Embracing the F Word: Growing Up as a Reluctant Feminist

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Growing up in the 1970s, I was, like millions of other American girls, stuck in a liminal space between feminism and femininity. The phrase "women's liberation" floated around the discourse of my childhood, on the fringes of Sunday barbecues or afternoon martinis. Most of the adults around me fell into naturalized gender roles without resistance or question, yet the thread of dissatisfaction that Betty Friedan articulated in *The Feminine Mystique* seemed like a current running under the flow of everyday family life. Influential to both my mother's generation and my own, Friedan's best-seller is credited with launching second wave feminism. Friedan herself was a co-founder of the National Organization for Women and became an iconic figure for women's rights.

I was encouraged to believe that the movement liberated not only those who fought for it, but also liberated me. If there was a sense that I would have more opportunities as a woman than my mother and her friends did, what would these opportunities be? Because the narratives and characters of feminism helped me understand social norms and expectations beyond my lived experience, I turned to television for answers. Critical theorist Douglas Kellner notes that "radio, television, film, and the other products of media culture provide materials out of which we forge our very identities; our sense of selfhood; our notion of what it means to be male or female; our sense of class, of ethnicity and race, of nationality, of sexuality; and of 'us' and 'them'" (7).

Television offered a limited spectrum of roles and identities for women: as mothers, wives, and homemakers; as single women seeking companionship; as women in the workplace looking for contentment in some form. From Edith Bunker to Maude, from Mary Richards to Rhoda, television presented girls of the 70s with a variety of characters to emulate or avoid. I struggled with confusion about how to best form my identity as a woman. I saw game shows and soap operas, made for television movies and prime time dramas, but sitcoms clearly had the strongest effect on shaping my sense of self.

One of the earliest female characters I aspired to emulate was Samantha Stephens, the charming witch of *Bewitched*. I remember the series in black and white, so it must have been in syndication (reruns, as we used to say) because the toddler who I was when the series started running in color could not comprehend the complexities of Samantha and Darrin's relationship. Looking back on the characters who shaped my ideas of gender presents me with a then-and-now duality. I remember admiring Samantha for her beauty, her magic, and her motherhood. She seemed able to please everyone. Yet watching *Bewitched* on DVD in 2015, I am furious with Samantha's constant prioritizing of Darrin's contentment. Then I remember: what I am watching aired to a prime time audience fifty years ago. Samantha may have aimed to please her husband, but her independence and intelligence were uncommon among women on television. And Endora, Samantha's mother, was even more independent and adventurous.

In fact, Samantha's decision to privilege marriage over adventure is likely the frustration I experience now, when I watch the episode tellingly titled "Witch or Wife?" in which Samantha finds herself bored while Darrin manages an overwhelming workload at the advertising agency, due to his boss's vacation. Finding Samantha at home playing solitaire, Endora convinces her to take a quick trip to Paris, a journey the witches can accomplish in a flash. There, they enjoy a decadent lunch at a sidewalk

café then take in a stylish fashion show. Despite these refined pleasures, Samantha returns to Darrin and the pleasures of their domestic life. She convinces him that a settled marriage is truly what she wants the most, and sacrifices the lifestyle she can engage with a twitch of her nose.

Samantha chooses the heteronormative, socially sanctioned life that young women were beginning to question in the 1970s. Today, I bristle at the way a strong female character is easily subdued, sending a message to viewers about making a particular choice that privileges a suburban marriage for a smart, savvy woman who is capable of anything, thanks to witchcraft. Not being a witch myself, I am not sure that I saw myself as able as Samantha to chart my own independent path. There were many cultural messages that said women should not go the park or to the store alone, so how could I possibly imagine myself jetting off to Paris? Susan J. Douglas, in *Where the Girls Are*, indicates that Samantha's duality appealed to a particular audience: "The show hailed young female viewers by providing, and seeking to reconcile, images of female equality—and, often, even images of female superiority—with images of female subordination" (133). This reconciliation draws viewers to sitcoms today, as women still encounter misogyny, not only in their lived experience but also in the media products informed by everyday life.

Sexism moderated by humor was a staple of the *Mary Tyler Moore Show*, a perennial favorite in my household. Following the formula typical of sitcoms, each week focused on a misunderstanding or miscommunication that played out over the course of the episode and resolved in the end. Sitcoms thus gave me an idea of what conflict among adults looked like, especially conflict in workplace and romantic relationships between men and women. *Mary Tyler Moore* is a situation comedy, so the conflicts are, as Jason Mittell points out, "low-stakes comedic mishaps," which become, especially for the child viewer, a safe space for playing out conflict without consequence. Mittell adds that these storyworlds are presented in "a low-key naturalistic style, focusing on

realistic characters in plausible scenarios" (248). The realism of this particular sitcom facilitated the possibilities of Mary Richards serving as a role model.

John Caughey's 1984 ethnographic research asked participants about their parasocial relationships with celebrities and the characters they play. One participant who watched *The Dick Van Dyke Show* as a child wanted her mother to be perfect like Laura Petrie, the perky young wife played by Mary Tyler Moore. The *Mary Tyler Moore Show* aired when Caughey's interview subject was in junior high school. She told Caughey: "I didn't pay much attention until I realized that I wanted to learn how to become a woman for myself. I had the perfect person to model myself after: Mary. On her show she was a career woman and still as perfect as before: she dressed well, she was slender, she knew how to cook, she was independent, she had a beautiful apartment, she was intelligent, she had friends. There was still nothing wrong with her" (62).

Perhaps it was that sense that there was nothing wrong with Mary Richards that made it difficult for me to see her as a role model. I appreciated her independence and ability to find a satisfying life without a partner to "complete" her: Mary Richards was a whole person on her own terms. What Mary had that I lacked, however, was what Lou Grant called "spunk." In an infamous bit at the end of the first episode of the *Mary Tyler Moore Show*, Lou Grant interviews Mary Richards for a job at JWM-TV. After asking her several inappropriate questions that would today be serious Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) violations, Grant says, "You know, you've got spunk." She demurs, thinking it a compliment until he quickly adds, "I hate spunk!" Here, then, is the binary: no matter how successful Mary might be in her career at the television station, no matter how many times she saves the day, it is always within a frame that critiques her courage and character. Then again, what good is a feminist in a sitcom without the patriarchy to rail against?

In the same way I lacked spunk, I was also not the girl who would grow up to toss her hat up into the air in a celebratory gesture of self-confidence. Surely I wouldn't catch it, and it would fall in the mud (an ironic spoof of this famous scene is the opening of *Sex and the City*, in which a passing bus splashes muddy water on Carrie's ballerina dress). I gravitated toward Mary's friend and neighbor Rhoda Morgenstern, who more closely epitomized my idea of a realistic role model: a sweet yet somewhat whiney, smart yet insecure, Jewish woman trying to find her way in the world. Rhoda was also deeply affected by the traps of cultural expectations for women, and perhaps I could relate to this as well.

The series premier of *Rhoda* features the eponymous character traveling from Minneapolis to visit her sister Brenda in New York, where the Morgenstern sisters grew up. The opening scene in which the sisters reunite in Brenda's tiny apartment speaks volumes about women's self-perceptions in 1974.

Brenda: I can't believe you're really here. God, you look so gorgeous.

Rhoda: So tell me everything. I want to hear it all...what's going on with your life.

Brenda: Oh, you know. The same things: mother problem, weight problem, date problem.

Rhoda: That's terrific. You don't have a job problem.

Brenda: Hey! That's right. I got promoted at the bank. Now I'm a teller.

Rhoda: Hey, there you go. That's terrific.

Brenda: And the best thing about being a bank teller is that your legs don't show.

Rhoda: Why do I get this feeling I'm looking in an old mirror?

This was familiar, self-deprecating dialogue. Even the positive successes, like Brenda's promotion, have a failure (unattractive legs) to undercut them. The laugh track playing under the conversation only enhanced my pre-teen idea that pointing out your own shortcomings could be something others appreciate as humorous. This is not a particularly winsome scenario for role models. Was Rhoda a feminist?

Her mother, who enters the apartment shortly after this conversation, hugs Rhoda and scolds her for not wearing a bra. Did I really want to be a feminist? There was always a certain edge of dissatisfaction to Rhoda's personality: no matter how content any given moment might find her, she was ever cautious of what misfortune might await. In retrospect, I can see these tendencies in my teenage self, always insecure. Was that classmate flirting with me, or did he see me as friendly and easy to talk with? Would I actually be prettier when I got my braces off? Would I feel comfortable to show my teeth when I smiled? Like both of the Morgenstern sisters, I worried about my "mother problem, weight problem, date problem," even though I was still finding my way in the world, not yet the single, independent career woman that Rhoda and Brenda somewhat, and unhappily, exemplified.

 And then there's Maude. We meet Maude Findlay as Edith Bunker's cousin on *All in the Family*, where Maude's liberal, feminist, open-minded attitude was a comedic foil for the conservative curmudgeon, Archie Bunker. Standing 5 foot, 10 inches with a deep, gravelly voice, Bea Arthur played Maude as an outspoken woman who seldom held back her feelings. *Maude* addressed controversial content despite the tendency for broadcast networks to shy away from it in order to retain corporate advertising sponsorship. For example, early in the first season, 47-year-old Maude

discovers she is pregnant, and she and her husband Walter decide that it is best for her to have an abortion. The two-part episode aired in November 1972, three months before the Supreme Court's decision in Roe v. Wade. At the time, abortion was legal in New York, where the series was set.

Maude was unrelenting. She was difficult. She did not back down. As an extreme introvert I could not aspire to those qualities, but I did admire them. I identified with Maude. Through identification with media characters, many of us are able to learn more about the world and about ourselves as well, as we consider how we might act and react in a given situation. Jonathan Cohen posits that "identification is defined not as an attitude, an emotion, or perception but, rather, as a process that consists of increasing loss of self-awareness and its temporary replacement with heightened emotional and cognitive connections with a character" (251). Cohen argues that identification occurs not as a way of seeing similarities with the character but actually imagining oneself in her place. If that is the case, did I want to be Maude? Yes and no.

Maude represented many of the things that get articulated negatively along with the distasteful rendering of "feminist": she was smart, "bossy," and stood up to men. I did not want to be seen as the "ugly feminist." I wanted to be a secret feminist superhero: that feminism could be the power I could hide and unleash in the moment when I needed to save the world.

These early influences that shaped my ideas of who and how I should be remain on the periphery of my sense of self. Great television characters do not disappear: they remain in circulation like old friends and neighbors. *Maude* was finally released in its entirety on DVD in 2015, putting that character into contemporary conversations about comedy, television, and feminism. As I talk now with women who were my fourth- and fifth-grade friends, we reminisce about Maude's boldness and conviction, marveling at some of the intricate humor that was too sophisticated for us to understand as children. Yet each of us, in navigating our feminism, felt

empowered at some point by Maude Findlay. She spoke unhesitatingly about controversial issues like abortion, addiction, and divorce. I could model my voice after hers: even when I lacked confidence, Maude demonstrated courage that I hoped to imitate.

Although programs and characters have changed dramatically over the decades, cultivation analysis argues that television itself has changed very little. In the film *The Electronic Storyteller*, George Gerbner attributed this to what he called casting and fate. The ways that men and women are cast differently on television affects our understanding and communication with each other. "For young women it has the effect of reducing—of tending to reduce—their sense of adequacy, and their sense of opportunities, potentials, and a range of activities in which they are likely to be seen as appropriate, and as adequate, and as successful" (*Electronic Storyteller*).

Television told me that women could have careers, but with caveats. I watched Pepper Anderson on *Police Woman* go undercover and be subjected to degrading behavior and violence from men as she masqueraded as a prostitute, a go-go dancer, or a flight attendant. The abuse suffered by Pepper while under cover created an aura of respect for Pepper-as-police-officer, whether authentic or not. Fast forward to 1982: Pepper would arguably not be described as a feminist, but Christine Cagney and Mary Beth Lacey certainly would. For me, and likely millions of other viewers, Cagney and Lacey were groundbreaking in a way Pepper Anderson was not. Critical and public praise for the series routinely points out that these characters were not police offers who happened to be women, but women who happened to be police officers; they were real people with real lives. If television gives audience members scripts to consider for managing their everyday lives, *Cagney and Lacey* offered abundant options.

As far as career choices were concerned, I knew I would not be a police officer. Gerbner also notes that television shows us far more police

officers, attorneys, and medical professionals than exist in contrast to other professions. These jobs enable action, conflict, and drama for televisual narratives that are not the typical experiences of writers and librarians. The professions that interested me enabled a quiet life. I preferred intellectual adventures to real-life danger. I had graduated from college and was taking my first small steps into a career in communication when *Murphy Brown* came on the air. Murphy was not a role model but a reprise, an echo of Mary Richards, Rhoda Morgenstern, and Maude Findlay. Coming back to television journalism after dealing with her alcoholism, Murphy has done so in the most publicly acceptable way, by checking in to the Betty Ford Clinic. The character is, like Maude, publicly brash yet privately sensitive. Audiences get more heart from Murphy Brown than they did from Maude, and that tenderness constantly reminded viewers that women are complex, multifaceted human beings, equally capable of surprising you and doing exactly what you expected.

In his reflections on the pedagogical power of film and television, Keller says that "media show us how to dress, look and consume; how to react to members of different social groups; how to be popular and successful and how to avoid failure; and how to conform to the dominant system of norms, values, practices, and institutions." Murphy Brown enabled me to finally embrace the F word. Not quite able to wear the badge of feminism in the waning years of the second wave, I saw that feminism and femininity did not need to be a binary. Although Bonnie Dow convincingly argues that Murphy Brown is the epitome of postfeminism, I learned that conforming to social norms did not necessarily mean creating a public persona to hide behind. Dow points out that "a clear message of Murphy Brown is that the personality traits [...] such as aggression, competitiveness, and lack of interpersonal sensitivity, are key to Murphy's professional success in a patriarchal world" (141). At issue is how Brown's defiance of traditional gendered behavior is often

the source of humor on the show: the audience laughs at Murphy's failure to be a feminist, as well as her failures *because* she is a feminist.

Many of the issues addressed on *Murphy Brown* are prevalent today, both inside feminist circles and in the larger public discourse: work-life balance, single parenting, leaning in, the role of women in the workplace. We need not admire or identify with Murphy Brown or any of television's female protagonists, but we can thank them for starting conversations that still persist.

These conversations take us back once again to Betty Friedan. In their overview of autoethnography, Carolyn Ellis, Tony Adams, and Art Bochner refer to *The Feminist Mystique* as an example of writing as a therapeutic process, for both author and readers. In Friedan's descriptions of the plight of women like herself who felt discontented in their lives, she was able to articulate what others felt but did not have the opportunities to discuss. Her readers "felt alone in their struggle, as if their isolation and feelings were issues with which they had to contend personally" (Ellis, n.p.). Friedan's stories are not dissimilar from the stories of television characters who offered viewers models for their gendered experiences. These characters taught me both the positive and negative consequences of being outspoken, and what it might look like to stand up for myself. Feminism showed me that I could speak out on behalf of others in the hope of improving the circumstances for all women. Nonetheless, it took many years before I could assert the values of feminism as something I embrace, rather than the F Word I feared would render me an outcast.

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