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# Leadership Ventures

Newsletter of the Congregational Life Centre

## *The Power of Story and the Challenge of Sexual Inequality* Gloria Steinem

*Feminist, activist and author Gloria Steinem addressed the African Grandmothers Tribunal last fall sponsored by the Stephen Lewis Foundation. She addressed her remarks to the six grandmothers from Africa who each told of the price women are paying for the AIDS epidemic there—but also to the grandmothers packing the 1,200 seat Vancouver Chan Centre for the event. We think her message upholding the power of story, calling for equality and denouncing violence in all its forms is one that needs to be shared more widely, and so we are sharing it with you. It is a call to action that we found inspiring.*

*Clair Woodbury & Joyce Madsen*

You as grandmothers are teaching and inspiring through stories—and stories are almost as crucial to human beings as air, water and food. We as humans have been formed by sitting around campfires for at least 100,000 years, each one sharing our unique experience in the narrative and imagery of story. That's how we conveyed knowledge, from birthing and the stages of life to maps, weather, healing, astronomy, animal behaviour, the power of the mind over the body—everything. Even now, if you tell me a fact or statistic, I will make up a story to explain why it is so.

Yet our modern media and educators don't always understand that our brains are organized by narrative and image. Instead, they give us generalities and statistics and words that end in *-tion*. This is another price we pay for the falsity of gender. Facts and statistics are considered "hard news," serious scholarship and "masculine," while narrative and image are considered "soft news," trivial, and "feminine."

This leaves us hungry for understanding through story. It leaves us feeling outside media and communities of learning—and makes us vulnerable to everything from celebrity journalism to dictators and religions—to anything or anyone that offers narrative and imagery and story—even when our instincts whisper to us that their stories

are manipulative and false, that they divide us from each other. Perhaps I should say here that I'm making a distinction between religion and spirituality, between a hierarchy that ranks us—men over women, humans over nature—and a circle that links us—males and females and all living things. I know we may use different words in our different languages. So perhaps I should just say about telling the difference between true and deceptive story: Trust your instinct. Honour that which honours your story and allows you to honour others. You wouldn't have survived or helped others to survive if you hadn't followed your deepest instincts. As a friend from Kenya once said to me: *If it looks like a duck and quacks like a duck and walks like a duck, but you think it's a pig—it's a pig!*

Second, you have already discovered through the crucible of HIV and AIDS that sharing our stories is how we know we are neither at fault nor alone. In my country, the oldest cultures say of someone who is ill or destructive, "They have lost



their story... they have lost their own song." Sharing stories and acting on their common themes is the source of every social justice movement I know. In a way, the tragedy of HIV and AIDS may have forced you to learn and to teach this wisdom that everyone needs in all areas of life.

Third, what has made HIV and AIDS even more of a danger to females than to males is far more than a minor difference in physiology that makes men less vulnerable through external skin, and women more vulnerable through internal membrane. It is a major difference in power between males and females in every area of life, from culture to politics. It is deep and definitional. What happens to men is called politics. What happens to women is called culture. Men's work is included in economics and measured in money. Women's work is often invisible and not measured at all. And this profound structural inequality gives women little choice in sexual relations, even when their decision would be an act of self-preservation.

This makes you the shock troops, the early warning system, the prophets of violence against females and its cost on this spaceship Earth that we all share.

I believe we all have instinctive knowledge of violence against females as basic to all other violence, but now it has been proven. In *Sex and World Peace*—a book by Valerie Hudson and three other international scholars—100 current countries, with many different governance systems, were assessed. Here is the conclusion: The single greatest determinant of whether a country is violent within itself—or will use military violence against another country—is not poverty, or natural resources, or religion, or even the degree of democracy. It is violence against females.

In some countries, female infanticide has produced a daughter deficit and a son surplus. For the first time in history that I know of, females are no longer half the human race. In many countries, child marriage and forced impregnation and childbirth have produced a human population that cannot be sustained. In my country, more women have been murdered by their husbands or boyfriends since 9/11 than Americans were killed in 9/11, both Iraq wars and the war in Afghanistan—combined.

Female life is not more valuable than male life. One can also imagine males being

vulnerable, especially since their unprotected genitals are on the outside. The problem is making one group of people powerful over another by dividing human beings into gender prisons of "masculine" and "feminine," the leaders and the led, those who own property and those who don't or even are property, those who own children in marriage and those who do the work of raising them—all of this inequality requires violence to maintain.

And it is that violence that normalizes all other violence, and that false division of gender roles that normalizes roles and violence based on race, caste, class, tribe, nation or culture.

It wasn't always like this. Most of human history on all our continents seems to have been matrilineal. Many Native Canadian and Native American cultures didn't even have "he" and "she" in the language, much less did attribute gender to tables and chairs. For reasons I think I understand, Europeans became the inventors of patriarchy, in turn became over-populated, and invaded my continent and yours. Much of why they called cultures "primitive" was because women had equal power and controlled reproduction.

Because controlling reproduction—controlling female bodies—is the root and rationale of male supremacy. Without it, racism and other birth-based hierarchies can't continue into the future without controlling reproduction. Thus the bodily integrity of females is also the answer not only to slowing the spread of HIV and AIDS, but to a population growth that slows and becomes sustainable, to ending the divisions of clan and race and caste—and for females ourselves, to an end to forced pregnancy, female genital cutting, infibulations, sex trafficking, survival sex—an end to the basic division that normalizes violence.

So you who are raising the children of the lost—you are teaching by your lives and by your stories.

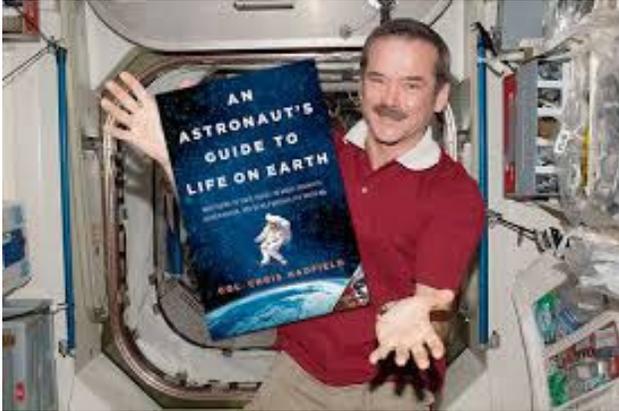
Perhaps in the future, historians will look back and say: This is when humans re-discovered that we are linked, not ranked. This is when a lethal illness forced females to rebel, and males to find their humanity in those who rescued them. This was the time of the grandmothers.

*Reprinted with permission. For more information on the Tribunal and the Stephen Lewis Foundation go to [www.africangrandmothertribunal.org](http://www.africangrandmothertribunal.org).*

## Book Review

# *An Astronaut's Guide to Life on Earth*

Book by Chris Hadfield



Chris Hadfield visited Edmonton twice in the last few months, once as a very eloquent theme speaker at the e-town conference and once to promote his book. He was equally impressive both visits.

Most people know Hadfield as the Commander of the International Space Station whose pictures of earth awed the millions who followed him on Twitter every day. His book tells a fascinating first-hand account of what being an astronaut was really like. It is worth reading for that alone, but there is more. Hadfield reveals what it takes to make it as a true leader, moreover a Canadian leader on the international scene

## Zero Personality Type

Chris Hadfield comes across as someone you could go up and talk to any time, any where. As someone said, he talks to school children and Prime Ministers with exactly the same total personal attention. Not a hint of arrogance. It is a very conscious approach he calls zero personality. We'll let him explain:

*Over the years, I've realized that in any new situation ... you will almost certainly be viewed in one of three ways. As a minus one: actively harmful, someone who creates problems. Or as a zero: your impact is neutral and doesn't tip the balance one way or the other. Or you'll be seen as a plus one: someone who actively adds value.*

He goes on to add that everyone wants to be a plus one—and Hadfield certainly is. “But proclaiming your plus-oneness at the outset almost guarantees you'll be perceived as a minus

one, regardless of the skills you bring to the table or how you actually perform.”

It is another way of saying you don't blow your own horn. You do the job and let others evaluate. Sounds very Canadian, but it works.

## Being Prepared

The impressive thing about Hadfield is the lengths he will go to be prepared. He wanted to be an astronaut before Canada had a space program, and took engineering to be ready just in case. He evaluated the best route to becoming an astronaut, and so became a pilot, then a test pilot, then got his Masters degree in engineering to strengthen he qualifications.

As soon as it became clear that the space program was going to become a joint venture with Russia as a major player, he learned Russian. The fact that he could attend complex lectures on space procedures delivered in Russian demonstrates the fluency he achieved.

A high energy individual achiever (he got top marks in the United States test pilot training program), he was clear about the greater value of working as part of a team. “Over the years I've learned that investing in other people's success doesn't just make them more likely to enjoy working with me. It also improves my own chances of survival and success.” In any crisis, every astronaut has to know his or her exact role and carry that out immediately, if everyone is to survive. As well, two heads are better than one.

Another skill is his ability to focus. “Nothing focuses your mind quite like flying a jet. That's one reason NASA requires that astronauts fly T-38s: it forces us to concentrate and prioritize.” That ability to be totally present to every situation, whether speaking to a class of school children from space or dealing with a fire alarm on board the International Space Station, is a quality Hadfield has carefully cultivated.

It's a delightfully entertaining read. It is also a primer in leadership that is as applicable to the church as to commanding the International Space Station.

*An Astronaut's Guide to Life on Earth* by Chris Hadfield. Random House Canada, 2013.

## Book Review

# Writing the Revolution

Book by Michele Landsberg

When Michele Landsberg's landed a job as women's columnist for the Toronto Star, her editor explained what makes news to her:

*"You see the CN tower out there," he asked gesturing wildly. "If I look out and see a man climbing up to the top of the tower, that's a news story." I nodded. "But if I look out and see a woman, now that's a woman's story."*

That's the world that Michele Landsberg has been dealing with her whole life. In the process she has received the Order of Canada and seven honorary doctorates. With all that behind her, and a marriage to Stephen Lewis still very much with her, she has gathered together what could be the definitive diary of the struggle of women for their rightful place in Canadian society.

## The Feminist Revolution

Betty Fredan's book *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963 raised the issue of women's rights to the point where it could not be ignored. Enter Michele Landsberg.

Michele was someone who lived the feminist revolution and wrote about it with a passion. After finishing for the day at the Globe and Mail, she would often come to the legislature to watch her husband, a NDP member. She was 23 years old with long black hair and black stockings.

An indignant Tory leapt up to protest: "Mr. Speaker, there's a beatnik in the visitor's gallery." She remembers well her husband, Stephen Lewis, rising on a point of order. "Mr. Speaker. That's no beatnik; that's my wife."

This book is a collection of the columns that Michele Landsberg wrote over the span of her career, each introduced with a few words of background. She has a philosophy about columns:

*A column is a piece of writing that draws a bead on the reader's heart or mind—or both. Unlike news writing, it is intended to move, engage, persuade, to provoke, even sometimes to enrage.*

*But although the privilege of having a column in a major daily newspaper gives you the possibility of tremendous power, there's a price the columnist must pay. You can't seize the reader's heart unless your own heart has already been seized.*

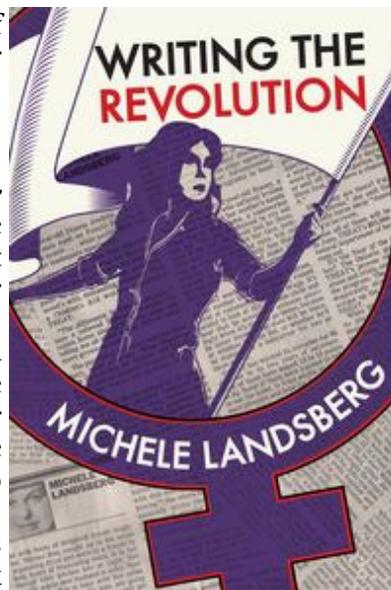
If you read this book, you have to be prepared to have your heart seized. Here is a brief sample of what some of the columns written over five decades cover:

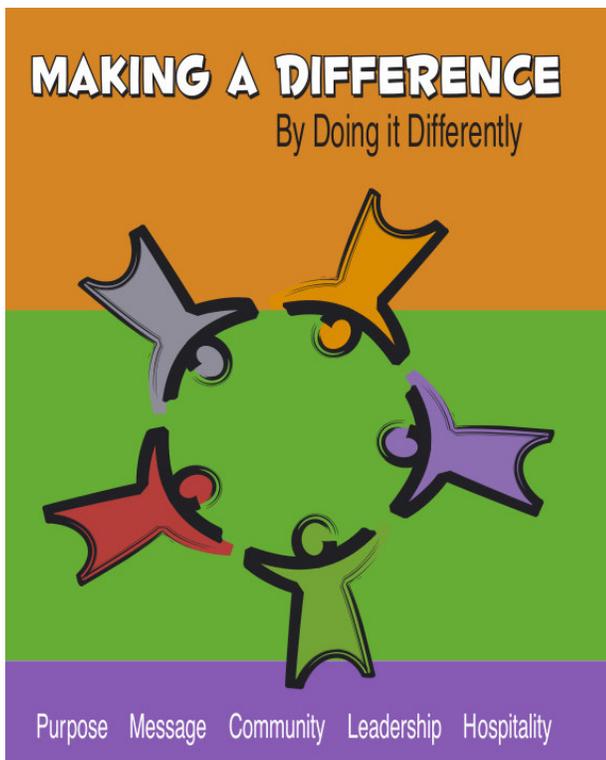
- ◇ Women's rights—Support for 172 women on strike at a Centralia factory.
- ◇ Sexism—Gail Cummings was a 12 year old Huntsville girl who was prevented from playing goal in boy's hockey.
- ◇ Women were being exposed to harmful untested sanitary products while those for the protection of men were thoroughly tested by the Canadian government.
- ◇ Anti-choice fanatics burned the bookstore under Mergenthaler's clinic.
- ◇ The Charter of Rights and Freedoms as originally drafted needed stronger wording around women's rights.
- ◇ Racism—There are judges on the bench as ignorant in their bigotry as any red-neck cracker.
- ◇ Gun control—Who can put a price tag on saved lives.
- ◇ Same-sex marriage is a movement whose time has come.

- ◇ Sexual harassment in the workplace and family violence have to stop.
- ◇ Children deserve better than lives of poverty.

We have come a long way! This book is a reminder of the human rights journey we have been on in this country—but with a focus on women's issues. We think it should be read by every young man and woman today, not just so they can be thankful for where we are, but so they can be encouraged to keep on working for change. There is still a long journey ahead.

*Writing the Revolution* by Michele Landsberg.  
Second Story Press, 2011





Here are two books worth buying in bulk for your council, study group or youth program. *Making a Difference* by Joyce Madsen & Clair Woodbury outlines five steps to making your congregation or organization user friendly. Newcomers deserve the kind of welcome it outlines.

*A New Take* by Clair Woodbury walks youth and adults alike through the new insights being provided by scholars like John Dominic Crossan and Marcus Borg, but in a language that is accessible to everyone.

## A New Take on an Ancient Story



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[www.CongregationalLife.com](http://www.CongregationalLife.com)  
Staff : Joyce Madsen & Clair Woodbury

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