

Why Martha Matters

When Martha Stewart was a little girl, wives who worked brought shame to their husbands; the implication was, such a man couldn't "provide" for his family. So, women knitted, cooked and cleaned like crazy, but they felt no particular pride. Their sweaters, casseroles and spotless ovens were just the underpinnings for whatever the men were doing.

Later, of course, women got "liberated." They not only took jobs, they pursued careers. For most, the change came from necessity, because a dollar no longer bought dinner for four, and families needed that second paycheck just to get by. Their struggle made news, but the big story was the women who worked because they wanted to. Jackie Kennedy edited books, Diane von Furstenberg made dresses, and Martha Stewart, a lawyer's wife, went to Wall Street. Then she opened a catering business that showcased her flair for the beautiful, and soon she was launching an empire.

I was a young newspaper editor when Martha's first book came out. Years went by before I noticed her, but what strikes me today, in the midst of her legal troubles, is how she gradually transformed my own perceptions, and, I believe, the American culture, with regard to what has value. She was the first post-modern feminist. Whatever else she may have done, and I make no judgment one way or the other, nothing can diminish Martha's contribution.

My boss at the newspaper was an old hack who knew a good story when he saw one. He looked around his newsroom and counted six, maybe seven, women—the makings of a timely page-one feature. I still have the photograph: smiling, confident women, all in pants (as we had planned), posing on the shoulders of the giant steel printing press downstairs from the newsroom. I interviewed the mayor and other local notables. To a man (yes, all men), they were skeptical. Equality may be all well and good on a newspaper, they said, but would you put a woman on the fire line? Would you send her to war?

Telling this story thrilled me. I loved the bigness and newness of it—the idea that women deserved equal rights at work. I crafted the headline, laid out the feature page and rejoiced in the workplace camaraderie.

Then I went home at night and sewed quilts. I was way into quilts back then. I also canned tomatoes from my own garden, but, aside from sharing a few zucchinis, I never mentioned these things at work. I was pretty good at this stuff. I didn't have Martha's depth of knowledge, but I loved it. I just thought it was secondary to what I did at the newspaper.

Then, over time, Martha's message started to sink in. The quality of domestic life, she was saying, is not subordinate. Home life is just as important as Commerce and Government. To believe anything else is to negate the contributions of women

throughout history. A woman at work is not just a man in a dress. A woman's *totality*, the sum of what all women have accomplished—all of it has value.

Critics say Martha's standards are ridiculously high and that since only fools expect perfection, Martha herself must be a fool, but, I think they misread her. I think she just takes joy in sharing what she knows. Here is the whole menu of interesting and beautiful things, she says; take from it what you will.

She also says, slow down. Notice every little thing. Appreciate the small. Take pleasure in the mundane. Value the things of the past. Value what you can make with your own hands.

Actually, I rather doubt Martha Stewart ever said these things; she seems more about doing than thinking (which may be how she got into this mess), but, nonetheless, Martha spoke to me. I think a lot of us heard her.

Not everyone got the message, of course. The misogynist's best friend is mockery, and there has been plenty of it. Now, as I have listened to the pundits bray about her scandal, I have heard echoes from my youth, when I saw everything as a feminist issue. Fat was a feminist issue (There's even a book with that name). So was sleep, which was passive and therefore something only mere women needed. Today, Martha Stewart's future turns on such sexual politics.

I trust the American people, especially American women, to be more resilient, more forgiving, than the experts give them credit for, especially when the transgressor offers something we want. Remember Hugh Grant and the streetwalker? At the time, we couldn't get his humiliating mug shot out of our minds, yet now here's Hugh, turning out nice little chick flicks year after year, as adorable and beloved as ever. He screwed up, we forgave him, we all moved on. If Martha's story turns out differently, I, for one, will take it as a sign that women have not come as far as we think.

This is the stuff of opera. The uppity woman's downfall. The single mistake that unravels a kingdom. The chorus bleating out I-told-you-so's.

This plot doesn't appeal to everyone. Young women especially, with their sense of professional entitlement, may wonder what all the fuss is about, but I remember one day at the newspaper when the layout editor came back from lunch in tears. A few days before, she had left her abusive husband and now Sears had refused her credit card. She couldn't buy a hand towel. Everything was his.

Perception shapes policy and culture. It's all tied together: financial independence and the perceived value of crochet. Demean the latter and the former stands on shakier ground. We still balance perilously close to the notion of womankind's basic inferiority.

Not every woman today embraces domesticity. I have friends who happily eat take-out every day, and I support them in that choice, but, nonetheless, we dismiss what Martha accomplished at our own peril.

In my version of Martha's opera, legions of women (and enlightened men) storm K-Mart with their credit cards, each taking home some token. Would that signal the triumph of consumerism? Not in my opinion. If you bathe, you need towels. All Martha has ever said is, why shouldn't they be gorgeous? The ancient Greeks saw the pursuit of Art as the height of civilization. What was the purpose of Commerce, they believed, if not to create the stable prosperity in which Art could flourish? Barbarians do not make beautiful homes, for they pursue a lower goal.

I hope Martha Stewart remains strong. I hope her elderly mother can endure the strain. I hope K Mart keeps Martha's brand on the shelves. I hope her company rides the wave. And, I hope this experience refreshes Martha's vision and prepares her for something new that will further enrich all our lives.

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