

How I Reconciled with Gloria Steinem

I got sick at the end of May this year on my birthday no less, and it wasn't a tragedy with the exception of how I felt. Nevertheless, I had no choice but to stay at home and park in front of my TV and recuperate.

One of the things I happened to catch was an entire show devoted to feminist Gloria Steinem on Oprah Winfrey's cable network OWN. What was fascinating about this interview was it was more about Gloria Steinem the woman, who now at 78, is navigating this later phase in her life. While perhaps not quite as relevant in this era—my 29-year-old cousin doesn't even know who she is—I get the feeling she doesn't have to prove herself anymore, and maintaining a balance in her life is just as important to her as taking up causes that she passionately believes in, as obscure as some of them are.

I must admit I've had conflicted notions about her. For starters, I once read one of her essays, "The Importance of Work," in a college freshman English class, which was so over my head at the time for someone who had very little perspective on women's issues other than seeing Sigourney Weaver beating up on mama aliens in "Aliens 2." But I do remember coming away with how the opportunity to work gives women a sense of value and self-esteem.

Later, I participated in a protest march against Proposition 187, which sought to curb services to undocumented immigrants in California, and she was one of a few celebrity protestors there. Rallying the troops, so to speak, she said to have fun, make friends and even fall in love, painting a rather romantic picture of what marches were like from her own experience. In my view, these events involved a lot of work and preparation and of course waiting—no meet-cute with a fellow rabble-rouser. I guess protest marches really weren't for me, and California voters passed the measure anyway. Moreover, it seemed to me Ms. Steinem was coming from a comfortable place, having reached a high level of achievement and fame, not struggling, as I was, to still figure things out.

Growing up, I also had a role model in my own mother who was a successful, highly-educated working woman from the 1970s to her retirement in 2007. I admired my mother for being a doer. Now she has traded in the regimented existence of her working career for a more relaxed lifestyle, which she clearly deserves. But Ms. Steinem keeps plugging away, accepting speaking engagements, especially at college campuses, and traveling the world to join others in their struggles for equality and justice.

Getting older myself and having gained more understanding, I have softened my own rigid positions of her, especially when vulnerable (being sick at home and having Ms. Winfrey help to make it go down easy and with clarity). Rather than harboring resentment and, dare I say, jealousy, I, like Ms. Winfrey, feel genuine gratitude for the work she has done to pave the way for equality for all people, including my own independence that I do take for granted. I realize

for every advocate who hangs on to Ms. Steinem's every word is another who persecutes her for the courage of her convictions, judging from a Larry King interview in which a caller insults her for not having children and deems her the cause of the downfall of the American family.

I was most moved, however, when she and Ms. Winfrey both spoke to an audience of students at the all-women Barnard College in New York City. It took me back to my own college days, being in those younger women's shoes when their lives were just beginning, and so much hope was stirring inside of them. It was really more a dialogue between generations, and later, Ms. Steinem regrets, exhibiting a kindness here as well as other points in the show I don't often associate with her, forgetting to tell them how we are told to achieve success in our careers by a certain age when in fact longevity has given us opportunities to have several careers, even several lovers. Certainly, I have learned that lesson from my own experience.

Since my college days, I feel as though I have lived several lifetimes, starting with work I truly loved to jobs I had to take to survive. I thought in my thirties I would eventually get it right, and I was getting there until I was laid off due to the recent economic downturn. In light of this new normal we find ourselves in, I realize this phase is less about getting it right, and more about what is right for me. I even returned to the required college essay of Ms. Steinem's in hopes of discovering something new with distance and fresh eyes. I still took away the same notions after my first reading of it, but now I see the value in work, as hum-drum as it may sometimes be, and how its rewards depend on how much effort I put into it.

As I start building a new career, my view of work is not just about survival, but also the difference I make with the unique talents and skills I bring to any workplace. If we use the "womenworkbecausewehaveto" defense ... "we will always be subject to the false argument that independence for women is a luxury affordable only in good economic times," Ms. Steinem writes. "Alternatives to layoffs will not be explored, acceptable unemployment will always be used to frighten those with jobs into accepting low wages, and we will never remedy the real cost, both to families and to the country, of dependent women and a massive loss of talent. Worst of all, we may never learn to find productive, honored work as a natural part of ourselves and as one of life's basic pleasures."

-Rachelle Ayuyang (June 30, 2012)