

On Teaching Feminism: A Speech by Robin Morgan

At a speech given by *Ms.* magazine's Robin Morgan, the author witnessed a confrontation between genders and generations that underscored the need for teaching and communication, not condescension and accusations.

by Sara Borins

Almost a year ago, Robin Morgan, editor of *Ms.* magazine, spoke at my brothers' (all male) high school. The event was part of their International World Affairs Conference. Morgan had been invited to deliver the key note address on the topic, "Gender Roles in the Wake of the Women's Movement." She began her lecture by offering a definition of feminism.

The editor stated that feminism is a politic of hope for intelligent life in the future. A dominant characteristic of patriarchy, Morgan explained, "is the 'disconnection' of individuals from one another and from their environment." In contrast, feminism is about humans working towards a greater connection with their surroundings. Morgan continued by reminding her audience that all issues—including the economy, politics, ethnicity, and racism—are women's issues because in any country, women are the majority of the population.

In her conclusion, Morgan remembered the 14 women who were murdered by Marc Lapine at the University of Montreal in 1989. His action, she stated, was a dangerous consequence of a disconnected society, ignorant of feminism. And a society which, unless changed, "will watch females continue to be killed...hideously, pitilessly and continuously."

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I sat elated throughout Morgan's eloquent address. Finally, a powerful speaker was standing in one the country's oldest, conservative and most exclusive high schools spelling out what feminism is and why it is important. At last, my brother was hearing from an authoritative source what I had been trying to explain to him for over five years. I was so moved by Morgan that I imagined the audience would do little other than cheer for her and then walk out, arm in arm, united by a warm feminist harmony.

the future of feminism as I listened to the youth of today. Robin Morgan made so much sense and such little impact.

To make matters worse, my careful efforts at introducing my brother to feminism had backfired. Before the conference he had been dubious, though inquisitive about feminism—inquisitive enough to help organize the event. After Morgan my brother didn't even wish to mention the topic, except to say, "Well, that's the last time I go out of my way to do anything for gender equality."

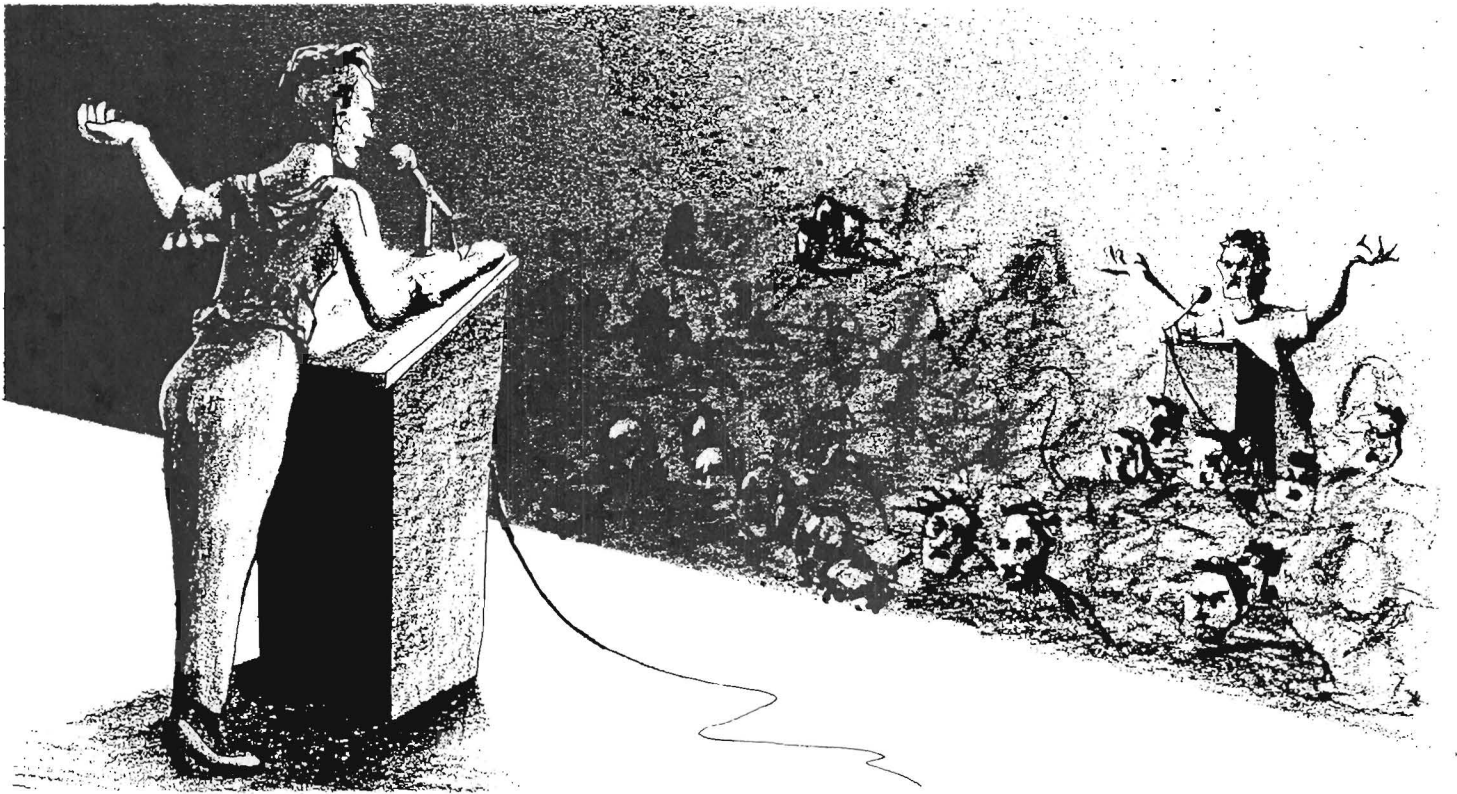
"Never once, while I was learning about [feminism], was I told that my questions were ignorant, or that my behavior didn't fit into an ideologically correct mold. The students at the World Affairs Conference were not so lucky."

My expectations could not have been further from the truth.

From jeers to hissing, from the sublime to the ridiculous, Morgan was engulfed by a sea of anger. Her teenager audience cried out that she was the sort of feminist who gave the movement a bad name. One individual simply got up and bellowed into the microphone that she ought to "get a life." Dumbstruck, I sat through the audience's outrage, lamenting

When I asked him what had gone wrong, my brother explained, "She made us feel stupid. Morgan told us, "that in over twenty years as a lecturer she had never heard such ignorant questions."

"Simple, defense tactic," I thought. "Morgan was challenging my brother's power as a privileged white male so he responded by refusing to deal with the reality of the situation; blaming Morgan when he should really be blaming all



[David Wysotski]

men.” For days we didn’t speak, for days I wrote off my brother as a typical male, for days I tried to understand why he couldn’t see what I could see.

A few weeks passed and then something happened. My brother turned nineteen. “Nineteen, so young,” I thought as I imagined myself at that age. Suddenly my brother’s anger became clear. Around nineteen I thought all feminists were lesbians and that the movement was about scary women with short spiky hair. Remembering my nineteenth year made me blush, it also reminded me that I was not born a feminist.

Rapidly, images began flooding my mind. First the memory of my friend’s face as she told me of being sexually abused as a child. Then the recollection of my own anger when a university professor told me that women’s history wasn’t relevant enough to be brought into his course curriculum. Finally, the feeling of complete despair after hearing that fourteen women, at the university down the road were murdered because of their sex.

As these thoughts flashed against the empty panel of my mind so did the realization that the process through which I

became a feminist was gradual and painful. It was one in which I had to comprehend and accept that men and women do not have the same opportunity and safety. Personal, sad experiences ushered me into the world of feminism.

That, and the nurturing of feminist friends, parents and teachers who taught me that this ideology did not mean that I couldn’t love men, nor celebrate my femininity, but that it would allow me to fulfill my greatest potential. Feminism, I learnt, would encourage me to have strength. Never once, while I was learning about this philosophy, was I told that my questions were ignorant, or that my behavior didn’t fit into an ideologically correct mold.

The students at the World Affairs Conference were not so lucky. From the first moment of Morgan’s address, they were put on the defensive. Their questions were labelled as ignorant and their behavior as something out of the “twilight zone.” Morgan told the students that she was critical of them because, although it is an honor to address the young, “to face those who have not done their homework is a disappointment.”

When I reflect upon what occurred that evening, I wonder how much homework Morgan had done before speaking to her audience. Did she know its age? Was she aware that most of the students had never heard a live feminist before her? Morgan scolded the students without offering an explanation as to how they might alter their behavior and left out the critical advice of how they might build a better world. And like unfairly punished children, many students left that evening angry for not knowing what they had done wrong.

I know that in the next few years a number of those students will go on to witness events which will allow them to understand Morgan’s rage and the importance of feminism. I know that in time a number of those students will look back at the evening and feel embarrassed about comments they made. But between that time and now a number of those students, including my brother, will have unnecessarily to regain their faith in feminists because they witnessed a scrap fight where cheap shots were thrown—from both directions—which, like angry punches, offered a fleeting sort of satisfaction, but solved nothing. ●