

Cultural Daily

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Doesn't That Make Me Feminist?

Laurie Ember · Thursday, June 27th, 2013

I've been thinking a lot lately about feminism and how I fit into the world of women "Leaning In." My mother is a big part of this story, but I only just realized it.

I was 8 years old when my mother cut off all her hair. I was away at sleep-away camp for the whole summer. I had been so excited to go, but now four weeks into it I was homesick. I couldn't wait to see my parents. I missed them. I missed home. I missed the stability and sameness of life with them. It was finally Visiting Day and they were waiting for me at the Administration Building. I ran as fast as I could up the hill to greet them. I recognized my father, but not the petite woman standing next to him.



My mother had the most beautiful hair. It was auburn – a color that people now pay hundreds of dollars for. It was severely curly, yet soft. The curls flowed down just below her shoulders. She would pull it back in a tight ponytail when she played tennis, which she did and still does every day.

It was the 1970s. Women with long, curly hair were straightening it. Declared feminists were chopping it off. My mother was not a feminist. She did not work outside the home after I was born. She did not burn her bra. She was a mom. Artistic and athletic but still a housewife.

Perhaps she obsessed about straightening it. About how she appeared in public. About what her mother and her friends thought and said about the way she looked. She cut off her hair and never grew it back. It was a small curly afro on top of her tiny head. Still that beautiful color.

I asked my mother that summer why she had cut it all off. She told me it was easier that way. After playing tennis, she could hop in the shower and not think about it. It was not a statement, just a matter of convenience. I did not understand.

This year, my mother turned 80. She still has that short little afro. Now, the curls have lost their kink and I can see her scalp in spots where it is thinning. Once every two months, my father takes her to the salon and the same man who trims his balding comb-over colors my mother's hair a weird, geriatric orange. She does not skip these appointments. It is important to her that her hair is not gray.

I wonder why she cares so much about how her hair looks now when she didn't care then. I wonder why she frets over it now when she didn't want to fret then. Why she compromised her beauty when she had it but wants it back now when it's too late.

I wondered about a lot of things my mother did and thought when I was growing up. I wanted to talk about so many things with her, like whether or not she missed teaching art or whether volunteering for the local music and art foundation was as fulfilling as she had hoped. But we did

not confide much in each other and we never had those conversations. Now, it is unlikely that she will remember.

Maybe, for all these years, I have underestimated my mother's intention. Perhaps she rid herself of those gorgeous auburn locks only because she wanted to.

Perhaps she wanted to play tennis all morning and didn't want to take the time to dry, brush, and style it before going back out among the ladies in town.

Those women always made her uncomfortable. Except on the tennis court, where she defeated all but one every single time they played.

Perhaps without ever talking about it, my mother taught me the importance of doing what you want in this life. The importance of not letting anybody dictate who you are or how you look. Of not letting anyone take you off your game.

Didn't that make her a feminist?

There was great pressure on women my age to work outside the home. I chose to suspend my career and stay at home to raise my girls. Nobody made me do it. Feminism was supposed to give women options and I embraced that. Even though I was stuck writing that disparaging word – "Homemaker" – anytime I was asked my current occupation.



Maybe I, like my mother, am living my life the way I want to. My daughters confide in me and I in them. I have gone back to work on my own terms. And I now have the sense of accomplishment that comes with "Leaning In" while also cherishing the memories of the irreplaceable years I had with my girls.

I wouldn't have it any other way.

And I like my hair long.

Doesn't that make me a feminist?

Images: Top, source: meggylicious.tumblr.com; below, Sheryl Sandberg, leaning in.

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