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Response to Presidential Address

**"A Voice from the Past:  
Catharine Beecher's Response to Simone de Beauvoir"**

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Perhaps it was because she was born a hundred years early... perhaps it was because she was born across the Atlantic Ocean in the United States... perhaps it was because she never married. Whatever may have been the cause, Catharine Beecher, was speaking about the important role of women one hundred years before Simone De Beauvoir. For Catharine, one is born a woman and she fulfills herself especially through her work as a teacher. "What is the most important and peculiar duty of the female sex? It is the physical, intellectual and moral education of children... the future citizens of this great nation." (Beecher, 1835)

Catharine Beecher was born on September 6, 1800 in East Hampton, Long Island, the first of eight children of Lyman and Roxana Beecher. Home-schooled as a child, Catharine entered Miss Pierce's school for young ladies when she was nine and learned "lady-like manners and cultivated and refined conversation. Catharine's character was formed during these years, learning from her mother to be cheerful and optimistic, orderly and neat with a strong sense of justice. Catharine withdrew from school when her

mother died and helped at home until her father remarried. In 1818, she began to teach needlework, drawing, and painting at Miss Pierce's school and then at a school for girls in New London, Connecticut (Haverson, 1969).

Catharine's fiancé died on a trip to Europe when his ship crashed and her dream of having a family turned to a dream about having a school of her own to help women pursue more rewarding studies than those at the finishing schools. With financial help from her family, in 1823, Catharine and her sister Mary opened the Hartford Female Seminary in Hartford, Connecticut. Catharine's career began in earnest now. She decided that she did not have to marry to find fulfillment as she was seriously engaged in the life of a professional, intellectual woman teacher. "The cultivation of the immortal mind shall be presented to women as her special and delightful duty" (Sklar, 1976)

The Hartford Female Seminary was an enormous success and within five years had its own building, eight teachers, and students from the leading citizens of Hartford. Catharine's competence as an educator was steadily growing and she began to innovate new pedagogical materials, publishing articles, developing the curriculum, and writing textbooks. Beecher saw the goal of her school as two-fold: 1) to better instruct women in intellectual development, and 2) to form moral character, good habits and a refined feminine character.

The Hartford Female Academy became one of the most celebrated academies in New England. According to Sklar (1976), "her contemporaries believed and historians have since held that Catherine Beecher's school constituted one of the most significant advances made in early 19th Century education for women."

The curriculum at Hartford was rigorous and complete including grammar,

geography, rhetoric, philosophy, chemistry, history, arithmetic, algebra and geometry, moral philosophy, natural theology and Latin.

Her premise was that women could and should learn all the subjects that men studied - and that the addition of a teacher-training curriculum as an essential part of the Seminary. Education, according to Catharine Beecher, did not stop with the communication of knowledge. She taught her teachers that character formation was the end of education and they should stress punctuality, order, neatness and other virtues. The American Journal of Education published her article, "Female Education" in 1827. Her chief point in this essay was that the education of women should be taken seriously and the community should want "refined and well-educate women because they would confer a beneficial influence on society" (Thorp, 1971).

This was to become Catharine's main message as an educational reformer. In 1830, Catharine turned her attention to the national scene, in great need of teachers as the nation moved west and immigrants flocked to the new world. Catharine Beecher decided to turn her seminary into a training school for women to learn social, religious and moral principles and then establish their own schools elsewhere on the same principles. She sought out a new group of teachers who agreed to devote three years of their life to this project. Teaching was important to Catharine because it provided women with a respectable alternative to marriage.

In 1835, Catharine gave an address in New York that was subsequently published, "An Essay on the Education of Female Teachers." In it she called for "permanent female institutions with regular systematic courses of instruction fitting women for her most important and peculiar duties - the physical, intellectual and moral education of

children... the future citizens of this great nation" (Haverson, 1969). She called for the creation of a corps of women to civilize the immigrants and the lower class.

In 1841, Catharine published *Treatise on Domestic Economy* which was a big success, reprinted every year from 1841 to 1856, establishing Catharine as a national authority on the American home. Catharine saw the home as an integral part of the national system, reflecting and promoting mainstream American values and women were essential to the nation in their role at home promoting the character formation of the young. According to her biographer, Kathryn Kish Sklar, by the end of the 1840's Catharine Beecher was one of the most widely known women in America.

She began traveling around the country, advocating a special role for her sex, that as educators. Her own life was the living embodiment of that role, Catharine started Female Seminaries in Quincy, Illinois, Dubuque, Iowa, Burlington, New York and Milwaukee.

Teaching in the 1830's was not a woman's profession. Catharine Beecher was the first to envision teaching as a profession dominated by - indeed exclusively belonging to women. Demographic and economic development in the United States during the 1940's and 50's supported Catharine Beecher's vision. A rapidly expanding economy demanded more teachers, but swiftly developing industrialization left fewer males available for non-industrial jobs. According to Beecher's speeches there were one million and a half children who needed ninety thousand teachers.

Although female teachers began to replace men in some eastern states in the 1830s, the economic and fiscal utility of this shift, as well as the pedagogic benefits were discovered by state and local boards of education from 1840 to 1880. By 1888, 63

percent of American teacher were women and in cities women constituted 90 percent of the teaching force. "None will deny the importance of having females properly fitted for their peculiar duties; and yet few are aware how much influence a teacher may exert in accomplishing this object" (Beecher, 1835).

Catharine Beecher would tell Simone De Beauvoir that the essence of a women is found in work and that the feminine soul is exceptionally fitted for the profession of teaching.

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