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Women's Wisdom: Sharing Her Voice

After looking at my resume and my fields of study (math and Hebrew), few people would consider me an anthropologist. If someone asked me to choose five words to describe myself, "anthropologist" would not be one of them. However, upon browsing through my book collection, I noticed that a substantial portion of it consists of autobiographies and memoirs. By reading about other people's lives, I am engaging in an independent anthropological survey. In each memoir, I learn about a person from a different background who has overcome hardships or accomplished something great. Not only does reading about other people's lives allow me to learn about their struggles and successes, but it also helps me to put my life in context. It enables me to learn from these writers' experiences and analyze my own accomplishments. In addition, it engages me in self-reflection and motivates me to become a better person.

The thread that ties my collection of memoirs together is that they are all written by women. As women, the authors have certain shared experiences despite being from different cultures and generations. Some common motifs include bridging cultural barriers and overcoming hardships as women in a male-oriented society. Many of the authors also discuss the events surrounding the stages of women's lifecycles, including relationships and sexuality, childbirth, adolescence, aging, and various health issues.

One of the first memoirs I owned was Anne Frank: Diary of a Young Girl. What makes this writing different from any of the other memoirs in my collection is that it was not the author's decision for this work to be published. Anne Frank writes so candidly of

her life because she writes for herself, without the intention of it being read by others. By reading her diary when I was about the same age as Frank when she wrote it, I felt intimately connected to her. Though her diary is set in the context of a horrible period in history, there are many parts that resonated with me as a thirteen year old girl. Anne Frank describes her adolescence, her feelings about growing up, her relationships, and her questions. Her diary is filled with inspirational gems. She writes, “Everyone has inside of him a piece of good news. The good news is that you don't know how great you can be! How much you can love! What you can accomplish! And what your potential is!” Despite the hardships that she and her family live with daily, Anne Frank retains her optimism during most of her diary. As a student about to graduate college, I continue to be in awe of Anne Frank’s attitude and the questions she asks about people’s ability to be evil and their potential to do good. Despite the hardships she faces, hope permeates the pages of her diary. I feel privileged to have read the Diary of Anne Frank.

In high school I continued to read memoirs written by young American women. Maxine Hong Kingston’s work The Woman Warrior describes Kingston’s childhood as a Chinese American girl who must deal with her family’s past, her mother’s expectations of her, and her developing expectations for herself. In Burnt Bread and Chutney, Carmit Delman describes growing up as a member of Bene Israel, a small Indian Jewish community. In relating her coming of age, Delman explains how she faced the typical adolescent crisis of trying to fit in with her peers. She experiences being an outsider on several planes: she is not completely accepted into the Jewish community because of her brown skin, but she does not feel completely at home in the Indian community because she is Jewish. By revealing information about her family’s background, Delman taught

me about a small group within the Jewish community that I previously knew nothing about. My desire to learn about the Bene Israel was a motivating factor in my planning of Jewzapalooza, a festival celebrating Jewish life on campus. For our theme “Jews Around the World,” we had posters describing Jewish communities in different countries. What I learned from reading Delman’s memoir informed my desire to share this information with others.

One of the subjects illuminated by Kingston and Delman is the tension between maintaining their families’ traditions and embracing modernity. Each writer exemplifies the internal conflict that arises from valuing both the old and the new. This balancing act is something that I continually struggle with. When I read Jewish texts, part of me feels veneration for the ancient tradition and the Rabbis’ attempt to understand their place in the world. However, another part of me feels deeply upset when these Rabbis classify women in the same category as slaves, minors, and the mentally deficient. In a way, I feel excluded from the texts because there are no female Jewish scholars; though these texts expect women to follow the laws they enact, women have no part in either determining or disputing these laws. In her memoir Words on Fire, author Vanessa Ochs deals with many of these issues. As a religious studies professor, she spends a year in Jerusalem learning Jewish texts with some of the most respected female scholars of Torah and Talmud and grappling with them from a feminist perspective. Though I have not resolved the tension between my liberalism and my respect for Jewish tradition, Ochs’ memoir has taught me about the ways other women have embraced this tension and made the tradition their own. Despite (or perhaps because of) my struggle with the Jewish tradition,

I am strongly considering spending time in Israel studying these texts in hopes of emulating the honesty and scholarship of Ochs and the women with whom she studied.

My interest in learning about women's lives has extended to my class selection in college. In my class "Contemporary Women's Health," we read Martha Manning's Undercurrents: A Life Beneath the Surface, a memoir which chronicles her experience dealing with clinical depression. I never expected to laugh so many times when reading a book about this topic. Manning's poignant writing, with its eloquence and complete honesty, helped me to understand a little more about what it is like to have depression. In her memoir I Knew a Woman, Cortney Davis, a nurse practitioner, recounts her relationships with four female patients. Davis develops connections with each of her patients that go beyond the typical nurse/patient relationship; she acts as a sympathetic counselor and a trusted friend to Lila, Renée, Eleanor, and Joanna. Through her writing, Davis conveys her passion for her job and the impact she has made on other women's lives. I hope that I will be able to incorporate her passionate desire to help others in my own life. I am in awe of Davis and the other women who have shared so much of themselves by writing about their lives. I see a part of myself through their honest, thought-provoking writing. Within the pages of my memoirs are the words of women who have become my role models.

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