

Women's Strength in Waves

by

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Biographical Statement

Nicole Defenbaugh (PhD, Southern Illinois University – Carbondale) is an Associate Professor at Bloomsburg University. This piece was originally presented as the featured guest performance for the Women's History Month reception on March 31, 2011 held at Bloomsburg University.

The Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) invited the author to create an original piece relating to the theme, "Our History is Our Strength."

Abstract

Twelve years into the new century and we cannot help but ask ourselves how far feminism has come. With gender inequities and atrocities such as lower pay wages, female genital mutilation, and continued debates over reproductive rights we (women and men) are forced to pause in the midst of our daily lives and question the advancements women have made since Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Sojourner Truth, and the many other founding mothers. How far have we come toward creating equality since women earned the right to vote a century ago? Who has laid the feminist foundation on which we currently stand? How do we continue to pave the way for future feminists while keeping the light of freedom and justice burning in the darkness of backlash and misogyny? In this performance piece, the author looks back at the waves women have made over the past one and half centuries and asks the audience to consider *who* has shaped the face of feminism and *how* their words and actions have influenced *who*, *what*, and *where* we are today. The author reminds the viewer not to forget the words of our foremothers as we reflect on the strength of women's voices over the past three waves.

Worksheet for “Women’s Strength in Waves” Performance

Objective

To understand how the birth of feminism impacted past and present feminist waves and how the history of feminism continues to influence our understanding of women’s roles and their rights. Read the questions prior to watching the performance and answer each question.

Part I - Discussion Questions

1. What do you believe led to the first feminist wave? Why had feminism not been “recognized” in the U.S. before the mid-1800s?
2. What do you understand to be a woman’s role during Elizabeth Cady Stanton’s time?
3. Why was Sojourner Truth’s speech so poignant? Why do you think her speech is still taught today?
4. Why do many people envision feminists as “bra burners” and streets protestors from the 1960s and 70s?
5. Based on the readings in the performance, how would you describe the third wave of feminism? Who is a third wave feminist? Are we still in the third wave?
6. Why are the most “famous”/well-known feminists female? Why are women more often associated with feminism than men? Can men be feminists?
7. Are there any feminists still around today? How is feminism today similar and/or different from earlier waves?

Part II - Individual Reflection Questions

1. How do *you* define feminism? What do you consider characteristics of a feminist? Based on the different pieces in the performance, what did the various authors have in common? What did they not have in common?
2. Are you a feminist? Why or why not? If you are a feminist, which wave do you most closely identify with and why? If you are not a feminist, do you personally know any? How do you know s/he is a feminist?
3. What did you learn about the history of feminism from the video? What is your understanding of how feminism began? (*Note: You can continue this question further by completing Activity 1 – “Digging Deeper into the History of Feminism”)
4. What do you believe is the future of feminism? Will it be a repeat of past feminist waves? Is the future of feminism in jeopardy?

Activity 1 – “Digging Deeper into the History of Feminism”

Objective

To research the history of feminism and further understand its commencement both in the United States and internationally.

Directions

1. Individually research the history of feminism online. Refer to the websites, books, and blogs listed below as a starting point. Find additional sources on your own (**Note: Make sure to write down the books and websites you find*). As you read, consider *who* wrote the information presented and *who* determined when feminism began? Do you think feminism existed before it was documented?
2. What *new* information did you learn about the start of feminism? What information did you already know? Was there anything you read that surprised you? Why?
3. Bring the information you found to the next class period. Work in small groups (4-6 students). Discuss what you found and your answers to the questions.

Additional Resources

Websites

- <http://www.wic.org/misc/history.htm>
- <http://www.history.com/topics/womens-movement>
- <http://civilliberty.about.com/od/gendersexuality/tp/History-of-Feminism.htm>
- <http://feminism.eserver.org/theory/feminist/Womens-Movement.html>
- <http://www.rise-of-womanhood.org/history-of-feminism.html>
- <http://www.infoplease.com/spot/womenstimeline1.html>
- <http://historyfeminism.wordpress.com/> (blog website)

Books

- *No Permanent Waves: Recasting Histories of U.S. Feminisms* (2010) by Nancy Hewitt, Marisela Chavez, Dorothy Cobble, and Leela Fernandes.
- *A History of U.S. Feminisms* (2008) by Rory Cooke Dicker.
- *No Turning Back: The History of Feminism and the Future of Women* (2003) by Estelle B. Freedman.
- *In Their Time: A History of Feminism in Western Society* (2001) by Mariene LeGates.

Activity 2 – “Visually Re-presenting Feminism”

Objective

To consider the various definitions of feminism and to collectively present a visual representation of feminism.

Time

1 hour – 1 ½ hours

Supplies

1. Large poster board, flip chart, or paper roll for each group
2. Colored markers, crayons, pencils, and pens (other supplies such as yarn or

Directions

1. In small groups (4-6 students) discuss your answers to Question 1 in Part II of the Worksheet (How do you define feminism and what are the characteristics of a feminist?).
2. As a group, create a definition of *feminism*. Write down ALL answers. Circle the words or phrases group members agree upon? Make note of the words or phrases group members do *not* agree upon and discuss why.
3. Decide what type of visual message the group would like to create about feminism. It can be a symbolic picture about feminism, an educational poster informing people about feminism, a persuasive advertisement encouraging others to be feminists, or another visual or symbolic representation of feminism.
4. As a group, create a visual poster about feminism. Your group can choose whether or not to include written text (e.g., statements or phrases). *Note: Be creative! You can make the poster 3-D, bend or alter its shape, etc.*
5. Present your group poster to the class. Make sure to explain the symbols/pictures along with the agreed upon words and phrases. If time permits, you may also want to explain to the class why some words or phrases were not included in the poster and why.

Performance Script

(STAGE SETUP: Table or stand to place candle, chair Center stage (1st wave), one chair R (2nd wave), one chair L (3rd wave)– move different positions: sitting, standing, walking around for each character in each stage. Move forward for the last section “Many Waves”)

(Performer enters stage in darkness, lights candle and sings)

Love and Justice By My Flag

I'll Live My Truth What E're Will Be

I Swear That I Cannot Rest

Till There's Equality

Love and Justice Be My Flag

I'll Live My Truth Whatever Comes

So Many Rivers To Cross

Till Our Journey's Done (Love and justice women's anthem, 2008)

The first wave....

(Lights slowly fade up)

(SLIDE – Votes for Women)

The first wave was, in fact, not the first time women spoke up for their rights. Around the world women have been speaking up in various ways, through different means. The first wave was merely a point in time when those in power couldn't help but notice that women...many women and men were speaking up so loudly it was virtually impossible to ignore. Some women were so noticeable they stopped those around them in their comfortable tracks.

(SLIDE – Elizabeth Cady Stanton)

“The point I wish plainly to bring before you on this occasion is the individuality of each human soul . . . the right of individual conscience and judgment . . . in discussing the rights of woman, we are to consider, first, what belongs to her as an individual, in a world of her own . . . her rights are to use all her faculties for her own safety and happiness” (Stanton, 1989, p. 372)

From the time of Seneca Falls in 1848 to the signing of the 19th Amendment was 72 years. 72 years for women to have the right to vote. Women took public speaking classes so they would be more articulate in public, created suffrage leagues and filled in for men during WWI and were still denied the right to vote ([Powell, 1988](#)). Women rallied together, to be a unified voice. But not all voices were heard. Not all women were included. In fact, white suffragist excluded black women “a particularly bitter irony in light of the fact that the women's rights movement had grown out of the abolition movement” ([African-American women website](#)). So when Sojourner Truth spoke, it was not only as a woman but as a black woman denied the right to speak, even by fellow suffragists.

(SLIDE – Sojourner Truth)

“And ain’t I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! I have plowed, and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me—and ain’t I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man (when I could get it) . . . and ain’t I a woman?...Then then talk about this thing in the head; what’s this they call it? (Someone whispers “intellect”) That’s it, honey. What’s that got to do with women’s rights or negroes’ rights? If my cup won’t hold but a pint and yours hold a quart, wouldn’t you be mean not to let me have my little half measure full? (Truth, 1989, pp. 100-1).

All women wanted the right to vote. All women wanted the right to be heard. All women still do.

The second wave...

Love and Justice By My Flag

I’ll Live My Truth What E’re Will Be

I Swear That I Cannot Rest

Till There’s Equality (Love and justice women’s anthem, 2008)

(SLIDE – Women Protestors)

“At last, after a long silence, women took to the streets. In the two decades of radical action that followed the rebirth of feminism in the early 1970s, Western women gained legal and reproductive rights, pursued higher education, entered the trades and the professions, and overturned ancient and revered beliefs about their social role. A generation on, do women feel free?” (Wolf, 2002, p. 9)

These words by Naomi Wolf remind us of where we’ve come. But how were the 60s remembered? Bra burning, protesting, and rebellion? Women were outraged and they often took to the streets. One such event of particular uprising was in response to the new public display of women’s bodies, the Miss America pageant which was ironically established in 1920, the same year women won the right to vote.

(SLIDE – Wolf & Steinem)

“On September 7, 1968, Robin Morgan, who had played Dagmar on the TV show *Mama*, organized several busloads of women to attend the annual Miss American pageant in Atlantic City . . . They were not there to attend the pageant and choose who was prettier or had a better butt; they were there to put down the pageant, and put it down they did. They swung brassieres in the air like lassos. They crowned a live sheep “Miss America” to dramatize that the contestants, and all women, are “oppressed and judged like animals at a county fair” (p. 139). . . There was, in fact, a level of rebellion in the 1960s that the media could neither manage nor contain . . . [and] there were real girls getting real political. And what led them to this awakening was that they now had the opportunity to go to college” (Douglas, 1994, pp. 141-2)

Gloria Steinem, a well-known feminist and activist during the 1960s was quoted as saying, “But the problem is that when I go around and speak on campuses, I still don’t get young men standing up and saying, ‘How can I combine career and family?’” (Gloria Steinem quotes)

Protests. Rebellion. Have we become complacent today in our fight for justice and equality? Do we believe equality has been achieved? Many of my students and friends say “yes.” But as I look around I see injustice daily whenever we receive our paychecks, read about date rape, and watch the mindless objectification of women on TV and in videos. How far have we come? Do we still let our voices be heard?

The third wave...

Love and Justice By My Flag

I’ll Live My Truth What E’re Will Be

I Swear That I Cannot Rest

Till There’s Equality (Love and justice women’s anthem, 2008)

(SLIDE – International Women Protestors)

What does it mean to be a feminist in this day and age? What does it mean to say the “F” word in a sea of misogyny and “You’re over analyzing that advertisement!” and “Women have equality...we live in the U.S. after all” and “It’s not like we have wear veils over our heads or live in poverty.” What does it mean to be a woman in this *new* century? Are there still any feminists around?

“Good question!” I answer in Spanish. “What is a feminist?” I pause, not knowing what to say in Spanish, my mother’s language—not even knowing how to say the word feminist. *Feminista? Femenista? Una feminista?* How do you go off to college, learn about feminism in English and then bring it back to a working-class community where women call their children in from the street at night in every language—except “standard” English?” (Hernández, 2001, p. 209)

Halle Berry, Tyra Banks, Naomi Campbell, Rihanna. Famous black women prized for their beauty. But what does it mean to be a woman of color in this day and age? What does it mean to be a black woman in America?

(SLIDE – Black Models)

“Sexualized Black bodies seem to be everywhere in contemporary mass media” (p. 35), “Black youth born after the great social movements of the 1950s and 1960s should have faced a bright future. Social movements of the past fifty years celebrated victories over historical forms of racism, perhaps naively believing that they were creating a new foundation for this new generation . . . For many, Tupac Shakur’s words, “I got nothin’ to lose—it’s just me against the world,” ring true” (Collins, 2005, p. 53)

“My body possesses solidness and curve, like the ocean. My weight mingles with Earth’s pull, drawing me onto the sand. I have not always sent waves into the world. I flew off once, for five years, and swirled madly like a cracking brown leaf in the salty autumn wind. I wafted, dried out, apathetic. I had no weight in the world during my years of anorexia . . . It took three months of hospitalization and two years of outpatient psychotherapy for me to learn to nourish myself and to live in a body that expresses strength and honesty in its shape. . . I remembered how to tumble forward and touch the world that holds me. I chose the ocean as my guide. Who disputes the ocean’s fullness?” (Chernik, 2001, p. 103)

“Once upon a time there was Me. Oh, there were others, I guess, but if they existed they would have to go through Me first. It was Me that made it possible for me to speak my mind without apology, laugh as loud as I wanted, think and feel freely, assume respect from others and most of all, play baseball. After all, I had decided that I would grow up to replace the catcher for the Yankees. It was beside the point that there were no women in Major League Baseball, because I was not a girl, I was just Me. And that was that” (Lennon, 2001, p. 213)

Many waves to come...

***Love and Justice By My Flag
I’ll Live My Truth What E’re Will Be
I Swear That I Cannot Rest
Till There’s Equality***

(SLIDE – Women United for Women)

As we look ahead to our own futures and the futures of those to come...the next waves we shall venture through, we must reflect on how we’ve gotten here. Who has come with us? Who we have left behind.? We reflect on our position, our standing, and the strength that brought us to this time and place. We reflect on our journey, the many journeys that brought us here. We reflect on our time together and apart. We consider who comprises our feminist future? The young, the old, the wise, the hopeful? Where do we stand (or sit) amidst the voices? What do we say (or not say) to let our presence be heard? How do you let your strength shine?

I invite you to join in on the chorus found on back side of the insert in your program entitled, “Love and Justice” Anthem (Love and justice women’s anthem, 2008) sung by the women of Victoria Australia to commemorate women’s suffrage.

(Performer picks up candle from table and sings along)

(START VIDEO OF “LOVE & JUSTICE” ANTHEM)

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6HpCmdLRuF8>

****Start at 0:39, slowly fade music at 3:18***

(Performer stands with candle center stage)

“The fire remains
See it burn in the center of the circle
where it has burned for a thousand thousand years...
This is the story we like to tell ourselves...
that there once was a time when we were free . . . (Starhawk, 1987, p. 28)

(BLOW OUT CANDLE)

Song Lyrics to "Love and Justice" Anthem

found on The Victorian Women's Trust website (<http://www.vwt.org.au/initiatives-28.html>)

Verse 1 (Not shown in performance)

The moon is hidden in the clouds
The fire light is dying
In the dark slum and street
Men, women, children crying
No work today means no pay
And no pay means we're starving
Mother I'm with child again
I feel like I am dying

Verse 2 (Song begins here in performance)

A pen a pen your weapon be
My fine courageous women
Let's sign our names a thousand times
For freedom that's hard winning
No more let fear and anger rule
With heavy hand of violence
The moon is shining in the sky
As we break the silence

Chorus

Love and justice be my flag
I'll live my truth what e're will be
I swear that I cannot rest
Til there's equality
Love and justice be my flag
I'll live my truth whatever comes
So many rivers to cross
Til our journey's done

Verse 3

All who toil the weary earth
See beyond your measure
Women are real gold
For all of us to treasure
For every heroine that's named
There are a thousand nameless
Who live to make a better day
With acts of love and justice

Chorus

Love and justice be my flag
I'll live my truth what e're will be
I swear that I cannot rest
Til there's equality
Love and justice be my flag
I'll live my truth whatever comes
So many rivers to cross
Til our journey's done

Daughter, sister, mother, wife

When you rise so shall others
Happiness will fall upon
Son, father, husband, brother
In home and in the marketplace
Town and countryside
Let our laughter spread its wealth
It's surely our birthright

Chorus

Love and justice be my flag
I'll live my truth what e're will be
I swear that I cannot rest
Til there's equality
Love and justice be my flag
I'll live my truth whatever comes
So many rivers to cross
Til our journey's done

Verse 4 (Not shown in performance)

Oh I had the strangest dream
It came one starry midnight
Men and women all joined hands
In peace and loving friendship
All broken hearts were mended
All broken bodies healed
River, mountain, rocks rejoiced
The bells of freedom pealed!

Chorus – Repeated

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