

Healthful Learning

*TEXT OF TALK FOR WOMEN'S HEALTH DAY,
WOMEN, HEALTH, AND EDUCATION PANEL
SPONSORED BY THE WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION
FOURTH WORLD CONFERENCE ON WOMEN
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Education is a life-long odyssey.

It is painful and exhilarating.

It occurs in classrooms, and beyond them.

Education is self-creation.

It involves heart as well as mind, sensation as well as intellect, touch, tone, cleansing, and defilement.

To be educated and to be lettered are not one and the same.

Of this we have many examples:
the wise and seeing illiterate; the degreed fool.

To be educated and to be ignorant are compatible.

For true education teaches that we have much to learn
and much to create.

Awareness of our immense lack of knowledge can propel us
to seek, discover, invent, and recant.

Learning is a way of life for our fallible, gifted species.

Because we have so much to learn,
and because we are gifted with curiosity
and goaded by often bitter circumstance,
we learn prodigiously when we need or want to.

We *un*learn a little less easily,
for we are creatures of habit as well as invention.

Whether we are taught formally
or learn by living

(by breathing in life around us,
by weaving threads of understanding through and around experience, ever
dynamically),
we learn and we unlearn.
Education is about learning and unlearning.
Both are necessary for individual development and species evolution.

Sometimes we picture education as a vast rockpile of facts: serial acquisition of
things unknown, captured, catalogued, and ripe for retrieval.

I have looked within myself for this storehouse
of fact upon fact; of idea upon paradigm;
of habit upon practice;
and I have *not* despaired
to find myself *not* filled
with useful and accurate knowledge, attitudes, and skills.

Don't get me wrong:
I very much want to know more and more.
But I prize my growing room; my possibilities.

Thus, I welcome
 the silences,
 spaces,
 and not-knowing
which catalyze future learning.
As I mourn any soul who finds
 no room to expand,
 no error to delete,
 no humility to burnish,
 no beginner's mind.

What an inhumane life!
What a lonely one!

As I learn,
As we learn,
we unlearn
facts ideas, habits, and preconceptions.
We unlearn our limits.
Unlearning releases learning; *is* learning.

What educational needs respecting health do I see for women world-wide?
Let me suggest a few...

Women need to study health,
formally and informally,
with body, heart, sense, and spirit.

They need to know about their bodies,
human bodies,
frankly and unashamedly.

Women, world-wide, require usable vocabulary,
causal explanation,
and inquiry skills
commensurate with the demands of self-care
and nurture of others.

Women need to talk as educated beings,
where and how educated men do,
and to be so received.

They need to question,
to experiment,
and to dream
without fear of gender-based reprisal.

Women need to develop ---
AND NOT TO UNLEARN ---
habits of listening,
beyond words,
detecting what is unsaid,
emanated, embodied,
among these:
the sometimes inarticulate counsel of intuition.

Women require worthy use of their immense powers
of compassion,
kindness,
and care.

THESE THINGS THEY MUST NOT UNLEARN

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either under cruelty's tutelage
or Western-style schooling
(which, at its worst, reduces life's vitality to facts, figures, and
physicalism).

WOMEN MUST NOT UNLEARN their holism:
their propensity to see body and soul as one:
as interactive.

WOMEN MUST NOT UNLEARN their unitary embrace of living things; their
proverbial feel for thought.

WOMEN MUST NOT UNLEARN their sense of symbiosis of self, family,
community and cosmos.

I could go on, but I'll stop here.

In sum, women need, and, in general, want to expand their capacities to heal.

They are open, generally, to learn scientifically accurate and medically helpful
information and skills.

They are ready ---
we all sense this!---
to UNLEARN marginality and undue deference;
to activate their talents, and expand self-learning.

But equally, medical and health establishments of Western developed nations
and their satellites across the globe
need to learn and unlearn. What lessons do I have in mind?

Briefly, the hyper-scientific need to unlearn arrogance.

They need to learn
the ways of heart
and spirit,
tears
and touch,
as these lessons *must* be learned:

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from the inside out.

They need to unlearn microbial myopia,
freeing themselves to notice
the complex interrelations
of being, energy, and force
within and about them.

They need to unlearn four syllable,
classically derived, super-specialist speak.

They need to learn to **listen**;
and to question;
and to say “I don’t know” when they don’t;
and “I care” because they do.

They need to imagine and nurture, grieve and support.

Such learning and unlearning are as achievable
as they are desirable.

But I am not so sure that medical and health elites
and those who promote them
are as eager to learn
--- and unlearn ---
as many unlettered women seem to be.
Perhaps they are unaware of the limitations
of their corpus of knowledge,
their ruling paradigms,
and, thus, of their capacities to observe and serve
wholly and effectively.
If this treatable ignorance hinders optimal health care,
liberal doses of WHAT WOMEN SHOULD NOT UNLEARN
will prove therapeutic.

Let me not equivocate:

if we are to weave truly human webs
across gaps in knowledge and cultural divides,
we human beings need to use

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ALL of our powers,
ALL of our keen conduits to understanding,
ALL of our linkages to life and health.

To substitute Western paradigms and approaches to health and education ---
to reduce our vibrant experiential richness to slides, cells, and syndromes ---
is to impoverish humankind, wholly unnecessarily.

(To witness syntheses of science and care worthy of our enormous desires and capacities for betterment, attend to the mindful blendings evident at the NGO forum and in these panels on Women and Health, especially the Women and AIDS panel later this evening.)

Education is learning and unlearning.
We never get it right.

We merely live learning,
transforming limits to opportunities where we may:
this is our genius; our fragile wisdom.

Delegates, organizers, supporters, and guests...
teachers, healers, seers, and sages:

I thank you for the experience and wisdom
you bring today.

With gratitude and anticipation,
I await your contributions
to my continuing education.

A sante!
(To our health!)

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