

Through The Looking Glass

Before going through the "Looking Glass", take a look at yourself. What do you see? A woman; someone who has been molded into a role or identity which has been defined by the society around her. But look again. Now what do you see? You see yourself, a person who has thoughts, feelings, wants, and needs just as any other person.

Now let us go through the "Looking Glass" as Alice once did. But let us go slowly and cautiously, being in tune with everything around us.

On Saturday, September 22, 1973, the Nelson Women's Center in conjunction with Notre Dame University held a Women's Workshop at N.D.U. The workshop was set up by the women of the movement themselves and offered several interesting topics and guest speakers. The Nelson Women's Center has a fairly strong collective which is aware of their problems and their goals, and Saturday's workshop was an example of one of their means to an end.

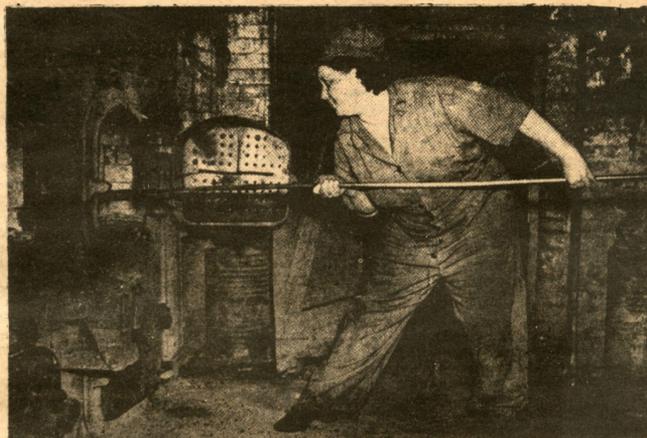
The women present at the workshop that day did not dwell upon the idea that men were to blame for their oppression, which is something you will find in many women's conferences. They felt that women's oppression was caused by the terms and concepts pertaining to women, which have been defined and laid down by the society in which we live. What they wanted was the establishment of woman as a person who is willing and who wants to work and live on the same basis as any other person, whether it be male or female. The trip was not "Sisters unite! Down with Male Chauvinist Pigs!". It was one in which women really wanted to learn to understand their oppression and how to overcome it.

Ms. Virginia Cover was there in the morning to give a short talk on the "Ideology and History of the Women's Movement. Virginia is an interesting and intelligent speaker who is presently active in the Trail Day-Care Center and who has been around the Women's Movement over the last ten years. There are three main sects or groups into which the movement is divided, she said, and they are the Women's Rights Movement, the Feminists, and the Politicos. She went into some detail about the position of each group, how they were formed, the reasons for their forming, the conflicts between each group, and finally where or at what main point these groups actually do come together because of a common feeling or concern. An informative lecture and Virginia Cover a delightful woman.

Two of the books she mentioned quite frequently were "Rebirth of Feminism" and "The Feminine Mystique". These are two highly recommended books and might be worthwhile looking at if you have any feelings at all about the oppression of women in our society.

Another charming lady entered the scene of the workshop early that morning, Susan Charleton. Susan is a member on the National Advisory Committee for the Status of Women to our Federal government. There are 29 members across Canada who have been appointed for terms of one to three years. According to Susan or Ms. Charleton, the committee's objectives are to change laws in Canada pertaining to the status of Women, which will take time, she says.

The committee itself has only been in existence for approximately two months and has only met once in that duration of time. Obviously it is going to take



time to accomplish anything at that rate. No one at the workshop was sure of the functions of such a committee but maybe it could have been because Ms. Charleton seemed rather unsure of the committee's objectives herself. Susan is a very contradictory woman and found herself with her back pushed against the wall quite frequently throughout the day's sessions.

Young Women

After a short lunch break, Vita Storey, one of the employees of the Nelson Women's Centre, led a workshop on "Young Women". She started it off by playing a record from a Women's Kit which is put out by the Ontario Education Board. The record contained short lines from certain popular songs which were written by well known artists. The object of the record was to show how in the music of today, woman is talked about as just a sex object with no mind or life of her own. Some examples of songs that were heard are: "A man needs a maid", Neil Young, "I've got you under my thumb", Mick Jagger, and "Look at that stupid girl", Mick Jagger.

First reactions were to laugh, but then - Wham, it hits. "What are we laughing for: this is terrible!" Soon we became angrier and angrier as we kept listening.

What the record was trying to do, was to make us aware of what was really being said by these musicians and song writers and to make us think. The worst thing was that we had actually listened to all these songs before and had just accepted them as they were. "Stupid Girl!"

Vita's approach was excellent and this workshop could have developed into an extremely interesting discussion session. But unfortunately, and the reason is not clear, there were no young women present.

How can you talk about the problems facing young women today without having a young woman or young women there to tell you? Well, they did. For a good hour the women present talked about how they could, by using certain techniques, make young women of the area conscious of male domination.

What they were forgetting or failed to realize was that many young women are quite conscious of their problems and actually do have minds of their own, whether the women at this certain workshop thought so or not.

Granted, their intentions were good, but young people are not robots who can be manipulated into doing and feeling the things you want. No technique will ever accomplish this. If you want to "help" them just take a little time to sit down and rap with them. You will be surprised at how aware of the situation many of them actually are.

Women and their Bodies

Morgan Fox from the Vancouver Women's Health Collective and a worker at the Women's Self-help

Clinic in Vancouver was the guest speaker at this workshop. Morgan is a contagiously warm and enthusiastic woman. The title of her talk was Men Get Ill, Women Get Nervous. She reminded us that the uncomfortable feelings that a visit to the Doctor often brings are not ours alone, but are shared with many women. In fact, those feelings are not ours at all — they have been imposed on us by the mystique of medical knowledge and the medical profession's authority. Adding to this is the tendency of most doctors to view and treat women as silly, nervous, hypochondriacal and stupid. Stupid we often are — but because we have been discouraged from learning about our bodies. Such knowledge would make possible preventive care, rather than total dependence on the health profession which provides only treatment for sickness and not education for health. That is the role of the Women's Self-Help Clinic. It emphasizes prevention and self-knowledge, by involving women in assuming more responsibility for their health care and enabling them to make the most of existing medical resources. Morgan gave us a brief knowledgeable introduction to the construction and workings of our reproductive system and genitalia. We all shared our knowledge and experiences. The commonality despite the differences was comforting and strengthening.

Sunday morning, 12 women met with Morgan to observe internal self-examinations and to learn how to do one using a speculum, a mirror and flashlight. It was exciting and wonderful to see your own or another woman's vagina and cervix, and to learn of their beauty and variety. Familiarity with the normal appearance of the vagina and cervix enables a woman to note changes and spot trouble before it becomes serious. But more than that it is important to destroy the myth of the vagina as 'dirty' and unpleasant and to become comfortable with its reality.

In short, the key to better health and better health care is to develop confidence in, knowledge of, and sensitivity to our own bodies.

Non-sexist Child Rearing

Meredith Kimble gave a short talk on non-sexist child rearing in an attempt to define what this means and how one goes about it. Then the collective broke into five small groups for some role-playing in hypothetical situations. Good discussions filled with strong feelings came out. It was obvious that there was a great concern about the whole non-sexist child rearing theory. Most important was the fact that at the moment there are really no set solutions but people knew and felt this. And they were also willing to try and find some. A useful story to read in order to understand the theory better is "X: A Fabulous Child's Story" by Lois Gould.

Women and Work

The discussion in this workshop was initiated by a panel of 3 women (Maureen Argatuff, Nina Argatuff and Judy Denny) who related their experiences in entering or re-entering the work force. Although their experiences were different, the similarity of their difficulties and problems was striking, particularly the financial problems of single parent women. What emerged was the need to be assertive, firm and even (god forbid) demanding with anyone in the position of being able to hinder or further your efforts, whether it be a Manpower counsellor, your boss or your husband. And very often, the support and advice of other women is crucial in maintaining your determination and achieving your goal.

This workshop also heard a report by Arlene Ommundsen and Arlene Burwash on the Western Conference on Opportunities for Women which was sponsored by Manpower, U.B.C. Extension Department and the B.C. Status of Women Council. We heard of the usual debate and formulation of a list of recommendations which will be forwarded to appropriate government agencies. It brings to mind the question of whether the government is really listening to women and their demands, or simply cadging votes. Clearly it is necessary to attack on all fronts. But the political battle for enactment and enforcement of equal pay legislation has been long and tedious, and is still going on. What of the struggle for equal opportunity which is now coming to the fore and which has far more widespread ramifications? There are limits to what the present political system can or will allow and the time will inevitably come to break down those limits (and thereby the system) rather than gently and politely trying to extend them.

Conclusion

The women attending Through the Looking Glass were mainly young (under 30's). This is unfortunate perhaps in view of the criticism that the women's movement is not touching all women. But it was fortunate in that it provided an opportunity to feel solidarity and to share common experiences — which is sometimes difficult with a mixture of all ages, sizes, life-styles. There are times to do battle and times to rest with one's sisters. Through the Looking Glass was a day of joining hands and re-discovering the way forward.

