

Keynote Speech by Senator Vivienne Poy

“Unsung Heroes”

An Address to the Famous Five Foundation

The Palliser Hotel, Calgary, Alberta

15 June 2000

Sisters and friends:

When I was first invited to speak about “heroes,” I immediately searched for female heroes in history. As many of us know, the number of female heroes that one can find in books have been relatively few until the last couple of centuries. This was not because female heroes did not exist – they certainly did – it is just that they were not recorded.

Men wrote history, and the selective memory on the part of those who recorded and interpreted human events had a devastating impact on women and our collective memory. More often than not, those women who were entered into historical records were those who stood in for absent husbands or brothers, and those who did what men traditionally did – they were the rulers, the queens and the regents for their family members.

Because of the long history of marginalization of women, our self-perceptions have been affected. Historical records have denied us of women heroines and role models until recent centuries. Those women who were written about were described by male historians from a masculine point of view. No wonder Simone de Beauvoir said “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.”

I find it very difficult to relate to the few women who were prominent in history. In my search, I’ve found women such as Elizabeth I, whom everyone here knows well, and her Chinese counterpart, Empress Wu, who lived at the end of the 8th and the beginning of the 9th centuries, and who was the only woman in the history of China who ruled in her own right. It is most interesting in drawing parallels between them. They were both very capable rulers, both lived long lives and brought peace and prosperity to their respective countries. While Elizabeth I had her paramours, Empress

Wu was reputed to have her own harem of young men. I wonder today whether they would be regarded as feminists? They are fascinating, but in all seriousness, they have had little effect on my life.

So instead of talking about such well-known female historical figures today, I wish to talk about those women, mostly unsung heroes, who have helped shape my life. Some of them fought for justice and equality. Others are women who selflessly worked hard for the happiness and prosperity of their families. Some of these women were not well known, nor powerful, but they have invariably had important effects on my life. And in many cases, they have had a profound impact on the lives of others as well. These are also women who sought a better life for themselves, and in so doing, have assured a better world for many others.

I begin my list of heroes with a woman I admired greatly – my paternal grandmother. In order to understand her, I need you to imagine China in the first part of the 20th century.

As a child, I observed her strength of purpose, her determination to survive, and thrive, and to realize the vision she had for her children. She was a tiny woman with a strong will.

In spite of her position in the family as a concubine, in fact one of three, she was methodical and serene. Just a word to explain that a concubine is a secondary wife who is accepted into the family by the wife, and whose children are legitimate members of the family. Grandmother never argued with grandfather's wife because she wanted to be assured that her son - my father - who was the eldest, and who was required to live with grandfather's wife, in order to bring her good luck, would hold the position as the head of the family in the future.

Grandmother was always patient and discreet, and was thankful for her lot. She was a woman of moderation and had great faith in Buddha. I used to watch her pray every afternoon. After grandfather's wife died, she became effectively the family matriarch.

In spite of her illiteracy, she was a wise woman. In addition to assisting grandfather when he first went into business, the way she conducted her life brought her great respect from the rest of the family – a family of fourteen children. Through her strength and determination, she

ensured that my father became the head of the family, as well as a community leader.

Grandmother was certainly not a feminist by any stretch of the imagination, but I attempt to emulate her in many ways because of her wisdom, vision, moderation and patience. She was a woman like so many of our forebears – women who were not recognized for their valuable contributions to their families, but who had such profound impact on future generations.

Another hero who had great influence in my life was a woman I once read about in the newspapers, regarding her time management skills. I remember so well one simple example: she said that if she was going from one room to another, and if there was something that needed to be brought there, she would make sure she took it with her to save time and motion – in other words, think and plan ahead. Her example inspired me to develop my own time-saving skills, which I can honestly say revolutionized my life. Admittedly, this woman was not the Queen of England, nor was she the Empress of China, but her simple example inspired me to take the steps necessary to be effective in my life. Looking ahead and planning has become my motto.

And truly, is this not the role of a hero? To inspire? To provoke thought? To provoke action? A hero is not measured by the amount of power she may hold – a hero is measured by the difference she makes in the lives of those she touches.

Another hero who touched my life was Irene Murdoch. In 1968, Ms. Murdoch, an Alberta ranch wife, came to preeminence in the media because of her divorce case. I remember being stunned when it was reported that the courts found that she had no claim to a share of the family ranch on which she had shared all the work during her married life. In fact, she had run the ranch for about five months of each year single-handedly. Although the Supreme Court recognized her contributions, it was deemed that she did no more than any other wife, and therefore, could not make any claim to a partnership with her husband.

In 1973, Murdoch was finally granted a lump sum maintenance payment, but the court did not recognize her partnership in the household. It would not be until 1993, in the case of Catherine Peter, that the Supreme

Court ruled that a housewife was entitled to compensation for the contribution she had made during her marriage.

The Murdoch case, and its profound implications, hit me like a bolt of lightning. It awakened me to the facts of life for a woman like me, who at the time was at home raising our eldest child and helping my husband in establishing his medical practice. At the time, I didn't consider myself a feminist, and was quite oblivious to the issues that affected women.

By fighting for her own rights, Irene Murdoch awakened in me an awareness of feminist issues. I realized that while it was rewarding to raise a family and to help my husband get established in his career, it just wasn't enough for me. I needed the freedom and opportunity to explore a career outside of the home.

I don't know whether I would have found that fulfillment had it not been for Irene Murdoch's example. Inspired by her struggle, I went back to school, not to further studies in history, but to study Fashion Arts, following which I embarked on a career in fashion design, a vocation that I have found very rewarding.

Ironically, this brings me to another of my heroes - Amelia Jenks Bloomer, the woman who popularized the wearing of pants by Western women in the 19th century. Most people who know me know that I wear pants most of the time in recent years. Gone are the days of miniskirts. Not that I don't like the look of skirts, but they slow me down when I want to walk quickly or run up and down the stairs. As you can see, I wear western clothes, and have done so all my life, except at special occasions when I will wear traditional Chinese costume.

Although Amelia Bloomer has been credited for popularizing the wearing of pants by women, to the extent that they were called "Bloomers," it was Libby Smith Miller who originally copied the style from uniforms worn by women in a Swiss sanatorium. The style was immediately adopted by Miller's well-known feminist cousin, Elizabeth Cody Stanton. Stanton told her friend Amelia Bloomer, who then promoted the new style in *Lilly*, a contemporary periodical.

Although this style really wasn't adopted as part of European costume until the end of the 19th century, and then only for physical exercises,

Bloomer's actions marked the beginning of the emancipation of clothing for Western women – a tangible symbol of the advancements in the struggle for greater equality between women and men. I attribute the way I dress today not only to the feminists of the 19th century, but also to the popularization of the wearing of pants in the 1970s as a formal way of dressing. I well remember my days at McGill University when female students were not allowed to wear pants to lectures. When I started working as a designer at the beginning of the 1980s, I helped promote the wearing of pants for evening wear.

The emancipation of clothing for women went hand in hand with women gaining civil rights. By the beginning of the 20th century, women were mobilizing to demand suffrage.

Today, my status as a Canadian woman with full citizenship rights depends a great deal on those who came before me. My heroines in this respect are many, and naturally, they include the Famous 5, who agitated and persuaded the governments of their day to grant women the vote, along with the right to be elected to public office, and to appointments to the highest offices, such as the Supreme Court and the Senate. I will not dwell on the Persons Case since all of us know it well.

Women in Canada received the federal vote in 1917, in large measure because the government required their support for the country's war effort during World War I. It is an irony that wars, despite their devastating effects, are often the catalysts for positive social changes. The passage of the *War-time Elections Act* (1917) was one of the first in a series of legislative changes that led to Canadian women possessing the vote at both provincial and federal levels of government.

I must point out that at the time, however, that “women” meant “white women.” Women and men of other racial backgrounds did not have the right to vote. For example, Chinese-Canadians were not given the right to vote until 1947. As an ethnic Chinese, two battles have been won for me, and therefore, I have two groups of heroes to thank. Not only the suffragettes, but also the Chinese Canadian World War II veterans, as well as other civil rights activists, who fought for the citizenship rights of Chinese Canadians in the post-war years.

While speaking about rights, this brings me to the next important issue, which is the right of self-determination.

My next and more recent hero is Sue Rodriguez. Through her very public efforts regarding a highly private matter, she moved the issue of assisted suicide into the political domain.

For myself, even at a very young age, I've always been adamant that I should be in control of my own life. I was, therefore, most interested when Sue Rodriguez fought the legal system to gain control of her own destiny. The fact that the able-bodied could commit suicide with impunity but those with debilitating illnesses could not, struck her as fundamentally unjust.

When Sue Rodriguez had originally decided to go to court, it was for herself. She hadn't been directly campaigning for other victims of terminal illnesses. But when she contacted the *Right to Die Society* after her diagnosis with ALS, she realized that there was a whole hidden world of people dying in physical distress, loneliness and psychological pain.

Through her personal struggle, she changed the very nature of the legal decision-making process surrounding her death. Rodriguez appealed to the Supreme Court of Canada with a profound belief in her right to self-determination. She perceived death and the way we die as part of life, and it was thus her right and entitlement under the law.

Moving into such an ethical and moral minefield, Sue Rodriguez was unaware of the scope of the political and legal battle her determination would engender. Though ultimately the courts did not side with her, their decisions were of profound significance, and continue to resonate in the political sphere today.

Whether or not we support Sue Rodriguez's actions or beliefs, we can't help but admire her for her audacity, tenacity and incredible courage.

The subject of living and dying reminds us that, it is important to plan ahead. So I come to my last hero today, who is a person who knows how to plan well, not only for herself and her husband, but also with great consideration for her daughter and her family.

This person is my aunt, in fact, the daughter of the same grandmother I spoke of earlier. More than ten years ago, when she was only about 70, she and her husband, who was quite a bit older than her, moved into a senior's complex. I was really surprised because she was still so young and active, but she told me that she did it primarily for her husband, whose health was on the decline. They live in a very nice complex in California that provides medical care when needed. Besides, they are free to travel which they love to do. She gave their house to their daughter with the stipulation that she can go back there once a week to cook up a storm and to see the grandchildren.

I still remember my aunt telling me that she planned, not only to take care of her husband, but also in order not to burden the next generation. She wants her golden years to be carefree and to be able to do what she enjoys, including writing her memoirs. She learned to use the computer after she turned 80, and she's now e-mailing everyone and having great fun.

I believe in the importance of enjoying the simple things in life. My aunt's philosophy is what I seek to emulate. Her consideration for others, as well as her love of learning is what I admire.

Each of us have our own heroes, depending on our life experiences. Mine have bridged the opposite sides of the world, as well as two very different cultures. I feel very privileged to have these heroes in my life, and I want to thank them for being who they are.