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ABSTRACT

"The Road from Coorain" is the autobiographical story of Jill Ker Conway, the first woman president of Smith College. The story traces Conway's journey from powerlessness to power. Born in the outback of Australia, where all people were powerless in the face of the vacillations of nature, forced off the land into a city life to which she was emotionally and socially ill-adapted, manipulated by a mother crippled by the conventions of appropriate female behavior, Conway eventually found that her love of learning and pursuit of education provided the path to power. The journey from powerlessness to power, according to Ann Bookman and Sarah Morgan, requires at least three specific steps: a change of ideas about the causes of powerlessness; an awareness of systemic causes; and some courses of action which allows change in both self-perception and attitude, and ultimately in situation. Conway's change of ideas about the causes of her powerlessness came about through recognizing the similarities between the dependent relationship between Australia and Great Britain and that between her mother and herself, identifying the causes of her mother's decline into alcoholism and paranoia, and understanding the underlying causes of her own problems with her mother. Conway was forced to the second stage of empowerment when after graduating from college she was denied a job because she was a woman. Finally, her decision to leave Australia, her mother, and the duties imposed by the bush ethos permitted her to complete her journey to power. (PRA)

THE ROAD FROM COORAIN "A Journey of Power"

A Paper presented by Dr. Sandra Madsen
Buena Vista College

Chicago, Spring, 1991

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The Road from Coorain is the autobiographical story of Jill Ker Conway, the first woman president of Smith College. The story traces Conway's journey from powerlessness to power. Born in the outback of Australia, where all people were powerless in the face of the vacillations of nature, forced off the land into a city life to which she was emotionally and socially ill-adapted, manipulated by a mother crippled by the conventions of appropriate female behavior, Conway eventually found that her love of learning and pursuit of education provided the path to power. The Road From Coorain is the story of one person's empowerment.

As Ann Bookman and Sandra Morgan point out in their book, Women and the Politics of Empowerment, "empowerment is currently a fashionable term, particularly as it refers to individual self-assertion, upward mobility, or the psychological experience of *feeling powerful*." The term suggests the ability of individuals or groups to gain skills or abilities which will allow them to exercise control over their individual lives and the political and environmental factors which affect them. However, Bookman and Morgan go on to point out, for women especially, empowerment may not so much exist in taking political action or changing the texture of the society in which they exist, but may manifest itself "when they change their ideas about the *causes* of their powerlessness, when they recognize the systemic forces that oppress them, and when they act to change the conditions of their lives." This conception of empowerment is particularly appropriate to the situation described by Jill Ker Conway in The Road from Coorain.

The story begins in the outback of Australia in the early 1930's with the establishment of her parent's sheep rearing enterprise, Coorain (an aboriginal word meaning "windy place.") Although the youngest of three children, Jill was raised as an only child while her older brothers were away at boarding school. Guided and tutored by her mother, working and associating with her father and the hired men, Conway lived a very nontraditional lifestyle deeply imbued with the bush ethic.

> The bush ethos which grew up from making a virtue out of loneliness and hardship built on the stoic virtues of convict Australia. Settled life and domesticity were soft and

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demoralizing. A "real man" despised comfort and scorned the expression of emotion. The important things in life were hard work, self-sufficiency, physical endurance, and loyalty to one's "mates." Knowledge about nature, the care of animals, practical mechanics was respected, but speculation and the world of ideas were signs of softness and impracticality. Religion and belief in a benevolent deity were foolish because daily life demonstrated beyond doubt that the universe was hostile. The weather, the fates, the bank that held the mortgage, bushfires--disaster in some form--would get a man in the end. When disaster struck what mattered was unflinching courage and the refusal to consider despair. (p. 8)

At the age of eleven this isolated existence was shattered when a devastating drought drove her father to suicide and her mother was forced to turn over the ranch to a caretaker and move to the city. The move to the city involved more than a change in geography--it required totally new coping skills.

. . .I found the small world inside the school gates alien and intimidating. Having never had a playmate, I did not know how to play. Never having known anyone my own age, I was uncertain about how to begin with thirty or so other eleven-year olds.

The school yard with its busy ant heap of people skipping rope, throwing basketballs, shouting, and playing hopscotch reduced me to a paralysis of shyness. I had never seen tennis or basketball played, and had not the faintest notion of the rules. I was used to knowing better than most people what needed to be done. Here I was the veriest incompetent, not only in games, but in the classroom, where there were also rules to be learned. . . Our parents had taught us to be the best at everything we did, but the things we were supposed to excel in had always before had some practical purpose. Now I was introduced to competition as an end in itself. (pp. 87-88)

Not only had the rules outside of her home changed, but the rules within had changed as well. As a settler in the outback Conway's mother had been a "young competent woman, proud, courageous, and generous". As a widow in post-war Australia, Evelyn Conway acceded to a "society [which] encouraged a woman to think her life finished after her husband's death and

encouraged a woman's emotional dependence on her children." (p. 195) The social life of a suburban matron seemed pointless, her skills were not in demand in the job market, and worst of all, her children now came under the influence of others. Adding to her misery, Conway's brother Robert died tragically at age 21 and brother Barry managed to escape his mother's control by moving to the outback, thus leaving Jill, at age 15, as her mother's chief companion and confidante. Her mother's despair increased, as did her reliance on tranquilizers and alcohol for relief, and her only outlet was in shaping the destiny of her daughter.

> The date for Barry's departure for Coorain was already set for late January. I would be alone with her again after that. I braced myself for the responsibility, proud that I could cope, but at the same time dreading assuming the role I now say being laid out for me. Thoughts of escape were unrealistic. Daughters in Australia were supposed to be the prop and stay of their parents. Would I ever get away? Was it wrong to want to? How on earth could I set about doing it? How could I tell this woman who lived for me that I did not want to live for her? . . . (p. 151)

The journey from powerlessness to power, according to Bookman and Morgan, requires at least three specific steps, a change of ideas about the causes of powerlessness, an awareness of systemic causes, and some course of action which allows change in both self-perception and attitude and ultimately in situation.

Conway's change of ideas about the causes of her powerlessness came about through three somewhat parallel understandings. First, as she studied history at her private, elite girl's high school, she came to recognize the relationship which colonial Australia had to Great Britain. The school system, government, even history texts were all centered in Britain and the self-perceptions of Australians as second class citizens with no legitimacy started to impinge upon her consciousness. The debilitation and lack of development even of an Australian history which grew out of this dependent relationship started her to thinking about her relationship with her mother. The second understanding involved identifying the causes of her mother's decline into alcoholism and paranoia. Of her mother she wrote,

> . . .It was hard to think of so strong-willed a woman as a victim. So much of her deterioration seemed self-imposed. Yet in another sense she was the victim of lack of education, of suburbia, of affluent meaninglessness. Her rage at fate was

> justified, it was just not tempered by any moral sense or any ability to compare her own lot with the predicaments of others. . . (p. 237)

The third understanding arose as she pursues her studies at the University of Sydney where she had enrolled to satisfy her mother's wishes and also to escape for the better part of the day the oppressive conditions at home. What began as a simple avoidance technique became the avenue to awareness of the causes of her powerlessness. During her second year at University, the underlying causes of her problems with her mother became crystallized through her reading in English literature and psychology.

> . . .I was thunderstruck by reading Samuel Butler's *The Way of All Flesh* for our course in the modern novel. Toni's sardonic view of her family had shown me someone who looked clear-eyed at family relationships, but Butler's full-fledged satirical treatment of the Pontifex family and its shameless exploitation of the young, exploitation justified by parental authority and through the mouthing of empty pieties, left me feeling that I had been struck by lightning. . .
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> Another thunderbolt struck one afternoon when . . .[I] lifted from the shelves a volume of Jung's Collected Works. Flipping through the pages, I began to read an essay entitled "The Positive and Negative Aspects of the Mother Archetype." It was astounding. There I was, described to a T. There was my mother sitting on the page before me, as though Jung had known her every mood. . .(p. 175)

Awareness of the causes of her problems with her mother started Conway toward the path to power, but did not prepare her for the systemic roadblocks which faced her when she graduated from University and sought employment as a means to power. Graduating with honors and first in her class, she fully expected to receive an invitation to join the Department of External Affairs, (Australian foreign service) as did some of her peers. When the invitation was not forthcoming she was forced to the second stage of her road to empowerment, an awareness of the systemic limits placed upon women in the 1950's.

> When the results of the selection were announced, Milton and Rob received invitations to join the Department of External Affairs, but I received a blandly courteous letter thanking me for my interest. I was dumbfounded. Milton and I had ranked first in our class and were to be awarded the University Medal jointly for our academic achievements. I could scarcely

believe that my refusal was because I was a woman. Inquiries made by faculty friends and friends with connections in Canberra confirmed that this was the case. "Too good-looking" was one report. "She'd be married within a year." "Too intellectually aggressive" was another assessment. "She'd never do for diplomacy." I knew I was no more and no less intellectually aggressive than Milton and Rob. That left my sex and my appearance. I could not credit that merit could not win me a place in an endeavor I wanted to undertake, that decisions about my eligibility were made on the mere fact of my being female instead of on my talents. I should have made me angry, but instead I was profoundly depressed. What was I going to do with my life? Where could I put my talents to some useful work? How was I now going to extricate myself from my dilemma at home? If there was no justice in such things, I could never expect to earn a place in life through merit. People were taking what I'd justly earned from me. It was all prejudice, blind prejudice. . . .(p. 191)

Having reached an awareness of the causes of her powerlessness and the systemic barriers to be overcome, Conway finally came to accept the impossibility of changing her mother's situation and the understanding that to achieve power she must change herself. Applying for and being accepted into the Harvard Graduate program in history, she made the decision to leave Australia, her mother, and duties imposed by the bush ethos. The decision to leave it all behind permitted her to complete her journey to power.

. . . Now I realized, in what amounted to a conversion experience, that I was going to violate the code of my forefathers. I wouldn't tell myself anymore I was tough enough for any hazard, could endure anything because, as my father's old friend had said, "she was born in the right country." I wasn't nearly tough enough to stay around in an emotional climate more desolate than any drought I'd ever seen. I wasn't going to fight anymore. I was going to admit defeat; turn tail; run for cover. My parents, each in his or her own way, had spent the good things in their lives prodigally and had not been careful about harvesting and cherishing the experiences that nourish hope. I was going to be different. I was going to be life-affirming from now on, grateful to have been born, not profligate in risking my life for the sake of the

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panache of it, not all-too-ready to embrace a hostile fate. (p. 232)

The Road From Coorain is a carefully woven interplay of power relationships and the destructiveness of the exploitation which results. Initially there is the power of the outback, the land which replenishes and remains, while mere humans who try to conquer there are reduced to desolation. Primary throughout is the power relationship of a mother and her children during a time when the only power which women could exert was in the home. There is the power that men possess and women seek. All of these relationships are played out within the context of the British power to define, exploit and control her Australian colony.

Two factors must be mentioned which affected Conway's successful journey. One is her unusual early socialization which allowed her to develop as an individual, not as a female child.

> All in all, what might on the surface appear like a lonely childhood, especially after the departure of my brothers, was one filled with interest, stimulation, and friends. It lacked other children, and I was seven before I even laid eyes on another female child. Yet this world gave me most of what we need in life, and gave it generously. I had the total attention of both my parents, and was secure in the knowledge of being loved. Better still, I knew that my capacity for work was valued and that my contributions to the work of the property really mattered. It was a comprehensible world. One saw visible results from one's labors, and the lesson of my mother's garden was a permanent instruction about the way human beings can transform their environment. . .(p. 50)

The second factor was the schooling she received in the city, where she attended Abbotsleigh, a private school for girls. The school "had given [her] a secure and orderly environment in which to grow, and adults to admire who took it for granted that women would achieve." (p. 144) In these ways it was not until Conway had developed considerable personal strength and a secure sense of self that she was forced to confront the barriers to power and truly begin her journey to power.

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