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Phyllis Chesler, A Politically Incorrect Feminist

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In this video I discuss Phyllis Chesler's riveting memoir of second wave feminism, *A Politically Incorrect Feminist*. Buy a copy here: <https://amzn.to/2UpP3Je>

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Transcript

Welcome back. Today I'm going to be reviewing a book, and the book in question is this by Phyllis Chesler, *A Politically Incorrect Feminist*, *Creating a Movement with Bitches, Lunatics, Dykes, Prodigies, Warriors, and Wonder Women*. I thought I'd review this book.

It's not usually the sort of book that I review here, but it came up in conversation a few days ago, and I thought that was a good book. I will mention it in a video and explore it a bit. It's the experience of Phyllis Chesler, who was a leading figure within the second wave of feminism within the 60s and 70s particularly.

She wrote on a variety of different subjects, and a very thoughtful, stimulating writer. I've looked through some of her work, particularly on women and madness, and also on women's inhumanity to women, other things like that. She was born in 1940 to first-generation immigrants, a Jewish-American family.

Her father was affectionate but volatile, and occasionally beat her up. Her mum had a very critical relationship with her, and had maybe thwarted ambition that she projected onto her daughter. That context was one that she found very stifling, and she wanted to escape.

She talks about the way in which in her flight towards freedom she lost a lot, and that's the way things usually happen, but yet the departure from that background was pretty much inevitable. She was going to find that context very constraining if she remained there. She talks about the experiences of many women within that context being stifling, not just stifling but deep experiences of abuse, marriage as a very unhappy place for many women.

And the experience of women in a society where almost all the significant roles within society, almost all the jobs and other things like that were restricted to men. And the women that did work outside of the home were few and far between, usually working in family businesses or something like that. This was something that she tried to escape.

She ended up marrying someone from Afghanistan and spending the beginning of months at the beginning of the 1960s in Kabul with this man that she'd married, and finding that the experience there was far more brutal than anything that she'd seen in the US. It's one of the areas where she's particularly interesting. Unlike many other authors, she's got a breadth of experience that helps her to avoid some of the very parochial prejudices that you find within many of these movements.

She escapes a lot of the ideology simply by having a sense of a broader range of human experience. And what it looks like to be a woman in somewhere like Kabul is very different from what it means to be a mother or a housewife in the US. And she talks about the fact that America, for all its problems, is an exceptional place.

It's somewhere that's very different in many respects. And the family is a brutal institution in places like Afghanistan. But yet that's not something that is without its brutality within the US and elsewhere in the Western world.

And it's an important point to recognise. As you look in the modern day and back through history, there is a great deal of brutality that's established by the order of the family. As a very intimate network where there can be incredible cruelty that occurs, where people can be stifled and constrained, where people can live lives of daily misery, and where the closest people to us can be our torturers.

So this is a situation that her experience gives her a bit more of an even-handedness in her approach to some of these subjects than you'd often find within feminist thought. And she pushes back against some of the ways in which people attribute to colonialism all the problems in places like Afghanistan and other places like that. The patriarchy is not a result of colonialism in these places.

And it can be far more brutal there, apart from Western influence, than with it Western influence. So that sort of treatment is interesting and it's a welcome change from the very ideological approaches that you'll find from certain people on the left. The political incorrectness of her approach is not one that comes at the expense of a consistent feminist line.

Rather, it is in many respects a consistent feminist line against some of these different forms of oppression. And the political incorrectness often comes from her consistently holding to principles when they actually push against the movement mentality of the left. And it's quite refreshing to read someone who is not just an ideologue, someone who's just bound up with a movement, who's just bound up with an ideology.

But is attentive to particular situations, that's prepared to change her mind on things, that moves over time and develops her opinions, and is prepared to call out hypocrisy. And it's one of the reasons why I found this book a refreshing read. It's also very entertaining.

Often not in the best way, because there is a degree of a sort of gossipy feel to it at points, because she's dishing the dirt on certain figures. Although it's not intended to dish the dirt. The whole point is, to be honest, about just how human the second wave feminist movement was, and how flawed many of its leading figures were.

Flawed, but brilliant. People who she was deeply delighted to be connected with, and drew so much rich joy from being part of a movement with them. But yet at the same time finding them people who were very flawed in very human ways.

And pushing back against some of the idealizations that you find of movements that are not white, male, cis, straight, whatever. It's a refreshing change to have someone who's willing to acknowledge human nature, and just how messed up we all are. That none of us are immune from the damaged structure of human nature, and sin plays itself out in all of our relationships.

She talks about the world that existed before feminism in many respects. Not just in the context of Afghanistan, but in the context of the West with sexual abuse and harassment by male employers just being part of the norm. And not really being addressed with any direct, open challenge.

And the amount of abuse within families. Child abuse, other things like that. A lot of the other ways in which women were held back or held down by society.

And it is important to pay attention to these things. If you look back in your own family history you'll probably find a number of stories like this. A number of stories of women who have been stifled or who have been mistreated by people that you may love.

And it's important to recognise that people can idealise the family in a way that's blind to

just how brutal the family can be as an institution on occasions. Her experience is one that's shaped also by an openness to life and experience in ways that are not always healthy. And has a series of relationships to bad men and men who are unfaithful or men who are abusive.

Men who are not very committed or not very responsible. And then a series of affairs with interesting but men that she's not going to settle down to. And she talks about an addiction to men.

This is part of her nature. It's not something that although many of the people within the second wave of feminism felt that to be consistent you had to be a lesbian. This wasn't the experience for her.

She was addicted to having relationships with men. Often men that proved, generally men, who proved quite unsuitable. And then later on she did start to settle down in a lesbian relationship.

But it's an interesting account of this series of partners that she had. And many of them who are quite reprehensible in their behaviour. Have married to an Israeli husband and that broke down and he failed to be present in her son's life.

And then there were many other things that happened after that particular divorce. So for instance I'll read a passage here. I've interviewed hundreds of divorced mothers whose ex-husbands stopped visiting their children.

As well as mothers who were forced to fight for the custody of their children. Non-payment of child support was rampant. While it may not be true for every man, many fathers abandon their first set of children, at least economically, when they remarry and have a second family.

Later on she talks about the fact that she couldn't just abandon her child. That even this Amazon warrior couldn't leave her baby, but his stay-at-home father could. Most women don't leave their children, a profound difference from men.

I now understood that motherhood changes you forever. And she talks about a number of these experiences of the relationships breaking down of irresponsible men and men who are abusive. Things like that.

And then weird experiences that exist within that sort of circle she was moving in. Erica finally told me quite earnestly that she was close to Phyllis and Eberhard Kronhausen. Who are holistic sex therapists and collectors of erotic art.

They had persuaded her that the only way to keep a marriage alive is to engage in friendly orgies. She told me that Jonathan had been lusting after my breasts. Six years later in the throes of my own divorce disaster I finally went to bed with them.

With Erica, the queen of erotica, chastely passively held my hand as Jonathan had at me. I felt like a used tissue. Rich people really are different from you and me.

Jonathan began calling me. This didn't end well for any of us. But when Jonathan challenged Erica for custody of their daughter Molly, I stood by Erica.

There's a lot of stories like that. Most of them not about sexual relations but there are a lot of stories about just people's messed up lives in these movements. Her experience of the sisterhood is a very interesting part of this.

The experience of relating to other women within this movement that was very fractious. That had a lot of needy and broken people within it. Once upon a time long ago I believed that all women were kind, caring, maternal, valiant and noble under siege.

And that all men were their oppressors. As everyone but a handful of idealistic feminists knew this was not true. Living my life has helped me to understand that like men women are human beings.

As close to the apes as to the angels. Capable of both cruelty and compassion, envy and generosity, competition and cooperation. Talks about the struggle that you have within a movement where people are putting a lot of weight upon the relationships.

Psychologically we second wavers had no feminist foremothers and no biological mothers. We only had sisters. If we had understood more about the dark side of female psychology we might have been able to find ways to resist our own mean girl treachery.

If only. Only now a half century later do I understand that women in groups tend to demand uniformity, conformity, shoulder to shoulder non-hierarchical sisterhood. One in which no one is more rewarded than anyone else.

Marxism and female psychology are a natural fit psychologically. Psychologically but not for me. Very interesting her discussion of this and I'll get into this at some point later on.

Talks about the difficult relationship that many of the people had with motherhood. Back then many feminists had a highly charged ambivalent relationship to biological motherhood. They didn't want to repeat the lives their mothers had lived.

They yearned to develop strong selves and given the obstacles women faced. They may have needed all their energies to do so. Some feminists were afraid of being overwhelmed or trapped.

Others feared being abandoned or impoverished. Rational fears. Fathers leave, die, lose their jobs, get sick.

But I think there was another reason for this ambivalence. Psychologically many feminists needed other feminists to mother them. Even though we're all sisters the need

for intimate emotional attention was great.

Unconsciously we didn't want our mother's sister to mother her own child. When would she have had time for us and for the revolution? Many of my feminist friends and I have been attacked daily by that starving child let loose in other women. Very interesting perceptive and she's a psychologist, psychiatrist so she has experience and given thought to the psychological dimensions of all of these things.

Which makes this book a lot more interesting than it would be if it were just written by someone who didn't have that sort of insight. Talks about the struggle within the movement, the feminist movement, with people with very different visions for it. So the more radical end of the movement, people associated with characters like, who want to be associated with characters like Valerie Solanas who tried to kill Andy Warhol and people like Betty Friedan who wanted very respectable movement.

Betty Friedan wanted women with status and power, preferably married to upstanding and powerful men to represent the feminist movement. She wanted no wild eyed riffraff, no one unpredictable or too radical to become associated in the public eye with what she viewed as her expectable and rational movement. And this is an example among many of some of the tensions that were existing within that movement at the time.

There's the radical end and then there's a more conservative end. There's a sort of hothouse of radical thought within Wrench Village and the other world, the more general world in which she's operating at the time. And she's connecting with people who are involved in all sorts of radical left wing movements, Malcolm X and John Lennon and Yoko Ono.

These sorts of characters are kind of in the peripheral area of the movements that she's involved in and they cross paths at different points. Talks about a movement with feminist and lesbian rock musicians, artists, comedians and actresses, creatives who are trying to create some sort of consciousness or some sense of a movement or identity. And she talks about the way in which a number of issues were brought to the forefront by this particular movement.

So, for instance, they'd have speak outs on issues like abortion where people who never speak about that subject, although Cheslough says just about every woman she knew had had an abortion but didn't discuss it and she had two. In these sorts of issues she wanted and others wanted women to speak out. And as they had these consciousness raising sessions, people would become aware of what women actually experienced.

And as a result, these issues would become more salient in their minds. She talks about her experience also in the context of the academy, which is a very male dominated context within that time and the struggle with male professors having sexual relations with their students, harassing female colleagues, the ways that they would be squeezed

out of the hierarchy prevented from rising up within the institution, the ways that their particular areas of study, their disciplines, when they're studying things like women's studies, other things like that, that they would be squeezed out or prevented from spreading their thinking. And it's interesting as you read through just how many of the cases resonate with current discussions.

So she talks about, for instance, in the early 1970s, a professor arrived to rate my college's curriculum for a national review board. I admit it, I did it again. I accepted his invitation to a dinner party with well-known intellectuals and their wives.

My equally ambitious heterosexual male counterparts also accepted dinner invitations, but they didn't have to face sexual harassment at the hands of their heterosexual mentors. I had the audacity to reject this professor's every subsequent social and sexual advance. He retaliated by arranging for the publication of a scathing review of *Women and Madness*.

Neither of these professors were overcome with love for me. They treated me as they did because I was a woman. It was nothing personal.

Prejudice rarely is. She talks about the demographics of this particular movement within Grinch Village that she was involved in, this really lively sisterhood and circle where people were, they had, she talks about it as the experience of something like a paradise that's later followed by a fall. But there's this sense of charged revolution.

Things are in the air. Something's about to change. Within a few years, the patriarchy is going to be gone.

Everything's going to change. And this movement where people are coming alive, where they're suddenly realising that something about themselves, that they're coming to an awareness of how they've been suppressed and thinking about how things could be different. The movement she describes is about half straight.

The rest is lesbian or bisexual, and all of them are Caucasian, a large number of Jewish women particularly. And in 1969, she was part of the founding group for the Association of Women in Psychology. Her description of the experience of women at the hands of psychology is particularly important.

And it's one of the things that was very much at the heart of her work. In graduate school, during my clinical internship and at the Psychoanalytic Institute where I trained in the late 1960s and early 1970s, I was taught that it was necessary to diagnostically pathologise a totally normal human response to trauma. For example, we were taught to view the normal female and human response to sexual violence, including incest, as a psychiatric illness.

We were taught to blame the woman as seductive or sick. We learned to believe that

women cried incest or rape to get sympathetic attention or revenge. In my time, we were taught to view women as somehow naturally mentally ill.

Women were hysterics, malingerers, childlike, manipulative, either cold or smothering as and driven to excess by their hormones. I was secretly studying what women really wanted from psychotherapy. I planned to present my findings at the annual convention of the American Psychological Association, APA, in the fall of 1970.

Mental health professions had never helped most women and had in fact further abused them by punitively labelling them, over-tranquilising them, sexually seducing them while they were in treatment, hospitalising them involuntarily, administering shock therapy to them, lobotomising them, and above all unnecessarily describing women as too aggressive, promiscuous, depressed, ugly, old, angry or fat, or as incurable. Again, there's a whole list of different issues that she brings up. The ways that psychiatrists would treat their female patients, how they would sexually abuse them or harass them, the ways that they'd use them as sort of live-in servants, other things like this.

And the treatment of these women and the ways that the mental health issues are used against women she discusses in great depth. But she makes very clear that mental health issues do in fact exist. And she writes, they were right.

And from that moment on I repeated their question whenever I spoke about the subject. The question is, what can we do? When the talk therapy and all the meds that we have fail and when our patient is still suicidal or agonisingly depressed, we try shock therapy. Sometimes it works, it pulls them back, they go on with their lives.

Should we avoid this treatment for political reasons? They were right. And from that moment on I repeated their question whenever I spoke about the subject. I had nothing left to lose.

I had long ago run afoul of the mental patients, liberation people, project people, poor souls much sinned against but also so lost in outer space. I believe that madness does exist and that those who suffer from it have been punitively diagnosed, stigmatised and mistreated. Nevertheless, I oppose those who attempt to romanticise depression or to view it as an art form.

I view mania, depression, intrusive flashbacks and schizophrenia as real, not imaginary. I do not think that a political revolution can cure such states of being. It's interesting to read her on these sorts of subjects and you have a sense, I hope, of her as a more even-handed thinker, someone who's not just an ideologue, who's spouting a particular ideological line but someone who wants to deal with genuine injustices and rectify some of these situations.

Someone who wants to understand the way that these things really are and how to treat

them well. She writes also about abusive women who would condemn the male practices but yet engage in many of the same things themselves. So she writes about Dr Anne Wilton Shafe and people like that who would have relationships with their patients and the ways that she spoke very strongly against that even though people within their organisations covered for them.

She talks about starting a women's studies course and the struggle that she had to go through to do that and talking about how that movement gradually morphed into gender studies and then later to LGBTQ etc studies and the way that in some ways it lost its way as it moved away from those roots. She writes about speaking out on issues like rape and pornography, a very strong series of conscious raising events on rape, the way in which women reporting rape were seen as manipulative, as people who were blamed for what had happened to them. All these different things that were fairly systemic and in many places are, continue to be systemic in the ways that these cases are mishandled and women are distrusted and the ways that certain systems are just designed in a way that will systemically privilege those who are accused and stigmatise those who bring forward accusations.

She talks about pornography and the challenge within the movement as it divided on these lines. What is the correct way to approach pornography? Are you going to oppose censorship? Are you going to be a movement that sees all of this as a form of oppression? Are you going to be in favour of sex workers and see this in a very positive way and the movement divided on those sorts of issues and this and other issues. She talks about the need for custody for women, so the way that women in many cases were losing their right to custody of their children because of unjust legal structures.

She says that very clearly there are cases of men being mistreated by the legal system in similar ways but that doesn't mean that there aren't these injustices against women or that those injustices were not at least historically and in many contexts continually far more serious and prevalent. She talks about the need to speak out against surrogacy. Again one of the interesting areas where she's someone who's not just towing a typical party line.

He asks the following questions. Do low income and less educated mothers have a right to their biological children or by definition are wealthier, higher income, better educated mothers always better parents and therefore entitled to the children of the poor? Is a mere donation of sperm equivalent to nine months of pregnancy with all its attendant risks and the labour of childbirth? Are all contracts enforceable? Even say one in which a person agrees to become a slave or to sell one's only remaining kidney. How do surrogacy arrangements psychologically affect birth mothers and the children who are adopted for targeted for adoption before they've even been conceived? And so she talks about the way that this was a struggle for many other people within the movement who thought about surrogacy as a means of providing children for infertile and gay couples

and pushing back against this movement favouring of surrogacy that really fits in with a particular political camp and social camp that really is not consistent with issues of justice to mothers.

So there are a number of issues like that that she raises that are very clearly whether you agree completely on the particulars or not. There are issues that are significant ones and I think many of us would acknowledge in many of these areas serious injustices that have at least historically existed and in many cases continue to exist that need to be addressed. Her involvement within, she also has spoken on issues like child abuse in Rotherham, she mentions that at certain points and other cases that just aren't politically popular because they raise unsettling issues like the idea that the same people who would be very strongly in favour of women's rights and other things like that on the left that they might in the name of avoiding Islamophobia they might end up covering over a deep form of abuse and she gets into that as well after her experience in Kabul and her experience of the patriarchy in Afghanistan.

She speaks about her involvement in feminist collectives and the ways in which very much an ideal seeing these situations where women are working and living together and some of the things that they can achieve, the sense of liberation. There, hours from Portland I saw Amazon straight out of science fiction. I had never seen eight women working together to build a house.

They were putting on a roof, sawing wood, measuring windows. I didn't see them as male identified. I saw them as mythic angels building a shining city in the desert.

But then there are other details there that suggest that it's not as real, it might be a mirage in some senses. It talks about given the rampant anti-elitism among feminists I decided to travel under a pseudonym, Buttercup. And then later on, at a farm I saw women planting, gardening, sitting in a sauna, building a shrine to the goddess and eating only what they could grow.

Their beds were sleeping bags and colourful tents. It was medieval and fabulous. Is this land collectively owned, I asked.

Nah, we're renting it from some man. At another location the answer was, the land is owned by one of the women. Well, actually her parents are loaded and they own the land.

The pioneers were not the owners. This didn't seem to bother them. They lived on money from home or on welfare and disability checks.

This then was only a temporary new land, a vacation paradise, not a serious, sustainable future way of life. When I visited an Oakland collective packed to the rafters with lesbian feminist poets, I noticed that it had too few towels and those that they had were thin and

always damp, that the fridge was practically empty and the ashtrays overflowing, and that it was dark even at noon because the shades were never drawn, were always drawn. Why do rebel women choose to live on the other side of midnight, I asked.

My friend told me, we won't do housework and we won't pay someone else to do our dirty work for us. So it's a vision of an ideal in some cases, but an ideal that when close to examination does not seem so realistic. A lot of things are covered up.

Her involvement also extends to religion. So she started, was involved in starting a feminist Passover Seder. Talks about, if you study Torah even a little bit, you develop a perspective about a human being's rather humble place in the universe.

For example, the prophet Moses, God's great intimate, our teacher and liberator, is never mentioned in the Haggadah, the text that is a guide to the Seder. There are complex historical and theological reasons why Moses is not mentioned. Most feminist seders elevate the prophet Miriam, the sister of Moses.

It is understandable but childlike, this hunger to see our own gendered human image writ large. I once had this hunger and I fully satisfied it. In the beginning, after so many centuries of God the Father, feminist women hungered for God the Mother.

We introduced ourselves by our first names and by our mother's first names. I'm Phyllis, daughter of Lilian. I'm Leti, daughter of Sihl.

Thus the earliest women's seders were created in our own image. They were meant to be a world of our mothers. We were a band of motherless sisters in search of our female ancestors.

We created a ritual, a verbal matrilineage. And introducing ourselves this way was and remains psychologically empowering. She talks about the way that her experience gradually moved away from that and she came more to favour a position which was trying to recover something closer to the tradition, to include men and children within the celebration and not just keep it to women.

And the ways that she started to become more involved in actually studying the Torah for its own sake, while still taking a feminist approach and a deeply unorthodox approach to understanding how women relate to God, for instance, that God is seen as feminine, things like that. But it's an interesting development. She talks, perhaps some of the most interesting and juicy bits of the book that people will remember are the bits where she talks about the experience that she had with other lead figures within the movement.

So, for instance, Jill Johnston. In 1971 and 1972, I was living alone in Lamontville, New York, on my winter and spring breaks and working on the final chapters of *Women and Madness*. Jill Johnston often stopped by.

She sometimes called first and asked to sleep over, telling me that she was Joan of Arc and the King's men were coming to get her so she had to hide. I thought this affectation was charming and I always said yes, but I also locked my bedroom door. I was hopelessly straight.

Well, maybe not hopelessly, since like many straight women, I was persuaded that the most revolutionary feminists were lesbians. If only that were true. It's not.

I thought of Jill with her long, lean, dancer's legs as gentleman Jill. She was a bit of a British beanpole and as she had learned, the illegitimate daughter of a British man who, if not royal, was close to royalty. So it was down with patriarchy, but also I want Daddy to acknowledge me.

I had no idea that Jill had been married and had two children she stashed with a gay male collective. I didn't yet know that, as she put it, she sometimes stepped out. By that, she meant that she had to go to a loony bin because she had stepped out of her mind.

Later on, she says Jill was so good at being helpless that she turned all her friends and allies into her unpaid staff. She asked everyone to make calls for her, get her out of trouble and give her urgently needed advice about lovers, publishers, editors, movement heavies, movie and restaurant choices and anything else she could think of. Writes about Gloria Steinem on a number of occasions.

Gloria has a little girl lost appeal to her that gets people to want to help and take care of her. It affected me that way too. She would sometimes look up at me with a trusting, even slightly helpless look and it worked like a charm.

The effect is somewhat unnerving as well as flattering. Neither of us was a lesbian, although it was a subject we sometimes discussed. We were both told over and over again that lesbianism was either a more perfect form of feminism or a form of excessive man-hating.

The first time I was attracted to a woman, not that it led anywhere, I told Gloria about it immediately as if it were some kind of a breakthrough. She sighed and asked, do you think it will ever happen to me? Betty Friedan's relationship with Steinem she discussed is as, writes, Steinem kept asking me to help her learn how to express her anger. She was terminally polite, genial, reserved, nice in a midwestern kind of way.

She's from Ohio. This amiable stability, the super control plus her appearance contributed to people not viewing her as a threat. This also meant that she could be heard, which I thought was a great advantage.

But Gloria said in despair, this is why Betty Friedan hates me. She won't talk to me. I was in Bloomingdale's going doing some Christmas shopping and bumped into Betty.

I said, oh, hi. And she said, I won't talk to you and just walked off. Gloria could not bear being disliked.

Betty Friedan was in a rage about all the media attention Gloria was getting. She believed that Gloria was unfairly stealing attention from her. Betty also did not believe that Gloria represented middle America because she had not been married or had children.

Betty saw Gloria as a lightweight people pleaser, a Jane come lately, a copycat. Betty did not value Gloria as someone who could preach feminism 101 decade after decade, long after the rest of us had quit the stage in exhaustion or boredom. She talks about her experience with Margaret Mead in debate with Margaret Mead and the rivalry that was supposed to arise.

The argument did not actually materialise. But then Margaret Mead putting her down in a subtle way. You young woman are obviously brilliant, but how many more are there like you in that movement of yours? It was a no win moment.

While I was pleased, even thrilled that I had impressed her, I was also embarrassed and outraged that she had publicly demeaned the movement I represented. I told her, Dr Mead, no matter what I say, I'm in trouble. If I'm not part of a worthy movement, because in your view, it doesn't exist, then I'm not that smart after all, am I? And a number of other people that she has encounters with or extensive experience with and Kate Millett is one that Kate, very strong friend of hers.

All those years ago in San Francisco, Flo Kennedy left Kate and me in her apartment and warned us not to do anything illegal like smoke pot. Of course, we locked the bathroom door and giggled with each drag. Suddenly, Kate started pawing me, telling me that she was in love with me, that we had to become lovers.

Kate, I'm a straight girl. I'm into boys. What's wrong with you? I'm a hero on feminist matters of state.

I became rigid, unmoving. I said, this is not what I want. She persisted.

I was outraged and frightened. She was my older sister, Kate, the feminist icon. After a while, she stopped.

I believe she arrested my bisexual evolution by a decade. Kate did me and herself no favours by falling in love with me. She began a campaign of sending flowers and leaving phone messages.

I hid from her. I didn't break with her over this. We continued our intellectual and political friendship without special privileges.

Our friendship lasted through many episodes of her truly bad behaviour. And there are a number of other accounts like this, her experience of Kate's episodes of mental illness and trying to send her to get treatment and some of the senses of betrayal between them. Kate started leaving abusive messages on my answering phone.

Our friend, Lila Karp, told me that she had taken Kate to the beach and that Kate had bloody freaked out. She was yelling at gas station attendants. She insisted that the beach had been dirtied by the Jews and that the Irish always have to clean up Jewish filth.

Whoa. Whoa. What is one to make of a mad genius? Kate's friends and groupies put up with it, thereby enabling it.

It was the price they were willing to pay to be part of the revolution. No one wanted to break with her. It was years before her enablers in chief came to me for help.

Margue Mary Daly is another one that she mentions. Mary Daly, the theologian. The theologian Mary Daly once implored me to help her empty her classroom at Boston College, which she had opened to all women, homeless, prostituted and mentally ill women, along with lost feminists with major attitude problems, had taken over her classroom.

I resolved her dilemma by flirting with her unwanted guests, charming the crowd, appealing for mercy for Mary, the professor, who was under almost permanent siege at her Jesuit college. Mary was intellectually outrageous and courageous, but she was interpersonally tone deaf. For example, once she commanded the platform at a conference, getting her to stop was difficult.

Even when time was short, others were waiting and the audience had grown restless. I listed two of Mary's books in the bibliography of my 1998 book, *Letters to a Young Feminist*. She was outraged that I had not listed all her books in all their editions, including their foreign editions, and she faxed me a rather daunting list of all her titles.

Oh, how wounded our warrior women were, how desperate we were for attention, how much we needed to be remembered. This made sense because our work was routinely attacked or disappeared. And when that happened, we were all soon forgotten.

She writes about Andrea Dworkin as well on a number of occasions. Like Kate Millett and Shulie Firestone, Andrea was a genius. Also like them, she was destructive, self-destructive, intense, demanding, paranoid, feared, despised and misunderstood, but also deeply admired and loved rather passionately by her followers.

Andrea was a fire and brimstone feminist preacher and was seen as the feminist advocate against pornography, prostitution and sexual violence against women. And later goes on to talk about her as, *Wounded women of genius bring out my maternal*

instincts. I tend to protect and support them despite the lack of reciprocity.

For example, I defended Andrea Dworkin against all comers, but I also experienced Andrea as a demanding, domineering figure. She experienced herself as fragile, wounded and vulnerable. When Andrea verbally laid you low or ordered you around, it was because she felt under attack.

She was only defending herself. I refuse to think of her as the battered wife or prostituted woman she claimed she was, one of patriarchy's uber victims. And then talks about Betty Friedan.

Betty deserves to be honoured, warts and all. Like many of the men who changed history, she was difficult, cantankerous, abusive, abrasive, outrageously demanding and an out of control drunk. It's an important reminder that she brings in at various points that when we look at the influential and significant men in history, they had messed up lives too.

These were not perfect human beings. Rather, the point is that if you're idolising this alternative, liberative movement, you need to recognise just how messed up humanity is, that these people are not flawless heroes, but they are deeply flawed characters. She later on writes about Dworkin and this is a longer passage.

I had been aware that John Stoltenberg, the author of *Refusing to be a Man*, supported Andrea Dworkin economically and that they lived frugally and I persuaded Merle to hire him as her managing editor. He seemed agreeable and had the skills for the position. I had no idea how arrogant and domineering John was.

He was quite the bully. And then something rather shocking happened. A group of young gay feminist men, all of whom said they had been seduced and abandoned by John, found each other and wrote a group letter about his abuse of power.

They sent it to anti-pornography activists, including me. They accused John of mesmerising them with his preening proximity to Andrea, swearing each to secrecy about their sexual relationship and then cutting each one loose. John had committed no crime in the eyes of the law, yet he had abused his power.

This was disappointing in someone who held himself as the model of the new feminist man and as the feminist gay man. But this was not half as disappointing as what Andrea did. She wrote to everyone who had received this letter to defend John with all the power of her mighty pen.

From that moment on, whenever Andrea and I made a date to meet, John always accompanied her. Andrea and I talked while John watched. On the surface it was always sociable, but it felt creepy.

When I finally said that I would like to have coffee with Andrea alone, she wrote a long letter hotly defending John and the importance of their relationship. At this point I allowed myself to understand that something was very wrong with Andrea and with her primary relationship. I was too heart sick to mention this at first, but when I did, other people who cared deeply about Andrea agreed that she had apparently found another kind of dangerous relationship from which she absolutely would not be parted.

A small band of Andrea's friends, including our city's major mavens on domestic violence, finally met and agreed that Andrea was the kind of woman we could not rescue, that she would never ever leave John. So there we were, the alleged liberators of womankind. And there was this sick thing.

And there are a number of stories like that, just of the hypocrisy and contradictions. And hypocrisy not just as a sort of high-handed thing, but just the flawed and fractured character of human nature, that people fall into the traps that they will condemn in others. And it's very tragic in this way, at a number of points.

She writes about Shulamith Firestone as well. Years later, Shulie called and asked me to visit her at her home in my capacity as a psychotherapist. She said, you're the only one I can trust.

I immediately agreed to do so. Then she added, but you'll need to come to the fifth floor by climbing up the fire escape. I'll talk to you through the window.

I told her I couldn't do that, that I might fall to earth and shatter. But I couldn't persuade her to open the door. Her book, *Airless Spaces*, is a small and tender gem.

Humbly, carefully, she writes about her schizophrenia and her time in various hospitals. When it was published in 1998, she asked a small group of us, including me, to read aloud from it at her book launch. I remember Shulie's standing off a bit to the side, watching, listening, but silent, at a remove, always removed.

And there are a lot of different accounts like that. She speaks about these figures with a deep awareness of their flawed and their deeply human characters. And at the end, you can see there's a deep affection there in many of these cases.

Some of these cases, she feels betrayed by these figures. Steinem, for instance, the way that she treated her. And I'll get to that in a moment.

But there's a warmth to the way that she treats them. It's not just gossip and digging the dirt. If you look, particularly in the final chapter, you'll see a lot of her affection for these people, the sense that these women were companions, people that helped her come to an awareness of herself and a sense of the importance of that sisterhood for her at pivotal moments in her life.

A key event that's described in the book is her rape, the fact that she was raped by Davidson Nicol from Sierra Leone at the United Nations. She was arranging some sort of international feminist conference and he raped her and then later harassed her in various ways. And just some of the events are quite horrific as she describes them.

But what happened then was even worse because all the people who were involved with her, the key figures in feminism, the sisterhood turned against her and squeezed her out because it would not look good for feminism for a white woman to charge a black man with rape. And there was a deep sense of betrayal that no one was actually willing to stand for her except for a few exceptions. And there was just this gossip and rumour mill that went into operation.

Her description of Davidson Nicol is quite appalling at certain points. Davidson casually stopped by my desk and almost dreamily told me a story about Sierra Leone. He described how young girls there are lined up along a road to be sold.

They're usually naked and their legs are splayed. The buyer or potential husband can decide whether their genital mutilation suits him. This scene was so horrible that I've never written about it before.

Was it true? I'll never know. But it terrified me to think that there was a man for whom little girls were like so many chickens in the marketplace, like silent slaves whose mouths were forced open to inspect their teeth in order to gauge their age, whose breasts, bellies and genitalia were rudely inspected as a way of measuring their sexual attractiveness and childbearing capacity. Davidson's anecdote has haunted me ever since.

This is one of a number of different things that she mentions. Forms of abuse in countries outside the US and the Western world and her sense of betrayal by Steinem, Steinem's failure to deal with things was quite shocking for her, she writes. But when the people we trust betray us, we're wounded more deeply than we can be at the hands of strangers.

When a woman finds a band of sisters who proclaim that we are all for one and one for all, what do we do when it turns out not to be true? Imagine being part of a movement that's on record as being against sexual violence and on record as believing the victim, a movement that earned its credibility and enormous following for holding precisely these views. Imagine finding out that your feminist allies don't really mean it or rather that like politicians, they will sacrifice one principle, believe the woman who says she was raped, for another, back the man or the political party that will keep abortion legal. It took 37 years for the mass media even to begin to critique the dual and duplicitous roles that institutional feminism played in the sexual harassment wars.

While Gloria and Robin benefited from the feminist movement's analysis and exposure of

rape and sexual harassment, they opportunistically covered for their men and also criticised some of their victims. Also, towards the end of 2017, an article by Peggy Noonan in the Wall Street Journal described Gloria's role in protecting Bill Clinton. She cited an article by Kathleen Flanagan in the Atlantic that said that by the 1990s, the feminist movement had by then ossified into a partisan operation.

Flanagan reminded us of the famous March 1998 op-ed piece Gloria wrote for the New York Times in which she slut-shamed, victim-blamed and age-shamed the victims and urged compassion for and gratitude to the man the women accused. She pointed out that Steinem characterised the assaults as passes. And on a number of occasions, she brings forward these examples of hypocrisy and the way that a movement that's invested in proximity to power, keeping certain institutional advantages and other things like that, end up covering up all sorts of abuse.

And when you have these same dynamics, women exposed to the same dynamics of power, the same things emerge, the same toxic cycles. And it's not as if this is just some male phenomenon, rather this is a more general problem with human nature. And she writes a lot about the movement and its dynamics, which is fascinating because it really fits in with some of the things that research has been done upon, women's tendencies in groups and things like that.

So for instance, as I read earlier, only now, a half-century later, do I understand that women in groups tend to demand uniformity, conformity, shoulder to shoulder, non-hierarchical sisterhood. One in which no one is more rewarded than anyone else. Marxism and female psychology are a natural fit psychologically.

And she talks about this in the context of the notion that the personal is the political. The concept that the personal is the political allowed women to share our supposedly minor miseries. This led to our understanding that we're all similarly oppressed and that it was not our fault.

Having to do the housework after working the same eight to ten hour day as our husbands was unjust and our weariness, often bitterness, was understandable, not proof that we were deficient or deranged. Many feminists have claimed credit for the phrase, the personal is political. I can assure everyone it wasn't me.

It was Carol Hanisch, perhaps in discussions with Shuli Firestone and Kathy Serachild, who first uttered these immortal words. I also knew that groups were forming and splintering, that women of ideas took ideas very seriously, and that if there were serious differences, they put the idea before the individual woman. Lesbians were meeting only with other lesbians, but they too swiftly shattered for reasons that weren't yet clear to me.

As I noted earlier, feminists had substantive battles about Marxism versus capitalism,

revolution versus reform, violent overthrow versus the evolutionary transformation of patriarchy, racism and lesbians as the only true feminists versus lesbians as man-haters who would destroy the work of heterosexual reformers. Feminists experienced all these battles not only as political differences, but as personal attacks from which many failed to recover. She talks about the ways in which ideas were stolen from people.

The idea that you would have an idea or a book of your own, that you'd have your name to, that you would have your authorship acknowledged, that that was seen as a threat to the sisterhood, that everyone had to be in it together, and a certain form of anonymity was part of the conformity that was expected. That if you had too much fame, too much prominence, that was a threat to everyone else. And so women who stood out were a problem.

And the experience of consciousness raising groups, and there's a sort of vicious egalitarianism. Anyone who has different ideas, anyone who stands out, anyone who might be seen to put themselves forward, that they were clamped down upon. Women who stood out were really a real problem.

I previously described what I call the Chinese Cultural Revolution in Feminist America. The resentment and anger shown to any feminist perceived as more talented, more visible, or prettier than whoever resented this fact. Many feminists came to believe that feminist ideas and activism belonged to the movement, not to any individual, and especially not to the feminist who did the writing or organized the protest.

This phrase was the angry, anguished, rallying cry of many radical feminists. If someone wrote an article, coined a phrase, pioneered a method of organizing, such as consciousness raising, or planned to speak out, she was judged to have ripped off what others considered intellectual property that belonged to the people, the sisterhood, the boundaryless merging of one with all. When certain feminists began taking credit for what they had not done or allowed the media to conclude that they alone had originated such key phrases as the personal is political, or sisterhood is powerful, or had pioneered the idea of consciousness raising, when they had not done so, rage and paranoia provoked a bitter and frustrated despair in those who had.

She also writes on the same subject. Here's what they were thinking. If all women were supposed to be equal, then no woman should be more appreciated or better known than any other.

She talks about the dynamic of a trashing movement where everyone would turn on someone and there'd be movements to establish intellectual purity. The structurelessness of the movement, the lack of hierarchy and other things like that, how it led to all these sorts of problems, and a movement that was constantly warring and eating itself alive. And along with this, there's all the shunning, the spreading rumours, the social ostracising, the different ways that things were, all this indirect competition

where people would squeeze out undesirable figures or figures that were threatening to the movement in some ways.

She writes about feminist cliques. Well, feminist cliques did obtain enormous power and influence in academia, media and politics. No clique ever obtained full state control.

Therefore, feminists could not arrest or execute their ideological opponents or competitors, but they used the power they had. They eliminated other feminists by discrediting and shunning them and by disappearing their work in the eyes of the media. In the histories the victors wrote and in the films they produced or for which they served as consultants.

And she experienced some of this herself after the whistle blowing after her rape. And at the end she says, what happened to me in Oslo is a behind the scenes tale about the second wave feminist leadership. If this could happen to me, then far worse things must have happened to others.

She writes about the dysfunctional longing for community that people had. The feminist longing for community has sometimes led to the creation of cults. Over the years, women have consulted me with me about their experiences in so-called therapeutic cults, in which patient daughters socialized intensely with their therapist mothers and with each other.

They experienced boundary violations audiastically. The cults merged Demeter, goddess of the harvest, with her daughter Persephone, goddess of both spring and the underworld, and divine madness reigned. I wrote about both goddess figures in *Women and Madness*.

I'm sure that many more heterosexual and homosexual male therapists abuse their power in sexual ways. That is not an excuse for women, gay or straight, to do so. Again, she writes, many NOW members had married NOW psychologically.

They had turned it into a total institution, the equivalent of a family or a religious order. When they lost, they lost everything for all time. This was not a game.

It was all that they had, everything that mattered, and they had no rules of engagement or disengagement. So these are descriptions of a movement that has lost its way in many respects psychologically, where you have a lot of unbalanced people, people who are trying to find their way after being abused, many traumatic, broken, wounded people scarred by the ways that they've been mistreated by others, finding themselves within a movement that has these dynamics that are unhealthy. And the way that those developed is fairly predictable, but it's tragic nonetheless.

And she writes about these in a number of different ways. Individual petty jealousies and leaderless group bullying were frightening and ugly. Mean girls envied and destroyed

excellence and talent.

In short, they ate their most gifted leaders. Feminists who had left the left brought with them its tactics of intimidation and interrogation. She goes on to talk about the scale of mental illness as a problem within the movement and writes about a series of different characters within the movement that she knew, leading figures who had severe mental issues.

This quite apart from ideological differences, some of our most beloved geniuses were unstable and wildly needy. No more so than people in general, including socialites, artists or members of other social justice movements, but no less so either. Feminism isn't crazy and feminist ideas aren't crazy, but some of the feminists I've known and loved have suffered from mental illness.

I'm reluctantly willing to admit that mental illness may have been one of the many problems that dogged our movements. However, I'm also writing about historical figures who must be judged for what they accomplished. That's why I'm writing about them.

It's why they matter. At the time, however, even I refused to think of feminists or of women as mentally ill. That phrase has been used against women so unjustly that I simply did not want to repeat this calumny.

Those among us who were not clinically or theoretically educated about mental illness, as well as those who were mentally ill, did not recognise or consider that certain behaviours, non-stop talking, yelling, paranoid accusations, drinking, stealing, pathological lying, might be evidence of mental illness. We all prefer to consider dysfunctional behaviours as ideological opposition. I think we see a lot of that today in many of the movements that are very prominent.

Look around and pay attention to what people talk about on social media, for instance. Notice how many leading figures talk about their experience being on medication and other things. When people are wounded, and often people who are leading figures in these movements are very wounded, they will be people who bring that woundedness to everything that they're doing.

It doesn't mean that we shouldn't be paying attention to them, but we should recognise some of the ways in which they can be scarred by their experiences. She writes about the tensions between the generations of the feminist movement, between younger third-wave feminists. The authors were angry because they and others of their generation felt that second-wave feminists were not reading their work, only telling them to read ours.

They may have been right. Nevertheless, something strange seemed to be going on psychologically. My generation never sought our biological or ideological mother's approval.

Their generation seemed to need it. From a psychoanalytic point of view, they were biting the breast that feeds them. The book contained a letter to an older feminist, which they say is in response to my book title.

In it they write, you're not our mothers. Now you have to stop treating us as daughters. You're responsible for raising your own consciousness about what third-wave feminists are thinking, engaging with us rather than knocking us down.

Read our books, buy our records, support our organisations. Don't treat us as if we're competitive with you. And the results of the movement that she sees, the way that it's, the direction that it's taken that she writes.

I recant none of the visionary ideals of second-wave feminism. Rather, as a feminist, not an anti-feminist, I feel obliged to say that something has gone terribly wrong among our thinking classes. The multicultural canon has not led us to independent, tolerant, diverse or objective ways of thinking.

On the contrary, it has led to conformity and totalitarian herd thinking. And I found this book more generally a very stimulating read, very even-handed. Someone I disagree with strongly on a number of issues, but yet someone who's open to reality.

Someone who's willing to change her mind. Someone who's not just an ideologue. And someone who is an interesting person, has a character and a flair to the way that she writes, has a warmth of personality.

The way that she describes the characters she engages with, there's a warmth there. And it's not just juicy anecdotes about people and things like that, or it's not intended to pull people apart. There's a deep affection, even with the sense of just how fractured these human beings are.

How broken and wounded and scarred and troubled certain people can be within the movements. She recognises that these figures, for all their scars and all their brokenness, were remarkable women. Who did something astonishing and something that's worthy of praise.

But along with that are all the dangers of a movement that is not psychologically healthy in various ways. And the dangers of not recognising some of the dysfunctional dynamics that exist. What I took away from this book, I think there's a number of things that are worth taking away from it.

It's a reminder once more that there are a great number of deep injustices and forms of oppression that feminism has rightly opposed. And many people who are critical of feminism, as I would be, have failed to take those things seriously enough. What else is there? There's a recognition of human nature.

That human nature runs through us all. That no movement is free from the flaws of human nature. There's no ideology that's going to get us a perfect society.

There's no sex that is going to save us from the brutality and the dysfunctionality and the cruelty and the ugliness of human relationships. Women are not somehow more ethical than men in a way that will save us from all these things. The world would not necessarily change in becoming a more just and noble place.

We would just have a different sort of dynamics. And there we see the dynamics of more female groups as opposed to male groups. It's something that we see the dynamics of male groups, the sort of extreme competition, often extreme antagonism and people attacking each other in particular ways.

Or we can have a more relaxed agonism as people struggle together or work alongside each other towards a shared objective. Women's groups have a different dynamic for the most part because it's composed of women and women and men have different tendencies. And here I think within this book you see just how pronounced these female tendencies are.

All the things that you would expect of female groups within the playground, within a context of social media and you see it within the leading feminists of the movement. That they had the same dynamics that you expect in most female movements. And it's worth remembering that we don't escape our human nature.

Ideology is not going to overcome these things. We need to find a way to work with the grain of our human nature, to tame it, to recognise its dangers and to work to create something more functional. I think one other thing is the danger of believing that our ideology will save us from certain forms of abuse.

Every single movement, where there is power and where there are these sorts of structures that people are invested in, there will be a deep danger of abuse. And that doesn't matter if you're the most pronounced campaigner against male abuse against women. It doesn't matter if you've written extensively against pornography.

It doesn't matter if you've written very strongly on domestic abuse. These dynamics afflict all of us and it doesn't matter if you have the right theology. These dynamics are things that we're all vulnerable to.

And so we need to be aware of that and not believe that we have some immunity because we have the right ideas rattling around in our heads. Rather we need to develop some more careful practices to hold in check some of the dangerous dynamics of power and movements that we can be invested in and in which we can cover up for abusers. I would strongly recommend the book.

The book, again, is called *A Politically Incorrect Feminist* by Phyllis Chesler. I'll leave the

link to that below. It's a very entertaining read.

It's a fun book to read at bedtime and all sorts of interesting anecdotes. And it gives you a window into a period of history that has a lot to tell us about our own time because we're seeing these same dynamics taking place today. And when you pay attention to these dynamics, understand where they're coming from, understand the psychology and the dysfunctionality that can be built into this, you will be able to speak more effectively into these current debates.

Thank you very much for listening. Lord willing, I'll be back again tomorrow with further discussion of the story of Abraham's family. If you'd like to support my videos, other ones like this where I'm doing reviews of books, and more particularly at the moment, any support that I get is going towards transcripts for my videos.

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God bless.