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Nostalgia and Promise

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(Article begins on next page)

Nostalgia and Promise

Ann Karnovsky

When I was a student at Radcliffe in the late 1940s, early 1950s, there was a rumor that president James Bryant Conant, on his visits to Harvard clubs around the country, would declare that “Radcliffe may be coed, but Harvard isn’t.” We met the remark with amusement rather than resentment.

My freshman year at Radcliffe was the last time professors left the Yard to teach the same course at Radcliffe at 11:00 a.m. that they had taught at Harvard at 9. History 1 was my only experience with the system, and it was an unhappy episode for me in several ways. It was, in fact, the first and last time I found myself in a single-sex class. I had been at coeducational schools all my life, and what I perceived as factual nit-picking seemed a speciality of some women in the class. Those who had been at traditional women’s schools took excellent notes, but seemed focused on minutiae and grades. Of course it was the nature of the first-year survey courses, not the single-sex aspect, that was so galling. I was at a complete loss when asked to draw a free-hand map of the route of the Visigoths across northern Europe; and to find that the hour exam counted for a considerable portion of course credit came as a shocking surprise. But another survey course, this time at the Fogg, and coeducational, also dwelt on detail. Did a given slide depict the east pediment of the Parthenon, or the west? It became clear that the surest

way to differentiate the interiors of various cathedrals was to make note of which way the chairs were facing.

When one made it past the surveys to electives, the academic world brightened. There were of course “gut courses.” I remember a senior in Briggs Hall jealously guarding entry into Roman Law, a course with famously little reading material. In my chosen field of Social Relations, it was a Golden Age of Henry Murray, Robert White, Robert Sears, and B. F. Skinner. The latter, in line with his theory of behavior modification, also gave a course containing only a brief mimeographed syllabus. A reunion classmate has reminded me that Clyde Kluckhohn did not want women in his anthropology classes because he would be unable to tell dirty jokes. I did take a class with him and was shocked to hear a risqué joke. Needless to say I still remember it, while the Navaho kinship system is long forgotten.

I had been drawn to Radcliffe in part after reading an article by Talcott Parsons on the role of women. I must admit that another draw was a memorable luncheon I shared with a member of the class of 1949, when I was trying to finalize my college decision. We sat at a long table at Le Petit Gourmet in Chicago, and Marion regaled me with tales of dates with everyone from the cox of the Harvard crew to first-year law students. As we got up to leave, one of the middle-aged women who had shared our table said, “Girls, we could not help overhearing your conversation. Tell us, do you need college boards to get into Radcliffe?” In the Midwest Radcliffe had not yet made it onto the map of prestige colleges, and now, fifty years later, it has vanished from the map again.

There were a few advantages Radcliffe had over Harvard. The most highly regarded was the honor system as it pertained to examinations. The story of a woman graduate student who was allowed to take an examination with Harvard men if she promised not to go to the bathroom is no myth. The reason behind this ridiculous-sounding demand was that at Harvard proctors routinely followed men to the toilet, whereas at Radcliffe we were free to leave the examination room at will and alone, leaving our blue books temporarily in official hands.

No description of the 1950s at Radcliffe would be complete without mentioning the concept of “gracious living.” It was a prescription for behavior appropriate to females: no smoking on the street; no shorts to be worn in the dining rooms--not just in the service of modesty, but because bare legs might ruin the finish on the wooden chairs. In the dorms we were sometimes invited to 10:00 p.m. chats in the House mother’s quarters, where crackers and guava jelly were staples. Coffee was served in demitasses in the living room, an elegant touch but frustrating to those who needed a caffeine jolt for a late night of studying. Many of us smoked then. I for one took it up to look more sophisticated. There was a “smoker,” a room on each floor of the dormitory, but we usually sat on the threshold of our rooms with our cigarettes extended into the corridor. Thirty years ago I was having dinner at Eliot House and explained our smoking behavior to a student. “Oh, that’s why they’re called ‘smokers’!” she said.

Undergraduates today say that the Health Service is not always responsive to student needs. In the 1950s the Radcliffe Infirmary was notoriously inadequate. I knew a very

unhappy student who went to the infirmary and was asked what was wrong. She answered through her tears that she didn't know. "Well, come back when you do," she was told. A good friend reminded me of a week she was forced to spend in the infirmary because, when seeking some relief from a headache, she mentioned that the children where she had her room-and-board job had measles. Although my friend had had measles and was now immune, the nurse insisted that she stay in quarantine, not even allowed to send for library books lest they become contaminated. Needless to say, she never went near the infirmary again. No wonder that my kit of medical samples, packed by my physician father when I went off to college, was popular. Emperin #2 was especially helpful for cramps.

In the early 1950s Radcliffe was indeed separate but unequal, and it sometimes bothered us, especially in small ways. Harvard houses served ice cream every day; we had it only on Sundays. Harvard still had "biddies" to clean the rooms, and staff to serve. Of course tie and jacket were mandatory in the Houses at meals. Meanwhile, back at the Quad, Radcliffe women worked "bells" (the switchboard), washed dishes, set the tables, and served in the dining rooms. Harvard men, because of postwar space shortages, were "crowded" four to a suite, sharing two bedrooms, a living room that often had a fireplace, and a bathroom. In the Quad, many so-called emergency doubles, originally meant for one person, now accommodated two. A whole floor of perhaps 20 women shared one bathroom, with two toilets, four washstands, and two baths or showers. It certainly was an unequal situation, but resentment of our lack of privacy did not include resentment of Harvard. We just wished that Radcliffe would improve conditions. (Guess what?

Conditions were not improved until men moved into the Quad, and even then, not immediately.)

Parietal rules also differentiated Radcliffe and Harvard. If we left after dinner we had to sign out saying where we would be, and we had to return by 1:00 a.m. Freshman year we were allowed only 15 “one o’clocks.” I still regret being unwilling to spend one of these precious one o’clocks with my parents and of course ending the semester with several to spare. Arriving even a few minutes late brought down the wrath of the House Committee. In those days the College took its role *in loco parentis* very seriously, and so did our parents. While we chafed against the rules and found them extremely annoying and inconvenient, they also served to bolster our superegos. They could be a soft way to end a date with someone overbearing or boring, and they could also strengthen our resolve not to give way to temptation. When Mary Bunting abolished the one o’clock sign-in, she made it clear that it was unfair that women could not spend the night at the lab if an experiment warranted. I do not think she realized what confusion she was creating for women who had no intention of spending the night at the lab.

Radcliffe women all rode bicycles to classes in the Yard, or to the library, which is now the Schlesinger. Neither rain, nor snow, nor dark of night could keep these hardy souls from their appointed rounds. It was only with the advent of the stronger sex in the Radcliffe Quad that the shuttle bus made its appearance. But to be honest, we rather liked riding our bicycles or walking briskly with our green bookbags. We made fun of the Jolly-Ups, when women could invite men to dances at the Quad, but we understood

the truth of the Radcliffe song: “Wellesley has a muddy lake, muddy lake,/But Radcliffe has its weekends all week long.” We were airily dismissive when young men told us they could be taking out Wellesley girls if only they had a car.

There were certainly inequities, and petty annoyances did weigh on us, but when it came to the really nasty inequalities we were amazingly non-confrontational. Being banned from the newly built Lamont Library, specifically meant for undergraduate use, was a true slap at Radcliffe, but it never occurred to us to protest. Harvard Law School and Harvard Medical School had just opened to women, but when making career plans we were cautioned to perfect our typing skills. One classmate wrote in our 35th reunion book: “It is astonishing how accepting we were.”

Since the days of the Annex, Radcliffe women wanted to be accepted into Harvard College on an equal footing with men, soaking up the vaunted intellectual atmosphere, sharing in the richness of extracurricular life, and being part of a long and illustrious tradition. That was the dream, but it took more than a century to become reality. Those of us who graduated in 1952 found ourselves midway on the path from a separate college, and a separate identity, to full integration.

Throughout life we gain new identities, often at the expense of losing old ones. In our day, when a woman married, she changed her maiden name. There were other crises of identity when we become mothers, or divorcées, or widows. At our fiftieth reunion, some feared that we had lost our identity as Radcliffe women. If our collective dream, set forth so long ago, was to be an integral part of Harvard at last, then what we wished for has been achieved. We may want to cling to our old identity, especially since

the new one is so vague, but we will surely adjust in time. Perhaps we will hyphenate our names, Radcliffe-Harvard, or more likely, Harvard-Radcliffe; perhaps eventually we will identify with the Radcliffe Institute. It is important to realize that whatever the future brings, our memories are valid and comforting, and we should accept our nostalgia as an appropriate response to change.