

Preface

How I Became a Teenage Activist

For the most part, I grew up in the small town of Aromas, California, a largely agricultural area. Early in high school, I was introduced to the United Farm Workers movement and the work of activists like Cesar Chavez and Delores Huerta. In 1987, when I was fourteen, my friends and I joined Chavez's hunger strike during the grape boycott.¹ I had to answer a lot of questions about not eating grapes, particularly after I passed out in the pool during swim practice. But once I learned about the dangers of using pesticides on foods and about the plight of most farm workers, I had to act.² I believed that if people only knew of the working and living conditions of the people who provide our nation's food, then something would change.

During the time of my hunger strike, I made a grocery trip with my mother. I entered the store and saw grapes in the produce section. I asked to see the managing grocer. I wanted to know where the grapes had come from and to educate the grocer about the plight of the farm workers. It took a bit of persuading, but finally someone came out to speak to me. I told him about the working and living conditions, the pesticides, the harassment, and the discrimination. Quite a crowd of shoppers had formed, unnoticed by me. I vividly remember catching a look in his eyes and realizing that not only was he not interested in what I was saying but he was irritated, and, to my surprise, I realized that I was the source of his irritation. How could he not care? I was in disbelief. I was frustrated. I was upset. But, more than anything, I was outraged. He was saying something, but I could barely make sense of it through my cloud of confusion. He wanted me to leave. I was causing a disturbance. So I did the only thing that I could think of. I grabbed a bunch of grapes and raised them above my head. Shaking them in my

fists, and in the deepest, most serious fourteen-year-old voice I could muster, I yelled, "These grapes have blood on them!" I slammed the grapes against the floor. Only then did I notice the crowd. I spun around and marched out of the store. I wasn't sure where I was headed, but I had to move. A few minutes later, my mom was at my side, saying it would be a long time until we would or could go back to that store. I wasn't sure if she was speaking in support of me or out of embarrassment because of what I had just done. I didn't care.

It wasn't until just a few years ago that I found out that the grocer had tried to make my mother pay for the grapes. Not only did she refuse, but she left her shopping cart in the middle of the produce section and left the store. We never shopped there again.

My early stages of activism were so filled with passion and outrage that I was often unsure of what to do with myself. I was angry a lot and embraced the saying "If you're not outraged, you're not paying attention." Many people told me that I overwhelmed them, that I turned people off to what I was saying because I yelled. I never thought that I yelled; I thought I spoke with passion. These responses were hard to understand because I thought I had a message people needed to hear, quite frankly, whether they thought so or not. I was learning so much, and my awareness of the issues was growing, perhaps faster than my diplomatic skills. I was searching for my voice and a way to use it effectively.

Around this time, my mother began to find her voice—or at least a new one. At forty-one, she became a re-entry student at the University of California, Santa Cruz, and took classes with, and later became a teacher's assistant to, Bettina Aptheker, a women's studies instructor and a long-time activist. And, while the experience and transformation was hers, as her daughter, I was deeply affected. I would often beg my mother to take me to class with her. I had grown up in a predominately female family, one that supported strong women, but I had not been widely exposed to the political nature of being female in a male-dominated society. I grew up on a ranch with two sisters where there were no boys to do the "boys' work" and with a father who had no sons and who didn't see that as a deficiency. I grew up being told that I could do anything that I put my mind to and that my voice mattered. This, as I began to learn in Aptheker's class, was not the norm. I sat in huge lecture halls, and, while I learned about women's empowerment and many political victories, I also began to learn about violence, oppression, racism, sexism, and homophobia. And, again, I was outraged.

Four years later, when I left my mother's college for my own, I looked around for the feminist community, and I found NOW, the National Organization for Women. I began a relationship that would change the course of my life. Not in my wildest dreams did I ever imagine that, a few years later, at age twenty-eight, I would become California NOW's youngest president, leading the largest statewide feminist organization in the country. I soon found myself a part of an active, vocal, and diverse group of young women and men who considered ourselves third-wave feminists. We were (and are) in a unique position of working alongside many second-wave feminists, those who came of age in the 1960s and 1970s. I am indebted to the people who mentored and guided me, women who fought similar battles before me, who had an understanding of the "big picture," and who could guide me to more effective ways of using my voice. At the same time, I believe that those of us who consider ourselves "third wavers" have something unique to offer. As a result of the efforts of our foremothers, we came of age with many of the rights and advantages that they did not have. We didn't have to fight for the right to be educated or to have a career; we could choose to obtain a safe and legal abortion, if we wanted one; we did not have to fight these struggles because the women and men who came before us already had. With these battles already waged, many of us were all the stronger, which in turn informed our experience with feminism. As third wavers join with second wavers, we need to build intergenerational partnerships in which we incorporate the knowledge and experience of the women who came before us and the knowledge and experience of women who are now coming of age.

Today, there are a variety of organizations working for women's rights, in the United States and worldwide. I continue to work with a number of these organizations, but I initially chose NOW because I appreciate its longevity and its focus on a variety of social justice issues. NOW addresses the many concerns that we face as women—from economic justice to reproductive rights. Joining gave me the invaluable experience of "hands-on" work in the women's movement. I was trained to work with the media on political and public education campaigns. I learned how to lead and how to make change happen. As a result of my involvement, I have had tremendous opportunities to work with, and to learn from, other feminist leaders.

These experiences have taught me more than I could ever learn from a book. Education is more than what you read or what occurs in a

classroom. One of the great possibilities of women's studies and feminism is the opportunity they present for action-based learning. Internships, chapter leadership, and community activism all provide "hands-on" experience and offer the opportunity to learn by doing. Through activism, we can learn from the experience of communities and develop community-based solutions to change the world.

One of the most significant aspects of the women's movement is that it gives validity to women's voices and to women's experiences. Throughout history, women have fought against the notion that they have little or nothing to contribute to politics or society. They have fought to have their voices heard, their experiences recognized, and their leadership respected. But, even within the context of the women's movement, our voices have sometimes been misrepresented. For example, in the 1960s, when middle-class white women like Betty Friedan began to talk about the frustration of being relegated to the home and their desire to be in the paid labor force, they represented only one part of women's experiences. At the same time, women of color and poor women who had long been in the paid labor force were working without fair wages, safe work environments, or recourse for rampant sexual harassment. All of these women represented the struggles that became part of the women's movement. Who got the attention, which stories were told, and which women were recognized as leaders became a political choice both within and outside the movement that created an image of feminism that did not fully recognize all its contributors. I point this out not to be politically correct or to unnecessarily chastise but rather to suggest that we must embrace the experiences, perspectives, and leadership of all women if this movement is to continue to move forward and effect positive change. That's the kind of movement that I envision and that I hope to give voice to here.

As president of California NOW, I had the opportunity to benefit from reputation, history, and global recognition, but I had also been called on to address criticism and explain the relevance both of NOW and of the feminist movement. I recognize that many see feminism as unnecessary, or too radical, or not radical enough. Many view NOW as a "white woman's organization" or as a lesbian organization or as strictly an abortion-rights organization. However, feminism and NOW represent women of color, poor women, young women, disabled women, mothers, working women, lesbians—all women. But the media, and those who actively oppose feminism, have created a cam-

paign against our movement. From the 1998 *Time* magazine cover claiming that feminism is dead to the radio talk shows of Laura Schlesinger and Rush Limbaugh to the writings of conservative women like Christine Hoff Sommers and Anne Coulter, the so-called horrors of feminism have been force-fed to a new generation. This media hype has had a lasting imprint on the women's movement and continues to divert attention from the true goals of feminism—ending discrimination against all women and girls, securing our safety, protecting our health, ensuring equal opportunities, and respecting our sexual identities.

I began to write this book after many conversations about the relevance of feminism today and after answering seemingly endless questions about young women in the movement. Questions came from active feminists, media interviews, friends, and family, all wanting to know, where are the young people in feminism today? Do they care? Are they active? Are they apathetic? I wrote this book because I see a great deal of activism among young people, but also a generation that doesn't feel that this movement belongs to them or that there is a seat at the table for their ideas and leadership. On the other hand, I see a generation of women who benefit from the gains of the feminist movement, who align themselves with the tenets of feminism but reject the term and any association with the movement. It is an interesting phenomenon that these empowered young women have little, if any, understanding of the fight that was necessary to win their rights and little connection to the fight that must continue to protect and advance rights for all women. Like the generations before us, young women must be able to draw on our experiences, critique our political, social, and economic environments, and create a plan of action for instituting change. As young women, we enter into a movement that has a great deal of history, and as a result we are confronted with the challenge of making a place within feminism to call our own.

OUTREACH FOR *FIGHT LIKE A GIRL*

While I have a tremendous amount of respect for those who came before me, this book focuses upon the voices of a younger generation. I wanted to write a book that explores where my peers, and those coming up behind me, enter the feminist movement—what are the issues today, and how is my generation addressing them? I wanted to create a

venue to speak about our concerns and about the movement. In classes, bookstores, meetings and through the Internet, I distributed questionnaires with the hopes of capturing the thoughts and ideas of those ages thirty-five and under. I realize that this focus targets a specific population—primarily those who frequent feminist and political listserves or attend feminist meetings. And, as with any questionnaire, I was subject to receiving responses from those who chose to submit. Despite all this, I was thrilled and surprised to see how far my questionnaire traveled. I received responses from all over the United States—from urban and rural areas, from coastal and mountainous regions, from universities and colleges, from community centers and after-school programs. Most of my respondents were college-age, though not always in college. Most were activists, but many were not involved in formal organizations. Some teachers and professors made the questionnaire a requirement in their classes or gave extra credit for its completion. Respondents passed the questionnaire on to friends and to members of other listserves and book groups and to attendees at various meetings. The questionnaire found its way to people in Canada who were eager to respond. I used this information to help me in my understanding of today's young feminists and also have pulled quotes that you'll find scattered throughout the book. I asked each respondent to self-identify, which, as you will see, led to a great variety of self-definition. It was important to me to use the respondents' language despite the risk of appearing "politically incorrect," as well as to show our diversity as a generation and as a movement. There is no single third-wave voice but rather a multitude of ideas and a commitment among us to respect differing perspectives.

This book focuses on the voices of my generation. I share my experiences as someone who is thirty-something, involved in the movement, and a self-proclaimed third-wave feminist. I discuss my thoughts and my fears for the world we live in today. Beyond my voice, you will hear from women, men, and trans individuals who have volunteered their opinions and views on social-justice issues and the meaning of feminism in their lives.

This book is a rebuttal to the message that feminism is dead and that young people are apathetic. It is a call to action. Dispelling the myths of feminism and detailing what is at stake for women and girls today, I outline the steps for taking action toward political, social, and economic equity for all. Exploring the issues of body image and self-

acceptance, education and empowerment, health and sexuality, political representation, economic justice and violence, this book looks at the challenges that women and girls face, while emphasizing the strength that we, both independently and collectively, embody. Additionally, I delve into the politics of the feminist movement from both inside and outside the movement, exploring both history and current realities. With an emphasis on young women, I discuss what the movement and activism mean to youth today. I look at how and where we encounter feminist ideas and activism—including the challenges to building multiracial, multicultural bridges and to forging intergenerational partnerships.

Perhaps more important, I want the book to be used, not just read. I have included a variety of resources to aid in taking action, including an “On My Bookshelf” section that includes titles for further reading; “Fabulous Feminist Web Resources,” with lists of Web sites that offer more information and an organizational community; “Spotlight” sections that are designed to give the reader more information about a specific issue or campaign; and sections that suggest actions that call for varying degrees of involvement—Getting Started, The Next Step, and Getting Out There. But this book is far from an exhaustive list of activism. My hope is that you will use this as a reference and begin to build your own set of books, resources, and organizations you can work with and to develop your own activist strategies. For the fight for justice belongs to us all. We must educate ourselves, empower one another, and unite under a common vision of creating a just society.

I write this book with this vision, looking critically at the issues that impact our lives, putting women at the center, and defining issues from the perspectives of those most affected. My focus is on self-exploration, self-discovery, and self-definition. I believe that we must speak up for what we believe in, work to end discrimination and oppression, question that which already is and envision what is still to come. Women and girls must be shown that they are valuable, strong, beautiful, and capable. I believe in the assertion that we are entitled to equal rights—including the right to be respected in our homes and workplaces and in our choices. I believe we must learn our history so that we know the contributions of our foremothers. I believe in the safety, health, education, economic security, independence, and free will of all. In this book, I want to reclaim the idea of fighting like a girl—a phrase that is usually

meant to suggest that those who fight like girls, as opposed to fighting like men, don't really know how to fight and that their struggle is not real, not intense, not legitimate—just hair pulling and nail scratching. I don't agree with that characterization at all. I know how to fight, and I know plenty of women whose struggles are all too real, all too harrowing, all too dangerous. I'm here to say that not only can we fight like girls; we can win.