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## From the Waves of Feminism to “The Mother of the Hubble”

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In the early twentieth century, a tradition began of celebrating March 8th as International Women’s Day. In the early 1980s, this tradition expanded in the U.S. to Women’s History Week, and a few years later designated March as Women’s History Month.

Among the many reasons Women’s History Month is significant is that looking back at the stories of our past can be a powerful way of informing and inspiring us to act for a better future. To that end, I would like to invite you on a brief tour through the expansion of women’s rights in the U.S., often referred to as the waves of feminism.

Pay attention in particular to that metaphor of a *wave*, an image helpful in highlighting a pattern that continues today: a wave of advocacy for gender equality builds, crests, and then often crashes, perhaps in part due to dispersal following achievement of a difficult goal, and/or patriarchal backlash.

To begin tracing that pattern, **the first public wave of the women’s movement in the U.S. began to rise around 170 years ago in Seneca Falls, New York, with the first women’s rights convention in 1848.** That wave built for around seventy years, then crested in 1920 with the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution: “The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged...on account of sex” (Dicker 6).

There’s a wonderful story that when:

“Tennessee became the thirty-sixth and final state to ratify the Nineteenth Amendment, the final and deciding vote in Tennessee belonged to twenty-four-year-old Harry Burns, who changed his vote after receiving a telegram from his mother reminding him to “be a good boy” and “vote for suffrage.” (54-55)

And as one example of the impact of how long political waves can take to crest, only one of the original signers of the 1848 Declaration of Sentiments in Seneca Falls lived to witness women win the right to vote in this country seventy years later in 1920 (55). And sadly, the struggle for voting rights for all, especially with regard to race, continued—and extends in disturbing ways to our present day.

Looking to the next wave: after four decades of rebuilding, **the second wave of the women’s movement began in the early 1960s, emerging alongside many other countercultural movements.** That wave grew in size and strength to achieve many successes including the passage of Title IX in 1972, which “prohibited sex discrimination in schools receiving federal funding” and created a sea change in athletic opportunities for girls and women (98). And 1973’s Supreme Court decision of *Roe v. Wade* secured greater reproductive justice for women. But despite many successes, **second-wave feminism began tragically crashing with the slow death of the Equal Rights Amendment**, which said: “Equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any state on account of sex.” Although the ERA passed the House of Representatives and the Senate to triumphant celebration in 1971 and 1972 respectively, it was defeated a decade later in 1982 when “North Carolina tabled the amendment and Florida and Illinois rejected it” (100).

After a backlash to the women’s movement in the 1980s, many historians date a **third wave of the women’s movement to the rise in consciousness about sexual harassment triggered by law professor Anita Hill's allegations against Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas in 1991** (103). The sexist way the all-male Senate Judiciary Committee treated Professor Hill inspired many women to run for Congress the next year, resulting in the election of five new female senators and twenty-four new women members in the House of Representatives (118). The second and third waves of

the women's movement have also become increasingly intersectional, embracing race, class, sexual orientation, and transgender perspectives.

We're still too close historically to declare an end to third-wave feminism and/or a beginning to a fourth wave. But the larger point is that **there are no permanent waves in any justice movement**. I should also hasten to add that the wave metaphor also does not mean that, "The decades excluded from the wave—before 1948 or from 1920 to 1960—are feminist-free zones" (Hewitt 5). When a wave crashes, another begins the process of rising up again. Any surfer will tell you that as glorious as it is to ride a wave, **you can't spend all your time on top of a wave; that's not how the ocean works**. But in the words of my colleague, The Rev. Rebecca Gordon: "**Our job is to keep scanning the horizon for the next wave. It will come.**"

Surveying the ocean of our society today, there are lots of statistics I could quote about the ways that systemic sexism operates—and the need for ongoing waves of activism for equality. To limit myself to one representative example, a study published just last year in the prestigious journal *Science* showed that:

At age five, girls and boys are equally confident that people of the same gender as them would be 'really, really smart.' During the ensuing few years, boys appear to maintain their faith in their own gender.... **Six- and seven year-old girls' belief in female brilliance drops off rapidly....** And the girls who lose this belief tend to steer themselves away from games that are earmarked for 'really, really smart' kids." (Manne 293)

That statistic is horrifying, and it also reminds me of a story about how important it is to work for change.

**Nancy Grace Roman** was born in 1925 in Reno, Nevada. She lived on the outskirts of town, and because of the low light-pollution in the desert on clear nights as a child she could see a breathtaking number of stars. And as precocious child who maintained a belief in her brilliance, she formed an astronomy club with her friends.

In high school in the early 1940s, this smart young woman asked to change her schedule from the expected course for women (a fifth year of Latin) to a second year of algebra. Her guidance counselor scoffed, "**What lady would take mathematics**

**instead of Latin?”** Looking back, Nancy said, “That was the sort of reception that I got most of the way.”

Nevertheless, she persisted! And she went on to earn a Bachelor of Science in astronomy from Swarthmore College in 1946 and a Ph.D. in astronomy from the University of Chicago in 1949. To share with you just one story from that period, her dissertation advisor “originally wanted nothing to do with her—going so far as to pretend not to see her when they passed each other in the hall.”

Nevertheless, she persisted! And in 1959, she joined NASA in the early days when it was only six months old. (The first moon landing was still a decade in the future in 1969.) She went on to become NASA’s first chief of Astronomy and the first woman in a leadership position at the space agency. But more than either of those accomplishments, she is most prominently remembered as “**the mother of the Hubble,**” which she helped design. Also crucially, in the words of Dr. Weiler, Dr. Roman’s successor at NASA, “It was Nancy in the old days before the internet and before Google and email and all that stuff who really helped to sell the Hubble Space Telescope, and organize the astronomers, who eventually convinced Congress to fund it.” Initially inspired by those clear desert skies of her childhood, she helped make possible the first large optical telescope in space. Free from the distortions of the Earth’s atmosphere, the Hubble Telescope has given us incredible images of deep space.

Dr. Roman retired in 1979, but if there are any Lego aficionados out there, you may recall that two years ago when Lego created a 231-piece Women of NASA set, one of the four woman featured was Dr. Nancy Roman.

I will also add that Dr. Roman was a lifelong Unitarian. In her words: “My willingness to buck tradition, especially when people told me science was not a role for women, as they often did when I was young, may have been influenced by the fact I had been brought up to think away from tradition. Unitarianism got me thinking independently and perhaps gave me the courage to fight tradition.” Dr. Roman died two months ago at the age of 93. Her Celebration of Life was held at River Road UU in Bethesda, Maryland where she was a longtime member. Her story is one we need to

keep telling. And I think she would be pleased to know that this month, NASA has scheduled the first all-female spacewalk for March 29.

Along these lines, if you are looking to dive deeper into this subject, a great book I've been reading recently, published in 2017 by the UUA's own Beacon Press, is titled *Inferior: How Science Got Women Wrong—and the New Research That's Rewriting the Story* by the award-winning science journalist Angela Saini. The title is inspired by the correspondence of Mrs. Caroline Kennard (who lived near Boston) and Charles Darwin. After overhearing someone argue for “the inferiority of women; past, present, and future” based on their reading of Darwin's books, Mrs. Kennard went straight to the source and wrote Darwin himself in December of 1881 with the request that he clarify what she assumed was a misinterpretation of his theories.

Sadly Darwin wrote back that, “the evidence appeared to be all around him. Leading writers, artists, and scientists were almost all men. He assumed this inequality reflected a biological fact.” We have copies of these letters. And Mrs. Kennard's initial, hopeful letter to Darwin “is written in an impeccable neat script on a small sheet of thick cream paper.” After receiving his reply, her second letter is, shall we say, not as neat. **It turns out that rage can affect your penmanship.**

There's a lot to say about the many important points she makes in this letter, but I'll let her closing line serve as a summary: “Let the ‘environment’ of woman be similar to that of men and with his opportunities, before she be fairly judged, intellectually his inferior, please” (13-17). As a point of reference, keep in mind that, “By 1887 only two-thirds of U.S. states allowed a married woman to keep her own earnings” (17-18).

What seems self-evident if you look around is that sex and gender is on a spectrum. Sure, the tallest people are typically male, but there are also plenty of women taller than some men (62). It is not the case that men are fully on one side (made of “snips and snails and puppy-dogs' tails”) with women fully on the other side (made of “sugar and spice and everything nice”). Most of us are in the overlapping, messy middle. But sexist stereotypes in society too often bias boys and girls in different directions and then pretend that those directions are “natural” (70).

We can also re-contextualize the argument that because some men are taller, faster, and stronger, those men are the natural, rightful leaders. As the Emory University

anthropologist Melvin Konner has written, “If brute strength is a large part of the reason for male supremacy, then in an age when strength matters less and violence appears to be declining, women should naturally ascend. I think it’s a better world if women have more influence” (178).

And we need all of us working together to build the world we dream about. Remember the series of feminist waves we traced earlier: both the cresting and crashing. Along those lines, let’s consider the Nordic countries as a case study in the troubling backlash that continues to happen. On the one hand, we can celebrate that Nordic countries have some of the strongest laws in the world supporting equal rights for women: “Iceland has among the highest levels of female participation in the labor market anywhere in the world, with heavily subsidized child care and equal parental leave for mothers and fathers. In Norway, since 2006, the law has required that at least 40 percent of listed company board members are women.” That’s incredible, and these are goals Americans should aspire to reach quickly. On the other hand, Nordic countries also have a “disproportionately high rate of intimate partner violence against women”: a backlash of toxic masculinity in response to rising gender equality (179). The truth is that “loss of privilege is not the same as reverse discrimination.” And much remains to be done to dismantle sexism and misogyny both in society and within ourselves.

For now, I’ll leave the closing words to Angela Saini from her book *Inferior*:

We control our environments in ways that no other animal can.... We have birth control that can stop women getting pregnant.... Within decades, it may be possible to delay menopause far into old age.... In this world it may seem strange that...we’re taking so long to make sexual equality a reality when the power to do it is entirely in our own hands.... The job ahead for researchers is to keep cleaning the window until we see ourselves as we truly are.... The facts are what will empower us to transform society for the better, into one that treats us as equals. Not just because this makes us civilized but because...this makes us human. (181)