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## Necessary Dreams: Ambition in Women's Changing Lives

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# Book Review

Catherine L. Morgan

## Necessary Dreams: Ambition in Women's Changing Lives

*Anna Fels. (2004). Necessary Dreams: Ambition in Women's Changing Lives. New York, NY: Anchor Books, 297 pages.*

*Anna Fels* is a practicing psychiatrist who has written on psychiatric and medical topics for the *New York Times Book Review*, *The (London) Times Literary Supplement*, *The Nation*, *Self*, the *Science Times* section of *The New York Times*, and most recently the *Harvard Business Review*. She is a member of the faculty of the Weill Medical College of Cornell University at New York Presbyterian Hospital.

### Introduction

The central theme of *Necessary Dreams* is the importance of ambition in women's lives. Fels states that "(w)omen, more than men, need to actively imagine themselves into their futures because so little is mapped out for them at this historical moment" (p. xvi). She contends that to have a plan, to pursue an ambition, it is necessary to dream. Although women have more choices open to them than ever, they are often still reluctant to express their ambitions. Why this is so is the subject of this book.

From her research, Fels concludes that ambition is composed of two parts, mastery of skills and meaningful recognition of that mastery. She uses the term recognition to mean "being valued by others for qualities that we experience and value in ourselves; it involves appreciation by another person that feels accurate and meaningful to the recipient" (p. 9). Both mastery of skills and recognition are essential, in Fels's opinion, in that a plan for the future without mastery is not ambition but mere "wishful thinking" and that a desire for recognition without mastery is the essence of narcissism.

This book will interest women who are, or who aspire to be, in leadership positions in higher education. Fels cites examples of women in higher education who have worked along side their male colleagues and who have not received equal rewards. She also cites a news story (Lewin, 2002) in

## About the Author

*Catherine L. Morgan* is Dean of the School of Business at Bridgewater State College in Bridgewater, Massachusetts. She began her academic career as a full-time faculty member and later entered administration. Morgan has participated in leadership opportunities for women in higher education including Certificate, HERS Summer Institute 2006, Bryn Mawr College, a four-week program which cover topics of legal issues in higher education, intercollegiate athletics, fund-raising and capital campaigns, accreditation, leading transformational change, strategic planning, student affairs, tenure review, institutional culture, diversity, and budgeting. Morgan has been honored for her leadership in education by the Florida Times-Union with its coveted EVE award in Education and with a Glass Ceiling Award by the Mayor's Commission on the Status of Women and the Women's Center of Jacksonville, Florida. Email: [catherine.morgan@bridgew.edu](mailto:catherine.morgan@bridgew.edu).

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which some women were found to be denied tenure based on their personalities. Her discussion on the masculine and feminine traits of leadership is interesting, particularly in light of a widely used measure of androgyny (Bem, 1974) finding that "ambition" is considered by the study participants to be a male leadership trait. She presents the documented behavior of females in the company of males as an argument in favor of single gender education. The discussion on the importance of recognition provided by institutions easily translates to higher education in which recognition comes in the form of promotion, tenure, and awards. Fels bemoans that "(t)he lack of support for women often occurs in ways that seem trivial—less secretarial support, a smaller office, no funding for a much-needed computer upgrade. Women professionals are often loaded down with committee assignments and other tasks that are time-consuming but provide little opportunity for advancement" (p. 131). For women of all professions, Fels provokes us to recall our own dreams and ambitions and to reflect upon the paths that our careers have taken.

## Overview

*Necessary Dreams* is organized into four parts. Part one introduces the subject of ambition. Part two, on the relation between recognition and ambition, includes six of the book's 14 chapters. It covers such diverse topics as femininity, why recognition is important for ambition, unequal (by gender) rewards, pseudo-recognition, and the importance of parents, mentors, institutions, and peers. Part 3 includes sections on skills, femininity and mas-

tery. The chapter on combining femininity and mastery is the longest chapter in the book, with seven sections. The final section of the book includes discussion on careers, marriage and family.

In a September 2004 interview with NPR's Diane Rehm, Dr. Fels explained that she had not started out with a hypothesis that she wanted to test (<http://wamu.org/programs/dr/04/09/06.php>). What she set out to do was to pursue an interest she developed as an undergraduate working with a scholar on women and achievement—she wanted to understand ambition. The desire to understand, rather than the desire to test scientifically a hypothesis, accounts for the methodology of the book.

Fels's approach is to weave together citations of psychological theories, research literature from various fields, biographies of noted women, popular press profiles of women and their achievements, and her own interactions through counseling and interviews. There are literally hundreds of citations and notes at the end of the book that allow the reader to delve more deeply into any that are of interest.

In order to understand ambition, Dr. Fels mined numerous studies from the fields of psychology, sociology, and organizational behavior. She enriches the reader's understanding of ambition with validating material from patient interviews and from biographies and writings of women such as Eleanor Roosevelt, Golda Meir, Margaret Mead, Willa Cather, Dorothy Wordsworth, and Simone de Beauvoir. She quotes from profiles of Vietnam War memorial designer Maya Lin, *Washington Post* publisher Katherine Graham, and Congresswoman Patricia Schroeder to emphasize a point about women who are uncomfortable with recognition. From these varied sources, Fels comes to clear understanding of ambition and the importance of mastery and recognition.

From her interviews with women and men CEOs, she concludes that for women the word ambition is a loaded word, connoting pushiness, aggressiveness, and a host of other "negative" attributes. Rarely would a woman CEO admit to Fels that she was ambitious. In contrast, Fels told Diane Rehm that the male CEOs "readily admitted to being ambitious and sometimes chided themselves for not being ambitious enough."

Her interviews, along with the literature and profiles on notable women, led her to conclude that women not only deny their ambitions, they marginalize themselves by denying that their mastery—of politics, diplomacy, or design—was a factor in their success. Fels names accomplished leaders such as Eleanor Roosevelt and Golda Meir who had difficulty admitting they were responsible for their own success or that they enjoyed it. She notes Katherine Graham's refusal to admit personal courage in her decisions to cover the Watergate matter in the *Washington Post*. She quotes a 1995 *Vogue* interview with Maya Lin, the designer of the Vietnam War Memorial, as saying that she feels lucky because she is "five foot two and three-quarters and weigh 96 pounds . . . people tend not to see you if you're small." In a later passage, Fels notes that "men simply do not talk this way," a conclusion with which the reader can heartily agree.

Fels would likely be interested to see the printed interview with recently selected Harvard president Drew Gilpin Faust. Faust is quoted in an interview as saying, "One of the things that I think characterizes my generation . . . that characterizes me, anyway, and others of my generation . . . is that I've always been surprised how my life turned out. I've always done more than I ever thought I would" (*Boston Globe*, 2/16/2007). This statement by Faust is an example of what Fels terms a well-worn narrative device "in which the successful woman starts as a young innocent and is waylaid by circumstances and somehow bamboozled into her present, utterly surprising success" (p. 25). As further example, Fels quotes a woman who became chair of a department of medicine as saying "Everything has been rather serendipitous. None of what I've described to you was planned . . . I was able to get good positions and good things just happened" (p. 30).

Fels terms this kind of denial the "fraudulence syndrome," a syndrome which accounts for accomplished women denying competence and authority (p. 192).

Fels concludes from her reading and research that different cultures and ethnic groups set different standards and hold different expectations for women. She states, for example, that middle-class, white women are expected (more so than black women) to defer attention and recognition to males. Fels leaves the reader wanting more discussion and documentation from her on this subject.

Fels also cites a variety of research and literature on women's failure to recognize the need for visibility. Women in education may be particularly interested in the discussion of Dr. Marguerite Vogt who worked with a male colleague at the Salk Institute on studies that led to the development of polio vaccine. While her colleague won a Nobel prize, Dr. Vogt told a *New York Times* interviewer that she was "happy not to have been bothered" adding that "(w)hen you get too famous, you stop being able to work" (p. 41).

The author's discussion on institutions is of particular relevance to women in higher education. Fels describes a 1997 study (Seymour & Hewitt) that found the single most important reason that women abandon studies of science and mathematics is lack of encouragement. (Obviously, former Harvard University President Larry Summers was unaware of, or disregarded, this study.) A discussion of a fairly recent study (Etzkowitz, Kemelgor & Uzzi, 2000) in which young women scientists said that they received less collaboration, that they had been treated as sub-ordinates, and that they had been ignored by their post-doctoral advisors may well dredge up some painful memories for women in higher education (p. 129). Fels adds to the evidence that women in the academy receive unequal attention, recognition, and rewards by referencing a 2003 study (Astin & Cress) of women professors at MIT who reported less institutional support than their male colleagues receive in every category of support (p. 130).

Fels's most interesting contribution is the understanding that she shares about the importance of recognition. She holds it to be one of the most basic elements of life, responsible for our definitions of our own identities. Citing studies from sociology and psychology (Bush & Simmons, 1987; Rosenberg, 1981), she relates identity formation with the concept of reflected self-appraisal, i.e. that "our sense of ourselves is defined by the responses we elicit from others" (p. 75). Others "appraise us of what they consider our capabilities and characteristics, and we then internalize their assessments, making them our own" (p. 76).

She cites relationships between recognition and productivity and between recognition and moods. From the Hawthorne studies in the 1920s, it has been observed that productivity rises in response to attention and recognition. She points to recent findings of positive associations between recognition and serotonin, a neurotransmitter that regulates mood (Kramer, 1993). Taken together, these studies clarify the importance of recognition in making us more productive and in improving our moods so that we have the energy to pursue our ambitions.

In her discussion relating recognition and ambition, Fels notes that ambitions are fluid, never fixed, and change in response to new opportunities for mastery and recognition. In the NPR interview, Fels talks more about this with a caller who notes how her ambitions had changed over time—becoming simpler, with a desire to be the kind of mother she envisioned, to give to the community, to be a kind person. Her husband's ambitions, on the other hand, had remained fixed—to have more money, more power, and more knowledge "than the next guy" (Rehm, 2004).

Fels provides a convincing argument that females receive less recognition for accomplishment than males do at every stage of development, from preschool throughout their careers. She notes the effect of gender on recognition ranging from acknowledgement by teachers in classrooms to personnel evaluations in the workplace.

On the subject of motherhood, Fels makes the provocative statement that "caring for children is the exact opposite of ambition" and that "motherhood is not the place to find" recognition. She is clear that parenting is a rich experience; it is just that recognition is not one of the rewards. She maintains "(p)arenting and ambition have very different benefits and constraints—in fact, they barely overlap. The two activities employ separate talents, provide different emotional rewards . . . and call upon dissimilar personal resources." She calls having children as "all too often the death knell for women's ambitions." Her discussion in the remaining part of the chapter explains why—that finding good and affordable childcare is difficult, that men are seemingly incapable of being caretakers, and that societal convention labels working mothers as neglectful of their children. She supports the decision of women to work by pointing out recent literature that shows children with working mothers are well adjusted and that they are more self-confident, and get better grades than children with non-working mothers.

## Conclusion

Fels's effort to better understand ambition has resulted in a positive contribution by explaining the undeniable role that recognition plays in women's ambitions. By establishing a history of gender differences in rewards, attention, and recognition for accomplishments, Fels explains gender differences in attitudes toward ambition.

*Necessary Dreams* is very readable and thought provoking. Fels's expertise is without question and her diligence in documenting professional and popular literature is laudable.

At times, the book suffers from uneven editing. In some places, material is not tightly woven and the book is, at times, somewhat repetitious. Some assertions are not documented well and a few citations are quite dated. Finally, the reader will likely wish that Fels would have offered more by way of recommendations for the problems that she so clearly describes.

There are passages in this book that will make the reader pause, reflect, and read again. Fels is at her best when she reflects from her position as psychiatrist and informed reader. In a passage worthy of remembering, Fels states,

If women are to thrive, we must identify, critically assess, and purposefully develop situations that can provide sustaining affirmation—spheres of recognition. If we have no opportunities for support, we have to acknowledge this and find other venues (p. 97).

She further emphasizes that "(w)omen who do not formulate life plans that are supported by appreciative communities pay a steep price. They often fail to understand, in the absence of such affirmation, why they feel unmotivated and de-moralized. They blame it on their lack of discipline or character or talent. But if sources of recognition are unavailable or inadequate or outside a woman's control, the chances are dim that she will thrive in her chosen enterprise" (p. 98).

Overall, this is a book well worth reading by all women and particularly by women who are, or who aspire to be, in leadership positions in higher education. For such women, Fels validates that the ambition to be in a leadership role is acceptable and she makes a strong case that women need to surround themselves with colleagues who provide them with positive recognition.

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