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Between women and generations: legacies of dignity

Drucilla Cornell; Rowman & Littlefield, Lanham, Maryland, USA, 2005, 256p.

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On the day she died, Drucilla Cornell's mother asked her daughter to write a book 'that would bear witness to the dignity of her death' (p. xvii). The result of this promise is *Between women and generations: legacies of dignity*. After suffering from lengthy multiple illnesses that left no hope of ever regaining her health, Cornell's mother decided to take her own life. Cornell explains:

My mother thought about her death carefully. She chose a suicide recipe of alcohol and barbiturates that would let her die intact....She died without doubt, without fear, and without flinching as she followed the recipe with the precision that I had come to expect from her (p. xvii).

In her mother's twenty-year struggle with lung disease, and suffering from Parkinson's disease as well, she confronted the daily humiliation chronic illness presents. Indeed, Cornell tells readers early on that 'it was the fear of humiliation and the need for dignity that informed all of my mother's decisions in the last years of her life' (p.xxii). This dance between dignity and humiliation threads throughout the book.

The reader begins the book by knowing how Cornell's mother's life will end. I expected, then, to discover a narrative of her mother's battle with disease and her decision to end her life; however, chapter one launches into what Cornell calls the inheritance of dreams. A substantial portion of chapter one is dedicated to the narrative of her maternal family's movement out of the working class to one of great material privilege. Her grandmother, the daughter of German immigrants, dropped out of high school and worked as a factory labourer. She eventually married the owner of a publishing firm. After ten years of marriage her husband died and she assumed the position of president of the company. It was 1931 and the idea of a woman-led publishing firm was unheard of. One is struck with the degree with which Mildred Kellow embraced feminist ideology; perhaps this can be attributed to her working class heritage. She believed in unionization of workers, never fired a worker in fifty years, rented company homes to workers below market value or for nothing at all when workers could not afford to pay, hired African-Americans in skilled positions when this was unheard of, and gave

financial support for college to the children of employees. Kellow tells her granddaughter, 'never let men tell you what is possible; men do not have a license on possibility' (p. 9).

On the other hand, Cornell's mother felt that she had been trapped in the model set forth for proper ladies which allowed no place for visions of a different path. The ability to dream of possibilities is central to Cornell's life philosophy. She observes:

For years, I struggled to articulate the space that my mother had been denied and that I wanted to ensure for my daughter. I have called that space the 'imaginary domain,' the moral and psychic space we all need to become whom we seek to be (p. 24).

Ironically it was in the decision to end her life that Barbara June Kellow Cornell believed she was able to break the script of being a proper lady, for as she points out, proper ladies do not commit suicide. Cornell supported her mother's quest to act with determination and dignity. It was in the taking of her life that she finally seized ownership of it. She tells her daughter, 'I did not live my life as a feminist, but I am dying as one' (p.26).

In the last chapter Cornell provides concrete details about her mother and grandmother's last days. She explains that each woman knew precisely the day she would die and notes that rituals played an important part of each woman's death. Cornell tells us:

On the last day of her life, my grandmother called me at ten in the morning. The purpose of her call was to review with me the last rites she wished to have carried out....She had set an appointment with the manicurist....no one in my family dies with a chipped nail. Later that afternoon, she put on her makeup. We do not die without makeup either (p.153).

The humour is welcome here. Cornell explains that while her grandmother had embraced being a Christian Scientist, her mother, in her last years, became a born-again Christian and prayed to Jesus to heal her suffering. When she saw that this was not going to happen, she made the choice to take her own life. In completing *Between women and generations: legacies of dignity*, Cornell fulfills her promise to chronicle the dignity of her mother's spirit. Cornell uses Lacanian theory as the philosophical foundation for this exploration of her intergenerational legacy. Feminist witnessing lends dignity to women's lives and this work provides a deeper understanding of our intergenerational connections.

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