



Joining the Resistance

Carol Gilligan

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polity

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This book is for Diana de Vegh

. . . Isn't the
honesty
of things where they
resist,
where only the wind
can bend them

back, the real weather . . .

Jorie Graham

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Introduction

In the summer when I was two-and-a-half, my mother, a forward-looking woman interested in the latest developments and invested in raising her child, took me to Clara Thompson's institute at Vassar College designed to impart psychoanalytic wisdom to the parents of young children. Like many such experiments, it was conceived with the best of intentions: the children would attend nursery school while the parents learned about child development. Though set in the midst of American society, it was organized like a kibbutz: the children would live in one building or dormitory while the parents lived in another. It was an arrangement my two-year-old self could not imagine, despite the careful preparation. I loved the nursery school and my teacher whose name I remember to this day, but when it came to bedtime, I wanted my mother, not some *metapelet*, to put me to sleep. And so, at a very young age, I discovered the power of voice to bring about change. Like Joshua with his trumpet at Jericho, I found that by crying loud enough and long enough walls *can* come

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tumbling down. The rules gave way and my mother was summoned. An exception was granted: she could put me to bed and sing me to sleep. I never learned what Clara Thompson thought of this breach in practice and can only imagine what was said about me to justify this irregularity, but my mother, God bless her, always cherished this display of spirit on my part, whatever embarrassment it may have caused her, and it's possible that the other children also enjoyed her singing.

Years later, I found an ethical rationale for what at two was a protest against resignation. It was the late 1960s, I had completed my Ph.D. in psychology, and being the mother of three young children, I was looking for part-time work. At a party given by a friend, I was introduced to Lawrence Kohlberg. His theory of moral development captured the passion for justice that had inspired me along with many members of my generation to take action on behalf of civil rights and to protest what we saw as an unjust war. When he offered me a job as a research assistant, I accepted and thus became involved in the lively discussions provoked by his claim, following Socrates, that virtue is one and its name is justice. Moral development follows a single path, leading beyond self-interest and societal conventions to a principled understanding of justice as fairness. It was a theory that captured the spirit of the time, providing a justification for civil disobedience.

For a long time, I did not see the connection between my early experience at Vassar and the questions about voice and resistance that have inspired my research. It explains my optimism about the possibility of having an effect, even against considerable odds. Yet what strikes

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me more particularly is that my resistance to losing a ground of relationship I had taken for granted was a resistance I would see again in four- and five-year-old boys and in adolescent girls. And even at these later ages, when the issue was not wanting their mother, it brought them up against institutional structures that seemed firmly entrenched.

Over the past forty years, a confluence of evidence in the human sciences, coming from developmental psychology and sociology, neurobiology and evolutionary anthropology, has shown that we are, by nature, responsive, relational beings, born with a voice and into relationship, hard-wired for empathy and cooperation, and that our capacity for mutual understanding was—and may well be—key to our survival as a species. When I say this on a panel in the fall of 2010, I am contradicted by my two co-panelists, both distinguished academics—told in no uncertain terms that by nature we are aggressive and competitive, driven by evolution to the pursuit of self-interest. What accounts for this disparity?

In her artist's statement for her exhibition "Proud Flesh," the photographer Sally Mann identifies herself as "a woman who looks." Photographing her husband of forty years, "let[ting] the sunshine fall voluptuously on a still beautiful form," the two of them "still in love, still at work," she is aware of the risk she is taking:

Within traditional narratives, women who look, especially women who look unflinchingly at men, have been punished: Take poor Psyche, punished for all time for daring to lift the lantern to finally see her lover . . . The

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act of looking appraisingly at a man, making eye contact on the street, asking to photograph him, studying his body, has always been a brazen venture for a woman, though for a man these acts are commonplace, even expected.

I remember standing in the Gagosian gallery on Madison Avenue on a rainy Thursday afternoon, the luminosity of the photographs like light from a distant star. I had never seen a man photographed in this way before, with an eye so loving, so insistent on seeing. Alone in the quiet gallery, I realized that Mann had broken a taboo.

It's true that the mythical Psyche was punished for breaking Eros's injunction against her seeing him or speaking about their love. When she lifted the lantern, she was planning to kill him, having been told by her sisters that he was a monster, intent on devouring her and their child. What stilled her hand was his beauty, and also his humanness, his vulnerability. The stories about him turned out not to be true. What she saw was what she had known about him in darkness and silence: he was a tender and responsive man. And although Eros does carry out his threat to leave her if she tries to see him, and Psyche is subjected to all manner of torments and trials, the story has a happy ending. Joined as equals in a just and everlasting marriage, Psyche and Eros become the parents of a daughter named Pleasure. It's easy to forget this ending, because the path leading to happiness seems so improbable.

Like Mann, I have lived in a long marriage, still in love and still at work. My husband and I have raised three sons. My mother loved men and I grew up loving

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two fathers, my father and also his father who lived with us through most of my childhood. When I went back to Harvard after graduate school to teach part-time, I gravitated to Erik Erikson and Lawrence Kohlberg whom I recognized as intelligent and sensitive men, with a playful side like my grandfather and an ethical sensibility like my father. Knowing them personally, I could see the roots of their work in their lives. Erik had named himself Erikson after discovering that he had grown up not knowing that he was the son of a Danish man; Kohlberg had been caught as a child in the moral dilemma precipitated by his parents' divorce: should his mother give up custody of him in order to enable him to secure his inheritance from his wealthy father? Both men became fathers to me in the sense of showing me a way into psychology that engaged my interests, and by their example encouraged me to pursue my own questions. I did not anticipate that by following in their footsteps (as they had followed Freud and Piaget), I would find myself in forbidden territory. It was one thing to bring men's lives into history and generalize from men's experience. To do so with women broke a silence.

To paraphrase Mann, I am a woman who listens. My research began with questions about voice: Who is speaking, and to whom? In what body? Telling what stories about relationships? In what societal and cultural frameworks? My ear had been caught by two things: a silence among men, and an absence of resonance when women said what they were really thinking and feeling. By inquiring into what men were not saying and by providing some resonance for women, I heard a voice that had been held in silence. It was like shifting the

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frequency and suddenly hearing a station that had been jammed. I wrote *In a Different Voice* to make sense of a dissonance between women's voices and the voice of prevailing psychological theories. In the process, I realized the extent to which we, meaning both men and women, had been telling false stories about ourselves.

In the tale of "The Emperor's New Clothes," it is a child who says that the emperor is naked. In Hawthorne's novel, *The Scarlet Letter*, seven-year-old Pearl sees what the Goodwives and Puritans cannot discern: the connection between her mother and the minister. In my research, it was an eleven-year-old girl who responded to my saying "this interview is just between you and me" by adding "and your tape recorder." When I went on to explain that the tape would only be listened to by other members of the research group, she asked, "Then why don't they just all come into the room?" Disruptive questions. I needed her to take what I said at face value so I could get on with my work, and in fact, she agreed to my terms, choosing a name she wanted us to use in place of her own. But from then on, she sounded depressed. The price of staying in relationship with me was to not say what she was seeing and to act as if what I had said made sense.

I couldn't listen to children and go on working in the same way. What stopped me was the realization that I was becoming complicit in overcoming their resistance to not saying what they saw or knowing what they knew. At Halloween, in a fifth-grade classroom, I watched the girls look up at the ceiling as their teacher read story after story in which a woman was strangled or otherwise mangled. They loved their teacher, who

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was a woman; they knew she didn't want them to notice this.

The resistance that gripped my attention was a resistance to dissociation. In coming of age, the girls were aware of but also resisting pressures to disengage themselves from their honest voices. Exploring their resistance, I saw how it challenged an initiation that was both culturally sanctioned and socially enforced. In many ways, it was adaptive if not essential to praise the emperor's new clothes and not see that the minister who professed to love the truth, was, in his own words, "living a lie"—as the minister says in Hawthorne's novel.

I had not remembered that the word "patriarchy" appears repeatedly in *The Scarlet Letter*. I had read the novel as a tragic love story and a cautionary tale about the wages of sin. But there it was, right on the page: "patriarchal privilege," "patriarchal deacon" (pp. 199, 200), along with the confession:

I used to watch and study this patriarchal personage [the Father of the Custom-House] with, I think, livelier curiosity than any other form of humanity there presented to my notice. He was, in truth, a rare phenomenon; so perfect in one point of view; so shallow, so delusive, so impalpable, such an absolute nonentity, in every other.
(p. 16)

I had associated patriarchy with anthropology and the study of ancient tribes, and also with a feminism that saw men as monsters. Yet in writing a play inspired by *The Scarlet Letter*, and turning the play into a libretto for an opera called "Pearl," my son Jonathan and I were

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repeatedly struck by the depth of Hawthorne's insights into what is not usually thought of as the American dilemma: the tension between the radical Protestant vision of an unmediated relationship with God (who can be worshipped by anyone, anywhere—at home, in the forest, as well as in church) and the continuation of an all-male clerical hierarchy; between the vision of a democratic society, a shining city on the hill, and the continuation of patriarchal power and privilege. In an aria for the opera, we ask: "If God is love, how can love be sin?"

I had taken Shakespeare & Company's month-long actor-training workshop to learn from Tina Packer and Kristin Linklater what theater people know about voice. I began to experience how voice lives in the body, how it is connected to breath and the physical world of sound and vibration, as well as to language and culture. I discovered how dissociation can be enacted through the body, how precisely it can come to pass that, as sixteen-year-old Tanya reflects, "the voice that stands up for what I believe in is buried deep inside me." Buried, not lost. Having seen girls resist self-silencing and noting the conflicts that followed, within themselves and in the adults around them, I realized that in order to understand what I was seeing, I had to ask: resistance to what?

My work branched out in two directions. To explore dissociation or dissociative processes, to understand how it is that we can separate ourselves from parts of ourselves and come not to know what we know, I entered psychoanalysis and the more associative world

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of the arts where emotion is not walled off from thought. I began to focus more on the physical voice, hearing it as an instrument of expression as well as a concept or metaphor for the self. I continued to work in the theater, co-directing an all-women Shakespeare company and writing a play as well as a novel. An invitation to join the Social and Political Sciences faculty at the University of Cambridge and subsequently to teach in the law school at NYU provided opportunities to explore the politics as well as the psychology of resistance and to plant my study of resistance more firmly in a social and political landscape.

I had come full circle, joining my interest in psychology with an ongoing commitment to the arts and to political activism, but, the times were a changing. My work became more radical and more incendiary. In the 1990s, for the first time since suffrage, women's votes elected the president, and in the contested presidential election of 2000, the largest divergence between men's and women's votes was recorded (with more men voting for Bush and more women for Gore). In the U.S. health-care debates, an ethic of care was countered by death threats; the word "patriarchy" was dismissed as archaic even as its manifestations became more apparent in the rise of religious fundamentalism and the attacks on Hillary Clinton; and the death of feminism was repeatedly proclaimed.

The inspiration for this book crystallized in 2009, prompted by three events: the French publisher Flammarion revised their original translation of *In a Different Voice* and published a new edition, and Fushoka, the Japanese publisher, decided to re-translate