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## A Work of One's Own

MY RECENT INTEREST in work and women's complicated relation to it grew out of two experiences. The first was an experience of worklessness. I was twenty-six years old, and had completed four years of graduate school, when I followed my husband to his job intending to write a dissertation. I had no children. My husband was interested in my work and supportive of any time or effort it took. He and I easily shared the few jobs involved in maintaining ourselves in our small apartment. In short, I had no excuse for a work paralysis so complete that for some months I was unable to read or talk about anything relating to my thesis, let alone to write about it. Although I recovered in some months from the worst of this paralysis and eventually wrote the thesis, I suffered for many years afterward from serious inhibitions, halfheartedness, and vacillation in my work—the legacy, in a milder form, of paralysis.

Two features of this experience astonished me. First, I was completely surprised by and unprepared for the pain of worklessness—a pain that pervaded my life despite the fact that I was married to a man I loved and respected and who loved and respected me, a pain that recurred in periods of worklessness despite the fact that I soon had children whose presence was a joy and delight to me. Secondly, I found that I knew nothing about myself, about my own history as a worker. I had learned to think of life as a matter of personal relations, to think about myself as a daughter, wife, friend, and lover. I knew more about myself as a mother, more about babies even before I ever had children, than I knew about myself as a worker. This was partly because I was a woman; in my generation, women's work histories were so buried in our love histories as to be barely visible. It was partly because neither I nor the young professionals around me had been thinking about the meaning, the uses, the "good" of our work. These were the *early* sixties, years of affluence, professionalism, and privacy. Cleverness, clarity, subtlety, taste were our virtues, professional success its own reward.

The second critical experience grew out of my efforts to avoid repeating the first. Two years ago I was granted a notoriously mixed blessing—a leave from my teaching duties. So long as I taught, I had both work and a place in which to do it. The unstructured time a leave offered, free not only from obligation but also from community, was threatening. I wanted to write, but could I? Although I had something

to say to people who seemed to be listening, the very idea of so much time made me pen-tied. The isolation and paralysis of the thesis years returned to haunt my night thoughts, whatever daytime reasons might reveal. Following my natural bent, I looked for *books* about work, work problems, the meaning of work. I was disappointed. I found numerous books about *jobs*, how to get them, who had them, who lost them. I learned more about the suffering and boredom most men and women experience in jobs that allow them little autonomy or dignity, let alone the leisure and support "work problems" presume. But I found next to nothing about the development of the capacity to work alone—to begin, sustain, and complete a piece of writing, for example. I wanted to know "how to do it" and why I couldn't. Despairing of books, I turned to people, to friends whose work—writing, teaching, thinking, making—resembled mine. I found that many people had been puzzled about their work or, for a time, unable to work. We began to talk and out of that talk this book was born.

I will try to trace the steps that led first to my inability to work and then, later and gradually, to a recovery of a sense of myself as a worker. I hope that my story will be sufficiently familiar to be useful to others. Although I have never voluntarily stopped working, it is only recently that I have had work I can do with confidence in its worth and my competence, and that I can count on being *able* to work most days, ordinary days, when there are no classes to prepare or deadlines to meet. At long last I have been *learning* to work. By that I mean that there is in my daily life a satisfactory predominance of activity over passivity, of reality over fantasy, of creation over conception. It continues to astonish me that this simple human ability to work brings so much additional pleasure, order, solace, and meaning to my life.

A "Life Plan" makes sense of early hopes and provides attainable goals that seem worthwhile when achieved. The Woman's Life Plan did this for me. The Plan is simple: to marry well, to bear and raise children who thrive, to accept age and one's children's children. Ancillary activities, varieties of pleasure and service, complement the basic goals. The Plan is embedded in particular plans, particular strategies and fantasies, bequeathed by individual families in different social classes.

In Midwestern, middle-class America, where I grew up, the Plan was so widely endorsed by peers and adults alike that I had no need to articulate it, only to live it. My earliest play included my future family; my earliest accomplishments would, I thought, be put to their use.

Later, by example, precept, chapel sermon, and friendly gossip I was taught the Plan's lessons. When in fact I did marry and have children as planned, I experienced the pleasures and sense of well-being I had been led to expect. The Plan has worked well for me, though it hasn't for others. I neither defend nor criticize it. I simply underline its existence.

Growing up, I was taught and accepted the myth of sexual division—the myth that the world, and especially the world's work, is divided by sex. Since I was trained by the Woman's Life Plan and looked forward to achieving its goals, I should have looked forward to a woman's work. But from early adolescence I was puzzled. What does a woman *do* when living out the Plan? I could see that women mothered, kept house, "entertained," cared for elderly family members, and contributed to various community projects. When these activities are done well, and they were in my family, they take time; they require discipline and numerous practical and moral strengths. I could see that time was being used up; I could not see how time was used—controlled and ordered by plans. Since I was given to fantasy, it was crucial for me to live *in* time, to make sense of the day's hours. I always respected women's work but it did not present sufficiently clear-cut tasks or long-range objectives to satisfy my fundamental need to live purposively.

Furthermore, from an early age I felt unsuited for women's work. I had no practical bent, and contrary to popular opinion, practical incompetence is no virtue in women who deal with much of practical life. I was not socially adept, had no interest in cooking or sewing, hated to shop, lacked any aesthetic sense of domestic as opposed to natural beauties, felt ill at ease around young children, had no knack for dressing well. I was, in short, unpromising as a woman's apprentice. My mother and her friends were tolerant of my eccentricities, so I suffered little from my inability.

Indeed, no one close to me, certainly neither of my parents, ever suggested that I would have to choose between a "woman's life" and a work of my own. For as I grew up I was subject to another middle-class myth—the myth of "opportunity and vocation." Both sexes, all classes, so the myth ran, have a right to work of their own, which, with effort and talent, they will discover and develop. Year after year our teachers tested us, boys and girls alike, in the hope that our "interests" would be revealed, and in turn our "vocation." Neither mothering nor householding was considered a vocation, although everyone knew that successful girls were supposed to find their primary work "at home."

When I was young, there seemed to me to be only one kind of truly

desirable work. Respectable work was professional, the worker essentially self-employed and therefore independent. Such work required training, earned status and money, but was free from the taint of commercialism. It was interesting, of use to others, performed outside the house. It took up most of one's days, earned the right to service at home and respect in the community. The work was far too absorbing, far too public, to be compatible with the Woman's Life Plan. Indeed, the person doing the work usually depended on someone else's living the woman's life and providing him with support.

Although the self-employed professional was almost always a privileged white male, this work ideal was as inappropriate for most middle-class white boys as it was for their sisters. Most professionals only appeared to be self-employed, much professional work was of dubious use to others, and commercialism was an aspect of the culture, not of the trades. Moreover, to become a professional one had to have the kind of intelligence rewarded in classrooms, consistent financial support, understanding parents, and lots of luck all along the way. In late adolescence, boys and girls alike had to make their peace with an ideal of work that was rarely realized. Although both sexes might suffer from the cruel and foolish ideal of professionalism, girls had a special burden. Intelligence, luck, support, and understanding could not save them from the radical conflict between their sexual identity and this work ideal.

I rejected "women's work," but I rarely considered "men's" work—professional work. Although I imagined future families, I had no comparable fantasy career. When I was already nearly adolescent, I was greatly taken with *Sally Wins Her Wings*—the story of a pilot who, though glamorously attractive, rejects immediate love for the disciplines and adventures of flying. About the same time I cut out advertisements for writers' schools, realizing, I suppose, that any wings I might acquire would be far less challenging to hearth and home than those of the braver Sally. From grade school on I wrote—stories, then poems, then essays—and took my writing fairly seriously.

My ambition to write did not seem to me more valuable—or different in kind—from my other ambitions: to ride well, to be elected to the student government, to read *all* "the great books." It was my teachers who judged that my writing and academic projects were serious enough to be considered "work." My interest in writing and studying had been spontaneous, unself-conscious. My "work," from the outset, was in danger of becoming a self-conscious identity. Recognition came too early, was too closely connected to performance, sometimes even to graded performance. I learned to depend on ap-

proval, to seek and to manipulate it by nonintellectual means. When I got approval, I could not be confident what the approval was for. My own confusion was encouraged and compounded by the ambivalence of the approvers, especially male approvers. I learned that, however I won it, the approval was not reliable. My intellectual activity was frequently praised for its weakness, as I was praised for being not only an intellectual but a woman as well. It was clear that to get the big apple, to be both intellectual and woman, meant being not too much, not too obviously, not too insistently the intellectual.

So long as the future seemed distant, however, I was encouraged to play at having work. Such playing at work has consequences. Years later, when it was deemed natural, even praiseworthy, to give up any independent work or ambition and withdraw to the "woman's life," I had experienced too often and too intensely the pleasures of work. I believe that worklessness is painful to most women who have been given educations like mine. If worklessness was especially painful for me, it is probably because I was, by virtue of my parents' hard work and good will, especially blessed. In a life of unearned good fortune, two blessings stand out.

First, in those years of adolescence when social pressures are strongest to commit oneself prematurely to the Woman's Life Plan, I was sent to a boarding school run for girls and in their interests. There was a *headmaster* to remind us of patriarchal life, but the dean and almost all the teachers were male-less women—some "spinsters," some divorced, some widowed, some young and potentially marriageable. Their male-less condition seemed so normal then that I didn't distinguish among reasons for being in it. In this school, teachers clearly acknowledged that we all wanted to achieve and to be rewarded. In this school, I developed loves I later learned are shared by many young girls—loves for Plato, Spinoza, Shakespeare, poetry, and "nature."

Later, after two years of college I was blessed with a second fortunate experience of work. My parents, despite considerable misgivings, sent me for a summer to a Shakespeare Institute in England. There I worked and played, loved a fellow student and Shakespeare's Beatrice, enjoyed travel and the theatrical performances that were part of our curriculum. My papers, whether on Macbeth's imagination or on Isabel's lack of mercy, seemed to me important and engrossing. I felt as if I were learning to live as well as to read. Although in awe of Shakespeare, I never wondered whether I had something to say. Unafraid of my loves, I had no work problem. Finding pleasure and emotional significance in my work, I had no difficulty in submitting to

its demands. With such happiness, the Woman's Life Plan took care of itself.

However, that summer now appears as an interlude in the midst of a college experience that was eroding my sense of myself as a worker. I had been self-confident in my work only so long as the sexual demands of adult life were a matter of the distant future. At Vassar the shadow of adulthood fell across even my sunniest, most naive ambitions. Whereas college was the schoolgirl's sufficient future, once in college we were encouraged to confront our expected, real futures, namely marriage and motherhood. Although Vassar was still a women's college and had then a woman president, it was permeated by the myth of the sexual division of work, hence of adult life. The myth was expressed in Freudian language that could not have been popular in a conservative girls' school but was in a liberal women's college. It was tacitly assumed in the domestic life-style—and, in some instances, in the explicit sexism—of an increasingly male faculty. It was expressed in the self-doubt and self-deception of the younger women faculty, who suffered from it most.

My reaction to the change from school to college was defensive. I denied the existence and ignored the practice of the sexual division of work. I was attracted by Mannheim's *Ideology and Utopia*, which spoke of a class above classes, made up of intellectuals free from political and economic determination. If intellectuals constituted a classless class, they might also be a sexless class. Comforted by this fantasy, I talked as if my future projects were independent of the Woman's Life Plan. In denying profound if conventional desires for a man and children, I was simply driving the desires underground. Since I didn't recognize their existence, I couldn't begin to deal with these "womanly" desires in a realistic way, couldn't begin to assess their conflict with other anomalous, sexless desires and ambitions.

Even as I denied conventional desires, I protected them by doing work that did not require self-knowledge or personal commitment. This was especially evident in my study of philosophy. Like many young students, I came to philosophy from religion. I found in metaphysics a tougher, more resilient attempt to make sense of the Big Questions. From my earliest encounters with it, I was also attracted to philosophy because it was witty, critical, even frankly aggressive. I was thought gullible and often chided for my seriousness. In return, I felt besieged by confused and sentimental ideals. Philosophy provided a weapon to use against my own romanticism and others' unwelcome expectations. Moreover, the mere *doing* of philosophy provided unambiguous pleasures of insight, mental exercise, sustained argu-

ment. At the same time, philosophy was hard, it was work. It was sufficiently tough, sufficiently respectable, sufficiently male to be the basis of a career.

Yet, I had then, and to a large extent still have, an observer's relation to philosophy. Spectatorship came naturally in a subject where most of the participants, teachers and writers, were men. As a spectator I found it possible to develop the skills that would enable me to enjoy and profit from the sport without feeling it odd that I had nothing to contribute to the game myself. Moreover, the aggressiveness I enjoyed from the sidelines was not something I could happily display. However eager I was to win arguments with roommates or friends in small groups, I was unable, publicly, to behave in a way I had been taught was both morally and sexually undesirable.

In the past years, as women have learned to talk to each other, our many fears—fear of success, fear of commitment, fear of pleasure, fear of exposure, fear of the "feminine," and, more consciously, fear of failure—have become depressingly familiar. The hidden patterns of my choices twenty years ago now seem all too clear. At first, in college, I had thought of myself as a critic, perhaps even a "creative" writer. Significantly, it was a woman who took my mind seriously and urged me to consider the training and responsibilities of criticism. Yet I did not continue my studies in literature. I stopped writing stories after a short story was well received. I stopped writing poems after two of my poems were published. I stopped studying literature after my happiest, most successful summer. I recognized even then that success somehow, mysteriously, made the work dangerous. Success in work which I viewed as feminine and which felt naturally mine would have forced me to risk failure, to know myself and confront my desires. I retreated to spectatorship.

For many years, unable to commit myself to a career in philosophy, I believed that my work troubles came from choosing the wrong subject. But this explanation underestimates both the public conditions and the private motive of my choice. In the academic world of the late fifties, almost any subject would have permitted the spectatorship that feeds on apolitical privacy, almost any subject would have required (for success) a competitive and committed professionalism incompatible with the Woman's Life Plan. Had the Shakespeare summer been followed by studies in New Criticism at an ambitious graduate school, my love of literature would have been trivialized and sorely tested. By the same token, in recent years, as I have learned to do philosophy with others and to some purpose, philosophy itself has allowed active, caring engagement.

In moving toward philosophy and away from literature, I was expressing in a specific way, a deep and general commitment to security, passivity, and spectatorship. An almost all-male department that taught a subject I considered "hard" and "rigorous" gave me the place and the space to live out that commitment, while pretending to myself and others that I had chosen some work of my own. In our discussions today of work and its problems, many of us talk in terms of a dual existence. We see through two lenses, travel on two rails, live in two spheres—one of work, the other of love. I used to think that I needed to find a work life to run parallel to my love life. Now I believe that I needed to recover the inseparability of work and love common among children, natural to me as a schoolgirl. It is said that women are unable to compartmentalize their lives. Superficially this is true of me; I cannot work when the people I love are unhappy or when I am unhappy with them. At a deeper level, I long insisted on a division between work and love, an insistence born out of many fears: that work can destroy love as it takes you from home, first your parents' and then your own; that work can hurt and be hurtful; that work is not after all classless and sexless, but reveals as it expresses its own sexual and political origins. In college I learned to avoid work done out of love. My intellectual life became increasingly critical, detached, and dispensable. If I self-deceptively denied my desires for the conventional loves of a man and children, I refused even to recognize the loves that work demands in its own name: love for oneself, love for the ideas and creations of others, love for the people one works with, love for the knowledge, change, and beauty that work alone can achieve.

In the spirit of the decade, I treated my move toward philosophy as a Significant Choice bestowing a preprofessional Identity. College over, I found it easy to act on the Identity, to take the next step and enter graduate school. I had come to depend on the companionship an academic community provides and I looked forward to an urban life of some excitement within a familiar structure. I was not disappointed. My years at Harvard were happy ones, but that happiness had little to do with my work. Partly because it was a low period for the Harvard Philosophy Department, partly because I was overeducated and undercommitted, I rarely attended classes during my first two years. When I try to recall my intellectual life, let alone my classroom life, I draw a near blank. My mind as well as my heart was elsewhere. I met and fell in love with the man I later married, a graduate student in philosophy. The promises of the Woman's Life Plan were about to be realized. Happy in the love the Plan antici-

pated, vicariously delighting in the work I would marry, I could overlook the fact that I was unsuited for woman's work and was otherwise workless.

I continued to act, even at some level to believe, as if I had work of my own. I expected to teach philosophy as a part-time supplement to the Woman's Life, but I was completely innocent of the realities of professional life and of the place of graduate school in that life. I lived my academic life as if it had no consequences. During three of my four years at Harvard I taught, and learned that I could teach easily and with pleasure. Yet I never took the simplest steps to get to know or to impress those people who could have helped me get the jobs that would have enabled me to continue teaching. The last two years I attended interesting seminars as an "auditor" who rarely spoke. It is significant that the seminar that excited me most was a seminar on the philosophy of logic. Admittedly, the issues of that seminar were central to philosophy, yet there is no part of philosophy in which I would be less able to make a contribution. It not only left me untroubled; it seemed completely fitting that I should be excited about an inquiry in which I was incapable of engaging, except as an appreciative spectator. In short, I still acted as if I were futureless, and my innocence was allowed and confirmed by the prevailing political optimism and sanguine sexism of those long-distant years.

To my surprise, when I followed my husband to *his* job and found myself in a male world without work of my own, I clung to a hollow and inappropriate sense of myself as a professional philosopher. Although I had scorned the closed-mindedness, the careerism, the conservatism of my fellow students, I myself was burdened for years by a timid professionalism. Harvard's training, and the identity it allowed, had become intimately, unconsciously connected with lessons of respectability I had learned as a child and consciously repudiated as an adolescent. Even now, I can surprise myself, wondering whether a question is "really" philosophical, whether I should ask questions I haven't been trained to answer. Now, however, timid respectability appears clearly as the burden it is. As a young graduate student in my husband's world, I clung to a professional identity partly *because* I lacked the interests, the collegueship, the public philosophic life that would have made that identity viable.

When my husband began looking for a job, both of us found it natural (though neither of us insisted) that his career come first. We hoped he would get a job in a community with several colleges, but the best offer came from Dartmouth. Neither of us even considered my staying in Cambridge, continuing to teach, and sharing the man-

ageable commute. The partial separation would have benefitted us financially and intellectually, but these were the early sixties and no one was doing that. Mainly because I was neither engrossed in nor committed to any work of my own, we lacked the imagination to cut a pattern suited to us. Foolishly, we counted upon jobs in the neighborhood, or upon some private and unprecedented creativity of mine. But there were no jobs, and Dartmouth undermined whatever intellectual initiative I had had.

Dartmouth was then a male college with a handful of women teachers, some of whom later told me of their suffering. The faculty was at best committed to patriarchal domesticity, at worst frankly and insultingly chauvinistic. The place of women in a community where women had no place was openly debated. Many of the women were quietly desperate as they attempted to make a life for themselves amidst children, housework, and an extremely limited social world that honored without markedly exhibiting male intelligence. It was at Dartmouth that I learned the distinction, now familiar, between people and wives. Wives were patronized while their lives were exalted, were almost always treated with contempt—albeit flirtatious contempt, were praised for their failure to be ambitious rather than encouraged to achieve. The wives, in turn, meeting for gossip and baby showers, spoke of their husbands as if they were overgrown, slightly pathetic children—spoiled, pettily tyrannical, too squeamish to change a diaper, too incompetent to cook a dinner. It was thought virtuous to placate these husbands while appearing demure. I've no doubt that individual men and women, when alone, treated each other with concern and respect. Publicly, however, male contempt was met with the now familiar resentful superiority of the oppressed toward their masters.

Although I was repeatedly invited to leave the wives, to join the people, I was unable to be myself in either group. Although I sometimes expressed the desire to be "just a wife," I never felt easy with the women around me. However I pretended otherwise, I couldn't really respect them. I was not at that time conscious of the forced, limited options the sexist division of work presents. I feel considerably ashamed of my lack of respect for those whose work was unappreciated and exploited, whose lives were much more difficult and less fortunate than mine, and who treated me with generosity and kindness.

I was unable to join the "people"—who were also the men—because I didn't really belong among them. Although I was asked to participate in an introductory course and was invited to philosophy

discussions, and although people asked respectfully about my work, I felt these were token gestures. I was still my husband's wife. My special status was doubly noxious. On the one hand, it was easy to feel an intruder, a fraud, a charity guest. On the other hand, because I had special or no status, I felt challenged to prove my right to be in those very places where I was so uncomfortably placeless. It was as if I were continually seeking invitations to parties at which I would be miserable and turning down invitations offered in good faith only to feel excluded if they were not offered again.

Demoralized and confused, alien both in the professional world I clung to and the woman's world I found myself in, I tried to do a piece of work: to write a dissertation. My husband not only supported my work; he insisted on it. Threatened not by my work but by the aggrieved anger of my worklessness, he seemed indifferent to the problems of competition, domestic neglect, and self-absorption that his friends, the community, and I myself expected in any marriage in which *The Wife Had Work of Her Own*. He urged me to write now and "sip sherry in the bath later"—making work appear simultaneously a duty, a right, and an illicit pleasure.

I never stopped, never was allowed to stop, *wanting* to work. Had I put my books and papers away, I don't know what would have happened. As it was, my severest work paralysis lasted only the school year. During the summer, in a more congenial environment, I managed to do some work. By January, eighteen months after we had arrived at Dartmouth, I began to set about my thesis in earnest, and finished it a year later. I worked alone. Too unsure of myself to share my work, I was capable only of defensive polemical debates that tried the patience of others and certainly served me badly. Although Wittgenstein's writings, the subject of my thesis, lend themselves better than most philosophy to tentative, subtle, uncompetitive exploration, in public I could treat them only as so many theses tacked to somebody's door.

We stayed at Dartmouth four years. My husband recognized my need to get out sooner than I had the courage to express it. He had some reason for leaving and made up others, but he left principally on my account and looked for a job in a city where we both could be happy. He had a grant, then a visiting appointment, finally a permanent post which enabled me to live first in Boston and for the last eight years in New York. Four years should be a short time. Yet, despite its brevity, I was quite demoralized by the Dartmouth experience and quite unable to understand the demoralization. I left Dartmouth with a small son and a credential, a Ph.D. I had lived the *Woman's Life*

according to plan and received its blessings. The work I had developed outside that plan, and the credentials I had earned, gave me an identity that felt lifeless and alien. I didn't consider applying for a full-time teaching post. Instead, I had a second child and a number of part-time jobs that left me essentially unconnected to the academic world. Although I was encouraged to revise parts of my thesis for publication, my efforts to do so seemed disconnected from anything else in my life. I gave up revising the thesis, but continued to look for "something to say"—a subject.

Voluntary efforts came to little. Unfinished papers littered my desk. I was happy to return to them for a few hours a day, happier still to leave them for my "real" work. Occasionally, the rewards and labors of raising small children allowed me to forget the pleasures of writing and systematic thinking. Often, however, I remembered them and missed them sorely.

I have recently recovered the ability to work. To trace the steps of that recovery I must backtrack a bit. Eighteen months after an incapacitating work paralysis I began and soon finished a dissertation. What had allowed me to work again?

The answer, however troubling its implications, is clear. I began to organize my thesis almost the day I learned that I was pregnant. I outlined it in the early months of pregnancy, wrote it in the last months. I worked long hours, then lounged in the bath, not with sherry but with Gutmacher, then Spock. At home with a new baby, I revised, then defended the thesis. Later, while pregnant with my second child, I took a part-time job in a publishing house, an experiment which allowed me to test and reject an alternative to academic work. In my daughter's infancy I returned to my desk—for a few hours on good days. There, for the first time in a decade, I developed non-philosophical intellectual interests (in anthropology and psychology) which brought new life to my philosophical work.

The conjunction of work and maternity is puzzling. Why should new parenthood, which subtracts enormously from the time available for work, nonetheless make work more likely? Other women have reported similar puzzling conjunctions. One obvious explanation is that with conventional feminine desires obviously satisfied, the fear of success in "unfeminine" work is less acute. Another is that pregnancies and childbirth constitute success. Moreover, for me infant care was, in itself, inspiring work which bred a general self-confidence. Pregnancy and motherhood enabled me to feel, and therefore to be, more *intellectually* competent on no grounds other than my proven capacity to do the work that women have always done.

For every woman whose independent work feeds on the pleasures of maternity, there must be several others for whom motherhood spells the end of earlier aspirations. Freedom from financial worries, early experiences of work pleasure and the value my husband placed on my work made my case a special one. Nonetheless, my sudden and all-too-explicable reprieve from work paralysis confused me. Only recently have I been able to accept the fact that strength came from such a common and womanly experience. Yet I learned one lesson immediately and forever: my work problems were not what they appeared to be, but masked some deeper, unrecognizable conflicts. Before my pregnancy I seemed to suffer from numerous, separable disabilities. I was unable to begin to read or to write on the blank page. Then again I couldn't stop reading; I felt that I was never prepared. Sometimes I couldn't construct an outline, other times I couldn't fill out a beautifully constructed outline with a single sentence. On and on the problems went. Yet the insurmountable difficulties disappeared—almost literally, overnight. The hard work of writing remained. Sometimes it was exhausting, sometimes tedious, sometimes discouraging; but writing is all of that.

Beneficial as motherhood was for me, it did not enable me to work more than fitfully and halfheartedly once the thesis was completed. For that, I needed a community and a subject. The most obvious source of community was the academic world. For various reasons, that world seemed alien and distant—as my father's law office had seemed to me as a child. It was a male world, and philosophy was my husband's subject. I was looking for a place of my own. Moreover, these were the war years. It was difficult to identify with a professional identity. Guilty, angry, and impotent, I saw too clearly the evils of academic institutions but was temporarily blind to their virtues and strengths.

On the other hand, I liked to teach, knew I taught well, and was trained for no other work. Despite considerable guilt and anxiety, I allowed myself to make use of my husband's money in order to take only part-time jobs free from departmental responsibilities and commitment to professional philosophy. For some time, I kept one eye on an imaginary *curriculum vitae* and pretended to myself and others that I would soon seek a more responsible post. Yet when the time came and a position was available, I turned the other way.

Ill-paid and without status, these part-time jobs have nevertheless been essential to my recovery of my working self. Almost always in the immediate neighborhood of my home, they have allowed me a flexibility that seemed essential when the children were younger, desirable even now that they are of school age. Moreover, even scattered

teaching, unconnected to programs or departments, provided a welcome check on my fantasies of self-importance, my assumption that my ideas were as clear to others as they were to me. With others I discovered that I would never succeed or fail so grandly as, alone in my study, I might hope or fear.

For the past four years I have taught in two programs, whose governing purpose is to provide pleasure and knowledge for instructor and student alike. In circumstances of freedom and respect, I have found my teaching not only a medium for presenting my work, but real work in its own right. I have come to care for my students' lives and minds—a love, if one might call it that, which I had been taught to avoid. Among students, I am neither a guru nor a chum. Keeping the distance I find natural, I have developed a genuine working relationship with those I teach, a relationship that gives me an enormous pleasure I am just beginning to admit and to appreciate. Among these students and my colleagues I have learned to talk with and in front of others; to disagree with little tension or aggression; to listen without fear that I will have nothing to say in return.

Even within these programs, however, I continued to search for a subject, not realizing for some time that I did not so much have to find a professional niche as to relinquish the ideal of professionalism. The slow—and, in retrospect, comically painful—process of deprofessionalization had many episodes. For example, I wrote an unprofessional, widely read paper on sex; I studied and taught Greek philosophy, even learning some Greek for the purpose, knowing that I was not and never would be qualified to “do something” with it; I sought an opportunity to teach women, many of them “housewives,” and found that I not only respected them but identified with them more easily and closely than with any other students.

Perhaps the most important episode in this deprofessionalization began with a break from all things great and serious. One winter about three years ago, I decided to give myself occasional holidays in the New York Public Library after a week's work. I went there to read Virginia Woolf's unpublished diaries; then in the evenings I began to reread her novels. This reading was completely divorced from public ambitions or expectations. Insofar as I brought problems to my reading, they were personal—connected with my sense of aging and death, with an interest in women and feminism, with my earliest love for my mother and fears for her death. Indeed, I was more than a little in love with Virginia Woolf herself.

At some point I began to turn this personal enterprise into something more public. I talked to others working on Woolf, read a paper

on Woolf and *her* mother at a conference devoted to Woolf's work, lectured on her feminism, published an article, imagined a book on which I am now “working.” As my private holidays were transformed into public work, I had to deal with work “problems” that became amazingly clear when freed from institutional or professional disguise.

For example, when pleasure turned into work, I became vaguely uneasy with work's pleasures. I realized the source of my dis-ease one afternoon while reading Leslie Stephen's touching letters to his wife. I was amply protected from the charge of frivolity by an array of serious reasons for reading this correspondence, for spending my time so pleasurably on a weekday afternoon. My defenses held up as long as the letters yielded some insight into “Victorian family structure” or “Woolf's early masculine identifications.” I felt virtuous when the letters were painful to read—when, for example, Stephens wrote about his daily struggles with a schizophrenic daughter from a previous marriage. I was especially content when I could take notes. But I was undone when I came to Stephens's quaint description of a Harvard football game, replete with cheerleaders. Told with the detachment of a visitor foreign to both sport and America, the tale was charming, delightfully amusing—and completely without general implications for understanding life, love, and death. I couldn't read on. With a great show of purposefulness, I packed up my notebooks and went home. It was only on the bus downtown that I realized my folly and reflected on the toll such folly must have extracted over the years. No wonder I so feared work, if work was pleasure's enemy.

Pleasure was not my only problem. Reading Virginia Woolf was emotionally engrossing, psychologically challenging, a “personal” confrontation. Yet I had until now used my work to escape and protect myself from the complexities of “real” life. Then again, I had become dependent on a professional identity, however ill-fitting. Reading fiction did not seem sufficiently tough, sufficiently “male” to be professional. And if it were professional, I was completely untrained. Finally, I had come to this reading with private concerns. Unexpectedly I found that Virginia Woolf had a profound and comprehensive political vision of the connections between patriarchy, violence, tyranny, and economic oppression. And that political vision was inextricably entwined with epistemological and metaphysical insights, with the impulse to philosophize evident throughout her fiction. Virginia Woolf's *politics* began to shape and inspire my “real,” officially sanctioned philosophical work. And that “real” work, done in my classes as well as at my desk, fed into and was fed by my study of Woolf. In reading *Three Guineas* and then rereading *To The Light-*



house, I felt as if I were learning to think and feel in new ways. For the first time in years my mind was truly alive, truly mine. With an urgency which overcame self-consciousness, I sought out other readers who loved and were learning from Woolf. I needed to share the results of my work with colleagues who would share their work with me.

My playful holiday had become heady, serious business. It was the Shakespeare summer all over again—suspiciously adolescent and romantic for a middle-aged mother. I was, in fact, being given a second chance to learn the lessons of that college summer, to unlearn the divisions that had burdened my life—divisions between work and pleasure, male and female, professional and amateur, political and personal, all aspects of the damaging separation of work from love. I could not simply reject such divisions, deep-rooted in my past and my culture. I could only try to decrease their power so as to increase my own. To do so I had to give up the deepest aspect of the division between work and love, which was at the heart of my work problems: the division between A Woman's Life and independent, demanding, autonomous work.

The division between a Woman's Life and autonomous work has a practical aspect. It is by no means easy to fulfill the duties and experience the pleasures of family life when absorbed by demanding work. Nor is it easy, in the midst of a busy private life and extensive teaching, to be disciplined and committed to work not required by a job. For me, however, the practical aspects of the division between private and public, woman and work, masked unrealistic ancient beliefs. A good woman should not want work of her own; the wish for such work betrays "neurosis" or, worse still, "narcissism." Above all, one should be healthy and good.

In recent years these ancient beliefs have surfaced. Their power dispelled, even to speak of them courts boredom. Yet it was not so long ago that I furtively turned the pages of *The Feminine Mystique* in a back corner of a Dartmouth bookstore. Then, when to my delight I had a daughter, I began to read feminist literature openly. As she grew, my daughter's strength and independence inspired and frightened me. I had to welcome, even to imitate it. Reading was no longer enough. Since entering graduate school, my colleagues and friends had been men. Now I began to need, and to say I needed, women friends.

I cannot overestimate the strength of this need. During important transitional years I depended on the daily companionship of a new-found friend as well as constant telephone contact and frequent visits

from school and college friends. Recently, since I have had more colleagues of both sexes, and since I have worked more confidently, I have become less intensely dependent on individual women. Yet I still must find my own divided identity—as a woman and a worker—reflected and confirmed in the lives, loves, and ambitions of other women.

As I gradually came to work on my own, the divided identity became less divisive. My idea of a Woman's Life, a woman's home, has changed profoundly. My husband was something of a feminist before I was anything of one. But good will is not enough. We had to *learn* what it meant to share parenting and family life. We had always shared tasks, (though not so equally as we do now); we have only recently shared responsibility. I will not rehash familiar issues here, but simply will repeat what others have often asserted: so long as the social conditions of motherhood are inimical to self-respect, the desire to mother will be threatening. So long as profound desires are threatening and therefore disavowed, experience is impoverished. In my case, so long as that impoverishment continued, I could not have the self-love necessary for work of my own. Nor could I, without the self-respect of shared responsibility in my intimate, private life, gain the self-respect necessary for me to act with some freedom in the public world.

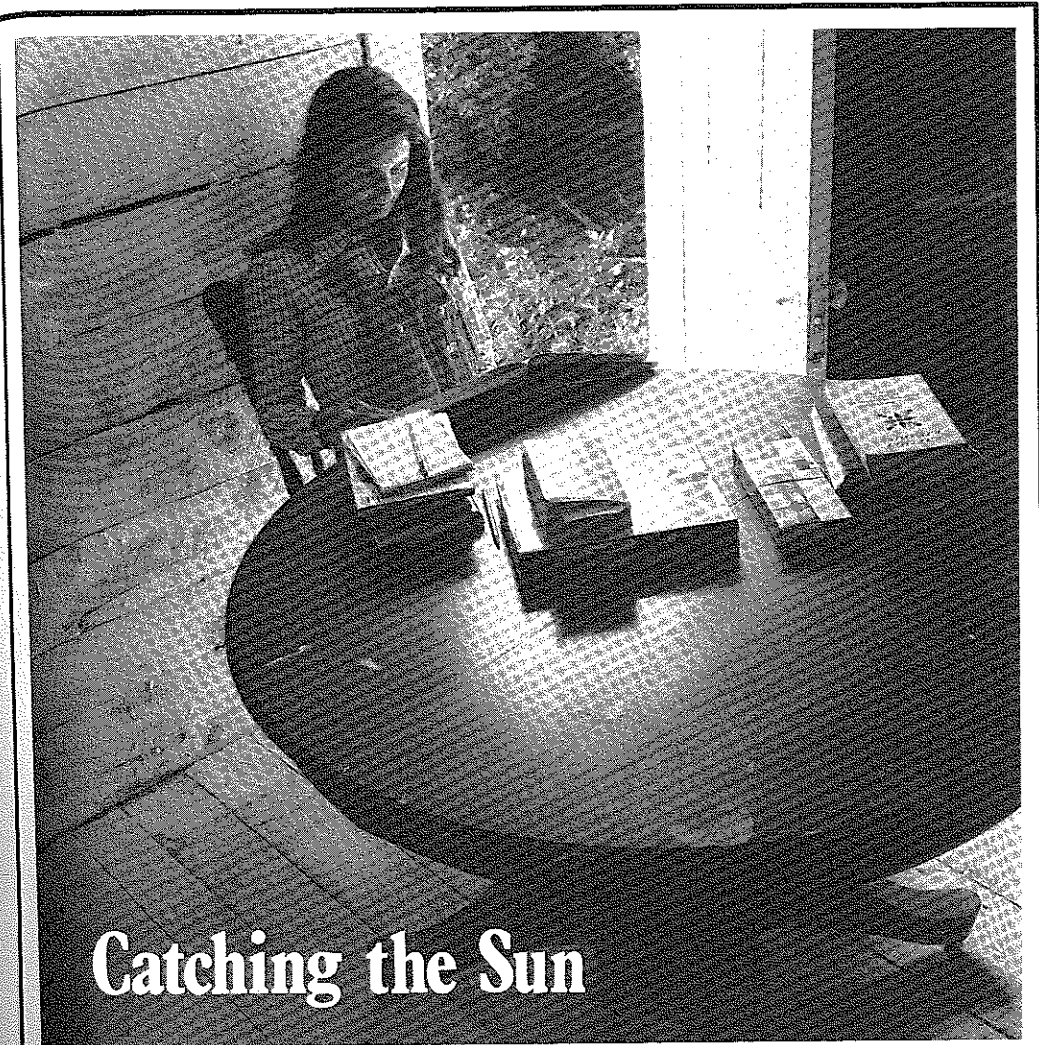
It was, of course, largely a cultural phenomenon—the movement of women—that enabled me to achieve a new self-respect at home, made me confident and clear about my need for the friendship of women, enabled me to read Virginia Woolf in a new, politically relevant way, and provided like-minded readers for me to talk to. That movement also transformed my sense of women's aspirations. It is difficult now to remember how activating it was less than ten years ago to hear it proclaimed that women, like men, wished to create a way of living that suited not only our personal hopes but also our more impersonal ambitions. No person close to me had ever tried to persuade me that my interests should be, if not identical with, at least subordinate to, those of my husband and children. No one had identified my aspirations with selfishness. But the identification was tacitly assumed by those around me and energetically imposed by the media catering to a "mass" always assumed to be somebody else. I had carried an invisible, almost amorphous weight, the weight of guilt and apology for interests and ambitions that should have been a source of pride. When that weight was lifted, I felt almost literally lighter, certainly more energetic, more concentrated.

Stirred to self-knowledge and action by the courage and honesty of

feminists, I gradually became able to say that I *wanted* to work and had been unable to work effectively. In the transformation from workless discontent to relative satisfaction in work, perhaps the most important step was simply to acknowledge that I had ambitions I couldn't fulfill. A simple acknowledgment, surely. But years of defensiveness and ambivalence, supported, even lauded, by those who liked female "intellectuals" to be "women" too had taken their toll. I could begin to work only when real failure, whatever the shame, became more desirable than the sentimental, illusory success an "interesting woman" was offered by the feminine mystique.

I wanted to work. But between the desire and the act fell shadows too numerous to mention. What to do? I turned, as I had learned to do, to other women. We put together this book. I wrote, and rewrote, this essay. I dug up that buried history of myself as a girl working, as a woman working. And it seems to me that miraculously, finally, in the midst of this collective, non-professional, serious, womanly project, I look up and realize that I am able to work.

*Sara Ruddick*



## Catching the Sun

**Diana Michener**

I HAVE A VILLAGE inside me. It's a noisy place. The laundress nags about the pile of dirty laundry, the cook wants the groceries, the mother reminds me of the children's school performances, the housekeeper shakes her finger at the messy rooms, the friend suggests a cozy lunch, the secretary coughs nervously at the stack of bills, the lover chirps over the frivolity of a new dress, and the village chronicler