Then, Now and Then What?

By Ellen Sweet

(This paper was presented as part of a panel discussion entitled “Then, Now, and Then What?” and organized for the Smith College Class of 1964’s 50th reunion in Northampton, Massachusetts, May 16-18, 2014.)

My talk today is supposed to trace an evolution from the class of 1914 to the class of 1964 and on to the class of 2014. That’s 100 years of U.S. women’s history in ten minutes. I’m from New York City, but I can’t talk that fast! Fortunately, I share the dais with Ros Petchesky, who will focus on a key part of that history, women’s reproductive rights. I’ll begin not at the beginning but with what I know best, our own class: how I see where we were back in 1964, and how far we’ve come.

Thirty-five years ago (that would be the early ‘80s), when I was an editor at Ms. magazine, a new staff member, fresh out of college, said to me, “You’re so lucky to have lived through the ‘60s!” Suddenly I felt old. But I knew what she meant. On the one hand, the ‘60s were full of protest and struggle, and some of our friends who actively engaged in that struggle didn’t survive. We lived through a Presidential assassination, racial bombings in Birmingham, and the Vietnam War. But on the other hand, those years were full of change and possibility.

Looking back now as a truly older woman, I realize I was indeed lucky. The late ‘60s, for me, and for most of us in this room, heralded the beginning of an important era for women. It was the beginning of what became known as the second wave of the women’s movement, an organized effort that helped me find my own voice and opened enormous opportunities for all of us. Our voice may have seemed strident at first, as we learned to use it, but it grew more resonant with time, and now it’s a normal part of the national conversation about justice and equality.

I thought I had found my voice at Smith. Our professors encouraged us to speak up in class. And I was editor-in-chief of the Smith College Sophian, where my colleagues
and I had a twice-weekly forum for expressing our views to the whole campus. Indeed, as I was reminded when I re-read our old school newspapers recently, I was brash enough in 1962, when Ted Kennedy was running for the Massachusetts Senate seat that his brother had vacated to become President, to write an editorial in which I called him “one more mediocre statesman.” Twenty years later, I would interview him for Ms. magazine—with new respect—about his national health care plan. (I did not realize that it would take another 30 years to see any version of a health care plan become law.)

But it turned out that I hadn’t fully found my voice at Smith. In 1960, Barbie (the doll) was a year old, and we freshwomen were all well past playing with dolls. But some of us weren’t beyond dressing like Barbie at times in order to attract men. Indeed, my idea of liberation when I graduated from Smith was closely linked to freedom to have sex, though that carried its own risks. Twenty-five years later, I appeared on the Today Show critiquing Barbie as a sexist toy (for which the show received lots of hate mail).

When Betty Friedan (Smith class of ‘42) came to our campus in 1963 to talk about The Feminine Mystique and told us “this is our era,” I didn’t know that I would make my life’s work organizing for women’s rights. Although I took my studies seriously, I didn’t have a clear sense of where those studies could take me beyond, I hoped, a job teaching English, a husband, and a family. As my colleague and friend Gloria Steinem (Smith class of ‘56) has said, I thought I had to marry the man I wanted to become.

I was not alone in my confusion. New York Times reporter Marylin Bender (Smith class of ‘44), wrote about her reunion in 1964. We all received a copy of that article. As it shows, at least some of Bender’s classmates expressed strong disagreement with Friedan’s analysis of unhappy, highly educated housewives trapped in the suburbs.
In the same article, President Mendenhall insisted that there should be more to a Smith graduate’s future than early marriage. I rejected the idea of early marriage, but as I approached 30 years old, unmarried, I wasn't sure about the idea of no marriage at all.

So perhaps transition is a better word than confusion. After all, our class grew up during the dark ‘50s (think Mad Men), when our mothers had returned to the home after World War II following years of taking over men’s work, from operating machinery in factories to flying planes. (Remember that famous poster of Rosie the Riveter flexing her muscle with the slogan, “We can do it”?)

And then, as my young Ms. colleague said to me, we lived through the revolutionary ‘60s, which included the civil rights movement and the anti-war movement (not to mention a growing global awareness). Some of us got very involved in those protest movements but gradually began to realize that we were mostly just marching in the ranks, invisible and powerless. (Think about Stokely Carmichael’s comment that “The only position for women in SNCC is prone.”)

Let’s remember: when we graduated from Smith, women couldn’t get credit in our own names; we searched for jobs on newspaper pages that carried separate ads for men and for women; when we did find jobs, they paid 59 cents to every dollar earned by men in comparable work; women CEOs, doctors, and lawyers were few and far between; birth control was illegal, whether we were married or not. I could go on. The list of inequalities was very long.

But all this recollection is moving us toward the present, and I promised to look back at that earlier class of 1914. I want to thank Smith College Archivist Nanci Young for her help assembling this material from our rich library special collections.

Here are a few things I learned about the class of 1914 that helped me trace a line of continuity to our class and to the current graduating class:
In 1914, students started two new and significant clubs: the Suffrage Discussion Club and the Debate Society. What both had in common was the desire to give robust voice to Smith women’s opinions about important issues of the day. Indeed, the Suffrage Discussion Club was disappointed that no one spoke against suffrage at their first meeting. A club member wrote in the *Smith College Weekly*: “If we want to take a broad-minded view of the Feminist Question, we must hear both sides presented, each by its own advocates.” Finally, a member of the department of Greek language and literature came forward and gave the counter-argument. It included the following: “Voting is a weighty duty from which women are justified in claiming exemption.”

Only two years later, pacifist Jeannette Rankin became the first woman elected to Congress, and six years after the Suffrage Discussion Club was formed, women finally won the right to vote. I don’t have time to recount the long struggle for the vote that constituted the first wave of the women’s movement. It gave women a powerful voice, and for years afterward women used that voice as they became active in many arenas, as women’s historians have now documented.

But, as we know, the struggle for equality is not over. It moved from gaining the vote to gaining equality in education, work, marriage, child rearing, sports, and so much more. And it struggles to survive against virulent backlash. To paraphrase a famous quotation: eternal vigilance is the price of equality.

Okay, some things have changed for the better. Just one light-hearted example: a column in a 1914 *Smith College Weekly* complained about “Ink to the right of us, ink to the left of us, ink in back of us and—yes, ink on us.... Haven't you seen people shaking their pens vigorously, perfectly unconscious of the fact that ink is spattering all over their neighbor’s books and clothes?” What would that writer have thought of this inkless, brave new world of technology!
Yet, we may be surprised at some comparisons. In 1914, one black woman graduated from Smith in a class of 319. The Rev. Charles E. Jefferson, of the Broadway Tabernacle, New York City, spoke on the subject "Some Uses of Poetry." In 1964, two black women (and one was from Nigeria) graduated in a class of 710. The commencement speaker was Secretary of State Dean Rusk. The graduating class of 2014, in contrast, had 41 potential black graduates as of April in an enrollment of 672, not to mention sizable representations of Hispanic and Asian students. The commencement speaker tomorrow will be a woman, perhaps not the one expected, but one of our own.

In 1914, there were approximately equal numbers of men and women on the Smith faculty. In 1961, women were only 44% of the faculty (and the percentage was to drop to 30% by 1969 and was only at 38% in 1981). Today, women outnumber men on the faculty 164-135.

And by the way, while the most popular majors in 1914 and 1964 were English and history, now they’re psychology, government, and economics.

In 1914, the president of Smith was Marion L. Burton. When he stepped down a few years later, there existed a strong internal candidate for president, Dean Ada L. Comstock. Indeed, she served briefly as acting president. It wouldn’t be until 1975 that the Smith trustees trusted a woman enough to make her president, following the tenure of the last male president, our own Thomas Mendenhall.

Yes, we’ve made enormous gains in the past 100 years: professionally, politically, and socially. Yet it would be a big mistake to think that we are the generation that completed the project. And here’s the best news: the great thing about getting older is that we have nothing to lose by speaking our minds. While I no longer feel I have to commit an outrageous act every day, all I have to do is read the newspaper in the morning to feel outraged. And I can’t work out all that anger by going to the gym.
(though it helps in other ways). As one of my role models for aging, Tish Sommers, said, Don’t agonize, organize!

I look at our student panelists, Afreen and Miari, and think about how much remains to be done, and what their role could be. I want to encourage them, while they’re young and full of energy, to embrace an older woman’s fearlessness and speak up for what matters to them. I hope that will include some of the things that matter to me. Just a few examples: women are still earning 77 cents for every dollar men earn at comparable work (and it’s lower for African American women and even lower for Latin American women). Violence against women in so many forms—including rape, battering, child abuse, sex trafficking, and honor killing—persists all over the world. And a woman’s ability to decide whether and when to have children, which is the greatest indicator of an economically strong society, is far from ensured.

I think the class of 1964 would agree with me that we aren’t ready to step aside just yet. But we are ready to help you, the younger generation, amplify your voices to make our world a better and fairer place for everyone.