

Bio: **Mary S. Hartman** is the founder and senior scholar of the Institute for Women's



Leadership. She served as the dean of Douglass College, the college for women at Rutgers, from 1982 to 1994. In that role, she initiated a number of nationally recognized programs for women including the Douglass Project for Rutgers Women in Math, Science, and Engineering; the Center for

Women's Global Leadership; the Laurie New Jersey Chair in Women's Studies; and the Institute for Women's Leadership. Dr. Hartman is the author or editor of numerous publications, including: *Talking Leadership: Conversations with Powerful Women*, editor, and introduction (Rutgers Press, 1999); *Gender, Household, and Power: A Subversive View of Western History* (Cambridge University Press 2004); *Victorian Murderesses: A True History of Thirteen Respectable French and English Women Accused of Unspeakable Crimes* (Schocken Books 1977); and *Clio's Consciousness Raised: New Perspectives on the History of Women*, editor (Harper & Row, 1974). Dr. Hartman has a B.A. from Swarthmore College and earned her M.A. and Ph.D. from Columbia University.

An Interview with Mary S. Hartman

Conducted by Leadership Scholar Nancy Santucci, Class of 2010

Edited by Pilar Timpane

Nancy Santucci: As a child, what did you imagine becoming?

Mary S. Hartman: The first time I imagined becoming anything was wanting to become a stewardess. Many women in my generation, at my age, wanted to become stewardesses. And forget all the stuff about Freud and sex and flying — it was about getting away! If you grew up in the fifties, you wanted to get away.

NS: How were women treated in your area? What were your opportunities?

MH: I grew up in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Then at age thirteen, my family moved to Fort Wayne, Indiana.

Again, it was an unconscious recording of what was happening. I saw my opportunities as what was related to what I love dearly — school. So, I wanted to become a teacher at a certain point. I think my first desire was to become a French teacher, but then when I got to college I started thinking about different possibilities.

This was an era in which women could pursue professions, but there were a very limited number of professions that were regarded as appropriate for women in those days. And I did not stray

from those definitions at that period. I never even thought of it. I thought of what I loved, which was knowledge, teaching, education. I related fully to that, so I don't feel that I had any constraints about those choices. However, I see in retrospect that they were limited choices.

There were role models in my school who were mostly women teachers. My Sunday school teachers were all women and there were some pretty terrific ones among them. Beyond that though, I can't say I ever brooded on this subject or ever gave it much thought until much later really. It was college before I started thinking about the way the world was put together.

NS: Did anybody push you to be a woman leader?

MH: Not to be a woman leader, but to speak my mind, yes. My grandmother at fourteen dropped out of school to raise her two younger siblings when her father lost his wife and what happened was she had to take over the management of the entire household; this was a tough cookie. Her husband died when she was only in her fifties, and that's when I began to know her as a person.

One day she came home — I was in college — and we were up at her lake house. I was reading a book for a college course that I was taking and she looked at me and she said, "Mary Susan" — that was my name in those days — "Mary Susan, what are you doing?"

And I said, "Well, I'm reading a book for my college class."

Then, she said, "What good are you?"

I was so crushed that she would dare to say that, but it had a big effect on me. I ran out.

Then, she realized she had gone a little too far. I was in the hammock at the neighbor's house kind of brooding and she said, "Mary Susan, I had no right to say that to you."

That was it, but it was something I've never forgotten because it helped me to focus on the relationship between all of this reading I was doing and what was going on in the wider world. For her, you do good in the world by going out there and being active, and she saw all this college girl stuff as a little frivolous.

NS: When was the first time you knew you wanted to be involved in women's leadership?

MH: When I first was involved in women's leadership and thought about it as such I had a career as a professor. In those days, I didn't think of myself as anything other than a professor of history; I didn't put that frame around it of being a woman leader. It was here at Douglass College at Rutgers that the then-provost came to me and said, "The dean of the college is leaving, would you be interested in being acting dean? We think you would be great, you've lead this and lead that around here." And it was true I had [been leading], I just hadn't put that little picture frame around it.

That was the first time I thought, Oh well it might be fun to do something like that for a year. Three months into it, Nancy, I got hooked! Because this was a different way of interacting with people in the world. I was immersed in a very friendly atmosphere and a very informal one, so I decided to throw my hat in the ring.

So, that was the first conscious time, but you will find with many women of my generation that the story is very similar. There was not a plan; you just went from one thing to another and in many ways I think that your generation is so much more with it than my generation was. We get together and we talk about how long it took just to realize that you can plan more actively for your future than we did.

NS: How did you first become interested in feminism and human rights?

MH: When I first learned about these things, I already had a position as a junior professor of history at Rutgers and, of course, it was the movement in the world that caused me to think, Well, my goodness I'm a historian and I've never studied women's lives. There must be something to tell there.

So, in a way, my awareness came as a part of what one might call "the academic arm" of the women's movement which we created here at Douglass. I taught the first course that had ever been taught [on women], "The Comparative Roles of Women."

There was a kind of excitement about doing all this stuff for the first time and kind of making it up along the way. So, one of the things we did was we had the first conference on women's history that was sponsored by the Berkshire Conference here at Douglass in 1973.

I'm proud to say that the conference on the history of women goes on today. It's the biggest conference in the world now on that subject. Every two to three years it's held in a different university.

Feminism itself was earlier and it was an extension of the women's rights movement. We embraced the term without thinking twice about using it, and I know now that particularly young women are ginger[ly] to use [it]. They want to be comfortable usually; they'll use the term around other women. Part of our awareness of wanting to respect the feelings of our students, those of us in the older generation have dropped the use of the word in classroom situations because we are aware that at least for young women what this often signals is "man-hating" and things that we don't associate with it in the older generation. But it's a term that I think has a whole lot of good uses and I think many come to embrace the term after they understand its history.

Human rights came a bit later in the eighties. We were able to create a chair in women's studies at Douglass and it was the first one in the nation that had been created. We had some wonderful women and men in the legislature, both parties. And [former] Governor Tom Kean thoroughly endorsed the idea, so the chair was declared and one of the recipients of the chair was Charlotte Bunch. She was already well-known locally and globally for her work in human rights. So, much of my introduction to human rights work [was] really through the work of establishing the center. We urged [Charlotte] to stay on and to think of what she wanted to do here. And she wanted to create the Center for Women's Global Leadership and she did that.

NS: When did you realize that women weren't a part of history and did you make the connection that it was because they weren't in public positions of leadership?

MH: When we think about leadership, we don't realize that women have always led; it's the context in which they've lead that we aren't aware of so much. That is to say, we only give people credit for leading when we first think about it in a much more institutional/traditional context, but the oldest institution in the world is the family and women have always led in the family. Women have always led in their local communities and only lately have they moved out into a wider world and begun to claim what I would regard as their rightful places in leadership.

People don't pay attention to the family because right now the family is not seen as a driver of history, but [in the past] the family was a driver of history. Women were a part of that leadership and transforming things. Yes, the man was more powerful, but the woman had a lot more power than she did in another kind of — structure.

NS: Do you feel like you've found a balance between work and your personal life?

MH: I feel as though I've been fortunate. I married a man I loved, and I still love him, and we've worked together pretty well. When I first married him — this was in 1966 — I was working on my dissertation and he was taking a second degree in philosophy. So, he was still in school because he was completing two degrees — one at Oxford. I was working on my dissertation at that point, but I was also still taking the laundry out to the local laundrymat, and I was cooking every meal, I was washing every dish. And he turned to me one day and he said, "You're not making much progress on this dissertation." And I don't think either of us realized it. I mean I wasn't seething with resentment, but the fact was we evolved into a shared relationship over the years that we were no place near having at the beginning of our marriage.

I don't believe in this idea though of balance between home and work. I mean sometimes it's better than others. But most of the time it's juggling, making things work. It isn't perfect but it's a lot more fun than I can imagine my mother had in her life. She wanted to be a librarian. My grandfather, a lovely man I'm told, told her she could go to college and he said the same thing to her sister but he said you have to major in home economics. She went to the University of Minnesota and at that time — she was born in the 1910s — so this was kind of unusual that she had a college degree. But it was not in a field of her choice, so I think that, again, it's one of those things. I feel as her daughter I had so many more options and privileges than she did. I haven't got too many complaints.

NS: Here at the IWL, how do you feel you influence young women, such as myself, in their formative years?

MH: In some ways, I think I've influenced them by telling them a story that I think is very different from their own. They can see paths that involve choice points and they can hear my perspectives at different phases.

You asked about obstacles, and sure, like most of the women in my generation who did something new and different — and I did that — I've had my share. But I would say that if I'm tracing the thread of all of this, I was excited about what I was doing and I went off, in some cases, head over heels with intellectual enthusiasms that it took me a while to even catch up with myself in terms of the way this was endangering a traditional career.

Let me give you an example. When I went to graduate school in modern European history — we didn't have women's history in those days — my professor, who was a lovely man, said to me, "How do you justify taking the place of a man?" Now this was standard practice in those days. The dean of Harvard famously asked all of the women who were in the law school there, "How do you justify taking the place of a man?" I didn't know at the time this was just standard issue for the males to say to the women. It was said to Ruth Bader Ginsburg who answered, "My husband is in the law school and this gives me a chance to have conversations with him."

Then what happened to me when I came to Douglass was that there was already ferment going on in the whole field of women and literature here. Elaine Showalter and the English department were creating a women's studies program. Hickman Hall was where the history department was located and we used to joke that we created women's studies in the elevator of Hickman Hall because we would meet one another and she would get very excited and excite all the rest of us about it.

This must have been the late sixties and early seventies that this happened. At that point, I was being told by the chair of the department who wanted to promote me, "Mary you're going to have to turn your dissertation into a book." Certainly, you have to have a published book when you come up for tenure. So, I went back to my dissertation which was on a very smart, very wonderful Frenchman named Benjamin Constant. He was a grand political leader in the Restoration, the early 19th century in France, and he'd been a participant in the French revolutionary movements as well. It wasn't as if I had picked someone dull or uninteresting, he published the first psychological novel, but I discovered I couldn't do it. I was meanwhile increasingly interested in this whole field of women's history and of course, I got excited about organizing a conference in that area, which happened then in 1973.

Meanwhile, I'm saying to myself, "I've got to change what I'm doing here and change my whole field," and I started asking myself, "Well, what was it like to be a middle class woman in the 19th century?" I know what we know from the novels and the books and all the rest, but I wanted to get inside the households and find out.

Well, when I was working at Princeton University library, I went up and took a look at all the new books that were coming in. And there was a wonderful book called *Victorian Studies in Scarlet*, about women and men who had been accused of murder. As soon as I sat down with this book, I realized this was a way to get inside that household and to get information about ordinary middle class women or maybe not so ordinary — they were accused of murder after all. I looked at French cases and English cases of middle-class women who were accused of murder, and most of them actually did it, but I was looking at their lives in terms of what drove them to murder and were those circumstances shared by a wider group of women in the society.

I was up and running, the only problem was that the tenure clock came up pretty quickly and when I first came up for tenure, well, I just squeaked through. It was a hell of a year. It was just awful. It was a really embattled time and I heard lots of painful things about how I got carried away with all this women's history stuff and if I hadn't been so involved with creating that conference then I would have had a clear way open for me for tenure. That was a challenge.

I was quite clear-eyed that we were creating something new and that's going to make people unhappy and it did make some people unhappy, but ultimately the whole idea prevailed. Now, within the history department, it is consistently named that Rutgers has the strongest graduate program in women's history of any place in the nation. I was hardly alone, there were lots of us, but we were in there early and one of the reasons we were in there early was that we had a college for women on this campus that was encouraging women such as myself to go ahead and take that risk. Yes, I knew it was a risk. But, I also knew that I had a supportive community that was saying, Go for it girl! And that made a difference.

NS: What do you wish you would have known when you were twenty years old, my age?

MH: In some ways, I have to tell you Nancy, knowing too little made it possible for me in those years to just keep on going. In some ways what I would like to have known — or I think I would like to have known — about the power structure in the institution and the obstacles that were out there for me would've maybe crippled me, I don't know. So, would it have been good for me to know that it was going to be very challenging and very difficult? I don't think so. A lot of us agree that ignorance was bliss then.

Is that advice for you now? Absolutely not. I often say now, "Don't do what I did, but be aware that you have choices that you can make now and you have plans that you can make now." I wrote a whole book now about how the marriage relationship from the Middle Ages shifted because families became smaller and this meant that there were only two people in a household. Women's positions were elevated because there were only two decision makers in the household. And what this meant was women were constantly inventing things.

We have created an art now of inventing things, inventing ourselves, inventing our futures, and you are in a continuum of that phase of inventing yourself that is much further down the road than my generation was. Young people such as yourself have to make decisions much more consciously than even people in my generation did. It's partly good, it's partly bad. What's good about it is that you have more choices. What's bad about it is that you have more choices. It's a game, but it's a much better game than people in my generation had, and for that I envy you. What I don't envy you is that you're going to have to recreate the world for the relationship between women and men in a much more conscious way than my generation did. If you succeed, you're going to transform the way the outside world works in an absolutely incredible way.

NS: What advice would you give to me as a young woman?

MH: I'm busy doing that all the time in class! I think that one of the things that I would say is that ultimately you're the one who is the decider about what you care most about. Listen to your parents, listen to your advisers and counselors from whatever area of your life and that you admire and value, but ultimately if you're interested in becoming a leader, if you're interested in going out in the world and making a difference, you have to work at finding what it is you love. And it may take you a while to do that.

Many young people think that when they come to college that their path has been set out for them. Either by themselves or their parents or others, and if they find something they love, it makes all the difference in the world. It takes a longer time; it takes maturity. It takes reading to

discover that there's even such a thing as sociology — you didn't have that in high school. You have to make discoveries when you come to college.

My concern is that students realize that they're not going to have a happy, fulfilling life unless they love what they do. So, the main choice is, "What do you care about?" And if you can then pick up on what you care about and turn it into a life with a career on the side, that's fine. See what your life passions are and then direct your career accordingly.