

## Some Good Books about Women's Lives

At our fall conference last October, Bart Campolo argued that an authentic inclusivity demands some serious work. Women read womens' studies, he argued, but men seldom do. Who do you see browsing the African-American studies aisle? African Americans. And so forth. To be authentic in our diversity, we need the cultural backstories of one another's lives. We need to read more widely.

I should tread more books? Way to go, Mr. Campolo! But then I stopped short: so much of what has been written about women in the last fifty years is hostile, Mommy-Wars nonsense. Mere shelf-browsing can be risky. And so: here are some thought-provoking, solidly-argued books about the complexity of women's lives.

Laura Babcock, *Women Don't Ask: Negotiation and the Gender Divide*. Men get more than women do in part because they ask for more. Women (especially middle-class women) sit back quietly, working hard and expecting to be recognized. When they are not, they cry "bias." Babcock sets out to teach negotiating strategy to her women graduate students. Wow. What a useful book!

Jill Kerr Conway, *When Memory Speaks: Reflections on Autobiography*. Women's autobiographies systematically deflect attention away from their own agency and their own achievements. Think about that vis-a-vis Babcock's book!

Kathleen Hall Jamieson, *Beyond the Double Bind: Women and Leadership*. Women leadership is thwarted by double binds like this one: women who speak up are condemned as shrill, demanding, and out of place; women who are silent are ignored. She has a short, stunning list of these double-binds, paired with portraits of 20<sup>th</sup> century leaders who triumphed nonetheless. Here are the core cultural dynamics behind what Conway and Babcock both describe--yet another useful book for men and women alike.

Sarah Blaffer Hrdy, *Mother Nature: A History of Mothers, Infants, and Natural Selection*. Female primates must endlessly frame-shift between immediate goals and long-term goals; social alliances have a major impact on infant survival. And so forth: motherhood is a whole lot more than coo-and-cuddle. (And yes, that is how her name is spelled.)

Daphne deMarneff, *Maternal Desire: On Children, Love, and the Inner Life*. An honest, generous, & well-informed analysis of how Mommy Wars rhetoric has distorted and disguised the issues faced by mothers (and, increasingly, by fathers). She spoke eloquently about all my own confusions, commitments, needs, fears, ambivalences, and self-doubts trying to manage work/life conflicts.

Christopher Lasch, *Women and the Common Life: Love, Marriage, and Feminism*. A lovely collection of witty, thought-provoking essays on the Western history of beliefs about relationships between men and women. Men inherit models no less oppressive than what women inherit. Can we stop blaming each other?

Deborah Tannen, *You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation*. Tannen is a linguist who takes an empirical approach to studying conversation. My husband laughed as hard as I did when I insisted he read it. And we learned a lot about how to avoid driving one another nuts.

Shelley E. Taylor, *The Tending Instinct: How Nurturing Is Essential for Who We Are and How We Live*. Male mammals respond to stress hormones with fight-or-flight, female mammals with tend-and-befriend. Both responses are vital to defending the nest, but wow what an invitation to misunderstanding! At times she may push her evidence too hard: both men and women both fight and ally with others. Nonetheless, the core difference is real enough--and worth knowing about if you ever argue with anyone of the opposite sex.

Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*. Social class shapes the experience of gender; gender just as potently shapes the experience of class. Ethnicity shapes and is shaped by both gender and class. We need to take all three into account carefully. Walker woke me up to how important that is: "women's rights" meant white women's rights, and so it was defined by white upperclass women's desires to enjoy the privileges of white upperclass men. Walker brings a novelist's skills to a trenchant analysis of the issues faced by African American women at various socioeconomic locations.

My resolve for 2014 is to read roughly a book a month on the African-American experience. My booklist so far: Jonathan Scott Holloway, *Jim Crow Wisdom: Memory & Identity in Black American since 1940*, then Jacqueline Jones, *A Dreadful Deceit: The Myth of Race from the Colonial Era to Obama's America*, then the 1903 classic, W. E. B. DuBois, *The Soul of Black Folks*. That gets me to April: what should I read next? Advice welcome.

Bart Campolo made a good point. We do need to know the cultural backstory of one another's lives. What else should any of us be reading?? Contact Kristen Metz in the church office to claim space in the next issue of *Life and Times*.