The Kaleidoscope of Gender

Prisms, Patterns, and Possibilities

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Unraveling the Gender Knot

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This reading is valuable for the insight that Johnson offers into: (1) the intellectual and emotional obstacles that stand in the way of individuals understanding positive social change, and (2) how individuals can overcome those obstacles in order to contribute to change. He offers specific suggestions for becoming involved in unraveling the gender knot and moving our own lives, and the lives of those around us, toward equal worth and justice for all people. Johnson also addresses the value of finding the courage and taking the risks to plant the seeds of change.

1. What are the two myths about social change that get in the way of individuals understanding change and participating in it?
2. Why do oppressive systems, such as patriarchy, often seem stable?
3. Which of Johnson’s suggestions for how to participate in positive change appeal to you and why?

What is the knot we want to unravel? In one sense, it is the complexity of patriarchy as a system—the tree, from its roots to the smallest twisting twig. It is misogyny and sexist ideology that keep women in their place. It is the organization of social life around core patriarchal principles of control and domination. It is the powerful dynamic of fear and control that keeps the patriarchal engine going. But the knot is also about our individual and collective paralysis around gender issues. It is everything that prevents us from seeing patriarchy and our participation in it clearly, from the denial that patriarchy even exists to false gender parallels, individualistic thinking, and cycles of blame and guilt. Stuck in this paralysis, we can’t think or act to help undo the legacy of oppression.

To undo the patriarchal knot we have to undo the knot of our paralysis in the face of it. A good place to begin is with two powerful myths about how change happens and how we can contribute to it.

MYTH #1: “IT’S ALWAYS BEEN THIS WAY, AND IT ALWAYS WILL BE”

Given thousands of years of patriarchal history, it’s easy to slide into the belief that things have always been this way. Even thousands of years, however, are a far cry from what “always” implies unless we ignore the more than 90 percent of humanity’s time on Earth that preceded it. Given all the archaeological evidence pointing to the existence of goddess-based civilizations and the lack of evidence for perpetual patriarchy, there are plenty of reasons to doubt that life has always been organized around male dominance or any other form
of oppression. . . . So, when it comes to human social life, the smart money should be on the idea that nothing has always been this way or any other.

This should suggest that nothing will be this way or any other, contrary to the notion that patriarchy is here to stay. If the only thing we can count on is change, then it's hard to see why we should believe for a minute that patriarchy or any other kind of social system is permanent. Reality is always in motion. Things may appear to stand still, but that's only because we have short attention spans, limited especially by the length of a human life. If we take the long view—the really long view—we can see that everything is in process all the time. Some would argue that everything is process, the space between one point and another, the movement from one thing toward another. What we may see as permanent end points—world capitalism, Western civilization, advanced technology, and so on—are actually temporary states on the way to other temporary states. Even ecologists, who used to talk about ecological balance, now speak of ecosystems as inherently unstable. Instead of always returning to some steady state after a period of disruption, ecosystems are, by nature, a continuing process of change from one arrangement to another and never go back to just where they were.

Social systems are also fluid. A society isn't some bulking thing that sits there forever as it is. Because a system only happens as people participate in it, it can't help but be a dynamic process of creation and recreation from one moment to the next. In something as simple as a man following the path of least resistance toward controlling conversations (and a woman letting him do it), the reality of patriarchy in that moment comes into being. This is how we do patriarchy, bit by bit, moment by moment. It is also how individuals can contribute to change—by choosing paths of greater resistance, as when men resist the urge toward control and women resist their own subordination. Since we can always choose paths of greater resistance or create new ones entirely, systems can only be as stable as the flow of human choice and creativity, which certainly isn't a recipe for permanence. In the short run, patriarchy may look stable and unchangeable. But the relentless process of social life never produces the exact same result twice in a row, because it's impossible for everyone to participate in any system in an unvarying and uniform way. Added to this are the dynamic interactions that go on among systems—between capitalism and the state, for example, or between families and the economy—that also produce powerful and unavoidable tensions, contradictions, and other currents of change. Ultimately, systems can't help but change, whether we see it or not.

Oppressive systems often seem stable because they limit our lives and imaginations so much that we can't see beyond them. But this masks a fundamental long-term instability caused by the dynamics of oppression itself. Any system organized around control is a losing proposition because it contradicts the essentially uncontrollable nature of reality and does such violence to basic human needs and values. As the last two centuries of feminist thought and action have begun to challenge the violence and break down the denial, patriarchy has become increasingly vulnerable. This is one reason why male resistance, backlash, and defensiveness are now so intense. . . .

Patriarchy is also destabilized as the illusion of masculine control breaks down. Corporate leaders alternate between arrogant optimism and panic, while governments lurch from one crisis to another, barely managing to stay in office, much less solving major social problems such as poverty, violence, health care, middle-class angst, and the excesses of global capitalism. Computer technology supposedly makes life and work more efficient, but it does so by chaining people to an escalating pace of work and giving them less rather than more control over their lives. The loss of control in pursuit of control is happening on a larger level, as well. As the patriarchal obsession with control deepens its grip on everything from governments and corporations to schools and religion, the overall degree of control actually becomes less, not more. The scale on which systems are out of control simply increases. The stakes are higher and the capacity for harm is greater, and together they fuel an upward spiral of worry, anxiety, and fear.
As the illusion of control becomes more apparent, men start doubting their ability to measure up to patriarchal standards of manhood. We have been here before. At the turn of the twentieth century, there was widespread white male panic in the United States about the "feminization" of society, and the need to preserve masculine toughness. From the creation of the Boy Scouts to Teddy Roosevelt's Rough Riders, a public campaign tried to revitalize masculinity as a cultural basis for revitalizing a male-identified society and, with it, male privilege. A century later, the masculine backlash is again in full bloom. The warrior image has re-emerged as a dominant masculine ideal, from Rambo, Dick, and Under Siege to right-wing militia groups to corporate takeovers to regional militarism to New Age Jungian archetypes in the new men's movement.

Neither patriarchy nor any other system will last forever. Patriarchy is riddled with internal contradiction and strain. It is based on the false and self-defeating assumption that control is the answer to everything and that the pursuit of more control is always better than contesting ourselves with less. The transformation of patriarchy has been unfolding ever since it emerged seven thousand years ago, and it is going on still. We can't know what will replace it, but we can be confident that patriarchy will go, that it is going at every moment. It's only a matter of how quickly, by what means, and toward what alternatives, and whether each of us will do our part to make it happen sooner rather than later and with less rather than more human suffering in the process.

**MYTH #2: THE MYTH OF NO EFFECT.**

**AND GANDHI'S PARADOX**

Whether we help change patriarchy depends on how we handle the belief that nothing we do can make a difference, that the system is too big and powerful for us to affect. In one sense the complaint is valid: if we look at patriarchy as a whole, it's true that we aren't going to make it go away in our lifetime. But if changing the entire system through our own efforts is the standard against which we measure the ability to do something, then we've set ourselves up to feel powerless. It's not unreasonable to want to make a difference, but if we have to see the final result of what we do, then we can't be part of change that's too gradual and long term to allow that. We also can't be part of change that's so complex that we can't sort out our contribution from countless others that combine in ways we can never grasp. Problems like patriarchy are of just that sort, requiring complex and long-term change coupled with short-term work to soften some of its worst consequences. This means that if we're going to be part of the solution to such problems, we have to let go of the idea that change doesn't happen unless we're around to see it happen and that what we do matters only if we make it happen. In other words, if we free ourselves of the expectation of being in control of things, we free ourselves as well and participate in the kind of fundamental change that transforms social life.

To get free of the paralyzing myth that we cannot, individually, be effective, we have to change how we see ourselves in relation to a long-term, complex process of change. This begins by changing how we relate to time. Many changes can come about quickly enough for us to see them happen. When I was in college, for example, there was little talk about gender inequality as a social problem, whereas now there are women's studies programs all over the country. But a goal like ending gender oppression takes more than this and far more time than our short lives can encompass. If we're going to see ourselves as part of that kind of change, we can't use the human life span as a significant standard against which to measure progress. . . .

(We need to get clear about how our choices matter and how they don't. Gandhi once said that nothing we do as individuals matters, but that it's vitally important that we do it anyway. This touches on a powerful paradox in the relationship between society and individuals. In terms of the patriarchy-as-tree metaphor, no individual leaf on
the tree matters; whether it lives or dies has no effect on much of anything. But collectively, the leaves are essential to the whole tree because they photosynthesize the sugar that feeds it. Without leaves, the tree dies. So, leaves both matter and they don’t, just as we matter and we don’t. What each of us does may not seem like much, because in important ways, it isn’t much. But when many people do this work together, they can form a critical mass that is anything but insignificant, especially in the long run. If we’re going to be part of a larger change process, we have to learn to live with this sometimes uncomfortable paradox rather than going back and forth between momentary illusions of potency and control and feelings of helpless despair and insignificance.

A related paradox is that we have to be willing to travel without knowing where we’re going. We need faith to do what seems right without necessarily knowing the effect that will have. We have to think like pioneers who may know the direction they want to move in or what they would like to find, without knowing where they will wind up. Because they are going where they’ve never been before, they can’t know whether they will ever arrive at anything they might consider a destination, much less what they had in mind when they first set out. If pioneers had to know their destination from the beginning, they would never go anywhere or discover anything. In similar ways, to seek out alternatives to patriarchy, it has to be enough to move away from social life organized around dominance and control and to move toward the certainty that alternatives are possible, even though we may not have a clear idea of what those are or ever experience them ourselves. It has to be enough to question how we think about and experience different forms of power, for example, how we see ourselves as gendered people, how oppression works and how we participate in it, and then open ourselves to experience what happens next. When we dare ask core questions about who we are and how the world works, things happen that we can’t foresee; but they don’t happen unless we move, if only in our minds. As pioneers, we discover what’s possible only by first putting ourselves in motion, because we have to move in order to change our position—and hence our perspective—on where we are, where we’ve been, and where we might go. This is how alternatives begin to appear, to imagine how things might be; we first have to get past the idea that things will always be the way they are.

In relation to Gandhi’s paradox, the myth of no effect obscures the role we can play in the long-term transformation of patriarchy. But the myth also blinds us to our own power in relation to other people. We may cling to the belief that there is nothing we can do precisely because we know how much power we do have and are afraid to use it because people may not like it. If we deny our power to affect people, then we don’t have to worry about taking responsibility for how we use it or, more significant, how we don’t. This reluctance to acknowledge and use power comes up in the simplest everyday situations, as when a group of friends starts laughing at a sexist joke and we have to decide whether to go along. It’s a moment in a sea of countless such moments that constitutes the fabric of all kinds of oppressive systems. It is a crucial moment, because the group’s seamless response to the joke reinforces the normalcy and unproblematic nature of it and the sexism behind it. It takes only one person to tear the fabric of collusion and apparent consensus . . .

Our power to affect other people isn’t simply about making them feel uncomfortable. Systems shape the choices that people make primarily by providing paths of least resistance. We typically follow those paths because alternatives offer greater resistance or because we aren’t even aware that alternatives exist. Whenever we openly choose a different path, however, we make it possible for people to see both the path of least resistance they’re following and the possibility of choosing something else. This is both radical and simple. When most people get on an elevator, for example, they turn and face front without ever thinking why. We might think it’s for purely practical reasons—the floor indicators and the door we’ll exit through are at the front. But there’s
more going on than that, as we'd discover if we simply walked to the rear wall and stood facing it while everyone else faced front. The oddness of what we were doing would immediately be apparent to everyone, and would draw their attention and perhaps make them uncomfortable as they tried to figure out why we were doing that. Part of the discomfort is simply calling attention to the fact that we make choices when we enter social situations and that there are alternatives, something that paths of least resistance discourage us from considering. If the possibility of alternatives in situations as simple as where to stand in elevator cars can make people feel uncomfortable, imagine the potential for discomfort when the stakes are higher, as they certainly are when it comes to how people participate in oppressive systems like patriarchy.

If we choose different paths, we usually won't know if we affect other people, but it's safe to assume that we do. When people know that alternatives exist and witness other people choosing them, things become possible that weren't before. When we openly pass up a path of least resistance, we increase resistance for other people around that path because now they must reconcile their choice with what they've seen us do, something they didn't have to deal with before. There's no way to predict how this will play out in the long run, and certainly no good reason to think it won't make a difference.

The simple fact is that we affect one another all the time without knowing it . . . This suggests that the simplest way to help others make different choices is to make them myself, and to do it openly so they can see what I'm doing. As I shift the patterns of my own participation in patriarchy, I make it easier for others to do so as well, and harder for them not to. Simply by setting an example—rather than trying to change them—I create the possibility of their participating in change in their own time and in their own way. In this way I can widen the circle of change without provoking the kind of defensiveness that perpetuates paths of least resistance and the oppressive systems they serve.

It's important to see that in doing this kind of work we don't have to go after people to change their minds. In fact, changing people's minds may play a relatively small part in changing systems like patriarchy. We won't succeed in turning diehard misogynists into practicing feminists. At most, we can shift the odds in favor of new paths that contradict core patriarchal values. We can introduce so many exceptions to patriarchal rules that the children or grandchildren of diehard misogynists will start to change their perception of which paths offer the least resistance. Research on men's changing attitudes toward the male provider role, for example, shows that most of the shift occurs between generations, not within them. This suggests that rather than trying to change people, the most important thing we can do is contribute to the slow sea change of entire cultures so that patriarchal forms and values begin to lose their "obvious" legitimacy and normalcy and new forms emerge to challenge their privileged place in social life.

In science, this is how one paradigm replaces another. For hundreds of years, for example, Europeans believed that the stars, planets, and sun revolved around Earth. But scientists such as Copernicus and Galileo found that too many of their astronomical observations were anomalies that didn't fit the prevailing paradigm: if the sun and planets revolved around Earth, then they wouldn't move as they did. As such observations accumulated, they made it increasingly difficult to hang on to an Earth-centered paradigm. Eventually the anomalies became so numerous that Copernicus offered a new paradigm, for which he, and later Galileo, were persecuted as heretics. Eventually, however, the evidence was so overwhelming that a new paradigm replaced the old one.

In similar ways, we can think of patriarchy as a system based on a paradigm that shapes how we think about gender and how we organize social life in relation to it. The patriarchal paradigm has been under attack for several centuries and the defense has been vigorous, with feminists widely regarded as heretics who practice the blasphemy
of "male bashing." The patriarchal paradigm weakens in the face of mounting evidence that it doesn't work, and that it produces unacceptable consequences not only for women but, increasingly, for men as well. We help to weaken it by openly choosing alternative paths in our everyday lives and thereby providing living anomalies that don't fit the prevailing paradigm. By our example, we can contradict patriarchal assumptions and their legitimacy over and over again. We add our choices and our lives to tip the scales toward new paradigms that don't revolve around control and oppression. We don't tip the scales overnight or by ourselves, and in that sense we don't amount to much. But on the other side of Gandhi's paradox, it is crucial where we "choose to place the stubborn ounces of [our] weight." It is in such small and humble choices that patriarchy and the movement toward something better actually happen.

**STUBBORN OUNCES: WHAT CAN WE DO?**

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What can we do about patriarchy that will make a difference? I don't have the answers, but I do have some suggestions.

**Acknowledge That Patriarchy Exists**

A key to the continued existence of every oppressive system is people being unaware of what's going on, because oppression contradicts so many basic human values that it invariably arouses opposition when people know about it. The Soviet Union and its East European satellites, for example, were riddled with contradictions that were so widely known among their people that the oppressive regimes fell apart with barely a whimper when given half a chance. An awareness of oppression compels people to speak out, breaking the silence on which continued oppression depends. This is why most oppressive cultures mask the reality of oppression by denying its existence, trivializing it, calling it something else, blaming it on those most victimized by it, or drawing attention away from it to other things . . .

It's one thing to become aware and quite another to stay that way. The greatest challenge when we first become aware of a critical perspective on the world is simply to hang on to it. Every system's paths of least resistance invariably lead away from critical awareness of how the system works. Therefore, the easiest thing to do after reading a book like this is to forget about it. Maintaining a critical consciousness takes commitment and work; awareness is something we either maintain in the moment or we don't. And the only way to hang on to an awareness of patriarchy is to make paying attention to it an ongoing part of our lives.

**Pay Attention**

Understanding how patriarchy works and how we participate in it is essential for change. It's easy to have opinions; it takes work to know what we're talking about. The easiest place to begin is by reading, and making reading about patriarchy part of our lives. Unless we have the luxury of a personal teacher, we can't understand patriarchy without reading, just as we need to read about a foreign country before we travel there for the first time, or about a car before we try to work under the hood. Many people assume they already know what they need to know about gender since everyone has a gender, but they're usually wrong. Just as the last thing a fish would discover is water, the last thing we'll discover is society itself and something as pervasive as gender dynamics. We have to be open to the idea that what we think we know about gender is, if not wrong, so deeply shaped by patriarchy that it misses most of the truth. This is why feminists talk with one another and spend time reading one another's work—seeing things clearly is a tricky business and hard work. This is also why people who are critical of the status quo are so often self-critical as well; they know how com-
plex and elusive the truth really is and what a challenge it is to work toward it. People working for change are often accused of being orthodox and rigid, but in practice they are typically among the most self-critical people around.

Reading, though, is only a beginning. At some point we have to look at ourselves and the world to see if we can identify what we're reading about. Once the phrase “paths of least resistance” entered my active vocabulary, for example, I started seeing them all over the place. Among other things, I started to see how easily I'm drawn to asserting control as a path of least resistance in all kinds of situations. Ask me a question, for example, and the easiest thing for me to do is offer an answer whether or not I know what I'm talking about. “Answering” is a more comfortable mode, an easier path, than admitting I don't know or have nothing to say. The more aware I am of how powerful this path is, the more I can decide whether to go down it each time it presents itself. As a result, I listen more, think more, and talk less than I used to.

**Little Risks: Do Something**

The more we pay attention to what's going on, the more we will see opportunities to do something about it. We don't have to mount an expedition to find those opportunities; they're all over the place, beginning in ourselves. As I became aware of how I gravitated toward controlling conversations, for example, I also realized how easily men dominate group meetings by controlling the agenda and interrupting, without women objecting to it. This pattern is especially striking in groups that are mostly female but in which most of the talking nonetheless comes from a few men. I would find myself sitting in meetings and suddenly the preponderance of male voices would jump out at me, an unmistakable hallmark of male privilege in full bloom. As I've seen what's going on, I've had to decide what to do about this little path of least resistance and my relation to it that leads me to follow it so readily.

With some effort, I've tried out new ways of listening more and talking less. At times it's felt contrived and artificial, like telling myself to shut up for a while or even counting slowly to ten (or more) to give others a chance to step into the space afforded by silence. With time and practice, new paths have become easier to follow and I spend less time monitoring myself. But awareness is never automatic or permanent, for patriarchal paths of least resistance will be there to choose or not as long as patriarchy exists.

As we see more of what's going on, questions come up about what goes on at work, in the media, in families, in communities, in religion, in government, on the street, and at school—in short, just about everywhere. The questions don't come all at once (for which we can be grateful), although they sometimes come in a rush that can feel overwhelming. If we remind ourselves that it isn't up to us to do it all, however, we can see plenty of situations in which we can make a difference, sometimes in surprisingly simple ways.

Consider the following possibilities:

- *Make noise be seen.* Stand up, volunteer, speak out, write letters, sign petitions, show up. Like every oppressive system, patriarchy feeds on silence. Don't collude in silence.

- *Find little ways to withdraw support.* This path of least resistance and people's choices to follow them, starting with ourselves. It can be as simple as not laughing at a sexist joke or saying we don't think it's funny, or writing a letter to the editor objecting to sexism in the media.

- *Dare to make people feel uncomfortable.* Beginning with ourselves. At the next local school board meeting, for example, we can ask why principals and other administrators are almost always men (unless your system is an exception that proves the rule), while the teachers they control are mostly women. Consider asking the same thing about churches, workplaces, or local government.

It may seem that such actions don't amount to much until we stop for a moment and feel our resistance to doing...
them—our worry for example, about how easily we could make people feel uncomfortable, including ourselves. If we take that resistance to action as a measure of power, then our potential to make a difference is plain to see. The potential for people to feel uncomfortable is a measure of the power for change inherent in such simple acts of not going along with the status quo.

Some will say that it isn’t “nice” to make people uncomfortable, but oppressive systems like patriarchy do a lot more than make people feel uncomfortable, and it certainly isn’t “nice” to allow them to continue unchallenged. Besides, discomfort is an unavoidable part of any meaningful process of education. We can’t grow without being willing to challenge our assumptions and take ourselves to the edge of our competencies, where we’re bound to feel uncomfortable. If we can’t tolerate ambiguity, uncertainty, and discomfort, then we’ll never go beneath the superficial appearance of things or learn or change anything of much value, including ourselves.

* **Openly choose and model alternative paths.** As we identify paths of least resistance—such as women being held responsible for child care and other domestic work—we can identify alternatives and then follow them openly so that other people can see what we’re doing. Patriarchal paths become more visible when people choose alternatives, just as rules become more visible when someone breaks them. Modeling new paths creates tension in a system, which moves toward resolution.

* **Actively promote change in how systems are organized around patriarchal values and male privilege.** There are almost endless possibilities here because social life is complicated and patriarchy is everywhere. We can, for example,

-- Speak out for equality in the workplace.

-- Promote diversity awareness and training.

-- Support equal pay and promotion for women.

-- Oppose the devaluing of women and the work they do, from the dead-end jobs most women are stuck in to the glass ceilings that keep women out of top positions.

-- Support the well-being of mothers and children and defend women’s right to control their bodies and their lives.

-- Object to the punitive dismantling of welfare and attempts to limit women’s access to reproductive health services.

-- Speak out against violence and harassment against women wherever they occur, whether at home, at work, or on the street.

-- Support government and private support services for women who are victimized by male violence.

-- Volunteer at the local rape crisis center or battered women’s shelter.

-- Call for and support clear and effective sexual harassment policies in workplaces, unions, schools, professional associations, churches, and political parties, as well as public spaces such as parks, sidewalks, and malls.

-- Join and support groups that intervene with and counsel violent men.

-- Object to theaters and video stores that carry violent pornography.

-- Ask questions about how work, education, religion, family, and other areas of family life are shaped by core patriarchal values and principles.

* Because the persecution of gays and lesbians is a linchpin of patriarchy, support the right of women and men to love whomever they choose. Raise awareness of homophobia and heterosexism.

* Because patriarchy is rooted in principles of domination and control, pay attention to racism and other forms of oppression that draw from those same roots.
[Patriarchy isn't problematic just because it emphasizes male dominance, but because it promotes dominance and control as ends in themselves. In that sense, all forms of oppression draw support from common roots, and whatever we do that draws attention to those roots undermines all forms of oppression. If working against patriarchy is seen simply as enabling some women to get a bigger piece of the pie, then some women probably will "succeed" at the expense of others who are disadvantaged by race, class, ethnicity, and other characteristics. . . . If we identify the core problem as any society organized around principles of control and domination, then changing that requires us to pay attention to all of the forms of oppression those principles promote. Whether we begin with race or gender or ethnicity or class, if we name the problem correctly, we'll wind up going in the same general direction.

* Work with other people. This is one of the most important principles of participating in social change. From expanding consciousness to taking risks, it makes all the difference in the world to be in the company of people who support what we are trying to do. We can read and talk about books and issues and just plain hang out with other people who want to understand and do something about patriarchy. Remember that the modern women's movement's roots were in consciousness-raising groups in which women did little more than sit around and talk about themselves and their lives and try to figure out what had to do with living in patriarchy. It may not have looked like much at the time, but it had the foundation for huge social movements. One way down this path is to share a book like this one with someone and then talk about it. Or ask around about local groups and organizations that focus on gender issues, and go find out what they're about and meet other people. . . . Make contact; connect to other people engaged in the same work; do whatever reminds us that we aren't alone in this.

* Don't keep it to ourselves. A corollary of looking for company is not to restrict our focus to the tight little circle of our own lives. It isn't enough to work out private solutions to social problems like patriarchy and other forms of oppression and keep them to ourselves. It isn't enough to clean up our own acts and then walk away, to find ways to avoid the worst consequences of patriarchy at home and inside ourselves and think that's taking responsibility. Patriarchy and oppression aren't personal problems and they can't be solved through personal solutions. At some point, taking responsibility means acting in a larger context, even if that means just letting one other person know what we're doing. It makes sense to start with ourselves; but it's equally important not to end with ourselves.

If all of this sounds overwhelming, remember again that we don't have to deal with everything. We don't have to set ourselves the impossible task of letting go of everything or transforming patriarchy or even ourselves. All we can do is what we can manage to do, secure in the knowledge that we're making it easier for other people—now and in the future—to see and do what they can do. So, rather than defeat ourselves before we start:

* Think small, humble, and doable rather than huge, heroic, and impossible. Don't paralyze yourself with impossible expectations. It takes very little to make a difference . . .

* Don't let other people set the standard for us. Start where we are and work from there. Set reasonble goals ("What small risk for change will I take today?"). As we get more experienced at taking risks, we can move up our lists. . . .

In the end, taking responsibility doesn't have to be about guilt and blame, about letting someone off the hook or being on the hook ourselves. It is simply to acknowledge our obligation
to make a contribution to finding a way out of patriarchy, and to find constructive ways to act on that obligation. We don't have to do anything dramatic or earth-shaking to help change happen. As powerful as patriarchy is, like all oppressive systems, it cannot stand the strain of lots of people doing something about it, beginning with the simplest act of speaking its name out loud.

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NOTES


4. This is a line from a poem by Howard Overstreet that was given to me by a student many years ago. I have not been able to locate the source.

5. Or, as someone once said to me about a major corporation that valued creative thinking: “It’s not OK to say you don’t know the answer to a question here.”