

# WOMEN'S LIBBER

BY: MICHELLE P. HEATHERTON

Every day of first grade commenced with the recitation of the Pledge to the Flag. When the principal's voice squawked over the intercom, all of us reluctantly rose to our feet, placed our right hands over our hearts, and faced the flag. The commotion was amusing as the thirty-three first graders in Mrs. Gordon's class struggled to stand to the attention of a voice and a piece of cloth. Anyone caught looking down, or with a mouth not moving, was sentenced to a day in the corner or worse--a trip to the principal's office.

The Pledge always proceeded in the same inharmonious manner. Yawning and half-awake, we would recite our own misguided version:

"I pledge allegiance to the Flag of the United States of America and to the Republic for which it stands, one Nation under God, **invisible**, with liberty and justice for all."

*One Nation under God, invisible.* No one ever bothered to correct us. Like rehearsing the incorrect notes in a piano sonata, the wrong word became ingrained in our minds. I went through two months of the first grade thinking that God could not see the United States because it was invisible. I was deeply disturbed by this notion since I had always believed that God and the spirits of dead people were watching over us from Heaven. This "invisible" idea troubled me for quite some time; something wasn't right. Finally, I decided to ask my mom, the possessor of infinite knowledge and wisdom.

"Mommy, why is the United States invisible to God?"

*"Invisible? Who told you it's invisible?"* Mom asked with a puzzled expression.

"The Pledge of Allegiance. You know, it says 'one Nation under God, invisible.'"

Mom pondered over the statement for a moment and then smiled comfortingly at me.

"The word's *indivisible*, Honey."

*"Indivisible? What does that mean?"*

"Well, it's something that can't be divided. Something that can't be separated--into parts."

Mom continued to elaborate on the definition of the word and applied it to some everyday situations so I would understand the concept. Now, it all made sense. God could see us, and we were inseparable. I felt peacefully secure within this beautiful image of indivisibility.

Whenever I stayed home from school, I usually watched "Donahue" with my mom. The various issues on the public agenda during the Fall of 1975 provided plenty of controversial fuel for the popular talk show. Feminism and civil rights, court-ordered desegregation in Boston and Louisville schools, problems with the educational system, inflation, the Vietnam aftermath--these were some of the major topics that were discussed. Phil Donahue was constantly running up and down the aisles asking, *Why can't we all just get along? What is happening in America? Will we even feel like celebrating in 1976?*

The children at Miami Elementary didn't have a choice in the celebration matter; we were trained in pseudo-military style for the next year's bicentennial events. It seemed as though this "patriotic training" was the most important item on Milford's educational agenda. "Patriotism" was a word that was used constantly; it was imprinted in every child's mind.

Each day, after the Pledge to the Flag, one of several songs was played over the intercom. The principal usually selected "The Star-Spangled Banner," "America," "Grand Ole Flag," or

"Yankee Doodle Dandy." We were all supposed to sing along to demonstrate our patriotic spirit. I sang every song except "Yankee Doodle Dandy" because, as I explained to Mrs. Gordon, the last line--"And let the girls be handy"--was "prejudice against women." I also took this opportunity to inform her that I was a "women's libber."

Mrs. Gordon, a red-faced and heavy-set woman, seemed like she had been manufactured by a company that produced first-grade teachers. She was a mother-hen type who was very protective of the boys, but didn't give the girls much attention. Although she was about forty years old, it was obvious that the sexist connotation of the song's last line had never occurred to her. At the time, this surprised me because I assumed that any "mature" woman would certainly object to these lyrics. My forty-two-year-old mother was a "women's libber," and I couldn't understand why any female wouldn't promote her own rights.

It was apparent that Mrs. Gordon thought the lyrics were harmless. She stared at me, perplexed and exasperated. Her eyes seemed to ask, *Why are you being so difficult? Can't you just go along with the program? Don't you know that you're going to make your life unhappy?* Finally, she said, "Then, don't sing it. I don't care!" and huffed away.

I must admit that I took a certain pleasure in aggravating Mrs. Gordon. She suffered from high blood pressure, and I liked to see how red her face would get when I misbehaved. I had ambivalent feelings towards her; I was fond of her, but I also resented the favoritism that she showed the boys. Whenever she asked a question in class, her eyes searched for a boy with a raised hand. If she couldn't find one, then she resorted to calling on me. I adopted the practices of waving both arms around or snapping my fingers so I would get noticed. I thought to myself, *What's wrong? Why won't you call on me? Am I invisible?* Many of the girls who had once participated in class eventually lost interest and faded into the concrete walls.

However, the "Yankee Doodle Dandy" episode wasn't just another way to get attention; the lyrics really did annoy me. When I first heard the last line of the song, it bothered me. It made me feel like an outsider, an object, a prop that wasn't involved in any action. I didn't know the exact words to vocalize what I was feeling, so, once again, I consulted my mother.

"What do you call it when something says something mean about women?" I asked.

"Like something cruel about women?"

"Well, sort of, but more like unfair, and it makes you feel kinda bad."

"Hmm--well, 'prejudice' would probably be the word you're looking for.

P-R-E-J-U-D-I-C-E." She spelled it out for me.

At the beginning of November, 1975, my mom met with Mrs. Gordon for the first round of parent/teacher conferences. I accompanied her but remained in the hallway; I tried my best to eavesdrop through the door.

Mrs. Gordon, in her flustered, mother-hen manner, told Mom that I was "obviously very bright," but had "some difficulty exercising self-control." (I received a check-minus in this particular section on my report card.) Mrs. Gordon proceeded to describe the abundant artwork that I had drawn on my desk and the talking/mischief during the Dick and Jane readings.

"Unfortunately, we have to go very slowly for some of these kids who've never picked up a book before coming here. I know Michelle often gets bored in class," she clucked.

They discussed a few other things, and then, Mrs. Gordon presented her most critical observation. It was difficult for me to hear because she had lowered her voice considerably. I moved in closer to the door, being careful not to make a sound.

"Mrs. Heatherton," she began as if she were about to divulge some top secret information, "a few weeks ago, I saw Michelle kick one of the boys in the--uh--genital--region while they were outside on the playground. I'm very concerned that she might injure the poor little boy if it happens again. I just wanted to mention it to you."

What Mrs. Gordon didn't know was that this news came as no surprise to Mom. I had already "bragged" to her about the incident on the day it had happened.

Danny, the "poor little boy" in question, was actually the class bully who amused himself by pulling up girls' dresses. We tried everything--including slapping, spitting, and hair-pulling--to deter Danny, but kicking him in the crotch proved to be the only successful remedy for averting the pest.

Beth, a wiry, boisterous girl who had an older brother, first demonstrated the defensive maneuver. (I guess her mom got an earful during conferences, too.)

When Danny and his band of ruffians approached us on the playground, we were ready. The boys reminded me of a pack of wolves circling their prey before moving in for the attack.

"I see London, I see France, I see Bethany's underpants!" Danny shouted.

"You *better* leave us alone, Danny!" I yelled.

"Yeah, get lost, turd!" screamed Beth.

But the "turd" didn't get lost. Instead of heeding our warnings, he lunged for the hem of Beth's dress. We immediately intercepted him. When our feet delivered the blow, he winced in pain and staggered away crying to the supervisor. His gang, fearing that they would meet the same fate, dispersed across the playground. Victory!

Although I felt triumphant, I slightly regretted what I had done. *I didn't want anyone to get hurt. I just wanted Danny to leave us alone.* The use of physical force was very foreign to me; my words had always been my best defense. In this case, though, no one had listened. The teachers knew about Danny's skirt-lifting antics, but they chose to ignore the fact that the boy needed some kind of guidance and discipline. I suppose they were applying the "boys will be boys" philosophy. This laissez-faire attitude of the adults had forced us to execute our own form of action--and it worked.

When I told my parents what I had done and why, they both glanced quizzically at each other. I felt that I could always confide in them because they listened before making any judgments and understood my dilemmas. This support imbued me with a great sense of security.

Upon hearing of the incident, Dad chuckled and said, "Well, I guess he learned his lesson!" Mom, in her usual fair-minded approach, cautioned me in regards to my actions and advised me to only use that self-defense method when it's absolutely necessary. However, she assured me that I had her support.

When I left the room, I heard them discussing the negligence of the school officials. *Why did their daughter have to physically fight off some barbarian at school? Where was the adult supervision? Why were the boys allowed to behave so disrespectfully to the girls?*

When Mrs. Gordon reported the episode, Mom responded with all of her questions. Mrs. Gordon was dumbfounded; she had not anticipated this type of reaction. I guess she was

expecting my mom to say, *Yes, you're absolutely right. My daughter should just learn to tolerate this harassment and not fight back. I'll be sure to brainwash her accordingly.*

After smoothing her feathers, though, Mrs. Gordon conceded to the fact that the boys had been receiving *some* favorable treatment. She thanked my mom for bringing the matter to her attention.

One small triumph!

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