WFWP USA: Standing Our Ground as Women, So Others Can Too

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"The role of women and their inborn nature differ from those of men. This does not mean that they have less value and that their status is inferior. The unhappiness of women [in the feminist movement] stemmed from not realizing the preciousness of their God-given original nature and role. Problems arose from the fact that many women forgot what they possessed and tried to imitate the nature and role of men, as if men were the exemplars for women.

My esteemed women leaders! Women are the individual embodiments of truth representing one of the two natures of the incorporeal God, who possesses yin and yang in both external form and internal nature. Therefore, women are not in a competitive relationship with men, who represent the other side of God. Women are not the assistants of men; they are interdependent partners who make the world whole."

- Hak Ja Han, October 12, 1994 (adapted from the original)

In June of 2014, employees at the popular Massachusetts grocery chain, Market Basket, erupted in protest. Their beloved CEO was ousted, causing panic that the corporatization of the family chain was imminent. Market Basket has a special place in my heart too. Having lived briefly in a church center in midtown Manhattan, I'd struggled to find a way to buy food nearby for a group of 50 workshop participants. This exasperation resulted in an iron clad self-commitment that I would live near a grocery store, especially in a city. Years later when relocating to Somerville, God seemed to gift my family an apartment on my birthday, which sat directly across from Market Basket in Union Square.

At the time of the protests, I was very pregnant with my second child, working from home on my exercise ball, listening to the drone sounds of protest. I'd look out the window to watch the action. Employees refused to work and stood outside the store with signs encouraging cars to honk in support. Fresh produce spoiled in abandoned trucks; shelves were not re-stocked. Market Basket reportedly lost $10M per day.

One night, I remember looking down as the streetlights illuminated a small group of protestors and thinking 'this is a waste of time, nothing is going to change. The CEO is gone and that's that.'

And then, the protestors won. The CEO was reinstated; the Market Basket we loved was saved. I was gobsmacked, honestly. I couldn't believe that what I had witnessed going on outside my window for months had actually made a difference.

When you are part of a movement like that, even on the periphery, not believing any difference will be made, but then it is made, there is a residual empowerment you are graced with. A bit like the shock waves of an earthquake that rumble under your own feet miles away. You can't deny the power in it. You come to believe in the power of democracy to move an institution/corporation to submission. It's a good feeling and it's one that women must experience.

And how lucky we are to be alive after such rapid improvement in the state and livelihood of women! Our female ancestors set in motion big projects that we benefit from today - The Suffrage Movement (1800s-1920), Property, Marriage, and Education reforms (1800s), Labor Movements and Workplace Protections (late 1800s - mid 1900s), Reproductive Rights Movements (early 1900s onwards), Second, Third and Fourth Wave Feminism (1960s - present). These women were warriors - their weapons: picket lines, pamphlets, the pill, #MeToo. Since we cannot go back to thank these women directly, we must pay it forward.

Women's Federation for World Peace USA (WFWP) is part of the movement too, offering education, community and social programs to elevate women. I can absolutely see a scenario where WFWP also trains women further to recognize and fight manipulative power, raising warriors who have the skills and strategy to challenge institutions. This is important because any change on a larger scale will also impact us at home, in our personal lives. A few weeks after the protests ended, I delivered a baby girl. And I was emboldened to request 20 weeks of maternity leave. I believe the residual empowerment of the protests encouraged me to advocate for my time off; and I won that too.

Thanks to the dialogue of WFWP and society at large, I would argue that the generation of women after Mother Han's 1994 speech already have a richer understanding of the words shared. An initial reading of her speech may come across very conservatively - is she encouraging women to embrace trad wife goals of domesticity? "…Women are not in a competitive relationship with men, who represent the other side of God. Women are not the assistants of men; they are interdependent partners who make the world whole." But the text is expansive enough to fit a 2026 context, implying that women will have unique contributions in all domains. What will those contributions be? The details and specifics are up to us to find through our experiences, as we pioneer new ground and pass along our findings to the next generation.

Toby Ord says in his book, The Precipice (2020), "A human, or an entire generation, cannot complete such grand projects. But humanity can. We work together, each generation making a little progress while building up the capacities, resources and institutions to empower future generations to take the next step." I know that WFWP and those who follow us will uncover deeper meaning and truth in Mother Han's words. I am excited to think of what women of the future will know about our "God given original nature and role." They might laugh at how we live now and how little we know, but they will appreciate our struggle as warriors seeking truth. Some of those struggles will be big, like a picket line. Others will be as small as one woman asking for 20 weeks of maternity leave, and getting it.