

**CREATING PEACE WITH SELF, SISTER AND SOCIETY:
AN INTERGENERATIONAL CELEBRATION
REPORT FROM THE BOSTON RESEARCH CENTER FOR THE 21ST CENTURY
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A year of planning by more than 40 women and girls from some 20 organizations culminated in a two-day spring event at the Boston Research Center, “Creating Connections 2000: An Intergenerational Dialogue on Peace with Self, Sister and Society.” The gathering brought together women ranging in age from their second decade of life to their eighth decade; African American, Asian, Native American, Chicana and white women; students, professors, theorists, activists, musicians, poets, photographers and writers. In a word, diverse groups that do not often, if ever, meet in one place to celebrate commonalities.

“This is not going to be your typical conference,” Virginia Straus, executive director of the BRC, predicted in her welcoming remarks. “The hope of the planning committee was to create a multigenerational, multicultural conversation and experience; to try to get to the values that give life meaning for all of us.”

Setting the Stage

Step dancers—the Malden YWCA Girls in Action—set the evening in motion. They celebrated the themes of unity, sisterhood, trust and peace. “We must all do our part to make a certain sound,” they explained at this, their first public performance. They set the beat for the second women’s Creating Connections event, an event, like the first one in 1998, also hosted by the BRC, to promote collaboration and friendship among women working for social change.

Poet Jeannette Giannangelo moved the ball down the court with a performance of her poem, “Growing Up,” in which she tackled the *ism*—adultism—by invoking the challenge: Growing up does something to people—it makes people forget who they are. The theme of her poem, “The path you take is yours to choose,” reverberated throughout the entire conference.

In her pace-setting keynote presentation, Jacqueline Maloney inverted the behavioral paradigm of “Do. Have. Be.” to “Be. Do. Have.” She urged conference participants to “take what works for you to be your best self.” Her exhortation was: be your authentic self. Don’t be the self someone else defines for you because “to be who you are and to do what you are capable of is the only worthy goal.”

Posted on foyer walls were inspiring extracts from the writings of prominent women. There was also an exhibit of “Ideal Selves” created by the participants. “My ideal self is who I am now,” one woman wrote. “I’d like to take more risks and be less scared,” another said. And still another, “I want to make a difference in the world. I want people to know who I am.”

Saturday’s Activities

Ten concurrent workshops formed the backbone of Creating Connections.

“The time of the woman is now,” Gail Anne Kelley, educator, filmmaker and executive director of Earth Action and A Circle of Women, said to participants in her workshop, “Woman as Peacemaker, Healer and Visionary,” reflecting a view, she explained, expressed by many indigenous peoples. Referring to woman as peacemaker, the

intercultural mediator suggested, “Before you can make peace, you have to have a common language.” Observing that woman’s voice has been too often absent, she asked workshop participants to consider what peace looks like to a woman and declared emphatically: “You never know how many people you will affect simply by having a conversation with someone. The power of you is phenomenal. You never know how your words will go out into the world. Words are sacred. This is one of the first things a peacemaker needs to know.”

“You cannot have peace without economic justice. Everyone’s basic needs must be met,” one of the women asserted in answer to the question: What does peace look like? Another participant maintained that individual differences have to be respected, honored and celebrated. Viewing woman as a natural healer, Ms. Kelley suggested that woman’s first question in peacemaking should be, “How can I heal the situation?” She decried as a “dire mistake” the inclination in our time to exclude the natural world in our thinking. One participant asked why we don’t do a better job of emulating the Native American perspective that decisions we make today should take into account the impact on seven generations.

In another workshop, conducted by executive director of Women’s Action for New Directions (WAND) Susan Shaer and founding director of the Center for Women in Politics and Public Policy Elizabeth A. Sherman, women were considering the question, What would be different if the president of the United States were a woman? What would have to happen to make it possible for a woman to become president? Presently, only 9 percent of senators in the United States are women; only 6 percent of U.S. governors are women; only 13 percent are in the House of Representatives; only 14 percent are on federal budget committees. One answer presented is that women must learn to make long-range plans for the direction of their ultimate political path if they are going to make it to a top position. Women must also learn to be pragmatic about acquiring a political base and using it to assure an even broader base. They will then be able to affect, in particular, the so-called women’s issues, including but not limited to health care, child care and arts funding. At the time when women assume the highest office, it will follow that the status of women will improve. Participants evoked the motto so often used by African American women, “Lifting as we climb.”

Some women shared the experience of writing poetry and discussions of publishing their work with author Ruth Jacobs; some discussed with facilitators Elaine Theodore and Liana Buddieri body image, sexuality, education about sexuality, self-perception and the impact of culture and of media on an individual’s perception of herself as a sexual being. In Mari Wolf’s and Yasmine Shah’s workshop, “Making Decisions During Times of Transition,” women examined “her War Story.” Sayre Sheldon’s workshop focused on women’s writings about war from World War I through the end of the last century. In addition, it dealt with the paradox that often, during war, doors to new opportunities and new freedoms are open to women. It also dealt with the other side of the coin, the issue of women’s sexual exploitation by the military and the use of rape, even to this day, as a weapon of war. Women, Sayre summarized, seem to understand more readily than men do, the effects of war on common people. While they admire heroism, they despise war. It was not clear to the participants that men arrive at the same perspective. The socialization of our young men must change, the women concurred.

Achievements

In essence, what women were doing during the weekend conference was celebrating their sisterhood by sharing insights—insights about how we become who we are and how we become who we want to be. Women were in the process of learning not to shortchange themselves.

They were also remembering how many connections there are among women around the world, even when those connections seem to be invisible. For example in one of the Saturday morning interactive exercises, Sumru Erkuty, associate director of the Wellesley Centers for Women, asked women to take a minute to examine the labels in the clothing they were wearing. The clothes had been made in a number of places, including China; Mexico, Taiwan, Bali, Central America. “Who made your clothing?” Sumru asked. “Did the woman who made your clothing wonder who would wear it? Was she paid poorly? What were her working conditions? Could she organize? What would I want her to know about me?” She was indicating that even issues like world trade are personal as well as political.

In dialogue exercises conducted in concentric circles, women talked with one another about who they are and changes they would like to effect. They dealt briefly with questions like: “What do you wish you had been able to ask your great-grandmother?” “What would you have liked changing in your upbringing?” It was an invitation to introspection and internal peacemaking before moving into the realm of social action and external peacemaking.

In her seminal work, *The Majority Finds Its Past: Placing Women in History*, Gerda Lerner spoke about women’s quest for autonomy. “Autonomy means,” she wrote, “women defining themselves and the values by which they will live, and beginning to think of institutional arrangements that will order their environment in line with their needs.”

Creating Connections succeeded in creating an environment where girls and women from a host of different backgrounds could speak candidly together of their hopes and dreams and could reassess their plans for a future they shape for themselves. As Francine Prose put it, “You can aim for what you want and if you don’t get it, you don’t get it, but if you don’t aim you don’t get anything.” The laudatory comments that conference participants were making as they left the Center indicate that this event surpassed expectations.

“It was a truly wonderful event,” BRC Program Chair Karen Nardella summarized, “because of all the interaction among three generations of women. People readily shared their concerns and experiences with one another. They were comfortable with one another. The evaluations we received have been extraordinarily positive. This is an event that seems to exemplify what the BRC’s founder, Daisaku Ikeda, has said: The lion’s roar of women committed to the creation of peace will be key in ushering in a new ‘Century of Life.’” Concurring, participant Anne Shumway, active in Social Workers for Peace & Justice, in her post-conference evaluation described this event as “a joyous conference.”