

## A Year of Living Dangerously: 1968

by Dana Densmore

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In January 1968, I got a phone call from my mother, Donna Allen. "Women's liberation!" she pronounced in a tone of incantation. The resonance and ring with which she invested the words conveyed her sense that the words themselves, sacred and momentous, constituted in their utterance the missing piece of a puzzle. Each word and all it signified, connoted, and implied—for each word a great rich world of context—was electrically alive to both of us.

We knew "women," being women ourselves, and coming from a long line of independent-minded, woman-valuing women. We also knew the disrespect women met in the world, as a gender, and we had watched as many fine, intelligent women's brilliant and heroic efforts came to very little. We knew "liberation," the central value and key verbal formula in many of the progressive causes in which we had always been activists. "Liberation" represented a whole, psychologically and ideologically clear process of thought and commitment. Injustice, perceived and analyzed, was met with a self-sacrificing determination to right the wrongs. It felt "clean," wholesome and unsullied, because the impulses were relatively unfettered by the inhibitions and the tradeoffs necessary in mainstream politics which make one feel compromised and bought off. To those who spoke of "liberation," matters were simple: If it was wrong, it must be changed. What more was there to say? The clean energy that welled up when conscience was clear and committed seemed equal to any adversity.

Two rich words, each with important values to us, but we had never heard them uttered together. The implications were dizzying. Suddenly the progressive causes we had always worked for were suddenly revealed as having been other people's causes. Was it possible that we could finally be turning to the most radical cause of all?

"It has begun!" The words were galvanizing, chilling; the implications were massive, dangerous and revolutionary; their seriousness precluded euphoria. I knew that the liberation of women was not going to be easily won, nor won through any moderate means. I knew that once I had embarked on this path, there would be no stopping short. Reality shifted, and I felt myself to be in a new world.

My mother Donna Allen, a national anti-war activist and a founder of Women Strike for Peace, had been in New York at a meeting to plan a peace demonstration, and, from fellow activist Bernadine Dohrn, had heard rumblings of women's discontent in SDS and other organizations in the movements for social justice. Some women were asking whether it was ideologically defensible to fight for the liberation of every single class and category other than women, while accepting female subservience.

"Liberation for us!" my mother said in her phone call? It has begun! Women are organizing, and we're going to turn the men's world upside down, throw the bums out, and run things as they should be run!" In her enthusiasm she skipped over the hard part, but I wasn't fooled. I knew that the disaffection of a few women was only a small start in a very big job.

A thoroughgoing, skipping disrespect for women permeated every aspect of society. I despair of conveying to young women of the nineties the chilling and depressing effect of this: they can't imagine how we could have been such low-self-esteem wimps to put up with it ("I would have smacked him one!"). I try to explain how it feels when it seems that all men, including all the men one respects, sneer and ridicule or, at their best, condescendingly take for granted the inferiority of women. And how it feels when it seems that all the *women* around one take that supposed inferiority for granted. The most self-respecting women did little better than to try to deny, each in her embattled isolation, that she was herself that contemptible thing: "I'm different!"

Hence the most exciting thing about Donna's news was that women were starting to identify themselves as women, to connect with other women, not protesting their difference from that ugly stereotype but questioning the stereotype itself, and protesting the treatment that resulted from it. Could it be that we would break free from the chilling and depressing effects of all those smirks and sneers, and that we would assert our own reality over the false and demeaning one? Having heard the words, "women's liberation," I knew that for me there was no going back. And I suspected the same would be true for many other women.

At the time of the phone call, I had been very active in the draft resistance movement, counseling conscientious objectors, men who opposed the Vietnam War, and the undecided, who were confused or questioning. I helped them to understand their options and to sort through the ins and outs of the law and the procedures and practice of draft boards and the Selective Service. With others, I supported the men refusing induction through "The Resistance": a loose support group of and for men who had already refused or were about to refuse induction, and the women who were keeping a world of meaningfulness and love around the men who were setting their lives in turmoil.

Yet the weekly dinner meetings of The Resistance were exercises in self-laceration for the women. It went without saying that we cooked and cleaned up while the men bonded, strategized, and postured. They were laying their balls on the line, and we were...what? The girls enjoined to say yes to the boys who said no? Of course, in reality we were more than that. We would not personally be going to jail, but our lives were equally disrupted. We were preparing to go to Canada or Sweden with husbands who chose exile, preparing to postpone children or to raise those we already had without the support of husbands who chose jail. But for "the boys" we were nonentities. Though of equal intelligence and thoughtfulness, and equal commitment, we had no legitimacy as part of the struggle. Should a woman have had the temerity to voice a thought in the course of one of the conversations, there would have been a silence in which the men looked embarrassedly away from her before picking up just where they had been.

After Donna's two magic words—"women's liberation"—I went to no more Resistance dinners. We women had been playing an inauthentic game, going through the motions of the required role, appearing to accept the attitudes that allowed the men to treat us dismissively while they used us as tools of service and psychological support. Although we certainly knew that we were not the intellectual and moral inferiors they indulged themselves in believing us to be, we did agree to a kind of moral inferiority when we said to ourselves (and very occasionally to one another) that their stand of courage and conscience mattered so much more than our human dignity that we would continue to support them as they were. Our courage in standing up to the United States government for what we believed was not matched by the courage to stand up to our male comrades for what we knew to be the truth of ourselves. Serving others and sacrificing self in almost every aspect of our lives, women remained psychologically vulnerable to the accusation of being "selfish" if we requested for ourselves a level of respect that was only common decency. Leftist men saw this vulnerability; therefore the word "selfish!" was used as a weapon against their women comrades and supporters.

Anything smacking of a real challenge to the phallocentrism of The Resistance was put down so brutally that such presumptions were rare. The women were not slow learners; most evidently learned from the example of others' experience and made no attempt to enter the public conversation. The unthinking brutality furthermore made it seem clear that forcing the men to change was out of the question; our only option would be to disengage from them, and in fact the men were riding so high in their macho exhilaration that even our departure seemed likely only to strengthen the male bonding. I no longer cared how they might muddle through without me; I departed and never looked back to see.

I began following up leads to women's liberation and, by the beginning of May 1968, was corresponding with Joreen, editor of a newsletter published in Chicago entitled *Voice of the Women's Liberation Movement*. I was now part of an actual movement, although I needed the right catalyst to launch me into activism. I had done the basic thinking; my consciousness was already raised. Now I needed comrades who were ready for revolution; I didn't want to sit around with housewives concerned about getting more help with childcare from their husbands or with new-left women wanting to persuade their male cohorts to be more respectful. The magnitude of the problem obviously required a much more radical and activist approach. But would I find any such comrades?

Although I had left The Resistance, I did continue for a while to do draft counseling, where my knowledge was eagerly sought and appreciated by the often rather desperate clients. This counseling organization, the Boston Draft Resistance Group, sponsored a "free school" in July, during which there was a workshop, offered by a woman named Roxanne Dunbar, on Valerie Solanas's *Scum Manifesto*, characterized in the program as a document of female liberation. Roxanne had just arrived in town inspired by Valerie in a way analogous to my galvanization in January. She was also transcending the usual leftist causes: she had been on her way to Cuba when she read about Valerie's shooting of Andy Warhol. She thought to herself "It has begun!" and canceled her trip. This attack seemed to symbolize some break with business as usual for women.

*The Scum Manifesto* was a wild, crazy, man-hating diatribe filled with energy, nastiness, and taboo truths. It seemed to say all the things we rational, nice, good-hearted, inauthentic women never said, things we scarcely permitted ourselves to think. It repeatedly turned men's hostile stereotypes of women upside down and blatantly asserted them to be true of men; and it did so in a way that rang true. It wasn't nice, it wasn't even fair (not to the "nice men", the "men who weren't like that"), but *the Scum Manifesto* was perfectly exhilarating. It invited us to recognize that being "fair" to the "nice men" was paralyzing us and distorting our perception of reality.

The other women who came to Roxanne's workshop, women who very likely came with expectations of an earnest liberal appeal for fairness, received what may have seemed to them to be paranoid rantings. To me, anything less would have seemed an underestimation of the problem. Roxanne and I left the workshop talking about organizing a women's revolution.

We thereupon placed an ad in the underground paper for a women's group. Several women showed up, including Betsy (who later took the surname Warrior), a dedicated and stalwart comrade who hung in through all the Cell 16 wars and remains still on the front lines for women, and Betsy's friend Stella. Later Roxanne recruited Ellen, who lived downstairs from her, a poet whose toughness and courage had been earned in brutal life battles. Some other women joined us at times, but it was essentially this core that flourished through the theoretical and activist makings of a revolution, in isolation, five or so women against the patriarchy. We were a mixed group: former college professor, former prostitute, space avionics computer consultant, welfare mother. But, for us differences of class and background faded to irrelevance before the magnitude of the shared caste of gender and the magnitude of the task before us.

It was a terrifying and dangerous time. We felt that we were laying our lives on the line in a way the boys of The Resistance weren't even contemplating. We saw the violence and hatred that demands of personhood and dignity for women brought out in men who until then appeared normal. These were many women's "nice men." They were the apparently-dignified conservatives, the open-minded liberals, the justice-hungry leftists, the apolitical hippies. These men gave us every indication that they would choose open warfare, to the death, rather than yield any privilege, including the psychological privilege of feeling superior. We felt we were girding for an apocalypse in male-female relations. It was startling—and deeply disturbing—how frequently men responded to our direct but courteous remonstrances about sometimes-small issues of behavior with the verbal and body language of physical violence.

The language of all-out physical combat and warfare would issue in response to what might seem to us equally mild propositions for social or behavioral change. Perhaps we would object that the calendar featuring nude women on the wall of the meeting room was embarrassing to us and a distraction from the seriousness of the meeting's deliberations. Or we'd opine that we'd like to see half the Supreme Court be women. Or we'd assert that there was something wrong with an ad which undertook to sell a computer by picturing it with a partially clothed woman draped over it. Or we'd recommend that the setting of the air conditioning should consider the way the women were dressed, not just the way the men were. Or we'd urge that fathers should sometimes be the ones to stay home when children were ill.

Then, astonishingly, their faces would get red, veins would stand out on their necks, chest and arm muscles would tighten and lift, and in tones of anger and agitation they would talk irrationally and in complete *non sequitur* of our having made them the "enemy," talk of our castrating them (a shocking and disturbing image of physical mutilation), talk of our wishing to "kill all the men." They pointed out by innuendo and outright threat that we could not hope to impose our views on them as long as we were vulnerable to rape, a vulnerability, they emphasized ominously, which their physical strength and our anatomy made permanent. The threats sometimes extended to graphic descriptions of injuries attendant on rape.

What on earth could be going on here? Did any stance but subservience make us enemies in their view? Was a wish for any modified behavior, which accorded us human decency equivalent to a wish for their death? Were they saying that they would die before yielding psychological or social privilege and pretensions? Was it really their view that the threat of physical violence against us was the foundation of gender relations, with their pious ideologies evaporating as soon as we criticized or questioned? If men really believed that in facing challenges to their privileges and pretensions they were defending themselves against enemies who wished to kill them or to cut off their body parts, what could we expect from them? We therefore prepared ourselves for the day when it would be women against men over the barricades. The prospect was terrifying; we had no wish for this, and certainly had no intention of initiating any such thing.

But we did mean to insist on our humanity and to urge other women to do the same, to decline to make ourselves into the myth and idol "woman" (which fond fantasy men were demanding we incarnate), and to decline to play the games of subservience. We meant to do this until the whole system of female subservience crumbled. Men gave us reason to expect that when we became sufficiently effective, sufficiently threatening, they would organize to come after us. Meanwhile we faced the hatred and threats of individual men in private challenges and in our political street actions.

In one action, we picketed the Playboy Club, at night, in an unpopulated and desolate part of town, trying to hand leaflets to men or to their wives and dates. Now I had encountered danger and the threat of violence before. I had been charged by New York City police on horseback wielding clubs to break up a peace demonstration. I had faced angry rednecks threatening me in a very personal way with rape, mutilation, and lynching in a civil rights sit-in in the South. And one night during the Cuban missile crisis, my sister Martha and I were picketing the White House as part of an around-the-clock vigil for peace; at 2 a.m. we found ourselves alone, two teenage girls with our peace signs facing off against Nazi Party members who took ugly issue with our stance. But, looking back, I think I may have felt most vulnerable facing the well-dressed patrons of the Playboy Club and the hatred aroused by our challenging the systematic objectification of women through sex.

In another political event at a local movie house, we sponsored a showing of *The Queens*, about a transvestite beauty pageant. The film portrayed men making themselves into women who were so convincing that one forgot that they were men. This evinced, we thought, better than any arguments in a leaflet, that womanly appearance and feminine mannerisms were purely convention. Around this time or a little later, our first black woman member had joined the group: Marianne, a feisty character who had been laughing raucously at our showing of *The Queens*. Somewhere else we had connected with our first out-and-militant lesbian member, Gail, a poet. In addition, Roxanne had acquired an apartment-mate, Maureen, whom she recruited into the group. She had also found Marilyn, high-strung and intellectual, who was to stay with us into Cell 16. Betsy and Stella and Ellen from the original group were still with us.

Still somewhat under the spell of Valerie Solanas, we considered what should be done in her defense. Roxanne and I went together to visit her at Mattawan, the mental institution in which she had been incarcerated after shooting Andy Warhol; later I made a visit on my own. Valerie was enraged about the publication of the *Scum Manifesto* by Maurice Gerodias; he was making money from her work, and had distorted her message on the book's cover and by putting all the emphasis on it being S.C.U.M. for "Society for Cutting Up Men," something which, for Valerie, had been only a snicker-worthy side joke on the title of her intended organization. Her actual purpose was to speak to women who considered themselves "scum"—that is, the unladlike women who weren't afraid to tell the nasty truth about gender relations. We considered retaliatory action against Gerodias. Our isolation and sense of living on the edge were taking a toll.

In August 1968, there was a meeting in Maryland of women mostly from "new left" movements to talk about women's liberation. Roxanne and I drove down from Boston, bearing our revolutionary ideas. These women wanted to talk about improving their treatment from their leftist male comrades and about their wish for more respect from their lovers. However, Roxanne was not one to try to meet people on their own level; on the contrary, she considered shock tactics to be the most salubry. Whether intending to shock or whether naively expecting this to be enthusiastically received, she insisted on reading aloud to them from the *Scum Manifesto*. To make matters worse, we talked about celibacy as a revolutionary tactic. The other women were horrified by us. They thought Valerie was clearly crazy (as her incarceration in a mental institution only confirmed). And they weren't a bit impressed by our political analysis on that: as Roxanne and I interpreted the ideology of patriarchy, when a man shoots someone, he is either justified or a criminal, but when a woman shoots someone, well, she must be crazy, since women don't do such things. Such a woman gets shut up in a mental institution where they can keep her drugged to mute her. And even if Valerie *were* crazy, we proposed that she was still worthy of our support as one probably driven to illness by the same pressures we were facing, and also valuable as theoretician and symbol.

More surprising than their reaction to Valerie was their stories of abusive relationships with men. Why stay? They're all that way, was the response; besides, we need sex. Why? Uncomprehending looks. They seemed to think that we were hopelessly out of touch with reality; how could one talk to people so unaware of basic psychology and physiology? These women had not missed the message of the so-called sexual revolution: to wit, that a woman who doesn't make sure she "gets plenty" (from men, of course) will "dry up inside," as one woman there anxiously characterized it. We responded to their stories of abusive male-female relationships with the suggestion—rather mild, so it seemed to us—that women aren't going to be able to respect themselves so long as they stay in such relationships. We suggested that women did not, in fact, need sex. What we needed was autonomy.

I doubt that we did more than scandalize; but Roxanne had greater faith than I in scandal as an organizing tactic. She believed people could be shocked and bullied out of complacent self-delusion; she felt it was probably the only way they would be. She was a great admirer of the tactics of the Chinese revolution. My faith was in finding a way of telling the truth so accurately, in ways so consonant with people's own experience that the person herself had to acknowledge it: something in her soul would turn with gladness to what was its own. I was, of course, trying to do that at the conference, but in such a short bit of time, with our coming in so at odds with them on so many levels, I doubt that it could have succeeded.

Although we were disappointed not to find women more in tune with our own views, we came home feeling enlightened about the nature of the work to be done and energized by the clear direction. I saw that it wasn't going to be enough to say a couple of magic words; we needed to explain why we saw what we did. We decided to start a theoretical journal.

We called the journal *No More Fun & Games: a Journal of Female Liberation*. The main title was meant to show our uncompromising intentions. We were not promising men that the liberation of women was going to be to their advantage; on the contrary, we were going to end the game-playing they found so appealing. The subtitle asserted our name for the movement: "female" rather than "women's" liberation. In addition it was "a" journal, not "the" journal, thus inviting others to publish other journals, each contributing the particular perspective of their group to weave a rich tapestry of female liberation theory. Roxanne had wrangled a typesetting machine from IBM, under pretenses that didn't bear looking into. We had it for the weekend only, so we worked all day and far into the night, each woman in our group typesetting her own articles. We were a strange manic crew, still "scum" as Valerie would have had us, but now, as our numbers increased, our bonds were looser. Ideologically, we were surfing on the same exhilarating wave, tolerant of differences of style and perspective, coherent in the importance of the primary goals, feeling fully committed to the cause. But we would no longer have trusted one another with our lives as the tighter group had rather rashly been prepared to do earlier in the summer.

The journal, which came out in late August 1968, contained no address at which we could be contacted; we sold it on the street for a dollar a copy (pretty much exactly what it cost to print, as I recall). The issue was also undated. Looking back as editor and publisher of some of the later six issues, it seems strange that it never occurred to us to date the first issue, but it accurately reflected our state of mind then. We didn't foresee an orderly future, which would in turn become history and require documentation. Instead, we saw ourselves on the verge of a great upheaval. Perhaps it was like the anticipation of the end of the world for early Christians.

The journal reflected our diversity, a dizzying mix of styles reflecting our group and the each-woman-speaks-her-mind editorial philosophy. The issue featured practical what-to-do analyses of ways we were tricked into supporting our own oppression. There were views on left movement politics, essays with an academic tone, militant diatribes, Marxist-inspired analysis, poetry, drawings, and collages. The cover was drafted, done by my sister Indra, was a naked woman whose massive curls of hair completely enclosed and imprisoned her. In fact, our first prospective printer had refused to take the job, claiming that the cover was pornographic, but perhaps he was really more confused and offended by it being brought to him by women. Or perhaps he'd had a peek at the contents.

I wrote quite a few pieces for this journal. Essays on sexuality and celibacy inspired by our conference in Maryland. A couple of ambitious analyses of how women's current condition came to be, how that condition was enforced, how women reacted to it, and what needed to be done; some of that analysis was noticeably influenced by Simone de Beauvoir's classic *The Second Sex*, which I had been reading. A short bit addressing the draft resisters and the irritating slogan "Girls say yes to boys who say no" left me with a sense of closure on my experience with The Resistance.

The journal was exciting. It said things that hadn't yet been said, things no one else was saying, things that needed to be said, things that had the shock of truth. Our message, as it emerged in gradually more coherent form in later journals, was to women, not men. It was women that we intended to change. We didn't flatter ourselves that we had anything we could say to men that would have any weight in balance with the privileges that the subordination of women conferred. (Oh, probably Roxanne thought some bullying of men couldn't hurt, but she only tossed her harangues out as a public service, for their own good, as it were; she didn't imagine that our liberation would come from them.)

We meant to empower women to reject enslavement on its many levels. We threatened men not with violence but with the refusal to play the games through which women built up men and misrepresented themselves, through which men manipulated women and rewarded them for inauthenticity. It was my focus in particular to expose the games, in as much telling detail as possible, so that women could see them for what they are and not be taken in.

The matter of a name for our group had been given some thought. We had toyed from the beginning with the name "Women Against Society", and had even told inopportune representatives of the media (who seemed unable to focus on the issues until they could get our label) that we were "tentatively" using that name. But we resisted the idea of having any name; it seemed limiting and invited pigeonholing and marginalization. We wanted to act in the name of liberation for women in the broadest and most radical sense. But we were certain and explicit about one thing regarding names, and had talked about this from our first meetings. We wanted the *movement* to be characterized as "female" liberation, not "women's" liberation, as it had begun to be called in the first stirrings by the women of the student peace and civil rights movements. To us, "woman" was a constructed and conventional role, created by men for their convenience and satisfaction. With the term "female" we went to the root of the matter, clearing away all the false accretions and making room for whatever was true in our natures to show itself. The term "feminism" had a respectable past history, but it was too close to the prescriptive term "feminine" to sit comfortably with us.

As it turned out, there was no stopping the media from its determination to name us; they began calling our group "female liberation" thus sabotaging our wish for that name to be used by the movement; to try to free it for the movement we eventually (about a year later) assigned ourselves the name Cell 16. The name was meant to convey that we were just one cell of the movement female liberation, like a single cell of a complex organism. The hopes for the name female liberation denominating the movement received its final blow a few months after that when members of the Socialist Workers Party who had infiltrated our group incorporated the name "Female Liberation" in order to take over our office and lay claim to the journals. But these are other stories, and not the stuff of 1968.

In November there was to be another, larger conference for women in Chicago. The indefatigable Roxanne used her left-movement contacts to connect with Abby Rockefeller, known to have given money in the past to progressive causes. Roxanne wanted to ask her for money to send one of us (me, as it turned out) to Chicago for the conference. Her pitch provided the magic words for Abby ("It has begun!"). Later that winter, Abby was to become part of the group, and remained among our most dedicated, most radical, and most thoughtful members, an important balance to Roxanne's compulsive energy, and remaining long after Roxanne moved on.

The conference in Chicago was huge (so it seemed at the time) and exhilarating. The general impression was one of tremendous richness. Women came from all around the country. Women from the thick of the civil rights struggle in the South. Women with particular contributions, like Anne Koedt (who seemed very much in tune with my approach) with her forthright article "The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm." The Redstocking women from New York offered the "pro-woman line," proposing that anything women do is right and good and that it's just a matter of looking at any female action from a woman's perspective to see its intelligence and value. This was refreshing, and often revealed more truth than the conventional view, which could be called the "anti-woman line": that anything women do is trivial or base. Much of the analysis of the conference, however, suggested that men were being unfair and that they should have this pointed out to them so that they would change, thus solving the problem. As I saw it, men knew perfectly well that they were being unfair to women, and chose their behavior because it was to their advantage. Thus men wouldn't voluntarily change. We had to change. And declaring everything women did to be good wasn't going to create change if it justified and honored things we were burdening on the system of subservience and oppression.

At that point, the suggestion that women must change struck many as critical of women, and, by putting the burden on the "victim," seemed to multiply the unfairness of gender relations. Though this was a touchy issue for those sick of the atmosphere of societal disrespect for women, I had no problem with admitting that we had fallen for some of the tricks, taken some of the bribes. I had no fantasy that women were perfect; I considered women to be human, with the full range of human strengths, weaknesses, and potentials. But in some women's insistence on men doing the changing, I saw more of the same trained in passivity that I thought we needed to break out of: women once again expecting men to do the work for us, to rescue us from our problem. What's wrong, one might ask, with being rescued? It seemed to me that we would never experience ourselves as powerful so long as men were handing us things—even if they would, which I knew they wouldn't. If we took control of our lives ourselves, maybe we would know better what to do with that control and those lives.

As I saw it then, and still do, the thing we want as women is full humanity, not male privileges and not female privileges. And it had always seemed to me, even before I read de Beauvoir, that full humanity is about deciding what one wants for oneself out of life, and then working to make one's choices a reality. Until we are fully self-respecting, how can we really demand respect from others? It seemed to me that many women had the whole situation backwards. They believed they would respect themselves when others respected them. But no one, male or female, will be likely to truly respect anyone who does not respect herself. Hence I thought we must learn to respect ourselves by giving ourselves reasons for self-respect: by giving up passivity, by resisting the stunting and crushing of our wills and aspirations, by taking action and taking risks, by rejecting excuses about the barriers to women, substituting a determination to knock down, climb over, or slip around any obstacles. If, despite our determination, we didn't accomplish everything we'd like, it wouldn't be for lack of will and aspiration, nor for lack of courage and energy. When I thought about women attaining full "humanity" or "personhood," it was *not* a code for getting to live like men, but something rather higher—living authentically.

Of the female liberation groups, we in our Boston group seemed the most deeply radical of the whole-heartedly ready to overturn and to sacrifice everything: the old coherence and whatever conveniences or privileges it might be offering us, all our systems of getting along in the man's world, our very lives. Of course, as it turned out over the next twenty years, it was not necessary to sacrifice our lives, and it did not come to be armed revolution. We had been misled by men's vicious response to our suggestions for change. In fact, it turned out that men were a great deal more dependent on women than they let on, and, as long as we had the ability to leave them, we had a trump card. When enough women were willing to say they didn't need men, willing to walk out and make it stick, men began to change. Of course, the men tried every trick of manipulation and bullying, used economic pressure and played on our sense of responsibility to our children. And of course there was violence: then and still now, many women who leave men are murdered by them, and sometimes their children as well. But enough succeeded in leaving that men learned that certain behavior was not in their interests, and things began gradually to improve.

Didn't this come from women following the very strategy we recommended, whether or not they knew it was ours? We proposed women respecting themselves, valuing their lives, and insisting on being treated fairly if they are going to give of themselves, whether in the workplace or marriage or anywhere else. I still think our uncompromising approach was right. One has to be willing to face it all, to say that one's dignity and self-respect are more important than keeping a man or a job, more important perhaps even than life, if it comes to a need to take some risk.

Although our positions late in 1968 included some that were startling to a wide spectrum of the emerging women's movement, gradually over the years much of what we insisted on became mainstream.

I am amused today to find young women who scornfully declare that they are "not feminists" taking for granted their rights to do some things we scandalized our feminist comrades for suggesting in the early days. I spoke the other day to a young "not-a-feminist" with a shaved head and remembered the scandal, the uproar, the outrage Cell 16 created at a feminist conference in New York City in 1969. We were speaking from the stage on the subject of the political implications of our making ourselves into conventional womanly women through the cultivation (often at the expense of great time and effort) of stereotypical feminine appearance. To dramatize this, we included a bit of guerrilla theater: one of our number who had luxuriant long blonde hair had decided to cut it to a more practical chin length. To help us make the point about femininity, she had also agreed to have us cut her hair on stage. There was pandemonium in the hall, with women standing up and screaming "don't do it!" One woman shrieked, "Men like my breasts, too; do you want me to cut them off?" In 1994, in contrast, my young "not-a-feminist" acquaintance considered her shaved-head haircut practical and rather interesting. If it shocked anyone, or if someone chose to regard it as "unfeminine," so much the worse for them.

What were our characteristic perspectives and positions in 1968, and why were they controversial within the movement in the historical context in which they appeared?

First, we saw the female liberation movement as demanding our primary allegiance.

The wave of activism that sparked the tinder of women's discontent and the groundwork laid by Betty Friedan to a real and powerful movement came from the women of the civil rights and anti-war struggles who became unable to ignore the contradictions between the assertions by their male comrades of belief in social justice and the men's insistence that women occupy an inferior social caste. Yet most of these women maintained their allegiance to the movements, seeking only greater equality within the organizations. We challenged these allegiances by insisting that the women's revolution was the first and only true revolution. Thus we withdrew our energies from other progressive movements, inviting the men to join us if they genuinely cared about social justice, but knowing that it was we who would be the visionaries and leaders of that genuine revolution. Society as it exists has too many privileges for men for them to be willing to change it in any thoroughgoing way; true social justice will cost them too much. It is women who, as we saw it, would remake society on the model of the true interdependent community. We thought it was time for women to stop giving their energies to support men in their partway justice.

Second, we insisted on rejecting every prescriptive description of how we must look, act, speak or think if we are to be "true women." The controversy this occasionally provoked, such as that aroused by our hair-cutting at the first Congress to Unite Women, always astonished us. We thought it obvious that whatever women did was by definition "feminine," and "women's nature" must necessarily be defined by the full richness and complexity of women's natures. Of course, what most women did most of the time under the current system was a distorted expression of their real strengths and aspirations. But as circumstances and our thoughts, choices, and actions changed, we would continue to see "woman's nature" unfold and display itself in its self-defined authenticity. When it has had a chance to unfold freely, we might then discover whether there is such a thing as "woman's nature" distinguishable from "human nature."

Let me emphasize that by "human nature" I don't mean "the way men are." Given the despotic dichotomy distorting human nature into such brutally stultifying and corrupting roles as "womanliness" and "manliness," we cannot see what any true expression of human nature is and we will not know it until all humans are free of such roles.

Meanwhile we had to dig out from under the weight and influence of cultural demands that we act, look, and think in certain ways selected by ourselves and mostly not in our own interests. These demands were enforced, should we deviate, by accusations of psychological deformity, by social ridicule and ostracism, and, worst, by having our opinions and analyses dismissed as the self-justifications of someone who has failed at what was most essential. We were lectured that our envy of men's penises was not being properly sublimated in the service of an individual penis.

This effort to dig out from under the normative dictates of men's fantasy of women's behavior, and a major activity of most parts of the women's movement. The media image of feminists as unattractive women who are bitter because they can't get a man has frightened off men for decades and still does. Even many who were prepared to call themselves feminists have wanted to dissociate themselves from the unattractive, presumably bitter ones. Until pioneers made a more relaxed version of womanhood acceptable, some women would not risk an overt feminist politics.

Our next characteristic and sometimes-controversial position concerned sex. In flagrant disregard for the ethos of the sixties, we advocated celibacy as the appropriate alternative to abusive relationships and considerably downplayed the importance of sex. We thought that the ideology of sex as a *need* was a myth perpetrated by men for their own convenience. We took for granted and, indeed, would have insisted on our own sexual freedom. But we classed sex with other enjoyable but optional activities: fun at the beach, ice cream sundaes, amusement park rides. We might choose to do any of these occasionally, but we would consider the price that was paid. If the price was too high, any could be passed up without regret.

Beyond the matter of whether one ought to stay in an abusive relationship, we questioned how much time and energy ought to go into working out "personal" relationships even of a more promising sort, and asked whether women ought to be devoting themselves to raising children. Although we didn't condemn good sexual relationships or worthwhile family life, should these be found, it is true that, at that historical moment, we thought it best for women to stay free for making the revolution. Even good relationships take time and energy, time and energy that we needed in getting the word to women about the possibility of a better way of life, time and energy that we needed for the struggle. And isn't it obvious that a *querrilla* must be free? Hence we made it understood at women who professed to be dedicated to fighting for female liberation and who also chose to have children. We felt that children became the hostages of the system; women's need to protect children made us vulnerable to male threats and bribes. We might be willing to bring the world down on our own heads through a revolution tall enough to effect true liberation for all, but we flinch in contemplating the dangers to innocent little ones. Of course, in our apocalyptic thinking, we never envisaged this struggle being one that would go on for twenty, fifty, a hundred years. In this, too, we were guilty of the sinner: we were little ones. Reform in the world in the next two or three or five years. There would be plenty of time for "a personal life" later.

Finally, it was one of our most important contributions to promote martial arts training so that women could defend themselves physically from the domestic violence to which they are prey because of their gender, and, if necessary, from violence directed at us because of our demands for dignity and personhood. But this stance too created its share of scandal. Many of our potential comrades in the fledgling women's movement came from a political tradition of nonviolence. This was further reinforced by the nurturer's distaste for violence and the passivity our training as "women" has produced in us. Hence our proposal that women equip themselves to return violence for violence seemed to many abhorrent and exactly wrong.

Of course, the whole point of martial arts training is to stop the intended violence promptly by our own physical competence, and to discourage the pattern of violence against women by making it more dangerous for the would-be assailant. When women do not play into the scenario of the helpless and frightened victim, the whole encounter, intended as a power trip, denies our assailant satisfaction. Further, our confidence in our own physical competence lends us an air of assurance and easy alertness, a way of moving through the world in harmony with it, which is the very best deterrent to being selected as victim by a would-be attacker. But even when expressed at its most philosophically high-minded, the idea of women training themselves to fight back offended and alarmed many women.

Furthermore, one doesn't like being reminded of one's vulnerability when the "cure" involves years of hard work, as martial arts training in fact does. In later years, promoting self defense for women and offering that training, I ran into much resentful blame from women over this. Once again, the burden of redress was falling on the woman, on the "victim," not on the male perpetrator. "Let me change!" women shouted angrily at me, as if I were to blame for the unpleasant state of affairs. "Why should I have to depress my life to learn to defend myself?" Well, the world is unfair; but frankly I'd rather depend on myself than on some perpetrator who has been ordered to behave nicely to me.

When we originally began formulating the politics of self-defense, our own experience with self-defense training didn't extend past a YWCA course that some of our group had taken in the summer. But a very important chapter was about to open. Jayne West, Abby's friend, and our house-mate, had a narrow escape when some men tried to pull her into a car one afternoon on a pleasant Cambridge street just outside of Harvard Square. Abby and Jayne took action and began serious martial arts training; I followed a week later.

Within a few months of beginning our training, which we pursued in classes five and six times a week, we were presenting self-defense workshops at women's conferences. Our teacher, Mr. Kim, gave us his studio one night a week to teach a women's class. It was filled not just with our group, which was itself growing, but with women whom we had convinced of our political analysis about the importance of self-defense training.

How can a woman have any needs of dignity or privacy, Abby asked, if she has to walk around conscious that she is at the mercy of almost any attacked, creep of a man who finds out at her? To experience oneself as powerful, one needs a certain sense of security in her person, or at least the confidence that she will acquire herself respectively if that she would resist as if she truly upholds her life.

My joining Abby and Jayne at Mr. Kim's school was the beginning of the rich collaboration that became Cell 16. The distinctiveness of Cell 16 came from the weaving together of the unusually strong characters, personalities, and intelligences of the five women who were its nucleus: Abby, Jayne, Betsy, myself, and (until the fall of 1969) Roxanne—enriched by the other lively and original women who worked with us.

The groundwork for all that was to come of our part of the women's movement had been laid in 1968: a year of exhilaration, terror, and upheaval such as everyone should have in her life, but perhaps not more than once.

Dana Densmore, 1998.

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