Chapter 4. Permanence and Flux: Forms of Feminism in an Academic Career

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Catherine Civello illustrates a vital but little appreciated form of shifting academic career paths. First a high school English teacher, she began graduate studies part-time and shifted to full-time doctoral studies in a humanities PhD program. As she completed her studies, she found full-time university employment, and in time gained a tenure-track position in English. She published her dissertation as a book and achieved tenure. Realizing that she enjoyed teaching students at excellent secondary schools as well as her in-city public university, she returned happily to do that for more than three decades. In retirement, she has returned to publishing scholarship.

> Their ardour alternated between a vague ideal and the common yearning of womanhood; so that the one was disapproved as extravagance, and the other condemned as a lapse.
>
> - *George Eliot, "Prelude,"* Middlemarch

The discussion was going well. Eighteen high school seniors huddled around the seminar table, focusing on Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye,* when I realized that they didn't recognize Morrison's allusion to Shirley Temple, whose iconic blue eyes are key to an understanding of the novel. I flipped open my laptop and in a matter of seconds projected little Shirley's blue-eyed blondness onto the large-screen television in the room. That led to a conversation about celebrities in the students' own culture, such as Chance the Rapper. "Who's that?" I asked. The room erupted into loud laughter, culminating in one usually calm 18-year-old young man, his voice dripping with mockery, shouting "Okay, boomer!" I froze. The look on my face and the silence of the room told him that he had gone too far. He apologized, I recovered my composure, and class resumed.

Later, I reflected on the effect that his use of "boomer" had on me. Why did this six-letter, two-syllable word have such power? Why had I experienced almost physical pain at the sound of a word that I had uttered so many times myself? The difference lay in the use of "boomer" by "boomers" and the assumptions made by a person so young that he very likely wouldn't have been able to get within a decade of identifying the dates of the population explosion that occurred in post-World War II America.

Acknowledging the dangers of generalizing about millions of heterogeneous human beings born in this country between 1946 and 1964, I nevertheless reflect

DOI: https://doi.org/10.37514/PRA-B.2025.2692.2.04

on this generation, connected to a particular historical and cultural world, and my own experience as a member of it, both my five-decade academic career, as well as my personal life.

Young 21st century Americans think of the sixties' in terms of marijuana, bell bottoms, and free love. But the student's use of boomer-as-accusation evoked in me images of napalm, protests, my brother's draft number (it was 30), and my high school classmate's husband's loss of both legs in Vietnam. I eventually listened to Chance the Rapper, but I still prefer Jagger, Lennon, Joni Mitchel, and Jerry Garcia. When Public Enemy sings "Had to kick it like that as we roll as one / One under the sun, to all the cities and to the side / Brothers and sister stateside and the whole worldwide / There it is, P-E-A-C-E, 1991," I simply don't feel the urgency of the Beatles when they sing "You say you got a real solution / Well, you know / We'd all love to see the plan / … You say you'll change the constitution / Well, you know / We'd all love to change your head / You tell me it's the institution." Not only did we say goodbye to brothers and boyfriends at train stations and in college dorms almost every week, but we also lived in fear of others being drafted.

In my case, my father served as a non-commissioned officer in World War II. Only after his death and in preparation for a trip to France with my husband did I obtain the government records of his service in the Army Air Corps. This man, who lost life-long Italian-American friends due to his vocal opposition to the Vietnam War and his son's possible draft, fought on the beaches of Normandy and in the Battle of the Bulge in the Ardennes Forest.

He never mentioned it. He was a union man, a child who had lost his mother at the age of 5 and had come of age in the Depression: "I'm for the underdog, Cathy, and you should be, too. That's my religion and my politics." A product of private education from elementary school through college, I recognize that familial influence on my philosophy of life and, therefore, teaching. Show me the underdogs—the poor kids, the kids who come from overcrowded high schools, the first-generation college kids, the refugees—and I'll try to empower them with linguistic competence so that they succeed in their own lives as well as contribute to the larger world.

Let's get this out of the way now: by 1996, I was a tenured associate professor in a state university system when, of my own free will, I decided to become a high school English teacher and subsequently an administrator at an all-girls Catholic school. I had published a book and several articles, delivered papers at conferences, was granted tenure and promoted, was not fired or guilty of immoral or unethical behavior.

But first, to go back. I loved the museums, restaurants, and opera in Houston where I taught university students for several years, as well as the company of cherished colleagues who often welcomed me into their homes and invited me to family weddings, holiday and holy day celebrations, and whom I visit to this day.

As well, I headed a large freshman English program and was assistant chair of the English department. I served on a departmental committee that re-envisioned its theoretical perspective to align an expanded literature canon with the theories

of Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak, and other scholars whose ideas about marginality, the oppressed, and privilege both reflected and appealed to the diverse often first-generation college student population of our school and our city.

I also founded, at students' request, a Women's Studies Organization and enlarged Women's History Week into the month-long event mandated by Congress in the 1970s. While at the institution, I created new courses such as History of the Novel, Cultural Studies, Feminist Philosophy, Gender Studies, and Women and Work. These contributions were acknowledged, even celebrated, by my fellow professors. The dean of our college remains my personal friend. This, certainly, was the path to associate dean.

To explain what happened to alter the course of my career, I will take the long view and begin in 1961.

My experience as a student at Ursuline Academy of Dallas, a Catholic all-girls school, prepared me for college: four years of two foreign languages, four years of English and math, four years of science long before STEM was created, as well as history, logic, and philosophy. We were taught by learned, if stern, women whose international religious order dates from 16th-century Italy. Many held graduate degrees in such disparate fields as chemistry and Latin.

I can still visualize where I sat in the classroom when a black-robed teacher, holding a book open to a centerfold picture of Stonehenge, told us about her visit to the site. I was hooked on literature from that moment. I knew that I was born to devour it, that I was destined to learn and teach it.

The all-female atmosphere, moreover, afforded us all the leadership and honors opportunities: student body president, editor of the newspaper, valedictorian. There were no male students to declare their entitlement to attention and privilege. At the same time, I felt alienated both by my darker physical appearance and my somewhat nerdy behavior, as one of only two or three Italian-American girls in the school, and a resident of a less affluent neighborhood far to the south.

My high school education was so rigorous that I easily excelled during my freshman year at Marillac College. My social and academic skills, formed by well-intentioned semi-cloistered nuns, lay underdeveloped. In high school, everything was regimented, from the uniform I wore sitting in alphabetical order in class to the way I walked ("ladies don't swing their arms"); now, I drifted in a sea of freedom. I used to say that I didn't want my education to get in the way of my education. In other words, I attended every foreign film festival and participated in every political protest march that St. Louis, Missouri, offered. A more cosmopolitan city than Dallas, the urban landscape featured an Italian neighborhood, a healthy open housing movement, and friends who shared my activist leanings. I spent my spare time tutoring at elementary schools in blighted parts of the old city. Discussions with fellow students lasted far into the night as we solved social problems involving race and poverty.

My packed schedule left little time for studying and reading long novels and writing weekly papers, despite my English major. By the end of sophomore year, I plunged from Dean's List to academic probation. At age 19, I felt that college had

little to offer me and, anxious to change the world and put an end to segregation in the South (single handedly), I decided to leave college, much to my parents' horror and my professors' disapproval.

I had been in school since age four and needed a reshuffle. I could not connect the study of literature with the practice of life as I wanted to live it. Some of it had to do with the isolated "lab" that we were told to enter in order to "analyze" texts for their undisputed meaning, known only to the professor. Much of it had to do with me and my untested idealism.

Too young to be a Peace Corps or Vista volunteer, I found a job as a teacher's aide in a Catholic elementary school in southern Missouri. At that time, the Ozarks formed one of the top ten pockets of poverty in the country. My students were rural kids whose parents tried to save farms that had been in their families for generations. Despite an inescapable sadness and economic hardship that hovered over that part of America in the late 1960s, I also saw undaunted courage from people who gave me so much but had so little. That year not only supplied me with evidence against assertions that poor people were "lazy" or "welfare cheats," but also exposed me to a rural America that I had never experienced and from whom we hear today in our cultural and political wars.

I returned to college a more realistic person, no longer taking my unearned opportunities for granted and aware that I could use those gifts to change the system (as we used to say) from within. For example, we asked for and received a course in Contemporary Black Literature, and I wrote a paper on how I might teach the works of Langston Hughes, Richard Wright, and Gwendolyn Brooks in an inner-city classroom.

Required to take an Introduction to Sociology course, I focused my project on proposed state-funded child care designed to keep pregnant teenagers in school. I was assigned to write a regular international affairs column in the school newspaper, the first column featuring war protests on American college campuses. Did I know what I was doing? Were my ideas realistic? Probably not, but my heart and my education found purpose. What had appeared to be "selling out" prior to my conversations with struggling Missouri farmers and migrant workers—the parents of my students—now took the form of teaching students to read closely and write convincingly so that they might have meaningful lives.

I graduated from college in August 1971 since my year away had interrupted the prescribed English curriculum. This would not have happened in a larger school, but at that time, the Jesuit and other large Catholic colleges (as well as many of the Ivies) were not open to female undergraduates.

This changed about halfway through my college years, but there were no girls' dormitories for some time, so Catholic females didn't flock to the Loyolas or Notre Dames in the same numbers as their brothers. Too late to find a teaching position for fall, I returned to Dallas and wrote for a trade journal that covered the electronics industry in the northern half of Texas. Having worked on both high school and college newspapers, I thought that this was the beginning of a

career in journalism. I was mistaken. These were three of the most difficult years of my life, but I learned things about myself as a young woman trying to do business in a male-dominated business world. I developed skills that, although less than effective at the time, served me well later.

My first clue that something was amiss should have been my father thinking that I was referring to a weekly instead of a monthly amount when I told him my salary. Second, there would be no overtime or gasoline reimbursement for weekly all-nighters and assignments that took me to a neighboring city.

Another sign came in the form of vulgarity or, as a recent president has called it, "locker room talk." Nothing prepared me for the f-bombs and sexual innuendo of the office. The final blow came one day as I stood in front of an open file cabinet. A large man who worked in sales came very close behind me, close enough to touch me. I quietly asked him to step back; he didn't move or say anything. I said, "You'd better stop because I have a black belt in karate." He mocked me loudly, so I replied, "You'd be pretty stupid to take a chance." The entire office erupted in laughter, and I drove home congratulating myself on my clever retort. The next morning, I opened my desk drawer to find a dead rat. I quit the next day.

For years, though, I blamed myself for what had happened. I berated myself for publicly humiliating a co-worker and being too weak to pursue a career in journalism. This was the early 1970s. Given my Catholic schoolgirl education and my traditional Italian-American parents, my reaction was predictable, but the aftereffects were long term and somewhat destructive.

We had no words then for sexual harassment, no laws against such behavior in the workplace. It wasn't even against the law for married men to rape their wives. Public statements on this issue from that time ("sex is a husband's right") reflect the uphill battle of women; they are chilling. Birth control was difficult for a single woman to obtain; abortion was illegal until 1973.

The following September, I began teaching English at my *alma mater*. While an excellent education was still at the core of the institution, almost everything else had changed. Girls talked and laughed in the hallways. Just a few years earlier, we had matriculated in silence and sat in alphabetical order in every class.

Individualized and experimental scheduling allowed students to take electives and study the language of their choice. When I was a student, we had had identical schooldays and everyone took French and Latin. (A few of the less academically inclined students were assigned to study Spanish, reflecting the racism of the city.) The new technology led to progressive projects across disciplines; we had made no such connections. In my enthusiasm, I agreed to teach every course, supervise every activity, monitor every club. Again, my monthly salary was paltry. I felt taken advantage of but lacked the confidence to ask for more money. I suspect that many young women were raised, as I was, to say "finances" instead of "money."

I noticed that married women (who had a man observing their treatment) with children were not treated quite so shabbily. The fledgling women's movement encouraged us to demand improvements in the workplace, but this was a

Catholic girls school in the South. The mostly female faculty were reminded that we were "doing the work of Christ."

Progress for women in the mid-1970s consisted of speaking tentatively in sentences that ended in an interrogative tone. But at least we were finally speaking. A combination of profound boredom with teaching literature at such a rudimentary level and pressure from the administration to get a master's degree led me to begin graduate work at a little-known university, The University of Texas at Dallas, in a program with a strange name: arts and humanities. I had no desire to have my parents pay for further education or to become indebted myself, so I enrolled. It was, on many levels, the best decision of my life.

Having turned down my father's offer to attend Vanderbilt, I drove through my new campus where I was to pursue both an MA and a PhD for the next eight years. Compared to the midwestern fall foliage and spring forsythia of my established midwestern college, the sight of twigs that had yet to grow into trees and concrete-and-glass buildings disheartened me.

The neighborhood seemed undeveloped, lacking coffee shops, bookstores, and restaurants. Never a suburbanite, I was tempted to put the car in reverse. The coldness of the campus matched the chilly reception I received from the professor charged with advising me on my first-semester courses. His German-accented condescension probably stemmed from the fact that I planned to enroll in two night courses while continuing to teach full-time in a high school. He referred to the "advanced age" at which I was beginning graduate school: I was 29. This treatment flew in the face of the university's marketing of their new and "interdisciplinary" graduate program whose low price could accommodate the "nontraditional" student. It seemed that no one had told some of the professors.

The university had recruited a group of brilliant young scholars, fresh out of graduate school themselves, with impressive credentials from distinguished universities in this country and abroad, but with little or no teaching experience. Oil money had lured many of them from the banks of the Charles and the halls of Cambridge to a town whose evangelical Christianity and conservative politics would alienate them from their students as well as from the university.

The job searches began before the ink was dry on their contracts. I couldn't blame them; I had never felt anything but "other" there, and it was my hometown. I, however, celebrated their presence and vowed to absorb all the knowledge and ideas I could from them for as long as they stayed, and I was sure that they wouldn't stay long. I was wrong, however. Some of them stayed for decades, their careers flourished, and they retired in Dallas.

This idealistic group eventually faced students—some of whom were restless wives of wealthy doctors and lawyers and high school teachers aiming for promotions—at possibly the most nerve-wracking time in their own careers, for most of them were untenured hires.

These collisions had a myriad of outcomes, ranging from many students' unpreparedness for graduate work to their apoplexy at the mention of Darwin

and Marx to life-long friendships. I soon realized the incompatibility of doing work at the level that I was aiming for and part-time enrollment, so I became a full-time graduate student in my second year.

The mostly female students quickly sorted ourselves into new categories. Rather than housewives, high school teachers, and full-time grad students, we rejected roles based on gender, marital status, and occupation. We divided into students seeking academic careers and those who wanted fuller and refreshed educational opportunities.

We were, after all, "nontraditional." There was a fair amount of overlap between the two columns, and categories blurred when people married, had children, and changed jobs, as human beings do over the course of decades. I tried to avoid political warfare among assistant professors vying for tenure and tenured professors evaluating them. Instead, I gravitated toward a small group of academics whom I call mentors to this day, an oasis in the intellectual desert of the southwestern part of the country at that time.

I had entered graduate school as a confirmed New Critic, proclaiming to "justify the ways of God to man" with Milton, lamenting that "'twas now a time of trouble" with Wordsworth, and parsing the life out of such lines in order to make perfect sense of an indivisible union of style and sense, of technique and meaning. My first mentor, a Cambridge-educated Romanticist with international standing, not only broadened our vision beyond the study of English' literature but also demonstrated that any isolated study of literature was simply not accurate. It hadn't happened that way historically.

She spoke of Schlegel's "arbitrariness of the poet" and Brentano's "Romanticizing force" and freed me to realize that I was reading "at the threshold that hovers between the work and the poet." She linked such language to the Enlightenment and the French Revolution and the evolving concept of the self that had emerged, quoting Freud to say "it is no sin to limp."

Shortly after that first semester, she invited me to a national conference on Romanticism where she spoke on a panel. I heard her debate the topic of Romanticism's "evolution or revolution" with M.H. Abrams and Morse Peckham and came to a realization: I was not in graduate school to increase my knowledge or to deepen my understanding of literature; rather, this was a process that had to do with thought *per se*.

Toward the end of the second year and in the semester before finishing my master's degree in 1978, I enrolled in a required course, a course dreaded by many graduate students: Approaches to Research or, as we groaned, "5304." Hadn't we been doing research since we were in high school? college? for the previous two years? And who was this bearded young history professor who smoked Lucky Strikes, wore jeans, and drank cups of black coffee as he taught?

In spite of the interdisciplinary nature of the program, we still cordoned off ourselves (and many of the courses) into literature, art, and history. It took time and much debate to explore and perform the concept of interdisciplinarity. Many

students—and faculty—didn't and still haven't come close to accepting it, but I won't address that in this brief essay.

I will say that, as I have come to view interdisciplinarity in my work and in my teaching, we were ahead of our time and that many messengers were wounded along the way. As far as 5304 went, I realized on the first night of class that the course was somewhat misnamed and that the teacher would be life-altering for me.

Pivotal ideas emerged from that class that had to do with the nature of literature. More to the point, with the construction of ideas themselves. I had permission, for the first time, to think critically about an author's credibility, sources, and method. I was encouraged to examine an author's unstated assumptions—something that had eluded me until that night but has animated my work and my teaching, I am not exaggerating to say, to this day.

The idea of the complex ways that culture is transmitted through imaginative literature transformed my reading of and writing about George Eliot and her view of Middlemarch villagers for my dissertation—and Stevie Smith and her ambivalent female voices for my book.

The professor required us to read a literary critic who opened my eyes in both an intellectual and a very personal way, though he probably didn't know it at the time: Elaine Showalter (1977). How basic she seems now but how epiphanic in the 1970s. As I read her references to the women's movement and the then-new field of women's studies, and as she used phrases like "feminist criticism," "gynocritics," and "double-voiced discourse of the mute and the dominant," I remembered and began to grasp the sexism (some of it criminal) of the dead rat, the lack of female dorms, the "locker room talk," the salary inequity, and my "advanced" age. I was furious and, to a degree, saddened.

This temporary discouragement paralleled the feelings I had experienced in my youth at seeing signs that read "Colored Water Fountain" and "Colored Waiting Room" in my hometown and heard my mother say, "We don't think that way because we know how it feels to be discriminated against." I eventually channeled these revelations into a dissertation, directed by the teacher of the dreaded 5304, my mentor and my friend. In time, I found my niche in academic research and writing, thinking that my career would take this form for the rest of my life.

As I neared the end of graduate school, my father's doctors informed us that the heart disease that had plagued him for decades was now terminal. I halted my national job search, and, thanks to the same mentor who had invited me to my first conference, found a position at Southern Methodist University in Dallas.

It soon became evident that what I had thought of as a temporary solution to a family problem was a full-time position as an adjunct assigned to four sections of Freshman English. I worked hard at balancing teaching with scholarship although that juggling act was not a requirement of the job.

The two-tiered system of professors and adjuncts stifled me; the workload was punishing. Along with others, I tried to write myself into a tenure-track position. The few male adjuncts closely followed their female counterparts' departmental

successes, such as appointments to committees, hostilely noting that they had "a family to support." In addition to the appallingly low salary that we, mostly female, adjuncts received, the condescension of many of the tenured and tenure-track professors smacked of the Victorian system of upstairs/downstairs.

We were frequently reminded that we were forbidden to teach literature in our classes. Since most of us had earned a PhD in literature, we drew the conclusion that what we lacked was an Ivy League diploma and coastal birthplace. (In fact, more than once, tenured professors congratulated themselves—in my hearing—on keeping natives of the city out of the English department. I was supposed to feel flattered that my appearance did not betray my unworthy place of birth. This was in the very city where many of them prospered, owned homes, had families, and sent their children to schools where they were taught by "natives.")

I despised being "downstairs" (my office was in a drafty basement with early 20th-century plumbing) since I had already out-published many of the "upstairs" folk who had been given tenure during an earlier time and in an outmoded campus culture at a school where football and fraternities recklessly reigned. I do not know the rules of football, and, as an Italian-American, would not have been admitted to a sorority. The culture was foreign to me, although I grew up within walking distance of the campus.

All the while, the specter of a bad job market loomed over us. Still, we futilely mailed hundreds of CVs in response to ads in the MLA Job List, then issued quarterly in print. Dreading having to terminate us after taking advantage of our situation for six years, the department chair and the program director frequently pressured us with transparent inquiries about our job searches.

I had nightmares about becoming what was then referred to as a "bag lady." But, in a collective effort to avoid the draft, young men had gone straight through college to graduate school and were clinging for dear life to assistant professorships and experiencing their own nightmares about being denied tenure. The mostly unacknowledged job applications piled up for us non-traditional students, many of whom were women.

One semester in the late 1980s, having been asked to teach a Foundations class filled mainly by football players, I found myself embroiled in a pay-for-play scandal involving coaching staff, wealthy alumni, and athletes that eventually made national news. Although I was supported and even comforted by the administration after I dropped from the course roster a football player who had never appeared in class, I was immediately telephoned by a football coach, who begged me to reinstate the student whom I had never met.

I will never forget his guilt-inducing words: "You are taking away his shelter and the very food out of his mouth." This young man had grown up in the projects of Detroit and was exactly the kind of student who had drawn me into teaching from the beginning.

During college, conscious of being a first-generation college student, I had read Paolo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* to confirm my commitment to

activist teaching, not to discover it. With my consent, a compromise was reached: if he made up every missed class-hour in the writing center, he could be reinstated in my class with a grade of F. He then would be eligible to play football, as well as to live (and eat) in the dorm reserved for the players.

During these office hours, I came to know this young man's intelligence, work ethic, and dedication to family. He was a gentle giant. I will never forget the productive hours I spent going over his drafts with him, especially the day he blurted out that "graffiti is art in the inner city." That sentence became the first line in a very solid essay, the first that he had ever written in his life.

Did I do the right thing? I think so, but the university eventually received the "Death Penalty" from the National Collegiate Athletic Association. He and many other mostly Black young men disappeared from our classes and our lives. They were barely given time to clean out their lockers. The university no longer had any use for them. The evening newspaper likened them to slaves and the university to a plantation.

When I received the contract for my sixth year as an adjunct, I was shocked to see TERMINAL stamped in several places on the document. I knew such notice was coming, but having received the highest possible ratings on teaching observation visits and student evaluations, I had hoped to be an exception. I had served on search committees, including one for a new Director of Freshman English, supervised groups of new adjuncts and graduate students, and had my course proposal accepted by the University Fellows for the second-semester Freshman English course. In that course, we took a thematic approach to the material and—*quelle surprise*—could include one work of fiction and some poetry, along with nonfiction works. For several years, this was somewhat humorously referred to as The Civello Plan among adjuncts and graduate students. For three consecutive summers, I taught a course, Composition Theory and Practice, to Advanced Placement English teachers in the city's public school system. Although I did not want to spend the rest of my years as an adjunct and yearned for the opportunity to earn tenure, the prospect of unemployment loomed over me as I job-searched in a bad market.

In April of 1990, I survived rounds of telephone calls and a campus visit to receive a contract for an assistant professorship at the downtown campus of The University of Houston. As I wrote earlier, my years there resulted in both professional and personal success and a reasonable degree of happiness.

As a downtown commuter campus, we attracted an even more diverse student body than did the flagship location. Two factors, however, prompted many of us to yearn for change. The first was salary. Since (again) there were no publication expectations, we were not paid on par with professors at the central campus. Yet (again), many of us were competitive with them in that area.

The budget book, available in the library, confirmed our suspicion that male assistant professors were hired at a substantially higher salary than females in the same department. In my case, the male candidate's moving expenses were paid by the university since he "had a family" whereas my widowed mother paid mine.

The second was race. Our students, especially in lower-division courses, paralleled the diverse population of the cosmopolitan nature of the city. As students entered the upper-division courses of their majors, however, retention was low. The connection we made was that the darker the students in the university system, the lower the pay—offensive on many levels and blatantly racist.

As Director of Freshman English, I was torn between remaining in that position and something I thought I'd never face again—a job search. I decided to look around. A colleague who had become my closest friend over the years remarked that, whereas she was married and had a child in elementary school, I was fortunate to be a single woman and childless and, thus, able to relocate easily. Agreeing with her in part, I sent out a few applications with good results though not anything I chose to accept.

Instead, I decided to remain there and become more active in the Faculty Senate and departmental affairs. I again advocated for change from within the system. I received a faculty grant and took a leave of absence for a semester in 1992 to work on a manuscript that resulted in a publication; I spent a summer at Berkeley at an NEH seminar that gave me more time to write. I was finding ways to navigate the minefield of academia and, at the same time, use literature to connect with young women who, on the one hand, disavowed feminism as outdated and unnecessary while, on the other, bemoaned youthful marriages and overwhelming child-rearing responsibilities.

I was content and somewhat relieved that I had escaped such domestic arrangements. I had never dreamed of weddings or children; the thought of home ownership panicked me.

And then the unthinkable happened: that same close friend was diagnosed with stage 4 inflammatory breast cancer at age 39. As assistant chair of the department, I was charged with visiting her classes and breaking the news to devastated undergraduates while experiencing kaleidoscopic memories of being invited to her home for shrimp boils, planning panels for Women's Month, sharing wine over dinner to celebrate its success, and endless hours of her listening to my stories of a broken engagement and the ensuing loneliness of being a single woman in a large city without once saying "enough" as others had.

Many people write papers on female friendship; we lived it daily. We couldn't have been more different. She was blond to my brunette, suburban to my urban, a published poet to my prose, married and mother to my single womanhood. As we discussed her terminal diagnosis during her three years of surgery and chemotherapy, she asked just one thing of me: to "keep an eye on her son" whom she had named after her favorite writer, Jane Austen.

At that point, I would have agreed to anything. As her condition worsened, her husband called and asked me to help him clean out her office. I refused, telling him that everybody had an office and that she often came in after a treatment to sit in her chair and peruse her books, but I assured him that I would help him when the time came. When she died, I made good on my promise. Reader, suffice

it to say that he and I have been married for almost 30 years, the boy is now a physician, and we are grandparents twice over.

George Eliot puts it best when, in the Prelude to *Middlemarch*, she writes of the "epic life" of Saint Theresa of Avila as well as "no epic life" for many latter-day Theresas, whose lives she associates with such words as "unfolding," "mistakes," "meanness of opportunity," "tragic failure," and "tangled circumstance," saying that "to common eyes their struggles seemed mere inconsistency and formlessness." These words serve as the prelude to the 900-page life of Dorothea Brooke, using words that could have emerged from the pages of Kristeva or Cixous and applied to us as 21st-century feminists—who (returning to the epigram of this essay) juggle multitudes of "extravagances" and "lapses" in our daily lives filled with competing claims of paper grading, soccer games, grocery shopping, syllabuses, research, school plays, office hours, and cooking dinner.

So I left my tenured position and became a high school teacher and administrator. To be clear, a grieving child adds another dimension to the already complicated landscape of parenthood. Grief is subtle, unpredictable. Although I continued to write and present at conferences, I decided to spend the time that would have been required for a second book with my son.

The very humanness of such an existence invigorated and challenged me; at the same time, it exhausted me and caused me great stress. In the Finale of her (yes) feminist masterpiece, Eliot concludes, "The growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts … half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs."

I have told this story, in an abbreviated form, many times—at job interviews, in classrooms, as encouragement to younger colleagues. I have met with responses from "you must feel so guilty" and "I can't believe you gave up tenure" to "I feel so much better now" and "I get it."

But I have never told it in such detail as in these pages. If my stated purpose was to show the effects of cultural milieu—of people, place, and time—on career, then I hope that within the complexity and contradictions of five decades of one woman's life, I've shown the connections between the woman and the work. I have outgrown the need for approval and even for understanding of my life choices, for choice is the essence of feminism and difference is crucial to an understanding of culture.

As for me, I have visited Dorothea's tomb and understand.

References

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