

“In Our Choices, We Create”

Carmen Lampe Zeitler

Offered March 11, 2005

Des Moines Pastoral Counseling Center
Women Helping Women Event

A poem by Marge Piercy, “To Be of Use.”

*The people I love best
jump into work head first
without dallying in the shadows
and swim off with sure strokes almost out of sight.
They seem to become natives of that element,
the sleek black heads of seals
bouncing half-submerged balls.*

*I love people who harness themselves, an ox to a heavy cart,
who pull like water buffalo, with massive patience,
who strain in the mud and the muck to move things forward,
who do what has to be done again and again.*

*I want to be with people who submerge
in the task, who go into fields to harvest
and work in a row and pass the bags along,
who are not parlor generals and field deserters
but move in a common rhythm
when the food must come in or the fire be put out.*

*The work of the world is common as mud.
Botched, it smears the hands, crumbles to dust.
But the thing worth doing well done
has a shape that satisfies, clean and evident.
Greek amphoras (AM phor uz) for wine or oil,
Hopi vases that held corn, are put in museums
but you know they were made to be used.
The pitcher cries for water to carry
and a person for work that is real.*

My Grandma Lampe, like so many women of her era in rural or small town Iowa, belonged to a club. There were seven or eight women in the photograph of them I remember, standing all lined up, squinting into the sun, aprons tied around their hips, ready for the work of the day. One of their husbands christened them the Breezy Club—something to do with the considerable conversations that accompanied their work—and the name stuck. As young mothers they would gather each month at one of their homes and take up the work that needed doing in that place. It might be quilting or canning or spring cleaning or mending. Always, one of the women would look after the children while the others worked and talked. They were, in the words of the poet, of use. They jumped into work head first, moved things forward, did what had to be done again and again, moved in a common rhythm, knew work that was real.

Long after children had grown and husbands were gone and modernization changed households forever, these women still met once a month to continue the conversation and have dessert. That’s where I came in, happening in at Grandma’s house whenever I knew she had hosted the Breezy Club, to enjoy the leftover dessert. Looking back, I wish I had, over the chocolate cake or cherry pie, asked her more about those women, their work, their conversations. The members of the Breezy Club were among the first young women to vote in this country. They married men of modest means in an age given to prosperity and wealth, some of whom went to the first war to end all wars. They raised children during the Great Depression, some of whom went to the second war to end all wars. If they were anything like my grandmother, they were strong and independent, smart and industrious, they paid attention, they showed up. Grandma Lampe bought a house in the 30s, against Grandpa’s advice and wishes, and paid for it herself, largely by taking in washings and working in the cafeteria of the local college. I’ll bet she talked about that with the Breezy Club.

Looking around, it seems that it might be time for the Breezy Club to come around again. There is all manner of work to be done, there are conversations we need to have, always there are children to look after, not tomorrow but today, in this very hour.

In this very hour, fear is on the rise, and determines direction and decision all too often. Violence is escalating in our relationships, both personal and global. Wealth inequality is increasing, undaunted; racial and religious divisions are heightened and exploited; basic human regard and rights are forfeited for some strange sense of security. The earth has become a commodity, leveraged and used up. The voices and imagination and wisdom of the women go unacknowledged and disregarded and lost. The futures of our children are sacrificed for the expediency of the bottom line next quarter. In this very hour.

There is work to be done, there are conversations to be had, always there are children to look after. And, forgive me all of the men who are present, but I dare say that it is the women who are going to have to do it. Folk singer Nanci Griffith sings on her new CD, *A reformation just might save us all/A voice of harmony and open heart/ Where the women teach the song*. It is time for women’s voices to be heard again, sure and strong and relentless.

About a year ago a movie was released by HBO called “Iron Jawed Angels.” It told the story of the last years of the women’s suffrage movement in this country. Focus was given to the younger, more insistent, more aggressive voices of the movement, largely members of the National Women’s Party and their leader, Alice Paul (played by now-Oscar-winning-actress Hilary Swank). Watching the movie and reading more about those women, most of whom were absolutely unknown to me, I was astounded at the power of their voices in their time. They were a part of a larger movement of the time, the Progressive Movement, driven primarily by the passions and work of women. Without benefit of electoral power, they created more compassionate communities and a more just society for women and children, immigrants and laborers, the sick and the poor. They made the choices in their personal and collective lives to create a new world, better lives for many, a future for the children.

Looking around, it seems that it might be time for a Progressive Movement to come around again. What kind of a world would *we choose* to create? What kind of lives would *we choose* to share? What kind of futures would *we choose* to offer to our children, to every mother’s child? In our choices we create.

But how? How does that happen? It happens over and over and over again. Women make their choices, join the strength of their hands and the power of their voices, and something new is created in the world, something of use. We hear about it in our grandmothers' stories, our daughters' stories, our sisters' stories, our own stories. If we are lucky we will hear the stories, mine the stories for new perspective, for imagination and inspiration, for courage and clarity.

(over)

In an essay entitled "In What Do I Place My Trust?" Sr. Rosalie Bertell tells the story of two Japanese grandmothers who strongly objected to the U.S. military presence on the sacred mountain Fuji during the occupation following World War II. The two women set up a small camp at the foot of the mountain and during military exercises they would pop up in front of the guns and shout "Shame on you. You should go home to your mother." This so unnerved the young men that they could not fight. The military police finally came, a *dozen* men with shields and armor, to arrest the two old women. But even after the women were removed, the troops were somehow unsettled and could no longer desecrate the sacred mountain with their war games. In our choices we create.

It's girls' state basketball tournament time in Iowa and I am reminded of the story Ian Frazier tells in his book On the Rez, a book about South Dakota's Pine Ridge reservation. It is the story of a girl's basketball game played back in 1988. The Pine Ridge team was playing an away game in Lead, South Dakota. Before the game, the gym where the girls were to play became a hotbed of the ugliest anti-Indian hostility. Lead fans waved food stamps, yelled epithets like "squaw" and "gut-eater," the band joined in with fake Indian drumming, the crowd whooped fake Indian war cries. Usually the Pine Ridge girls made their entrance onto the gym floor by height, led by the tallest seniors. When the tallest senior hesitated to take the court and face the hostile crowd, a fourteen-year-old freshman named SuAnne Big Crow offered to go first. She surprised her teammates by running, dribbling into the jump-ball circle, taking off her warm-up jacket, draping it over her shoulders and performing the Lakota shawl dance—a young woman's dance—"graceful and modest and show-offy all at the same time," in Frazier's words. And then she started to sing in Lakota, swaying back and forth at center court. The crowd was absolutely silenced. When she finished, she dropped her jacket, took the ball and ran a lap around the court dribbling fast and expertly. The crowd began to cheer and applaud. She continued to the basket, went up and put the ball through the hoop, the fans cheered more loudly. Pine Ridge went on to win the game. And no one who was there ever forgot the power of SuAnne's dance. In our choices we create.

In recent months we have heard the remarkable story of our sister Wangari (Wahn GAHR ee) Muta (MOO tah) Maathai (MAH tye), the first African woman to win the Nobel Peace Prize. In the 1970s Maathai (MAH tye) returned to her home in Central Kenya to find the region changed. The sights and smells of the once fertile land blossoming with trees, plants, and flowers had vanished. Once-clear rivers were filled with silt, there was only barren ground where once the trees flourished. The land had been raided and prepared for what some called development and the growing of what others called more lucrative crops. As she saw what the land had become, she abandoned her plans to spend her life and education in laboratories and classrooms, and chose instead, to spend her life taking the land back to its verdant past, creating a new future for both the land and the women who traditionally tended it. The movement founded by Maathai (MAH tye) has planted 20 million trees. It has indeed been a movement of women, who, by protecting their environment and through the employment of planting trees, have created a different world, better lives, and a future for their children. But it has been no easy saunter. Maathai has been attacked while planting trees and protesting further deforestation, she was arrested and imprisoned for opposing development that would further devastate the people's land for the benefit of a few. In her remarks at the Nobel ceremony, Maathai said, "Today we are faced with a challenge that calls for a shift in our thinking, so that humanity stops threatening its life-support systems. I call on leaders...to...build fair and just societies." In our choices we create.

These are just a few of our grandmothers', our daughters', our sisters' stories. We could tell them all afternoon around these tables. We are here because we know the stories. We are here because we know that we need women, every woman, whole and strong in the world. We are here because we know we need the work of women's bodies and the power of women's spirits in the world. We are here because we have made a choice to create a world where the voices and imagination and wisdom of women are acknowledged, regarded, and needed as much as they have ever been needed in any hour of our history. What other choices will we make as women in this day, in this hour?

Is it the hour for the Breezy Club to come around again? Is it the hour for the women to make movements again? Is it the hour for the women to teach the song? In our choices we create. Each of us. All of us. Writer and theologian Frederick Buechner defines one's call in life as that place "where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet." The Quaker writer and educator, Parker Palmer, writes, "...I believe that the activism we most need is not a specialized activity, but an outflow of everyday living..." Alice Paul said, "I always feel the movement is a sort of mosaic. Each of us puts in one little stone, and then you get a great mosaic at the end." She also said, "When you put your hand to the plow, you can't put it down until you get to the end of the row." And also, "There will never be a new world order until women are a part of it." In our choices we create.

Writer and poet Julia Alvarez shared this piece in the 2003 poetry collection, Cry Out: Poets Protest the War. It is entitled "Message from the Hopi Elders" and was offered to their young people during a difficult time in their history.

*You must go back and tell the people that this is the Hour.
And there are things to be considered.*

*Where are you living?
What are you doing?
What are your relationships?
Are you in right relation?
Where is your water?
Know your garden.
It is time to speak your truth.
Create your community.
Be good to each other.
And do not look outside yourself for the leader.*

This could be a good time! There is a river flowing now very fast. It is so great and swift and there are those who will be afraid. They will try to hold on to the shore. They will feel they are being torn apart and will suffer greatly.

[Know the river has a destination. The elders say we must let go of the shore, push off into the middle of the river, keep our eyes open, and our heads above the water.]

See who is there with you and celebrate. At this time in history, we are to take nothing personally. Least of all ourselves. For the moment that we do, our spiritual growth and journey comes to a halt.

The time of the lone wolf is over. Gather yourselves!

Banish the word struggle from your vocabulary. All that we do now must be done in a sacred manner and in celebration.

We are the ones we have been waiting for.

My friends, let the work begin, let the conversation continue, let the children flourish, in this and every hour. We are the ones we have been waiting for. In our choices we create.

It is an honor to be a part of such a gathering of women, to be in the service of an organism like the Des Moines Pastoral Counseling Center. The work of the Center so clearly and intentionally values the wholeness of women and the well-being of children, who couldn't offer them every support and encouragement and benefit? Thank you to the staff and board of the Des Moines Pastoral Counseling Center for all that you do and are in our midst.