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Work in Progress

Feeling Like a Fraud

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Work in Progress

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About the Author

Peggy McIntosh, Ph.D., is a Program Director at the Wellesley College Center for Research on Women. Her programs are funded by the Mellon, Ford, and Dodge Foundations, and by the Anna Wilder Phelps Fund. All of the projects focus on bringing materials on women and perspectives from feminist thought into the liberal arts disciplines and into the basic curriculum of United States schools and colleges.

Abstract

Many people — especially women — experience feelings of fraudulence when singled out for praise, press, publicity, or promotion. While such feelings of fraudulence may be deplorable, especially if and when they trouble women more than men, these same feelings also may indicate a wise reluctance to believe in the accuracy of absolute ranking, and may point the way to a valid critique of hierarchical structures. Apology and self-disparagement may indicate an honest refusal to internalize the idea that having power or public exposure proves one's merit and/or authority. Apologetic or hedging speech may indicate uneasiness with rhetorical or coercive forms of speech and behavior, and may signal a desire to find more collaborative forms. People who feel in public like imposters are perhaps more to be trusted than those who have never experienced feelings of fraudulence. The analysis is placed in context of a theoretical model of a double and conflicting structure within the psyche and within the society: overvalued, overdeveloped, "vertical," competitive functions at odds with undervalued, under-recognized, "lateral," collaborative functions. A double vision of these double functions within both psyche and society is recommended to understand feelings of fraudulence and to overcome them in contexts where that is necessary.

This paper was originally presented at a Stone Center Colloquium in April 1984.

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Not so long ago in Wisconsin at the Wingspread Center I attended a conference on women's leadership in higher education. Seventeen women in a row spoke from the floor during a plenary session and all seventeen started their remarks with some kind of apology or disclaimer. The self-deprecating comments ranged from "I just wanted to say . . ." to "I have just one point to make . . ." to "I never thought about this before, but . . ." through "I really don't know what I'm talking about, but here goes!"

Ironically enough, all of us had been funded to attend the conference because we supposedly knew something about Women's Leadership. Yet we seemed to share a feeling of illegitimacy when speaking in front of women like ourselves. The apologies started me on a new train of thought which led to this talk on "Feeling Like a Fraud."

I find that this title triggers a flash of recognition in both male and female friends and colleagues. For many, it calls up a familiar feeling — the feeling that in taking part in public life one has pulled the wool over others' eyes; that one is in the wrong place, and about to be found out; that there has been a colossal mistake in the selection and accreditation process which the rest of the world is about to discover. One dreams recurrently, as I do, that one has been exposed as "not belonging," or as having "gotten in" under false pretenses. In my case, someone from Harvard University calls to say they have found out I never took the Ph.D. qualifying exam in German. Or one feels like a play actor, a hypocrite, a stager of charades, or like sixteen personalities without a common center. One feels illegitimate in doing something, or appearing as something; one feels apologetic, undeserving, anxious, tenuous, out-of-place, misread, phony, uncomfortable, incompetent, dishonest, guilty. Many women and men I know seem to share these feelings. But some research and much observation suggests they are especially severe in women, both in chronic life-long forms and in acute forms in particular situations.

I think we need to take a double look at the phenomenon of feeling like a fraud. I will discuss it here from two apparently opposed points of view. I suggest *both* that we mustn't let the world make us feel like frauds, *and* that we must keep alive in ourselves that sense of fraudulence which sometimes overtakes us in public places. I suggest that on the one hand feeling like a fraud indicates that we have, deplorably, internalized value systems that said most people were incompetent and illegitimate in the spheres of power and public life and authority. But then on the other hand, I suggest that when we apologize in public, we are at some level making a deeply wise refusal to carry on the pretense of deserving and feeling good about roles in conventional and oppressive hierarchies. I think that most feelings of personal fraudulence need to be analyzed politically and deplored, especially feelings of fraudulence in lower caste people. But on the other hand, I also think that feeling like a fraud is conducive to social and political *change*, and that some forms of it should be applauded and developed in us, so that we become better at spotting fraudulence in, and trying to alter, the forms of our culture.

You may be wondering which of these sides I will come out on. I am coming out on both sides. My talk is like a Moebius strip. On one side it says, "We must not let them make us feel like frauds." And on the other side it says, "Let us continue to spot fraudulence in the roles we are asked to play." And when I twist over this strip which has two "opposing" sides and join it together again as a circle, I have the Moebius strip phenomenon. You run your finger along the surface. Without changing sides, you cover all surfaces of the twisted circle of tape. In the end your finger comes back to the very spot it began without having changed sides. I feel that the two kinds of argument I am making here are similarly, so to speak, both "on the same side."

Let me give some more specific examples of the feelings of fraudulence which I am talking about. In students it often takes these forms. "The Admissions Committee made a mistake. I don't belong here." Or "I got an A on this paper. *So he didn't find me out.*" Or "I got a B on this paper. *So he found me out.*" Or "I got a C on this paper. *He really found me out.*" All three reactions to the grade are variants on the same feeling that one was an imposter to begin with as author of the paper. Or in reaction to the comment: "You made your points beautifully in this paper," the student may think, "It can't be true. I can't even remember what I said." Or a student who works on a committee may be praised by the Dean for her organizational skill, and think guiltily of the mess on

the desk which the Dean hasn't seen. Analogously, a person feeling like a fraud when told that someone likes her will feel "Then, he must be a jerk." Or, if told she is beautiful, will think only of her faults. Likewise, a graduate student, told that she has written "the definitive work" and will very likely have a brilliant defense, is likely to think that it is all a colossal mistake, and that she couldn't "defend" a guppy. When a letter of recommendation states: "Ms. X is one of the brightest students I have taught in the last 15 years," Ms. X is likely to think, "What a pushover! But, how long can I keep fooling her?" When a commencement speaker says "Medicine will be better off with people like you entering the field," the graduates are likely to think, "These speakers are all hypocrites." If an executive says, "She has set her goals high and has met them in a truly professional way," the employee may feel, "This is no picture of me. I just hold the office together. I just talk to people, for goodness sake." The book reviewer may say, "This book is a path-breaking study," while the faculty member feels, "No, I just cobbled my term papers together into a book of essays because I want to get tenure." Within life in general, one may feel like a fraud speaking in meetings, calling in to a talk show, writing to the newspaper, being praised, telling people what one thinks, claiming to know anything, being called an expert, taking a strong point of view, putting one's head up in any public place, having opinions, and, most terrifying of all, having one's opinions taken seriously.

I have begun to touch on the tip of the iceberg for a few rather privileged people in rather academic and elite situations. There are myriad other examples from spheres of experience which are more widely shared in terms of class and race and culture. But I notice as I think through feelings of fraudulence that they seem to me not to occur in some areas of life. I pat our cat and the cat purrs. I don't feel like a fraud. It's not the same as getting an A on a paper. When I bring home chocolate chip mint ice cream, the kids' appreciation doesn't throw me into a panic about who I am. I think that being praised for a good spaghetti sauce or for finding a bargain is not so unnerving as being praised for giving a speech.

I do not think that it is simply the public nature of certain activities which makes us feel fraudulent. Kiyoo Morimoto of the Bureau of Study Council at Harvard/Radcliffe has said that a majority of the incoming freshmen feel that they were admitted to the college by mistake. Feeling fraudulent can infect lives even within not-very-public situations.

I have come to think of it this way. The more hierarchical the activity or institution, and the higher up we go in it, the greater our feelings of fraudulence are likely to be. People feel fraudulent especially when ascending in hierarchies in which by *societal definition* they do not belong at the top of the pyramid. I call hierarchies pyramidal because most resemble mountains, with far less room at the top than on the bottom. On the top there is less territory but more power, more money, more press, more praise, and more prizes. On the bottom is far more territory and more people, but less of the powers and privileges. Women and lower caste or minority men are especially few in the tops of the hierarchies of money, decision making, opinion making, and public authority, in the worlds of praise and press and prizes, the worlds of the so-called geniuses, leaders, media giants, “forces” in the culture. Women are not considered, for example, to be actors in real history, but only in women’s history. Our perspectives are not featured in mainstream psychology, but only in “Psychology of Women” courses. We are featured not on the front page, but in the Living section of the newspapers. And so on and so forth through the curricular and noncurricular matrix (or should I say matrix?) of our lives. And so when we rise up in hierarchical worlds, while socialized to feel that we *shouldn’t* be there, it is not surprising if we appear to ourselves to be fraudulent. “If this is ‘one of the best colleges in the country,’ then I don’t belong here.” “He thinks I am wonderful? Then he must be a loser.” “She said I argued brilliantly? Then I fooled her.” I think most people who feel like frauds have internalized systems of seeing which say most people are not valid and don’t belong in the worlds of worth, distinctiveness, excellence, authority, creativity, opinion, or forceful expressiveness, positive or negative.

In recent discussions, people have used terms such as the “imposter syndrome” in “high-achieving” women. They talk about some of the problems I have been discussing, and especially about executive or highly-placed women’s feelings of tenuousness and illegitimacy in their careers. Very often such discussions turn to parental attitudes, particularly parental attitudes toward girl children, and some say that when parents supported nontraditional career aspirations in girls, this correlated with fewer feelings of being an imposter.

I like the phrase “imposter syndrome.” This is very useful. I also admire the work of Irene Stiver (1982) on this subject. But I think that it does not make sense to start with a unit like the nuclear family to try

to account for the imposter syndrome. The unit to study, though it is much harder to study than the individual family with its individual actors, should be the whole society. Most people receive messages from *every side, throughout* the culture, that they are not legitimate in places of authority, not legitimate wearing the white coat, not legitimate behind the podium with the presidential seal, not legitimate as a female or minority male within frameworks of the boardroom, the corporate executive office, the banking industry, the Defense Department, in the worlds of making and shaping technology, opinion, and policy. Adults’ failures of nerve may relate, of course, to specific attitudes in specific parents. While our own parents may have failed to encourage, for example, nontraditional career aspirations in women, the society as a whole reinforced in a thousand ways that failure to encourage anyone to challenge the hierarchical winners-and-losers arrangements of the whole culture.

We have some remedies for the feeling of personal fraudulence. Particularly in the United States and over the last two decades, we have been introduced to courses on assertiveness training and confidence building, and, for some of us, also courses in public speaking, or workshops in surviving interviews. We have won greater chances at athletics, and now more women than before are developing an ability to compete in athletic situations with confidence and self-respect and enjoyment. These correctives help some women and men to feel that they are not frauds, and that they are, on the contrary, competent, whole, entitled, and legitimate, both as private persons and as public speakers and actors.

In addition, exposure to mentors and to role models apparently helps to create a feeling of competence and of being sponsored and encouraged in high places by those who “ought to know” our worth. I have benefitted very much from some of the correctives mentioned above, and especially from two courses in public speaking given by the wonderful Merelyn Jacobs of Dartmouth College who told us, “Say what you want your audience to know. They have come all this distance to hear you, and you owe it to them to get to the point.” Such advice helped her listeners to cut down on the apologies. But such remedies do not go beyond the first way of seeing feelings of fraudulence. They help only to correct the problem as I have outlined it so far, that we feel like frauds because we were socialized to think we do not belong high in hierarchies, and that most feelings of fraudulence come when one is rising in — or appearing to rise in — hierarchical territory, by taking

the pulpit, or taking the podium, or taking the front of the class, or taking a position in the news — taking positions which the world associates with people of merit and importance. The higher we go in those hierarchical structures, the more likely we are to feel, hollowly and in our inner selves, that we do not belong and the more we are likely to ask, “What am I doing here?” Assertiveness training *can* help us to look around and check out the people around us, and then say, “I am here because I have as much right to this podium as anyone else, as much competence in this presidency as anyone else I see around me.” This translates into “I may be a fraud, but I am *no more fraudulent than the next person.*”

Now suddenly, the plot thickens. Is the next person fraudulent? This question leads to my second perspective on feeling like a fraud. Here we move into territory where assertiveness training and speech workshops may be of no help. The next person behind that podium is, yes, very likely to be playing a role which entails fraudulence, pretense, imposter behavior. And it has less to do with that individual than with the roles which develop out of the public *requirements* at the tops of hierarchies as now constructed.

I now shift from the Moebius strip message “We must not let them make us feel like frauds” to the other Moebius strip message which is contiguous yet apparently opposite: “Let us continue to spot fraudulence in the roles we are made to play in the hierarchies of power.” And here I want to tell a story about a woman colleague in a large United States research university who dared, figuratively speaking, to move in public from one side of the strip to the other. Her university was holding a faculty-wide debate on whether affirmative action guidelines for hiring should also be followed for decisions about tenure and promotion. The heated meeting on this important subject included all of the undergraduate and graduate school faculties. I was not there, but I heard that, one after another, white male faculty members stood up to say they had their doubts; when it came to promotion and tenuring, the university had to be on guard against *mediocrity*, and not let down its high standards, and that when it came to giving people a lifetime vote of confidence, one couldn’t just take “any old person” and give that vote of confidence — one must make a financial investment in excellence. The woman psychologist to whom I am grateful stood up and said, “I am hearing a lot of talk about excellence. But then I look around me and I see a lot of mediocre men. For me the real test of affirmative action will be whether or not I can stand up here in 20

years and see equal numbers of mediocre women and mediocre men.” She called the men on their claim to excellence, on their equation of power with merit.

This relates to my second perspective on feeling like a fraud. We feel fraudulent, I think, partly because we know that usually those who happen to get the high titles and the acclaim and the imagery going with them are not “the best and the brightest,” and *we don’t want to pretend to be so either.* When we entertain nagging thoughts about whether we belong or deserve to be at the podium, or in the boardroom, or tenured, or giving an interview to a newspaper, or earning a good salary for what we like to do, we may be deeply wise in feeling anxious and illegitimate and fraudulent in these circumstances. Those men who feel the same way in such settings may be deeply wise as well, for the public forms and institutions tend to demand that one appear to be an authority figure, an expert, “the best.” The forms require that one appear to be a person who sets goals and knows how to meet them, a “leader” who is superior in certain qualities over those who are “followers.” The public forms and institutions insisting on these images do require fraudulent behavior of us, and they will turn us into frauds if we accept the roles as written. The roles are dishonest and people who are still in touch with their humanity and with their frailty will properly feel fraudulent in them. What the public roles entail and promote are usually not those qualities we have really specialized in ourselves. What the systems reward in us rarely corresponds to what we are really good at, and most humane in being.

This point brings me back to the conference of women who appeared to disown their own ideas when they took the floor. When 17 women in a row apologize, then perhaps we should listen to what they are saying, particularly when the 17 apologists are known as “leaders” but are not acting like them. We need to listen to what they tell us about *the way they want to lead.* My first response was to think that these apologetic women were testimony to women’s incompetence. And that *is* the world’s judgment on them. But an alternative way of listening to them, on the assumption that women *are* competent, brings out a message their behavior delivers, which is not that they can’t stand behind the podium, but that they can’t stand the podium. And in their apologies these women were, let us say, trying to change the forms of public speaking to make them less fraudulent, less ridiculous, less filled with pretense. Conventions of public speaking entail many uses of rhetoric; effective rhetoric requires that one speaker persuades a group of followers. What if a person at a conference simply

wants to put new ideas on the table? She may begin by saying, "You may not agree with this, but . . ." In this apparent apology, she is creating an opening which is nonrhetorical, and her words accomplish several important ends. "You may not agree with this, but . . ." This opening not only acknowledges the presence of the Other; it also postulates the engagement of the Other in what is going on (as they say in literature, it postulates reader response). It also acknowledges the validity of the Other's ideas. "You *may not* agree with this, but . . ." and it creates a tentative tone, a conversational matrix, a sense of give and take. As I see it, this opening acknowledges and strengthens the social fabric before it can be torn by rhetoric. It says, "I am not taking the floor from you. I recognize you are there. I am trying to make this more like a conversation than like a speech." The woman who says, "I have just one point to make . . ." is saying also "I don't want to interrupt the flow," or perhaps "I am not saying this in opposition to what has already been said . . ." Research has indicated that girls in playgrounds often break up a game rather than having it disintegrate into conflicts over rules. The woman speaker who says, "I really don't know what I'm saying, but here goes!" inspires neither confidence nor respect in the boardrooms of corporate America; but she is not pretending, and perhaps we need more of her in the boardrooms. At any rate, I find I want to make the case for some of the apologies I heard as refusals to pretend, refusals to be a fraud, refusals to carry through with the rhetorical conventions of public speaking, or writing, or performance in which one must pretend to be a strong man overcoming others, or a woman strongly identified with white males' functions and rules for power and success.

I wish to return now to undergraduate students' feelings of fraudulence, of feeling guilty and out of place. "The Admissions Committee made a mistake. I don't belong here." If one insists on defining certain colleges as "the best," any intelligent woman will feel that no one has done the tests to know whether either the college or she *can* be called "the best." It's a valid doubt. When she gets an A on a term paper, beyond the idea that "this means he didn't find me out" is this idea: An A is a grade absolutely better than B. Even when used together (in A-/B+), there is a slash between to show they are not the same grade. But is the student with the A *absolutely* better than the others who took that exam and who scored lower? A woman down the hall may have studied all month, never having had a course in this subject before, and have gotten a B. Another may never have really understood what was going on, but her questions

really showed others what the course was about. Let's say she got a C. Our "A student" may not have done any work until the last two days, and then crammed all night. That puts her up, away from the others, on a pedestal. Does she belong there? A woman may say to herself, "He thinks I am beautiful. But I hate that Beauty Queen stuff; I won't get trapped by it." Or, "They call me an expert. That's because they don't know any better. They probably don't know who the experts *are* on this subject. I certainly don't." Or, "They call me a pathbreaker. But I don't think of myself as breaking paths. I think and write." It seems to me that the absoluteness of hierarchical rankings and ratings and of the existing metaphors of originality or strength contain many elements of fraudulence. For women, especially, this absoluteness, and those metaphors of pathbreaking and being expert don't correspond to our complex sense of the web of circumstances in which we are born, circumstances in which our lives do not have trajectories and goals, but are, rather, threads in the fabric of circumstance, only partly of our own social and emotional weaving.

We resist, in other words, the building of pedestals, and the awarding of titles which we feel are not quite appropriate and which separate us from others like ourselves and which imply that we are self-sufficient or independent loners. And this resistance is healthy for us and others. Or, rather, it can be seen both as good and bad for us, but as good for the whole society.

A colleague told me that she attended a conference in which, in the relaxed aftermath, students began to ask the visiting professors, all of whom were women, how they came to their public lives and their academic fields. One woman, in examining her past, put her distinguished present down mostly to the circumstance that she had been rich. Another, examining her past, put her distinguished present down mostly to the circumstance that she had been poor. And a third put her success down to the fact that she entered the library and the books that interested her more or less fell on her head. None of the women acknowledged her own competence or excellence or enjoyment of her field. None said, "I liked the field; I read the books; I understood them; I got my papers in on time; I became competent; I saw new possibilities; I add to the world; people appreciate my work and I do, too." These women were perhaps then, let's say, deplorably modest, rejecting credit for themselves. But on the other hand, I would say they were applaudably honest. From one point of view, they were all feeling rather like frauds as "success stories," or "notable women," so they put their lives

down to circumstances. On the other hand, they were feeling a fraudulence attaching, as I think, to the myths of self-realization which go this way: "I came up from nothing, rags to riches, from pink booties to briefcase on Wall Street. I did it all myself. I knew what I wanted and I was self-reliant. You can be, too, if you set your sights high and don't let anything interfere; you can do anything you want." Now, it seems only honest to acknowledge that that is a myth. When women refuse to take sole credit for their mid-life status and insist on mentioning circumstances of birth and color and wealth and regional and ethnic setting and rejecting the pretenses of the pedestal and the podium, they are doing something that the whole society needs. We need it, in other words, in our highest policy-makers, this sense of how circumstances of birth and status and social network more than individual selves bear on life outcomes. False pictures imply that the individual is the unit of actualization in this culture, and that self-actualization is the main business of all competent people. But most of human life is bound up in collective and social and private experience which is not linear and not filled with clear upward trajectories and not identified with the aspirations of white, upwardly mobile men. Most of human sensibility is not covered by what authoritative experts tell us because their frameworks for thought are often wrong, and are in fact, fraudulent when they claim to cover all of us.

What, then, should we teach students about feeling like a fraud? First, that it is a feeling taught to us. Second, that this teaching is no accident. Third, that it is not good for us to feel like frauds insofar as that feeling perpetuates hierarchies. And fourth, that in another sense, it *is* good for us to feel like frauds insofar as that feeling may help us to undermine hierarchies. I advocate in this a *double vision*, as I do in virtually all other kinds of work with students and in the society at large. We need a double vision both of what the dominant culture stands for, and of what we lower caste people who are undervalued can develop in the way of a critique of the dominant culture. Within the dominant culture, people who can't deliver the goods from behind the podium will look incompetent. Therefore, we need to get over the socialized feeling of being a fraud and stand behind that podium and deliver the goods. This is learning the present ways of power. But, alternatively, it is constructive for the whole society if we question why there must be a podium, and ask whether the town meeting or the Quaker meeting or the March on Washington weren't perhaps better experiments in public speaking. Only when we examine the

difference between the conversation and the speech can we suggest that world leaders try conversation.

Let me turn now to the linguistic aspect of feelings about fraudulence in writing. When one writes a paper on virtually any subject, one is likely to begin with a complex of myriad ideas that constitute what William James called "a buzzing, blooming confusion." But one must choose among these ideas in order to put a paper together, because the rules for the sentence and the paragraph are very arbitrary. The rules insist on beginnings, middles, and ends. Within the sentence, conventions of grammar dictate that the subject act on the object through the verb. Moreover, traditional conventions of expository writing insist on something still more autocratic, that one make a case which is cohesive and clear, an argument which has no holes in it, a position from which one can take on all comers and defend one's self. This assumption about what writing is, the making of a case against the fancied attacker, permeates our teaching of writing from the expository courses through the graduate student's defense of the thesis, which is a kind of king-on-the-mountain in which you take on all attackers of your small piece of territory. It's silly, isn't it, that the paper must make a "watertight," "unimpeachable" argument, must make "points," and be like the world of boxing or dueling, holding off imagined attackers. The rules surrounding formal writing leave sensitive people with a feeling that the finished paper makes a statement which is fraudulent. Those who want to use language for other purposes are uneasy with the praise which comes with using language for making arguments. A student who says "I am such a fraud; I can't write this paper" will tend toward self-censorship or silence, and she needs help against those feelings. A student who says that one is, after all, a fraud in writing this kind of paper is in better shape. She knows life doesn't come in sentences; life doesn't come in paragraphs. And although institutions are encouraging her to use the expository essay as a kind of combination attack and defense mechanism, she wants to find alternative uses of language. I think we need to help students to have both states of mind. First, we need to help them get past the feeling that they are *more* fraudulent than anyone else, and help them get past the feeling that everyone else in the class is really writing a first-rate argument, whereas they are blocked individually. Second, we need to help them to project some of their feeling of fraudulence onto societal forms. They should be encouraged to see that the public forms of our lives are a construct for organizing us, and that they particularly serve to keep the present economic, political, racial, and sexual

hierarchies in place. Students as actors can gradually change those forms as they use and become successful in them. So the student may wisely repudiate that pinnacle-shaped A in the terms in which it was offered to her, as praise, for example, for “winning” argumentation. She may keep her own rich sense of connection which the subject nevertheless gave her before she wrote the “winning” paper on it, and which may enrich her life as she tries to write new scripts for her own public performance.

Likewise, students can be helped to get high grades or prizes for successful debating, learning to make a point against all comers. We need also to teach them to see fraudulence inherent in the conventions of debate, in that you become a polished expert in making the case for the side you have been assigned, rather than making a case for what you may perceive as the truth. Students need to be helped to see there is a reason why they can accept “You are good to talk to” more easily than “This is the best paper I have had in 15 years.” The letter and the conversation as forms have less of fraud in them; they don’t force us into authoritativeness and gross simplification.

My husband, on hearing me work through these ideas, said, “You’re saying that those who don’t think they are fraudulent are the real frauds.” Yes. We have been socialized to feel like frauds but have developed some strengths in the midst of that fact, and because of that fact. Those who were socialized to feel absolutely entitled have made a habit of fraudulent behavior in proportion as they have internalized the view of themselves as the best and the brightest. So our task is complex. When a student says “I get so nervous talking in class,” I think we need first to point out that she/he was set up to get nervous: Hierarchies are disempowering, and nearly all people are socialized so that they *will* feel like failures in public and need help to feel confident. At the same time, students are right deeply to mistrust what anyone says authoritatively, including themselves. We need that tentativeness in high places. We need it in the Pentagon, in the White House, and in makers of public policy. We need that conversation, that ability to listen, to have a nonrhetorical, a relational self.

I hope we can move students from “My voice should not be heard at all” to “I don’t like the official tone I am forced to take in those situations; it misrepresents me” through “What *other* voice can I find to convey not an autonomous, self-confident me (which doesn’t exist), but the self-in-relation, not coercive, and not deceptive, but social?” If we give students a double vision of social reality, I think they can learn both the language of power, which we use

standing at the podium and delivering those straight sentences, and the language of social change, which suggests alternate visions of how to use power.

Women and others who have been disempowered are not all able to bring our truths to light yet. Many such people tend to apologize. But in doing so we are creating a voice which, though sounding tentative, has the seeds for the future in it. When we say, “You may not agree with this, but . . .,” we are creating an atmosphere of *detente*, peace, negotiation-making tentativeness, rather than using the podium for the violent act of bringing everyone over to our side. Perhaps, then, we women should be seen as canary birds testing for the carbon monoxide poison in the atmosphere. When seventeen women in a row apologize, there may be something wrong with the air in the nonapologetic world. Our habit of smelling the poison in the air and trying not to add to the poison can be seen as a strength, not a weakness, creating a healthier kind of atmosphere. The fraudulent-feeling people in the culture are perhaps our best canary birds. When they begin to keel over, we know we are really in trouble — that the air around them does not have enough life-sustaining oxygen. Those situations in which they sense the poison in the air most clearly are those situations connected with grades, titles, promotions, public accreditation, and public pronouncements, in the hierarchies which have the clearest absolute ranking systems, with a clear demarcation between winners and losers.

So, “which of these things do you want?” says the mind seeking only one vision. As I have said, I want two things at once: to mitigate apology which reinforces hierarchy, and to intensify revisionary tentative behavior, so that we see and criticize fraudulent forms and customs in the expert, the leader, the “self-made” man, the “self-reliant” person, the self-righteous American certain that God is on our side, and that He intends us to be a winner. We need more training in seeing the public presences of winners and authority figures as personae, fraudulent actors in high places, and in bringing the material of the private consciousness into public life, as feminists are already trying to do on so many fronts.

My theory of two ways of seeing fraudulence should be put here against my theory of the psyche and of the society in general. I see both our individual psyches and the whole society as having the shape of a broken pyramid, with a kind of geological fault running more or less horizontally through the center and dividing the top part from the lower part. The public and competitive functions of our psyches are

contained in the top part of the pyramid, and the most ordinary, lateral, everyday business of simply getting along “without accomplishing anything” is, in my view, at the base of the psyche, and of civilization, and of the pyramid which I am drawing here.

All institutions and psyches have both public, competitive functions and, underlying these and making them possible, a substructure of the ordinary work of upkeep, maintenance, and making and mending of the social fabric. At the tops of the pyramids are concentrated money, power, and decision-making functions, and in the very much wider base are the more ordinary functions which have either no visibility at all in most of what we read and do and think and are told, or very little visibility, and have seldom been named and identified. The grain in the public part of the psyche and in the public part of our institutions is vertical and contains many ladders to promotion, “success,” praise, and prizes. The hidden prescription under these competitive functions of personality and society is that you win lest you lose, because those alternatives are seen to be the *only* alternatives: *Either* you are on your way up, *or* you’re on your way down, falling toward the bottom. One wouldn’t want to be on the bottom, so it is assumed one will be striving toward what the world calls the top — that is, toward “accomplishment,” “achievement,” “success,” defined as leading to individual power. In the lateral functions of the psyche and of the society occur the experiences of washing the dishes and patting the cat, and having talks with one’s friends, and earning enough money to put the bread on the table, and getting the bread on the table, and washing the dishes, and loving those who cannot help us “get anywhere.” These are the functions of answering the phone, of driving home at night, of being a person intimately involved with others for the sake of the involvement. They are not what the world would call the functions of achievement or success. They have instead to do with survival. The hidden prescription in this basis of our institutions and our psyches is that one works for the decent survival of all because therein lies one’s own best survival. This is not an altruistic prescription; you don’t simply work for others, but you live *with* others because that is one of the impulses and conditions we were born to. One finds one’s development through the development of others. One develops, as the researchers here have defined it, a self-in-relation (Miller, 1984; Surrey, 1984).

Now, unfortunately, the functions represented by the top parts of my broken pyramids have been projected onto white males born to circumstances of

cultural power, and the functions of the psyche and the institutions which I place at the base of the pyramids have been projected onto women and lower caste males. Much research is now showing, of course, that women aren’t so happy with that assignment — that projection onto us — of all of the lateral functions of survival, nor men with the projection onto them of the world of winning versus losing — a world which has only two alternatives: yes/no; right/wrong; top/bottom; win/lose; self/other; success/failure.

By now it is clear to you that the first type of feeling like a fraud occurs chiefly in these top-level public functions of self and society. If one has internalized the view that only the win/lose value system and version of reality are real, women at the podium (or lower caste men) will feel fraudulent, since by definition they are losers trying to act like winners in occupying the podium. If, however, we have educated our students and ourselves to a double vision, to both the public functions of psyche and society and the hidden, lateral functions of psyche and society, the survival functions, then we can see feeling like a fraud as something else again. In its second aspect, the feeling of fraudulence is the *critique* of the vertical from these lateral parts of the personality, objecting both that the vertical behavior is partial and misrepresents us and that the lateral realities which are the ground of our humanity are not honored in the culture’s value system or its most conventional praise.

My view of curriculum change superimposed on this diagram goes this way. In Phase I you study womanless History. In Phase II, women in History, but only as exceptions, and still on History’s terms. In Phase III, women are seen as a problem, anomaly, or absence in History, as a problem for historians and also for the society, as victims, the oppressed, the losers, or the incompetent. Then one moves further to that main work of women which has been assigned to us — finding one’s self through the development of others, and then one is doing Phase IV: *Women As History*, redefining history so as to make us central. In Phase V we will have *History Redefined and Reconstructed to Include Us All*. Now once one has come to see the traditional lives of women as just as real as the rest of what history has named, and more plentiful, why then everything shifts. The feeling of fraudulence at that point is seen to arise out of the sense that all people are interconnected, and that in no absolute way is one student different from the one down the hall who studied for weeks, or the roommate who never really understood the course. Each of us has done something that cannot be absolutely ranked. When we resist that ranking

system that awarded us the A, because of our consciousness of the lateral functions of life and personality, then we are resisting fraudulence in a way that may become useful to the whole society.

Now what do I mean by that? According to my dream of the next hundred years, we can, if we live that long, bring into public life with us our sense of the now-named and reconstituted surviving functions, and we can call into question and change the behavior of those who see the world only in terms of winners and losers. And, of course, we need this work on a global scale to keep from blowing ourselves up. We can see already that so much of public performance is based on rules of acting and image-building, and we can spot the inaccuracy of the hierarchies in that they are not the meritocracies they claim to be. We know that our consciousness coming out of the survival aspects of personality can help us encourage the whole society not to pretend to be what it isn't. The pluralistic version of reality that comes out of seeing women *as* history — and that means all women, not just a few white women — also conduces to a kind of foreign policy which says that the Russians and we and the Chinese are equally valid people. The seventeen apologies come from this deeper level, and if we will *listen* to them and *learn* from them, they will bring revisionary strength to the whole culture. The apologies suggest that most leaders are poseurs, and that the “top” is *not* the top. I think Alice in Wonderland was right when she said to the Court, “You are nothing but a pack of cards!” Wise people go behind the screen and perceive the Wizard of Oz as the little shriveled man. Until we see the authoritative forms *as forms*, we will continue to deny those parts of ourselves that have no words, that don't come in paragraphs and chapters and footnotes; we will be forced to deny the woolgatherer, the conversationalists, the imaginer, the lover of women and lower caste men, the one who likes people and joins with them without necessarily “achieving” anything. The world of neighborhoods and of human communities is the world of survival. If the public world becomes more honest, it may help us invent a form of podium behind which honest people don't have to apologize for their connectedness to others.

I wish to end with the apology, which is not *only* an apology, which might have introduced my talk. I appreciate the invitation to speak in this colloquium series. I am not an expert in women's development. I am only an observer, but you thought I might be a resource for the series. In the same way, in your Stone Center work you invite us all, and not just the experts, in on a process. You show us not a finished theory,

but a *process of reaching a theory*, a process of reseeing women and renaming some of our apparent weaknesses as potential or actual strengths. Your work in reconstruing and reconstructing enabled me to do some work, personal as well as public, which goes into my observations tonight. Your work, I think, can help us convert “feeling like a fraud” into resisting fraudulence and pressures toward fraudulence which originate outside of us in absolute, hierarchical systems and in definitions of our strengths as weaknesses. To this audience I want to say that I do see myself as a amateur observer, very limited, merely human, narrowly circumstanced and therefore half blind in observing all of what I have described. But also I would like to ask whether it wouldn't have been good for us all if every *expert* lecturer, every general, and every leader had demonstrated an ability to appreciate the process of living more than the products of success and victory. Wouldn't it have made quite a difference to ourselves and to human life in our time?

Discussion Summary

After each colloquium lecture, a discussion is held. Selected portions are summarized here. In this session, Dr. Janet Surrey joined in leading the discussion.

Question: Don't you think it's more important for women to try to build their self-confidence by learning to be competent in the way the world does operate at this time?

McIntosh: For numbers of women that may be satisfying. I really cannot judge for any one person. However, I've found that for a great many women that isn't enough. They know that there are other parts of themselves, parts which the major institutions of the world, as they operate, do not recognize as existing and valid. I believe it is important to recognize these parts and their importance for all people.

For example, if I am trying to help a student write a speech and I want to help her do things in ways that will be valued according to the standards of our major institutions, I would take her speech and scratch out all of the apologies. But, if I'm trying to help a student see the systemic factors which create fraudulence in the roles we're asked to play, I'd go back and put all the apologies back in, helping her to see the wisdom of her apologies, and applauding her resistance to a fraudulent tone in writing.

It's important to recognize that we have large parts of our personalities which will feel uncomfortable according to the rules of the “vertical

world.” And we have strengths which come from the “nonvertical world.” Women can be held back if we don’t recognize this for each other.

Comment: I wonder if we can describe this as a need for different ways of operating in different situations. For example, in a seminar with students, it may be better to take an “apologetic” view, saying, for example, “You may disagree, but let me ask you what you think about this explanation . . .” You are then saying you don’t know everything and inviting an exchange. But if I have to meet with the president of my university because he is doing something that I think is not good for the women at the university, I would not want to apologize for what I’m about to say.

McIntosh: That is a very valuable way to extend this discussion. As I hear it, you’re suggesting a kind of “taxonomy” of varying situations.

I’ve talked about this topic really in a very rough “first cut” way. We probably need to work out a much more specific taxonomy of apology.

Surrey: It may be useful to know that we have to work in these different modes and in different kinds of settings, at least at this time in history. For myself, I find it important to work within a workplace which operates very much in the ways that you say are generally valued in public life. It’s important to know this reality because it is the way the world operates and it is so powerful. However, it is very important for me to work and be with groups of women — and sometimes men, too — who value the “lateral” parts of life. Even if the dominant world does not recognize these parts of life, it is essential that we keep recognizing their value for each other.

McIntosh: At this time we do have to recognize the existence of these two worlds, so to speak. It means we have a kind of double consciousness or double vision. While it’s complicated, I feel that it helps us to provide for these parts of life which are really essential to our psychological well-being.

Comment: Despite what is happening in actuality, what is “invented” by those at the top is going to be the construction that’s put on everything—including the explanations about everything that goes on in the lateral parts of life. There’s good reason to believe, then, that most explanations of the lateral life are not likely to be valid representations.

McIntosh: I agree, especially since if you think only in terms used at the top, you’re not likely to have a well-developed “double vision”: you really won’t have seen everything from *within* the lateral world. Your account of it will be that of a person who has

looked down at the surface of the water in the Caribbean rather than snorkeling in it. The life underneath can’t be guessed from the surface.

Comment: I’m thinking of the world as a place in which power is very real. The people in power are not going to act on a basis derived from the recognition of the importance of those lateral parts of life. Perhaps we should begin to think in terms of effective transitional forms — ways of building some bridges between these two realms. Are there ways that we could think about creating such forms?

McIntosh: Power is there all the time in all situations. It’s there in the family, too, yet within that political setting we try to recognize that everyone has her or his needs, and try to find the ways to meet them. At least we project this as a valid way to be within the family. Is this, then, perhaps a “transitional form?”

When I talk about the aim being the “decent survival of us all,” that means granting recognition to everyone’s needs in all of life, including public life. If you make that your stated aim, then you work toward that and you cannot simply work toward a win-lose, one up-one down way of being. You become “transitional,” again.

We are just not yet attuned to bringing this value system into all of the situations in the world, in public life; to say, for example, that the secretaries really keep everything going at times. If their work were recognized as equally important or sometimes more important than what the “top” people do, our forms in public life would be very different.

Yes, I think we should work on devising more transitional forms which may help us to move this comprehensive sense of meeting everyone’s needs into more parts of our life in the world.

Comment: I think it’s dangerous to talk this way about the “bottom” or lateral parts of life. It’s important not to romanticize this. It really represents what oppression has done to us, to women and other people who have been made disadvantaged.

McIntosh: I agree it is dangerous to romanticize. But I don’t see these lateral parts of life only as those phenomena produced by oppression. I’m describing *functions* — the differing kinds of sustaining functions that are needed in all societies but also within everyone’s life and personality; I’m saying that we would all be better off if we recognized the crucial validity of these functions of making and mending the personal and social fabric. They do not result simply from our being victimized.

The oppression — and the misunderstanding — come when these parts are devalued and then

projected on to women and lower caste people *only*.

It's important for all of us, female and male, to fulfill ourselves in the lateral parts of our personalities.

Comment: I think it's important, too, to point to the illusions of those who operate at the top or only in the vertical mode. It's really clear if you look at a great many of the people who are said to be leading people and the people who are at the top in institutions that are said to be leading institutions, that they are flawed in many ways.

The people who are most fraudulent may be those who would never be able to consider really asking themselves if they are fraudulent, as you said.

McIntosh: Yes, and you remind me, too, of Elizabeth Dodson-Gray's book, *Patriarchy as a Conceptual Trap*, which is very valuable in helping us see that whole point.

Comment: When you were talking, I was thinking that you were talking a great deal about students. I think there is an important age factor. I have been talking to older women, really old, in their eighties or seventies. In the whole way that they talk they do not seem to feel like frauds. They seem to have come to a certain resolution.

McIntosh: That is very encouraging to hear. Perhaps they have seen what really counts for themselves and for others, and what doesn't, and they have gained the courage to state it more openly, and live in a less divided way.

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