

Clarion Call For Women

July 1, 2011 Category: Domestic Politics

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THE NEED FOR MORE GREAT WOMEN IN POWER:

The thesis here is simple: So many women of dubious merit dominate the public's attention here in America, while so many amazing women—of both today and yesterday—fail to be recognized by the wider population. Just as with men, women would benefit from a more discerning selection of role models.

Let's be blunt. Today's society could use an Abigail Adams, a Mary Elizabeth Wollstonecraft, an Elizabeth Cady Stanton, an Emma Goldman, or an Eleanor Roosevelt. We seem to be lacking such prominent female figures not because women of such caliber don't exist, but because women like these are often not afforded the opportunity to rise to stature. Instead, great women typically go woefully unappreciated...even as less worthy female personalities hoard the limelight.

Who today is worthy of the company of such female icons? Suu Kyi of Burma is a stateswoman who exhibits courage and rectitude that the entire world should emulate—surpassing her male counterparts on almost every score. Arundhati Roy has done great work in India advocating for the disenfranchised. Reshma Saujani founded Girls Who Code (helping to bring technology training and science education to girls around the world). Roya Mahboob is working to make IT more accessible to women in Afghanistan. Jane Aronson founded the World Wide Orphans Foundation—devoting her life to helping children find families. These are female role models of which we should all be aware.

Joyce Banda of Malawi, Michelle Bachelet of Chile, Malalai Joya of Afghanistan, and Corazon Aquino of the Philippines are some international examples of laudable stateswomen. (Slightly more flawed women like Germany's Angela Merkel, South Korea's Park Geun-hye, and Argentina's Christina Kirchner are other possible examples.)

Here in America, many of us have forgotten the vital contributions to civil society by great women like Lucretia Mott, Susan B. Anthony, Florence Kelley, and Jane Addams. Rarely do we hear about these stalwarts, and rarely are they championed as role models for young women of today. (To the question, "Who is your female hero?" we hear inadequate answers. If as many people answered one of the above great women as answered, say, "Oprah", the world would certainly be better for it.)

How about this for a fact: The world's first university, the University of Al-Karaouine, was founded in 859 by a woman: Fatima al-Fihri. Located in what is now Fes, Morocco, the university originally was a mosque. It would eventually develop into one of the region's leading universities for the natural sciences. This is something to be celebrated—ESPECIALLY in the Ummah. Alas, she is not. And what of Hypatia of Alexandria, the great female scholar who broke new ground during the 4th century? Rarely do we hear about her.

There are various other admirable women (read: female role models) from around the world, throughout history (see the appendix below for two-dozen more of them). For example, the 19th century British polymath, pantheist, and freethinker, Sarah Losh is a woman who is rarely talked about. Most of us don't know who she is...YET we are kept fully abreast of the latest fashion choices of Kate Middleton. What does this say about our priorities?

There are several contemporary female figures here in America worthy great respect: Elizabeth Warren, Ann Richards, Barbara Jordan, Ashley Judd, and Naomi Klein. Yet it is a sad commentary on our culture that there aren't more great women who've been able to rise to prominence by doing great things. This shortcoming can be attributed, in large part, to a pop culture geared toward superficial concerns and petty fixations.

Consequently, few Americans are familiar with great female intellectuals of modern history. Here are a dozen: Mary Elizabeth Wollstonecraft, Simone de Beauvoir, Patricia Churchland, Margaret Gilbert, Susan Haack, Ruth Barcan Marcus, Janet Radcliffe Richards, Judith Jarvis Thomson, G.E.M. Anscombe, Susan Blackmore, Judith Butler, Martha Nussbaum, and Barbara Tversky. (If you stopped reading this essay now and looked up each of these women, it would be well worth your time.) Any one of these women—amazing scholars one and all—is far more important to society than an Oprah Winfrey or a dozen Sheryl Sandbergs...or, for that matter, most men.

Women in America should have as their role models some of these great female philosophers...but they don't. (How many of these twelve women have YOU heard of?) It is an understatement to say that such women have not received the recognition in American pop culture that they deserve. Our criteria for esteem are—to put it mildly—drastically out of wack.

We revere corporate titans and plastic airheads instead of great minds and pioneering humanitarians. We laud the Meg Whitmans, Carly Fiorinas, Marissa Mayers, and Sheryl Sandbergs because they are powerful businesswomen. But what, exactly, have they done for society? (Will Oprah do for society in her lifetime what Eleanor Roosevelt did during a typical week?)

Take, for instance, best-selling author Amy Chua (a bona fide idiot), who sells millions of books peddling rubbish. Meanwhile, nobody knows who, say, Kshama Sawant might be. (Answer: The courageous, democratic-socialist City Council member of Seattle). Is this because Sawant is not a high-profile executive contributing to the profits of a multi-national corporation? What are our standards for reverence? Most of us know who Miley Cyrus is, but few know who Ani DiFranco is. Why? How?

As it happens, the most visible women in today's media are a gaggle of well-coifed celebrity talking heads in MSM "news" and morning talk-shows. Heaven forbid we celebrate an INTELLIGENT woman—a woman with something insightful and important to say. Most Americans would rather watch blow-dried airhead Kelly Ripa, a TV host who has never uttered an erudite thing in her entire life (and makes MILLIONS of dollars for BABBLING). Banal chit-chat is all that most of us are interested in hearing. (Never mind the endless litany of balderdash incessantly churned out by the pageant of FoxNews bimbos to tens of millions of viewers. These are some of the highest-paid, most prominent women in America.)

Meanwhile...there are some strong, intelligent women with vaunted principles—women who speak up and take a stand—who serve as inspirations, catalysts, and role models for not just other women, but men as well. But so long as we pay attention to the likes of every glamorous starlet, wealthy business titan, or celebrity diva, we won't encourage people to support great women doing great things. There may well be the next Abigail Adams living next door—but we may never find out who she is. She may never garner recognition she merits because she will not be afforded the chance to realize here latent capacity to change the world. Meanwhile, an endless coterie of glamorous ditzes generally take center stage.

For every Peggy Noonan, there is a new Naomi Klein waiting to be discovered.

In 2000, I voted for an African American stateswoman for POTUS: Carol Moseley Braun. Indeed, it's what our nation needed at the time: a black woman who—though flawed, and saddled with her own share of Chicago politics—had guts and laudable values

...in the White House. Alas, the country wasn't ready for such a bold step. (Unsurprisingly, Braun didn't get the party's nomination, so I voted for an Arab-American activist in the general election—another quixotic venture. Predictably, Ralph Nader did not fare well in the general election. Instead, a puppet of the radical right wing stole the election—and was illegitimately installed into the Oval Office.) Most recently, I voted for a Jewish woman for president (in the 2012 main election).*

The 20th century had very few great statesmen. Rare examples include Teddy Roosevelt, Mohandas Gandhi, Lech Walesa, Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King Jr., and—to a mixed degree—Mikhail Gorbachev. That is to say, India, Poland, South Africa, and Russia have each boasted a great statesman since WWII. Other statesmen (e.g. Mustafa Kemal “Ataturk” of Turkey and Mahmoud Abbas of Palestine) are noteworthy, if not shining ideals. But for my money, Eleanor Roosevelt was the greatest “statesman” of the 20th Century: a WOMAN. Here was a human being with more rectitude, more chutzpah, than any man I can think of.

Alas, merely seven figures *worldwide* during the course of the entire post-war period seems—shall we say—slightly pathetic. That mankind has averaged barely one world-changing, great statesman per decade in the post-war era is—to put it mildly—a grave disappointment. My contention: this surfeit in luminaries is in large part attributable to the so-called “glass ceiling”—an unnecessary yet ubiquitous social barrier preventing remarkable women from rising according to their merit.

Surveying the cast of characters in recent world history, it becomes plain that great people are rarely given their due...even as countless men of dubious repute have risen to prominence...and dominated the halls of power. From the Seneca Falls Convention in 1848 to the U.N. Commission On The Status Of Women in 1946 to the women's lib movement of the late 60's, the empowerment of women has been a long process. Indeed, we have much further to go. But we should take care to ensure that we are empowering women in good ways. Indiscriminate allotment of power / esteem is utterly pointless. Merit matters.

Alas, our standards for esteem are egregiously flawed. It is no wonder, then, that great WOMEN have not been accorded the respect they deserve. (Think about it: Any of the estimable women mentioned so far in this essay would make better statesmen than just about ANY man presently found on Capitol Hill...or, might I add, in the White House.) Today, we can look to, say, Elizabeth Warren...and see how (un)appreciated / (un)celebrated our nation's most exemplary women are.

Want to talk about female empowerment? Talk about the amazing Annie Oakley. Talk about the audacious Sakagawea. Talk about the nobel peace prize winning Emily Greene Balch—founder of the Women's International League For Peace & Freedom. Talk about the indomitable Harriet Beecher Stowe. Talk about the implacable Harriet Tubman. Talk about the tenacious Shirley Chisholm (the first black woman elected to U.S. congress).

Talk about how Ida Tarbell pioneered Progressive journalism. Talk about how Jane Austen, Kate Chopin, Mary Ann Evans (a.k.a. “George Eliot”), Mary Shelley, Emily Dickenson, Phillis Wheatley, Louisa May Alcott, and the three Bronte sisters broke new ground in publishing by female authors. These are remarkable women that we too rarely hear about.

America's track-record for allotting esteem is shoddy, to say the least. Barring, perhaps, FDR and JFK—each of whom had his fair share of flaws (and made plenty of missteps)—every American President since TR has ranged from moderately bad to completely disastrous. Yet we rarely hear this admission stated openly and frankly. (Carter—one of the great humanitarians of the last three decades—had noble ideals and good intentions, but made poor decisions during his presidency. And had RFK made the presidency, perhaps he would have been one of our greatest statesman.) Based on this sad record, it seems that our criteria for reverence are flawed. Consequently, we allot esteem to the wrong kinds of people... *mostly men.*

Happily, pursuant to the civil rights movement of the 1960's, women have had increasing opportunity to rise to positions of prominence. Yet such success stories have been tragically few and far between. During the 20th century, the two females on the Supreme Court were barely mediocre (which is far more than can be said for many of the men who've sat on the vaunted bench). Barring Stephen Breyer, the three women who CURRENTLY sit on the Supreme Court are better than the (other five) men.

Meanwhile, few—if any—female legislators stand out as true heroines (Donna Edwards comes to mind). So why, of all the great women in our society, have so few risen to prominent stature in our pop culture? In a civil society that aspires to be meritocratic, such occurrences would not be so rare.

Point in case: More people know who Michelle Malkin and Ann Coulter are than, say, Naomi Klein. This is—simply put—a national embarrassment. As Sarah Palin has recently demonstrated, the rubbish often rises to the top...while much of the crème remains at the bottom.

When the likes of Michele Bachmann and Nikki Haley are able to talk their way into positions of public power, our society is in grave danger. Meanwhile, millions of intelligent, well-educated women go under-appreciated as a matter of course. For every erudite female who will never achieve lofty status in our society, there is another bimbo on FoxNews (or co-hosting an insipid morning talk show) that gets airtime—and the attention of millions. We could call this phenomenon "SPS" (Sarah Palin Syndrome).

The iconic example of SPS was Phyllis Schlafly. Today there are myriad examples—from Peggy Noonan to Laura Ingraham. SPS has infected the body politic to a disturbing degree—as illustrated by the caliber of female figures that so often rise to prominence vs. the kind of females that continue to be un-noticed.

SPS demeans women by championing the worst...while marginalizing the best.

We are now almost half a century after the civil rights movement's acme. It's high time we get our act together.

Carol Moseley Braun might have been one of our best presidents. Elizabeth Warren may prove to be one of our greatest Senators. (Meanwhile, Condoleezza Rice—it might be said—should have stuck with the piano.)

One need not go out on a limb to note that Eleanor Roosevelt may well have been a better president than her husband—nay, better than any president in the 20th century. (It's not a high bar to clear.) Not only was she *principled*, she had far more courage and more rectitude than any man that has sat in the Oval Office for the past century. This point is rarely made. (I would also make the same point about Abigail Adams, who almost certainly would have been a much better president than her husband.)

This is not merely to say that Ms. Roosevelt was a phenomenal human being; it is also to recognize that most of the men who have walked the halls of power in the last century have been rather abysmal. Indeed, many have represented humanity at its worst. Meanwhile, only a handful of women currently sit on Capitol Hill. What does this sad trend say about our culture? Our esteem for intelligent / courageous women?

Today, several celebrity female commentators are worth recognizing: Amy Goodman, Stephanie Miller, and Rachel Maddow play a notable role in this respect. Advocates and writers like Arianna Huffington, Katrina Vanden Heuvel, Barbara Ehrenreich, (the late) Molly Ivins, Dawn Johnsen, Joan Walsh, Majora Carter, Susan Jacoby, Katha Pollitt, Amy Wilentz, Donna Brazile, Melissa Harris-Perry, Patricia Williams, Emily Nussbaum, and Jill Filipovic are wonderful as well. These are all intelligent women who advocate for noble causes.

We need more newswomen like Krystal Ball and Randi Rhodes. Instead, America's mainstream media gives forums to morons like Maria Bartiromo, Erin Burnett, and Kelly Evans. With role-models like these, it's no wonder our culture exhibits the dysfunction that it does.

FINAL THOUGHTS:

The present essay is not only a clarion call for more stateswomen (for FEMALE world-changers and rainmakers and role-models); it is a wake-up call for the rest of us. **We should be more judicious in the kind of people we choose to revere.**

What I call for here is an increased recognition of women who *undertake actions* to change the world in a positive way. The impresarios of pop culture must take measures to shine a light on those who should be recognized for their pivotal roles in making the world a better place—especially if they are minorities, marginalized iconoclasts, *and/or women*. Mentioned throughout this essay are remarkable women who are respectable for their unstinting probity...and their bold efforts to transform our society for the better. These women make a difference by going out on a limb, taking a stand, and speaking out—thereby moving the world forward one step at a time. They are able to accomplish such feats by doing something courageous and new.

Such women are all around us—yet are often not afforded the chance they deserve (or given the praise they've earned) simply because they have not made themselves into *celebrities*. (Most of the female icons enumerated above were not looking for celebrity when they undertook their noble endeavors.) For this reason, we should applaud organizations like “Vital Voices”, which promote female leadership around the world.

The world could use the 21st century's incarnation of an Eleanor Roosevelt. America should have as many female heroes as male; and there are more of both—heretofore un-sung, in unexpected places—waiting to be recognized.

APPENDIX:

Over 80 great women were mentioned in this essay. Here are 25 other female role models we should all learn more about:

1. Charlotte Perkins Gilman
2. Florence Nightingale
3. Jane Jacobs
4. Hellen Keller
5. Anne Frank
6. Frances Perkins
7. Alice Stokes Paul
8. Lucy Burns
9. Margaret Fuller
10. Mary Harris “Mother” Jones
11. Dorothy Parker
12. Bella Abzug
13. Ella Baker
14. Dorothy Day
15. Rose Schneiderman
16. Virginia Foster Durr
17. Ida B. Wells
18. Frances Wright
19. Margaret Sanger (despite her unfortunate sympathies with eugenics)
20. Dorothy Ray Healey
21. “Madam” Marie Curie
22. Hannah Arendt
23. Dorothy Cotton
24. Betty Friedan
25. Gloria Steinham

It would be better for us all if more of us knew who these great women were.

* On principle, I will never vote for Hillary Clinton. (No genuine Progressive would.)

Postscript 1:

The preceding essay is, of course, not an exhaustive account of all the great women of modern history, but it certainly accounts for the majority of the most estimable. Feminist writers like Virginia Wolf, Iris Murdoch, Anais Nin, Joan Didion, Joyce Carol Oates, Susan Sontag, Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, and Naomi Wolf are also noteworthy for their contributions to the discussion.

We especially should pay tribute to ALL the females in the abolitionist, suffragist, and civil rights movements—most of whom will tragically go forever unsung. Fannie Lou Hamer, Nellie Stone Johnson, and Dolores Huerta are also notable female activists. The famous Rosa Parks is a worthy figure, but we should keep in mind that—like Medgar Evers—she was (is), most of all, an important SYMBOL...and that the lesser celebrated Claudette Colvin was actually the first black woman to refuse to abdicate her seat on a bus in the south.

Postscript 2:

In the spirit of full disclosure, I must admit that, as a straight man with certain “default” inclinations, have personally succumbed (temporarily) to the lures of very attractive women in isolated situations. Prone to misconstruing aesthetic prowess for virtue, I have caught myself lending marginal credence to right-wing pundit Sarah Elizabeth Cupp. WHY? Because she is extremely sexy. (That was it. That was all.)

Such is the nature of clouded judgement.

Alas, even a feminist like myself is not immune to the trappings of certain primally hardwired proclivities. The key is that I usually have the wherewithall (the will-power, the rectitude) to keep such libidinal penchants “in check”. I make a concerted attempt to recognize such weak moments for what they are: my limbic system trumping my pre-frontal cortex...thereby sabotaging my better judgement.

Such fleeting lapses in self-discipline are, frankly, episodes that I take pains to curtail. But the problem for many men persists. We tend to judge women based on aesthetic prowess more than on anything else—a criterion that invariably pressures women to emphasize the cosmetic over other characteristics (i.e. courage, intellect, substance, rectitude). I think that men are largely to blame for that widespread dysfunction (as they perpetuate the distorted incentive structure that fosters it). Therefore, the onus is on men to help rectify the problem.

How this might be done is an open question. A good start would be for the impresarios of media to start championing women for reasons other than raw sex appeal.

Postscript 3:

As I child, I loved “The Unsinkable Molly Brown”. The movie portrayed an audacious, strong-willed woman with the courage to eschew norms, to stand up for what she believed in, and to tackle her dreams head-on. Even while in elementary school, I was enthralled by the character and by the movie.

Since the 80’s, cinema has offered a pantheon of heroines. For me, the most notable was the indomitable Samantha (a.k.a. “Charly”) of “Long Kiss Goodnight”. Here are 40 examples of female characters in the tradition of “The Unsinkable Molly Brown”:

1. Ripley of the “Alien” series (Sigourney Weaver)
2. Dian Fossey of “Gorillas In The Mist” (Sigourney Weaver)
3. Celie Johnson of “The Color Purple” (Whoopi Goldberg)
4. Sarah of “Children Of A Lesser God” (Marlee Matlin)
5. Nina of “Point Of No Return” (Bridget Fonda)
6. Clarice Starling of “The Silence of the Lambs” (Jodie Foster)
7. Evelyn Couch of “Fried Green Tomatoes” (Kathy Bates)
8. Sydney Ellen Wade of “The American President” (Annette Bening)
9. Louanne Johnson of “Dangerous Minds” (Michelle Pfeiffer)
10. Darby Shaw of “The Pelican Brief” (Julia Roberts)
11. Mathilda of “The Professional” (Natalie Portman)
12. Emma Russell of “The Saint” (Elisabeth Shue)

13. Samantha / Charly of “Long Kiss Goodnight” (Geena Davis)
14. Kate McTiernan of “Kiss The Girls” (Ashley Judd)
15. Eleanor Arroway of “Contact” (Jodie Foster)
16. Virginia Baker of “Entrapment” (Catherine Zeta-Jones)
17. Karen Sisco of “Out of Sight” (Jennifer Lopez)
18. Sara of “Save The Last Dance” (Julia Stiles)
19. Libby of “Double Jeopardy” (Ashley Judd)
20. Slim Hiller of “Enough” (Jennifer Lopez)
21. Jessica of “Kissing Jessica Stein” (Jennifer Westfeldt)
22. “Erin Brockovich” (Julia Roberts)
23. “Veronica Guerin” (Cate Blanchett)
24. Tessa Quayle of “The Constant Gardener” (Rachel Weisz)
25. Jane Smith of “Mr. & Mrs. Smith” (Angelina Jolie)
26. Claire of “Elizabethtown” (Kirsten Dunst)
27. Josey Aimes of “North Country” (Charlize Theron)
28. Ophelia of “Pan’s Labyrinth” (Ivana Baquero)
29. Erica Bain of “The Brave One” (Jodi Foster)
30. Kathryn Bolkovac of “The Whistleblower” (Rachel Weisz)
31. Valerie Plame of “Fair Game” (Naomi Watts)
32. Della of “State of Play” (Rachel McAdams)
33. Elizabeth Bennet of “Pride & Prejudice (Keira Knightly)
34. Leigh Anne Tuohy of “The Blind Side” (Sandra Bullock)
35. Catalina of “Colombiana” (Zoe Saldana)
36. Eli of “Let The Right One In” (Lina Leandersson)
37. Mattie Ross of “True Grit” (Hailee Steinfeld)
38. Ree of “Winter’s Bone” (Jennifer Lawrence)
39. Tiffany of “Silver Linings Playbook” (Jennifer Lawrence)
40. Katniss Everdeen of “The Hunger Games” (Jennifer Lawrence)

[Regarding female empowerment on the big screen, we might also note movies like “All About Eve”, “Basic Instinct”, “Thelma & Louise”, “Juno”, and “Kill Bill”. Though amusing, such female protagonists don’t offer viable role models.]

In most of the 40 cases listed above, the female protagonist beats the odds and accomplishes something worthwhile. She endures tribulation, rises above circumstance, weathers set-backs, and comes out on top...often not IN SPITE of the fact that she’s female, but BECAUSE of it. Thus, these heroines embody perseverance, grit, and determination. Some are extremely intelligent, some are just plain tough. All of them symbolize integrity, aspiration, and resilience—and can thereby serve as role models for both men and women.

Since Disney’s “The Little Mermaid”, there also has been a tradition of strong female protagonists in animated films. Generally, the theme has involved an empowered female who deigns to buck convention in order to realize her full potential (i.e. “pursue her dreams”). Happily, this has been done for females of different ethnic backgrounds: Aladdin (Arab / Persian), Mulan (Chinese), Pocahontas (Native American), The Hunchback of Notre Dame (French), Anastasia (Russian), The Princess & The Frog (African American), Tangled (German), Brave (Scottish), and Frozen (Scandinavian).

[Ancillary note: Mavis in “Hotel Transylvania” was Romanian, Megara from “Hercules” was Greek, Marina from “Sinbad” was nondescript Eastern Mediterranean, and Kida from “Atlantis” was a fictional ethnicity. Surprisingly, we’re still awaiting a Spanish or Latina protagonist in a major animated feature. In

2017, Pixar will release a film based on Mexican culture—perhaps with a Latina heroine. In 2018, Disney plans to release “Moana”, with a Polynesian heroine.]

The heroines of the above animated films (Ariel, Jasmine, Mulan, Pocahontas, Esmerelda, Anastasia, Tiana, Rapunzel, Merida, and Anna) are typically feisty and ambitious. Each is trying to find herself, persevering in the face of adversity. Each overcomes obstacles as an assertive woman. In the end, they all learn an important lesson (and, barring Merida, fall in love with a chivalrous male lead).

We’ve seen roles of female empowerment on Broadway (most notably, Elphaba in “Wicked”). We briefly saw it on the silver screen with “Commander In Chief”, though the series was cancelled after just one season. Glimpses have been seen in TV series like “Voyager”, “Alias”, “Saving Grace”, the re-vamped “Battlestar Galactica”, “Homeland”, “The Good Wife”, and “Scandal”. But it’s not enough.

We are all suckers for a good story—one that captivates, inspires, and compels...and especially one that taps into the child in all of us. For better or worse, movies are one of the most effective vehicles in pop culture for instilling values. Animated features especially resonate with youth (i.e. those who are still having their perceptions of the world formed), and do so in magical ways. Childhood is the time to instill noble values, and to engender enchantment. I have no doubt that “The Unsinkable Molly Brown” influenced me—and, specifically, catalyzed my feminism at an early age. I pray that the aforesaid strong female characters do the same for those of following generations.