

Transcendental Feminism
by Celeste Plumlee

Oppression is people, us, not knowing that we have options. Those of us who are put-down or discriminated against for any reason are deeply emotionally and intellectually affected by the oppression that engulfs us. In a society where attaining material wealth is the way to achieve social status, many of us are left feeling failure and humiliation when we are not able to realize society's ideals, yet the advantages that enable this status are reserved for the privileged few. Preoccupation with commercialism, wealth, and materialism distracts us from the worthiness of our lives and convinces us that it is not our character nor our compassion that make us worthy, but the sum of our bank accounts and the brands of our shoes. Transcendental feminism seeks to educate people about the greater implications of living our lives for ourselves, where we can make the quality of our lives better on a very personal level. When we have a strong core of

belief in ourselves, we are much more resilient to the pressures and misconceptions of popular culture and media hype. It is through realizing our individual significance that we can free ourselves from the oppression and suffering emphasized in material and commercial success.

Karl Marx wrote extensively about the alienation of people from their work. He concluded that most modern working people are estranged from our work in three ways; we are alienated from the products of our labor (in that we do not see the completion and application of the products we produce and, instead, see only the small part we play in production), we are alienated from the activity of labor (in that, as workers, our time and effort is the sole property of our employer), and we are alienated from each other (where we work to progress individually and overlook the collective good of the big picture). These processes were created out of the capitalist reformation of the western world and have had a significant impact on modern American values. When

we work within the narrow-mindedness of satisfying our personal needs, we are alienating ourselves from the possibility of social consciousness. The emphasis on individual progress and material advancement that arose from the industrial revolution in Europe and the United States has pushed us further into the relentlessly dark mindset that ignores the needs of the self, and perpetuates the blinding materialism that keeps us from being truly free.

Although I am female, I am also clearly a member of the dominant race in the United States and grew up with the privilege of having middle-class parents, a good education, and little contact with the violence and crime that permeates our culture. Because of this, it is risky for me to make any assumptions about people facing far greater obstacles than my own in their quest for liberation. However, I do believe that the goals of transcendental feminism apply to people of all genders, races, and classes and are a powerful force against the intellectual and emotional oppression to which

we are subjected. We are all taught that achievement is measured in beauty, poise and material wealth, and although we all find ourselves on different rungs of the social strata, we are driven by the same expectations. It is those expectations of that are taking the greatest toll on our collective consciousness.

The assumption that all the members of our society honor and idealize success by material advancement is oppressive to everyone involved, even those who have achieved notable success. Although less privileged and non-privileged people in our country have unquestionably fewer opportunities to access to the goods and services we regard as worthwhile, even the most privileged are oppressed in the eyes of transcendental feminism. It is simply the focus on material advancement itself that keeps people from looking inward to our spiritual and emotional strengths to exemplify success; and transcend what has become an internalized doctrine of our culture.

Prominent sociologist Max Weber devoted much of his work to the study of religion and its relationship with capitalism, and looked at the way the reformation of the Catholic Church redefined the role of work in spiritual life. He wrote that in Catholicism, the path to God's acceptance is through the church leaders who are believed to have a direct and communicative relationship with God. When the religious reformers argued that a relationship with God could and should be found personally and directly – that is, without the intervention of a holy leader – it was through work that individuals were to find salvation. After several attempts to redefine religion, it was the belief that God rewards those who work diligently and faithfully that presented the path to righteousness. Our society is footed so strongly in Protestant traditions that this religious ethic has become a cultural one and what Weber referred to as the “Protestant Ethic” has now become the American “work ethic”.

A significant obstacle that transcendental feminism seeks to overcome is the notion that diligent work is equal to spiritual advancement. When the prescription to work hard is promoted and the subsequent material benefits are glorified, all with deeply rooted ties to religious growth, it is hard to rip open and present the belief that work and financial success can be opponents to spiritual health. Ironically, and appropriately, we are oppressed by that which we hold most dear.

In transcendental feminism's quest to liberate people from the binds of oppression, it seeks to remind us of our duty to ourselves to respect and value our lives and those of others with justice and compassion. The movement requires a shift in the goal of the highly honored notion of individualism from social advancement to that of increased inner resilience to societal norms. The pitfalls of the Enlightenment and the notion of individualism are the selfishness and greed that they propagate. Although it is

very important for people to recognize our inherent worth as individuals, it is detrimental for us to mark our worth solely by our personal progress, pocketbook, appearance, or any other external manifestation. The theory I propose here looks to deepen individual ideals and focus people on our personal strengths. Its work is to instill in everyone that there is much more to strive for than what modern society dictates as accomplishment.

Materialism is a distraction. We are encouraged to pacify our pain with “stuff”. We are taught that it is by getting more that we become more. It is very sad to me that often those of us who struggle the most financially feel the need to spend what little we have to feel we are a worthy part of society. Our culture is responsible for this situation - we all subscribe to it on some level and we all feel the negative repercussions. It is our responsibility to fortify ourselves against the demands of our material culture and focus instead on whatever we authentically find of value.

Popular trends and fads come and go through our culture so quickly that it can truly be hard to keep up. Imagine if the resources of time and energy that we put into keeping up with commercial expectations were put into personal ones. The belief that people are on this planet for a purpose has been the preoccupation of many individuals and cultures for centuries, and the search to determine what that purpose is has been given a lot of attention. Whatever the true purpose may be, if there even is one – or only one, we cannot achieve or even work toward that purpose while we are preoccupied with “fitting in” or being like those around us. While we are focusing on material gains, we are distracted from our individual quest to define that purpose for ourselves. It is clear to me that the limitations placed on us by our material preoccupations inhibit our ability to freely choose who and what we want to be.

Now onto why this perception of mine is called a feminism. Although the issues at hand certainly do affect

females, they do not do so exclusively and these ideas could easily be considered sociologic or even economic. Feminism comes from the minds and actions of female people and those concerned for the true equality of female people - from our experiences, perspectives and beliefs. The critical benefit of feminism is that it sees our society and others in terms other than they have been handed to us by our patriarchal structure. Feminism does not focus solely on the plight of women, but also on the insight women offer.

Although my personal circumstances have been privileged, I do know and have internalized oppression as an American female. The gender that I have been fortunate enough to experience has allowed me to see the world behind the veil of complacent obedience and to challenge the assumptions and oversights that our culture embodies. It may simply be the unique perspective that I bring to the topic as a woman that defines this theory as feminism.

Webster's Dictionary defines transcendentalism as “of or characteristic of a system of philosophy emphasizing the intuitive and spiritual about the empirical and material”. The idea of transcendental feminism is to look beyond the prescriptions of success as defined by our culture and to instead pursue the internal intuitive desires we all carry. The transcendentalist movement in 19th century America sought to open people’s minds to the awesome and powerful natural world, and to seek the connection between that world and themselves. The movement encouraged self-awareness and inner reflection. At that time, the academics of our culture were still male-focused and although I doubt any of the transcendentalist thinkers would have negated women from their perspectives, neither did they specifically address them. Thoughts in cultures cycle, and it is now time for a resurgence of transcendental thought and application of that thought to the modern and rapidly changing world of which we are a part.

People believe in society. The climates into which individuals are born and then raised are the fish's water – the invisible and constant sustenance of our lives. The culture in which we develop is our norm and a frame of reference from which we observe the world. We determine what is right and wrong in the world, who is succeeding and who isn't, who has value and who doesn't, in terms of the version of the world that we are brought into. Although this is understandable, it is also dangerous. It is easy to internalize culture to the point where we do not think for ourselves and rely far too heavily on society to determine what is of value in our lives. When we are constantly bombarded with the messages of materialism as fulfillment and not taught alternative ways of thinking, it is difficult for the human mind to manifest a new view all on its own. The intention of transcendental feminism is to open human thought to the possibility of new perceptions. Although the theory itself

does not ascribe to any particular dogma, it does challenge the carefully held beliefs that our culture propagates.

The dangers of living and struggling in a material and physical value system stem from us being alienated from ourselves and the preoccupation with attainment that we are all expected to share. There are no assumptions made in transcendental feminism as to what people will find valuable once permitted to think freely. The motivation is the free thinking itself. From an early age, we are taught that conformity with social norms is the road to happiness. When trying to get my 2-year-old daughter to keep her ponytails in her hair, I said “Don’t you want your hair like Mimi’s and Bella’s?” A moment later, I thought, “Oh, what did I just say to her?” but the message was there in me as a deeply ingrained mode of control. I would get her to do what I wanted her to by exemplifying her against her peers. Not to mention that I only wanted her to have ponytails in her hair

so she would look like a “normal” little girl. Although I have offered, I have not pressured her to have ponytails since.

When the road to success is not accessible by everyone, there is obvious and uncontrollable inequality. The nature of advancement in our culture requires privilege. Those who have access to the means of success (money, education, familial ties) are much more likely to attain it, which in itself causes a problem. However, regardless of the means used to determine success, there will always be people more and less prone to achieving it. That is why I propose the shift in focus from the external to the internal. That is why it is imperative that we are given permission to look within ourselves to determine what is and is not of value. No matter what the expectations of any culture are, it is the individual’s ultimate right to think for him or herself that needs to be encouraged, honored, and celebrated.

A woman who believes that men have an inherent right to tell her what to do, or an African-American boy who

believes that he is not worthy of the academic attention that his white peers receive, or a homosexual man who hides his identity to avoid ridicule, are all products and even casualties, of cultural narrow-mindedness. It is when people truly internalize the messages of inequality that the messages become the most volatile. Freeing our minds from the cultural assumptions that weigh us down will truly liberate us. Although the oppression will not end, the effect of the oppression on our views of ourselves will change dramatically. If someone calls me an idiot, and I know that I am not an idiot, then his or her comment has little effect on me. If someone calls me an idiot and I believe that I am, then I am pushed one step further in the dark hole of self-loathing and misery.

Many socialist theorists propose the reformation of our social structure into one that is more communal, where people work for each other instead of themselves and all the profits of production are shared equally. The belief is that

oppression would be eliminated then and people would find contentment in equality. Although I am perhaps pessimistic, I don't have faith in a socialist structure and I just don't think the human population would collectively allow the eradication of oppression and inequality entirely. However, if the people who exist within the structure of inequality actively choose to rise above it and define themselves outside of its borders, the negative effects will be greatly reduced. Although re-working society to promote equality for those who are most oppressed is a valuable and worthy goal, something has to happen right now that doesn't require the uprising and/or organized revolution of the population, but that can be managed on an individual and immediate basis. It is the apathy of society that is the most dangerous and it is that apathy that transcendental feminism seeks to obliterate.

The approach to infiltrating our culture with a more positive message must be subtle. It is through aggressive

positivism and affirmation of the human spirit that I propose to change the world. Getting the word out to everyone that there are alternatives to life that will bring more value and worth to living than striving for monetary gain must be done carefully. Again, the oppression that materialism imposes affects all of us and even those who have the means for visible success are suffering without any deeper purpose. Eventually transcendental feminism would no longer be a movement against social norms; it would be an aid in redefining them. Perhaps transcendental feminism could live happily alongside materialism because it would not have to be affected by it. It is the nature of the theory itself that free will and personal growth are paramount in our lives and individual strength can and will overcome any external obstacles. It is with this that I propose we convert our world from the misguided ideals that leave us scrambling for success to personal freedom of thought and action, and true authentic strength.