

READING 2

Letter One
Your Legacy

Phyllis Chesler

Here I sit, head bent, writing you an intimate letter. I sense your presence, even though I don't know your name. I envision you as a young woman, possibly a young man, somewhere between the ages of eighteen and thirty-five, but you may also be a decade older—or younger—than that. You may not yet be born.

Perhaps I am trying to speak to my own younger self. When I was coming of age—a process which is still far from over—no one ever spoke strong truths to me in a loving voice. When I was your age, I did not know what I needed to know in order to understand my life—anybody's life. Perhaps, in writing to you, I wish to correct that, to make amends.

In the past, Niccolò Machiavelli wrote a letter such as mine to a prince, Sun Tzu to a king, Virginia Woolf to a gentleman, Rainer Maria Rilke to a male admirer. This letter is for you. You are either poor or rich; you are any or all the colors of the human rainbow, all shades of luck and character. You are my heir. This letter is your legacy. Without your conscious intervention, that legacy may again lie dormant for one hundred years. Or longer.

I imagine you are a person who wants to know why evil exists. People commit evil deeds because we, the good people, do not stop them. To quote Edmund Burke: "All that is necessary for the forces of evil to win in the world is for enough good men to do nothing." Ah, Burke, evil also triumphs when good women do nothing.

Men alone are not responsible for patriarchy; women are also their willing, even ardent, collaborators.

Perhaps you believe you can "have it all": a brilliant career, a loving, life-long marriage, healthy children/no children, enough money,

and happiness too. If you're anything like I was, you probably believe that whatever awful things may have happened to women in the past, or still are happening to "other" women today, cannot happen to you.

Darling, I don't want to frighten you away, but I don't want to waste your time either, so I can't pretend that simply because you or I want it to be so that in fact women and men are equal.

Even when men and women do exactly the same thing, it means something different. The father who changes a diaper is often seen as a hero; not so the mother who is, after all, only doing what she's expected to do. This is not true in reverse. The woman who succeeds in a man's world—although she is not expected to do so—is rarely treated as a conquering hero. She is, more often, seen as an aggressive bitch. She may well be aggressive—but no more than her male colleagues are. Some women try to prove their worth by outdoing their male colleagues in tough, anti-female behavior. Some women feel compelled to behave in "feminine" or "maternal" ways to appease those who would otherwise punish them for stepping so far out of line.

Thus, unlike her male counterparts, the chief judge pours her own coffee, and the police officer may not use what she's learned on the job to stop her husband from beating her, whatever she's learned at work can't over-ride what she's learned all her life about being a woman. The female employee—not her male counterpart—is still expected to buy the gifts, take the coats, bake the cookies for an office party, babysit her employer's child. Hardly gang-rape, but sexism nevertheless.

Yes, the world is different now than it was when I was your age. In only thirty years, a

ings. We need to take to heart the words of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, a poet, a thinking woman, and a feminist, who wrote in 1845 of her impatience with studies which cultivate a "passive reciprocity" in the mind, and asserted that "women want to be made to *think actively*." Their apprehension is quicker than that of men, but their defect lies for the most part in the logical faculty and in the higher mental activities." Note that she implies a defect which can be remedied by intellectual training; *not* an inborn lack of ability.

I have said that the contract on the student's part involves that you demand to be taken seriously. This means seeking out criticism, recognizing that the most affirming thing anyone can do for you is demand that you push yourself further, show you the range of what you can do. It means rejecting attitudes of "take-it-easy," "why-be-so-serious," "why-worry-you'll-probably-get-married-anyway." It means assuming your share of responsibility for what happens in the classroom, because that affects the quality of your daily life here. It means that the student sees herself engaged with her teachers in an active, ongoing struggle for a real education. But for her to do this, her teachers must be committed to the belief that women's minds and experience are intrinsically valuable and indispensable to any civilization worthy [of] the name; that there is no more exhilarating and intellectually fertile place in the academic world today than a women's college—if both students and teachers in large enough numbers are trying to fulfill this contract. The contract is really a pledge of mutual seriousness about women, about language, ideas, methods, and values. It is our shared commitment toward a world in which the inborn potentialities of so many women's minds will no longer be wasted, raveled-away, paralyzed, or denied.

Now comes the second part of the contract. I believe that in a women's college you have the right to expect your faculty to take you seriously. The education of women has been a matter of debate for centuries, and old, negative attitudes about women's role, women's ability to think and take leadership, are still rife both in and outside the university. Many male professors (and I don't mean only at Douglass) still feel that teaching in a women's college is a second-rate career. Many tend to eroticize their women students—to treat them as sexual objects—instead of demanding the best of their minds. (At Yale a legal suit (*Alexander v. Yale*) has been brought against the university by a group of women students demanding a stated policy against sexual advances toward female students by male professors.) Many teachers, both men and women, trained in the male-centered tradition, are still handing the ideas and texts of that tradition on to students without teaching them to criticize its antiwoman attitudes, its omission of women as part of the species. Too often, all of us fail to teach the most important thing, which is that clear thinking, active discussion, and excellent writing are all necessary for intellectual freedom, and that these require *hard work*. Sometimes, perhaps in discouragement with a culture which is both antiintellectual and antiwoman, we may resign ourselves to low expectations for our students before we have given them half a chance to become more thoughtful, expressive human be-