

The Convert

BY ANN FRANK WAKE

Dans ce texte autobiographique, une fille dans la trentaine spécule sur les forces qui ont mené sa mère dans la mi-cinquantaine, à se "convertir" au féminisme, changeant ainsi la nature de leur relation et donnant un nouveau sens à son propre passé.

Initially I took credit for my mother's conversion to feminism. After all, I have years of formal training, landed an academic position and made it to associate professor. We either resist or subsume ourselves in our mothers' agendas, but either way we emerge knowing more about ourselves. I knew that my academic opportunities and good fortune did not happen in a vacuum, but it took until recently for me to realize that my less advantaged mother had taught me about the realities and practice of feminism, rather than the other way around. I had *learned* feminism, while Mom had *lived* it. Life in rural northwestern Carroll County Illinois, U.S.A., seemed very straightforward when I was a child, and remains predictable.

**It took until
recently for me to
realize that my
less advantaged
mother had taught
me about the
realities and practice
of feminism,
rather than the
other way around.**

Rural working-class families were/are for Protestantism, Republicans, farmers, hunting, family values (later, Ronald Reagan), America, the company. Rural working-class families were/are against (still!) hippies, Democrats, drug legalization, Clinton, declared atheists, homosexuals, globalization, technology (except for farmers), feminists. No wonder that six years of graduate school in liberal Ann Arbor would rock my world. Tenure now protects my voice, but my mother always took risks without institutional safety or economic security.

To be honest, I was leery of Mom's feminist conversion, emerging as it did in her mid-50s at perhaps the lowest point in her widowed, laid-off, unhealthy (thyroid), uninspired (no one to *talk* to) life in Milledgeville, Illinois (pop. 1100). At various times in my childhood mother rebelled in ways unfamiliar to my observations of other women, but back then she turned to the church, rather than politics, for salvation. She always stuck up for herself when dad's (drunken) tirades kept us awake half the night. She shifted from part- to full-time work and took night classes when my younger brother reached school age. She assumed leadership roles in the church. She read *all* the time, and not just mysteries, but biographies and history. My brother and I simply assumed we would go to college. She paid for our privilege. The college experience quickly soured us on established religion and Lyle and I would fight with her, brutally condemning her religious faith, the verbal abuse in our past (as if it was our mother's fault that dad had a drinking problem), and our border lines of poverty.

These cruel conversations reflected the nonchalant secular humanism embedded in university life. My father died in 1980 and the church helped my mother. But Lyle and I viewed religious faith as weak—a fiction that provided facile answers to the unknowable. I remember pretentiously quoting in frustration from Shelley's "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty" during one of these arguments:

No voice from some sublimer
world hath ever
To sage or poet these responses
given—
Therefore the name of God and
ghosts and Heaven,
Remain the records of their vain
endeavor,
Frail spells—whose uttered
charm might not avail to sever,
From all we hear and all we see,
Doubt, chance, and mutability.

The message was clear—get a life, Mom—the church mirrors the patriarchy (or is it the other way around?)—you uphold what I abhor by even attending church—the opiate of the people, and capitalism makes it all happen—did you know it *guarantees* an underclass?—and the semantics, the very language of "third world," do you see, Mom, that *you* have been victimized and lured into the capitalist patriarchal trap? But, a feminist—Mom?!

Suddenly (it seemed) one day in the summer of 1995 the conversations with Mom changed. In fact, I really didn't know her anymore. The hours of arguing, of academic theorizing and instruction must have finally taken hold. Yet the centered world toppled for me, with Mom

now adamantly opposed to those christened tenets of my youth. She now argued against Protestantism (all religious faith), Republicans (even to get elected in conservative areas), farmers (if male), hunting (for any reason), family values (trap of the capitalist patriarchal ruling class), America (all media hype), companies (see family values). She argued for hippies (right to self-express), Democrats (even demonstrating appropriate shame and guilt over her prior voting record), declared atheists (she is now one, and resigned from the Church Board), drug legalization (currently the cash crop for wealthy white males), Clinton (she knows where her [new] bread is buttered), homosexuals (although leery of same-sex parenting), globalization (we are the world), technology (taking word processing courses at Sauk Valley Community College), feminists (self-empowerment, economic independence, peace of mind). I both feared and hoped that the conversion was temporary.

Perhaps her church involvement and her own past had kept me from recognizing that Mom's feminist conversion wasn't as sudden as I thought. With a husband who drank, kids who constantly complained about household chores, jobs and bosses that rarely took advantage of her intelligence and capabilities, together with severe money shortages, Mom clearly had good reason to search for a more satisfying political and social philosophy. The church had provided community, leadership, and a philanthropic mission. But just before her conversion Mom had a significant "last straw" that led to her dissolution from the church. She said she couldn't pretend anymore that answers came from outside the self (shades of my training in British Romanticism, no doubt!). The female pastor in this hard-worn community confessed to Mom one fateful day in



Seated, Zelma Baker. Behind her, from left to right, Ann Frank Wake and Karen Frank.

the early 1990s that *she didn't believe in everything the church stood for, namely assumptions of patriarchal rule, etc.*, and when Mom said "then how can you *preach it to people??!!*" and so on, until, well, after that my Mom, it seemed, emerged a feminist.

But even before that my mother had learned the brutal impact that thwarted intellectual and emotional desire had on women of her youth. Her own mother, now 97, still talks with longing of wanting to be a professional singer in Chicago, or perhaps a teacher. Like many other female relatives and neighbors of her time, the Great War forced Grandma to quit school with an elementary school education that seemed plenty for a young woman anyway. She worked at National Manufacturing, got married, quit, had my mother late (at age 40), worked at the factory, discovered her husband's long-term affair, divorced, again worked at the factory, and raised Mom with her three unmarried siblings in a house just up the street from the church in Sterling. (Mom remembers that my Great Aunt Edie, her primary caretaker while Grandma packed hinges, never smiled, and that her father's

occasional attempts to visit gradually tapered away because Grandma couldn't stand to see him). Grandma retired at 65 having secured a job for my young father in the early 1960s when I was still very small. I would eventually work my way through college packing those same hinges for that same company, often in the very same chair alongside her friends.

When I was in my early teens in the 1970s Grandma gave me a school report card she had kept, dated 1913 (she would have been 12 or 13). The marks reported earned percentages, rather than the now customary letter grades earned in American schools. She had earned evaluations in the high 90s, with a 100 in grammar. But she never went

to high school, let alone college. It wasn't even a possibility in her world. When a professional church choir in Chicago recruited her in her early 20s—they heard her perfectly pitched, soaring alto in solo at the Broadway Methodist in Sterling, Illinois—her family refused to allow it. Young women did not travel alone by train to the big, hostile city 120 miles away, even to sing in church. Fifty years later, my mother (an only child born in 1940—a war baby, and a depression aftermath baby) would cringe in embarrassment, glancing over at me in the pew as that instrument gradually fell off key, yet remained gloriously above self-consciousness as it sailed over other more timid voices. We listened to the slow, sad decay of Grandma's voice every week in 1974. Grandma, in her 70s then, and just before the stroke, sang every Sunday from the third row pew, her notes heard even when the choir hoped to sing its special numbers without her help. During this year of hiatus in Milledgeville, squeezed in before joining her brother at the Retirement Home in Rockford, Grandma hung on for life to her only ticket out, that never got her out—

the alto voice, louder than all others. She still passes out the hymnals (and bibs at meal times) at Wesley Willows Retirement Center in Rockford, and, you know, she still sings.

My mother found a familiar, but strangely illogical path to “freedom” from her eccentric upbringing with smothering elderly relatives. She got pregnant at age 16, quit school and married my 19-year old father, who had already dropped out of school. Seven months later this girl held her premature child in her arms for a few minutes, after which Linda died only several hours after birth. (Did this make me a dreaded *middle* child rather than the oldest?) So Mom carried on with her life. She got a Spaniel she named Rags, a good job at the telephone company, and pregnant with me by age 19. She remembers feeling angry that she had to give up that job (the rules for pregnancy were different then), and devastated that Rags was hit by a car and killed at the end of the driveway. Dad started to drink, like all the other men I knew. He always got to work on time, but he kept us up arguing until late into the nights. We all lived with sleep deprivation and no money.

Mom began taking classes for \$30 a semester hour at the local community college. She recognized early on that her only leverage would be economic. When she finally threatened to leave my dad for real (I was 18 by then and just off to college) she had a two-year college degree in accounting that she earned a class or two at a time over a 12-year period while working full-time in Sterling. Dad sobered up under this threat and they had a good time for two years that I missed while away at college. (I always feared there was a connection between his new-found sobriety and my absence.) But dad died shortly thereafter of a heart attack, in 1980, at age 43 (Mom was 40, I was 20). The church helped. Believing in God helped. But only for a while. Material reality pressed in, complicating her already meager life, now irrevocably expanded by her formal education and her love of reading. Social reality

pressed in—the abuse from drunken husbands, the narrow views of women, no one to talk to. If first the church, then education saved my Mom, it was feminism that ultimately changed her for good.

I used to wish that I could rewrite my Mom’s story to look more like mine—great education, “real” career, freedom, late marriage (I was 31). But she had to earn and discover what I simply assumed and took from her. Like her mother before her, what Mom found, what she kept, and what she gave, was her voice. We both, like Grandma, had better than average alto voices (a motif that I now know links the three generations more tightly than I could know before), but Mom’s voice was always more courageous, if not stronger, than mine. Though I got stage-fright and refused to sing after age 12, Mom sang “Oh Holy Night” every Christmas Eve, bringing the congregation to tears, intensified by the beauty of candlelight. Now, her voice educates school children on domestic and sexual violence. This, the powerful voice, revised at age 55, but always strong and ever-present, and always in my ear.

I had distrusted the zealous enthusiasm of this converted feminist because, I realized later, I hadn’t really looked at her life, or my own. Mom hadn’t needed me as much as I’d thought. She’d have found her own “official” way to feminism (which

means that she named it) from her own experience, with or without me. I was downsized as her world got larger, embracing the only political and social philosophy that was comprehensive and realistic enough to satisfy her intellect and her heart. My comfortably antagonistic role became obsolete as she networked, read, and taught on her own. The rewards abound. Now my mother and I speak with one voice—a voice paid for by my grandmother’s hinge-packing and divorced loneliness. An alto voice Grandma passed on that finally learned to speak, as well as sing, through her daughter and granddaughter. Mom and I also had to earn, each in our own way, our voice of pain, our voice of power, our shared voice of feminism. It is a voice that never leaves, and one that we pass along.

Addendum: When I told my mother that I was writing this story, she replied, “Well, then, maybe I’d better write my own version, too!”

Ann Frank Wake is an associate professor of English at Elmhurst College in west-suburban Chicago. She loves to teach undergraduates, but squeezes in research on women of the Romantic period and writes poetry. She occasionally longs for a country life to echo the good in her rural northwest Illinois upbringing.

LINDA FRANK

Conversation Overheard on a Train

Mom, she said
to me. You treat the dogs
so good. You never
treated us
so good
So I said to her
I never paid
five hundred dollars
for you either

Linda Frank is the author of three chapbooks: Taste the Silence (1997), ... It Takes a Train to Cry (1998), and Orpheus Descending (1998).