

**BREAD AND ROSES**  
JULIE STONEBERG  
LAKEHEAD UNITARIAN FELLOWSHIP  
MARCH 12, 2006

There is a poem entitled "To Be of Use"<sup>1</sup> by Marge Piercy that resonates with me even as it unsettles me. A part of it is one of the readings found in our hymnal...one line seems particularly fitting to include in a service about International Women's Day. She writes, "I want to be with people who submerge in the task, who...move in a common rhythm when the food must come in or the fire be put out." And then... "The work of the world is as common as mud."

Surely Piercy speaks of the work of women.

I don't mean to imply in stating such that there is genetically assigned women's work. What I do mean to state, and to state plainly, is that in our patriarchal society, the work that women do is often work that is not valued as highly as work done by men. To devalue a woman's work is to devalue her contribution, and to devalue her contribution is to devalue her very being. This devaluing is systemic and has become an insidious force...a reality that women everywhere face every day on every level. In spite of this, we all have women in our lives that have been inspirations for us. I dedicate this service to all of those women...countless women who so bravely and with love and fortitude take on the hard realities of their lives and simultaneously work toward change. These are women who understand the need for bread and for roses.

In 1975, during the Second Wave of feminism, the United Nations gave official sanction to, and began sponsoring International Women's Day. Of course, work for women's rights didn't begin then...it is about as old as it is common. It certainly didn't start with the Second Wave, or even the first. But for today's purposes, I'll start there. The 'first wave' of feminist activity, in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, focused on suffrage, and that wave was chock-full of Unitarian and Universalist women...women like Mary Wollstonecraft, who, in Britain in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, advocated the social and moral equality of the sexes, and who dared to

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<sup>1</sup> "To be of use" by Marge Piercy © 1973, 1982.

acknowledge the existence of women's sexual desires. Women like Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony who crusaded in the United States for the abolition of slavery and for women's right to vote. Women like Emily Stowe, who led campaigns here in Canada to provide access for women to professional education. She herself, having been denied admission to the Toronto School of Medicine, attended a women's medical college in the States. But even with her medical credentials, she was unable to obtain a medical license in Canada until 1870, thirty years after she began practicing homeopathic medicine in Toronto.

Indeed, the path we walk today has been cleared through the vision and hard work of these women, and so many others who have gone before us. We share a history with them. We belong to the same motion. In part, because of their work, many of us have been spared a limiting and demeaning existence. Because of their work, it is possible today for many women to have a relatively rosy life. Yet so many still struggle to provide bread for their families.

As I stated earlier, International Women's Day came into being during the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in honor of those who worked for women's rights and better labor conditions. March 8 was identified as IWD because in Russia, thousands of women chose that day, in 1917, to leave their homes and factories to protest the increased suffering they experienced...terrible food shortages, high prices, and the world war. These demonstrations actually marked the start of the Russian Revolution, and thereafter, in the Soviet period, March 8 honored 'the heroic woman worker.'

It was only a few months after this first International Women's Day that Hazel Barrett Wohni was born (1917 May 26). More than once, I have heard Hazel's name uttered here with a kind of reverence...a reverence I imagine arising out of her involvement in the justice work of this community. Hazel was essentially born into the Communist party, into a family of labor organizers, into a farm family that would have had nothing to eat had it not been for a large and productive garden at their place in Dorion. Sometimes they were able to sell potatoes to get enough money to make it through the winter. For them, speaking up for the hungry was an imperative. They marched for bread, literally.

About a week ago, I had the pleasure of sitting down with Hazel Wohni at her kitchen table over a cup of tea and some butter tarts. For those of you who don't know Hazel, she is a longtime member of this Fellowship; unfortunately she fell and broke her hip this winter. She is recovering very well, but she is not able to be with us on Sundays because she cannot maneuver the steps into this building. Our physical inaccessibility is one of the reasons LUF hopes to move to a new space one day soon.

Hazel is a joy to speak with. She is positive and cheerful about everything, and speaks demurely, with a twinkle in her eye. On this particular occasion, I visited her in hopes that she would tell me a little bit of her life's story for purposes of today's service. In the end, I don't feel that I heard so much of her life story, as I heard of her life philosophies...the attitudes and beliefs that fueled the work of her entire family. Herein is the stuff of roses...the ideologies that motivate a life. Her family believed that our first responsibility is to be sure everyone is taken care of, to ensure that the basic needs of all are met. The slogan they used was "work according to ability and receive according to needs." During the depression era, when people didn't have enough to eat, Hazel's family was instrumental in successfully petitioning the government for assistance. The resulting relief checks, in the amount of two or three dollars, made it possible for families to buy enough bread to survive.

When the Second World War broke out, Hazel came to Thunder Bay and went to work at Canada Car, where she worked briefly in Department 69 as a riveter, drilling sheetmetal for airplane wings. She was joined in this work by hundreds of other women who had been brought here by train from Western Canada to work at the plant. She particularly remembers a successful battle for higher wages... when women's pay was raised from \$.49 to \$.65 per hour. This was a huge victory for women who were working fulltime and raising families alone.

Indeed, World War II changed the social landscape. This was the first time that many women had their own money - money earned and controlled by themselves. Wartime has a particular way of leveling economic and cultural diversity, exposing women of all walks of

life to the realities of raw survival. This 'leveling' was the experience of Lotta Hitschmanova, the "atomic mosquito", as she was called, who founded the Unitarian Service Committee of Canada. She was a woman of some privilege...a woman whose wartime experiences shaped her into a woman of compassionate action. Born into an upper-middle class family in Prague in 1909, Hitschmanova was educated in political science and was working as a journalist when Germany took over Czechoslovakia. The anti-Nazi sentiment in her writings made it necessary for her to leave her homeland; traveling alone as a refugee, she eventually ended up in Marsailles, France, poor and starving. There, standing in a food line, she collapsed, and was taken to the Unitarian Service Committee medical clinic for treatment. To be among Unitarians must have been somewhat familiar to her; her parents had been friends with Dr. Norbert Chapek, the founder of Unitarianism in Czechoslovakia. Thereafter, having received help, she worked with the Americans of the Unitarian Service Committee in France helping other refugees in turn. The refugee experience was one she now knew all too personally, and she vowed to do everything she could to help others who were helpless in times of war, especially children.

Hitschmanova couldn't get a visa to the United States, but was granted one to Canada. And I say, good move, Canada. The Ottawa Unitarian Church supported her in starting the Unitarian Service Committee of Canada, and she directed that Committee for forty years, organizing 150 programs in 20 countries...programs that help people all over the world recover from war, drought, disease, and poverty. Hers is a legacy we can build upon through our support of the Unitarian Service Committee.

Lotta was a woman who, when her world broke apart, made the choice to work to repair it for others. She received numerous awards for her efforts, including the Companion of the Order of Canada in 1980. Hitschmanova was a humanitarian in the fullest sense... She was a woman who understood the need for assistance and advocacy... the need to provide basic necessities in the spirit of love and respect. Bread and roses.

I have named just a few, yet for every woman I have named there are hundreds more who have spoken with their lives...women who have put their very existence on the line in the service of a better world for themselves and for others...and for us.

At the same time that the United Nations recognized International Women's Day, it named a Decade for Women, from 1975-1985. The themes of the Decade were Equality, Development and Peace, goals sought by feminists from the First Wave on. These three themes are crucially interdependent. The issues of women's development and equality cannot be separated from those of peace, and vice versa. In wartimes, actually in all times, resources that otherwise could feed and educate are used for military and destructive purposes. Social programs and social services are a central means of creating an egalitarian society. When cutbacks in social programs are deemed necessary, women bear the primary burden of those cutbacks, and this is an issue that the UN hoped to address during the Decade for Women. The achievements of this Decade, an effort that Hazel Wohni participated in here in Thunder Bay, are many. At the end of those ten years, there was more awareness of women's problems, greater advocacy of their rights and greater understanding of their needs. During this Decade, seventy governments ratified the "Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women" Act. Appreciation for the diverse roles which women can play in society grew, the focus of primary health care shifted, appropriately, to women, and there was a perceivable narrowing in the education gap.

Yes, progress was made. However, the goals of equality, development and peace are far from actualized. This past year, the Canadian Feminist Alliance for International Action, in a report to the UN entitled "A Decade of Going Backwards", critiques the progress for women in this country in the areas of the economy, poverty, and violence.<sup>2</sup> I'm certainly no expert on Canadian social policies, but taking this report at its word, it would seem that recent (and by that I mean going back about ten years) recent cuts in social programs have jeopardized much of the progress that was made in previous years. In fact, in 2003, the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women issued 26 recommendations to Canada, highlighting women and poverty as an area requiring urgent action. However, the report goes on to say, these recommendations have fallen into a vacuum because there are no mechanisms within Canadian governments on all levels for dealing with deficiencies in Canada's human rights performance.

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<sup>2</sup> A Decade of Going Backwards: Canada in the Post-Beijing Era, Canadian Feminist Alliance for International Action. Response to UN Questionnaire on Implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action... January 2005.

It may be presumptuous of me, an American, to talk about Canada's human rights policies and programs. Although I haven't done the research, I would not be surprised to learn that the United States would be evaluated in a similarly negative fashion, so there is no reason for us to be parochial in our view of the problem. It is worldwide. Because of women's seemingly inherent role in the feeding and rearing of children, because of women's substandard position in the parsing out of economic resources, because women have an intrinsically vital place in the infrastructure of society, addressing the needs of women can have an exponential ripple effect that would benefit the lives of all. Women are the ones who are submerged, daily, in the task of justice...women are most often the ones doing the work of the world, the work that is as common as mud. This is why micro-lending, particularly of women's cooperatives, has met with such success in developing countries. This is why The Decade for Water - the current UN initiative - places its emphasis on women as managers of the water. Women hold up half the sky... at least!

It seems appropriate that the Canadian theme for International Women's Week 2006 is "Beyond Laws: The Right to Be Me." This theme was chosen because despite legal foundations for women's rights, a gap remains between those laws and the reality of women's lives. Issues of violence and poverty have not been resolved, and these issues disproportionately affect Aboriginal women, women with disabilities, lesbians, single women, and lone parents.

The absence of equality, poverty and peace is an issue that is with us still, even in countries such as this that have the resources to make a real difference. And so, women and their allies must continue to do the work. The future of the human race depends on all of us. Every one of us is needed now.

We can take our example from women like Cindy Sheehan and Code Pink who are valiantly working to end the US involvement in Iraq. This past week, in celebration of International Women's Day, they joined a courageous group of Iraqi women who converged in Washington DC. Representing Shiites, Sunnis and Kurds, they are united in their horror at

the killings, and their determination to stop the violence. Their statement reads, "This is not the world we want for ourselves or our children. With fire in our bellies and love in our hearts, we women are rising up - across borders - to unite and demand an end to the bloodshed and the destruction. We women did not give birth to and raise our sons and daughters to kill other women's sons and daughters."

We can take our example from women like Rosa Martha Zárate Macias who sing out their struggle for human rights. With a strong commitment to building a new world order, Rosa Martha stands as an artistic spokesperson for Latinas. She has successfully combined her rich musical talent with courageous leadership in championing rights and has founded two organizations that promote and develop programs to help the Hispanic poor.

We can take our example from Hazel Wohni, who continues to stand up for justice; just last fall, at the age of 88, she picketed with the CBC employees who were locked out. "I feel so lucky," she said to me, sitting in her simple apartment. "I have so much. We need to work for a better life for all people."

There is a wonderful account from the 1912 Lawrence textile strike. Labor reporter Mary Heaton Vorse wrote, "It was the spirit of the workers that was dangerous. They are always marching and singing. The tired, gray crowds ebbing and flowing perpetually into the mills had waked and opened their mouths to sing." For some of us, it is time to wake up. For some of us, it is time to march...and to sing. Always and forever, to sing. I want to be with people who submerge in the task in this way. May we each renew our commitment to the march for bread and for roses too.

Blessed be.