

ON BEING A WHOLE PERSON

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When Betty Friedan wrote The Feminine Mystique in 1963 she argued, quite simply, that women were people - no more, and no less - and that all the obstacles society put in their way, preventing them from being accepted as such, would have to change.

Feminism has since become far more complex, and virtually balkanised. There are a thousand varieties of women's voices, all angry and impatient for change. The issues are the same: is woman's destiny shaped and contained by her anatomy? Are women specially responsible for children? Should mothers work (the fact that they nearly all have to, is overlooked)? Who should control their reproductive decisions? Is the immense problem of violence to women also shaped by biology, or by culture and tradition? They are still unresolved. What do women want? Does equality require being the same as or separate destinies from men? Are women's rights a moral choice? Should a fair society allow, in the name of multiculturalism or religious freedom, values and practices that consign women to a secondary and limited role, to fewer or no choices and voices than men?

I certainly wondered about that when, on 10 December, the Age ran a story about a new Islamic school at Hoppers' Crossing, in outer Melbourne. There, though boys and girls are taught in the same classes, the traditionally clad girls sit at the back, the boys at the front. The headmaster was quoted as saying that, though women and men were of course equal, and women might aspire to any achievement, women doctors, for example, should work with and treat only women - and indeed, Victorian women doctors chose to establish a Women's Hospital last century - and they must wear traditional dress, which could be limiting for 'it might be difficult,' he said, 'to wear the hijab under the bonnet of a

car'. Shades of the Taliban, I thought, sending female pupils home from Afghanistan's colleges and universities and women workers back to their homes - where some undoubtedly starved - in the name of God and their proper role.

What is the sense, in an industrialised society which has provided free, inclusive and secular education as an ideal, of encouraging exclusive, segregated, religious - not just Muslim - schools that teach women to defer and withdraw? Where - and how - does a fair, pluralist society draw the line between women's rights, and religion? (Why do all major religions practise women's domination?)

The self-consciously autonomous women who call themselves 'power feminists' - the Paglias, Wolfs and Roiphes - who deride as 'victim feminists' those who demand privileges for women, or consideration for women's biological and child-caring functions at work, or protection from male violence through laws prohibiting discrimination and harassment, and progress through affirmative action, have never had to sit, like the Muslim girls, in the back row of the computer class nor been taught to defer to men.

Is it really, as Senator Newman said as she dismantled the women's funding programs in her Office of the Status of Women, time women moved out of the sand-pit? Have male-run institutions so changed that it is safe?

Feminists' demands - all kinds - are all founded on a collective sense, built on generations of grievance, that women should mistrust men's institutions. For all the gains feminism has brought women a vast pool of resentment remains, and will, as long as women are seen to be 'different' from 'workers' because women are - or can be - mothers and because they still, actually, perform the major responsibilities of children's care, low-status work - we would not consign so many children to poverty if their well-being, were as precious as the politicians preach. We can hardly blame talented women for wanting the rewards enjoyed

by men in business, the professions and academia who perceive that motherhood is an obstacle to full personhood.

This sense, that the grievances of women still require redress, is one of the most profound obstacles to collaboration between women and men, and to an inclusive, diverse and dynamic society. Institutions spend so much energy in ignoring women's experience when making policy, men and women on manoeuvring for the upper hand, that there is precious little for the voluntary, daily interchanges, the give and take, on which trust and goodwill and social capital grows. A myriad of different melodies instead of, as Robert Putnam sort-of put it, a choral society does not build a harmonious community.

Feminism, like any philosophy which strikes root and grows, develops and changes in the struggle for survival: one variety fails and another will take its place. It's a jungle out there, and as I write this in my study I am looking at one. Through the window is my garden, a very tiny oasis, full of birds attracted to a little stone bath of murky water and stale bread. A few feet away, six lanes of traffic roar and pour filth into a canopy of *pungas* - huge, prehistoric-looking tree ferns - and the tough and primitive plants that somehow survive the insults of modern living best. This garden has a guardian: an authentic stone carving of a podgy, elephant-headed Hindu god: Ganesha.

I bought him for ten dollars thirteen years ago from a Balinese carver, knowing nothing about the god but loving the delicate carving. I realised only recently how well I had chosen when an Indian visitor told me his story. Ganesha's mother, the goddess Parvati, was wife to the Lord Shiva. Parvati was apparently one of the first to reject the constraints of reproductive biology: she made herself a baby out of the mud, when her husband had left her alone for a long time. Ganesha was a perfectly normal baby and grew strong and beautiful and - of course - very close and loyal to his mother. One day she set him outside her door while she bathed, and instructed him to let no-one enter. But Shiva returned, unheralded,

and when he found a strange boy outside his wife's door who wouldn't let him in he became infuriated, and struck off the child's head. Parvati heard the shrieks, rushed to the scene and, weeping, told Shiva that he had murdered his own son. Grief-stricken, Shiva sought about for some way to make his son live again - and found a passing elephant, chopped off its head and stuck it onto his son's shoulders.

Ganesha is a favourite in Hindu homes, revered as the representation of the whole of creation, yet loved for the principal quality attributed to him, that of helping to overcome all obstacles. He is as powerful as an elephant - he can tear down and trample the jungle or structures that stand in his way - or, if he chooses, he can be as subtle as a mouse - he rides one - slipping secretly through the slightest of gaps. Ganesha - the wounded god, the not-whole person, the link between creator and creature - has a solution for every problem.

What better guardian for a feminist, animal-loving advocate of children's rights and runner-at-closed-doors than such a god? My friend, a practising Hindu, advised me to pray to him daily. Perhaps I'll have more luck with him than St Jude, or the Church.