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Dropping the Torch? One Feminist's Thoughts

by The Rev. Eilidh Campbell St. John

When I was first asked to write this essay I was delighted to accept. I have had, for over 30 years, a keen interest in the place of women in our society, and particularly in the field of scholarship. I think, however, that in the interests of honesty, integrity and authenticity, I should begin with two confessions.

Two Confessions

Firstly, my academic training is in theology and philosophy and my inclination is to poetry, so when 780 pages of statistical data — weighing nearly four kilograms — from the Rhodes Project landed on my desk, both it and I groaned. In many ways I feel quite inadequate to the task of saying anything meaningful about the data, mostly because I am easily intimidated by pages of numbers (I need a stiff whisky before trying to read my bank statements). I am destined to remain forever mystified by talk of means and medians and averages so I felt quite overwhelmed and not a little intimidated by the sheer quantity of statistical data collected and presented for this project. Anything I say, therefore, will be much less an analytical understanding of the copious material and much more an impressionistic canvas of the colors and shapes the raw figures have projected onto my poet's eye.

My second confession is in some ways more important because it contains within it the real possibility of bias. I come from a society where the awarding of a Rhodes Scholarship is regarded as one of the pinnacles of academic achievement. Even today, in the somewhat cynical and anti-intellectual environment generated by too many years of extremely conservative, economically rationalist government, and in a country where the “tall poppy syndrome” is a powerful social force, people still say, “He was a Rhodes Scholar,” in slightly awed tones, even when the subject may well have left Oxford without taking a degree. In the minds of many

Australians, simply going to the University of Oxford means that you must be only one step lower than a god. In addition, I come from a generation of women who were deprived of the opportunity for such status simply by virtue of their genital apparatus. For many women of my generation, myself included, discovering that no matter how brilliant our academic results, how committed our community service, how elevated our sporting prowess, we would not be considered for this prestigious award, acted as a depressor on our ambition and our subsequent achievement. It is difficult now, some 35 years later, to convey the heartbreak many of us felt as we watched our male contemporaries, many of whom had achieved less than we had, particularly academically, marching off to Oxford with the adulation of our society in their suitcase. Many of us are probably still infected with the disease of what might have been had that exclusion of women not existed then. I write this, not to generate any pathos or sympathy, but to explain why a certain tone of impatience might creep in from time to time in what I have to say about the Rhodes women who are the subjects of this project.

Perhaps I should also say something about my methodology in writing the substantive part of this essay. Certainly, I am not going to give any extensive analysis of the raw statistical data. As I have said, I am ill-equipped to do so and such an analysis would take considerably more time than I have at my disposal. In attending to the material from the Rhodes Project, I worked my way through the data, circling and page-marking things I considered to be significant. After that I left that material to circulate in my mind for several weeks, and I now return to the material to see if there are ideas and impressions formed around some of the circles and page markers. What follows is the result of this somewhat idiosyncratic process.

First Impressions

The first thing to be noted is that 88 percent of the respondents are from North America, Western Europe, Australia and New Zealand. This makes the Rhodes institution a somewhat elite one. Further, 57 percent of the respondents are from the U.S., and this must somewhat skew the figures on certain questions, especially those concerning moral, religious and political attitudes. This subject will be explored in more depth below.

There are two distinct questions which can be answered from the collected data. Firstly, what kind of women have been recipients of Rhodes Scholarships and secondly, what kinds of women have the recipients of Rhodes Scholarships between 1977 and 1995 turned out to be?

One particular response which caught my attention was the answer to the question “Did you feel you deserved the Rhodes?” Forty-four percent of respondents answered that they did not. This is an alarming statistic for it speaks of one of two things. Either it says that 44 percent of this particular sampling of Rhodes Scholars severely lacked belief in their own abilities, or they are guilty of a disturbing level of disingenuousness in that they applied for a Scholarship for which they deemed themselves unworthy. Of course, if this self-assessment is both sincere and accurate, and if it is representative of all recipients it means that a substantial percentage of Rhodes Scholarships are awarded to people who do not deserve them.

Forty-five percent of the responding Rhodes women were first born, while another 32 percent were second born. Seventy-seven percent, therefore, were first or second born and 30 percent came from families with only two children. Even more significantly, 63 percent were the first girl in the family and 64 percent had no older brothers. Seventy-one percent come from families of three children or less. This says a number of things. Many Rhodes women grew up in a position of privilege either as natural leaders by virtue of birth order and/or as children with little or no competition for parental attention or family resources. This latter impression is borne out by the responses to a question on competitiveness where 77 percent of respondents are either not very or not at all competitive with their siblings.

Parental occupation tells us something else about privilege. The mother’s occupation profile largely falls into two distinct clumps — teaching (16 percent) and unemployment (36 percent) — though six percent worked in a secretarial capacity, six percent were academics, four percent doctors and three percent nurses. The fathers’ occupation profile is a little more diverse with 14 percent in academia, four percent in business, 18 percent in law or medicine and 14 percent in science or engineering with the unemployed constituting less than one percent. I suspect, therefore, that the statistic for unemployment among mothers of Rhodes Scholars is very misleading. It is highly unlikely that unemployment means the same when applied to mothers as it does to fathers. Given that 38 percent of the respondents nominated their mothers as primary caregivers during their childhood, this anomalous statistic is probably the result of the somewhat old fashioned patriarchal attitude that was adopted by first wave feminists that full-time home making and child rearing does not constitute “real” or prestigious work. This is acknowledged in the notes on the Project Data, but it is a little disappointing to see the attitude perpetuated into the twenty-first century.

The first two strokes of my impressionistic brush therefore indicate that many of the women who have been awarded Rhodes Scholarships have a somewhat ambivalent attitude to their own abilities and most probably did not actually need the Scholarship anyway. Their family backgrounds and resources more than adequately equipped them for entrance into one of the world's prestigious universities if that is what they wanted.

Private Lives

The vast majority of the respondents are married or in long-term relationships and a substantial proportion of them are still in their first such relationship. Monogamy appears to be important or very important to over 90 percent of them. In line with the general population, just under ten percent consider themselves to be homosexual, but 83 percent think that same sex marriages should be legal. I do not have current statistics on this question for the population at large but I would guess that considerably fewer people in general would agree with that position, indicating that most Rhodes women either come from or have moved into a socially liberal sector of society.

Most of the respondents have never had an abortion, most have never been a victim of domestic abuse and most have never suffered a sexual assault. Only 58 percent of the respondents have children. This seems to represent a much higher degree of childlessness¹ than in the general population, especially as the youngest respondents must be at least 35 years old. There seems, therefore, to be a trend among Rhodes women particularly, but probably highly educated women in general, to choose to defer bearing children until the last possible moment, if ever. Although understandable in terms of individual career advancement there is a worrying edge to this trend which can be best summarized as a tendency toward a kind of reverse intellectual evolution. If it is true that educated people tend to raise educated children, and this supposition seems to be borne out by the educational levels of the parents of the respondents in this study, then there is some cause for concern that so many highly educated women are eschewing the bearing and rearing of the next generation.

One curious statistic is that while 38 percent of respondents reported that their mother was their primary caregiver, 45 percent claim to be the primary caregiver for their own children.

¹ I am aware that many feminists prefer the term "childfree" to childless. While agreeing that "childless" implies a situation of lack that many do not feel, I am concerned that "childfree" carries with it an implication of children as burden.

This is not a trend that one would have expected among high achieving women at the beginning of the twenty-first century. The percentage of joint care-giving has dropped correspondingly from 54 percent to 45 percent.

Wherefore Feminism

As someone who joined the Women's Liberation Movement in the late 1960s I was keen to discover what the Rhodes woman thinks about feminism. Eighty-four percent of respondents claimed to be feminists although only 39 percent are active in women's groups. There is a consciousness of being female in the workplace in 56 percent of the respondents, and 46 percent have felt themselves discriminated against because of their gender. Aware or not, 45 percent admit to sometimes or often feeling pressure to remain quiet about gender discrimination, 42 percent sometimes or often yield to the opinions of male colleagues (presumably whether those opinions are right or not), 19 percent admit to using their gender to their advantage and six percent have used sex appeal to gain a work advantage. Fifty-four percent sometimes or often adopt masculine traits at work to gain an advantage.

Slightly less than half think that they carry the larger burden of household tasks, 34 percent believe that they have the primary role in managing household finances and 24 percent believe that they are the primary breadwinners. In both of the latter categories approximately half the respondents believe that they share financial management and support equally with their partners.

The exceptional "feminist" indicator seems to be that less than a quarter of the respondents who are married or in long-term relationships have adopted their partner's surname. There are, of course a number of reasons why this might be the case — some of them ideological and some of them pragmatic. Pragmatically, it is highly likely that most of the respondents gained their degrees and qualifications before marriage and retaining the name that appears on the *Testamur* can be a simpler option. Ideologically speaking, the retention of one's birth name is certainly a measure of a woman's self-esteem and confidence, although it is probably less significant if one can use the title Doctor rather than having to choose between Miss, Mrs. or Ms. The choice of whether to adopt one's husband's name is perhaps a little more difficult when one has available no other markers of one's status or worth. Perhaps a more reliable pointer as to whether this decision is one of practicality or commitment is the family name of one's children. In this survey, nearly three-quarters of those who have children have

consented to their children taking their partner's name, indicating that fifty years after the beginning of the modern feminist movement agnatic kinship is still the accepted norm in family structure.

Given all these factors, I am forced to question the nature of the professed feminism of the respondents. It seems that for many Rhodes feminists, practicalities like household management and the earning and management of money are the determining benchmarks of their feminism. Feminism seems to mean the right of women to "self-actualize" on an individual basis. I do not want to discount the value of this. Certainly it ought to be every woman's right to have available to her every opportunity and possibility that is available to her brother. For feminism, however, to have a lasting effect on the position of women, it must move beyond the rights and opportunities available to individual women. If feminists do not move beyond their personal concerns, their daughters and granddaughters, even unto the seventh generation, are doomed to be focusing on the same questions of whether to use their femininity to gain employment advantages, and of who pays for what and who takes out the garbage. The enemies of women are not men, not even men who discriminate against them in the workplace or who tell sexist jokes. The real enemies of women are the age-old patriarchal structures and assumptions that still provide the foundations for our societies. Patrilineality is one such structure that is quite easy for women of education, power and substance to challenge, and it is disappointing to discover that most of the Rhodes women have not done so.

Ninety-one percent of the respondents with children breastfed them. This might be surprising to those who think of successful career women as handing their children to nannies and other carers as soon as possible, but I suspect that it again reflects education, economic and social status more than it does work status per se. Certainly almost the same percentage of women reported that children changed their lifestyle choices. Two more statistics concerned with children are interesting. Thirty-seven percent of women agreed that having children caused them to make career changes while 32 percent of their partners made child-related career adjustments. By contrast, 81 percent of women claimed that children limited their career opportunities, while only 43 percent of their partners suffered, endured or chose similar limitations. The conventional way of looking at this is to conclude that apparently the burden of career sacrifice that children and family inevitably involve is still being borne more heavily by women. Alternatively, it could be said that the privilege and joy of child rearing is still being monopolized disproportionately by women, even high-achieving women who demand equality

for themselves in the work place and in society in general. In 1976, Dorothy Dinnerstein² traced the roots of sexism (and other neurotic human behavior, including environmental degradation) to the fact that the first and major relationship the child has is almost always with a woman. In 1978, Nancy Chodorow argued that exclusive mothering “creates a psychology of male dominance and fear of women in men. It forms a basis for the division of the social world into unequally valued domestic and public spheres, each the province of people of a different gender.”³ She argued convincingly that to achieve true women’s liberation, therefore, the family must be reorganized so that women and men share parenting responsibilities equally, and children grow up dependent upon people of both genders from their earliest days. The work of these distinguished feminist scholars seems to have had very little impact on a substantial proportion of this group of highly educated women.

Of course, even more distressing than these perceived failures of feminist commitment is the fact that 16 percent of the respondents do not consider themselves to be feminists at all. If nothing else, a refusal to identify feminism as part of one’s self description among women who have benefited from the privileges bestowed by virtue of being a Rhodes Scholar, points to a serious deficiency in grace. It seems to be a postmodern disease that so many people, but especially women, born in the second half of the twentieth century are unable to embrace the causes and the individuals whose tireless labor and considerable sacrifices have enabled them to take advantage of rights and privileges hard won but now taken for granted.

The Women Themselves

The statistics continue to indicate deep ambivalence among the women surveyed in the area of work. Seventy-eight percent of the respondents claim to love their jobs and 94 percent of them have never been dismissed from a position, indicating a considerable degree of mutual satisfaction between employer and employee. Nevertheless, 33 percent have experienced some dissonance between their work and their values and 74 percent identify work as a major cause of stress in their lives.

There is a conflicting effect around money also. Fifty-seven percent agree that they are wealthy. Sixty-five percent have household incomes of over \$100,000 per annum, 77 percent

² Dorothy Dinnerstein, *The Mermaid and the Minotaur: Sexual Arrangements and Human Malaise* (New York: Harpers & Row, 1977).

³ Nancy Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

believe that they have as much money as they need, but only 43 percent have as much money as they want. Only 20 percent, however, consider money to be a marker of success.

Conflict continues in the area of personal satisfaction or happiness. Eighty-eight percent claim to believe that success is marked by inward factors and 87 percent consider themselves to be successful by their own definition of success. Eighty-six percent claim to be living life richly and fully, 73 percent feel they have made a positive difference to society, and 66 percent believe that they have fought “the world’s fight” in its various guises. Nevertheless, 65 percent claim to have suffered some depression, 33 percent have endured an anxiety disorder, 24 percent have suffered panic attacks, 16 percent have had some kind of eating disorder and 10 percent have been beset by obsessive compulsive disorders. Yet 74 percent feel secure or very secure in their self-confidence and 94 percent think that other people would think them very secure. It would appear then, that 20 percent feel that they are very good at projecting an image even when it is not entirely true, and, clearly, there are serious levels of angst and dysphoria in many of these outwardly successful confident women.

Perhaps some of the explanation lies in the answers to two curious, stand-alone questions. When asked whether they felt themselves to be middle aged, 77 percent answered in the negative. There is an indication of a certain degree of self-deception here! The survey indicates that 64 percent had passed their 38th birthday. Even allowing that “three score years and ten” is now a rather under-estimated lifespan projection, it is nevertheless reasonable to believe that anyone approaching 40 years of age is middle-aged. An extreme indicator of self-deception can be found in that 12 percent of the respondents did not feel themselves to be growing older! Of all the questions in the survey, however, the one which leapt out at me and struck me as being very curious indeed was the one which asked participants to respond to the statement “I am consciously scripting my own life.” Fifty-seven percent of those who responded agreed or strongly agreed that they were, 24 percent didn’t know, and 19 percent felt they were not. To a philosopher/theologian, this is an alarming response. Apart from seeming just a little arrogant, it has the potential to establish all kinds of false expectations and their necessary concomitants of disappointment, frustration, anxiety and even despair. I am not arguing that it is not a good thing to make plans and have a strong sense of direction. We might make a three, five and ten year plan for our lives. We might “consciously script” a salary of \$100,000 a year; work with intellectual or social significance; marriage to a loving and empathetic partner, or even a family of however many children. All sorts of psychological and spiritual mentors encourage us

to do just that, and many people do to some extent.

But do we also “consciously script” being raped or otherwise assaulted? Do we “consciously script” the lingering death from cancer of a parent, the sudden death of a partner, the miscarriage or still birth of a longed for child? Do we “consciously script” that our country will go to war and that we will lose loved ones in the fighting? Do we “consciously script” a bushfire, a drought, a flood, an earthquake, a tsunami or a “terrorist” attack? I think not — and one would have to question what kind of people we are if we did. Nevertheless, these things happen to good and just people every day and no one, not even Rhodes Scholars, is exempt. The truth is that we cannot “consciously script” our lives to any meaningful extent and it is surprising that so many educated women think they can. The idea that we can seems to be part of the general arrogance that has infected the generations from baby boomers onwards — another aspect of the disease of postmodernism. It seems to complacently discount the reality of all the random events and frailties that beset human beings every day. It is not a healthy approach to living — there are far too many variables which are out of our control. It is an approach to life which is fraught with dangers, and those dangers may well be the foundational criteria for the depression, anxiety and other mental health conditions noted above.

On Religion

The preceding observations lead me to consider the responses to the questions in the survey headed “Beliefs and Opinions.” Sixty-nine percent of the respondents consider themselves to be a spiritual person. Thirty-one percent do not. Twenty-one percent are atheists and 31 percent are agnostics. Obviously some who do consider themselves to be spiritual must also be atheists or agnostics. Given that five percent of the respondents are Buddhists, it is also possible that some of those attached to organized religion are also atheists. I am sure that a statistician could glean a more detailed picture of how the figures overlap and inter-relate. For me, there must again be only general impressions. The percentage of women who consider themselves to be part of an organized religion is interesting. In the 1996 census in Australia, 74 percent of the population indicated they had a religious belief of one kind or another and only 17 percent indicated that they had no religious belief at all. Australia is acknowledged as one of the most secular societies in the world and most sociologists would find this self-reporting of religious belief to be a little on the high side. The U.S., on the other hand, is acknowledged as having a very high level of religious affiliation and participation. The U.S. Census Bureau does

not ask questions related to faith or religion on the decennial census because of constitutional issues concerning the separation of church and state. Accordingly, there are few sources of comprehensive data on church membership and religious affiliation for the U.S., but there seems to be a fairly uniform consensus that around 90 percent of the population professes a belief in God and around 80 percent have some religious affiliation to a greater or lesser degree. About half the population claim to attend a religious ceremony on a regular basis.

This is borne out by the fact that although 57 percent of the women surveyed consider themselves to be attached to an organized religion only 21 percent attend religious worship once a week, leading to the conclusion that much of this attachment is more in the word than in the observance. Another curious statistic indicates that while 57 percent are attached, 67 percent are raising their children in a religious tradition. Unless that extra ten percent have handed the spiritual education of their children over to someone else, it is hard to see how this can be possible. There is clearly much ambivalence around the subject of religion and spirituality. There was, however, no ambivalence on the question of whether women should be allowed to be religious leaders, 99 percent of the respondents replied in the affirmative. This means that the 43 percent with no religious affiliation and the 21 percent who declare themselves to be atheists nevertheless felt qualified to express an opinion on the matter. While I have absolutely no ambivalence on this question, having been ordained in 1980 and coming as I do from a tradition that has ordained women since 1896, it strikes me as odd that people with no other interest in religion should have an opinion on it. Presumably for that 43 percent, the question of women in leadership roles in religion is not a matter of theology but purely a question of the pragmatism of political equality. This statistic indicates the probability that most of these women think that matters of religion are no longer the sacred business of the faithful but rather that all the world and everything in it is now profane.

The women are fairly equally divided as to whether they spend as much time with their partners as they would like — 48 percent do and 52 percent do not; although 65 percent feel that their partners give them as much time as they would like. Eighty-four percent feel that their work satisfies them financially, 99 percent find themselves intellectually satisfied and 91 percent agree that their work satisfies them emotionally. Overall then, these Rhodes women have found a very high level of fulfillment in their work. Most seemed to have found some balance in their work/life ratio with 46 percent admitting to having been a workaholic in their student days and early careers, while later in life 24 percent say they were never so obsessed.

Profile of a Female Rhodes Scholar

In summary then, what kind of women have the recipients of Rhodes Scholarships between 1977 and 1995 turned out to be? Mostly they come from affluent backgrounds, many with a strong academic orientation. For the most part, they have moved into careers which mirror their backgrounds. Most seem to have led rather charmed lives with a very low incidence of sexual assault, domestic violence or the need for an abortion. Most are in settled marriages or long-term relationships, and, given that they are not confined to these relationships by economic necessity, it is reasonable to assume that most are happy in them, or, to paraphrase Winnicott's famous formula, happy "enough."⁴ Some 42 percent do not have children, so it is possible that many of them have sacrificed family for career. It is sad that women are still feeling themselves forced into making these stark choices. On the other hand, I notice that around 80 percent are prepared to give sex a fair to very important role in their lives, and this is in marked contrast to women who wanted careers in the past. Before the advent of the contraceptive pill many women felt that they had to choose between their intellectual being and their sexual being, and even women who came of age in the 1960s felt that they had to make the same choice — either to avoid distraction or to be taken seriously.

Although most of the women surveyed seem to be leading happy, productive, fulfilling and well-paid lives, there is evidence of serious conflict. There is ambivalence surrounding child-rearing, domestic roles, ethics and work. High levels of stress, particularly work-related stress, seem to abound. These conflicts and ambivalence seem to have given rise to rather alarming levels of mental illnesses including depression and anxiety disorders. This is very disquieting. To a certain extent it speaks to a failure of feminism. Rather than liberating women to be fulfilled and happy human beings, it is possible that it has merely allowed them to have access to all the worst aspects of modern life which give rise to these major disturbances of the human psyche. One wonders whether this major dissonance is being passed on to the next generation.

It is a salutary lesson indeed for one who has always carried somewhat romantic and idealistic notions of what it would mean to be a Rhodes Scholar to discover that along with the achievement and recognition come most of the ills to which all mere mortals are prey.

⁴ D.W. Winnicott, "Transitional objects and transitional phenomena." *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* (1953: 34), pp. 89-97.