

Discrimination

One of the most used buzz words of the current times is undoubtedly *discrimination*. It arouses varying degrees of passion in many people, particularly if it is preceded by *sex*, *age*, or *race*. I would like to look at the first adjective, *sex*, as I have experienced it. Actually, *experienced* is not very precise. *Observed* is a far more accurate description. Mostly, the extent to which I have experienced sex discrimination can be summed up in my not being allowed to emulate my younger brother in several activities. The one I remember best is that my parents would not let me have a paper route. I don't know whether the newspaper would have countenanced my employment back then; the question never left the confines of our house, where the rule was firmly made and enforced. I lived with it without a great deal of fretting.

One hears today about sex discrimination in education, where boys are encouraged to develop their mental abilities and girls are encouraged to be passive and stupid. I think I must have absorbed a bit of that philosophy since I refused to let anyone in my classes, particularly boys, know what kind of grades I made. But as to teachers ignoring my mental capacities, I can't remember a single instance. In college I remember no professor indicating in any way that I didn't have as much right to learning as any male in the class.

I was fortunate in being in the right place at the right time after World War II, when exploding college student populations and shortages of professorial material made it possible for women to teach in universities in remarkable numbers. I was not the first but among the first women on the faculty of the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill. After Paul and I received our masters degrees at Southern Methodist University and he was accepted at Carolina to work on his PhD in statistics, I was accepted as an instructor in the English Department. I was elated to be able to teach in my chosen field and was assigned classes in composition and literature, particularly a sophomore course in the novel. Paul had a fellowship and my instructor's salary made our life comfortable without being luxurious. I had no particular ambition beyond Paul's getting his degree and enjoying the fun and games of the graduate students in statistics and mathematics. If I'd thought about it, I probably would have decided that after Paul got his degree, I'd shoot for one for me.

I was assigned to a cavernous office in Saunders Hall and was duly introduced to the English faculty at the first departmental meeting in September, 1948. That was the only faculty meeting I was invited to, but I thought nothing of it: instructors were not invited to departmental meetings. The office held a number of male colleagues who later became distinguished educators. There were three other women in the office: Lily Leonidas, Belle Smith, and Cecilia Holman. (I've changed all their names.)

Lily was new, like me. Her theme song had two verses: she was born with her PhD, and women were discriminated against because they had to surrender their identity to their husbands when they changed their name at marriage.

Belle was a two-year veteran in the department who aspired to become a novelist but had the unfortunate experience of submitting her manuscripts at the wrong time. Her stirring account of her experience in an insane asylum coincided with the appearance of the best-selling *Snakepit*. Then she finished her memoir about her father just as *I Remember Papa* became popular. She did eventually publish a mystery story. Her troubles were due to circumstances rather than sex discrimination, since she submitted her manuscripts under a male pseudonym and even her agent didn't know her sex. And, more importantly, she wasn't a very good writer.

Cecilia Holman had a very different problem from any of the rest of us. She was the wife of a professor of history, but in her own right she was an outstanding Chaucerian scholar, regularly publishing learned articles in the journals of her field. She was often an invited speaker at the annual meetings of the Modern Language Association. Cecilia was, like Lily, Belle, and me, an instructor, and had been for several years. Finally, she saw that she was not going to be promoted to assistant professor without a campaign. She began that campaign on a fairly low-key level with no success. Each year she heightened her request for promotion, to no avail. My last year in the department, she issued what I thought was a reasonable ultimatum. She did not necessarily need the salary of the higher rank, but she felt that she had to reach professorial rank in order to maintain credence in her field. She told the department that she had earned the right to a professorship, and indeed she had, and that she would forego any raise in salary. If the powers that were did not promote her, she would be forced to resign. After a few weeks the department accepted her resignation. She continued to be an outstanding Chaucer scholar as editor of a respectable Chaucerian journal. Countless future students were denied her superb instruction in Chaucerian literature because of the academical myopia of the fifties. Unfortunately, before the University of North Carolina had emerged from the dark ages, Cecilia had met an untimely death from cancer.

In contrast, I have led a charmed life of being in the right place at the right time, working in "enlightened" departments of English at several universities, having opportunities to develop struggling activities such as English as a Second Language, a Writing Center, and a summer program for disadvantaged students. In all of this, I have truly experienced no discrimination because of my sex – that I am aware of.

(Note: see “Chapel Hill” for more details about her colleagues, including real names!)