

## What Can We Do?

### *Unraveling the Gender Knot*

**W**hat is the knot we want to unravel? In one sense, it is the complexity of patriarchy as a system and worldview—the tree, from its roots to the smallest outlying twig. It is misogyny and sexist ideology that keep women in their place and men in theirs. It is the organization of social life around core patriarchal principles and the powerful dynamics of fear and control that keep it going. It is the fate of the Earth itself as the patriarchal obsession with control drives an economic system wreaking havoc on the environment on which we and every other species of life depend.

But the knot is also about our individual and collective paralysis when it comes to gender issues. It is everything that prevents us from seeing patriarchy and our participation in it, from the denial that patriarchy even exists to false parallels, individualistic thinking, and cycles of blame and guilt. Stuck in this paralysis, we cannot think or act to help undo the legacy of privilege and oppression.

To undo the patriarchal knot we have to undo the knot of our paralysis in the face of it. A good place to begin is with two powerful myths about how change happens and how we contribute to it.

### Myth 1: It's Always Been This Way and Always Will Be

Given thousands of years of patriarchal history, it is easy to slide into the belief that things have always been this way. Even thousands of years, however, are a far cry from what 'always' implies unless we leave out the more than 90 percent of humanity's time on Earth that preceded it. Given all the archaeological evidence pointing to the existence of goddess-based civilizations and the lack

of evidence for perpetual patriarchy, there are plenty of reasons to doubt that life has always been organized around some form of privilege (see Chapter 3). When it comes to human social life, the smart money should be on the idea that *nothing* has always been or will be this way or any other, that the only thing we can count on is change. Reality is always in motion. Things may appear to stand still, but that is only because we have limited attention spans. If we take the long view—the *really* long view—we can see that everything is in process all the time.

Some argue that everything *is* process, the space between one point and another, the movement from one thing toward another. What we may see as permanent end points—global capitalism, Western civilization, advanced technology, and so on—are actually temporary states on the way to other temporary states. Even ecologists, who used to talk about ecological balance, now speak of ecosystems as inherently unstable. Instead of always returning to some steady state after a period of disruption, ecosystems are, by nature, a continuing process of change from one arrangement to another and never go back to the way they were.

Social systems are also fluid. A society is not some *thing* that sits there forever as it is. Because a system only happens as people participate in it, it cannot help but be a dynamic process of creation and re-creation from one moment to the next. In something as simple as a man following the path of least resistance toward controlling conversations (and a woman letting him), or being silent in the face of men's violence, the reality of patriarchy in that moment comes into being. This is how we *do* patriarchy, bit by bit, moment by moment. It is also how individuals can contribute to change—by choosing paths of greater resistance.

Since we can always choose paths of greater resistance or create new ones entirely, systems can only be as stable as the flow of human choice and creativity, which is no recipe for permanence. In the short run, patriarchy and its worldview may look stable and unchangeable. But the relentless process of social life never produces the same result twice in a row, because it is impossible for everyone to participate in any complex system in an unvarying and uniform way. Added to this are the dynamic interactions that go on among systems—between capitalism and the state, for example, or between families and the economy, or between ecosystems and human populations—that also produce powerful and unavoidable tensions, contradictions, and other currents of change. Ultimately, systems cannot help but change, whether we notice it or not.

Social systems often *seem* stable because they limit our lives and imaginations so much that we cannot see beyond them. This is especially true when a social system has existed for so long that its past extends beyond collective memory of anything different. As a result, it lays down terms of social life—including various forms of privilege—that can easily be mistaken for some kind of normal and inevitable human condition.

But this masks a fundamental long-term instability caused by the dynamics of privilege and oppression. Any system organized around an obsession with control is ultimately a losing proposition because it contradicts the uncontrollable nature of reality and does such violence to basic human needs and values. As the last two centuries of feminist thought and action have begun to challenge the violence and break down the denial, patriarchy has become increasingly vulnerable. This is one reason why men's resistance, backlash, and defensiveness can be so intense.<sup>1</sup> Talk radio is full of men complaining about their lot, especially the inability to realize ideals of control in relation to their own lives,<sup>2</sup> women, and other men. Fear and resentment of women are pervasive, from railing against affirmative action to worrying about being accused of sexual harassment or rape. Even the mildest criticism of men or mention of patriarchy is enough to elicit angry—and worried—charges of male bashing.

Patriarchy is also destabilized as the illusion of masculine control breaks down. As we saw in the financial collapse of 2008, corporate leaders alternate between arrogant confidence and optimism on the one hand and outright panic on the other, with banks becoming so large and complex that even their CEOs are no longer able to understand how they work. At the same time, governments lurch from one crisis to another, barely managing to stay in office, much less solving major social problems such as poverty, violence, terrorism and war, health care, middle-class angst, and, of course, the excesses and recklessness of global capitalism and the climate crisis it has caused. Computer technology supposedly makes life and work more efficient, but it does so by chaining people to an escalating pace of work and giving them less rather than more control over their lives.

The loss of control in pursuit of control is happening on a larger level as well. As the patriarchal obsession with control deepens its grip on everything from governments and corporations to schools and religion, the overall degree of control actually becomes less, not more. As out-of-control banks and other financial institutions illustrate, the scale on which systems are out of control simply grows larger. The stakes are higher and the capacity for harm is greater, and together they fuel an upward spiral of worry, anxiety, and fear.

As the illusion of control becomes more apparent, men start doubting their ability to measure up to patriarchal standards of manhood. We have been here before. At the turn of the twentieth century, there was widespread white male panic in the United States about the feminization of society and the need to preserve masculine toughness. From the creation of the Boy Scouts to Teddy Roosevelt's Rough Riders, a public campaign tried to revitalize manhood as a cultural basis for revitalizing a male-identified society and, with it, male privilege.<sup>3</sup> A century later, the masculine backlash is again in full bloom with the warrior image re-emerging as a dominant ideal, from superhero movies to right-wing militias to images of war being invoked for everything from the search for a cancer cure to curbing illegal drug use.<sup>4</sup>

Neither patriarchy nor any other system will last forever. Patriarchy is riddled with internal contradiction and strain. It is based on the false and

self-defeating assumption that control is the answer to everything and that the pursuit of more control is always better than contenting ourselves with less. The transformation of patriarchy has been unfolding ever since it emerged seven thousand years ago, and it is going on still. We cannot know what will replace it, but we can be confident that patriarchy will go, that it is going at every moment. It is only a matter of how quickly, by what means, at what cost, and toward what alternatives, and whether each of us will do our part to make it happen sooner rather than later and with less rather than more destruction and suffering in the process.

## Myth 2: The Myth of No Effect and Gandhi's Paradox

Whether we help change patriarchy depends on how we handle the belief that nothing we do can make a difference, that the system is too big and powerful for us to affect. In one sense, the complaint is valid: if we look at patriarchy as a whole, it is true that we are not going to make it go away in our lifetime. But if changing the entire system through our own individual efforts is the standard against which we measure the ability to do something, then we have set ourselves up to fail. It is not unreasonable to want to make a difference, but if we have to *see* the final result of what we do, then we cannot be part of change that is too gradual and long term to allow that.

We also cannot be part of change that is so complex that we cannot sort out our contribution from countless others that combine in ways we can never grasp. Problems like patriarchy are of just that sort, requiring complex and long-term change coupled with short-term work to soften some of its worst consequences and lay the groundwork for what is to follow. This means that if we are going to be part of the solution to such problems, we have to let go of the idea that change does not happen unless we are around to see it and that what we do matters only if we *make* it happen. In other words, if we free ourselves of the expectation of being *in control* of things, we free ourselves to act and participate in the kind of fundamental change that transforms social life.

To get free of the paralyzing myth that we cannot, individually, be effective, we have to change how we see ourselves in relation to a long-term, complex process of change. This begins by changing how we relate to time. Many changes can come about quickly enough for us to see them happen. When I was in college, for example, there was little talk about gender inequality as a social problem, whereas now there are women's studies programs all over the country. But a goal like ending male privilege takes far more time than our short lives can encompass. If we are going to see ourselves as part of that kind of change, we cannot use the human life span as a significant standard against which to measure progress.

To see our choices in relation to long-term change, we have to develop what might be called 'time constancy,' analogous to what psychologists call 'object constancy.' Infants lack object constancy in the sense that if you hold a toy in

front of very young children and then put it behind your back while they watch, they cannot find the toy because they apparently cannot hold on to the image of it and where it went. In other words, if they cannot see it, it might as well not exist. After a while, children develop the cognitive ability to know that objects or people exist even when they are out of sight. In thinking about change and our relation to it, we need to develop something similar in relation to time that enables us to carry within us the belief that significant change happens even though we are not around to see it.

Along with time constancy, we need to get clear about how our choices matter and how they do not. Gandhi once said that nothing we do as individuals matters, but it is vital that we do it anyway. This touches on a powerful paradox in the relationship between society and individuals. In terms of the patriarchy-as-tree metaphor, no individual leaf on the tree matters. Whether it lives or dies has no effect on much of anything. But collectively, the leaves are essential to the whole tree because they photosynthesize the sugar that feeds it. Without leaves, the tree dies.

Leaves matter and they do not, just as we matter and we do not. What each of us does may not seem like much, because in important ways, it *isn't* much. But when many people do this work together, they can form a critical mass that is anything but insignificant, especially in the long run. If we are going to be part of a larger change process, we have to learn to live with this sometimes uncomfortable paradox rather than go back and forth between momentary illusions of potency and control and feelings of helpless despair and insignificance.

A related paradox is that we have to be willing to travel without knowing where we are going. We need faith to do what seems right without necessarily knowing the effect our actions will have. We have to think like pioneers who may know the *direction* they want to move in or what they would like to find, without knowing where they will wind up. Because they are going where they have never been before, they cannot know whether they will ever arrive at anything they might consider a destination, much less what they had in mind when they first set out. If pioneers had to know their destination from the beginning, they would never go anywhere or discover anything.

In similar ways, to seek out alternatives to patriarchy, it has to be enough to move *away* from social life organized around dominance and control and to move *toward* the certainty that alternatives are possible, even though we may not have a clear idea of what those are or may never experience them ourselves. It has to be enough to question how we think about and experience different forms of power, for example—how we see ourselves as gendered people, how privilege and oppression work and how we participate—and then open ourselves to experience what happens next. When we dare to ask core questions about who we are and how the world works, things happen that we cannot foresee, but they do not happen unless we *move*, even if only in our minds. As pioneers, we discover what is possible only by first putting ourselves in motion, because we have to move in order to change our position—and hence our

perspective—on where we are, where we have been, and where we might go. Alternatives begin to appear as we imagine how things might be, but first we have to get past the idea that things will always be the way they are.

In relation to Gandhi's paradox, the myth of no effect obscures the role we can play in long-term transformations. But the myth also blinds us to our own power in relation to other people. We may cling to the belief that there is nothing we can do precisely because we know how much power we do have and are afraid to use it because people may not like it. If we deny our power to affect people, then we do not have to worry about taking responsibility for how we use it or, more significant, how we do not.

The reluctance to acknowledge and use power comes up in the simplest everyday situations, as when a group of friends starts laughing at a sexist or homophobic joke and we have to decide whether to go along. It is a moment in a sea of countless such moments that constitutes the fabric of all kinds of oppressive systems. It is a crucial moment because the group's seamless response to the joke reaffirms the normalcy and unproblematic nature of it and the system of privilege behind it. It takes only one person to tear the fabric of collusion and apparent consensus.

On some level, we each know we have this potential, and this knowledge can empower us or scare us into silence. We can change the course of the moment with something as simple as visibly not joining in the laughter, or saying, "I don't think that's funny." We know how uncomfortable this can make people and how they may ward off their discomfort by dismissing, excluding, or even attacking us as bearers of bad news. Our silence, then, is not because nothing we do will matter. Our silence is our not *daring* to matter.

Our power to affect other people is not simply about making them feel uncomfortable. Systems shape the choices people make primarily by providing paths of least resistance. We typically follow those paths because alternatives offer greater resistance or because we are not even aware that alternatives exist. Whenever we openly choose a different path, however, we make it possible for people to see both the path of least resistance they are following and the possibility of choosing something else.

The choice is both radical and simple. When most people get on an elevator, for example, they turn and face front without ever thinking why. We might think it is for purely practical reasons—the floor indicators and the door we exit through are at the front. But there is more going on than that, as we would discover if we simply walked to the rear wall and stood facing it while everyone else faced front. The oddness of what we were doing would immediately be apparent to everyone, and would draw their attention and perhaps make them uncomfortable as they tried to figure out why we were doing that. Part of the discomfort is simply calling attention to the fact that we make choices when we enter social situations and that there are alternatives, something that paths of least resistance discourage us from considering. If the possibility of alternatives in situations as simple as where to stand in an elevator can make people

feel uncomfortable, imagine the potential for discomfort when the stakes are higher, as they certainly are when it comes to how people participate in oppressive systems like patriarchy.

If we choose different paths, we usually will not know if we affect other people, but it is safe to assume that we do. When people know that alternatives exist and witness other people choosing them, things become possible that were not before. When we openly pass up a path of least resistance, we *increase* resistance for other people around that path because now they must reconcile their choice with what they have seen us do, something they did not have to deal with before. There is no way to predict how this will play out in the long run, and there is certainly no good reason to think it will not make a difference.

The simple fact is that we affect one another all the time without knowing it. When my family moved to our house in the woods of northwestern Connecticut, one of my first pleasures was blazing walking trails through the woods. Sometime later I noticed deer scat and hoofprints along the trails, and it pleased me to think they had adopted the trail I'd laid down. But then I wondered if perhaps I had followed a trail laid down by others when I cleared 'my' trail. I realized that there is no way to know that anything begins or ends with me and the choices I make. It is more likely that the paths others have chosen influence the paths I choose.

This suggests that the simplest way to help others make different choices is to make them myself, and to do it openly so they can see what I am doing. As I shift the patterns of my own participation in patriarchy, I make it easier for others to do so as well—and *harder for them not to*. Simply by setting an example—rather than trying to change people—I create the possibility of their participating in change in their own time and in their own way. I can thus widen the circle of change without provoking the kind of defensiveness that perpetuates paths of least resistance and the systems they perpetuate.

It is important to see that in doing this kind of work we do not have to go after people to change their minds. In fact, changing people's minds may play a relatively small part in changing systems. Rather than turning die-hard misogynists into practicing feminists, we can shift the odds in favor of new paths that contradict core patriarchal values. We can introduce so many exceptions to the patriarchal worldview that the children or grandchildren of die-hard misogynists will start to change their perception of which paths offer the least resistance. Research on men's changing attitudes toward the male provider role, for example, shows that most of the shift occurs *between* generations, not within them.<sup>5</sup>

This same dynamic is what has driven the dramatic change in attitudes toward same-sex marriage in the United States. In the ten years between 2003 and 2013, for example, the percentage of Americans reporting favorable images of lesbians and gays rose from 38 percent to 58 and 54 percent, respectively, while the percentage supporting same-sex marriage rose from 51 to 72 percent. Much of this change reflects the greater level of LGBT acceptance among

young people: 65 percent of those eighteen to twenty-nine years old support same-sex marriage, for example, compared with just 39 percent of those age sixty-five and older.<sup>6</sup>

All of this suggests that rather than trying to persuade individual people, the most important thing we can do is contribute to shifting entire cultures so that patriarchal forms and values begin to lose their 'obvious' legitimacy and normalcy and new forms emerge to challenge their privileged place in social life. And when this happens, the structures of privilege—the unequal and oppressive distribution of wealth, power, resources, and opportunities—become harder to maintain.

In science, this is how one paradigm replaces another.<sup>7</sup> For hundreds of years, for example, Europeans believed that the stars, planets, and the sun revolved around Earth. But Copernicus and Galileo found that too many of their astronomical observations were anomalies that did not fit the prevailing paradigm: if the sun and planets revolved around Earth, then they would not move as they did. The accumulation of such observations made it increasingly difficult to hang on to an Earth-centered paradigm. Eventually the anomalies became so numerous that Copernicus offered a new paradigm, for which he, and later Galileo, were persecuted as heretics. Eventually, however, the evidence was so overwhelming that a new paradigm replaced the old one.

In similar ways, we can think of patriarchy as a system based on a worldview that shapes how we think about gender and organize social life in relation to it. The patriarchal worldview has been under attack for several centuries and the defense has been vigorous, with feminists widely regarded as heretics who practice the blasphemy of male bashing. The patriarchal worldview weakens in the face of mounting evidence that it produces unacceptable consequences. We help weaken it by openly choosing alternative paths in our everyday lives and thereby providing living anomalies that do not fit the prevailing paradigm. By our example, we contradict patriarchal assumptions and their legitimacy over and over again. We add our choices and our lives to tip the scales toward a worldview that does not revolve around control, privilege, and oppression. We cannot tip the scales overnight or by ourselves, and in that sense we do not amount to much. But on the other side of Gandhi's paradox, the poet Bonaro Overstreet reminds us that it is up to us to decide where to place "the stubborn ounces" of our weight.<sup>8</sup> It is in such small and humble choices that patriarchy and the movement toward something better actually happen.

### Stubborn Ounces: What Can We Do?

There are no easy answers to the question of what to do about patriarchy. There is no twelve-step program, no set of instructions for turning it into something else. Most important, there is no way around or over it—the only way out is through.

We will not end oppression by pretending it isn't there or that we don't have to deal with it. Some may complain that working for change is divisive

by drawing attention to oppressive systems of privilege. But when members of dominant groups mark differences by excluding or discriminating against subordinate groups and treating them as other, they are not accused of being divisive. Usually it is only when someone calls attention to how differences are used as a basis for privilege that the charge of divisiveness comes up.

In a sense, it is divisive to say that oppression and privilege exist, but only insofar as it points to divisions that already exist and to the perception that the status quo is normal and unremarkable. Privilege and oppression promote the worst kind of divisiveness because they cut us off from one another and, by silencing us, cut us off from ourselves as well. Not only must we participate in privilege and oppression by living in society, but we also must act as though they don't exist, denying the reality of our own experience and its consequences for people's lives, including our own.

What does it mean to go out by going through? What can we do about patriarchy that will make a difference?

### *Acknowledge That Patriarchy Exists*

A key to the continued existence of every oppressive system of privilege is people being unaware of it, because privilege contradicts so many basic human values that it invariably arouses opposition when people know about it. The Soviet Union and its Eastern European satellites, for example, were riddled with contradictions that were so widely known among their people that the regimes fell apart with barely a whimper when given half a chance. Something similar happened in 2011 when Egypt's authoritarian ruler was deposed as a result of popular protests. An awareness of privilege can compel people to break the silence on which continued privilege depends. This is why most cultures mask the reality of privilege with a worldview that denies its existence, trivializes it, calls it something else, blames it on those most damaged by it, or draws attention to other things.

It is one thing to become aware and quite another to stay that way. The greatest challenge when we first become aware of a critical perspective on the world is to hang on to it. Every system's paths of least resistance invariably lead *away* from critical awareness of the system and how it works. Therefore, the easiest thing to do after reading a book like this is to forget about it. Maintaining a critical consciousness takes commitment and work. An alternative worldview is something we either maintain in the moment or don't. And the only way to hang on to an awareness of patriarchy is to make paying attention to it an ongoing part of our lives.

### *Pay Attention*

Understanding how patriarchy works and how we participate is essential for change. It's easy to have opinions, but it takes work to know what we're talking

about. The most available place to begin is to make reading about patriarchy part of your life. Unless you have the luxury of a personal teacher, you cannot understand patriarchy without reading, just as you need to read about a foreign country before you travel there for the first time. Many people assume they already know what they need to know about gender since everyone has a gender, but they are invariably wrong. Just as the last thing a fish would discover is water, the last thing we will discover is society itself.

This means you have to be open to the idea that what you think you know is, if not wrong, so deeply shaped by the patriarchal worldview that it misses most of the truth. This is why feminists talk with one another and spend time reading one another's work—seeing things clearly is tricky and difficult work. This is also why people who are critical of the status quo are so often self-critical as well, for they know how complex and elusive the truth really is and what a challenge it is to work toward it. People working for change are often accused of being orthodox and rigid, but they can be among the most self-critical people around.

There is a huge feminist literature available through any decent library and, increasingly, online, although you might never know it to judge from its invisibility in the mass media and mainstream bookstores. In fact, it is a good idea not to rely on mass media for meaningful analysis of privilege in any form. The media ignore most of what is known about privilege and routinely focus on issues that have the least to do with it (“Do men and women use different parts of their brains?”), that reflect the most flawed models of social reality (“Men are from Mars, . . .”), and that set women against one another, especially when women attack other women. Most feminist work is virtually invisible to book reviewers, journalists, editorial writers, columnists, and publishers. So, to know what's going on, it may take an Internet search followed by a trip to the library or an interlibrary loan request or a special order at the bookstore. But we can do more than that—we can also tell librarians and bookstore managers how surprised we are that they do not stock such essential reading for understanding the world.

As you educate yourself, it is important to avoid reinventing the wheel. Many people have already done a lot of work that you can learn from. There is no way to get through it all, but you don't have to in order to develop a clear enough sense of how to act in meaningful and informed ways.

A good place to start is a basic text on women's studies. Men who feel there is no place for them in women's studies can start with books about patriarchy and gender that are written by men. Sooner or later, however, men will have to turn to what women have written, because women have done most of the work of figuring out how patriarchy works.<sup>9</sup>

Those who expect feminist writings to be full of animosity toward men should prepare themselves for a surprise. And while it is important not to swallow anything whole and uncritically, it is also important that men believe what women say about their experience of oppression under patriarchy. These are,

after all, our mothers, sisters, daughters, lovers, wives, and friends telling us in a resounding collective voice of centuries of oppression from perspectives that we as men cannot duplicate. When the stories originate from women of so many ages and racial, class, and ethnic backgrounds, and when they echo across cultures and so much history, they call on men to have enough respect and humility to be silent for a while and listen.

Reading, though, is only a beginning. At some point you have to look at yourself and the world to identify what you are reading about. Once the phrase 'path of least resistance' entered my active vocabulary, for example, I started seeing them all over the place. The more aware I am of how powerful a path is, the more I can decide whether to go down it each time it presents itself. When this kind of awareness is shared openly among people, the possibilities for alternative paths multiply rapidly, especially when you realize that you don't have to feel guilty for what you're leaving behind.

If we focus on paths and people's choices in relation to them rather than on the content of their character, we can leave guilt and blame behind and work to identify new paths and support ourselves and other people in choosing them. It doesn't have to be about continually pointing to 'what's wrong' with ourselves or someone else, because the truth is that individuals are not the problem. The primary problem is the system we participate in and the consequences that result from the choices we make in relation to it. Seeing this and seeing how we can participate differently is not easy or fun. But it is a way for women and men to reclaim important parts of their lives that are now compromised, distorted, and damaged under patriarchy.

There are endless opportunities to participate in change, because paths of least resistance connect us to all kinds of systems. At work, the path of least resistance for managers is to mentor and promote people who most resemble themselves, which in most companies turns out to be white men. Whether at work or on the street, sexual harassment results from men following paths that define both male and female sexuality in male-dominated, male-identified, and male-centered terms. In everyday conversation, the path of least resistance is for men to dominate and be heard and for women to defer and be unheard. In school, patriarchal paths draw teachers to pay more and better attention to boys than to girls, draw boys to take advantage of it, and draw girls to expect less than they need or deserve. In politics, leaders routinely act as though compassion and compromise are weakness and domination and control are the only valid measures of strength and success. And on it goes, from one social situation and system to another, as the patriarchal worldview shapes how we perceive alternatives and how we choose among them without even knowing it. The challenge is to know it by becoming more aware of both the paths inherent in those situations and the choices we make about them.

It helps to be like anthropologists, participant observers who watch and listen to others and ourselves, who notice patterns that come up over and over in social life. We can pretend we are strangers in a strange land who know

nothing about where we are and *know* that we know nothing. This keeps us open to mistaken assumptions and the surprise of realizing that things are not what they seem.

This is especially challenging for men, whose privilege tells them they should not have to work to figure out someone else, that it's up to others to figure them out. It is easy for men to fall into the trap of being like impatient, arrogant tourists who do not take the initiative to educate themselves about where they are and their place in it. But taking responsibility means men not waiting for women to tell them what to do, to point out what is happening, or to identify alternatives. If men are going to take their share of responsibility, it is up to men to listen, watch, ask, and listen again, to make it their business to find out for themselves. If they do not, they will slide down the oblivious path of male privilege. And then they will be *just* part of the problem, and they *will* be blamed, and they will have it coming.

### *Learn to Listen*

This is especially difficult for members of dominant groups. If someone confronts you with your own behavior that supports privilege, step off the path of least resistance that encourages you to defend and deny. Do not tell them they're too sensitive or need a better sense of humor, and do not try to explain away what you did as something else than what they are telling you it was. Do not say you didn't mean it or that you were only kidding. Do not tell them what a champion of justice you are or how hurt you feel because of what they're telling you. Do not make jokes or try to be cute or charming, since only privilege can lead someone to believe these are acceptable responses to something as serious as privilege and oppression. Listen to what is being said. Take it seriously. Assume for the time being that it is true, because given the power of paths of least resistance, it probably is. And then take responsibility to do something about it.<sup>10</sup>

A student of color in one of my classes, for example, once told me that she noticed me cutting her off during class, something she did not think I did with white students. I could have weighed in with my professorial authority and said it wasn't true, that she was imagining it, that I treat all my students the same, that she was being too sensitive, that I travel all over the country speaking about issues of inequality and injustice, so certainly I was above such things. But what I said to her was that I was truly sorry she'd had that experience. I was not aware of doing that, I told her, but the fact that I did not consciously mean to was beside the point.

To respond in this way, I had to decenter myself from my position of privilege and make her experience and not mine the point of the conversation. I ended by telling her I would do everything I could to pay attention to this in the future to make sure it did not happen in my classes.

It is important to note that my goodness or badness as a person was not the issue. The issue was the existence of pervasive racist patterns through which privilege is enacted every day and whether I was unconsciously reproducing those patterns and, most important, whether I was willing to take responsibility for paying attention to my own behavior as a participant. I believe that most of the time, members of subordinate groups are not looking for dominant groups to feel ashamed or guilty, because this will do nothing in itself to improve their own lives. In my experience, the true goal is to end privilege and oppression and to get dominant groups to commit themselves to doing whatever they can to make that happen.

### *Little Risks: Do Something*

The more you pay attention to what is going on, the more you will see opportunities to do something about it. You do not have to mount an expedition to find them, because they are all over the place, beginning in ourselves.

As I became aware of how I gravitated toward controlling conversations, for example, I also realized how easily men dominate group meetings by controlling the agenda and interrupting, without women objecting to it. This pattern is especially striking in groups that are mostly female but in which most of the talking nonetheless comes from a few men. I would find myself sitting in meetings and suddenly the preponderance of male voices would jump out at me, an unmistakable hallmark of male privilege in full bloom.

I have had to decide what to do about this little path of least resistance and my relation to it that leads me to follow it so readily. With some effort, I have tried out new ways of listening more and talking less. At times it has felt contrived and artificial, like telling myself to shut up for a while or even counting slowly to ten (or more) to give others a chance to step into the silence. With time and practice, new paths have become easier to follow and I spend less time monitoring myself. But awareness is never automatic or permanent, for patriarchal paths of least resistance will be there to choose or not as long as patriarchy exists.

You might be thinking at this point that everything comes down to changing individuals after all since doing something is a matter of people's behavior. In a sense, of course, it is true that, for us, it all comes down to what we do or do not do as individuals since that is what we are. But the key is always to connect our choices to the systems we participate in. When we *openly* change how we participate in a system, we do more than change our own behavior, for we also change how the system itself happens. When we change how a system operates, we change the social environment that shapes other people's behavior, which, in turn, further changes how the system operates. And when we do that, we also change the consequences that come out of the dynamic relationship between systems and individuals, including patterns of privilege and oppression.

Sometimes stepping off the path of least resistance is a matter of directly calling attention to the system and how it is organized. As we will see shortly, for example, it might involve calling attention to the distribution of power and resources in an organization: Why are all the secretaries women and all the executives men? Why is the custodial staff mostly people of color and the management staff entirely white? Choosing to call attention to such patterns means changing our own behavior, but it does more than that, because the focus of our actions is the system itself.

In short, since the world happens as it does through the dynamic relationship between individuals and social systems, changing the world has to involve both.

As we see more of what is happening, questions will come up about what goes on at work, in the media, in families, in communities, in religion, in government, on the street, and at school—just about everywhere. The questions do not come all at once (for which we can be grateful), although they sometimes come in a rush that can feel overwhelming. If we remind ourselves that it isn't up to us to do it all, however, we can see plenty of situations in which we can make a difference, sometimes in surprisingly simple ways. Consider the following possibilities:

*Organize, organize, organize* was the advice given by the writer, abolitionist, and former slave Frederick Douglass. Work with other people. This is one of the most important principles of participating in social change. From expanding consciousness to taking risks, it makes all the difference in the world to be in the company of people who support what you are trying to do. You can read and talk about books and issues and just plain hang out with other people who want to understand and do something about patriarchy. Remember that the modern women's movement's roots were in consciousness-raising groups in which women did little more than gather to talk about themselves and their lives and try to figure out what that had to do with living in patriarchy. It may not have looked like much at the time, but it laid the foundation for huge social movements. One way down this path is to share a book like this one with someone and then talk about it. Or ask around about local groups and organizations that focus on gender issues, and go find out what they're about and meet other people. After reading a book or article that you like, write to the author in the care of the publisher or by e-mail. Don't be stopped by the belief that authors do not want to hear from interested readers, because the truth is that they usually welcome it and respond. Make contact and connect to other people engaged in the same work. Do whatever reminds you that you are not alone in this, and in so doing, you will remind others that they are not alone either.

*Make noise, be seen.* Stand up, volunteer, speak out, write letters, sign petitions, show up. Like every oppressive system of privilege, patriarchy feeds on silence. Breaking the silence is especially important for men, because it un-

dermines the assumption of male solidarity that patriarchy depends on. If this feels too risky, men can practice being aware of how silence reflects their investment in solidarity with other men. This can be a place to begin working on awareness: "Today I said nothing, colluded in silence, and this is how I benefited from it. Tomorrow I can try something different."

*Find little ways to withdraw support from paths of least resistance and people's choices to follow them, starting with yourself.* It can be as simple as not laughing at a sexist joke or saying you don't think it's funny. Or writing a letter to the editor objecting to sexism in the media. When my local newspaper ran an article whose headline referred to sexual harassment as "earthy behavior," for example, I wrote a letter pointing out that harassment is anything but.

The key is to interrupt the flow of business as usual. You can disrupt the assumption that everyone is going along with the status quo by *not going along yourself*. This stops the flow, if only for a moment, and in that moment other people can notice and start to think and question. It is a perfect time to suggest the possibility of alternatives such as humor that is not at someone else's expense or of ways to think about harassment and violence that do justice to the reality of what it is and how it affects people's lives.

We often like to think of ourselves as individuals—especially in the United States. But it is amazing how much of the time we compare ourselves to other people as a way to see how well we fit in. Anything that disrupts this process in even the smallest way can affect taken-for-granted assumptions that underlie social reality. It might help to think of this process as inserting grains of sand in an oyster to irritate it into creating a pearl of insight, or as a way to make patriarchy itch, stir, and scratch and thereby reveal itself for others to see, or as planting seeds of doubt about the desirability and inevitability of the way things are, and, by example, planting seeds of what might be.

*Dare to make people feel uncomfortable, beginning with yourself.* At the next local school board meeting, for example, ask why principals and other administrators are almost always men, while the teachers they control are mostly women, especially in elementary school. Ask how students are being prepared to deal with gender issues in their lives, including men's violence and the use of social media to stalk and harass women and girls.

It may seem that such actions do not amount to much until you stop for a moment and feel your resistance to doing them—your worry, for example, about how easily you could make people feel uncomfortable, including yourself. If you take that resistance to action as a measure of power, then your potential to make a difference is plain to see. The potential for people to feel uncomfortable is a measure of the power for change inherent in such simple acts of not going along with the status quo.

Some will say that it isn't nice to make people uncomfortable, but patriarchy does a lot more than make people feel uncomfortable, and it certainly

isn't nice to allow it to continue. Besides, discomfort is an unavoidable part of any meaningful process of education. You cannot grow without being willing to challenge your assumptions and take yourself to the edge of your competencies, where you are bound to feel uncomfortable. If you cannot tolerate ambiguity, uncertainty, and discomfort, then you will never go beneath the superficial appearance of things or learn or change anything of much value, including yourself.

*Openly choose and model alternative paths.* As you identify paths of least resistance—such as women being held responsible for child care and other domestic work—you can identify alternatives and then follow them openly so that other people can see what you are doing. Patriarchal paths become more visible when people choose alternatives, just as rules become more visible when someone breaks them. Modeling new paths creates tension in a system, which moves toward resolution (like the irritated oyster). You do not have to convince anyone of anything. As Gandhi put it, the work begins with us as we work to be the change we want to see happen in the world. Anyone who thinks this has no effect need only watch how people react to the smallest departures from paths of least resistance, at how much effort people expend trying to ignore or explain away or challenge those who choose alternative paths.

*Actively promote change in how systems are organized around patriarchal values and male privilege.* There are almost endless possibilities here because social life is complicated and patriarchy is everywhere. You can, for example:

- Start where you live by paying attention to and speaking out on issues of gender equity in your family. Cultural ideas about wives and husbands, mothers and fathers are linchpins of male privilege.
- Speak out for equality in the workplace.
- Promote awareness and training around issues of privilege.
- Support equal pay and promotion for women.
- Oppose the devaluing of women and the work they do, from the dead-end jobs most women are stuck in to the glass ceilings that keep women out of top positions.
- Support the well-being of mothers and children and defend women's right to control their bodies and their lives.
- Object to the punitive dismantling of welfare and attempts to limit women's access to contraception and other reproductive health services.
- Speak out against violence and harassment against women wherever they occur, whether at home, at work, or on the street.
- Object to media coverage of men's violence in all its forms that ignores gender.

- Support government and private support services for women who are victimized by men's violence.
- Volunteer at the local rape crisis center or battered women's shelter.
- Call for and support clear and effective antiharassment and abuse policies in workplaces, unions, schools, professional associations, government, religious institutions, and political parties, as well as public spaces such as parks, sidewalks, and malls.
- Join and support groups that intervene with and counsel men who perpetrate violence against women.
- Object to pornography in theaters, fraternities, and neighborhoods and on the Internet. This does not require a debate about censorship—just the exercise of freedom of speech to articulate pornography's role in patriarchy and to express how its opponents feel about it.
- Ask questions about how work, education, religion, family, and other areas of social life are shaped by core patriarchal values and principles. Some accept women's entry into combat branches of the military or the upper reaches of corporate power as progress, for example. But others question what happens to people and societies when political and economic institutions are organized around control, domination, 'power over,' and, by extension, competition and the use of violence. Is it progress to allow selected women to share control with men over oppressive systems of privilege?
- Speak out to expose the connection between patriarchy and the way social institutions are organized—how the masculine obsession with control, for example, is connected to militarism and war, ways of responding to and defending against terrorism, government surveillance and the invasion of privacy, the exploitation and destruction of the natural environment, and the oppression of working people and people of color.

*Openly support people who step off the path of least resistance.* When you witness someone else taking a risk—speaking out, calling attention to privilege and oppression—do not wait until later to tell them in private that you are glad they did. Waiting until you're alone makes it safer for you but does them little good. Support is most needed when the risk is being taken, not later on, so do not wait. Make your support as visible and public as the courageous behavior that you're supporting.<sup>11</sup>

*Because discrimination and persecution targeting gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people is a linchpin of patriarchy, support the right of women and men to be who they are and to love whom they choose.* Raise awareness of homophobia and heterosexism. Ask school officials and teachers about what is

happening to LGBT students in local schools. If they do not know, ask them to find out, since it is a safe bet that LGBT students are being harassed by other students and in other ways oppressed at one of the most vulnerable stages of life. If you find alternatives to heterosexuality to be unacceptable for moral or religious reasons, then consider how the treatment of LGBT people is used to perpetuate patriarchy and the oppression of women. Whether in the media or among friends, when gender identity and sexual orientation are discussed, raise questions about their relation to patriarchy. Remember that it is not necessary to have answers to questions in order to ask them. Offer support to those who question and challenge the rigid dualisms of sex and gender, female and male, masculine and feminine, on which the patriarchal worldview depends.

*Because patriarchy is rooted in principles of domination and control, pay attention to racism and other forms of oppression that draw from those same roots.* There has been a great deal of struggle within women's movements about the relationship between patriarchy and other forms of privilege, especially those based on race, social class, and sexual orientation. There has also been debate over whether some forms of privilege are more important to attack first or produce more oppressive consequences than others.

One way out of this conflict is to realize that patriarchy is not problematic just because it emphasizes *male* dominance but because it promotes dominance and control as ends in themselves. In that sense, all forms of privilege draw support from common roots, and whatever we do that draws attention to those roots undermines them *all*. If working against patriarchy is seen as enabling some women to get a bigger piece of the pie, then some women will succeed at the expense of others who are disadvantaged by race, class, or sexual orientation. But if we identify the core problem as *any* society organized around privilege, then changing *that* requires attention to all forms of privilege and oppression. Whether we begin with race or gender or disability status or class, if we name the problem correctly, we will wind up going in the same direction.

*Do not keep it to yourself.* A corollary of looking for company and organizing is not to restrict your focus to the tight little circle of your own life. It is not enough to work out private solutions to social problems like patriarchy and other forms of privilege and keep them to yourself. It is not enough to clean up your own act and then walk away, to find ways to avoid the worst consequences of patriarchy at home and inside yourself and think that is taking responsibility. Patriarchy is not a personal problem and it cannot be solved through personal solutions alone. At some point, taking responsibility means acting in a larger context, even if it means letting only one other person know what you are doing. It makes sense to start with yourself, but it is equally important not to *end* with yourself.

If all of this sounds overwhelming, remember again that we do not have to deal with everything. We do not have to set ourselves the impossible task of

letting go of everything or transforming patriarchy or even ourselves. All we can do is what we can *manage* to do, secure in the knowledge that we are making it easier for other people—now and in the future—to see and do what *they* can do. So, rather than defeat yourself before you start:

- *Think small, humble, and doable rather than large, heroic, and impossible.* Do not paralyze yourself with impossible expectations. It takes very little to make a difference. Small acts can have radical implications. If the main requirement for the perpetuation of evil is that good people do nothing, then the choice is not between all or nothing but between nothing or *something*.
- *Do not let other people set the standard for you.* Start where you are and work from there. Make a list of all the things you could actually imagine *doing*—from reading another book about patriarchy to suggesting policy changes at work to raising questions about who cleans the bathroom at home—and rank them from the most risky to the least. Start with the least risky and set reasonable goals (“What small risk for change will I take *today*?”). As you get more experienced at taking risks, you can move up your list. You can commit yourself to whatever the next steps are for you, the tolerable risks, the contributions that offer some way—however small it might seem—to help balance your inability to avoid being part of the problem. As long as you do something, it counts.

In the end, taking responsibility does not have to be about guilt and blame, about letting someone off the hook or being on the hook yourself. It is to acknowledge your obligation to make a contribution to finding a way out of patriarchy and to find constructive ways to act on that obligation. You do not have to do anything dramatic or earth-shaking to help change happen. As powerful as patriarchy is, like all oppressive systems, it cannot stand the strain of many people coming together to do something about it, beginning with the simplest act of speaking its name out loud where others can hear.