

# A Farewell to Feminism

**Delivering on its promise of a total restructuring of society, the women's movement has led its own followers into a...**

JAN, 1997 BY ELIZABETH POWERS [HTTPS://WWW.COMMENTARYMAGAZINE.COM/ARTICLES/A-FAREWELL-TO-FEMINISM/](https://www.commentarymagazine.com/articles/a-farewell-to-feminism/)

+ *She was intelligent and generous; it was a fine free nature; but what was she going to do with herself? This question was irregular, for with most women one had no occasion to ask it. . . . Isabel's originality was that she gave one an impression of having intentions of her own.*  
—Henry James, *Portrait of a Lady*

My coming of age in the early 1970's was inextricably linked with what is variously known as feminism, the women's movement, women's liberation. It is a link by which I am much puzzled and troubled. The passing years have brought me a closer look at, so to speak, the fine print, and I shiver now when I observe the evolution that some of my closest friends from that era have undergone, spouting phrases about comparable worth and voicing the most fantastic bureaucratic visions of the future.

But in truth, if I go back to the sources—say, to a *Time* essay by Gloria Steinem in August 1970—I can see that the writing was already on the wall. Steinem, for one, had fully evolved as of that date:

The [feminist] revolution would not take away the option of being a housewife. A woman who prefers to be her husband's housekeeper and/or hostess would receive a percentage of his pay determined by the domestic-relations courts.

**Did I talk like that, advocating state control of private life**, with (as Steinem went on) “free nurseries, school lunches, family cafeterias built into every housing complex”? Did I ever stand up in front of people, like the cadres of Red Guards in China, and, parroting the words of Kate Millett in *Sexual Politics* (1970), demand “a permissive single standard of sexual freedom . . . uncorrupted by the crass and exploitative economic bases of traditional sexual alliances”?

As a matter of fact, I do not believe I ever said such things or even contemplated them; nor, I suspect, did most of the women who considered themselves followers of the movement. A dissertation is probably being written which will offer a demographic breakdown of leaders and followers, but my own suspicion is that the leaders were girls whose mothers had been college-educated but became full-time housewives, and so were putatively victimized by what Betty Friedan had defined as the “feminine mystique.” The followers, those with backgrounds similar to mine, were not so solidly middle-class or goal-oriented, and had not yet grasped they might be leaders of anything.

We daughters of the working class or the slippery lower reaches of the middle class aspired, by and large, to a greater degree of participation in life outside the home. The shape that

participation would take was uncertain. Though a number of highly motivated girls of my generation took advantage of opportunities to enter professional schools, the general affluence of the period allowed those of us who were less motivated or who came from less privileged backgrounds to engage in a lot of shopping around. In my own case, participation did not mean anything practical or even lucrative but rather “fulfillment,” a realization of myself in literary and intellectual realms. It was my fortune, as Henry James wrote of Isabel Archer, to care for knowledge that was unfamiliar.

Throughout high school—I grew up in a rather cloistered environment in Kentucky—my aspirations seemed to run in thoroughly conventional directions: I wanted to be a cheerleader and prom queen and, of course, I wanted a boyfriend. But the same thing that kept me from becoming a cheerleader or prom queen also meant I was essentially dateless. I simply did not possess that combination of attributes which, for a brief time, confers unexpected grace on otherwise undeserving teenage girls. When I went to college, in 1965, still desiring to be exceptional in some way, I quickly perceived other possibilities of achievement.

This was a moment when university standards were still sacrosanct and an Ivy League institution was not the only place at which to receive a first-rate education. Though a fair number of women prominent today in public life probably graduated from women's colleges, I suspect the majority went, as I did, to schools like Indiana University (Jane Pauley, my classmate!). It was hard going for me—I was terribly uneducated when I got to college—but for the first time in my life I began to train my mind and came close to perfecting myself in something, namely, a foreign language.

Yet this youthful accomplishment, immeasurably assisted by two years of work and study in Europe, was attended by new challenges, chiefly of a social and sexual nature. Europe produced in me the same feeling that assailed Christopher Newman, the central character of Henry James's novel *The American*, in the presence of Old Master paintings: a vague self-mistrust. Possessing a fair share of Newman's innate American confidence and naturalness, but not his steady moral compass, I found myself entranced by the relaxed cultural habits that had evolved in Europe by the late 1960's. These I could not help contrasting with mid-century America's moral certitudes, centering on sex and the cold war, which now seemed to me to be a caricature of inflexibility.

Not three years before, where I came from, sex had been a matter cloaked in a great deal of mystery. I had been much fascinated by a girl I knew only by sight who became pregnant at fifteen and was married, probably shotgun-style, to her boyfriend of seventeen. Without being able to articulate it, I felt she must have been marked by her experience in a way that ordinary mortals, hewing to the straight and narrow, were not. Transgression may have resulted in shame and social denigration, but through her risk she had become an object of interest. Still, to stand outside the moral order was a fearsome prospect.

My Catholic attitudes were shot through with the fire and brimstone of other American cultural remnants—the sermons of Jonathan Edwards, Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*. In an educated European of the late 1960's, such attitudes provoked only condescending smiles. Europeans, it seemed, got to have the experience minus the soul-scorching. I was ignorant in those days of the social arrangements, mainly an intensive welfare bureaucracy, that cushioned these permissive sentiments and perhaps had even helped bring them into being. Instead, in the presence of mores

so different from my own, and influenced as well by superior church architecture and other evidence of cultural tradition, I came to conclude that European attitudes in the matter of sex were wiser than those of Americans. I wanted to be wise like Europeans.

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## II

*“I told you just now I’m very fond of knowledge,” Isabel answered.*

*“Yes, of happy knowledge—of pleasant knowledge. But you haven’t suffered, and you’re not made to suffer. I hope you’ll never see the ghost!” . . .*

*“I don’t think that’s a fault,” she answered. “It’s not absolutely necessary to suffer; we were not made for that.”*

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The birth-control pill, available in Europe in the 1950’s, was first approved by the FDA in 1960; the last state ban on contraception was struck down by the Supreme Court in 1965. The pill would seem to have solved the problem for which, historically, the movement for women’s emancipation had struggled: freedom from constant reproduction.

Yet the pill was one of those technical achievements, like gunpowder and printing, like the desktop computer, the effects of which flowed all over the social and political landscape. One of its effects was to alter a perilously achieved historical understanding regarding the responsibility of men to their offspring. With the pill, this responsibility was taken from them overnight. It was at this point, in 1969, returning from Europe, that I entered graduate school at the University of Texas. One of the first things I did after getting an apartment, registering for classes, and picking up my paycheck as a teaching assistant was to go to a doctor and get a prescription—even though I was still a virgin. That knowledge of which Isabel Archer spoke, which could be obtained without difficulty, had suddenly offered itself: all one had to do was take a pill 21 days in a row.

To get at some of the larger confusions engendered by this new dispensation it may be helpful to turn to a prominent book of the early women’s movement, Ingrid Bengis’s *Combat in the Erogenous Zone* (1972). I wonder if anyone has actually gotten to the end of this exercise in rage and self-pity; despite Bengis’s avowed admiration for artists, it seems never to have occurred to *her* to shape her material or give form to her experiences. The book is instead hardly more than an accumulation of horrors, an inventory of the infallible tendency of the nicest-seeming males to take advantage of Ingrid Bengis. The gallery of villains ranges from construction workers whistling at her on the street to the boy she shared a room with who fondled her as she lay blissfully zonked out in her sleeping bag, to the Mexican restaurant owner who gave her a free meal and then demanded sex, to the truck driver who picked her up while hitchhiking and then got upset when she refused to put out.

These were experiences many of us had in the 1970's. In hindsight, the source of Bengis's rage, a rage felt by so many women of our generation, can be discerned as early as the second page of her book, where she speaks of the men (plural) she has loved. The long and the short of it is that, thanks to the pill, young American females of the 1970's were suddenly behaving with the license, but without the sensibility, of jaded aristocrats. We women instinctively knew that what we were conferring was important and had something to do with love, and, like Ingrid Bengis, we used that word when we spoke of sex. Yet the terms of the bargain between men and women had radically changed. The old bargain—sex in exchange for commitment—had issued out of conditions of what might crassly be called a balance of supply and demand. These conditions were undermined in the 1970's by the flooding of the market with casual sex.

Feminists tend to blame men for their cavalier treatment of women, but, in the realm which Goethe spoke of as *Sittlichkeit* (roughly, morals), men follow the lead of women. Young males, it turns out, will only be protective and caring of females if something is at stake. When women sleep with men they barely know, assuming on their own the responsibility for regulating reproduction, men will be equally casual. A reward not having been fought for or truly earned is not a reward for which any individual will feel more than momentary indebtedness.

No wonder the whistle of construction workers, once a sign of appreciation for rewards not yet earned, and perhaps unattainable, came to sound to us like a hiss of contempt at our availability. The resulting sense of bafflement can be gleaned from where, in her prose, Bengis stamps her foot in emphasis, and where her inimitable ellipses fall:

*Of course* I was proud to be a woman . . . proud as well of a subtle kind of sexuality. But I was not proud of the way in which that sexuality was systematically abused in the service of something that ultimately cheapened both me and it.

By such displacements outward did rage at men become the fate of an entire generation.

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The role of the women's movement was to turn this rage into something powerful—sisterhood. As unexpected as it may sound, the experience of becoming a feminist was, for many, akin to a sudden spiritual conversion, a radical turnaround of the kind Tolstoy described in *Confession*, in which “everything that was on the right hand of the journey is now on the left.” An essay by Jane O'Reilly, “Click! The Housewife's Moment of Truth” (from the whimsically entitled *The Girl I Left Behind*, 1980), perfectly captures the quality of transformation promised by the movement, and just as perfectly exposes its hollowness. The essay inhabits a genre the publishing market has long catered to: morality tales in which adolescents learn the deceptiveness of appearances through painful lessons that lead them to maturity and true values. Just so, Jane O'Reilly finally grew up when she encountered women's liberation. Her book is a tale of setting aside the unimportant things, the very things she had once (in the 1950's) perceived that being a woman meant: debutante balls, identification bracelets, popularity, 75 people singing carols on Christmas Eve, drinking cocoa out of Dresden cups, real pearls. The illumination she underwent was to recognize that all these were a snare and a delusion, a cover and a preparation for deferring and submitting to men. Instead, what women needed was to become “equal members of the human society.”

O'Reilly's essay contains Erma Bombeck-like hints for negotiating the transition from Cinderella-cum-domestic-drone to liberated human being: "(1) Decide what housework needs to be done. Then cut the list in half." In the realm of love, her language is up-to-date, *circa* 1980: "I practiced and practiced taking the sexual initiative"; "I need to get laid." But the subtext is still the same old thing: romance. It turns out Jane O'Reilly truly wanted the flowers, the passionate declarations, and all the rest. For her, too, though perhaps less grimly than for Ingrid Bengis, women's sexual liberation was a bust. The new social arrangements—here is an entry for February 29 from the *Liberated Woman's Appointment Calendar*: "Leap Year Day. Propose to the Person of Your Choice"—failed.

At the end, Jane O'Reilly gives up, though she puts a brave face on it: "I now think love is somehow beside the point." Having sloughed off the demands of boyfriends, husbands, children, parents, in-laws, she is left to craft her own "lifestyle" out of the limp slogans of sisterhood:

Nontradition has become tradition. My friends are my family, and we will provide for each other. Gathered about the [Christmas] tree will be the intact family from upstairs, the broken family from across the park, an extended family from out of town, my own reconstituted family, and the various inexplicable attachments we have all acquired along the way.

Thus, by 1980, had Kate Millett's turgid and off-putting rhetoric of revolution been refashioned into O'Reilly-style sentimentality. Moreover, this sentimentality had become a staple, peddled in magazines and books, in TV programs and movies. Seldom was it asked whether or how it could actually carry you through long-term illness, financial jeopardy, or personal crises of a truly acute nature. Instead, as many women went through affair after affair, as they failed with one Mr. Right after another, as they approached forty and saw the possibilities of a family of their own **diminishing, as they found themselves living alone, scrambling for an invitation for Christmas dinner, O'Reilly's defeated alternative became more and more a necessary article of faith.**

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### III

*"Do you know where you're drifting?" Henrietta pursued [with Isabel], holding out her bonnet delicately.*

*"No, I haven't the least idea, and I find it very pleasant not to know. A swift carriage, of a dark night, rattling with four horses over roads that one can't see—that's my idea of happiness."*

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People who look at my *curriculum vitae* often come up with comments like, "What an interesting life you've led!" By 1988, for instance, when I returned to graduate school to finish my Ph.D., I had lived in Tokyo for several years, working, variously, as a writer of advertising, editor of a travel magazine, and bar girl, with side trips for extended periods to such exotic locales as Bali and Chiang-mai.

My decision in 1974 to take a job in Tokyo was no doubt influenced by my love of things unfamiliar, though the choice was also determined by an impulse today's self-help primers

discourage as “geographical escape.” Having had so many boyfriends (or been in love with so many, as Ingrid Bengis would have it), I suffered from an intensely unsettled personal life. By this point, I had become diverted from the studious habits of my undergraduate years. With a different perspective on life, so I thought, and perhaps a Japanese boyfriend as well, things would fall into place.

If Henry James's Americans are disabused in their encounters with Europe, so my own love of the unfamiliar was much shaken by Tokyo. As I quickly discovered, not only would I not get to live in a picturesque wooden Japanese house, I was also not going to find a Japanese boyfriend. Japan in 1974 was profoundly conservative, and sexual emancipation was definitely not the order of the day. What was more, Japan must have been the only culture in the world where it was deemed unmanly for a man to display interest in a woman. Overnight I seemed to become invisible.

Within a few days, I felt I had struck a very bad bargain, but I was too stubborn to go back to the U.S. Thrown on my own resources, without multitudinous opportunities for diversion, I finally got down to writing. At first, the pages of my notebooks were filled with little more than Ingrid Bengis-like rantings against the Japanese. Soon, however, I began to write for third- and fourth-rate travel magazines, which in turn led to more substantial opportunities.

It was with a slender stock of writing credentials that I returned in the early 1980's to the U.S., where it soon became clear to me there would be a price to pay for my waywardness. In the few years I had been gone, things in America had changed, and I found I had gotten off the track. In my usual confident way I decided to support myself as a freelance writer and to publish a novel, a task at which I succeeded. But after my first novel a somewhat bleak period followed, as I adhered to my desire to distinguish myself by writing stories and novels that nevertheless went unpublished. I used to meet weekly with a group of writers, all of whom had been published in the field of genre fiction, but they quickly grew impatient with me, giving me little encouragement in my determination to write what they all considered too literary and rightly scorned as unmarketable.

It was about this time, the mid-1980's, that I conceded that the promise of participation and distinction was going to take a long time to realize (I was nothing if not stubborn!). Such a clear-eyed assessment did not result in my entering the job market, however. Instead, in 1988, with my 1970's-based confidence still intact, I returned to graduate school. That I happily contemplated the prospect of teaching at a small liberal-arts college at a time when there was already a glut of Ph.D.'s seems another delusion that only an American woman who came of age in the 1970's could entertain.

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#### IV

*Smile not, however, I venture to repeat, at this simple young woman from Albany who debated whether she should accept an English peer before he had offered himself and who was disposed to believe that on the whole she could do better. She was a person of great good faith, and if*

there was a great deal of folly in her wisdom those who judge her severely may have the satisfaction of finding that, later, she became consistently wise only at the cost of an amount of folly which will constitute almost a direct appeal to charity.

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The women's movement is usually seen as having grown from the movement for civil rights for blacks, and, to many people, it had to do primarily with equality of economic opportunity. From the late 1960's on, mainstream journalists dutifully trotted out the statistics concerning women's economic and professional disadvantages. Yet feminists agitating about the pay scales of lawyers or accountants were in fact after something else: a change in the very meaning of equality.

For women to be "equal," as Jane O'Reilly dimly perceived ("The point of feminism is not that the world should be the same, but that it should be different"), something more drastic than admission to medical school was required. Female biology itself would have to be interpreted as a humanly limiting condition, established not by nature but by a cabal otherwise known as the patriarchy. There was much at stake, and a 1969 article in the *Nation* spelled it out: the women's movement, intoned the writer, was dedicated "to a total restructuring of society, . . . and is not content simply to integrate women into male-defined goals and values."

This thoroughgoing radicalism, a (relatively) new aspect of the century-old movement for female emancipation, elicited criticism even on the Left. Among the opponents was the socialist and literary critic Irving Howe. In December 1970 Howe published in *Harper's* a long review-essay of Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics*, which a few months earlier had been baptized by *Time* magazine as the *Communist Manifesto* of the women's movement. Howe took the book sharply to task not only for its intellectual and literary failings but also for what he perceived as Millett's dangerous political agenda, which he considered "a parody of the Marxist vision of class struggle." In one of the nastiest literary put-downs of all time, he declared that "the emotions of women toward children don't exactly form an overwhelming preoccupation in *Sexual Politics*: there are times when one feels the book was written by a female impersonator." This was a comment, I recall, that particularly exercised me and my sisters in the movement at the time. That I had not read Millett was beside the point; it was enough that Howe attacked the woman who articulated our rage for us.

Were sexual differences amenable to the kind of social reconfiguration Millett was advocating? Howe, for one, certainly did not think so. To the contrary, he thought they should not be jettisoned on the trash heap of history in the pursuit of some bloodless ideal. In speaking of the struggles of his own parents, toiling as garment workers while raising children in wretched poverty, Howe sounded almost like a conservative. Besides suggesting that the differences between the sexes might in fact contribute to the melioration of our fallen human condition, he also defended the family as being not necessarily oppressive to women:

That the family . . . has been coextensive with human culture itself and may therefore be supposed to have certain powers of endurance and to yield certain profound satisfactions to human beings other than merely satisfying the dominating impulses of the "master group," hardly causes Miss Millett to skip a phrase. Nor does the thought that in at least some of its aspects the family has protected the interests of women as against those of men.

In retrospect, this may have been the moment when the Left gave way definitively to the New Left. That Howe was fighting a rear-guard action is clear from the fact that he soon withdrew from this polemical field—as did Norman Mailer, another leftist stalwart whose lone contribution to the anti-feminist canon was his 1971 *The Prisoner of Sex*. By now, moreover, both the women's movement and the New Left had begun to find a new source of legitimation in a philosophy that had sunk roots in the universities. Call it deconstruction, call it post-structuralism, its intent was to demolish the notion that there could be anything like cultural standards, or agreed-upon truths, or, it went without saying, objective sexual differences.

Today, of course, this relativism-in-the-service-of-a-new-absolutism has contaminated far more than the upper reaches of academia and the fringes of the Modern Language Association. All introductory college courses, be they in literature, sociology, anthropology, religion, etc., have become shot through with the insights of deconstruction, and an afternoon of watching Oprah is enough to demonstrate how they have filtered down into the general culture. The goal of this new orientation is, ostensibly, radical human freedom and equality, without ties to oppressive institutions of any kind, especially not to the patriarchy, that shibboleth of social reconstructionists. But what deconstruction has really done is to banish, as nothing more than a set of arbitrary conventions, the moral promptings that lead people to notice oppression in the first place, and along with them the ability to distinguish true oppression from false.

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V

*He had told her, the first evening she ever spent at Gardencourt, that if she should live to suffer enough she might some day see the ghost with which the old house was duly provided. She apparently had fulfilled the necessary condition; for the next morning, in the cold, faint dawn, she knew that a spirit was standing by her bed.*

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There is a cart-before-the-horse quality about feminism. An explosion of economic forces, starting after World War II, sent women into the workplace in large numbers. It was only after this process was in high gear, and when women began directly competing with men in the upper echelons, that feminism came into being. An ideology then arose to justify the unprecedented autonomy on the part of women (and perhaps to assuage some of their felt guilt over the abandonment of hearth and home) and to allocate spoils. A panoply of institutions formed in its turn, to buttress the ideology: women's-studies departments in universities, tax-exempt institutions setting themselves up as lobbyists for “women's issues,” a larger and larger government bureaucracy. By now, many women have come to believe that their opportunities stem wholly from the struggles of their feminist forebears and not at all from the steady expansion of the market.

But ideology, as Karl Marx noted long ago, is replete with tensions. These tensions are in abundant evidence in an essay by Diane Johnson in a recent issue of the *New York Review of Books*. Johnson is aware of the distress signals being sent out by contemporary feminism, and

she demonstrates that even a liberal like herself can recognize the ridiculousness of academic feminist highjinks:

. . . endless testimonials, diatribes, and spurious science from people who imagine that their personal experience, the dynamics of their particular family, sexual taste, childhood trauma, and personal inclination constitute universals.

Johnson even circles back to the incommensurables of human existence, going so far as to refer to God and original sin. Since she is a novelist, such incommensurables may be on her mind.

Yet on the subject of women and women's issues, she inevitably begins from premises that are at odds with the way individuals struggle to craft their individual solutions to life's demands, a task that, ironically enough, the novel has traditionally taken it as its prerogative to illuminate. Johnson's constant use of the word "class" in connection with women alerts the reader to the non-novelistic sources of her thinking. Her enumeration of the minimal rights that feminists should urge on everyone is unalloyed bureaucratic boilerplate: personal safety, autonomy in sexual and health matters, equal pay for equal work.

Among my friends who are working women of middle age, there are very few who do not consider themselves feminists. Their attitudes, like Johnson's, are permeated by a belief in the inevitable progress of humanity—from which, they hold, women, prior to the 1960's, were excluded. They remain upbeat concerning the bureaucratic arrangements that will bring about the inevitable progress. Such has been the infiltration of feminist-think that women who 30 years ago would have recoiled from the social engineering extolled by Gloria Steinem now accept the rationale for suspending a six-year-old boy from school for sexual harassment because he has kissed a six-year-old girl.

Johnson herself adduces several sociological studies which purportedly demonstrate that all the parameters are finally lining up and settling into place. She quotes Dr. Daniel J. ("mid-life crisis") Levinson: "Humanity is now in the early phases of a transformation in the meanings of gender and the place of women and men in every society." The same doctor also holds, from the loftiest Archimedean perspective, that such gender transformation (here I am quoting Johnson) "is an irreversible historical trend which will take another century to achieve." And people think Newt Gingrich is a crackpot for spouting Alvin Toffler.

Johnson declines to question whether the "transformation in the meanings of gender" projected by Levinson is a desirable state, whether it is a state any of us would wish to morph into. An irreversible trend, after all, is an irreversible trend. But she compliments France and Scandinavia, "whose governments have committed themselves to large-scale child-care arrangements." These arrangements, like the model farms the Soviets used to allow foreign visitors to see, seem to offer evidence that rational social planning will work and that the awful dislocations and disruptions occurring all around us are only temporary and in any case justified by the march of History.

But maybe Dr. Levinson is on to something. It strikes me that one of the peculiar results of the reign of feminism is that women have actually become unimportant, indeed nonessential. This has come about by feminism's making radically suspect the influence that women, *qua* women, have traditionally exercised on the souls of those with whom they come into contact. The first effective thrust was to deny that any of the endless tasks performed by women within the marriage union contributed in any way to its spiritual wholeness. Housekeeping and child-raising were transformed into a purely material operation, consisting of the kind of mindless, mechanical steps that characterize the assembly of an automobile or a computer. It is no surprise that the most ambitious women of my generation fled this scenario of drudgery, and, by extension, also avoided traditional women's occupations as they would the plague. A generation of women who would have been excellent teachers instead became attorneys, in what they were told and seemed to believe would be a net gain for humanity.

This abandonment of the female realm has also led to the production of a class that appears to be in the vanguard of the nanny state: women who “have it all,” whose marriages are not so much unions as partnerships of two career paths, and whose children, once assembled and produced, are willingly turned over by them to caretakers. Most of these women have probably not dwelt on the consequences of the Faustian bargain they have struck, but their example says loudly and clearly that children are interchangeable units and that the values they learn can be equally well acquired from a Norwegian au pair and after-school public television as from parents.

Whether such women really do have it all is for them, perhaps, to say. Even so, there remains a lack of synchronicity between the highest levels of feminist achievers and ordinary women. Housework and the raising of children, denigrated by the movement and by so many elite women, is looked upon very differently by my unmarried friends, even those who call themselves feminists. They sense that the struggle to form one's life in conjunction with another—including all those horrible minutiae of daily existence that Jane O'Reilly described as the murder of a woman's soul—is a spiritual enterprise of the highest sort, involving the “discovery,” as Midge Decter put it with her habitual precision in *The New Chastity* (1972), “that to be in charge of oneself also requires the courage to recognize the extent of one's frailty and dependence on others.” And they sense acutely that, in declining or refusing to make those compromises of daily living-with-an-other, they have missed out on the greatest of human challenges and have indeed failed in point of courage. They still yearn to meet someone with whom, as the current parlance goes, they can share their life.

The tragic part is the egocentrism of their current existence, the days and years devoted to self-maintenance, with minimal effect on the lives of others. Women now get to fulfill themselves—O'Reilly's passionate wish—but they do so in the most resolute solitude. If there is any validity to what Aristotle said long ago—that one's existence has a goal toward which the soul strives—then the care of one's physical and mental self can only be a subordinate part of a larger existential plan. The women I am talking about do not have such a plan, be it marriage or children or a high-powered career. Instead of caring for the direction of their souls, they tend to their “personal space.”

The greatest loss for my friends who have not married is of course the children they never had. Exhortations to self-fulfillment aside, by the time they reached forty many women of my

generation were in a desperate race with their bodies. Magazines in the late 1980's began featuring articles on "Mommie Oldest," as women underwent Herculean efforts to get their aging uteruses into shape. *In vitro*fertilization, artificial insemination, hormone shots—if only they could go back and undo all those abortions!

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Here, indeed, is the great unnameable, the subject that many of us have refused to face squarely in its terrible personal dimension but that, like the purloined letter, has always been there, before our eyes. Childbirth, contraception, abortion: these dividers of women also illuminate the terrible contradictions of feminist ideology, and particularly the contention that women are no different from men.

The divide between the goals of radical, society-transforming feminism and ordinary women is inadvertently captured by Diane Johnson in her criticism of the social thinker Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, whose latest book, *Feminism Is Not the Story of My Life*, dwells precisely on this divide. Fox-Genovese, she writes, "stops just short of saying that feminists will murder infants in their cradles." Even setting partial-birth abortions aside, Johnson's refusal to see what feminism has, in fact, done in this realm is breathtaking. And because she will not acknowledge it, she must also censure Fox-Genovese for speaking of women's sexual decisions as being somehow fraught with special danger. To speak in this way, says Johnson, suggests that women are not up to "independent moral choice." But Fox-Genovese does not deny women moral choice; she merely underscores what most women have always known: that sex, for them, *is* fraught with special danger. Ingrid Bengis knew that, though it made her very angry.

I have made my way back to my starting point. Is sex merely a material manifestation, a physical fact and act, a discharge of physical tension? Does it make any difference that the man who caresses a woman's body is a man she met only a few hours before? Or is a woman's experience of sex part of a larger moral, indeed spiritual, equation? Does she require that the man with whom she shares her bed be one whose love has settled unwaveringly and discriminatingly on her? Does she expect him to take responsibility for the child she may conceive? These are the hard questions, ones that many of us have not confronted. But whenever a woman does confront them, and arrives at the latter point of view, you will probably find that she has severed her ties with feminism.

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### Elizabeth Powers

Elizabeth Powers is currently completing a memoir about the ascendance of contemporary liberalism.