

USING HISTORY TO MAKE HISTORY

Learning from Our Successes

by Carol Hanisch

I can't tell you how thrilled I am to have been invited to speak to you tonight. I spent some of the best years of my life living and organizing here in Gainesville from 1969 to 1973 before I moved back to the New York area to work with Redstockings on *Feminist Revolution*. I even fell in love here, but that's another story. Anyway, I want to thank the Womens Studies Student Association and University of Florida/Sante Fe Community College Campus NOW for this wonderful invitation and Gainesville Women's Liberation for making the suggestion and providing the connection that made it possible.

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We often hear that those who do not learn from history are bound to repeat its mistakes. That's so true! But in this Women's History Month, I want to talk a little about what was done right, from the experience—the history—which I lived through and helped make.

When I was a student in the early 1960s at Drake University in Des Moines, Iowa, I suppose I was pretty much like you. But the rules were quite different then for women. We were not allowed to wear pants to class unless it was below zero. Women were required to live in the campus dorms until they were 23 years old. The men weren't. Women students had to be in the dorm by ten on weeknights and midnight on weekends. The men had no such hours. I remember several times being really pissed when speakers would come to campus and the women would have to go back to the dorms after the speech while the male students would get to go hang out and talk with the speaker. Instead of demanding what we really wanted—an end to all these rules for women—we politely asked the Dean of Students to extend our hours a little. We had a lot to learn.

After graduation I was offered a real plum job as a reporter at the United Press International Des Moines bureau—the first woman to hold that job there, I think. My beat was to be the Iowa State legislature. A few weeks before the session started, another reporter—a man with even less knowledge and writing ability than I had—was hired and he was given my beat and I was assigned to the rewrite desk. I was made the alternate legislative reporter and the first time I showed up at the Capitol Building's press parking lot, the attendant wouldn't let me park because he didn't believe that I was really a reporter because I was female. When I finally got

inside, I found the legislators didn't want to talk to a woman reporter. All this was done blatantly, too, because there was no feminist movement to stop it. In disgust and desperation I went off to join the Mississippi Civil Rights Movement, which was waging and winning a great struggle against racism and segregation. I figured if I couldn't write about important events, then I'd just go help make history myself. I had no idea at the time that that decision would entirely change the direction of my life.

I want to make it very clear that we didn't start the Women's Liberation Movement back in the 1960s because we hated men per se, but because we hated being oppressed. Men were often the ones doing the oppressing and we wanted them to stop it. We wanted them to treat us with respect and to move over and allow us to stand shoulder to shoulder in our own place, partially so that men and women could really love each other—both sexually and as comrades—as equals. We believed that our liberation was in most men's long-term interest as well as in our own, even though it meant a serious struggle to make them give up their privileged position. We knew, for example, that if men took equal responsibility for their children, they would lose some free time and have to do more work, but they would gain something much more precious: a close and good relationship with their family. Some men see that more clearly than others and want to support feminism. We have to teach them how and why to give that support, just as we often need to teach them to make love in a satisfying way or how to really clean the bathroom. Also, working men are our potential allies in the struggle against our capitalist oppressors.

It is very difficult to find the right words to talk about the most successful years of the Women's Liberation Movement of the late '60s and early '70s because the terms and concepts that everybody had at least a passing familiarity with have either been co-opted, distorted, buried or even turned on their heads. I hope if I say "revolution," for example, you'll know that I'm not talking about the takeover by Gingrich and the forces of the Christian Right! The result of the distortion of these concepts is that it keeps many women from knowing why they should even care about these terms and the rich treasure trove of ideas they hold. I'm not trying to hold up the '60s here as some kind of ideal that you can never attain. Quite the opposite. I'm here to tell you about your radical heritage because I believe you can use it to make history even better than we did.

We called ourselves "radicals" and "women's liberationists" with a great deal of pride. By radical, we did not mean extreme; we meant at the very heart of, or at the root. We wanted to get at the heart of the matter, to understand the root of our oppression as women, so that we would know how to fight to win, not just fight to show off or just to be able to say we were doing something. We wanted so much for ourselves and our sex; we weren't about to settle for mere "crumbs from the freedom table" as the Civil Rights Movement used to put it.

We need to always remember that every inch of freedom that we enjoy today was fought for and won by women united in struggle. By women, who, like ourselves, wanted liberation above all else because it was the only way to get what we wanted and needed—to fulfill our dreams.

Radicalism has always been and still is crucial to that fight. There is a lot of confusion about what is and isn't radical. An understanding of an idea like "radical" doesn't come overnight or out of the blue. It doesn't come from books so much as from experience in freedom fights. It comes particularly from the actual experience of radical theory, strategy and tactics, from actually jumping into the battle ourselves.

Without radical theory, there would be no Women's Liberation Movement. Without radical strategy and tactics, we have no hope of abolishing male supremacy. History—both the history of the Women's Liberation Movement and the history of human progress—show that without radicals, there is no progress for women or for the masses of people. Kathie Sarachild and others explain this well in the Redstockings book, *Feminist Revolution*.

The test of radical theory is “Is it true in the real world?” Is it a deep truth that goes all the way to the roots, to the source, to the heart of a matter? What is untrue cannot be considered radical. When we talk about radical feminist theory, we mean the radical, deep truth about women's situation. When we apply “radical” to the Women's Liberation Movement, we mean the radical, deep truth about our fight for liberation.

Now there are other truths—deep, radical truths— about other things in this world besides women and women's liberation. But we must be careful not to confuse them with women and women's liberation. For example, there are a lot of people—women included—who try to redefine radical feminism to mean the fight against every injustice in society, bringing them all under the feminist umbrella and therefore making feminism meaningless. To say that economic exploitation, poverty, racism, peace, or the environment are feminist issues is first of all not true. They are issues that concern men as well as women and should be solved by men and women working together. The effect of calling these other issues feminist is that the real issues that affect us as a sex get pushed aside. OUR issues get diluted or even lost. Women end up fighting for everything BUT our own freedom. And it lets men off the hook because these are issues that affect them and that they should be fighting on. If the Women's Liberation Movement doesn't fight for women's liberation, who will?

Our stated goal is in the very name: Women's...Liberation...Movement. The shortening of the name to women's movement is sometimes just sloppiness, but it is often an attempt to redirect the thrust of radical feminism and cool it off. The goal of a “women's movement” can be just about anything. The goal of the Women's Liberation Movement is clearly the liberation of women. To fight in segregated groups as women on these other issues—no matter how crucial they are—is a backward, reactionary step because it makes us into a kind of ladies auxiliary to the real struggle. When we fight on general issues, we do it as people, not as women.

On the other hand when we segregate ourselves into women only groups to fight male supremacy it is because we recognize the necessity of organizing out of the earshot of the oppressor. Like labor unions we have had to fight for the right to meet without the bosses in the room. Some women say we need “free space” without men to fight on these general issues. But we never shied away from confrontations with men in the general movement. To us, fighting for equality in movement groups was part of the struggle for women's liberation. We formed women's caucuses within those groups to deal with the male supremacy that was keeping us from full participation.

So feminist theory—to be radical—must be true and honest and unafraid of its own conclusions. It must reveal the position of women as we really are. It tests all premises against what we know, what we can learn from sharing our own experiences, not on what some man or some book or even some woman tells us is true. In the Women's Liberation Movement we have always relied heavily on our own experiences and feelings to study our position in society and to develop our theory and strategy for change. This we named CONSCIOUSNESS-RAISING. We

were adamantly committed to finding truth under the mass of lies about women and telling it as clearly as we could. A deluge of stifling rules of how to do consciousness-raising would come later, but at first the only rule was to tell the truth so that our analysis would be based on the truth of women's lives.

We put at the forefront of our struggle those forms of oppression which all women experience and which all men benefit from so that women would understand that even the best of men aren't good enough and a real fundamental change in the power relationship is what's needed. Those issues—public childcare, men sharing the housework, good sex, respect, abortion, restrictive clothing and beauty standards—were not necessarily the most sensational or horrible or heart-rending or media-grabbing. When we discussed and organized around issues which do not directly happen to every woman and are not done by every man, such as rape or violence against women, we presented them as part of the whole picture and not as single issues isolated from other aspects of our oppression.

Consciousness raising helped us cut through the tendency—which we all have to some degree—of substituting wishful thinking for reality. It is absolutely necessary to understand our situation if we are to change it. That is why consciousness raising came from radical feminists. We were determined to examine our lives from what we knew and what we could know, not look to some wishful thinking about some golden age of matriarchy when women supposedly ruled the world.

Through consciousness-raising, we learned early on that THE PERSONAL IS POLITICAL, that so many of what seemed to be our individual problems and frustrations were really a social problem that was a result of the power that men had over us. Being stuck with the housework and childrearing, lack of abortion and childcare, unsatisfying sex, oppressive appearance codes, double standards and lack of respect were all political problems that resulted in the usurpation of our time, labor and mental and emotional energy. Therefore, we reasoned, each woman standing up for herself, though often necessary, was not enough to win freedom. We would have to unite like labor unions had done and like the Black freedom movement was doing, to build enough power to change the society as a whole, not just one man at a time. We needed a strong Women's Liberation Movement that could speak and act with the power of a class in the interest of all women.

The Personal Is Political is one of those concepts that got turned on its head. It did not mean that taking action in our personal lives—like berating a man for telling a sexist joke—is an effective substitute for working collectively in a group to take some real power.

If the test of radical theory is truth, the test of radical strategy and tactics is effectiveness. Now some people think radical feminism means picking up a gun and shooting the first male chauvinist you see. Now we don't wish to limit our tactics ahead of time, but it would seem obvious that this is not the way to make a feminist revolution. After all, many of us want men to shape up, not disappear off the face of the earth.

Others think radical tactics means only marching in the streets. While that is certainly a tactic effective in many situations, being in the streets is not in and of itself radical. It depends on why we are there, and if being there is what needs most to be done at any given moment. To be radical means to remain flexible and to suit our actions to the concrete situation in which we find ourselves. Sometimes the most effective thing to do may be to beat a fast retreat and live to

fight another day. Sometimes the most militant and radical thing a person can do is to simply tell it like it is. We need to learn and use old proven tactics as well as create new ones. We've got to dare to try things, but not in an individualistic way and not without thinking things through and understanding what we are doing.

We believed and tried to put into practice the slogan, **SISTERHOOD IS POWERFUL**, a phrase coined by Kathie Sarachild in 1968 at New York Radical Women's very first action [at the Jeanette Rankin Brigade in Washington, D.C. in January of 1968]. We recognized that the unity of women was necessary for a successful political movement. Some of our groups had rules that you didn't flirt with or mess with another sister's man. We didn't shy away from demanding power for women. We didn't fall back on demanding the wimpy "empowerment" of individual women that we so often see on posters and book titles. Empowerment implies that an attitude change is enough rather than actually getting power into women's hands. Sisterhood Is Powerful did not mean uncritical, individual support for anything a woman did, as it came to mean later. We were talking about political power, societal power—the unity to take power to determine what happened in and to our lives.

We recognized the necessity of **RAISING OURSELVES BY RAISING UP ALL WOMEN**. We couldn't raise up our sex only by raising ourselves, because as long as any woman could be treated like a "dumb broad" all woman could be. We were women's liberationists, not liberated women. We did not see ourselves as—or aspire to be—superwomen, but to create conditions where no woman had to be superwoman to have what she needed, to have respect, to have both a family and contribute in the public labor force outside the home.

**WE CALLED THINGS BY THEIR NAMES**. Betty Friedan wrote about "the problem that has no name" and we named it: male supremacy. We said men oppress women, white people oppress black people, bosses oppress workers, the rich oppress the poor, for the real material advantages that they get out of it, not because we were brainwashed or socialized by some vague entity called "society." We didn't talk about "perceived" sexism, racism, exploitation, as if maybe they didn't exist or couldn't really be known. We didn't demand just "choice," but "Free Abortion on Demand." We said the words that we actually meant and that helped us organize. It didn't turn women off; they responded in droves, like after the Miss America Pageant Protest when Ros Baxandall, one of the members of New York Radical Women, appeared on the David Susskind show and said "Every day in a woman's life is a walking Miss America Pageant" and we received more letters than we could even answer. Women responded to a group calling itself New York Radical Women and wrote, "I've been waiting all my life for something like this."

The Women's Liberation Movement was initially rather successful at exposing the myth that our problems as women were "all in our head." We showed they came from the male supremacist society in which we live. Telling the truth about sex, love, men, work, in consciousness-raising groups and then analyzing our experiences led us to discover that real circumstances were usually at the root, not some psychological hangup. We did certain things not because we were brainwashed or conditioned, but because there are real punishments for daring to go against the rules—written or unwritten. If women wore make-up, it wasn't just because we were brainwashed by advertising, but because we were forced to deal with constant pressure from men and bosses to look a certain way. We called this understanding of why women act the way we do **THE PRO-WOMAN LINE**. As I wrote in "The Personal Is Political" in 1969:

*What [the pro-woman line] says basically is that women are really neat people. The bad things that are said about us as women are either myths (women are stupid), tactics women use to struggle individually (women are bitches), or are actually things that we want to carry into the new society and want men to share too (women are sensitive, emotional). Women as oppressed people act out of necessity (act dumb in the presence of men), not out of choice. Women have developed great shuffling techniques for their own survival (look pretty and giggle to get or keep a job or man) which should be used when necessary until such time as the power of unity can take its place. Women are smart not to struggle alone (as are blacks and workers). It is no worse to be in the home than in the rat race of the job world. They are both bad. Women, like blacks, workers, must stop blaming ourselves for our "failures."*

The Pro-Woman Line would later get skewed to support the reactionary idea that women are inherently superior to men. During the century-long struggle for the women's right to vote in the United States, many feminists claimed women would use their vote to bring morality, peace and harmony to the world. It hasn't happened. Women must claim their right to participate in the affairs of the world based on justice, not purity. Otherwise we end up in a new prison of our own making. Women are quite capable of arrogance, cruelty, murder, child abuse, cheating and cheating on, robbery and soldiering. Men are capable of love, caring, honesty, humility, fidelity, fairness and the desire for peace. The vexing question is how do we create a society in which the positive in all human potential is brought to the fore.

As radicals, WE COMMITTED OURSELVES TO CHANGING THE WORLD in a way that gave people hope and drew them to join us. People risked or gave up jobs, careers, lovers, homes, family ties, life savings, their sanity, their security, and in some cases their lives, for something bigger and more important than each of us as individuals.

WE WORKED HARD. While many of us didn't think male supremacy—and capitalism and racism—would be as intransigent as they have proven to be, we were aware that it would take an enormous amount of hard work and sacrifice to better our lives. We encouraged and pushed each other to do the kind of hard ground work that made us effective. I can't in all honesty say there was no competition in the movement, but as a rule, we delighted in each other's work. When somebody would write a paper or come up with a new idea or take some daring action, we would be thrilled and inspired.

WE PUT OUR FAITH IN "THE PEOPLE." We believed that we could unite into a force strong enough to cut through all the lies and fear to either educate or force people to abandon their prejudices and hatreds and privileges. I have to admit that this is one of the ideas I find it hardest to hang on to. The racism, sexism, class arrogance and power that permeates our society now sometimes seems un-overcome-able. But then I hear of some freedom fight going on, or I read an enlightening analysis of some struggle, or the enemy exposes his weakness and stupidity and shows he's not invincible, and I'm ready to get back into the fray. Sometimes I just need to feel the outrage and anger of people speaking up against injustice and I think, "Right on, let's go."

These are only some, and mostly very general, things that I believe we did right and that we must build upon if we are going to make another great leap forward, or even a big step. Our mistakes were many and we also need to come to understand them so as not to repeat them.

But to do either in any meaningful way, we must make history again. I know each time I dare to do something, I learn something important. Sometimes it can be frustrating or painful or confusing, but each step—even if it is small or if it is not the success we hoped it would be—teaches us something. I remember how hard it was to get up and hang the women’s liberation banner inside the convention hall at the Miss America Protest. Doing this meant disrupting the big moment of the outgoing Miss America as she began her farewell speech. It seemed so rude and such a terrible thing to do to this woman. And I remember thinking, “Do we really have to do this?” But as we stood there shouting “Freedom for Women—No More Miss America—Women’s Liberation” a great wonderful liberating feeling came over me. There is an old slogan from the 60s—DARE TO STRUGGLE; DARE TO WIN. We will never win unless we dare to struggle. That’s a fact of life. You can’t move forward when you’re sitting on your butt.

I think one of the most important things the Women’s Liberation Movement can do right now is to organize into effective organizations. We’ve had too much “do your own thingism.” Not everything a woman does in the name of feminism is good, and not everything a feminist group does is good. Some strategies are more effective than others, and some even set us back. In the beginning of our movement, we were very good at raising consciousness, but we neglected to build ongoing organizations with accountable, chosen leadership. We must get even more serious about our work, really dig in our heels and do our homework. The task of making a feminist revolution is going to be harder than any of us imagined when we started the Women’s Liberation Movement nearly 30 years ago. We are going to have to be better organized than our oppressors, more determined, more persistent, but we have decades of recent history to study and centuries of feminist struggle to guide us.

### **THE REACTIONARY RIGHT**

I want to say a few words about the reactionary right—which is a redundancy in terms, I guess—before we go to question and answers. Some say “The right is just so strong these days, fascism is just around the corner and it’s gonna get us if we don’t put all our efforts into stopping them.” There’s some truth in that, but the real question is, “What’s the best way to do it?”

First of all, I want to assure you that the Right has always been around and ever bit as much in control as they are now. Hey, I grew up in the 1950s when “family values” were so in control that I didn’t know what an abortion was. I knew if I got pregnant in high school, I would have a shotgun marriage or I would be sent away to have the baby and give it up for adoption. And you think the Right is strong today?

What deposed the Right of the 1950s? The movement of the 1960s. Not with slogans and rallies to “Stop the Right” but with organizations dedicated to freedom and equality—social, economic and political. Dedicated to putting power into the hands of the people—the people who actually do the work—the production and the reproduction—rather than leaving it in the hands of parasites who live off everybody else. I hear young people moan that they grew up under Reagan and Bush. Well, we grew up under McCarthy and General Eisenhower and Richard Nixon. We had the media telling us where our place was then, too—and that was in the home, period. The TV commercials were selling us Toni home permanents and floor wax, and a real woman knew how to use them and went into ecstasy at the sight of a bright and shiny floor because she dare not demand some ecstasy in the bedroom.

The Right is not strong because they are correct. They are not strong because their ideology is appealing to the vast majority. They are strong because we are weak. We're not winning very much right now. In fact, we're being pushed backward. But that's because we are disorganized and have little unity. We don't even have national publications that carry the news of people's struggles and teach us how to do our work better.

I had a little discussion group at my house one night after watching the documentary about the Mississippi Civil Rights Movement called "Freedom on My Mind." The one thing I learned that night was that when it comes to the general movement against capitalist oppression, hardly anybody knows what it is that they want anymore. We don't even have an ideology to unite around. How can you win if you don't know what you're fighting for? People who once considered themselves socialists look at what's happening in the former socialist countries and say "Socialism has failed. I guess I can't be a socialist anymore because socialism doesn't work." Instead of looking at what went wrong with the practice—with trying to put the principles of socialism into practice—they say it's a failure. But as Kwame Ture, who I knew as Stokely Carmichael, pointed out in a speech here recently, the principles are still sound, even if they haven't yet been correctly put into practice. Women's liberation has not been put into practice yet either. It hasn't won yet, but do we abandon the great principle of what we have been fighting for because we haven't won yet?

Before the fall of the Soviet Union and similar setbacks for socialism around the world, to be a Red meant that the government and the powers that be considered you a dangerous subversive; now it means that you are just a relic of the past pushing an outdated and ineffective ideology. That's a real smart thing to pull on Americans, because some of us can stand up—at least some of the time—to being considered a dangerous subversive, but, boy, it's just as hard or even harder to be dismissed as irrelevant, obsolete fools.

At a time when the big corporations are making a great leap forward in internationalizing their workforce and their markets—that is, going after the markets, cheap labor and other natural resources around the world that they have no right to—it seems to me that most of what such male radicals as Marx, Lenin and Mao wrote about is turning out to be true. Check it out. Don't listen to somebody else's interpretation of what these great revolutionaries said. Read them for yourselves. Many of us in women's liberation learned a lot from these theorists and from the revolutions that they led. The first paper I wrote for the Women's Liberation Movement in *Notes from the First Year* was called "Women of the World Unite—We Have Nothing to Lose But Our Men," a take-off on the unity called for in the Communist Manifesto: "Workingmen of all countries unite, you have nothing to lose but your chains." Those words had made the hair on the back of my neck stand up when I read them in a college class because I immediately thought of how hard my parents who were small farmers had to work for so little. The class was called "Democracy and Its Enemies," but I just knew those words had not been written by my enemy! They raised in my mind the idea that things do not have to be the way they are. We could get together and make it better. Of course, if Marx were here today, we would have to raise his consciousness to change that phrase to "working people of all countries" instead of "working men"!

Consciousness raising itself came directly from our experience in the southern Civil Rights Movement—and from reading Mao and a book called *Fanshen* by William Hinton about the Chinese Revolution. I have to tell you these things because they are the truth and part of our

history, even if they might scare you a little because all you know about them is probably what you've been told by a power structure that wants to keep you away from this theory by scaring you off with the big C-word: communism.

As capitalists become more organized inter-nationally, it is obvious that "Working people of all countries unite, you have nothing to lose but your chains" is more relevant today than it ever was. National boundaries mean less and less. Being a middle-class American is no longer an assurance of living a comfortable life. Uniting and organizing against this great international power becomes a necessity. And you as future professionals, are going to have to decide which side are you on—which side you are going to give your time and your talents to. The way things are going you may end up working a \$6 an hour job anyway—with or without that college degree.

To believe that there is anything near a level playing field in the United States is like depending on a mirage of water in a desert. And yet, many people seem to prefer to think the mirage is real than to deal with the reality that it is not. We like to think that anyone who is "smart" and/or works hard enough can climb right up the ladder, or at least make a good living. The possibility that a person can move into the class above him or her through initiative and hard work is probably just a little greater than winning the lottery. As Mississippi civil rights workers liked to point out in the 1960s, "If hard work made you rich, Black people would own America." (Not to mention women!)

We are living in a time of great opportunity to take a great leap forward for humankind. Consciousness about ourselves as working people is rising because of what is happening to our lives. Inherited wealth and power are as much the order of the day as inherited kingdoms and fiefdoms were in the days of feudalism. There is nothing representative or democratic in our "representative democracy" in which a bunch of lawyers and businessmen inside the beltway run the country at the behest of the corporate fronts of America's wealthy families. The contradictions of capitalism, of male supremacy, of racism—both in this country and in the world—are getting so sharp that you have to really shut your eyes tight and sing your mantra loud not to see and hear it. What we are lacking is a clear goal and effective organization—a program with a strategy. Something to unite around with at least a general idea of how to proceed. We must get to work on this.

The corporate grip on America is so tight, most people accept the fact that the head honchos make 157 times more than the people who produce the goods, even when these CEOs have obviously done the kind of job a mere worker would be fired for. The few big guys who do get fired are rewarded with severance packages that will keep them living very comfortably for life.

How is it that these overpaid corporate executives get to decide to move or close down plants, layoff workers, or turn half the workforce into blue, white or pink collar migrants? Where is democracy when it comes to the workplace where we spend such a large part of our lives and which dictates so much of the rest of what we do?

While not everyone works for a large corporation, it is these large businesses that call the tune for the remainder of the country. Such progressive benefits as the 40-hour week, sick leave and vacation benefits, were won when workers were able to change the law and/or the employee policies of large companies, largely through the pressure of strikes and popular support.

Unorganized workers and those working in small shops have always benefited from union successes. These advances won by labor struggles are being rolled back and we are in danger of losing them, just as the hard-won, and limited right to abortion is being eroded.

Insecurity and poverty are no longer limited to women, people of color, and blue and pink collar workers. We, the working people, must move beyond joining petty “tax revolt” organizations and trying to put the brakes on government aid to the poor and unemployed as the means of solving our financial crisis. We must take a good look at where our money and jobs are really going and who is making the decisions. It’s not you and me—and it should be. We need to restructure our whole system to get some democracy where it really counts.

By taking up this struggle, men can do more for women’s liberation than by trying to work in the Women’s Liberation Movement. We want your support when we ask for it and we expect you to give it. But your primary battle must be against capitalism and for socialism. Get yourself down on the picket line at Publix where brave workers are leading a struggle against racial and sexual discrimination and harassment. These workers are fighting for you and me as well as for themselves. White men have to realize that black people and women are like the canaries used in the coal mine to warn the miners of what’s coming their way. If the struggle at Publix is lost, it will weaken ALL workers.

I’d be lying to you if I stood up here and pretended to have all the answers. I don’t. But I do have some ideas about what we must do based on my participation in the struggle. Everything we know in the movement comes from struggle—*somebody’s* struggle. Some people will say, “Oh, I read all about women winning the vote in a book.” Well, he or she may have read the book, but if some people hadn’t jumped in and made the struggle, they wouldn’t have the book to read. And if the book is really good and tells deep truths, you can bet somebody went through some kind of struggle to get it written and published and into your hands.

So get involved. Do it for yourself to better your own life and do it for humanity. The best way to do that is to join an organization. That’s pretty easy to do here in Gainesville. As far as I know, there are few places in the country that have both the rich radical tradition of struggle and active radical feminists willing and eager to teach you your history and how to organize. Gainesville is one of those rare places. If you’re a student you can join UF/SFCC Campus NOW. If you’re not a student, you can join Gainesville Area NOW. When we’re finished here, you can go over to the Gainesville Women’s Liberation table and learn more about the ideas I’ve talked about because I’ve not had time to explain them thoroughly. Go buy a copy of *Feminist Revolution*, the Redstockings book which I helped edit. Learn about our history so you can make history. Then go out and make some history so that you can better understand history. Inform yourself. Go over the Civic Media Center at 1021 West University Avenue. They have a unique and wonderful collection of material including video and audio tapes from, by and about all kinds of movements. I wish I could spend a couple of months in there myself. I’d know a whole lot more than I do now. If you’re eligible to join a union, do it. If you’re already in a union, get active. Or join other organizations working for economic and social justice. If you’re a student, join the Freedom Coalition. It will help you fight tuition hikes and other student issues.

I know from experience that not everyone is going to join a women’s liberation group or a NOW group. Some of you aren’t going to want to get involved. But you can at least give some money to the organizations that are out there fighting to make your life better. Forego a few goodies for

yourself and pass that money on to feminist work. If every woman in the country would donate one percent of her income, we could win a lot very quickly because we would have enough money to pay organizers. Most of us working for women's liberation end up struggling to make a living and still do political work. That wasn't so bad in the 1960s and early 1970s when we could survive on a part-time job and still do a lot of organizing. But that's not possible in today's economy. I often find that I don't have the time to do the research to make my work better. It takes a lot of time sometimes to search out your hunches or to present your case clearly. You end up flying by the seat of your pants because economically there's no other solution.

If you're a little scared about getting involved, it's ok. But don't let that fear stop you. One of the things that I learned in the Civil Rights Movement is that everyone gets scared sometimes. You're only a coward if you let that fear stop you from what needs to be done. The struggle isn't always easy and sometimes it will call on you to make sacrifices you'd rather not make. But don't let that stop you either. Several years ago I was feeling very depressed about all the setbacks we were experiencing. It looked like we might lose abortion rights and everything else I'd spent my life fighting for. Then one day it dawned on me how much worse my life would have been without the gains the movement had made. I'd still be in agony walking around in a girdle, skirts and high heels! I'd still be worrying constantly about my relationships with men and not know what to do about them. I would be blaming myself for everything that's wrong with my life. And I would have been a lot dumber about the world and how it operates. My life would have been less rich, less interesting. I would not have the satisfaction of knowing that it has counted for something—that I am part of the great ongoing struggle to free women and humanity from the oppressions that keeps us all from realizing our best dreams. I want that experience for you, too.

I urge you not only to study our liberation movement's history but to donate your time, energy and money to organizations fighting for justice.

Fight on, Sisters!

*This speech was the keynote address at the University of Florida (Gainesville) Women's History Month activities on March 27, 1996. It appeared in **Frankly Feminist, A Collection of Writings from the Hudson Valley Woman 1991-1995** by Carol Hanisch.*