

A Future Issue

From Issues To Choices

Sacrifices may follow success

by

Elizabeth Howard

The end of a decade. The beginning of the 1990s. And the countdown to the new millennium begins. Certainly this year's end will be a time of reflection for many of us. Women especially have much to think about. We have come a long way from the issues of the 1960s to the choices we have earned in the 1980s.

A retrospective view of the women's movement is found in Wendy Wasserstein's Pulitzer Prize and Tony Award winning play, "The Heidi Chronicles," which is currently playing on Broadway. Although it is written from the perspective of a woman who came of age in the 1960s and sets forth highly

predictable vignettes, it is meaningful for women of all ages.

We are introduced to Heidi, with long hair and a short black skirt, as a college student at a presidential election rally in New Hampshire. We follow her into the 1980s when, with short hair and dressed in a more assertive deep purple blazer, she is pursuing a Ph.D. in art history. The background music, reflecting our rallying cries and our moods, ranges from Bob Dylan and Janis Joplin to Diana Ross and Supremes' love ballads of the 1970s.

Heidi and her friends remind us of the progress, recall the struggles and display the emotions we experienced. Anger, rebellion, and frustration are eventually replaced with determination and self-confidence. Political and social protests, consciousness-raising groups, the fights to gain the right to abortion and even the relationship with a friend who has AIDS are all considered.

Ironically, the play ends on a sad note. Heidi, now a single mother, is seated with her baby in a rocking chair in the middle of a darkened stage. Like many women, Heidi has what she thought she wanted — a career, financial independence, a loft in the city and even a child, without the commitment of marriage. Yet, she seems overwhelmed with the choices she has to make and uncertain about the direction she wants her life to take.

Throughout the women's movement our primary goal was to achieve equal rights, which translated into economic independence and access to the same opportunities men had in the business world. In many cases, we've succeeded. Most colleges and universities are co-educational, and attending an all-female or all-male school is a matter of preference. Many social and business organizations are now co-ed, and the few old-school, venerable organizations that

haven't changed are beginning to yield to social pressure. Women are found in careers that were once only open to men, and we continue to make progress reaching the top echelons of corporate America and to hold positions on corporate boards of directors.

Women, however, haven't felt comfortable with the accompanying sacrifices. Reaching the top means an almost total commitment of time and energy to that pursuit. It precludes living a balanced life. Felice N. Schwartz, president of Catlyst, a women's advisory organization in New York City, published an article early this year in the *Harvard Business Review* ("Management Women and the New Facts of Life") suggesting that corporations should recognize women who are on a "career-primary" track and treat them like men, separating others who are on a "career and family" track. The article resulted in a cover story in *Business Week* titled, "The Mommy Track," and raised red flags among women who felt they were being discriminated against. In fact, Schwartz was supporting those women who were making the choice to devote their life to a career/profession and those women who have or intend to plan a family.

Today, working women with children find it difficult to break-out of middle-management positions and are torn by the demands of the workplace and family. Balancing a family, a career and maintaining a healthy marriage is a very challenging proposition. Schwartz's proposal of the "career and family track" was an attempt to find a new approach to a difficult reality.

If working women have found it necessary to make additional sacrifices, men have benefitted from the increased attention being given to the needs of working parents. Men have been used to making sacrifices in their personal lives as they make their way up the corporate ladder. Fathers have been missing ballet recitals and little league games and slipping in late for graduations for years. Men, in most cases, didn't have any other option. However, now with the number of

women in the workplace and with two-career couples becoming the norm, there are few households where the man does not contribute in some way to running the household and handling tasks that were once considered "women's work." Men and women are planning their work schedules and organizing time together and with their children.

I wonder, though, if we are asking society to define what our choices are and therefore what our lives should be? Are we unfulfilled because we are striving to reach society's perception of success, which is defined by the assets one has acquired and a title on a business card.

Do we make choices based on what we believe or what we think is currently popular? Are we confused because we have too many choices?

As we enter the 1990s, the choice we face is to determine how we wish to define and live our own lives. How do we wish to interact with society and act as a catalyst for change in the world. Every woman should be concerned with environmental issues and the social and political ramifications these issues will have. Every woman should be concerned with economic problems in the Third World, the drug wars in South and Central America and the continuing problems in the Middle East. Every woman should be concerned with the racial problems in our country.

At the end of the Heidi Chronicles, as Heidi is rocking her baby, she looks at the audience with a troubled expression, searching for some idea of what will come next . . . How the next scene, the 1990s will be played out . . .

The choice is up to each of us. It is time to assume more responsibility and become less self-absorbed. We've come too far and gained too much to "live happily ever after." The struggle, the sacrifices and the commitment to stand up for our beliefs and to take advantage of the many choices we have earned is up to each of us. It won't be easy.

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WOMEN

F A I R F I E L D C O U N T Y

December 1989