

# **Toni Morrison: 'I Am Alarmed By the Willingness of Women to Enslave Other Women.'**

'Cinderella's Stepsisters,' her poignant commencement address to the Barnard Class of 1979, is just as insightful today as it was 40 years ago

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*In this compelling speech by the late icon, Morrison reminds us that as women, we hold the fate of humanity in our hands. And that, because of this, the last thing we should do is turn on one another. Lifting up a sister as a matter of nurturing and care does not show our weakness, but rather our strength. May we all take a lesson from the words she uttered 40 years ago that still have resonance in the 21st century.*

L et me begin by taking you back a little. Back before the days at Barnard. Indeed to the days before secondary school and even elementary school. To nursery school, probably, to a once-upon-a-time time you first heard, or read, or, I suspect, even saw *Cinderella*. Because it is Cinderella that I want to talk about; because it is Cinderella who causes me this feeling of urgency.

Like most fairy tales it is peculiar, but, unlike most of them, it may also be dangerous. Not the "virtue will triumph" part of it (it may very well be that virtue does triumph, but I am not all sure that that is what virtue is for). Not even the nature of the triumph: handsome devoted prince plus castle in perpetuity.

What is unsettling about it is that the story is essentially the story of a household, a world, if you please, of women. Of women gathered to abuse another woman. There is, of course, a vague rather absent father and a nick-of-time prince with a foot fetish. But neither has much personality. The real fireworks don't concern the men, and do not take place among or between them. The surrogate "mothers" (god- and step-) contribute to Cinderella's grief and to her release and happiness.

But it is her stepsisters who interest me. How crippling it must have been for those young girls to grow up with a mother, to watch and imitate that mother in the enslaving of another girl. How brutalized the sensibilities must be

when you are encouraged, instructed, expected to live off the selfless labor of another woman. How poisonous to be forever in the company of a non-nurturing mother — a mother without milk.

I am alarmed by the violence that women do to each other: professional violence, competitive violence, emotional violence. I am alarmed by the willingness of women to enslave other women.

I am curious about their fortunes after the story ends. For contrary to recent adaptations, the stepsisters were not ugly, clumsy, stupid girls with outsized feet. The Grimm collection describes them as “beautiful and fair in appearance.” When we are introduced to them, they are beautiful, elegant women of status and clearly women of power. And in the violence of the power they exert, there is no one, not anyone, to stay their hand. All one can hope for is a magical escape from them. Hoping for a way to defuse their misdirected violence is in vain. Having watched and participated in the dominion of another woman, will they be any less cruel when it comes their turn to enslave other children, or even when they are required to take care of their own mother?

**It**

is not a wholly medieval circumstance. It is quite a contemporary one if you think about it. It is not so uncommon to see feminine power used in what has been described as a “masculine”



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manner. I am speaking now to a group of women

who will be (if not already) in a position to do the very same thing. Whatever your background, rich or poor; whatever the history of education in your family, five generations or one, you have taken advantage of what has been available to you at Barnard and you will, therefore, have both the economic and social status of the stepsisters; you will have their power.

It is splendid to see women close ranks and rally behind another woman when that woman is abused emotionally, professionally, economically by men or the system or the law of the land. How exhilarating that is. But how much more exhilarating to see women outraged when they witness the oppression of women by other women. You will soon have that opportunity on the killing floor. In offices and laboratories, in boardrooms, classrooms, living rooms, you will see it there on the killing floor that is waiting for you.

Rather than describe for you what you already know: the immense strides women have taken into positions of real power and policymaking, and to deplore the fact that there is still so much more to be done. I want not to ask you, but to tell you, not to participate in the oppression of your sisters.

Mothers who abuse their children are women, and another woman has to be willing to stay her hand. Mothers who set fire to the buses of children are women and other women have to tell them to stay their hands.

Women who stop the promotion of other women in careers are women and other women must come to the victims' aid. Social welfare workers who humiliate their clients may be women and other women colleagues have to deflect their action. Perhaps there is too much privacy, and individuality among us, so that we do not feel what it seems to me was more common a longer time ago: when women felt responsible for other women — when women did what agencies now do.

In any case, I am alarmed by the violence that women do to each other: professional violence, competitive violence, emotional violence. I am alarmed by the willingness of women to enslave other women, alarmed by a growing absence of decency of the killing floor of professional women's worlds.

If education is to have value as well as price; if it is to have meaning as well as substance, then it must be about something other than careers and power. The pursuit of a liberal education and the pursuit of the arts and sciences cannot be simply about husbanding beauty, isolating goods, and making sure enrichment is the privilege of a few. The function of a 20th-century education must be to produce humane human beings. To refuse to continue to produce generation after generation of people trained to make expedient decisions rather than humane ones.

You are the women who will take your place in the world where you can decide who shall flourish and who shall

wither; you will make distinctions between the deserving poor and the undeserving poor; where you can yourself determine which life is expendable and which is indispensable. Since you will have the power to do it, you may also be persuaded that you have the right to do it. As educated women, the distinction between the two is first-order business.

I am not suggesting there be some distortion of judgment, some lessening of standards or some emotional altercation of the intellect in order to promote ourselves. Not at all, and let me be very clear on that point. What I am suggesting is that we pay as much attention to our nurturing sensibilities as to our ambition. You are moving in the direction of freedom and the function of freedom is to free somebody else. You are moving toward self-fulfillment and the consequences of that fulfillment should be to discover that there is something just as important as you are and that just as important thing may be your stepsister. We are women and we are human, and as human beings we are also the only ones we know and as far as I can tell, we are, as human beings, the only moral inhabitants of the globe. There aren't any others.

**In** your rainbow journey toward the realization of personal goals don't make choices based only on your security and your safety. Nothing is safe. In the world of work, nothing is safe. In the world of family, nothing is safe. In the world of

human emotions, nothing is safe. That is not to say that anything ever was, or that anything worth achieving ever should be.

In pursuing your highest ambitions, don't let your personal safety diminish the safety of your stepsister. In wielding the power that is deservedly yours, don't permit it to enslave your stepsisters.

And I want to discourage you from choosing anything or making any decision simply because it is safe. Things of value seldom are. It is not safe to have a child. That is an extremely risky enterprise. It is not safe to want to be the best at what you do. It is not safe to challenge the status quo. It is not safe to choose work that has not been done before. Or to do old work in a new way. There will always be someone there to stop you. None of the things of real value are simply safe. That is the mistake the stepsisters made; they wanted to wield their power, fulfill their needs in order to be safe.

In pursuing your highest ambitions, don't let your personal safety diminish the safety of your stepsister. In wielding the power that is deservedly yours, don't permit it to enslave your stepsisters. Let your might and your power emanate from that place in you that is nurturing and caring. Don't measure your wealth by the desperation of a poor stepsister; don't define personal success by the frequency with which you can identify deficiencies in a less fortunate stepsister. Know the



difference between what is just and what is mean-spirited; between what is fastidious and what is disdainful; between womanly pride and feminine petulance. It is dangerous, I know, to put love before one's own ambitions. But let me read a few lines written by someone who has said it much better than I can:

"... The present is a dangerous place to live. There were dreams once, riding past and future alike; we embraced the dream, drunk past any look at the present in the face. There were dreams once and the illusion led to the present. There were dreams once, gold, or red, green, and black but the present is here like me and you. And is articulate. And knows no peace; neither do you nor me, if we are friends enough to have known the dreams."

Women's rights is not only an abstraction, a cause; it is also a personal affair. It is not only about "us;" it is also about me and you. Just the two of us. I leave you my love.

Thank you.