PERSONAL

For a Woman, an Unaccustomed

By Katharine Graham

When I first took over The Washington Post Company in 1963, I seemed to be carrying inadequacy as baggage. What most got in the way of my doing the kind of job I wanted to do was my insecurity.

Partly this arose from my particular experience, but to the extent that it stemmed from the narrow way women's roles were defined, it was a trait shared by most women in my generation. We had been brought up to believe that our roles were to be wives and mothers, educated to think that we were put on Earth to make men happy and comfortable and to do the same for our children.

I adopted the assumption of many of my generation that women were intellectually inferior to men, that we were not capable of governing, leading, managing anything but our homes and our children. Once married, we were confined to running houses, providing a smooth atmosphere, dealing with children, supporting our husbands. Pretty soon this kind of thinking—indeed, this kind of life—took its toll: Most of us *became* somehow inferior. We grew less able to keep up with what was happening in the world. In a group we remained largely silent, unable to participate in conversations and discussions. Unfortunately, this incapacity often produced in women—as it did in me—a diffuse way of talking, an inability to be concise, a tendency to ramble, to start at the end and work backward, to overexplain, to go on for too long, to apologize.

One indicator of my sense of inferiority was a chat I had with my good friend Luvie Pearson during the height of Phil's illness. I was talking about hanging on to the paper until the children, especially the boys—since in those days that's how I thought—were old enough to run it. I recall Luvie firmly and distinctly saying, "Don't be silly, dear. You can do it."

"Me?" I exclaimed. "That's impossible. I couldn't possibly do it. You don't know how hard and complicated it is. There's no way I could do it."

"Of course you can do it," she maintained. "You've got all those genes. It's ridiculous to think you can't do it. You've just been pushed down so far you don't recognize what you can do."

Like other women, I suffered from an exaggerated desire to please, a syndrome so instilled in women of my generation that it inhibited my behavior for many years, and in ways still does. Although at the time I didn't realize what was happening, I was unable to make a decision that might displease those around me. For years, whatever directive I may have issued ended with the phrase "if it's all right with you."

When I first went to work, I was still handicapped with the old assumptions. I was "inferior" to the men with whom I was working. I had no business experience, no management experience and little knowledge of the governmental, economic, political or other matters with which we dealt. Since I regarded myself as inferior, I failed to distinguish between, on the one hand, male condescension because I was a woman and, on the other hand, a valid view that the only reason I had my job was the good luck of my birth and the bad luck of my husband's death.

Being a woman in control of a company—even a small private company, as ours was then—was so singular and surprising in those days that I necessarily stood out. Even at my own company, there were no women managers. This was typical of the times; the business world was essentially closed to women. At least through most of the 1960s, I basically lived in a man's world, hardly speaking to a woman all day except to the secretaries. But I was almost totally unaware of myself as an oddity and had no comprehension of the difficulties faced by working women in our organization and elsewhere.

The trade association that I joined when I went to work, the Bureau of Advertising, became the first of many over the years in which I was the only woman. Meetings were especially hard for me, because they often were held at resorts, creating problems of a social nature—whom to join at dinners, what to do when the men paired off or went in groups.

At one bureau meeting, a friend of mine was presiding over a discussion of an issue totally new to me. To my horror, he decided to go around the table asking each individual for his view. I was sitting on his right, and he started at his left, which gave me time to try to think what to say while listening to what everyone else had to say. When he got all the way around the table and we had heard from everyone but me, he just stopped and acted as if I wasn't there. There was a brief pause, and then we all laughed, I shakily said something, and the moment passed. At the time, I didn't know whether I was more relieved at not having to make a comment or more upset at being ignored.

An extreme example of my acceptance of traditional notions of men's and women's roles and realms was a frivolous but basic one. In Washington and elsewhere where large, social dinners were given, men and women automatically separated after eating, the men usually remaining at the dining room table discussing serious matters over brandy and cigars while the women retreated to the living room or the hostess's bedroom to powder their noses and gossip, mostly about children and houses—"women's" interests, as they were then considered. Long after I had gone to work and was engaged in discussing political, business or world affairs with many of these same men by day, at night, after dinner, I would mindlessly take myself off with the rest of the women, even in my own house.

Finally, one night at the home of Joe Alsop, the columnist, something snapped. I realized that I had worked all day, participated in an editorial-issue lunch, and was not only deeply involved in but actually interested in what was going on in the world. Yet I was being asked to spend up to an hour waiting to rejoin the men. That night at Joe's—he was especially guilty of keeping the men around his table—I told him I was sure he would under-

HISTORY

Seat at the Table

stand if I quietly left when the women were dismissed.

Far from understanding, Joe was upset. Defensively, he insisted that the separation didn't last a full hour but only long enough for the men to go to the bathroom. I maintained that that was nonsense, that I liked early evenings, that I looked forward to my reading and, further, that I wasn't trying to tell him what to do but only stating what I wanted to do. Joe couldn't accept the idea of my leaving and promised that if I stayed he would let everyone—men and women—remain at the table.

I had had no intention of starting a revolution, but my action did indeed trigger a minor social coup, as news of my innocent suggestion spread. Because I was regarded as a conservative on these social issues, my stance was particularly effective. The illogic of expecting women to leave while men held meaningful discussions became obvious, and the practice gradually broke up all over town.

The Awakening

There was no single dramatic moment that altered my views about women; rather, I just began to focus on the real issues surrounding the women's movement. Looking back, I can't understand, except in the context of the times, why I wasn't quicker to recognize the problems.

Thinking things through with my friend Meg Greenfield, then deputy editor of the editorial page, helped a great deal. She and I came at women's issues from different perspectives but with surprisingly similar attitudes. Meg had "made it" before women's liberation—in her early days at The Post she had a sign on her office door that said, "If liberated, I will not serve"—but she faced many of the same prejudices in her office that I did in mine. We tried to articulate our ideas together.

My friendship with Gloria Steinem was also an important influence in my thinking. Being younger, she had been shaped by the 1950s, a very different time from my own frame of reference. I had watched the burgeoning women's movement, of which she was a distinguished leader, from afar at first and was put off by the pioneering feminists who necessarily, I now suspect, took extreme positions to make their crucial point about the essential equality of women.

As time passed, Gloria, more than any other individual, changed my mind-set and helped me grasp what the leaders of the movement—and even the extremists—were talking about. I recall her encouraging me to throw off some of the myths associated with my old-style thinking. She said: "That's General Motors passing through our womb—you know, it goes from our fathers to our sons. But there is this kind of authentic self in there that is a guide if it's not too squelched, and if we're not too scared to listen to it." I was pretty certain that whatever authentic self I may have had had been pretty well squelched, but Gloria kept telling me that if I came to understand what the women's movement was all about it would make my life much better. In time it inevitably dawned on me, and how right she was! Later, when Gloria came to me for funds to start up Ms. magazine I put up $20,000 for seed money to help her get going.

As a manager, I had no clear idea how to lean on male-chauvinist managers to make changes. I felt that I and other women in management positions had a special duty to bury the old prejudices—first by refusing to accept them, and then by refuting them wherever and whenever we encountered them. Attitudes needed to be modified on both sides. Women had accepted the dubious assumptions and myths about themselves for much too long. And men had to be helped to break out of the assumptions of which they, too, were victims.

Feelings about women's issues had slowly gathered steam, and by the early 1970s they exploded. Women in professional situations began to assert themselves through lawsuits in behalf of equal opportunity. In March 1970, 46 women at Newsweek filed a complaint with the EEOC claiming discrimination. Not coincidentally, it was the same day that Newsweek's first cover story on the women's movement, titled "Women in Revolt," appeared. I'm sure the frustration of these women was fueled by the fact that there was only one woman writer at Newsweek at the time and she was judged too junior for the assignment, so a free-lancer, Helen Dudar, the wife of one of Newsweek's writers, Peter Goldman, was hired to write the cover.

I was away at the time and got a phone call from Fritz Beebe, chairman of the Washington Post Company, and Oz Elliott, the editor of Newsweek, telling me about the complaint. "Which side am I supposed to be on?" I asked—to which Fritz quickly responded, "This is serious. It isn't a joke." I hadn't thought it was a joke, nor had I meant my question to be.

Eventually we started to remedy the situation—but not enough. By August 1970, we reached a memorandum of understanding, but two years later we had a whole new round when the editors were accused of not living up to the understanding. This time we were more successful. I don't believe it was bad faith that made us fail the first time, but lack of understanding.

The Post, too, was sued. In 1972, after earlier complaints had gone largely unnoticed—and little action taken—59 women at the paper, clearly dissatisfied with management's response, signed a letter that they sent to me and several top editors. The memo let the company's own statistics speak for themselves in terms of our stated policy at The Post "to make the equality and dignity of women completely and instinctively meaningful."

Eventually things improved dramatically at both Newsweek and The Post, but without the suits and without the laws adopted by the country, this would have happened even more slowly.

The issues relating to women were on my mind constantly throughout these years. Though it took me a long time, I did come to understand the importance of the basic problems of equality in the workplace, upward mobility, salary equity and, more recently, child care. Most important to me was that women had a right to choose which lifestyle suited them. Eventually I came to realize that, if women understood this and acted on it, things would be better for men as well as for women.