

## CELEBRATING WOMAN\*

**Alma Fernandez\*\***

I am here because I have to: I work in the Center. As such I am duty-bound to help the rest of the center crew to host you. More than that I have to be here because I am bothered by our center's invitation for you to be here "to celebrate women." Which of the women are we to celebrate? All women? Or just the few perceived to be achievers? How is achievement to be measured? These questions kept me awake all night. As I lay in bed beside dear husband, who was fast asleep, I saw before me a procession of faceless women. They were telling me to celebrate them. How? I asked them. I could not read from their eyes what it was they wanted me to celebrate. Remember they had no faces. And if I gave each a face, one thousand and one nights would not suffice. And so because time is of the essence I picked only one in the procession. I gave her a face.

Who is this woman?

She, like the rest of us, is woman-born. Her mother taught her how to be a woman: Be feminine; learn how to cook; be a dutiful wife when the time comes; stay at home and raise good children.

She became a woman, a dutiful wife, and stayed home to raise good children.

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\*Read during the UCWS's dinner in honor of friends and supporters of the Center on March 11, 1999 at the Executive House, U.P. Campus, Diliman, Quezon City.

\*\*Loves to cook, grow flowering plants, play with children, and experiment with words.

And then it happened. She asked herself if she is satisfied with her life. She wasn't. And so she wore her college ring right next to her wedding ring. One day while rinsing the laundry suds from these rings she hatched a plan.

The plan worked. Dear husband said, "Yes, yes, yes, dearie."

And so she enrolled in a graduate course leading to a master's degree in Asian Studies. When she was writing her thesis she became pregnant. The maids, in anticipation of another brat coming to the household, left her for good. She had to do all the housework while preparing for the comprehensive exams which she passed with flying colors. So exhausted did she get trying to be wife, mother, unpaid maid and scholar that she could not add one paragraph more to the unfinished thesis which she started to write before the baby's birth.

She took her situation in stride. When asked about when she would get her master's degree she would say, "I already have a master. All I need is a degree."

The new baby, a boy, was so demanding a master. He wanted his mother all the time. And because his mother paid him much attention, his three elder brothers saw to it that the same mother would give them equal time. She tried to. Of course she could not succeed. Another baby came and stayed. She became a nervous wreck. But not for too long. Her children became her source of joy and fulfillment.

And then it happened again. Once more she asked herself if indeed all she could be was to be a wife and be a mother and cook and launder and heaven knows what other jobs a domestic worker has to do in a day. She hatched again a plan.

The plan worked. Dear husband said, "Yes, yes, yes, dearie."

She worked as editor in a family-owned corporation. In between editing manuscripts she studied for a masteral course in industrial relations. The decision to enroll in this course

was in keeping with her desire to understand her husband's work as a labor lawyer. Since no new baby came during this time she managed to get the degree without extending the usual time set by the university.

She busied herself in work. As though that were not enough to absorb her energies she also joined an NGO engaged in promoting children's literature. And then it happened. Her youngest son died while trying to save his friend from drowning. She felt so guilty about the tragedy. If I had stayed at home as my mother told me, she told herself, this would not have happened.

For a while she brooded over her loss. Then it happened again. She wanted to test herself. Could she teach in UP? Why not? A former classmate, then the chair of a department in the College of Arts and Letters told her. "I can't find anyone to teach the Rizal course," she informed the woman with the face.

Her first day in school was a revelation to her: Her mouthings were not called "nagging" but "lectures". And, on top of it all, she was paid per hour for talking!

She liked the job. And so she opted to become a full-time faculty member. She soon became the butt of jokes. She was referred to as the faculty member who was senior in age but junior in academic standing!

When she has served the UP for 3 years she asked that she be given tenure because in her opinion the university rules were on her side. She was told that she could not be a tenured faculty. The prospect of losing a job she has begun to love put her in a fighting mood. She called for an emergency faculty meeting. She got it. She explained why she had to be given what she was demanding as a right. They listened. She girded herself for war but that turned out to be unnecessary. She got what she wanted. She soon realized that

she could get what she wanted if she worked hard enough for it. She also realized that it is not enough that one claims part of a crowded space for one's self. One must also have the graciousness in occupying that space.

Unlike the rest in her department, she did not get any fellowship nor even a reduction of load while in pursuit of a doctoral degree. In fact, while studying she was also very busy in NGO work for which she received the UP-Diliman Chancellor's Award for Outstanding Faculty Member in Extension Work in 1997.

In 1996 she earned her Ph.D. in Philippine Studies for which she did not get an automatic promotion because by that time she was already an associate professor. No longer did she mind much this oppressive policy of UP to punish old women who try very hard to become achieving persons. By that time she already had grandchildren, and in fact all of her children have finished their tertiary education in UP. Besides, by then, she has fallen into the habit of celebrating herself every morning when she rises with the sun. "What more could I ask for?" she asked herself.

I can tell you so many stories about this woman. The first time we met I didn't like her. She was much too much of her mother's daughter. And so I decided to put her inside me, in that part of me which is the womb that women's realities and visions have created. It is here where my mother's daughter stayed until I gave birth to her. This child of mind, this reborn woman, is someone I can say straightfaced to anyone: "This is my beloved child in whom I am well pleased." She knows how to celebrate herself, and because she does, she also knows how to celebrate others. If time were only on her side tonite she would call these others one by one and pay them the tribute that they deserve. Some of them are here. One is in my house right now raising up

that part of the sky which I am supposed to do but can't because I am here with all of you. To this man holding my half of the sky, I say, my celebration is neither yours nor mine. It is ours.

Before I leave, may I invite each of you to become a mother? Mother yourself. Give birth to a self that you can celebrate everyday of your life.