12 Gathering Up Loose Ends

As a woman, I believe that “gathering up loose ends” says something about knitting, or perhaps weaving. It is an intuitive feeling about finishing up, and I use it here to summarize diverse but important matters.

The National Government and Concern for Social Justice

Utah Agricultural College had its origin in 1888 when the federal Hatch Act offered $15,000 for an experiment station, and the Utah Legislature voted to accept it and build an agricultural college as well. Land grant colleges were an invention for social justice, giving farm families and working people access to higher education. These institutions were designed to level the playing field. Over the years, federal funding played a varied role in university, state, and community affairs.

The history of federal action for social justice in the twentieth century shows some high points, beginning with the Progressive movement that brought anti-trust legislation, improved labor conditions, and introduced the first income tax, widows’ pensions, prenatal clinics, the Pure Food and Drug Act, and dozens of other reforms. Jane Addams and Sophonisba Breckinridge in Chicago were only two of many women who were leaders in the Progressive movement. I have already described the women’s club movement, and women’s work through rural extension programs. Although women in the Progressive movement could not vote, they set the terms of political debate. Their goals, moreover, were not modest: They hoped to create a just society that protects the weak, rewards the inventive and restrains greed.

The next decade of intensified federal concern began in the 1930s with Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal programs. The Wagner Labor Relations Act guaranteed the right of workers to join unions and bargain collectively. The Social Security Act of 1935 brought security to the elderly and programs for the poor. Margaret Reid’s rural housing survey in Iowa had Works Projects Administration (WPA) funding and became background for the Rural Electrification Act. The Civilian
Conservation Corps brought young men to the West to terrace mountain slopes, preventing soil erosion and mud slides. In Logan Canyon today there are still foot bridges and picnic areas built by the Corps.

Juanita Brooks had WPA funding to collect pioneer diaries in southern Utah, which started her on a distinguished career of writing history. At our university, WPA money built the Commons (Family Life) Building where, thirty years later, I was assigned office space. I had an office in that building during my twenty-two years of teaching.

Federal action of the 1930s and 1940s boosted succeeding years when there were still public works projects, veterans' benefits, student loans, and housing subsidies. President Harry Truman could report in 1953 that eight million veterans had been to college thanks to the GI Bill. Our campus was bulging. The 1950s also saw high rates of unionization and heavy corporate investment in manufacturing, which led to a steady rise in real wages.

The next decade of intensified federal concern became the 1960s, when President John F. Kennedy was the inspiration behind Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society (War on Poverty) programs. The Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 made possible Project Head Start, Community Action efforts, college work study, and other programs. Most continue today. As a school board member I saw Title I of the Elementary, Secondary Education Act of 1965 benefit children from low income families. It still continues.

The Equal Pay Act of 1963 came in handy when, ten years later, our campus feminists helped women custodians get pay equal to that of men. Women made good use of Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which prohibited discrimination against women in employment, and I benefited because it outlawed anti-nepotism rulings. Medicare, a vital program for millions, became law on July 30, 1965. Medicaid also came into being. When the 1960s closed, the health and nutrition of poor children was at its high point, and child poverty had reached it lowest level in United States history.

The 1970s saw growth of the anti-Vietnam War movement, the environmental movement, and the women’s movement. But the next decade, the 1980s, proved economically to be another kettle of fish. Early in that decade, Dean Phyllis Snow asked me to create a course dealing with how the economy affects families. So I did, calling the new course, “Family and Economic Change.” The oil crisis had created unbelievable inflation, yet the economy was in the doldrums, resulting in stagflation. I taught about stagflation, and I wanted to
include information on the distribution of family incomes, but I couldn’t find much. So I went to see Ross Peterson of our History Department, a compassionate man who, for several years, chaired our county Democratic party, a discouraging task in such a heavily Republican state. Ross didn’t know any recent books on income distribution, so I did the best I could, suspecting, but not being sure, that the gap was widening between rich and poor. Not until the end of the Reagan-Bush years did the country wake up to the fact that indeed the gap had widened, and the middle class was in decline. The Reagan-Bush administrations skillfully concealed the statistics, and by 1996 this was the kind of economic situation we were in:

During the twenty years since 1974, four-fifths of American households had declining incomes, while the top one percent of households received 17 percent of total income and owned 42 percent of the wealth.

Real wages of supervisory employees declined.

The minimum wage is at its lowest purchasing power in 40 years. It is impossible for a person with a family, working full time, year round at this wage to keep out of poverty.

Congress seeks to cut back Legal Service lawyers who help low income people. The rules remain stacked in favor of the rich and powerful.

Corporations are raking in profits from productivity growth instead of raising wages. When they downsize, employees lose their jobs but stockholders gain.

The income ratio of chief executives to the average worker in major corporations grew from 40 to 1 in the 1970s to 187 to 1 in 1995. Chief executives are pocketing huge bonuses and stock options because they have abandoned their employees and communities.

This picture continues today. The worship of a free market system, heightened by the global economy, forgets the need for rules of fairness to protect the less fortunate and to keep communities alive. Instead of facing economic realities, too many in Congress and state governments spend their time on subjects such as abortion, gay issues, illegal immigration, and the decline of “family values.” Not that I have anything against family values. I searched for values for too many years to let them become the monopoly of the radical right today.
However, a ray of hope lies in the fact that the First Amendment contains the means of a cooperative discourse between right and left. Such discussion is encouraged by the Freedom Forum First Amendment Center at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee.\(^3\) Sponsored by twenty-one diverse national organizations, including such opposites as the Christian Coalition and People for the American Way, the center shows how a debate can occur that forges public policies to serve the common good, particularly in public education.

But the economy continues to be of deep concern. Here and across the world it is devastating for women, a fact highlighted at the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing in 1995. In an attempt to focus world attention on women’s needs, which include the needs of their families, Hillary Clinton addressed the conference and emphasized that “women’s rights are human rights.”

There is a backlash against Hillary Clinton, and a continuing backlash against second wave feminism. The historian Ruth Rosen has written, “The political backlash against feminism is brutal . . . [L]et us remember that these gender skirmishes, while they leave terrible scars, also publicize great injustices and help redraw the national agenda.”\(^4\)

I fervently hope that the national agenda gets redrawn, but government can’t do everything. There are other yeasts in the ferment of public activity and community life, yeasts that work to improve economic and social well-being. Feminism is one of them.

Second Wave Feminism and Family Work

In the history of land grant institutions, home economics was assumed to be a field for women. Indeed, this new field was invented by Ellen H. Richards at the turn of the century to give academic employment to women, well educated in the sciences, who could not find academic positions because of discrimination. A major focus of home economics has been the work that women do for their families. Some second wave feminists disdained women’s work at home, but later changed their minds. Alice Rossi is a good example. Still later, Carol Gilligan strengthened the idea of “care.”\(^5\)

Although I have strongly criticized perfectionist standards in the home, I have always considered household and family work to be important in spite of being devalued by society. In teaching the introductory women’s studies course, I included early domestic writers Catharine Beecher, Ellen H. Richards, and Marion Harland, followed
by class discussion of current studies of time devoted to household and family work. This course gave credit in both home economics and sociology. I strongly agree with today’s feminist agenda, which includes the ideas that men should share domestic work, and that child care by other than parents should be available.

Action against family violence is also central to the feminist agenda. Every year on our campus each college has a week that highlights a topic of concern. Under Dean Bonita Wyse’s guidance, the College of Family Life explored the problem of family violence in February 1985 and invited Barrie to give a convocation lecture on this subject. I went to the Salt Lake airport to pick Barrie up.

In her lecture Barrie indicated that, without the women’s movement, problems of violence and abuse would not have come into public focus. By then in our valley we had Citizens Against Physical and Sexual Abuse (CAPSA), but it lacked an adequate safe house. The first step toward one had been taken when Jenny Box took an abused mother and her children into her home.

Part of the conference featured a panel composed of Kathy Sheehan, director of CAPSA; Roberta Hardy, Child and Family Support Center; Dr. Marilynnne Glattfelter, psychologist; Cheryl Hansen, deputy sheriff of Cache County, Dr. Bartell Cardon, director of Bear River Mental Health Services; and Dr. Kim Openshaw, marriage and family therapist. The workshop was organized by Jean Edmonson, of the Home Economics extension, who was active in going out across the state with a message against domestic violence.6

The immediate result of that conference was a community fund drive for a safe house for battered women. The drive had the whole hearted support of the LDS church and people of many faiths participated. A key mover was Ann Jurinak, who is Catholic, as is Dean Wyse. In this case, Mormons joined those of other faiths in encouraging community action for a good cause.7

Regardless of accusations that home economics is a conservative field, I have witnessed much pragmatic feminism among home economists at USU including a survey of teen age sexual behavior, a project on treating child abuse, a study of how women can start small businesses in rural areas, and the training of low income women to be nutrition aides. An extension specialist works with Vietnamese refugees. In the public schools boys as well as girls take home economics. USU trains parent educators for high schools and alternative school programs.
The label “home economics” has had a precarious existence in the last half century. Some colleges and universities renamed their schools of home economics early on. At USU the College of Family Life was established in 1959, and the Department of Home Economics was subsumed within it. For years Cornell and Michigan State have had colleges of “Human Ecology.” In 1987 Iowa State University changed its 116-year-old College of Home Economics to the College of Family and Consumer Sciences. Recently USU’s Department of Home Economics was renamed the Department of Human Environments, retaining the initials HE. Nationally, the American Home Economics Association has become the American Association for Family and Consumer Sciences. These new titles were intended to free curricula from the historical assumption of female monopoly and to encourage a broadened scope.  

The Challenge of Feminist Economics

I met feminist economists at the annual meetings of the Allied Social Science Associations in Boston, in January 1994, when snow storms blanketed the city. Janet Shackleford, president of the International Association of Feminist Economics, had invited me to give a paper on women mentoring women economists in the 1930s, in the session on recovering lost contributions of early women economists. So I wrote about my experiences with Elizabeth Hoyt, Margaret Reid, and Hazel Kyrk. When I sat down after giving my paper, Mary Ann Dimand leaned over and said, “I want to publish your paper in a book I’m working on.” Startled, I gathered my wits together and said, “Fine!” It became chapter four in Women of Value: Feminist Essays in the History of Women in Economics.

Feminist economists have joined feminists in other disciplines to question the very borders of disciplines and to undertake research that crosses them. The philosopher, Sandra Harding, wrote in the first issue of the new journal Feminist Economics:

Feminist work in economics and other social sciences, as well as in biology, and the humanities, has made its greatest contributions to growth of knowledge when it has been able to step outside the preoccupations of the disciplines, and from the perspective of one or another of the diverse political discourses constructed from the perspective of women’s lives and interests, take a fresh look at nature, social relations and ways the dominant discourses have represented them.
Feminists are looking at poverty, inequality, and unemployment, and they are bringing feminist issues into introductory economics courses. They are looking at economic reform and the status of women in other countries, as evident at the Beijing Conference of Women in 1995.

In particular, feminist economists have challenged neoclassical economics, the economic theory that dominated the twentieth century. Neoclassical economics spoke of economic man, a rational being, and his relationship to production. This theory placed great emphasis on the market system and assumed that competition is the key to production. Economics was considered value-neutral because it concerned itself with means, not ends. In contrast, feminist economists ask where individuals and families get goods and services for their daily living. Provisioning is the emphasis, and it doesn’t all come from the market system. Care giving within the family is an important part of provision—so are governmental services—and not all of these go through the market system.¹¹

To return to my own beginnings, I first learned of consumption economics when my father wrote his book, *The Standard of Living*, in 1923. I completed graduate work in this field in 1938, and in the years that followed, Wynne Thorne and I lived consumption economics, seeking to make wise choices among goods and services. In 1965 I began teaching at USU and my courses held a generous component of consumption. With the creation of feminist economics and its term, provisioning, I came full circle when an issue of the new journal, *Feminist Economics*, honored my professor, Margaret Reid, for her contributions to the field, contributions that remain valid today.¹²

In the tradition of my professor, Elizabeth Hoyt, who fifty years ago began sending books to African libraries, I recently sent twenty-seven years of *Signs: A Journal of Women in Culture and Society* to the Tanzania Gender Networking Programme in Dar es Salaam, a project which is creating a Gender Research Centre. Things do come full circle.

**Commencement of 2000**

Kip Thorne and I received honorary doctorates at this commencement, and he was commencement speaker. It was not Kip’s first honorary doctorate. He has probed the extremes of gravity including black holes, neutron stars, and other exotic deep-space objects, and has “led the way in converting Albert Einstein’s General Theory of Relativity from a purely theoretical science into an astrophysical and observational
one.” At Caltech, where Kip is Feynman Professor of Astrophysics, he has trained forty Ph.D.s, who in turn have trained others. In preparing his commencement talk for USU, Kip asked me to send him what I knew about the commencement of 1900. So I told him that Old Main did not yet have its tower, only the south and north wings. My Aunt Hattie Comish was a student in the two-year domestic science program in 1900 (my father would graduate in 1911), and Aunt Hattie had told me that as a student she used to walk up Old Main hill. There was often mud. “It was three steps forward and slide back two.” Sometimes the administration put straw on the path to ease the way. Then Kip compared the very real problems the class of 1900 faced with those that the class of 2000 will face.

I especially appreciated the fact that in the printed program, opposite the page with my picture and citation, is the picture and citation of sociologist Richard Krannich, who received the D. Wynne Thorne Research Award. So three Thornes of our family were recognized at commencement May 6, 2000.

As I stood at the podium waiting to be hooded, I looked over at Kip and winked. After the hood was in place, he got to his feet, grasped me around the waist and kissed me with such vigor that my cap began sliding off the back of my head, to considerable applause.

This honorary degree came to me for long time work for social justice, and especially for work on women’s issues. This land-grant institution offered me opportunity, although it was a long time coming. And I did not earn this degree by myself. Many, many others worked with me in the struggle for equal rights in the twentieth century.