

**Discovering All the Comforts of Home**  
**One Woman's Engagement with Feminism and Identity**

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## **“Beginnings: My Secret Life”<sup>1</sup>**

*“No one is too superior or intelligent to care for hearth and home.”<sup>2</sup>*

A year ago I bought a book intended for my mother, partially because I thought she might like it, but also as subtly snide commentary on a trait of hers that I have found irksome since my childhood. The book, written by Cheryl Mendelson, is entitled *Home Comforts: The Art & Science of Keeping House*.<sup>3</sup> My mother has always been a fastidiously clean person, a quality she attributes as reaction against the relative squalor in which she grew up. But her immaculate housekeeping also resulted in my own reaction – one, not of squalor, but certainly of rebellious disarray.

We often warred with one another when I lived at home: I insisting upon the freedom to keep my room as I wished, she insisting that my room was part of *her* house and that I would keep it as *she* saw fit. The war really never ended, I just moved out. Even until this past year, she was giving me cards that boasted sentiments such as: “Happy Valentine’s Day to a great daughter! Here’s wishing you more happiness than there are stars in the sky, sand on the beach . . . clothes on your floor.”<sup>4</sup> She signed it, “Just kidding, Ha Ha! Love you, Mom.”

And she was kidding, to a degree, for although the battle wounds still exist, our war is no longer one of justifiable conflict – I have been keeping my house in relatively good order for many years now and I respect her even higher standards when visiting at

her home. Interestingly, though, the transformation was not a result of my surrender or even an attempt at peace-keeping – in fact, it really wasn't a transformation at all but rather a new freedom I had finally granted myself: that of enjoying an art my mother had, by model, quite carefully instilled within me, the art of creating a comfortable home.

I had known for quite some time of my talent in this arena, but I had also guarded it from the “extremes” I witnessed in my mother's talent: I kept a warm, inviting home, but not one meeting surgical room standards of hygiene. I felt happy enough, my family was comfortable, and even my mother could bring herself to stay for long visits without being overcome by hidden filth. Perhaps because I did recognize my own adeptness at housekeeping, I “forgot” to give my mother that book called *Home Comforts*, after all.

So, when the time came recently for us to buy a new home – one that called to us because of its sustainable features (a producing fruit orchard, ample land for a large vegetable garden and laying hens and sheep, alternative energy sources plus a generator large enough to run the house for a month, if needed) – my husband (also adept at various housekeeping skills) and I fell into a sort of utopian mindset: we both, without words, agreed to make our new home an even greater haven of comfort, warmth and order. One day, in the process of culling things out of our current home so as not to move clutter to our new sanctuary, a cheerily alluring book in its bright yellow jacket found itself in my hands; it was none other than Cheryl Mendelson's *Home Comforts: The Art & Science of Keeping House*. I decided to take a break from my tasks and actually crack the cover of what was once meant as an equivalent of that Valentine card I had received.

What I found instead was an amazing catalyst that has generated within me more invested thought and meaningful discovery than one could ever imagine possible from a

book categorized by the Library of Congress as “home economics.” Mendelson, a lawyer and a professor, admits right away that she has a secret life: “I keep house,” she says.<sup>5</sup>

What intrigued me about this confession was the “secret” part – why, after all, would one need to keep this passion a secret? Explains Mendelson:

“Until now, I have almost entirely concealed this passion for domesticity. . . . Without thinking much about it, I knew I would not want this information about me to get around. After all, I belong to the first generation of women who worked more than they stayed home. We knew that no judge would credit the legal briefs of a housewife, no university would give tenure to one, no corporation would promote one, and no one who mattered would talk to one at a party.”<sup>6</sup>

When I read those lines, I sat for a moment in a sort of shocked state. There was nothing particularly surprising about her assessment of others’ views on female domesticity, but her confession along with her willingness to stand up and say, effectively, “Hey, I’m a professional woman and I identify strongly with a role long attributed to women *because it is my passion*,” struck me as one of the most potent examples of what a true “feminist” could be. Her explanation became my catalyst, unleashing an emotional and intellectual outpouring that shows only its first manifestation within these pages.

### **“Food: Breakfast, Lunch, and Dinner”<sup>7</sup>**

*“Cooking at home links your past and future and solidifies your sense of identity and place. When a home gives up its hearth . . . it gives up its focus. And the people who live there lose theirs too.”<sup>8</sup>*

In a recent classroom debate, I found myself on what others might believe is the not-pro side of feminism; I was objecting to a certain type of feminism: an element I have experienced within the Second Wave feminism of the 60’s, 70’s and 80’s (and still alive and kicking today) in which “sisterhood” and aggressive polemics often ran rough-shod over motherhood and tending the hearth.<sup>9</sup> Of course, Second Wave feminism as a whole

had positive attributes and must be recognized as a major force in the advancement of women's issues within the United States. As for these attributes serving as tools for at least a partial awakening and transformation, I take no issue. But I do take issue with an ideology that serves as much to divide as to unite, to exclude as to include, and one that remains stuck in short-term victories instead of long-term solutions. I do not hold that all feminist theory born from Second Wave feminism serves these non-transformational purposes, but neither do I hold that all feminist theory should be limited by the title "feminist," regardless of its "wave."

It isn't that "feminist" is a bad word, but rather that it is a complex, often misunderstood, heavily loaded and debated word, and one that – for all of its claims (past and present) of representing, supporting and promoting equality for both sexes, all people and the ecological world at large – can be strikingly inadequate within these arenas. "Feminist" as a corrective against millennia of powerful patriarchy is both understandable and welcome, but it alone does not provide the final cure for the cruelties of humankind. It is a very real, very necessary step in the right direction, but can we really stop at any word that embodies only one half of two axial energies, especially when its loudest speakers care more for polemics than for the equanimity they profess to desire? This was the question that I found myself posing, defending and pondering in this classroom debate. At first I spoke without hesitation, then in stunted snippets, and finally not at all. The debate lasted only two or three class sessions, but, to me, it felt as if I had been engaged in this same discussion for 25 years or more. And, perhaps, I have been. Here is Cheryl Mendelson again as she further describes her book-writing journey:

"When I finally had to begin disclosing to friends and acquaintances just what the long book was about that I had been working on for years, I got a lot of [hard]

stares. Many times my courage failed me when painful silences followed my confession. . . . I managed to persevere partly because not everyone responded with that stare; there was enthusiasm as well. And I was struck that no one responded with bored indifference. The topic was clearly hot – too hot for some people to handle . . .”<sup>10</sup>

Why was this topic too hot for some people to handle? I believe it is for the same reasons that I have found myself on what has appeared to others to be the “con” side of “feminism” for so many years: women who identify with what has been labeled as the “traditional” role of women (hearth-keeper, wife, mother) are not considered by some as capable of also being women’s rights advocates or “feminists.” But the problem with this narrow assessment is that more than one type of feminism exists, and the development of different feminist ideologies did not suddenly jump straight out of mid-twentieth century “rules” on feminism. There have been, in fact, two quite distinct movements almost from the start (as stated in extremes here): a feminism embracing the private and individual as often expressed through the daily lives of mothers and women with a deep appreciation for the tending of hearth and home; and, a feminism geared towards the public and communal as often expressed by women desiring activist and political careers who view motherhood and domesticity as impediments to their cause.<sup>11</sup> What neither extreme disputed within First Wave feminism, however, was that women were deserving of equal rights, just as were all human beings. However, as time went by, the divides between those committed to private and those committed to public spheres deepened. Monumental in these growing divisions was the onslaught of industrialization and the changing roles of women fostered first by gaining the vote, then by WWII and its accompanying influx of women into the work force, and finally by the social devaluation of women as hearth-keepers. Out of these events Second Wave feminism emerged; legal

equalities were viewed as “not enough” and the cause became a reactionary general reordering of the status quo. The status quo included women in traditional roles as wife and mother. Although for many women this reordering was experienced as liberation, for others it resulted in an identity crisis and increasingly low self-esteem, even if these same women were supportive of women’s equal rights. The right to ascertain one’s own identity while still upholding the rights of women and others became antithetical to a growing movement not only intent on unveiling the horrors of patriarchy, but to establishing the “correct” identity of a “feminist” as well. The strong – even manipulative – politics of some Second Wave feminism created a great divide between what was once a movement for human equality and what has since become an all out war for the right to define others’ (specifically women’s) identities. The food that First Wave feminism once lovingly prepared and provided to nurture the souls and needs of, not only women, but the plight of the oppressed at large, some Second Wave feminism stored as leftovers and replaced with t.v. dinners and fast-food, thus jettisoning the hearth while creating a dining atmosphere fraught with anxiety and malnutrition.

### **“Cloth: Gathering, Storing and Sorting Laundry”<sup>12</sup>**

*“Sorting the laundry has become more complicated . . . As a result of these complications, a kind of mini-crisis of sorting has developed in which the old rules no longer seem to work, and the standard consequence of a breakdown in rules and values has ensued: the youth have become skeptical and*

*nihilistic. They do not believe it is possible to figure it all out. They do not sort their clothes for laundering, and they sneer that sorting makes no difference. But they are wrong. You can still figure out how to sort, and if you don't sort, over time your clothes will suffer . . ."*<sup>13</sup>

But perhaps the terms “First Wave” and “Second Wave” mean very little to the reader without some historical background on the topic. Unfortunately, creating a concise and unbiased history of feminism seems to be a difficult task; in the many hours of research I have already invested in this subject, no quick, definitive, non-polemical guide was available for my perusal. I read or scanned over forty books, numerous internet sites, and several journal articles – perhaps such a guide exists, but I was only able to come up with a dizzying amount of information from which to attempt a fuller understanding of “feminism.”<sup>14</sup> With this caveat in place, I will hazard to sort this feminist laundry as best I can, for as the saying above so wisely advocates, sorting is necessary no matter how complicated. As must already be evident, I have also had difficulty in quieting my own bias but, as in every subject that teems with complexity (in other words, just about every subject), each “side” has its positives and its negatives. While I will still err on one side more than the other and believe that the bias shown here is one deserving of more attention (which it will receive herein), the rich study involved in the totality of this work has produced within me a much more compassionate and balanced view of feminism’s underlying structures.

Rather than attempt a history full of names and dates, a “flavor” for the various times and temperaments of feminism might best serve.<sup>15</sup> When speaking of “First Wave,” a general timeframe might be the mid-nineteenth century through the early-mid-twentieth century, but certainly the stirrings began much sooner. At the time of the

American Revolution, for instance, women were acting as more than passive participants in public life, despite the negative criticism they incurred:

“Yet in spite of ridicule, women who refused to buy British goods, who made herbal teas, spun and wove their own cloth, and insisted on ‘buying American’ were engaging in defiant political acts in the course of their domestic responsibilities. That some enacted their intentions in more public and formal ways through meetings and petitions demonstrates not only the reality of their political commitments but also a new level of self-perception as political actors.”<sup>16</sup>

In this passage we see already the beginnings of different feminist approaches: women acting in a more private and individual sphere associated with hearth and home, and women in the public and political sphere demonstrating their convictions. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, however, a co-mingling of private and public resulted in a new, very powerful force called the “republican mother”:

“ . . . republican mothers gained a new status that was both political and domestic, filled with contradiction and possibility . . . women in the postrevolutionary era began to build on the idea and image of republican motherhood a sense of purpose and mission *as women*; for a century this would reshape their political consciousness and the terrain of politics itself.”<sup>17</sup>

The republican mother was an extension of the powers of women within the private realm – those of motherhood and domesticity – to that of the public realm; in short, a woman could now not only provide her family with a well-run, well-nurtured foundation, but could do so for her nation as well. Women took active roles in education, shaping the lives and thoughts of children not their own, and the second Great Awakening heralded in a new era of increased feminine influence within the churches, further serving to shape larger society. But before long, the “contradiction and possibility” of being dedicated to both hearth and politics began to emerge. Women still did not enjoy equal legal rights with men and the role of “wife and mother” began to be

seen by some as a well-hidden trap conceived of and perpetuated by men to keep women “in their place.” When Elizabeth Cady Stanton and her cohorts devised the *Women’s Rights Declaration* in July 1848, they stated:

“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men and women are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”<sup>18</sup>

This statement held within its calm words the outrage these women felt over the lack of equal rights they were afforded. The activism of Stanton and her like fueled the women’s suffrage movement and helped to usher in a new consciousness enabling men and women alike the opportunity to experience, at the very least, legal equalities. But although the gain was great, what cannot be overlooked is the bitter split between women that accompanied this movement. There was still a large majority of women who saw themselves as active proponents of women’s rights while simultaneously embracing their roles as mothers and wives, or simply as individuals acting responsibly within the private spheres. They, as much as the more public activists, would agree with Elizabeth Cady Stanton when she told the New York State Legislature in 1854: “We need no other protection than that which your present laws secure to you.”<sup>19</sup> However, they did not take the further stance that they must abandon their identities as women with affinities for hearth and home in order to uphold the rights of equality for all human beings.

The Women’s Movement has not been kind to these women: they are often labeled as religiously brainwashed, willing to accept the “natural” superiority of men over women; or they are viewed as psychologically damaged, destined to remain unwitting victims to an abusive male system; or – worst of all – they are accused of being knowingly complicit in preserving the horrors of the patriarchy because, in internalizing

patriarchy, they now use it to serve their own selfish needs over that of their fellow women. Whatever the analysis, women who have not agreed to abandon their domestic identities have been deemed as *actively fighting* “against their own enfranchisement.”<sup>20</sup>

First Wave feminism was by no means a simple, utopian enterprise – its components consisted of diversity between private and public, individual and communal, and (not covered here but an important study all on its own) race/class and privilege. But Second Wave feminism (still alive in many forms today) not only embodied many of these same diversities, its polemical attitudes created rifts between them that were markedly deeper than any differences found within First Wave feminism. In addition, during Second Wave feminism, the “flavors” of feminism increased, eventually requiring more sorting than I can even accomplish here. Ken Wilber provides excellent commentary on these many flavors in his discussion on integral feminism:

“There are today at least a dozen major schools of feminism (liberal, socialist, spiritual, eco, womanist, radical, anarchist, lesbian, Marxist, cultural, constructivist, power), and the only thing they all agree on is that females exist [I believe in a later addition he adds, “and two don’t even believe that!"]. *There simply is no consensus view on ‘the’ voice of women, despite the claim of some feminists to be speaking for such.*”<sup>21</sup> [Italics mine]

Key in his somewhat humorous statement is his last sentence, for those feminists who have been claiming to speak with the voice of *all* women have created a deathly scenario for feminism as a whole. Some feel such a death would be welcome (and some believe it has already occurred), but not all agree why such an event would be a joyous one: for some it might be for very real (and ugly) misogynist reasons, but for others it may be the compassionate hope that out of feminism’s death, humanism can arise.

### **“Cleanliness [Part I]: Aprons, Rags and Mops”<sup>22</sup>**

*“Make distinctions among your towels, cloths, and rags. A fundamental rule of housecleaning is that separate things are used for [different types of] cleaning . . . Store your different types of rags in*

*different ragbags or boxes . . . After housecleaning, throw all your dirty rags into the washing machine – separately, not with your regular laundry . . . They are now sanitized and ready to be returned to the ragbag for the next cleaning day.”<sup>23</sup>*

Aside from the “dozen different schools” of feminism, there are also different “labels” that can be applied to various strains of feminist expression. First Wave and Second Wave have been used to denote both a difference in era as well as a difference in approaches to feminism. Along those same lines, “Old Feminism” refers to a certain mindset springing from First Wave feminism, and “New Feminism” refers to a certain mindset strongly emergent within Second Wave feminism. These two mindsets are, respectively, “Equity Feminism” and “Gender Feminism.”<sup>24</sup> Equity feminism was not concerned with eliminating *differences between the sexes*, but rather with *noting the differences* while still *establishing equal legal rights* for both sexes. Gender feminists, on the other hand, hold to a paradoxical agenda: they want to teach women that men are “the Other” who created and continue to maintain patriarchy and that women should always be on the lookout for “male hegemony;” while at the same time gender feminists also want to create a “feminist utopia” in which even the biological differences between men and women no longer exist. Says Gerda Lerner in The Female Experience: An American Documentary:

“The first step toward emancipation is self-consciousness, becoming aware of a distortion, a wrong: what women have been taught about the world, what they see reflected in art, literature, philosophy, and religion is not quite appropriate to them. It perfectly fits man, woman’s “other.” In here reversing the phrase by which Simone de Beauvoir defines woman as man’s “other,” I intend to indicate that there comes a moment in woman’s self-perception, when she begins to see man as “the other.” It is this moment when her feminist self-consciousness begins.”<sup>25</sup>

And University of Massachusetts philosopher Ann Ferguson offers this version of a gender feminist utopia:

“With the elimination of sex roles, and the disappearance, in an overpopulated world, of any biological need for sex to be associated with procreation, there would be no reason why such a society could not transcend sexual gender. It would no longer matter what biological sex individuals had.”<sup>26</sup>

I believe what I find to be most disturbing about these philosophies within gender feminism is, in the first scenario, the continued propagation of a polemical relation between female and male,<sup>27</sup> and (quite obviously) the tendency towards extremes as evidenced by the second scenario. These, and more, are the weapons found within the gender feminist arsenal, one asserting “difference” only as a means of turning the tables on one’s otherwise “victimized” state, and the other asserting “homogeneity” only as an attempt to wipe out the “other” completely, hence eliminating any “victimization.” But both approaches fail and, worse, exhibit suspiciously misogynistic qualities (as discussed below). Many leading feminists today recognize the danger of these approaches and have begun to risk their “status” as “true feminists” by speaking out against what they believe to be impediments to the flourishing of, at the least, a more representative feminism, and an inclusive humanism in the ultimate. Quite interestingly, these critiques are not limited to only a few arenas, nor do the critics all issue forth from the same mold. A dissertation-length paper could be written detailing these critiques, but here are just a few examples:

Christina Hoff Sommers critiques with the most enraged voice of all. A professor with numerous academic and professional accolades to her name, she has written two searing reproaches to gender feminism: Who Stole Feminism? How Women Have Betrayed Women,<sup>28</sup> and, The War Against Boys: How Misguided Feminism is Harming Our Young Men.<sup>29</sup> Both books present impressive and well-supported (read: factual) exposes of the manipulative tactics used by some gender feminists to further their cause, the most deplorable being the intentional falsification of statistics, reports and other

“research” that end up harming just as many women as men, if not more (rape research and anorexia conclusions are two notorious examples). I find her books fascinating and authoritative, albeit more than a bit scathing and pejorative at times. Despite the tone, however, her books should be read by anyone not aware of the disparities within feminism.

Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, Professor of Humanities, History, English Lit and the founder of the Institute for Women’s Studies at Emory University, provides us with a multi-cultural, multi-class exploration of the *day-to-day* implications of feminism in her book, “Feminism is *Not* the Story of My Life”: How Today’s Feminist Elite Has Lost Touch with the Real Concerns of Women.<sup>30</sup> Relying on historical research combined with sociological studies and live interviews, the book delivers just what the title indicates.

On the homefront, U.C. instructor Glenna Matthews gives us an historical perspective on the struggles of “housewives” to maintain their identities in a world now given to devaluing domestic crafts and skills, in her book, “Just a Housewife”: The Rise & Fall of Domesticity in America.<sup>31</sup> Similarly, independent scholar Jean Zimmerman (author of numerous women-centered works) takes a more personal approach to the subject in Made from Scratch: Reclaiming the Pleasures of the American Hearth.<sup>32</sup> What both books lament is the gross misogyny practiced *by women* (specifically those steeped in Second Wave feminism) *against other women* as evidenced by the utter degradation of “housewives.”

And going deeper within the house – into the bedroom, in fact – Merri Lisa Johnson, Ph.D. (and occasional stripper) is the editor of Jane Sexes It Up: True

Confessions of Feminist Desire,<sup>33</sup> a provocative collection of essays detailing the various ways in which *real* women (who also consider themselves feminists) view, desire and engage in sexual activities. Her main thesis is that gender feminists have tried to hi-jack the sexual identities and rights of all women, subjecting them to an even more prudish prison than men have been angrily accused of doing for centuries. Don't read this one if you don't like explicit sexual imagery, otherwise it makes for great bedtime reading!

Along these same lines of “reclaiming,” several books have been compiled by “young” feminists who are eager to tell Second Wave feminists just what they think of all this “restrictive” theory imposed by the “feminist police.” Notable are ManifestA: young women, feminism, and the future,<sup>34</sup> edited by Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards; Colonize This! young women of color on today's feminism,<sup>35</sup> edited by Daisy Hernandez and Bushra Rehman; Listen Up: voices from the next feminist generation,<sup>36</sup> edited by Barbara Findlen; and, to be real: Telling the Truth and Changing the Face of Feminism,<sup>37</sup> edited by Rebecca Walker. It is this last book within the young feminist genre that I most recommend. (The lower-case instances within these titles are not mistakes – it seems to be an interesting trademark tool of “young” feminist publications!)

Finally, in the academic arena, Professors Daphne Patai and Noretta Koertge step far out on a limb – not for lack of sources, but for lack of feminist support – by taking on the pedagogical abuses, professional excesses, and agenda-driven indoctrination committed by Women's Studies departments nationwide in their whistleblowing book, Professing Feminism: Cautionary Tales from the Strange World of Women's Studies.<sup>38</sup> This book unveils temperaments and tactics of feminists within the academy, lends a bit of history, and makes a plea to Women's Studies to clean up their act for the sake of the

program; unfortunately, it speaks so condescendingly at times that even I was put off, yet it certainly serves to open eyes to a problem usually not touched with a billion-foot pole. Perhaps even more courageously, Phyllis Chesler, herself a fairly diehard gender feminist within academia, addresses the issue in her book, Woman's Inhumanity to Woman,<sup>39</sup> and even almost succeeds in adopting the humanist viewpoint, though not quite. Still, her position as an "insider" lends even more credibility to the dangerous and damaged state of a feminism prone to unsubstantiated extremes.

But the rags don't end here . . .

#### **"Cleanliness [Part II]: Peaceful Coexistence with Microbes"**<sup>40</sup>

*"Antimicrobials kill some microbes, benign as well as pathogenic, and leave behind those that are harder to kill, or resistant ones. These survivors might then multiply excessively in the absence of competition from the ordinary microbial inhabitants of the household. If pathogens should be among these, we might inadvertently be exposing ourselves to greater danger, not lesser, of infection."*<sup>41</sup>

We have yet to hear how the gender feminists respond to such books. In general, the response comes in three different forms, listed here from lightest to most harsh:

1. "Please, don't. You'll set the women's movement back years, hurting yourself and the rest of us, and giving the woman-haters just what they want."

2. "What you're saying is interesting, but you really don't understand what feminism is. You don't have any original theories because we Second Wavers have already been there, done that. You should really just shut up and accept the wisdom of us true feminists."

3. "You have sold out to the patriarchy! You have betrayed feminism!"

The first type of response has some merit because, indeed, anti-feminists do love to use whatever ammunition they can find to push forward their own propaganda –

unfortunately, this is another topic far too long for this work. As a single example, let me make use of a book just released this year called Feminist Fantasies.<sup>42</sup> When I first read about it, I rushed to buy it – how could I not when its review promised: “No assault has been more ferocious than feminism’s forty-year war against women. [This book] exposes the delusions and hypocrisy behind a movement that has cheated millions of women out of their happiness, health, and security.”<sup>43</sup> What I didn’t realize in my neophyte state is that the author, Phyllis Schlafly, is the famous right-wing, ultra conservative, pro-family, Judeo-Christian Queen Bee of anti-feminism. Her bio proudly touts her as a brilliant intellect, a formidable politician, a syndicated columnist, a lawyer, a lecturer and “Illinois’ 1992 Mother of the Year.” In many ways, she sounds like a feminist’s dream, but rather she is their nightmare. Her book, I must concede, was powerfully written and hit some extremely sore spots within the feminist – particularly the gender feminist – rhetoric. Fortunately, Mrs. Schlafly so gives herself away by spending at least half of the book espousing Judeo-Christian right-wing ultra-conservative, etc. doctrine, that it becomes all too clear that she has been doing her homework – finding those (often self-created) “weak spots” within the women’s movement *through* the women’s movement itself, and hitting them hard and often. If ever I allowed others to make me question my own commitment to the rights of women, one encounter with Phyllis Schlafly was enough to silence those questions for the rest of my life. And so, yes, there is some danger in a “feminist” negatively critiquing certain feminist philosophies . . . but this does *not* mean such critiquing should cease! Why not?

Because of the second response given to critics by gender feminists: you don’t understand true feminism – we alone know what’s best for you. Betty Friedan (founder

of the National Organization for Women) first became famous for her 1963 best-seller The Feminine Mystique<sup>44</sup> in which she addressed “the problem that has no name.” This problem was none other than the loss of identity that hearth-keepers were experiencing in rampant numbers as technology increased and domesticity declined, as men became more threatened by women in the work-place and by “thinking” women who stayed at home, and as the ever-louder voices of Second Wave feminists shouted that women were acting as agents to patriarchy by retaining their primary roles as wives, mothers and housekeepers. When Friedan expressed this unnamed problem in her book and further declared that women were prisoners within their own homes, many women, for the first time, found their voices and cheered Friedan’s “revelation” – but other women stood their ground: “We can be concerned for equality and still do what we love, in this case, being a housewife.” Nonetheless, it was widely believed that Friedan almost single-handedly twisted the death-nail into domesticity’s coffin. But, in an ironic turn, Friedan later realized that her passionate assertion was not reflective of the real lives of most women – not all women felt trapped by their children, husband and home – in fact, many women, even if not completely fulfilled by these things alone, at the very least found part of their larger life’s contentment through them, despite the accompanying challenges. Friedan eventually wrote another book (The Second Stage) in which she recanted the harsh, black and white stance she had earlier taken. But how, then, was she treated by her feminist colleagues, women for whom her work had greatly served? She was set aside for her overly liberal views, or labeled as a nice old has-been with some good ideas, but whose mind was slipping. In a 1997 reprint of The Feminine Mystique, author Anna Quindlen

demonstrates a typical feminist response to feminist-originated critiques of feminism – she poo-poops it:

“Friedan’s own revisiting of the material in The Second Stage (1981) was not as rigorous or well-researched as The Feminine Mystique had been. While she attempted to make some valid points about why women have chosen to embrace childrearing and a domestic life, the revisionist message of this second book appeared to be an apologia for the ferocity of her first.”<sup>45</sup>

What an incredible assertion to so boldly place in the introduction of Friedan’s own work! With friends like that . . .

There are numerous examples of this “you aren’t wise enough to know better” mentality amongst gender feminists, and they can be far from benign. Here’s one that makes even Phyllis Schlafley look like a suffragist:

“Betty Friedan once told Simone de Beauvoir that she believed women should have the choice to stay home to raise their children if that is what they wish to do. Beauvoir answered: ‘No, we don’t believe that any woman should have this choice. No woman should be authorized to stay at home to raise her children. Society should be totally different. Women should not have that choice, precisely because if there is such a choice, too many will make that one.’”<sup>46</sup>

It frightens me to read these words, especially because de Beauvoir is often quoted in favorable terms within feminists’ writings. The good news is that many feminists would quickly recognize the dangerous ideology presented here as one of misguided extremes; the bad news is that many gender feminists champion these words by regarding women as “badly brought-up children whose harmful desires and immature choices must be discounted.”<sup>47</sup>

The third type of response feminist critics of feminism receive – that women who question the “status quo” of feminist ideology are traitorous sell-outs – is sad commentary on the fragile state of feminism: if feminism cannot stand up to criticism from within its own ranks, how, then, can it survive at all? When Phyllis Chesler was

writing Woman's Inhumanity to Woman, a feminist editor told her: "You should not be writing this book. Are you ready to sell out, is that why you're doing it?"<sup>48</sup> When struggling to edit to be real, Rebecca Walker noted, "I thought I might be perceived as betraying 'The Movement' rather than celebrating it. I feared that this betrayal, which was grounded in staying true to myself, could mean banishment from the community for questioning the status quo."<sup>49</sup> And Daphne Patai and Noretta Koertge comment sadly that almost all the participants in their book Professing Feminism requested anonymity, reflecting the "tendency of feminism to stifle open debate and create an atmosphere in which disagreement is viewed as betrayal."<sup>50</sup>

Is there, then, any hope for feminism when it is so rife with internal dilemma?

**"Safe Shelter: Poisons, Hazardous Substances, and Proper Disposal of Hazardous Household Wastes"<sup>51</sup>**

*"In every home, the potential exists for someone to suffer serious injury or death as a result of swallowing or touching a poisonous or hazardous substance. Accidental poisonings and injuries and illnesses resulting from ingesting or contacting hazardous substances in the home, however, are highly preventable."<sup>52</sup>*

Early on I stated my empathy for Cheryl Mendelson's feeling that keeping house and enjoying it must be something to be "kept secret" if she were to successfully fulfill her role as a woman dedicated to the rights of women within a "free" society. When I entered into the classroom discussion on feminism, I assumed such "freedom" as comes with being a woman in the twenty-first century would also protect my right to my own identity, free from the worries of condemnation that Mendelson described and, more importantly, free from my own internal condemnations. While my right to my own identity is certainly protected, I cannot say that freedom from condemnations – external or internal – has yet been confirmed. As a woman, as a human being, and as a humanist

to whom some might also allow the label of “feminist,” I find that the struggle to define oneself within our ever-increasingly complex social world is an ongoing challenge, but one that I will continue to meet. In this instance, I have chosen to meet that challenge by challenging myself to take a deeper look at the issue of feminism – an issue that has, as I once described, “long been a bug-a-boo of mine.”

In this study I have discovered many things: history that I did not previously know, diversities I had yet to understand, ideologies with which I strongly disagreed, and communion with a whole realm of other women – women who *do* consider themselves to be feminists although they are willing to question that very container into which they have placed their identity. It is from this willingness to question, however, that I have derived the most comfort, and the most hope that feminism can survive long enough to transcend its own lingual title – a title that, by the very nature of its gender-based etymology, places limits on its actual ability to enact its larger vision. Many of the works I have used for this study speak to this larger vision. I want to give room here at the end for these writers to speak *for themselves*, an act I believe we all should be able to enjoy:

“If our social geography is to have any locale where love counts for more than merit or profit, then home will have to be that place. To say this does not mean that the private sphere has more intrinsic worth than the public sphere. Rather there are certain important values that are generated in each realm. A disproportionate emphasis on one realm at the expense of the other impoverishes the whole of life . . .the good society and the good home are inextricably intertwined.” -Glenna Matthews<sup>53</sup>

“[Readers] may wonder whether there is *anything* I like about the gender feminists . . . I do like the features they share with classical feminism: a concern for women and a determination to see them fairly treated. We very much need that concern and energy, but we decidedly do not need their militant gynocentrism and misandry. It’s too bad that . . . we can’t have the concern without the rest of the baggage.” - Christina Hoff Sommers<sup>54</sup>

“The foes of feminism do not accept the basic goal of the liberation of women from all that impedes their ability to lead full and productive lives. It is the friends of feminism who are best suited to argue about the means for realizing that goal. We are feminists and we are friends of feminism, but we submit that the methods of teaching and research and of self-governance that have become normative in many Women’s Studies programs are ill-advised and destructive to women in the long run. That is why we wrote this book.” –Daphne Patai and Noretta Koertge<sup>55</sup>

“We must challenge the simplistic notion that man is the enemy, woman the victim. We all have the capacity to act in ways that oppress, dominate, wound (whether or not that power is institutionalized). It is necessary to remember that it is first the potential victim within that we must rescue – otherwise we cannot hope for an end to domination, for liberation.” –bell hooks<sup>56</sup>

“Rather than judging them as unevolved, unfeminist, or hopelessly duped by the patriarchy, I hope you will see these writers as yet another group of pioneers . . . an instinct I consider to be the very best legacy of feminism. These voices are important because if feminism is to continue to be radical and alive, it must avoid reordering the world in terms of any polarity, be it female/male, good/evil, or, that easy allegation of false consciousness which can so quickly and silently negate another’s agency: evolved/unconscious. It must continue to be responsive to new situations, needs, and especially desires, ever expanding to incorporate and entertain all those who wrestle with and swear by it, including those who may not explicitly call its name.” –Rebecca Walker<sup>57</sup>

“If we are honest about our difficulties and contradictions, we can turn out to be . . . (what? the words coming to mind are all wrong, so I’ll leave the sentence unfinished – full of possibility and capaciousness) . . . –Jane Gallop<sup>58</sup>

It is through listening to and embodying the voices of these writers that the potential for rendering harmless the “poisons and hazardous substances” of some feminist ideologies can be realized. The dilemmas within feminism can be lessened by opening ourselves up to balance, by recognizing difference as a thing’s “suchness,” and by realizing the unlimited potentiality in which we all exist. It helps, also (as I have been reminded by this study), to not hold too tightly to our own beliefs but neither to resist forming our identity, because neither grasping nor avoiding serves us well. Such a

transformation will require practice: hard work, a willingness to shift our attitudes, examine our identities, and to remember that all things are interconnected.

To these ends – to this practice – Cheryl Mendelson’s words can once again offer us insightful, practical advice:

“Housekeeping is a subject that brings out attitudes . . . what a traditional woman did that made her home warm and alive was not dusting and laundry . . . Her real secret was that she identified with her home [as] part of her relation to those she loved . . . But most men and many women do not want to identify with homes that they create through their housekeeping and through which they offer of themselves to others. Many people imagine housekeeping to be boring, frustrating, repetitive, unintelligent drudgery. I cannot agree. Domesticity does not take time or effort but helps save both. It is just an orientation that gives you a sixth sense about the place you live in, and helps you keep it running with the same kind of unconscious and effortless actions that keep you from falling when you walk down the stairs . . . Modern housekeeping, despite its bad press, is among the most thoroughly pleasant, significant, and least alienated forms of work that many of us will encounter . . . [housekeeping] routines echo the rhythm of life, and the housekeeping rhythm is the rhythm of the body . . . Housekeeping requires knowledge and intelligence as well, the kind that is complex, not simple, and combines intellect, intuition, and feelings . . . [negative] attitudes toward housekeeping are needlessly self-defeating. You can be male and domestic. You can have a career and be domestic. You can enjoy keeping house.”<sup>59</sup>

And, finally, she wisely reminds us again that: “No one is too superior or intelligent to care for hearth and home.”<sup>60</sup> To this I would add, “Or too feminist.”

And with that, this particular humanist ends this semester’s worth of work by going off to joyously immerse herself in caring for her *new* hearth and home.

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<sup>1</sup> All section headings and subsequent following quotes in this essay derive from the chronological section headings, chapter titles and text found within Cheryl Mendelson's *Home Comforts: The Art & Science of Keeping House* (Scribner, New York, 1999). The section heading "Beginnings" appears on page 3 of her work, chapter one is entitled "My Secret Life" and begins page 3, and the endnote for the quote is as follows:

<sup>2</sup> Mendelson, Cheryl. *Home Comforts: The Art & Science of Keeping House*. Scribner, New York. 1999. Pg. 10.

<sup>3</sup> Mendelson, Cheryl. *Home Comforts: The Art & Science of Keeping House*. Scribner, New York. 1999.

<sup>4</sup> Shoebox Cards, Hallmark Cards, Inc. Kansas City.

<sup>5</sup> Mendelson, Cheryl. *Home Comforts: The Art & Science of Keeping House*. Scribner, New York. 1999. Pg. 3.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Mendelson, Cheryl. *Home Comforts: The Art & Science of Keeping House*. Scribner, New York. 1999. Section heading "Food," pg. 35; Chapter Five Title "Breakfast, Lunch, and Dinner," pg. 49.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. Pg. 37-38.

<sup>9</sup> So as to disarm the possible protest that this sentence is purely the opinion of the author, a later discussion will indicate various sources (many of them feminist sources) reflecting this same portrayal of Second Wave feminism.

<sup>10</sup> Mendelson, Cheryl. *Home Comforts: The Art & Science of Keeping House*. Scribner, New York. 1999. Pgs.3-4.

<sup>11</sup> These are, obviously, simplifications as feminism also certainly fell somewhere between the two as well, but these generalizations are used here as necessary illustrative points.

<sup>12</sup> Mendelson, Cheryl. *Home Comforts: The Art & Science of Keeping House*. Scribner, New York. 1999. Section heading "Cloth," pg. 191; Chapter heading "Gathering, Storing, and Sorting Laundry," pg. 288.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. Pg. 293.

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<sup>14</sup> This in itself is interesting, leading me to further consider what future manifestation of my interest in this topic may emerge – perhaps the writing of such a guide, or the creation of a college-level course on the subject . . .

<sup>15</sup> These portrayals relate specifically to American (U.S.) feminism, although “Continental” influences abound.

<sup>16</sup> Evans, Sara M. Born for Liberty: A History of Women in America. New York: Free Press Paperbacks, 1997. Pg.50.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. Pg. 59.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. Pg.93.

<sup>19</sup> Sommers, Christina Hoff. Who Stole Feminism? How Women Have Betrayed Women. New York: Touchstone Books, 1995. Pg. 22.

<sup>20</sup> Miles, Rosalind. Who Cooked the Last Supper? The Women’s History of the World. New York: The Rivers Press, 2001. Pg. 222. This portrayal is amazingly rampant amongst current “women’s history” books!

<sup>21</sup> Wilber, Ken. The Eye of the Spirit: An Integral Vision for a World Gone Slightly Mad. Boston&London: Shambala, 1998. Pg. 190.

<sup>22</sup> Mendelson, Cheryl. *Home Comforts: The Art & Science of Keeping House*. Scribner, New York. 1999. Section heading “Cleanliness,” pg. 391; Chapter Thirty-Two Title “Aprons, Rags, and Mops,” pg. 446.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. Pg. 448.

<sup>24</sup> Sommers, Christina Hoff. Who Stole Feminism? How Women Have Betrayed Women. New York: Touchstone Books, 1995. Pgs. 22-24.

<sup>25</sup> Lerner, Gerda. The Female Experience: An American Documentary. Oxford University Press, New York, 1977. Pg. xxi.

<sup>26</sup> Sommers, Christina Hoff. Who Stole Feminism? How Women Have Betrayed Women. New York: Touchstone Books, 1995. Pg. 265.

<sup>27</sup> The reader might feel inclined to argue that the associated quote is not deserving of this analysis, but further reading of Lerner’s various works and especially developing an understanding of her own constant personal sense of victimization by an “other” (the Holocaust and the Red Scare to name two significant examples) would undoubtedly support this portrayal as accurate. In addition, numerous other writings by various sources (some included herein) evidence an even more pronounced and negative sense of this “otherness” mentality within gender feminism’s major proponents. I want to add, however, that Lerner does articulate well her own struggles and commitment to marriage, motherhood and domesticity in her recent autobiography, although she never quite suggests that a successful integration of “feminist” activism and these “women’s” activities can be achieved.

<sup>28</sup> Sommers, Christina Hoff. Who Stole Feminism? How Women Have Betrayed Women. New York: Touchstone Books, 1995.

<sup>29</sup> Sommers, Christina Hoff. The War Against Boys: How Misguided Feminism is Harming our Young Men. Simon & Schuster, New York, 2000.

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- <sup>40</sup> Mendelson, Cheryl. *Home Comforts: The Art & Science of Keeping House*. Scribner, New York. 1999. Section heading “Cleanliness,” pg. 391; Chapter Thirty Title “Peaceful Coexistence with Microbes,” pg. 417.
- <sup>41</sup> Ibid. Pgs. 420-421.
- <sup>42</sup> Schlafly, Phyllis. Feminist Fantasies. Spence Publishing Company, Dallas, 2003.
- <sup>43</sup> Ibid. Jacket (and internet trailer).
- <sup>44</sup> Friedan, Betty. The Feminine Mystique. W.W. Norton & Co. Inc., New York, 1963.
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- <sup>47</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>48</sup> Chesler, Phyllis. Woman’s Inhumanity to Woman. Thunder’s Mouth Press, New York, 2001. Pg. 16.
- <sup>49</sup> Walker, Rebecca. Ed. to be real: Telling the Truth and Changing the Face of Feminism. Anchor Books, New York, 1995. Pg. xxxi.

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<sup>50</sup> Patai, Daphne and Noretta Koertge. Professing Feminism: Cautionary Tales from the Strange World of Women's Studies. BasicBooks, New York, 1994. Pg. xix.

<sup>51</sup> Mendelson, Cheryl. *Home Comforts: The Art & Science of Keeping House*. Scribner, New York, 1999. Section heading "Safe Shelter," pg. 691; Chapter Sixty-Four Title "Poisons, Hazardous Substances, and Proper Disposal of Hazardous Household Wastes," pg. 742.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid. Pg. 743.

<sup>53</sup> Matthews, Glenna. "Just a Housewife": The Rise & Fall of Domesticity in America. Oxford University Press, New York, 1987. Pgs. 225-226.

<sup>54</sup> Sommers, Christina Hoff. Who Stole Feminism? How Women Have Betrayed Women. New York: Touchstone Books, 1995. Pg. 275.

<sup>55</sup> Patai, Daphne and Noretta Koertge. Professing Feminism: Cautionary Tales from the Strange World of Women's Studies. BasicBooks, New York, 1994. Pg. 218.

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<sup>59</sup> Mendelson, Cheryl. *Home Comforts: The Art & Science of Keeping House*. Scribner, New York, 1999. Pgs. 8-10.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid. Pg. 10.