

Mount Holyoke College Class of 1964
After the Middle Ages Comes the Renaissance!
Reunion 2014

BOOK DISCUSSION OF "FLUX: WOMEN ON SEX, WORK, LOVE, KIDS & LIFE IN A HALF-CHANGED WORLD" BY PEGGY ORENSTEIN

Jean Vnenchak and Edie Prentice Mendez, Organizers

The final event of our busy Thursday program was a discussion of our reunion common read, "Flux ...". Jean Vnenchak and Edie Prentice Mendez organized and moderated this session. The discussion was held in the Buckland dining room where classmates and guests sat around tables, and Edie covered much ground getting the portable mike to all who wanted to comment.

Edie and I framed the discussion around the theme -- is it possible for women to have it all - satisfying career, marriage, family and financial security? Was it possible for us? Is it different for young women today?

Before the session we had heard comments from a number of classmates who did not like the book for a variety of reasons. I was not concerned about these comments because from my experience with book groups the best discussions often occur when there are widely differing opinions about a book.

We were not disappointed. The discussion was lively and extensive and continued in a variety of ways throughout the weekend. We began the discussion by reading quotes selected from the book to highlight the challenges of having it all, especially with the arrival of children.

Many classmates described versions of having it all but not at the same time. Sometimes pursuit of a career took center stage; other times it was family - not only the raising of children but also dealing with issues of aging parents and illnesses of themselves and/or of family members.

Others spoke strongly about the inadequacies of the book -- especially that the interviews primarily covered college graduates and not the greater numbers of women who had few job and financial options. Another criticism was that the book had little coverage of ethnic and gender minorities.

Men also participated in the discussion, primarily talking about how they saw the capabilities and successes of their spouses.

There was also talk of the struggles that classmates' children and grandchildren were having with balancing career and family today. Many classmates help with childcare to make it easier for their daughters/nieces to manage their many responsibilities.

A major change in the direction and energy of the discussion came when a classmate stood up and said that the book and we were asking the wrong question. It should not be how can we have it all? - but, how can we share it all?

There was then much discussion about the need to work to raise the standard of living and increase opportunities for everyone. Obviously these are very challenging issues that need to be approached from many perspectives, including encouraging more women to run for local and national political offices.

We thank everyone who participated, listened and cared about the topics discussed.

Here is a link to our introductory framing handout.

As Edie and I planned this book discussion, we were amazed by the number of current articles and TV mentions that we found on different aspects of women in the work-place and at home and how or could -- they have it all. I was surprised also to read in reviews of Megan Marshall's biography of Margaret Fuller that these were challenges Fuller was living with and writing about in the 1800s.

From: Edie Prentice Mendez and Jean M. Vnenchak May 2014

ADDENDUM

Postscript to our "Flux" discussion

The issues that we covered in our book discussion continue to inspire research and comment. Witness the new book by Anne-Marie Slaughter, "Unfinished Business: Women, Men, Work, Family". Some time after leaving her high powered DC job in 2009, Slaughter wrote The Atlantic article, "Why Women Still Can't Have It All", In her new book, she lays out what she thinks needs to change now for both men and women in the work place to resolve this issue. However, Patricia Sellers in a Fortune article counters Slaughter's prescriptions. Sellers, who is responsible for Fortune's "Most Powerful Women" project, says that the core problem is not with corporation or government but with the fact that women view success differently from men. Women lack the same type of ambition that men have.

The issues we discussed do indeed continue to be extremely timely and relevant!

Jean Vnenchak
October 1, 2015

A FEW SELECTED RESOURCES

These are some of the many online resources that can help you delve more deeply into topics considered in Peggy Orenstein's "Flux":

Bentley University's Center for Women and Business

"Bentley University's Center for Women and Business envisions a world where women no longer make up a small fraction of corporate leadership. We engage preeminent thought-leaders and business executives to help them address the challenges of the ever-changing, global market for talent, and develop best practices to support, retain and advance women in the business world."

Wellesley Centers for Women "A world that is good for women is good for everyone"

"The Wellesley Centers for Women at Wellesley College is one of the largest gender-focused research-and-action organizations in the world. Scholars at the Centers conduct social science research and evaluation, develop theory and publications, and implement training programs on issues that put women's lives and women's concerns at the center. Since 1974, our work has generated changes in attitudes, practices, and public policy."

"Catalyst is the leading nonprofit organization with a mission to expand opportunities for women and business. We are dedicated to creating more inclusive workplaces where employees representing every dimension of diversity can thrive." "Issues to care about: The Leadership Gap, the Pay Gap, Diversity Matters, Men Matter"

Watermark - "The word "watermark" means "the highest point to which water has risen." The nonprofit organization Watermark is a community of executive women who have risen to the top of their fields" coming together to connect, develop and advocate for the advancement of women in the workforce."

The Clayman Institute for Gender Research

"Founded in 1974, the Michelle R. Clayman Institute for Gender Research at Stanford University creates knowledge and seeks to implement change to promote gender equality. Our current focus is Moving Beyond the Stalled Gender Revolution. We are bringing together an intellectually diverse group of scholars to provide new insights into the barriers to women's advancement and to propose novel and workable solutions to advancing gender equality."