Joining the Resistance

Carol Gilligan
This book is for Diana de Vegh
Isn’t the honesty of things where they resist, where only the wind can bend them back, the real weather . . .

Jorie Graham
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Introduction

In the summer when I was two-and-a-half, my mother, a forward-looking woman interested in the latest developments and invested in raising her child, took me to Clara Thompson’s institute at Vassar College designed to impart psychoanalytic wisdom to the parents of young children. Like many such experiments, it was conceived with the best of intentions: the children would attend nursery school while the parents learned about child development. Though set in the midst of American society, it was organized like a kibbutz: the children would live in one building or dormitory while the parents lived in another. It was an arrangement my two-year-old self could not imagine, despite the careful preparation. I loved the nursery school and my teacher whose name I remember to this day, but when it came to bedtime, I wanted my mother, not some metaptele, to put me to sleep. And so, at a very young age, I discovered the power of voice to bring about change. Like Joshua with his trumpet at Jericho, I found that by crying loud enough and long enough walls can come
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tumbling down. The rules gave way and my mother was summoned. An exception was granted: she could put me to bed and sing me to sleep. I never learned what Clara Thompson thought of this breach in practice and can only imagine what was said about me to justify this irregularity, but my mother, God bless her, always cherished this display of spirit on my part, whatever embarrassment it may have caused her, and it’s possible that the other children also enjoyed her singing.

Years later, I found an ethical rationale for what at two was a protest against resignation. It was the late 1960s, I had completed my Ph.D. in psychology, and being the mother of three young children, I was looking for part-time work. At a party given by a friend, I was introduced to Lawrence Kohlberg. His theory of moral development captured the passion for justice that had inspired me along with many members of my generation to take action on behalf of civil rights and to protest what we saw as an unjust war. When he offered me a job as a research assistant, I accepted and thus became involved in the lively discussions provoked by his claim, following Socrates, that virtue is one and its name is justice. Moral development follows a single path, leading beyond self-interest and societal conventions to a principled understanding of justice as fairness. It was a theory that captured the spirit of the time, providing a justification for civil disobedience.

For a long time, I did not see the connection between my early experience at Vassar and the questions about voice and resistance that have inspired my research. It explains my optimism about the possibility of having an effect, even against considerable odds. Yet what strikes
me more particularly is that my resistance to losing a ground of relationship I had taken for granted was a resistance I would see again in four- and five-year-old boys and in adolescent girls. And even at these later ages, when the issue was not wanting their mother, it brought them up against institutional structures that seemed firmly entrenched.

Over the past forty years, a confluence of evidence in the human sciences, coming from developmental psychology and sociology, neurobiology and evolutionary anthropology, has shown that we are, by nature, responsive, relational beings, born with a voice and into relationship, hard-wired for empathy and cooperation, and that our capacity for mutual understanding was—and may well be—key to our survival as a species. When I say this on a panel in the fall of 2010, I am contradicted by my two co-panelists, both distinguished academics—told in no uncertain terms that by nature we are aggressive and competitive, driven by evolution to the pursuit of self-interest. What accounts for this disparity?

In her artist’s statement for her exhibition “Proud Flesh,” the photographer Sally Mann identifies herself as “a woman who looks.” Photographing her husband of forty years, “let[ting] the sunshine fall voluptuously on a still beautiful form,” the two of them “still in love, still at work,” she is aware of the risk she is taking:

Within traditional narratives, women who look, especially women who look unflinchingly at men, have been punished: Take poor Psyche, punished for all time for daring to lift the lantern to finally see her lover . . .