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UN International Day of Peace and Global Ceasefire

August 26, 2008

### Women's Equality and Peacemaking

Equal rights. Equal responsibility. Wo/man. Human. Crafting creation peace.

I do not know when it happened. I do not know the instant in herstory, history, that woman became object to the subject of man. When in the beginning time did man look up, down, across some aspect and see a woman as the object of his lust and power and fear and love and decide that his physical strength meant that he was more. More human. More worthy. More able. I do not know whether or not history, herstory, marked the moment when women's inequality became prevalent on the earth. Did a cool moon eclipse an insolent sun, turning day to night and making man tremble at the possibility that his own projected power could be so easily rendered powerless? Did a female divine gather a few things for a few days' journey and leave for centuries? Did she leave of her own volition or was she thrown out of the human heart/mind by a masculine god gone insane with his own self regard?

The fear of lost power only lives in an imagination with a calcified idea of what power means. Power over Others. The absent goddess only lives in the imagination of a religious mind that still in its stillness senses the presence of a she God. Such is foolishness when the ligaments of religion have been cut, leaving us alone in our individuality desperately searching for some thing, some one, some cause, some meaning to reconnect us to each other and to all that is. Disconnected, we lose our balance. And the hard truth is that such reconnection, the return to equilibrium, can never come until woman and man see each other and work together as equals.

At this moment, somewhere on the earth, a woman is preparing a meal for her family. She is thinking about what she is cooking and how to prepare it. She is thinking about food for tomorrow. She is thinking about where she will find the money to get the food. She is thinking about water and fire and fuel. These things may be as simple as turning a knob in a safe suburban house or a city apartment in a western industrialized world. Or, it may be a decision to risk rape and go after firewood in a war ravaged place somewhere in the two-thirds world. In any case, the woman probably lives in a society where the political economy and primary religious and cultural institutions are controlled by men. Yet, she bears, often disproportionately, the responsibilities of ordinary life.

The inequality of women is a barrier to peace because it violates the principle of respect for all of humanity. It is a violation of human rights. It is a barrier to peace because it is an element in economic disparity that is a risk factor for violence. Peacemaking from the bottom up requires the equality of women. In the countdown to the UN International Day of Peace and Global Ceasefire, August 26 is Women's Equality Day. It is a day dedicated to an awareness that peace is not possible until women are free and live lives equal with men, lives that allow both men and women and creation to flourish.

Sustainable economic development is an important just peace principle. It resides under the broad category of respect. Gender equality is important to a nation's economic development because when women bring their talent, wisdom, and work into the public sphere as well as into the private sphere they add to the reservoir of talent, wisdom and work available to a nation. Moreover, when women are educated and when they take advantage of professional opportunities, they are better able to contribute to the economic well-being of their families. This has been and continues to be a primary concern of women throughout the world. It is therefore not surprising that much of women's activism

historically begins with bread and butter issues. When women organize against economic injustice, they often also speak in support of multiple causes, including the cause of peace.

Let us briefly consider two women activists and a woman's peace movement -- Nannie Helen Burroughs, Clara Lemlich Shavelson and Women Strike for Peace. Nannie Helen Burroughs (1879-1961) was an African-American activist rooted in the Afro-Baptist tradition.<sup>1</sup> She worked as associate editor of the *Christian Banner*, a newspaper of the National Baptist Convention, and in the 1900 convention in Richmond, Virginia, she gave a speech that helped to move the convention toward establishing a women's convention. Burroughs understood the importance of economic justice and job training evinced by her effort to organize the Women's Industrial Club. The club taught women "clerical skills, homemaking and handicrafts" (23). Burroughs wanted to make domestic work a profession, teaching Black women Latin, English literature and history, including Black history, along with practical skills such as sewing, home economics, book keeping and gardening (24). Her work was intended to enhance the human dignity of African-American people in general and African-American women more specifically. It was work of racial uplift.

However, her concerns did not stop there. Burroughs was interested in social activism that extended to working for women's suffrage, education, labor reform, and political participation (25). She founded the National League of Republican Colored Women (30). She worked to unionize domestic workers, and she helped to found the National Association of Wage Earners, an organization intended to make life better for working women (25). Further, her activism included advocacy for peace. Womanist scholar Rosetta Ross quotes Burroughs: "Peace is made out of respect for human personality. Think of a nation talking about enduring peace when it spends Five Dollars on the education of a white child and Fifty Cents on the education of a Negro child! Think of a nation talking about enduring peace when it

sends Black men to fight for world freedom and denies these same men a semblance of it when they return to the land of promise” (27).

Another 20<sup>th</sup> century woman activist whose activism started with economic concerns was Clara Lemlich Shavelson (1886-1982)<sup>ii</sup> Shavelson, a Jewish immigrant from the Ukraine, started her activism as a founder of Waistmaker’s Local 25, an affiliate of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU). Before she married, while still only 23-years-old, she gained notoriety for calling for action over words, calling for a strike and invoking a Hebrew oath: “May my right [hand] wither from [my] arm if I betray the cause I now pledge” (519). She dedicated her life to working against anti-Semitism and racial discrimination, working for class unity, women’s rights and giving support to peace organizations (519).

During the economic depression of the 1930s, Shavelson organized hunger marches, rent and food strikes and “kitchens for the jobless” (521). In 1935, she was part of a meat boycott organized by housewives to protest the high cost of meat. Further, she was international in her thinking. In 1934, she attended the 1<sup>st</sup> International Women’s Congress Against War and Fascism in Paris; she also travelled to the Soviet Union. She was a member of the Communist Party and ran unsuccessfully for office (521). This was also a time when progressive Jewish organizations came together. The Progressive Women’s Council merged with the Jewish People’s Fraternal Order (JPFO) of the International Women’s Order (IWO). In 1944, the IWO-JPFO started an Emma Lazarus Division which in 1951 would become the Emma Lazarus Federation of Jewish Women’s Clubs (ELF) (523).

Just as Nannie Helen Burroughs worked to educate Black women about their history, the ELF worked to make Jewish women aware of their history and culture. (Emma Lazarus is the poet who wrote the poem that is carved in a plaque mounted inside the pedestal of the Statue of Liberty. It famously says in part: "Give me your tired, your poor your huddled masses yearning to breathe free.") The ELF also worked on such practical projects as : "full employment for men and women; equal pay for equal work; maternity unemployment, old age, health and housing benefits; day nurseries and after-school care; and the inclusion of greater numbers of women in government" (523). Understanding the importance of coalition building, and recognizing the triple oppression of Black women – oppressed as women, workers and as "Negroes" -- the ELF "joined in a common statement of principle with the Sojourners for Truth and Justice, a Black woman's civil rights group" (528). The ELF would continue its advocacy for "constant contact" with Black women to work against both racism and against anti-Semitism. Leaders of the ELF were called before the House Un-American Committee. Nevertheless, they continued to work for progressive causes while they protested McCarthyism.

In the 1960s, the ELF urged the ratification of both the UN Genocide Convention and the UN treaty to end all forms of racism. Historian Joyce Antler writes: "In 1966 the federation delivered seven thousand signatures to Ambassador Arthur Goldberg; in 1969 it sent a delegation (including three black women) to present sixty thousand signatures to Senator William Fulbright of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. The Senate finally ratified the Genocide Convention on 19 February 1986" (529). Before the Elf disbanded in 1989, it cooperated with peace groups such as the anti-nuclear weapons organization Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy (SANE) and with the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom.

It is important to note that in both the herstories of Nannie Helen Burroughs and her work with the Women's Convention of the National Baptist and that of Clara Lemlich Shavelson with the ELF, concern for economic justice led to work toward education, political activity, coalition building and an advocacy of peace. These women saw the connection between these various issues. In the early 1960s, a group of women opposed to nuclear testing saw the connection between atmospheric testing and possible contamination of the food they fed their children. Thus they saw protesting nuclear testing as part of their responsibility as mothers. They opposed nuclear testing of both the United States and of the Soviet Union.<sup>iii</sup>

In mid-December of 1962, Women Strike for Peace (WSP) confronted the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC) (479). A year earlier, November 1, 1961, 50 thousand women walked off their jobs and out of their kitchens in a one-day strike for peace. Their intent was to protest the nuclear arms race. Women used Christmas card lists, membership lists from PTA, League of Women Voters, Church and Temple to spread the word. (480). WSP functioned through a loose organizational structure where it did not keep formal membership lists; no hierarchical authority consented or stopped a particular action. The members acted by consensus. They did not exclude women who were affiliated with the Communist Party as long as those members agreed to work against the nuclear testing of both the US and the USSR. Some of the primary organizers of WSP left other peace organizations that functioned with a rigid structure and that did seek to find Communists and to expel them from their organizations.

When HUAC called some of the leaders to testify, WSP did not refuse, but rather embraced the opportunity to speak. The organization made an intentional decision to support every woman called before the committee, Communist or not, as long as she supported the end of nuclear testing (483). In an anti-HUAC statement the WSP said: "the quest for peace has become the highest form of patriotism"

(484). The tactics that the women used to confront the committee were born from the idea that women's ways of being in the world were different from those of men. Feminist historian Amy Swerdlow writes: "The contrast between the sexes, according to the WSP version, involved female common sense, openness, humor, hope, and naiveté versus male rigidity, solemnity, suspicion, and dark theories of conspiracy and subversion. The WSP women, in their middle-class, feminism, political style, turned the hearings into an episode of the familiar and funny "I Love Lucy," rather than the tragic and scary inquisition of Alger Hiss" (486). They turned the narrative of the hearings into: "motherhood under attack" and "the battle of the sexes" (486). The women refused to respect the decorum of the committee room and allowed their babies to crawl around the room at will. Their answers to the committee's questions led members of the press to ridicule the committee.

While they used humor and wit to disarm the committee, they were not political novices. Some had been active members of SANE. Some were or had been professional women. The majority were well educated. "Most of the women strikers had been liberals, radicals, or pacifists in the 1940s" (491). History credits Women Strike for Peace for being an important force in bringing about the limited Test Ban Treaty of 1963 (481).

All of the women organizers I have discussed in this essay and the women in their organizations faced resistance from men. But they refused to allow men to stop them from doing their work. These women started with a clear-eyed understanding of the forces against them, but organized nonetheless to work against these forces. It is in their determination that these women asserted their own equality and brought about necessary changes in the world. The women in the Women Strike for Peace observed: "there was no political force in the world acting morally and humanely in the interest of the preservation of life" (492). This means that the work of the preservation of life is the work of ordinary people. It is our work to make our governments act morally and humanely.

August 26, 2008 marks the 88<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the ratification of the constitutional amendment giving women the right to vote in the United States. Today, women across the globe hold the reins of power in both governmental and nongovernmental organizations. This year a woman, Senator Hillary Clinton, was a serious contender for president of the United States. On August 16-17 the South African Development Community (SADC) signed into effect the Protocol on Gender and Development in Johannesburg. There were 23 set targets, among them: women will hold 50 percent of decision-making position in the public and private sector by 2015; constitutions should contain provision for gender equality, including affirmative action clauses; halve gender-based violence; abolish legal minority status of women in member states' constitutions.<sup>iv</sup>

Women still have a long way to go to become equal to men, but women's herstories and the facts we see today give us hope that perhaps the goddess has returned, and she is giving her daughters strength for the struggle toward equality with her sons. She is giving her sons the wisdom to work with women to craft creation peace.

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<sup>i</sup> Rosetta Ross, Witnessing & Testifying: Black Women, Religion, and Civil Rights (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003)

<sup>ii</sup> Joyce Antler, "Between Culture and Politics: The Emma Lazarus Federation of Jewish Women's Clubs and the Promulgation of Women's History, 1944-1989), Unequal Sisters: A Multicultural Reader in U.S. Women's History, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., Vicki L. Ruiz and Ellen Carol DuBois ed. (New York: Routledge, 2000) 519-541.

<sup>iii</sup> Amy Swerdlow, "Ladies' Day at the Capitol: Women Strike for Peace Versus HUAC," Unequal Sisters: a Multicultural Reader in U.S. Women's History 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Vicki L. Ruiz and Ellen Carol DuBois ed. (New York: Routledge, 1994) 479-496.

<sup>iv</sup> [http://www.unifem.org/news\\_events/story\\_detail.php?StoryID=719](http://www.unifem.org/news_events/story_detail.php?StoryID=719) accessed 8/26/2008