

Anna Quindlen Speech
The Power of the Purse Luncheon
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First of all, I'd like to say congratulations on what is an incredible event, and congratulations to Pat for that standing ovation that I think said more than words could ever have said about how this community feels about her service to the community.

I'm always a little confused about what people want me to talk about when I'm in a setting like this. Some of them are interested in my life as a columnist, and so they want me to talk about journalism. Some of them are interested in my life as a novelist, and they want me to talk about fiction writing. But it seemed to me that it was entirely proper today for me to talk about women for women.

I was having breakfast with one of my friends and during the course of the breakfast I mentioned that I forget everything now. I think this had come up because I blanked suddenly on the name of her son, whom I've known since he was a baby. And I didn't even really feel that bad about that because that morning I'd forgotten my own home telephone number. And I could share that with her because she's one of us. You know what I'm talking about; all of us in this room today are one of us. We share lots of the same great educational backgrounds and terrific jobs, privileged existences and lucky children. We exercise on the treadmill, we run into one another on the street or in bookstores. We all shop in the same places and we all buy black pants. What's that all about? I have 18 pairs of black pants!

I wind up talking a lot to big groups of women like us, which is a great blessing. One of my small securities is knowing that if I forget my reading glasses, there will probably be at least a dozen of you in the audience who have the same drugstore magnification number that I have. All the 2.5s? Could you raise your – see? Us.

And one of the greatest things we all have in common is that we've lived through the greatest social and political revolution in the last century in this country. And that's the great changes in the lives of women like us, and our daughters, and our granddaughters. When I was growing up, there weren't any girls in Little League. There were no altar girls in my church. Most law firms had never had a woman partner. Most hospitals had never had a female surgical resident. There were no women in the United States Senate, and there were no women on the United States Supreme Court.

To illustrate the enormous shift, I thought I would tell you the story of three girls today, whom I happen to know well. The first girl had parents who came to the United States from Italy. Her parents were strict, and they were certain about certain things, and so was the girl. She knew that if there was money for college, which there wasn't, but if there was, it was her brother who'd get it, even though her art teacher said that she was really talented and should go to art school. But her parents expected her to get married, which is what she did, and to have children, which she

did, five in all, and to never work outside of her home, and she did that too. But sometimes she showed her children a portfolio she kept in a bedroom drawer of her watercolors, and when she sent them to school with bag lunches, sometimes she drew pictures on the shells of their hardboiled eggs. If she had other dreams, bigger dreams, she never spoke of them, and neither did any of the other women she knew.

The second girl was her daughter. She was raised as her father's oldest son. When she got Bs, he told her she should have As, and when she had As he asked why they weren't A+s. She always knew that she would go to college, but she also knew that there were colleges she couldn't attend because they were only for boys – Princeton, and Yale, and West Point. She looked around at people who ran the country and they were all men, all of them, and she looked at the people who worked at and ran businesses, and they were all men too. And no matter what dream she had she was told that it would just be harder for her, because she was a girl. But she decided that that was just too bad, and that to show them she would just be so much better that no one would be able to take her less seriously.

The third girl is her daughter. She is 20 years old, and she has grown up in a radically different world than her mother did, never mind her grandmother. There are plenty of women and Princeton and Yale, and at West Point too. There are some women in the Senate, and there are not enough women on the Supreme Court. She takes for granted that women work, and that they help run the world. It would never occur to her that her brothers are more entitled than she is to do anything, from college to a career in science, law or medicine.

Now, what you've just heard is a family tree. The frustrated artist was my mother. The girl who was pushed hard by her dad is me, and the youngest is my daughter. I remember once coming to pick her up for "Take Our Daughters to Work Day" when she was 11, and spent the day with my friend the federal judge, and in the cab I asked her if she ever wanted to be a boy, and she replied, "Oh no, Mom, it would be too boring!"

I'm glad that my daughter has come of age in a time when being male seems tedious, in a way, I confess, that being female once seemed to me, when I was a girl. I could never have imagined how different the world would be by the time I was all grown up. I could never have imagined that we would just completely come to take for granted women cops and women firefighters, women rabbis and women ministers, women senators and women judges, women partners and women surgeons, women editors and women columnists. I could never have imagined that my boys, when they were little, would be talking in the back seat of the car one day driving home from a visit to my good friend the pediatrician, and that Chris would say to Quinn, "When I get big, I might want to be a doctor." And Quinn would reply, "Don't be stupid, Christopher, only girls can be doctors!"

I could never have imagined that trickle-down feminism would become so pervasive that some of the things that we thought of as utopian just 30 or 40 years ago would become completely absorbed by the culture. So that one day, when I was visiting a junior high school, one thirteen-year-old boy would rise to his feet and mutter, "Okay. I know that girls can do anything boys can, but ...". He thought that was nothing, what he was saying. He thought that was a

commonly accepted principal: girls can do anything boys can. But I heard revolution encapsulated in that offhand sentence, “Girls can do anything boys can, but...”.

Well, here’s the but – and this event is a great time to deconstruct it: was the point of this whole revolution for us to get corner offices, executive washrooms, fat retainers, retirement accounts? Did we want to win the right to lead imitation guys’ lives? Or did we really want something that we’re just beginning to get now, the right to put our female stamp on the ethos of the whole wide world?

Because despite all the changes I mentioned, that part hasn’t really happened yet. Most Americans, for example, are open to the ideas of women leading, in all areas, in all professions, and because of that, most of us think that all arenas are now open to women leaders. With many more women entering professional fields at the bottom, we have this charmingly naïve belief that we have been rising slowly and steadily to the top. But I got a report a couple of months ago from the White House project, part of the Ms. Foundation, and instantly saw that was not true. Women are half the population, but on average only 20% of the nation’s leaders. In business, in journalism, in politics, there’s a leadership lid in this country, that’s been on for almost 15 years while other countries moved ahead of us. For example, based on the number of women in the House of Representatives, we’ve dropped down the world’s ladder of female political representation to the 69th spot behind – wait for it - Iraq and North Korea. At big law firms in this county, one study showed women were only 12% of the partners in 1993. Today they are way up to 16%.

The saddest part of that is has there ever been a time when we needed new, dynamic, communitarian, philanthropic female leadership more? I mean, by its very nature, female leadership, at least now, is more about redefinition, changing things, while men’s leadership has been about maintaining the status quo. That’s just how it works when one group has all the power and influence, and wants to keep it, and another group has none, and wants some righteous parity. And insiders come with deeply ingrained assumptions and the inevitable sense of business as usual. Outsiders frequently bring clarity of vision, as well as a sense of discovery and innovation. Women aren’t the only people capable of this, don’t get me wrong. But the difficulties we’ve encountered while seeking representation and respect may provide the steel and the strength needed to embrace innovation. You’re less wedded to the shape of the table if you’ve never been permitted to sit at it. Well, we need that now. I mean, look around, the insiders have made a complete hash of things, and everybody knows it. From corporate malfeasance or failure, to a political system that sometimes seems disconnected from everyday realities, the powers that be have ceased to derive their authority from the goodwill of the people. We women have been reinventing ourselves for decades. I think now we are just going to have to reinvent America.

And hear this: we do not need more women in leadership because it’s good for women; we need them because it’s good for everyone. I remember once talking to Deborah Tannin, the famous psycholinguist who has concentrated her research on the differences between the way men and women talk to one another, which you can see anytime you walk past one of them on the telephone, by the way. And she said that men use language for description and confrontation, and

women for connection and communication. Well, connection and communication are not in great supply in our society right now.

We've gone through this great revolution that has kind of been a dialect. I mean, we started with the thesis, the thesis of woman as wife and mother alone, what Betty Friedan called "The Feminine Mystique". And then we came up with an antithesis, an opposite, and it too often in the early days was a 'faux guy's life' complete with those little floppy tie things with our suits that almost killed it all for me. And finally we've approached a synthesis, a balance and that is that work, influence, even power, with no countervailing forces, with no intimacy, no family, no sense of connection to others is for most of us women, no kind of life at all. This revolution meant that we rebelled against the indiscriminate taking of those things we had to give. We rebelled against being taken for granted as support and as caregiver. We rebelled against being seen as second class citizens because we were doing the great work of creating and launching a new generation of new human beings. And we finally found ourselves where we belong which was, like God, everywhere. But with great gains we always have to be careful of our potential losses. And if we women become the sort of people who believe as a group that the position of our names on the page or the letterhead is the most important thing about us, we will, as the Bible verse goes, "have gained the whole world but lost our own souls". If this great social revolution is just about women like us, it's nowhere near enough. There are other women whose lives have not changed the ways ours have. We talk about them in other countries, swaddled in burkhas or enslaved by male tradition. Internationally 80% of the world's 35 million refugees and displaced people are women and children. But we can look at them in our own communities too the way this organization does, because in America the largest share of the most impoverished adults are women and children as well.

You can't call yourself a sister if you think of all those lost and wandering and suffering women, and are not moved. You cannot call yourself a mother if you think of all those lost and wandering and suffering children and are not moved. And you cannot call yourself a human being if you think of all those lost and wandering and suffering people and are not moved. They somehow managed to do what, against all odds, women always do: they comfort and care; they give shape and sustenance. Kofi Annan once said about them, "They maintain the social fabric". Imagine doing that in neighborhoods poisoned by violence and despair, without support or education. It puts all of our complaining about the glass ceiling in stark contrast to the dirt floor.

My mother, who just missed the revolution that changed my life, left her five children an index card with this section of St. Paul's letter to the Corinthians handwritten on it:

Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels and have not love, I am a sounding brass or a clanging cymbal. Though I have the gift of prophecy and know all things, though I have faith strong enough to move mountains, but am without love, I have nothing. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails.

Now, in some versions of the New Testament, that word "love" is translated as "charity", which suits our purposes here today perfectly, because what does it profit us if we gain all that résumé power and all that freedom I talked about, but have not love within or charity towards our sisters

and their children without? Doesn't that mean essentially that the price of our equality will have been the loss, not of femininity, but of basic humanity?

Most of you in this room have done well in your lives. And it's fine to want to do well. But if we do not do good too, doing well is just never good enough.

We so changed the world over the last three decades so we can sit here and have our lunch, after a blessing by a female rabbi – as a Catholic I can only hope. My daughter has grown up with access and opportunities that would never even have occurred to me. She's grown up in a world in which she and her friends assume that the Secretary of State is always a woman. She's grown up in a world in which at a black-tie dinner one night, I heard her say sweetly to the woman on her left, "Oh, you're my second female astronaut." She's grown up in a world in which millions of women have extraordinary opportunity, and millions of others have no safe place for themselves and their children to live, and no hopes for their futures. Lots of you are women with power, whether you think so or not – the power of influence, and the power of affluence. And maybe all of us should walk out of this room today with a shadow at our heels – the shadow of a woman who though she is not here, can't be here, is really one of us. Maybe if we think about her in our mind's eye as we leave here today, she'll remind each of us of what we've been given and therefore what we are obliged to give in return. Believe me, the point of all this was not a corner office. The point was sisterhood, solidarity, freedom, and peace. The point was bringing values of connection and communication to the whole world. I only wish that we'd started earlier, so my mother could have gone to art school. Thank you.