Epilogue
“A DEGENERATED SOCIETY”?

The principle which regulates the existing social relations between the two sexes—the legal subordination of one sex to the other—is wrong in itself, and now one of the chief hindrances to human improvement; and...it ought to be replaced by a principle of perfect equality, admitting no power or privilege on the one side, nor disability on the other.

—JOHN STUART MILL

THE SUBJECTION OF WOMEN (1869)

In this second decade of a new millennium, we sit perched on a precipice, looking into an uncharted expanse of the future. What kind of society do we want to live in? What will be the gender arrangements of that society?

To see gender differences as intransigent leads also to a political resignation about the possibilities of social change and increased gender equality. Those who proclaim that men and women come from different planets would have us believe that the best we can hope for is a sort of interplanetary détente, an uneasy truce in which we exasperatingly accept the inherent and intractable foibles of the other sex, a truce mediated by ever-wealthier psychological interpreters who can try to decode the sexes’ impenetrable language.

I think the evidence is clear that women and men are far more alike than they are different and that we need far fewer cosmic interpreters and far more gender equality to enable both women and men to live the lives they want to live. The future of gender differences is intimately tied to the future of gender inequality. As gender inequality is reduced, the differences between women and men will shrink.

And besides, the interplanetary model of gender differences entirely ignores the historical record. For the past century, we have steadily moved to lessen gender inequality—by removing barriers to women’s entry into all arenas of the public sphere, protecting women who have been victimized by men’s violent efforts to delay, retard, or resist that entry. And as we have done so, we have found that women can perform admirably in arenas once believed to be suitable only
for men and that men can perform admirably in arenas once held to be exclusively women’s domain. Don’t believe me: Ask those women surgeons, lawyers, and pilots. And ask those male nurses, teachers, and social workers, as well as all those single fathers, if they are capable of caring for their children.

In this book, I’ve made several arguments about our gendered society. I’ve argued that women and men are more alike than we are different, that we’re not at all from different planets. I’ve argued that it is gender inequality that produces the differences we do observe and that that inequality also produces the cultural impulse to search for such differences, even when there is little or no basis for them in reality. I’ve also argued that gender is not a property of individuals, which is accomplished by socialization, but rather a set of relationships produced in our social interactions with one another and within gendered institutions, whose formal organizational dynamics reproduce gender inequality and produce gender differences.

I’ve also pointed to evidence of a significant gender convergence taking place over the past half-century. Whether we look at sexual behavior, friendship dynamics, efforts to balance work and family life, or women’s and men’s experiences and aspirations in education or the workplace, we find the gender gap growing ever smaller. (The lone exception to this process, as we saw in the last chapter, is violence.)

To celebrate this gender convergence in behavior and attitudes is not to advocate degendering people. A recent book by Judith Lorber makes a case for degendering. She argues that, as one reviewer put it, “degendering reduces gender inequality by eliminating gender difference as a meaningful consequential component of institutions and identities.” Such an argument, to my mind, however utopian, still puts the cart before the horse, claiming that eliminating difference will lead to eliminating inequality. But such a model equates equality with sameness—only by flattening all differences will equality be possible. I see it exactly the other way around: Only by eliminating inequality will difference recede until the variations among us—by race, age, ethnicity, sexuality, and, yes, biological sex—will prove largely epiphenomenal. (There are some differences, after all, and we should neither ignore nor minimize them.) Just as we know that sameness doesn’t automatically lead to equality, so, too, is difference not necessarily incompatible with it.

I don’t have much faith, for example, in the ideal of androgyyny. Some psychologists have proposed androgyyny as a solution to gender inequality and gender differences. It implies a flattening of gender differences, so that women and men will think, act, and behave in some more “neutralized” gender-nonspecific ways. “Masculinity” and “femininity” will be seen as archaic constructs as everyone becomes increasingly “human.”

Such proposals take a leap beyond the ultimately defeatist claims of immutable difference offered by the interplanetary theorists. After all, proponents of androgyyny at least recognize that gender differences are socially constructed and that change is possible.

But androgyyny remains unpopular as a political or psychological option because it would eliminate differences between people, mistaking equality for sameness. To many of us, the idea of sameness feels coercive, a dilution of difference into a bland, tasteless amalgam in which individuals would lose their distinctiveness. It’s like Hollywood’s vision of communism as a leveling of all class distinctions into a colorless, amorphous
mass in which everyone would look, act, and dress the same—as in those advertisements that feature poorly but identically dressed Russians. Androgyny often feels like it would enforce life on a flat and ultimately barren, degendered landscape. Is the only way for women and men to be equal to become the same? Can we not imagine equality based on respect for and embracing of difference?

Fears about androgyny confuse gendered people with gendered traits. It’s not that women and men need to be more like each other than we already are but rather that all the psychological traits and attitudes and behaviors that we, as a culture, label as “masculine” or “feminine” need to be redefined. These traits and attitudes, after all, also carry positive and negative values, and it is through this hierarchy, this unequal weighting, that gender inequality becomes so deeply entwined with gender difference. To degender people does not by itself eliminate gender inequality.

In fact, calls for androgyny paradoxically reify the very gender distinctions that they seek to eliminate. Advocates frequently urge men to express more of their “feminine” sides; women, to express more of their “masculine” sides. Such exhortations, frankly, leave me deeply insulted.

Let me give you an example. Some years ago, as I sat in my neighborhood park with my newborn son in my arms, a passerby commented, “How wonderful it is to see men these days expressing their feminine sides.” I growled, underneath my conspicuously false smile. Although I tried to be pleasant, what I wanted to say was this: “I’m not expressing anything of the sort, ma’am. I’m being tender and loving and nurturing toward my child. As far as I can tell, I’m expressing my masculinity!”

Why, after all, are love, nurturance, and tenderness defined as feminine? Why do I have to be expressing the affect of the other sex in order to have access to what I regard as human emotions? Because I am a man, everything I do expresses my masculinity. And I’m sure my wife would be no less insulted if, after editing a particularly difficult article or writing a long, involved essay, she were told how extraordinary and wonderful it is to see women expressing their masculine sides—as if competence, ambition, and assertiveness were not human properties to which women and men could equally have access.

Love, tenderness, nurturance; competence, ambition, assertion—these are human qualities, and all human beings—both women and men—should have equal access to them. And when we do express them, we are expressing, respectively, our gender identities, not the gender of the other. What a strange notion, indeed, that such emotions should be labeled as masculine or feminine, when they are so deeply human and when both women and men are so easily capable of a so much fuller range of feelings.

Strange, and also a little sad. “Perhaps nothing is so depressing an index of the inhumanity of the male supremacist mentality as the fact that the more genial human traits are assigned to the underclass: affection, response to sympathy, kindness, cheerfulness,” was the way feminist writer Kate Millett put it in her landmark book, Sexual Politics, first published in 1969.2

So much has changed since then. The gendered world that I inhabit is totally unlike that of my parents. My father could have gone to an all-male college, served in an all-male military, and spent his entire working life in an all-male work environment. Today that world is but a memory. Women have entered every workplace, the military,
and its training academies (both federal and state supported), and all but three or four colleges today admit women. Despite persistent efforts from some political quarters to turn back the calendar to the mid-nineteenth century, those changes are permanent; women will not go back to the home where some people think they belong.

These enormous changes will only accelerate in the next few decades. The society of the third millennium will increasingly degender traits and behaviors without degendering people. We will still be women and men, equal yet capable of appreciating our differences, different yet unwilling to use those differences as the basis for discrimination.

Imagine how quickly the pace of that change might accelerate if we continue to degender traits, not people. What if little boys and girls saw their mothers and their fathers go off to work in the morning, with no compromise to their masculinity or femininity? Those little boys and girls would grow up thinking that having a job—being competent, earning a living, striving to get ahead—was something that *grown-ups* did, regardless of whether they were male or female *grown-ups*. Not something that men did and that women did only with guilt, social approbation, and sporadic and irregular dependence on their fertility. “And when I grow up,” those children will say, “I’m going to have a job also.”

And when both mothers and fathers are equally loving and caring and nurturing toward their children, when nurture is something that *grown-ups* do—and not something that mothers do routinely and men do only during halftime on Saturday afternoon—then those same children will say to themselves, “And when I get to be a *grown-up*, I’m going to be loving and caring toward my children.”

Such a process may sound naively optimistic, but the signs of change are everywhere around us. In fact, the historical evidence points exactly in that direction. It was through the dogged insistence of that nineteenth-century ideology, the separation of spheres, that two distinct realms for men and women were imposed, with two separate sets of traits and behaviors that accompany each sphere. This was the historical aberration, the anomaly—its departure from what had preceded it and from the “natural” propensity of human beings goes a long way in explaining the vehemence with which it was imposed. Nothing so natural or biologically determined has to be so coercive.

The twentieth century witnessed the challenge to separate spheres, undertaken, in large part, by those who were demoted by its ideological ruthlessness—women. That century witnessed an unprecedented upheaval in the status of women, possibly the most significant transformation in gender relations in world history. From the rights to vote and work, asserted early in the century, to the rights to enter every conceivable workplace, educational institution, and the military in the latter half, women shook the foundations of the gendered society. And at the end of the century they had accomplished half a revolution—a transformation of their opportunities to be workers and mothers.

This half-finished revolution has left many women frustrated and unhappy. For some reason, they remain unable to “have it all”—to be good mothers and also to be effective and ambitious workers. With astonishing illogic, some pundits explain women’s frustrations as stemming not from the continued resistance of men, the intransigence of male-dominated institutions to accept them, or the indifference of politicians to enact
policies that would enable these women to balance their work and family lives, but rather from the effort of women to expand their opportunities and to claim a full share of humanity. It is a constant source of amazement how many women have full-time jobs exhorting women not to take full-time jobs.

The second half of the transformation of gender is just beginning and will be, I suspect, far more difficult to accomplish than the first. That's because there was an intuitively obvious ethical imperative attached to enlarging the opportunities for, and eliminating discrimination against, women. But the transformation of the twenty-first century involves the transformation of men's lives.

Men are just beginning to realize that the "traditional" definition of masculinity leaves them unfulfilled and dissatisfied. Whereas women have left the home, from which they were "imprisoned" by the ideology of separate spheres, and now seek to balance work and family lives, men continue to search for a way back into the family, from which they were exiled by the same ideology. Some men express their frustration and confusion by hoping and praying for a return to the old gender regime, the very separation of spheres that made both women and men unhappy. Others join various men's movements, like Promise Keepers or the Million Man March, or troop off to a mythopoetic men's retreat in search of a more resonant, spiritually fulfilling definition of masculinity.

The nineteenth-century ideology of separate spheres justified gender inequality based on putative natural differences between the sexes. What was normative—enforced by sanction—was asserted to be normal, a part of the nature of things. Women have spent the better part of a century making clear that such an ideology did violence to their experiences, effacing the work outside the home that women actually performed and enforcing a definition of femininity that allowed only partial expression of their humanity.

It did the same for men, of course—valorizing some emotions and experiences, discrediting others. As with women, it left men with only partially fulfilled lives. Only recently, though, have men begun to chafe at the restrictions that such an ideology placed on their humanity.

At the turn of the twenty-first century, it might be wise to recall the words of a writer at the turn of the twentieth century. In a remarkable essay written in 1917, the New York City writer Floyd Dell spelled out the consequences of separate spheres for both women and men:

When you have got a woman in a box, and you pay rent on the box, her relationship to you insensibly changes character. It loses the fine excitement of democracy. It ceases to be a companionship, for companionship is only possible in a democracy. It is no longer a sharing of life together—it is a breaking of life apart. Half a life—cooking, clothes and children; half a life—business, politics and baseball. It doesn't make much difference which is the poorer half. Any half, when it comes to life, is very near to none at all.

Like feminist women, Dell understands that these separate spheres that impoverish the lives of both women and men are also built upon gender inequality. (Notice how he addresses his remarks to men who “have got a woman in a box.”) Gender inequality produced the ideology of separate spheres, and the ideology of separate spheres, in
turn, lent legitimacy to gender inequality. Thus, Dell argues in the opening sentence of his essay that “feminism will make it possible for the first time for men to be free.”

The direction of the gendered society in the new century and the new millennium is not for women and men to become increasingly similar, but rather for them to become more equal, for those traits and behaviors heretofore labeled as masculine and feminine—competence and compassion, ambition and affection—to be labeled as distinctly human qualities, accessible to both women and men who are grown-up enough to claim them. It suggests a form of gender proteanism—a temperamental and psychological flexibility, the ability to adapt to one’s environment with a full range of emotions and abilities. The protean self, articulated by psychiatrist Robert Jay Lifton, is a self that can embrace difference, contradiction, and complexity, a self that is mutable and flexible in a rapidly changing world. Such a transformation does not require that men and women become more like each other, but, rather, more deeply and fully themselves.