

[Norma Swenson's remarks as spoken March 31, 2018 at the 20th Anniversary Memorial for Mary Raugust Howell at the concert celebrating her memory and accomplishments.]

Dearly Beloved:

First: A couple of preambles: One of my ways of remembering precious people who have left us is often to write them a letter. As I speak I will try to do some of that here.

I am also calling you all The Beloved, because it used to be a term in obituaries and carved on tombstones after death. So, we here are the Beloved of Mary, and Mary is our beloved.

My other preamble is that almost all the activism I pursued with my BWHBC hat, working with Mary, was done in tandem with Judy Norsigian, my support from the generation behind mine and Mary's, trying to demonstrate the generational spread of feminism. Our accomplishments could never have been so effective without Judy's energy, patience, and skill.

[START]

Dear Mary: {It is March, 2018, in Watertown, MA}:

Twenty years can seem like yesterday for those of us who remember you, Mary. We sustained the powerful imprinting of you and your love in just a few turbulent years, or even just months at times, during the last revolution. That revolution never really quite ended, though the press was eager to pronounce us dead. But the imprinting of those times remained, slumbering underground ever since, until just recently, until right now. Dear Mary, today's children would have made you cry, as they did me, and others. They might make you hope, as they are done to many of us. They could be your children.

What endures, and feels so present right now, is the people who led us during those times, who were listening to their own drummers, and offered us – inspired us -- with those rhythms. This is the best possible moment, better now even than last week, to salute you,

Mary, because you were one of the brightest stars of that last revolution, if not the brightest, and so you can help us now to renew our vows, our vows to resist.

But was there ever such a lighthearted, mischievous and loving revolutionary leader as you were, Mary?

Surrounded by children and a living husband who was also a physician, confirmed by medical training and practice, as well as the competence of psychology and prodigious scholarship in the humanities, you had demonstrated conclusively, even to those with the deepest prejudices, that the ineradicable, fundamental handicap of being a woman, especially in Medicine, could be compensated for, as much as was humanly possible.

What could possibly go wrong?

I have not seen the notes of meetings that must have taken place within that all male, virtually all white, virtually all upper class bastion of elite privilege and Boston Brahmin dominance that was academic medicine at Harvard at that time. They even described in mid-twentieth century writings their belief that Medicine had become by then, perhaps “Western civilization’s finest flower.” Now, something had to be done, because:

The Women were coming! The Women were coming!

Somehow, they had to be co-opted. Whether they wanted them or not – and there was plenty of evidence that the leadership did not want them and never had, and were no way prepared to receive them– but that leadership was about to be forced to admit women, in greater numbers than ever before.

Somehow. Someone very special would have to be appointed to deal with them!

Who could that be? Whatever else, it had to be a woman. And besides, many more women's bathrooms would have to be built in all the marble temples of the Quad, and quickly. This item of their agenda did actually come down to us.

When you and I did meet, Mary, in our early forties, on the Harvard Longwood campus, we gradually recognized one another as being from a very small group of educated women, the smallest cohort in the 20th century. Of those, only a very small group pursued graduate education, and even fewer of them became feminists. In time, likely we knew them all. We were born in the same year, you and I, and had lived our lives as girls and women growing up in this country.

At that time on the Longwood campus, I was simply a student at the Harvard School of Public Health, earning my MPH degree. But I had already spent a decade working as a non-profit volunteer in Boston and throughout the North America, with community groups and some global professionals, trying to improve maternity care practices. I didn't particularly want to be at Harvard and I never aspired even for a moment to become a doctor, as you may recall. But of course, as a married woman with a child, I had to be in Boston. The faculty at HSPH surely felt they had things to teach me. But I had also just become a member of the Boston Women's Health Book Collective, helping to prepare the first commercial Simon & Schuster edition of *Our Bodies, Ourselves*. By the time my MPH was awarded in 1973 the book was out. It was also the year that the Supreme Court handed down the *Roe v Wade* decision legalizing abortions.

I met you without knowing any of your extraordinary credentials or accomplishments. We began our collaboration and friendship at the newly reconstituted Commission on the Status of Women that included the entire campus, all its schools and all its employees, most of whom were women. There we listened to Mary Rowe from MIT tell us what was truly needed and what had already been accomplished at MIT, to protect women and to empower them. We dreamed it could be a model for what Harvard could do. We had been on very different paths, you and I, using totally opposite tools to be on that campus. Yet

by the time we met we had a number of similar goals and determined sense of mission: We wanted medicine and all those in charge of policies on that campus, to live up to their own professed ideals and solemn oaths, to be more accountable to those being cared for, more resistant to the easy money and corruption risks of the pharmaceutical industry, to be more scientific in its evaluations, more honest in its messaging and about the harms caused by medical care itself, more ethical in all its behaviors, more transparent and inclusive about how it makes decisions and does its work. And finally, we expected those institutions to be much, much more responsible to all of society. That seemed to us only reasonable in exchange for the enormous, often disproportionate wealth and privilege they enjoyed, and the nearly unlimited social power granted to them as healers by virtually the entire society.

But not least, along with Judy and the Collective, and many other women in the fledgling women's health movement, you and I both recognized that medicine's power and domination over everyday life, a power that scholars like Irv Zola and Ivan Illich came to call medicalization, was still growing, expanding its already considerable control over women in particular, starting with limiting their numbers in medical education and training but pervading the entire enterprise. To change this unhealthy situation seemed absolutely essential. Among many other resources to do this work, we needed data, proof of discrimination and poor management. You began producing a lot of our data, and wrote for the movement's fledgling newsletters besides.

I soon learned that you had planned most of the interviews with women applicants to medical school, eventually published by The Feminist Press as "Why Would A Girl Go Into Medicine?" and that Margaret Campbell, its author, was in fact your pen name.

Over time, you published some of the best compilations then available of all the categories and evidence of discrimination against women in health and medical care, in the *New England Journal of Medicine*. Next came the state of the art, two-part summary published in *Pediatrics*, challenging, documenting and demolishing once and for all the myths so often pronounced and promoted by pediatricians, that children of most working

mothers would and did suffer irreparable harm. You produced the evidence that these ideas were false, anchored by your impeccable scholarship, and placed it in medical journals no one could dismiss, even as they kept trying to ignore it.

You also believed in my capacity to play a leadership role, or at least that I deserved an apprenticeship. It was part of your special genius to continually offer me opportunities I would never have had otherwise, of a kind my faculty at School of Public Health would not have been capable. I came to know that you did this with many other people, too. As you may recall, you made me spruce up my Vita [CV] and sent me to be interviewed by Matina Horner at the Radcliffe Institute [formerly The Bunting] to become the new Director of the Radcliffe Health program soon to be launched in cooperation with BU. PS I did not get the job, I was no way qualified and the program never happened anyway, but I certainly learned a lot in that process.

Still another time, [while holding your office as Dean, and while I was still a student, I believe] you sent me to New Orleans to the convention of the most powerful and prestigious body in the Obstetrics and Gynecology establishment, the American Board of Ob-Gyns, knowing by then that I liked to eat Ob-Gyns for breakfast. Your sending me there was one of your more disrespectful acts. It is difficult to think of a more outrageous no-no than a non-physician impersonating a physician – it is even a crime under some circumstances. But you sent me as a substitute for you, a Dean of Women and Minority Students at Harvard Medical School, to take the platform and to speak, participating in their meeting as if I was one of them. I knew from the expressions on some of their faces that they were appalled, but mostly I remember thinking that they would make certain nothing so outrageous would ever happen to them again.

But perhaps that was not quite the capstone of my career as an impersonator, Mary that only you could make possible. It was my initiation, through your largesse, into the inner circles, or “belly of the beast,” as we sometimes call it, of that part of the medical establishment I was keeping most constantly under my non-medical gaze. You had a friend in Chicago, a physician and psychiatrist named Anne Seiden, who had published a

really interesting article whose thesis was “Childbirth As Mastery.” She had been invited to meet with some of the leadership circle of the American College of Obstetrics & Gynecology for dinner at their headquarters, located in Chicago at the time, not far from the AMA. [Later they moved to D.C. but in those days they were in Chicago.] And Anne invited you to be her companion. You proposed that I go in your place, and Anne graciously agreed. I do not recall now what we ate, or whether my substitute presence came as a surprise to them. I can’t tell you what we said at that dinner, in a glorious pink silk dining room fit for an upper class bordello, all hung with genuine Impressionist paintings – possibly rented for the occasion? I know I came away with a much deeper and more sober understanding of the level of power and influence arrayed against all of us, hardly diminished even to this day. One more of your amazing gifts to me, Mary, a part of my education I will never forget.

Then, after I had earned my MPH, and was already enrolled in a medical sociology grad program at Tufts, you, Mary, still at HMS, asked Judy and me, representing the Collective, if we would work with her students to help organize a conference at Harvard Medical School, with other community groups. As most of you know the rest is history, that event became the 1975 Conference on Women and Health. But some of you may remember hearing, we really did freak out the school’s administrators when they discovered, that as organizers we had achieved what amounted to an “occupation” of every available class and meeting space and laboratory, including the library, on the LMA campus. They wanted to cancel the conference. I was among the gray haired team of supposedly mature women, some with Longwood Medical Area credentials, who were sent to meet with those administrators the night before the conference was set to open. Our job, which we did, was to calm their fears that there might be vandalism to property and violence to people on campus, coming from the almost 3000 women expected, from the US, Canada, and Mexico, the next morning.

You helped found The National Women’s Health Network that same year, with several other women whose work was indispensable in producing the evidence undergirding the exploding activism of the Women’s Health Movement. [Those women were Belita

Cowan, Alice Wolfson, Phyllis Chesler, Barbara Seaman, and you, Mary Raugust Howell.] The following year the second edition of *Our Bodies, Ourselves* was published, and this one came onto the *New York Times* best-seller list, also triggering a couple of best-selling “foreign-language” editions. We were all beginning to make history, and more and more often there was often a sense of inevitability about what we did and what happened as a result.

I recall so vividly the big sprawling houses in which you always lived during all this– in Newton, and here in Watertown, filled with children’s voices, something always cooking in the big kitchen on one of the biggest ranges I had ever seen. You made nooks and crannies upstairs where people could do truant reading if they wanted or needed to. I remember arriving in York, Maine, with the sound of Elton John booming out over the veranda of another massive house, and out onto the harbor nearby, as you offered me a drink.

But you, Dear Mary, had by then long since come to the end of your tolerance for many things, and your hope that the powerful position you occupied would not be distorted or blunted by those who secretly and not so secretly opposed everything you stood for. You were not the first Midwesterner or the first outsider to come to Harvard and slowly see revealed the kind of tribalism and power that did not brook interference by people outside their own inner circles. And I had begun to move into another realm overseas, and could not follow you into your nest career in adoption reform.

[Read: MH Letter of resignation from her HMS position here? >]

All the rising triumph of what you accomplished was shot through with both happy and unhappy personal struggles of many kinds, however, and we were determined to see some of them through to resolution, to bear witness. We stood by during the terrible months of the kidnapping of the children. Later, I took you to the York County Court House in Maine where your divorce finally ended your marriage. We helped out when your colleague Michele Harrison needed trustworthy babysitting so she could finish her

Ob/Gyn residency at Beth Israel, an experience that resulted in her very successful book, “A Woman in Residence.” Somewhere I have a picture of you, Mary, playing your violin, looking very much like my aunt Peggy, serenading me on my birthday. [I have to find that picture, I will..]. And finally, I remember being nearby during some of the hours of your dying and your death, learning that you had refused to be a patient yourself in the system in which and against which you had labored for so long.

I made you some promises then that I have not kept, to tell your whole story. But it may not be too late...

[End]

So, when I ask myself if I can name what it was you stood for, really, that inspired so many of us, and stirred such deep resistance among so many others, I can only stumble, and fall back on such trite clichés as “moral courage,” knowing that says nothing.

There is no simple answer to explain how your shining integrity was formed, where your steely determination came from, what forces kept driving you to seek out the least endowed and least privileged among us to care for them, so lovingly, or how you did it all with so much grace and loving kindness –and with such exceptional good humor! I suspected then and I know now that we will never see your like again, but I hope you know, wherever you transitioned to, that we are all still here, still trying to match your deathless spirit, and pass it on.

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