

ACCENT

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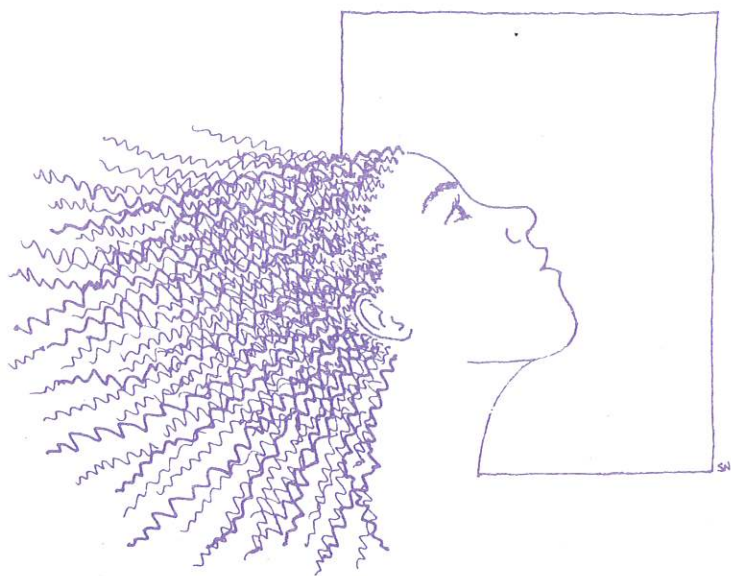
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In Honor of Women's History Month



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Celebrate Women's History (Herstory?) Month!

*by Nadine Addington, 1992 summer teaching
staff member*

As I began to write this article about Women's History Month, and in particular, African-American women's history, I was reminded of two things. One, when we think of history it is usually from the vantage point of our own culture, and two, the people who come to mind are men. This is as true for me today as it was when my fifth grade teacher first introduced me to history. I want to take this opportunity to share with you some reflections on the significance of celebrating Women's History (or should it be Herstory?) month.

To begin with, history is usually written and recorded from the vantage point of the "victor"--those who are in power or control of what is to be written. Consequently, numerous participants are excluded, and thus become invisible. Such has been the case for women, and in particular African-American women. Women have been viewed as inferior to men. Certain positions and roles were assigned to us in support of this view. For African-American women, this is intensified and illuminates the interrelatedness of racism and sexism.

I have struggled with affirming women and myself as a woman of African descent because of the lack of acknowledgment of my existence. This has led me to do some deep soul searching. There were two occasions (these were not the only ones) that I recall that helped me to understand what was going on in society and within myself.

Some time ago I attended a "Leadership for Black Women" conference in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Approximately thirty women participated in this event. The

facilitator had us volunteer to be in one of six groups--economic investment was one of them. Only two women selected this group! Our facilitator suggested that this was a critical area that we have yet to affirm because of our struggle to invest in ourselves. The topic included human as well as financial resources. Its central focus was the necessity to educate ourselves to become self-sufficient. Prior to this event I had not seen myself as a significant resource to society nor to myself--what a profound revelation!

This experience prompted me to do some research into the role African-American women have played in shaping our society and determining their own destinies. I was elated and encouraged by what I discovered. I found numerous examples of creative resistance to our society's assumptions about African-American women. Many of them are quite familiar: Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, Mary McLeod Bethune, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, and Mary Church Terrell, to name only a few. I was particularly struck by the example of Mary McLeod Bethune. She was one of seventeen children, had a keen mind, had the support of her mother, and a passion for and dedication to education. She founded a school for girls in Daytona Beach, Florida, on the sheerest of faith and \$1.50. To learn more about her I strongly recommend the book *When and Where I Enter: Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* by Paula Giddings.

A second experience which underscored the importance of celebrating women in history happened in Seoul, Korea during March 5-12, 1990. I was a participant in an international convocation sponsored by the

World Council of Churches (WCC). Its theme was "Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation." I was a delegate along with approximately 800 people from around the world. The membership bodies of the WCC were pressed to send lay delegates to this event and to downplay participation of their hierarchies. It was the first of its kind because of the "grassroots" representation.

Prior to the convocation there was a women's conference (March 3-5). Participants created an agenda of key issues and challenges to present at a session during the convocation. However, they subsequently discovered that their concerns about sexism within the church were not a top priority. There was no plan to include a covenant to address the issue of sexism in the church at this convocation. Also, the structure seemed to be too inflexible to accommodate any adjustment. This was quite painful in that it revealed to me the persistent reluctance to acknowledge, recognize, and honor the significant role that women have played in shaping society and history. Once again the question of my individual significance came to mind.

At one of the worship services during the convocation, women participants made a presentation of hand-made banners (representing different cultures) and declared March 8 International Women's Day. I was encouraged by this bold demonstration of self-affirmation and solidarity with one another in spite of being excluded from the convocation's covenants.

Both of these experiences helped me to understand the importance of self-affirmation and common convictions. We must stand together if we are to open others' eyes to the significance of women (and African-American women). Our perspectives must be included in the recording and "telling" of history. Then, history will indeed become "herstory"!

Nadine identifies herself as a female human being of African, Native American, and European American descent. She is part of a blended family. She has lived and worked in India, Malaysia, Singapore, Jamaica, and Venezuela for some 16 years. She is an office manager/administrator of the Contextual Education Department at Luther Northwestern Theological Seminary.

The first time I went to a church and heard a woman minister preach I cried . . .

I cried because I grew up in a church where women couldn't even light candles. And where women were not quite enough, inferior, and suspicious.

I cried because I grew up with the feeling that because I was female, I was not worthy to serve God. And I was taught that if I was submissive, obedient, long-suffering, self sacrificing, unquestioning, and most importantly, never caused trouble or upset the status quo, I would have a good life.

I cried because as much as I tried to make myself believe that, I looked at my life and at the women who I knew lived that way and couldn't bring myself to believe that that was all there was for me in life.

I cried because some part of me still believed that because I couldn't make myself sit down and shut up and because I questioned and made people uncomfortable and caused trouble and because I couldn't pretend that I believed what I didn't and wouldn't settle for being half alive that I was the greatest of sinners and could never be right with God.

I cried because finally someone was speaking my language and talking about something I could understand. And I suddenly came to see that those things that I had considered my greatest sins were really God's greatest gifts to me. And I knew that no one could ever say that I wasn't worthy to serve God--because that is what I'd been doing all along.

I cried because the exile was over, and I could come home.

*By Julie Kramer, Holden Head
Maverick, 1991-1992. Julie read this piece to the Holden winter community during women's history month in 1992.*