

UP

One Man's Journey to Feminism

Peter W. Pruyn

he / him / his*

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Revision 2020-12-01

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Cover photo: 7,500 feet over Galveston Bay early on a Saturday morning. ©2020 Peter W. Pruyne.

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Content warning:
Contains descriptions of physical and emotional violence

* Pronounced "prine". He/him/his: This is the set of pronouns I ask others to use when referring to me. People who identify as transgender or gender nonconforming may use pronouns that do not conform to binary male/female gender categorizations, such as "they, them, theirs."

Introduction

This book comes from love. I didn't know that when I started writing it, but when I saw the first printout sitting on my kitchen table, for the first time I could see where it came from. Pain happens when something we love is hurting, and I think humanity is hurting.

I think we're losing our way. This sense of unease about the direction our species is heading does not come from any one event but from trends I've experienced across diverse contexts over the course of my life.

This memoir is the confluence of the following arenas of experience: my experience working in operational environments, predominantly aviation and human spaceflight; the theory and practice of decision-making that such environments demand; my experience as a trauma survivor; the resulting lens of gender which my survivorship encourages; and my experience of now working as a trauma-focused psychotherapist.

My current work supporting trauma recovery offers a particular lens for understanding the human experience. Due to its subject matter, however, most people turn away from this lens. After all, it is human to avoid what we fear, and to fear what we do not understand.

I write this memoir with the following overlapping purposes:

- 1) To further my own healing by telling my story and speaking my truth.
- 2) To raise awareness about the pervasive role that trauma plays in everyday life and the enormous societal cost of untreated trauma.
- 3) To raise awareness about how eminently treatable trauma is and the reality and promise of post-traumatic growth.
- 4) Through connecting the dots of my own story, to make the case that the single greatest cause of the perpetuation of societal trauma is patriarchy.
- 5) And finally, as result of 4), to advocate that the most powerful intervention to course-correct our species is achieving gender equity in society.

A result of being a trauma survivor was becoming an unwitting social anthropologist with the ever-present research question, "What are the dynamics of power in this moment?" This question led me to understand how social systems can cause suffering. Guided by empathy borne of my own experience, I gradually began to see the systemic nature of women's suffering and its impact on all of us. Finally, I began to see the problem as patriarchy and feminism as the antidote.

The following diagram summarizes the above.

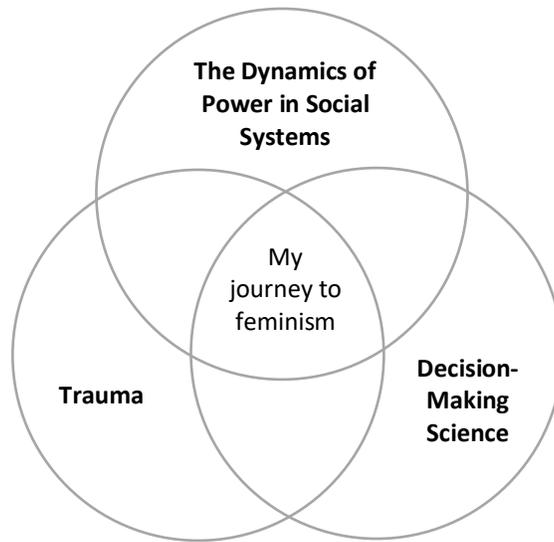


Figure 1: A visual representation of this book.

What This Book is and is Not

I have tried to write this book to meet the reader where they're at. The challenge of such an aspiration is that different readers will have widely different attitudes towards feminism. In a topic rife with pain for so many people, it is inevitable that there will be those who feel I haven't gone far enough as well as those who feel I've gone too far. As a result, I have chosen to make my primary target audience those who are curious, ambivalent, or just learning about feminism. My thinking is that targeting this middle group offers the possibility of making the greatest difference. If someone who is skeptical about feminism reads this book and walks away from it identifying as a feminist, that will be success.

The diagram below depicts a spectrum of attitudes towards feminism and where my target audience falls along it.

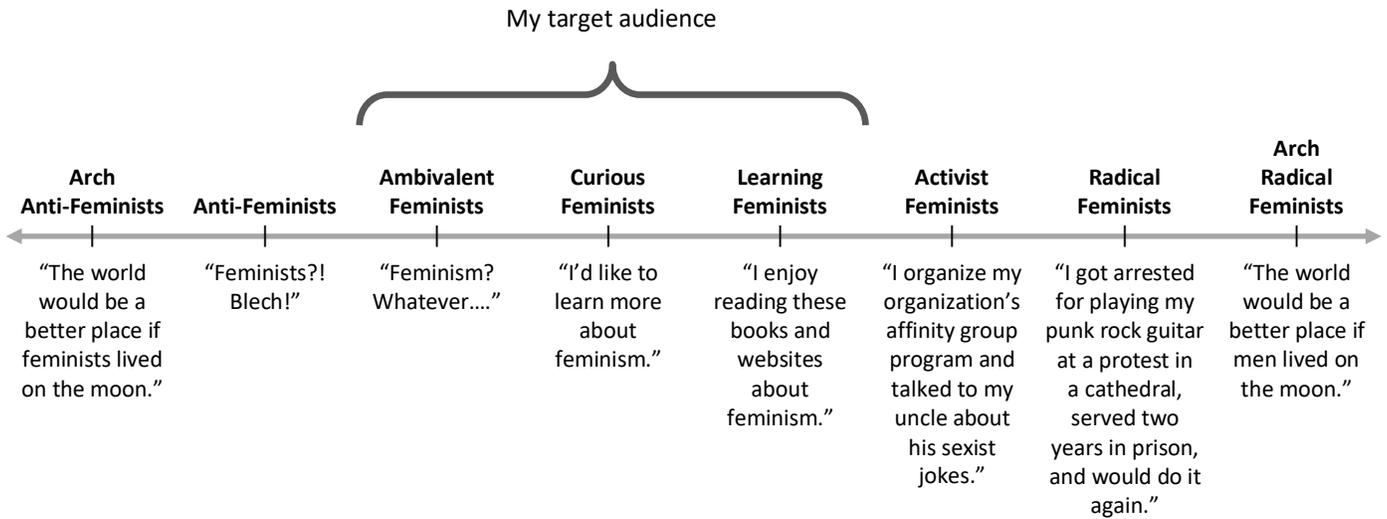


Figure 2: A spectrum of attitudes towards feminism and my target audience.¹

A consequence of this choice is that those who already believe in feminism may find this book's pace slower than they would like. My gradual journey to feminism doesn't start with women; it starts with me, a man, and my experience of the dynamics of power in diverse social settings. How long it takes me to connect the dots to feminism is part of the story.

Another spectrum of difference among readers will be their experience of privilege. I am a White American male. As such, I write from a place of privilege given to me at birth by that identity. Reviewers have shown me how different readers interact with that privilege depending on their own identity and lived experience.

In wrestling with these two spectrums of difference in deciding how to tell my story, I eventually came to the belief that the closer to our truth we speak, the greater the number of people who will be able to hear it. The best I can do is to remain true to myself as best I can.

This book is an exhortation, an exhortation to truth-telling, healing, and human development. Its adversary is not men but a way of thinking that pervades the globe. Some call that way of thinking patriarchy.

Patriarchy pigeon-holes. Pigeon-holing enables comparison, and comparison leads to ranking. What if, as Steinem likes to ask, we are linked, not ranked?

It may be tempting to pigeon-hole this book by supplying a single adjective to categorize it. "Survivor memoir." "Feminist memoir." "Professional memoir." "Travelogue." But labels have a downside; they create expectations, and expectations limit.

Instead, I invite you to experience this book not as a memoir, per se, but as a story, a story of a journey that aspires to be a conversation-starter. What conversations does it make you want to have? What does it make you want to do?

This story is also not trying to be a complete autobiography. The focus is on events that led me to feminism. This includes events that, in retrospect, taught me about who I am as a person,

¹ For one comprehensive model of feminist identity development see: McNamara, K., & Rickard, K. M. (1989). *Feminist identity development: Implications for feminist therapy with women*. *Journal of Counseling & Development*, 68(2), 184-189. The punk rock guitar example is an allusion to Pussy Riot.

including my privileges. My greatest teacher on this journey has been encounters with an ‘Other’—those who were different from me. The result is a collection of stories that helped give me a systemic view, particularly experiences in organizations, other cultures, and witnessing the Earth from the air. A meta-theme of this book is exploring the question, “What are pathways to systemic understanding?” How can we learn to “see systems”? What does it take, as James Joyce put it, to see the universal in the particular?

My most important learnings specifically about gender and power have occurred in organizational settings where multiple actors and levels of power were in play. As a result, this memoir leans toward my professional experiences. Because it leans to the professional, I will spend more time on my older years than my younger years. For the sake of their privacy as well as mine, I will not be focusing on my family or personal relationships any more than is absolutely necessary. One exception will be my relationship with my father—my patriarch.

I identify as a private person. Writing this memoir is by far the most vulnerable thing I’ve done in my life. This is not a personal “tell-all”. It’s an inquiry into the relationship between self-knowledge, systemic understanding, and progress.

I have lived a non-linear and unconventional life. To be true to that life, this memoir is also non-linear and unconventional to some degree, as well. While the central narrative unfolds chronologically, I have chosen to insert certain memories out of order to evoke the experience of intrusive thoughts, visual flashbacks, and emotional flashbacks that trauma survivors experience. The result is a montage of selected scenes from my life.

I am not trying to write “a feminist memoir”. I am telling a story about a life whose destination is the belief in the imperative of gender equity. If you’re expecting men to be “the bad guys” and women “the good guys”, you will be disappointed. If you read waiting for a climactic scene where I jump out of a phone booth wearing a feminist ally cape, you’re also going to be disappointed. It’s a process, not an event. While the themes of survivorship, aviation, travel, and feminism do appear, they are intertwined. The interwoven threads of childhood dreams, fathers and sons, trauma and recovery, mentoring and decision-making, privilege and power, vulnerability, and aging unfold gradually at their own idiosyncratic pace.

In short, gender is complicated, and this memoir wants to engage with that complexity. Managing complexity requires a commitment to both breadth and depth, as well as self-examination. I have come to see self-reflexivity as a core feminist principle, something that patriarchy tends to resist.² To do otherwise is to set ourselves up to repeat old mistakes. This is not “a quick read”. While the destination is feminism, the path is many things.

What do I hope the reader gets out of this story? That depends on who you are.

If you’re an untreated trauma survivor, I want to give you dignity, solidarity, and hope.

If you’re a trauma survivor in recovery, I want to give you dignity, solidarity and validation.

If you’re not a trauma survivor, I want you to understand the systemic role that trauma plays in society and how it impacts all of us.

If you already identify as a feminist, I want to support you.

If you’re on the fence about feminism, I want to challenge you to get off the fence.

And if you have no interest in feminism, you’ve probably got the wrong book.

If I’m honest with myself, I have one additional purpose. We all have good days and bad days. I’m also writing this to remind myself of who I am for the days when I’m at risk of forgetting.

² Also see: Marissa Conway, *Defining Feminist Foreign Policy*, The Centre for Feminist Foreign Policy, May 11, 2020. Retrieved from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QqYCMJMjtUJI>

How This Book Came to Be

In the spring of 2018 I read Chessy Prout's memoir, *I Have the Right To: A High School Survivor's Story of Sexual Assault, Justice and Hope*. Chessy's relentless honesty about her ordeal and recovery was inspiring to me in an unprecedented way. Virtually every chapter left me in tears. I cried for my clients—past, present and future—I cried for Chessy and her family, I cried for myself, and I cried for the majority of trauma survivors around the world who will never receive treatment. Chessy reminded me that our most powerful tool for change is telling our own story. By the time I finished her story, I knew I had to tell mine.³

An over-simplification of Chessy's book would be a story of trauma, recovery, and a critique of the organization that caused the suffering. This inspired me to tell my story using the same components, but I would use my experiences across different organizations, professions, and cultures to critique society as a whole.

One of the unexpected pleasures of getting older is learning from people who are younger than you.

Writing this book now, in the way that I am writing it, I give credit to Chessy and her co-author, *Washington Post* investigative journalist Jenn Abelson, for how they wrote *I Have the Right To*. I am grateful to them both.

Since then, I've realized that there were other earlier experiences that planted seeds for this memoir.

In the late 2000s, a career counselor at a prestigious university asked to do an informational interview with me about my field at the time of organizational development. As you might expect from a career counselor, she asked me to tell her my professional story. When I finished, she paused and said, "*Wow*. That's quite a story—and I've heard a few!" This was coming from someone who had counseled elite international clients as a career. I took that in. For me, it had just been my life. No matter who we are, how we grow up is our normal. Sometimes it takes someone else to point out what is unusual.

It would take much longer for me to realize that I am also someone who has spent a significant amount of time in both male-dominated professions and female-dominated professions. If conventional male culture and conventional female culture were represented as two binary club houses, I often feel like I have guest membership in both club houses but full membership in neither. This has resulted in me trying to understand each from the perspective of the other. In particular, this made me want to create a book about feminism that men actually might want to read.

The final nudge to write this memoir was that while I was a Peace Corps Volunteer in my late 20s, I kept a journal and began to write newsletters to family and friends as a way of keeping in touch. I continued writing newsletters for most of my 30s. As a result, about half the stories in this memoir were already written.

Besides stories from these newsletters, I've included two kinds of artifacts: personal letters and photographs. Over the years, letter-writing has become a central contemplative practice of mine. Collectively, these letters now tell a story of meaningful moments and relationships in my life. Meanwhile, my father's first career was as a photographer, a by-product of which was that I had a very well-documented childhood. I inherited from him the urge to visually document events and beauty in my life. My hope is that these artifacts will bring the reader along in connecting the dots of my life as I did in the course of living it.

To chronicle my evolving perspective over time, most of the newsletter stories and all the

³ For a summary I wrote of Chessy's book see "*Why a Trauma Therapist Recommends Chessy Prout's Story: A High School Survivor Teaches How to Heal*", *Fourth Wave*, medium.com, January 7, 2020, <https://medium.com/fourth-wave/why-a-trauma-therapist-recommends-chessy-prouts-story-e087ba4d8106>.

letters appear as I wrote them at the time. The intention is to document my evolving consciousness. A risk in doing this is that, today, I don't always agree with my past self! If you sometimes find yourself cringing at what I wrote when I was 18, 28 or 38, know that there's a good chance I'm cringing with you, which I sometimes note in the footnotes. As the quote from Ari de Geus in the front-piece suggests, we are only fully able to understand our lives in retrospect. Only the final debrief chapter towards the end of the book is from a perspective of the whole.

For sections about past events that I wrote more recently, whenever possible I tried to speak with people who were there at the time and share drafts with them. In some cases, I had access to audio recordings. For the sake of privacy, I've made the decision to change most individual and organizational names, and some individuals depicted are composite characters.

As I wrote, I tried my best to imagine the impact of my words on different audiences. How will People of Color react to my experiences of race? What will Native Alaskans think of my descriptions of the Yup'ik? How will Asian readers react to my observations of Vietnam? How will my note to transgender readers below be received?

To help answer these questions, I shared five drafts of the manuscript with a diverse collection of reviewers of different ages, races, genders, sexual orientations, and nationalities. As a result of that process, I have come to see this book as like a pinball in a pinball machine. When my story bumps into a reader's pain, one of two things seems to happen. Either my story validates and helps heal the reader's pain or it makes the reader's pain worse. Based on feedback, it is my belief that the difference between those two groups of readers comes down to whether they trust me or not. As a result, I will offer the following advice: if, by the end of Chapter 1, you feel you don't trust me, I strongly recommend that you stop reading. My goal isn't to maximize the number of people who read this book; it's to maximize the quality of connection with those who do.

While I have done my best to make this account as factually accurate as possible, it is difficult to document more than 50 years of life without error. Though I have valued the assistance of many others in this process, whatever inaccuracies remain are mine and mine alone.

Options for Reading this Book

My reviewers taught me that there is more than one way to read this book.

If you're interested in both the journey (my life) and the destination (feminism), I recommend reading the book as it was designed to be read: front to back. This will allow events and insights to build on themselves as they did for me living my life.

If you're more interested in the destination than the journey, you might start with Chapter 10: *Debrief*. The downside of doing this is that you will not understand the references to prior events in my life. Chapter 10 may also be useful to share with someone who you don't think will read the whole book. Feeling particularly hopeless about gender equality? See the Chapter 10 section *Hope*.

If you're more interested in the journey than the destination, you might enjoy cherry-picking stories to read. Most sections were originally written as standalone stories. Ever wonder what it's like to scuba dive at night? Read *Night Dive* from Chapter 3. Never flown in Alaska? Take a look at the stories in Chapter 4: *Alaska*, such as *Victoria's Wings*. Ever wanted to travel in Vietnam? Read Chapter 7: *Vietnam*. Ever wonder what it's like to fly over the Grand Canyon? Read *Grand Canyon Air* from Chapter 5.

Finally, if you are more interested in taking action than in reading, you might start with the *Resources* section in the Appendix. I didn't want to tell a story just for the sake of telling a story. I also wanted to encourage future action.

Use of Italics

Besides the traditional use of italics to emphasize individual words or phrases, I also use italics in three other ways.

First, each chapter begins with an introduction written from the perspective of the present day. These introductions are in italics to demarcate the transition to the time-frame of each chapter.

Second, there are places where I represent my inner dialogue or self-talk at the time in italics.

Third, as described above, I occasionally insert related memories into the text. To denote a retrospective shift, these memories are also in italics.

A Note to My Transgender and Non-Binary Readers

You understand gender and power dynamics better than I ever will because you live with cis-normativity every day.⁴ As a result, frankly I'm skeptical I have much to teach you about feminism. I have more to learn from you. So please understand that every time I say "men and women" in this book, I haven't forgotten you. I'm trying to address the readers who I feel need to engage in these conversations most.

⁴ Cisgender refers to a person whose gender identity and gender expression correspond with their biological sex assigned at birth. For example, a cisgender man would be a person whose biological sex is male, identifies as male, and presents as a man. Cis-normativity is the assumption that being cisgender is the social norm. For more on sexuality and gender, see <https://www.genderbread.org/>.

Acknowledgments

More than three dozen people reviewed different drafts of this book. As this is a memoir, some who helped with the book are also those who helped with my life. It is not possible to name them all. Here I will just name a few, chronologically, whose kindness along the way furthered my journey:

Jerry Cascio	Grady McGonagill
Janice Berkey	Richard Karash
Cynthia Maupin	Jane Briscoe
Dennis Thurmond	Helen Haste
David Clarke	Andrew Scott Conning
Robert Sample	Robert Dingman
Doug Rademacher	Susan Powell
Michele Fish	Richard Reilly
Juris Hartmanis	Magi McKinnies
Donald Greenberg	Cynthia Jirak
Richard Thaler	Leah Price
Marguerite and Roger Mancienne	Rhonda Holyoke
Mislaine and Benoit Laporte	Robert Ross
Tom Wardleigh	Debbie Korn
Don King	Valerie Hudson
Janice Voss	Mike Descoteaux
Steve Nagel	and my parents.
Mike Fossum	
Michael Sterling and my colleagues of DT34	
Donna Blankmann-Alexander	
Jim Wetherbee	
Al Holland	
Piers Sellers	
Milt Heflin	

A private person writing a memoir is a paradox. In addition to the encouragement of those above over the course of my life, I would like to acknowledge the role of someone I've never met whose example helped sustain the two-and-a-half-year effort to bring this book into the world.

When UN Women Global Goodwill Ambassador Emma Watson was all of 26 years-old, she gave a speech at the 2016 One Young World Conference in Ottawa, Canada. In that speech she shared with the audience seven statements that, as she put it, "I've struggled with, and continue to struggle with on a daily basis, but that I have found inspiring

I am willing to be seen.
I am willing to speak up.
I am willing to keep going.
I am willing to listen to what others have to say.
I am willing to go forward even when I feel alone.
I am willing to go to bed each night at peace with myself.
I am willing to be my biggest, best-est, most powerful self.

She then concluded, "These seven statements scare the absolute shit out of me. But I know that they are at the crux of it all. At the end of the day, and when all is said and done, I know that these are the ways that I want to have lived my life."⁵

Thank you, Emma Watson.

What you hold in your hands is what those words have meant to me.

PWP
Cambridge, Massachusetts

⁵ The full speech is here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=elbqER_ZrLQ

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