

"Radical Feminist Leadership: Lessons From Women's Music"

~ Margie Adam ~

National Women's Music Festival Keynote Speech **Madison, WI July 3, 2015**

I remember when I got the email inviting me to perform at the 40th National Women's Music Festival, I thought - ah, what a shame. I'd love to go but I'm not performing anymore.

I sat with the invitation for a couple of weeks, talked to friends and then came to this conclusion: yes, it's true. I am no longer performing. But I'm still thinking. I'm 68 years old - I know some things. And perhaps there will be women who'd be interested to know what I'm thinking. So here I am.

I was 27 years old when I performed on stage at the first National Women's Music Festival Anyone else here at the first NWMF in Campaign-Urbana, Illinois? Raise a joyful noise if you were!

...Before I go further, I want to thank Kristin Lems, the producer of the first National Women's Music Festival for introducing me. I have great admiration for this woman who produced one of the most progressive and inclusive women's music festivals ever - one where every genre of women's music was represented by an extraordinary diversity of women musicians. Thanks also to our current esteemed producer, Linda Wilson, Leslie Judd, Mary Spillane, Bonnie Z., Beth Kennon, Shellee Botts, Rae Baskin, all the festival staff and volunteers. I want to acknowledge the many women I know and love from the women's music industry who are here: radio programmers, bookstore owners, distributors, producers, newspaper publishers, performers, and technicians. Thank you for giving me a career and life experience beyond my wildest dreams.

...Let me start where I am today and create a kind of a narrative that swings back to 1974 then loops back to the present and finally brings us to considering the 2016 presidential campaign and women's spirituality.

...First - I'm not here to take a trip down memory lane. Nostalgia has limited appeal for this "woman of a certain age." I want to say this as simply as I can: I'm not done.

To update you all since we last saw each other... I stopped performing in 2008. It would have been a big deal but I didn't realize I had stopped until much later. My last performance was on the steps, under the rotunda of San Francisco's city hall. A gang of us organized a celebration of Del Martin's life that was held in city hall. Holly Near and Linda Tillery both sang at the event. It was the first time a radical progressive lesbian feminist activist had been honored by a celebration in city hall and it was extraordinary.

And then... I simply didn't accept the next invitation to perform.

It took me a while to realize I was not going to perform for the foreseeable future. Gradually - it came to me that I might want to write a memoir centered on my life as a radical feminist lesbian in women's music.

So I put myself in a graduate program and began to write essays about my life: gardening, family of origin issues, Scotland, women's music, being a lesbian, being a feminist, an activist, being a woman in recovery, going to Disneyland.

All this writing led me to understand that what I really wanted to do was to work with others, one on one: women in recovery, women in transition, women struggling to complete projects.

I put myself in a graduate psychology program and came out the other side with a PhD and a private practice in integrative counseling. That's where I am today. Amazing.

...Before I go on, I want to clarify a little about my language. When I use the word "radical," I mean ideas and activities that are generated and operate initially outside the system, outside the mainstream. As opposed to "reform," which occurs inside the system.

When I say "our" and "we," I am talking about women, sometimes I am talking about lesbians, and sometimes I am talking about our allies. My intention is to self-identify, but also to be inclusive. For me these are the two pillars of feminism: self-identification and inclusiveness.

And, for a moment... I will set aside our glorious family of initials - LGBTIQQ - and speak as a lesbian - a lesbian who came out in 1963 when I was 16. Any other women here who came out in the 1960s?

...Today I am full of feelings. At the same time I'm talking about radical feminist leadership & lessons from women's music - I also want to talk about the recent supreme court decision affirming that marriage among gay and lesbian couples is a constitutional right - not something special that we are being granted, but something that is our right according to the constitution of the United States of America.

I want to talk about Mary Bonauto, the lesbian feminist attorney who argued that case in front of the nine supreme court justices last week.

Mary Bonauto is the civil rights project director at Gay and Lesbian Advocates and Defenders. She was born in 1961 and is currently 54 years old.

Mary Bonauto was 2 years old when I came out in 1963. She was in her 30s when she produced me in concert in 1993 for a fund-raising event at GLAD.

Mary Bonauto - radical feminist leader and women's music producer, envisioned the marriage equality strategy long before it was possible. She argued and refined this radical vision as it moved from court to court, state to state, all the way to the Supreme Court. And she won!

This is what I'm talking about: radical feminist leadership is not a theory. It is not historical. It is not a retro idea.

It is a living, breathing commitment being played out in our world by Mary Bonauto, by women in this room, by women all over the country, by women all over the world - right now.

It has to do with envisioning a world that does not yet exist and being willing to do something - anything - to help bring that vision into reality.

...Oh, and before I forget - I want to disagree with the title of this keynote address which I wrote: Radical Feminist Leadership - Lessons From Early Women's Music.

When I first came up with the title, I thought I would limit my remarks to the first 10 years of the movement. Then it occurred to me that I didn't really know what I was talking about.

Because really - if you want to talk about early women's music, you want to talk about the lullaby, you want to talk about mothers singing to their babies. And more recently, you want to talk about Barbara Dane, Marian McPartland, Nadia Boulangé, Mary Lou Williams, Hazel & Alice, Odetta, Ronnie Gilbert among many others. These were women singing and writing women's music before the genre had a name. Their music spanned all musical genres in raw instrumental power, in lyrical point of view, in brazen vocal uninhibitedness before the genre had a name.

So let's agree - I'm just talking about women's music as I'm thinking about it today. I think about it all the time, really.

...I'm thinking about connexion: that heart connexion Ruth Barrett tapped into last night in her remarks...

I am grateful for the deep sense of connexion that I felt from the very beginning with my audience, with women like me and not like me. I felt that at the first National Women's Music Festival on that Saturday night when I sang "Beautiful Soul...." Or maybe it was Tender Lady. I no longer have that kind of detail in my memory. But I do remember this: I knew you knew what I was singing about and how deeply I felt about loving women. I felt you.

When we talk about lessons in women's music - I want to honor first this mysterious, unique, demanding, passionate connexion that we feel for each other - lesbians, straight women, women defining our own selves with and without language.

This first lesson about radical feminist leadership is about woman-loving.

It is learning that loving, celebrating, honoring women is what connects us. This is what weaves us together across every difference, every struggle. It is that we love women, that love is growing every day - despite politics, despite difference, despite all efforts to divide and define us out of existence, all efforts to disappear us.

We are women-loving women and this is a connexion that we share, always and forever.

...When we talk about activism, we must acknowledge that it is a challenge to be visible in an era when being a feminist is so unpopular.

After eight years of Reagan, the relentless assault on women's reproductive rights, the stink put on the word "feminist" by the media and radical right - all this has made it much harder to use our own feminist language, language that included the phrase "women's music."

But by not using this phrase, "women's music," and words like "feminist" and "abortion rights," we may be diluting the very power embedded in the language: these words reflect a simple acknowledgment of our woman-loving connection.

...The first ten years of my work in women's music, I suffered mightily from a messianic urge. It was this vague assumption that if I just incorporated enough different feminist ideas, activism and announcements into my shows, I could somehow be all things to all women... and not be criticized. Oh dear. I know some of you know what I mean.

What I learned after years of failure in this quest for perfection was this simple truth:

I am responsible - I am accountable
to do what I can where I am with what I have.

...In the early era of women's music, money was in short supply so we developed other "currencies of exchange": acknowledgment had a high value, other resources like our expertise, our sweat equity were valued.

Meanwhile, in some corners, money had a bad name. It seemed somehow dirty - suspect. And women with financial resources could find themselves treated with suspicion within the community.

One of the lessons from women's music has been that money is a resource, yet another tool to be used for the good of the community. What the religious right understood way before we did is that raising money for a project is not about how much you contribute, its that you contribute something., no matter how little. Because contributing something is your buy-in, it is a way of taking ownership.

...Follow me now as I take us a little deeper into the woods... When I was working on this speech, thinking about feminist economics led me to a meditation on a recent project of mine: re-mastering and re-issuing my 1977 album, "Margie Adam. Songwriter." after 30 years. Until a month ago, this first recording of mine was only available on vinyl or cassette.

Why did it take so long to re-issue "Songwriter" on CD? Because somehow I thought it was a frivolous idea. I built a case against letting myself release it. Gradually, I came to feel that the decision not to update the sound and reissue "Songwriter" was about withholding something from myself and others who might really see the reissue of the music as a gift. Finally, I realized that I waited so long, put it off, argued myself out of it year after year not for economic reasons but because the recording represented the most excruciating miracle I ever lived through - the birth of the women's music movement - and it was really hard to contemplate climbing back into the music to reclaim it now. As the woman I am now.

I wonder if what brings many of us here this weekend is that, you too, were marked forever by an excruciating miracle of possibility in your own work in the women's movement... when women's music was a soundtrack for that work.

However it is that each of us has come here this weekend, I am here to say that our lessons - our woman-loving connexion, our influence and skill sets, our competence, our resources will be called on soon.

...If we believe - truly - that we deserve to have the most qualified person as our next president of the united states - then we feminists - we who know what we know - will do what we can, where we are, with what we have to elect Hillary Clinton to be the next president of the United States.

We may not trust her, but we do know very well how to hold ourselves and each other accountable. As a community, as a political force, we can trust ourselves to hold her accountable.

She is a politician. She is not a radical. And yet - I see myself in her.

If we trust ourselves, if we honor and celebrate our own radical feminist leadership skills, we will succeed in electing the most qualified candidate, the first woman president of the United States, Hillary Clinton.

...So Finally... since I'm way out here on the edge with you all, letting you in on everything I'm thinking these days.... I want to say a word about lessons in women's music in relation to women's spirituality.

I made a mistake when I said Kristin presented every genre of women's music at the first national women's music festival. That is not true. Luckily, at the very first National Women's Music Festival in 1974, we had Kay Gardner to remind us all that classical music needed to be represented along side pop/folk/ jazz/ bluegrass/r & b music. I remember well this woman striding up the aisle from the back of the theatre leading a procession of women, waving her flute. This strong, fierce woman demanded a place for classical & instrumental music at this first radical banquet set for women's music in

1974. And the very next year, classical/instrumental women's music was well-represented at the National Women's Music Festival.

I can tell you that when Kay talked about Women's Spirituality, I didn't understand her - I remember listening to her - beloved Kay - and inwardly rolling my eyes. She seemed so smart and yet... I didn't understand - something about a "Goddess" and "witches" and "covens..." I wasn't sure this talk was grounded. I wasn't sure SHE was grounded when she talked like that.

And yet... gradually, in my own life, just spending time alone in the garden... working with the labyrinth - I slowly came to identify with a divine feminine principle - something deeply healing and empowering.

Something that - as it turns out - was hidden from me in plain sight in women's music. It was always our relationship - mine with you, the audience, you, the women who held my music to your hearts even as I held you in my own.

Lauren Artress (friend and labyrinth visionary) calls the labyrinth a spiritual tool and defines it this way: it meets you where you are, gives you what you need and weaves an invisible thread between you and others.

That is my experience of women's music.

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