may find in increased outside resistance an excuse to withdraw from the fray. In the seventies, raised consciousness led to exhilaration and exhilaration led to action. The resistance was there, but it was not mobilized, and there was the heady sense of moving through rarified air. Now that resistance has been mobilized, has, in fact, been institutionalized in the Reagan administration, consciousness is as likely to lead to anguish as to action. And there is danger that some of us (especially those buffered by relative privilege) will cope with fear, frustration and fatigue by retreating from awareness, from action, from both.

It is sometimes necessary to stop, to get our bearings, to admit our need to rest. But even then, especially then, especially now, we must continue to call things by their right names. We thought at first that there could be no turning back, that once we crossed that street, there was no going home again. We thought that one's consciousness once raised could not be lowered. We were wrong. Raised consciousness is a spatial metaphor, but it has temporal implications, the present a pivotal point between a rediscovered past and newly conceived future. Lowered consciousness likewise has temporal implications. It tempts us with nostalgia—not a species of remembering but the quintessence of forgetting; denying the present and longing for what never was. It is heralded by the sound of disconnection, of separation—me from you, "was" from "is." And a past without its roots in the present betrays the future. We may be clearheaded enough to reject the blatantly nostalgic siren song when Madison Avenue calls us back to the solace of femininity. But nostalgia has other voices as well; its smooth patter is also audible when we say, "We will have to start all over again," as if that's the hardest thing in the world, when clearly, it is much harder just to keep going on.

We must pledge ourselves to understand what happened in the seventies and what is happening now, how they are connected and how we are connected to them. The years ahead demand not only new energy, but new vision—and a new sound. What shall it be?

Judith Stitzel teaches English at West Virginia University, where she is also Coordinator of the Women's Studies Program.