

I Am an Eco-Feminist

By Holly Hallman

Ecofeminism: *The term “describes movements and philosophies that link feminism with ecology. Ecofeminism connects the exploitation and domination of women with that of the environment, and argues that there is a connection between women and nature that comes from their shared history of oppression by a patriarchal Western society.” (Wikipedia)*

Definitions, such as this one from *Wikipedia*,ⁱ can be helpful. Ecofeminism, unlike its constituent terms ecology and feminism, has yet to achieve mainstream consciousness. But definitions can also be misleading. It is not simply the case that the oppression of women and of the environment are analogous. Ecofeminism, rather, sees these two forms of oppression as interconnected and mutually supportive—rooted in the same patriarchal premises. Moreover, ecofeminism denotes neither a single movement nor philosophy. It is described in the broadest sense as a loosely knit philosophical and practical analytical set of concepts. It extends even beyond its own terminology in that, according to new scholarship at Lancaster University, it examines and challenges the “interconnected oppressions of gender, *race*, *class*, and nature.”ⁱⁱ

Definitions and terms, though, are still helpful. For the first half of my life, every word that began with “fem” ended in “inine”, as in, “Does this make me look feminine?” Trying to figure out what the other endings meant eventually took me on a four year quest: one, to see if I was a feminist, and two, to see if I wanted to be. Even while I was flying for Pan AM in my very feminine high heels, I felt something sad and questioning inside my chest—a low, soft sound.

My mother was the person who introduced me to the alternate endings for words that began with “fem”—and it was she who showed me what it means to live at the intersection of feminism and environmentalism. Mom had grown through the ranks in the Rocky Mountain Region of the USDA Forest Service Office and was one of eight professional women in the United States working for that very-male organization. In the process of “moving up,” she was given the job of Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) representative. Her primary work was to inform and educate women’s groups around the country, inviting them to support Forest Service projects. That work meant she spent a lot of her time simply listening to women and their experiences of inequality. Mom had to balance the voices of both Shell Oil and the Sierra Club as she deepened her understanding of the politics of Earth stewardship and the fragility of the resources and land that she was stewarding. At the same time, holding the stories of the women in her workplace deepened her understanding of the politics of gender and the fragility of those women’s positions.

I think, in quiet times, I heard the same low, soft sound coming from somewhere inside her.

Sometime later I finished a degree in counseling and the first job I was offered was in the sex abuse treatment field—all incest cases. The notion of women and children as “objects” or “property” suddenly gained new concrete meaning. The tiny, sad thing in my chest began to hum more loudly.

About that time I met two Methodist clergy women who felt that Hebrew and New Testament scripture had played a large part in the devaluation of women, which shocked me. Later, in my second seminary semester of Old Testament, I asked my professor, Marv Cheney, to help me understand what those Methodist ministers were suggesting. He invited me to read Phyllis Trible's *Texts of Terror*. The growing understanding of my Judeo/Christian history was turning the low, sad hum into sobs.

The apex of my exploration came when a once-in-a-lifetime course was co-taught, on the University of California (Berkeley) Campus, by Rosemary Radford Ruether and Carolyn Merchant. It would be hard to find two women who gave more definition to the term ecofeminism, and they were in the same room together once a week. Rosemary took the stance that the three desert religions were to blame for the environmental crisis by thinking that God gave mankind "dominion" over the earth. Carolyn, on the other hand, felt science was to blame, because of men like Francis Bacon who thought of the earth as a mechanism to be used and improved, like a clock. The sad hum was growing into a wail.

About a year earlier, Rosemary Radford Ruether spent an evening, on campus, with our Feminist Perspectives Group. The group was mixed in age. The two youngest women voiced the thought that the meeting was a waste of time because equality was a fact and the object of the evening was only to regale ourselves in a time of patting each other on the back through an exploration of the issue's history. I was angry! Here I was finally getting an understanding of the problem only to be told I was too late—the train had already left the station. The tiny hum of years gone-by grew louder and was nearly filling my chest.

As I was thinking about this article, I wondered if other young people might have the same thoughts. I asked a young man to chat about the word and the ideas behind it. Kyle is bright, outspoken, and known for seeing hidden agendas. After a long sip on his frosty Frappuccino he, also, suggested that equality has been achieved and that the ideas I spoke of were interesting but archaic. We talked a little about mutual environmental interests and then about the church. We mused for a few minutes about the number of religions that hold different (and unequal) opportunities for men and women. Many examples came to mind for both of us and we decided that religion seemed to be lagging behind other social systems and Kyle wasn't hopeful that it would change.

What can I make of these young voices that say women have attained equality and that the need for a feminist perspective is no long viable? In both instances, religion landed in a different category. For the two young women in the campus discussion, reality came when they began to seek a call. In a conversation with one of them five years later, she spoke of her naivete that night with Rosemary. Like many women who graduated that year, "calls" came quickly for some but slowly for most of the women.

Hours after my talk with Kyle, I learned that reproductive healthcare and rights were topping the charts in political discussions for the upcoming presidential election. Energy issues and use of the earth were hot topics on both sides. The notion of legislating what a woman can or cannot do with her body is alive and well. And, it isn't hard to see the parallel in the political approach to ecological issues: both women's bodies and the environment are regarded as objects to control,

as resources for (generally male) political agendas. And, both are very much a part of the concerns of the ecofeminism discussion, once again pointing out how the earth and women's bodies are treated with equal lack of agency. My sad feeling has grown and grown, and it is hard to keep the sound of it in my chest.

I have to admit that I often wonder if it helps to put the two issues, ecology and feminism, together. Does ecofeminism point to a different action? Or, does it give women a unique seat at the table?

My mother lived at the intersection of these issues but she kept them separate. Her pondering came in those quiet times we shared as family. When outsiders saw my mother, she was a woman working hard on behalf of the earth *or*, with her EEOC hat on, on behalf of other women. She found funding for things that never had her name on them. She was pragmatic; always "making it happen" and letting others take the credit. The low, sad hum is a wail that tells me that this is not enough!

Is it only in our hearts that we are to ponder? Is the pairing of the two words meaningful, or is it just an interesting "loosely knit philosophical and practical analytical set of concepts"? I think, and pray, that it is more, and that the pondering needs to be shared. When I lay my breast on the breast of the earth, I experience a mutual lament. Some days it is a murmur and on days when politics can determine what will be done to the bodies of either of us, it is a *roar*. The word *ecofeminism* may not immediately give us direction or action but it does give us the power of naming, the Psalmists power of lamenting, and the hope that comes from knowing that two powerful allies can birth something much brighter than what is. When the word is spoken, my wail is shared, rising in common voice with others who are lamenting, and that frees my chest to fill with love and a little laughter.

ⁱ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ecofeminism> - accessed on November 6, 2012.

ⁱⁱ <http://www.lancs.ac.uk/staff/twine/ecofem/whatisecofeminism.html>