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All the Comforts of Home

By Kerri Kor

Discovering All the Comforts of Home One Woman's Engagement with Feminism and Identity

. . . One day, in the process of culling things out of our current home so as not to move clutter to our new sanctuary, a cheerily alluring book in its bright yellow jacket found itself in my hands; it was none other than Cheryl Mendelson's *Home Comforts: The Art & Science of Keeping House*. I decided to take a break from my tasks and actually crack the cover . . . What I found . . . was an amazing catalyst that has generated within me more invested thought and meaningful discovery than one could ever imagine possible from a book categorized by the Library of Congress as "home economics." Mendelson, a lawyer and a professor, admits right away that she has a secret life: "I keep house," she says. What intrigued me about this confession was the "secret" part - why, after all, would one need to keep this passion a secret? Explains Mendelson:

Until now, I have almost entirely concealed this passion for domesticity. . . . Without thinking much about it, I knew I would not want this information about me to get around. After all, I belong to the first generation of women who worked more than they stayed home. We knew that no judge would credit the legal briefs of a housewife, no university would give tenure to one, no corporation would promote one, and no one who mattered would talk to one at a party.

When I read those lines, I sat for a moment in a sort of shocked state. There was nothing particularly surprising about her assessment of others' views on female domesticity, but her confession along with her willingness to stand up and say, effectively, "Hey, I'm a professional woman and I identify strongly with a role long attributed to women because it is my passion," struck me as one of the most potent examples of what a true "feminist" could be. Her explanation unleashed an emotional and intellectual outpouring that shows only its first manifestation within these pages.



"Food: Breakfast, Lunch, and Dinner"

"Cooking at home links your past and future and solidifies your sense of identity and place. When a home gives up its hearth . . . it gives up its focus. And the people who live there lose theirs too."

In a recent classroom debate, I found myself on what others might believe is the not-pro side of feminism; I was objecting to a certain type of feminism: an element I have experienced within the Second Wave feminism of the 60's, 70's and 80's (and still alive and kicking today) in which "sisterhood" and aggressive polemics often ran rough-shod over motherhood and tending the hearth. Of course, Second Wave feminism as a whole had positive attributes and must be recognized as a major force in the advancement of women's issues within the United States. As for these attributes serving as tools for at least a partial awakening and transformation, I take no issue. But I do take issue with an ideology that serves as much to divide as to unite, to exclude as to include, and one that remains stuck in short-term victories instead of long-term solutions. I do not hold that all feminist theory born from Second Wave feminism serves these non-transformational purposes, but neither do I hold that all feminist theory should be limited by the title "feminist," regardless of its "wave."

It isn't that "feminist" is a bad word, but rather that it is a complex, often misunderstood, heavily loaded and debated word, and one that - for all of its claims (past and present) of representing, supporting and promoting equality for both sexes, all people and the ecological world at large - can be strikingly inadequate within these arenas. "Feminist" as a corrective against millennia of powerful patriarchy is both understandable and welcome, but it alone does not provide the final cure for the cruelties of humankind. It is a very real, very necessary step in the right direction, but can we really stop at any word that embodies only one half of two axial energies, especially when its loudest speakers care more for polemics than for the equanimity they profess to desire? . . .