

A Feminist Redefined

By Jenny McPhee

The other day, I was having lunch in a croissant shop in midtown Manhattan and eavesdropping on the people sitting at the next table. A twentysomething college-educated woman was describing her wedding plans in detail to a friend. Between discussing how much the caterer would cost and what color the bridesmaids' dresses would be, she said, with considerable embarrassment, "I can't believe I'm actually doing this, that I'm talking about *me* doing this. But if I don't get excited about it, who will?"

I find the subject of weddings fascinating, so I kept listening as she justified her choice of band and church, made clear why her ex-boyfriend was in the wedding party, and explained her decision not to use the designation "Ms." in addressing her invitations to women. "It just seems so, well, professional," she said, looking inside her sandwich. Then, with a bit of hesitation, she added, "I just don't want people to think that I'm, you know, a *feminist* or anything."

For a long time now, I've been trying to figure out what it is about that word that gives women so much trouble. The definition of feminism in my Webster's is the following: "1. Feminine character or characteristics; also, a feminine expression. 2.

Jenny McPhee is a writer and editor.

The theory, cult or practice of those who advocate such legal and social changes as will establish political, economic, and social equality of the sexes; propaganda or activity favoring the emancipation of women." Given that definition, what woman in her right mind wouldn't be proud to call herself a feminist?

I have heard many blame the feminist movement itself for having alienated women from the cause.

No 'Ms.' on the invitations to this wedding.

Feminism, they claim, has surrendered to the will of radicals and extremists, has become splintered and factious, does not have a unified and truly representative voice.

I don't buy it. All movements are fraught with extremism, infighting and power struggles. The problem with feminism goes much deeper and the woman in the croissant shop gave me a clue: shame.

Women are deeply ashamed of themselves for being women. At a moment that is clearly of utmost significance to this woman — her wedding — she is apologetic and ashamed of herself for taking center stage. Why isn't she saying, "This is

important, this is about me"?

If a woman can't allow herself to feel proud and powerful at her own wedding — a traditional rite in which a woman is both central and celebrated — then how will she feel in situations where the circumstances aren't necessarily favorable, like applying for a job or running for office?

Which brings me to the dictionary's first definition of "feminism." The word "feminism" is rooted in the concept of the feminine, and women are as prejudiced as men against the feminine, especially where issues of power are concerned. In the public sphere, (with the exception of Hollywood) most women do not find power in the so-called characteristics of our sex — from physical beauty to a reluctance to compete. We are afraid of being labeled bimbos, or ineffective.

Traditionally, we have sought power through association with a male — usually father or husband. More recently, some women have gained power by assuming androgynous appearances and acting more aggressively. I do not mean that women (or men for that matter) should not exploit male characteristics. I'm just sorry that women don't see their identity as something to be proud of, as something that doesn't need to be modified.

As women, as feminists, one of our greatest challenges is to claim the power of our feminine character — whatever we choose it to be. As the woman in the croissant shop said to her friend, "If we don't get excited

Correction

Because of a production error, the last paragraph of an Op-Ed article yesterday by Jenny McPhee was incomplete. The paragraph should have read:

"As women, as feminists, one of our greatest challenges is to claim the power of our feminine character — whatever we choose it to be. As the woman in the croissant shop said to her friend, if we don't get excited about it, who will?"