

Douglass Alumnae Reunion Weekend 2016  
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**HOW I FILLED MY PACK**  
*Keynote Address by Author Eileen Stukane '66,*  
*(provided with permission from the author)*

Fifty years ago, as we prepared to graduate from Douglass, our Dean Ruth Adams addressed our Class of 1966 as if she were talking to each of us over tea. She was truly remarkable. She began with “I want to talk to you about *you*.” From her vantage point of years lived, she spoke about the courage needed in life to be honest, kind, responsible, decisive. She did not mince words, saying, and I’m quoting her here: “We carry history like a pack on our backs, our own personal history, as well as that of our culture and our country. What lies behind us, we have with us; and we must be prepared to live with the results of anything we have ever said and done. It takes courage sometimes to carry that pack of our own making.”

When I heard those words at age 21 I didn’t have a very heavy pack. I had hardly ever summoned the kind of courage I imagined Dean Adams referring to, the kind where you’re very fearful at first, but you take a breath, let the bravery rise up from your toes to your lips and then say to yourself “I can do this. I can question the status quo. I can challenge authority that seems misguided.” I didn’t feel I had done anything that big yet. Not that I was shy. I had been a college guide, and a housechairman, but being gregarious didn’t mean that I was brave, or could be brave. I didn’t know whether I could fill my life pack courageously, even though I wanted to.

Having spent four years on the Douglass campus, I really did have the seeds of bravery sown inside me. How did they get there? By sitting in this very chapel hearing Betty Friedan speak about her new book *The Feminine Mystique*, by listening to my Douglass classmates as they pushed me to make brave choices—during those late-night talks, long after curfew. Remember curfew? A lot of us do.

In the dark we Douglass girls inspired each other to take on the day. Courage accumulated in small ways. I still have the memory of the day I charged into the office of my English lit professor to complain about the unfairness of a pop quiz, arguing that pop quizzes do not reflect knowledge. Months later, at the Senior Dinner Dance he approached me and said, “Do you realize that I never again gave a pop quiz after that day you came into my office?” “Really?!” I said, in disbelief. “Yes,” he said, “You scared me. Did you notice that I didn’t come out from behind my desk the whole time you were there? Truth is, you were right.” I don’t think he realized the impact *his* words would have upon *me*. An action I had taken, an action that had required a deep breath and an “I can do this” had had a lasting effect on someone else. I was astounded, and frankly, emboldened by my small act of courage. He said I was “right” but I was actually motivated by what I thought was “fair.”

Douglass, then as now, brought women together, not as competitors but as colleagues and friends. Fairness was at the heart of our community. Being in the company of smart women who were looking out for each other, looking back on the predetermined roles of the fifties and thinking about what might lie ahead for them, what was good and just for them, we knew something big was brewing. Our class had lived through the assassination of John F. Kennedy together, and at young ages experienced this sudden extinction of a human life that meant so much to us. We also knew boys our age who never returned from an inexplicable war in Vietnam. Together it was time to make every moment count. So with my personal pack, strong but still fairly light in life experience, I moved to New York City, where it didn’t stay light for long.

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I wondered whether the forward thinking sisterhood of Douglass could be transposed into the greater world. No one was even talking about “sisterhood” in 1966. And this is important, what I did to fill my life pack, what other women did, had nothing to do with labels. The words “Women’s Movement,” “Feminist,” “Consciousness Raising,” had not yet come into vogue. We made choices organically, from deep within. I went to work at LOOK magazine, at a time when it was forbidden for women to wear pants in the workplace. Of course I had worn jeans virtually every day on the Douglass campus. But only the men wore the pants in the greater world! The trousered male college graduates were hired as researchers and junior staff writers. The skirted female college graduates were asked how fast they could type and were given the top job of executive secretary – not that there’s anything wrong with being a secretary but it’s depressing to have only one decent job choice available.

However, in spite of all this, the managing editor of LOOK was -- unusual for the times -- a woman, named Patricia Carbine, who years later would become the founder of Ms magazine with Gloria Steinem. I told Pat that I would do anything not to be a secretary and that’s how I became LOOK’s copy girl, not high in the pecking order, but at least I wasn’t typing for anyone. My choices baffled my boss, LOOK’s male copy editor, who regularly counseled me that I should marry a stockbroker, live on Park Avenue, and shop at Bergdorf’s. What was I doing going to the office every day? Indeed!

And then something else happened. The only female staff writer at LOOK recommended me for a feature writing job at GOOD HOUSEKEEPING. She knew I wanted to write and here it happened again, women were helping women, just the way they did at Douglass. I tied a great big ribbon around --“Reliance On Other Women” -- and safely secured this parcel of knowledge within my life pack.

I don’t think I recognized at the time, that I and the women in the Class of ’66 were the foremothers of cultural change. Individually, we were creating our own road maps. Some married right after graduation, or sometimes just before, others went on to graduate school to pursue lives as doctors, lawyers, academicians, still others went immediately out into the world to forge careers. There were the more traditional teaching, nursing, and home economist career paths, and then there were those who sought something different. It’s not that we didn’t want partners or marriages, we just didn’t want them right away. We didn’t want to be “captive on the carousel of time,” going ‘round and ‘round, as if we were living in that Joni Mitchell song “The Circle Game.” We wanted to break out.

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I have two girlfriends I have known since we were all in our 20s inventing lives as single women in New York City. Now we often call ourselves the original “Sex And The City” women, although there were few female-friendly cocktail lounges serving us cosmopolitans at that time. There were bars where newspaper reporters hung out together, bars where workers went for beers, some singles bars that you’d never want to go to, and fancy restaurants for dates. Instead, we met over coffee in Greek diners and tried to figure out how to navigate a landscape that was new and forming around us, and we were helping to form. Yes, there was a Sexual Revolution at the time, one which the government was working hard to suppress.

Allow me a minute to make this side note of history: In 1965 the Supreme Court ruled that only married couples – forget those unmarrieds -- had the right to use birth control. Although some states legalized birth control on their own, it wasn’t until 1972 that the Supreme Court ruled that all Americans, in every state, could legally use birth control. I wish I were talking about ancient history here, but 1972 is within the lifetimes of many of you here today, and even now, in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, politicians and government officials are still arguing over whether women can make their own

decisions about the health of their own bodies. And that male contraceptive that they're always researching just never quite seems to come to fruition!

Anyway, working out relationships in this newer, more open and volatile culture required regular get-togethers and honesty among each other, sort of like those post-curfew talks at Douglass. What emerged was a permanent awareness that I needed to be respected and regarded in both the personal and professional aspects of myself. Many here already have this awareness. It was, and still is, called feminism. Let's face it, the word "feminist" has taken a beating, but its true meaning has never changed. A feminist, who can be male or female, is someone who believes that both men and women should be equals in the social, political, and economic aspects of life. Yet calling yourself a "feminist" has been tossed off as a ridiculous joke or defined as meaning "man-hater." No less than Beyonce has attempted to rescue the word "feminist" and give it more power in present day, but does that really matter? I don't think so. Debating a single word is not important, but defining how we behave is. What's powerful comes from within. All we have to do is keep our eyes open and act upon the contents of that pack we are carrying. Personally, my pack was getting bigger.

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In the 1970s and Eighties, doctors used to be overwhelmingly male. I had undergone surgery to remove an ovarian cyst and in recovery my doctor told me all was well and by the way, I removed your appendix. "Why did you do that?," I asked. "I was in the neighborhood and thought I might as well, it could give you trouble in the future." "What!" I didn't want any parts of me removed that didn't need to be removed. Under his philosophy I might as well have cut off my arm because it might break someday. If I could, I'd have my missing part returned to me immediately.

I had already started writing about women's health at GOOD HOUSEKEEPING, and then edited health-related articles at COSMOPOLITAN and SELF, and I could see that scant information was being shared by the medical profession, and little choice was offered. You have excruciating pain due to fibroid tumors? We'll just take out all of your reproductive organs then you'll feel a lot better, menopausal, but better. Endometriosis? Just take it all out! A hysterectomy is a lot easier than doing complicated fibroid-removing surgery, and researching drugs that may ease the pain takes so long.

There were so many areas where the male medical establishment either barreled ahead with drugs and recommendations as a result of studies that had never included women, or it ignored women's health issues entirely. "Informed Consent" for surgery was nonexistent. With a doctor, I wrote a comprehensive health book for women and included a chapter on Premenstrual Syndrome. Afterward, a female editor I was working with said, "This has never been considered real. Let's do a whole book on PMS." It's hard to believe now, but in the 1980s, the recognition of PMS as a legitimate health concern was still considered revolutionary. Mostly, it had been regarded as a totally made-up condition, "all in your head" as doctors used to say. I knew better. I went to a women's college. I had lived in a community of menstruating women. Need I say more?

It felt good to be contributing to the advancement of equality by advocating for women's health, which also meant working to refute the perception that a doctor – usually a man -- was a god whose word could not be questioned. Here I was, in writing my books, once more calling up the courage to confront authority and fill my pack. It has been a joy to watch women evolve and to think that I may have played a small part in this evolution. In 1966, barely 7 percent of medical school graduates were female. In 2015, women comprised 48 percent of the graduates of medical school.

From my time at COSMOPOLITAN, I had also broadened my view of the world of women. Then editor-in-chief Helen Gurley Brown had many idiosyncrasies but she would often say: "I'm interested in the girl out there like I was in Arkansas, with her nose pressed to the glass, looking in and wondering, 'how do I get inside?' I want to help her." She embraced women who were not

college-educated, not urbane, but were nevertheless, just as ambitious and striving and searching. I recognized that the women's movement was usually driven by the goals of upper middle class, educated women, mostly white women. Not all women were represented. There were many women of different races, of different socioeconomic standing, who were Helen's women, who wanted to be taken seriously, who wanted to be able to earn equal pay, and keep a job even if they became pregnant. If women were helping women, that meant every woman, everywhere.

My pack, I thought, was becoming weighted with respectable contributions, five books advocating for the improvement of women's healthcare, a monthly magazine column on how to eat healthfully, decisions made in an emergent feminist culture, but how much of my pack was really being filled by the personal courage that Dean Adams had mentioned? Had I truly been tested? Or was I simply in sync with the changing culture?

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When I decided to become a mother at age 50, opposition stared me in the face. Adoption agencies told me that the cut-off age for would-be adoptive parents was 45. I was too old. They told me I could become a foster parent, and maybe, someday, that foster child would be available to be adopted as my own child, but maybe not. I can't tell you how often my husband David and I heard: "You have good lives, why do you want to do this to yourselves? And at your ages!"

I did begin to wonder whether the world may be right, but the world was wrong so often! I remained committed and other women helped me find a way. By casting a wide net and speaking to adoptive families, female friends who urged me on made connections that I could explore. The idea that I was somehow past my expiration date as a mother after my 45<sup>th</sup> birthday did not exist in countries outside the United States. Still there were several false starts and time was passing. Paperwork, approvals, documentations seemed endless. Staying the course I had set, in spite of the bewilderment I heard from others, was where courage came in.

Returning to Dean Adams' commencement address for a moment, some of her other words also resonated. She said: "Sometime, sooner or later, every one of us wakes up at two o'clock in the morning face to face with herself. It is the function of a liberal education to make those moments of self-contained solitude endurable." My education had my back. Finally, I was welcomed as a new mother in Lithuania at age 53.

Motherhood became more important to me than any book or magazine article I might write. Many women in my generation simply wanted the ability to choose their own directions, and now, thanks to their collectively, courageously, filled life packs, I had that. A culture was changing and I was able to *choose* family life over career. Women in generations before me had to adhere to one path or the other. The ability to choose life goals, or to switch them, or to combine them, seems to me one of the big successes women have attained in my time. By the way, I'm proud to say that my husband David and my daughter Masha are here with me today, and also my sister Ellen Stukane Black, Class of 1971.

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I have been able to shape my destiny thanks to the educated women who have walked with me. It's important to remember that girls are still fighting to go to school all over the world. In Pakistan, Malala Yousafzai {You-chef-zi} was shot in the head on her way to school because she advocated for educating girls. Globally, there are 62 million girls who are not in school, and half of them are adolescents. President and Mrs. Obama together, are doing something about this. They have started the Let Girls Learn initiative, which is being championed by our own government to break down the barriers that are preventing teenage girls from completing high school, because educated females change worlds for the better.

Today women are rising in the ranks of doctors, lawyers, business owners, government officials, perhaps soon, President of the United States. In New York City where I live, there are

almost 900,000 women-owned businesses, 45 percent more than there were in 2002. This is happening not from the latest round of catch phrases: Lean In, Empowerment, Know Your Value, but from the courage to consider how we want to live. I can only repeat what Dean Adams said so wisely: “What lies behind us, we have with us; and we must be prepared to live with the results of anything we have ever said and done. It takes courage sometimes to carry that pack of our own making.” I wish you all courage for filling and carrying your packs.