

4-2008

The Story of Women

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Grady, Marilyn L., "The Story of Women" (2008). *Journal of Women in Educational Leadership*. 49.
<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/jwel/49>

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The Story of Women

Marilyn L. Grady

In a quest to visit the Statue of Liberty, the incredibly long line of similar adventurers waiting for the experience distracted me. I determined that in order to board the ferry to Liberty Island, in addition to the treacherous line to acquire the ticket, I would need to have two security screenings before I could begin the ascent of the steps.

I was not charmed by the idea of investing a day in seeking this bonding experience with the Statue. Besides, I had made the trek many years ago when I was much more enthusiastic and before the advent of security screenings and endless lines.

I began to retrace my steps through the park to the subway station of my arrival. I had seen a very old, red brick building on my way to the Statue of Liberty. The building was three stories and appeared to be from the era of George Washington. It was not prominently marked as a historic site . . . but it had “the look.”

I walked to the front of the building, walked around the front in search of some identification, and went up the steps to explore more. In the entryway, there were a number of brochures. To the left, a small office appeared to be unoccupied. A sign described the building as “a place to rest a while.” To the left was a small chapel. By picking through the brochures, I determined that I was in a shrine or memorial to Elizabeth Ann Seton. Very old pictures that traced Seton’s life decorated the back of the chapel. There were possibly as many as 40 of these colored pictures. I read the story they told.

Elizabeth’s story is a woman’s story. She was born in 1774 to a New York family. She was a child of privilege. However, her mother died when she was three. Her father remarried and the stepmother did not treat Elizabeth kindly. Elizabeth spent her childhood with aunts, uncles, and family friends. She was ignored by her father until she had passed her childhood. Eventually she developed a fond relationship with her father.

She married at 19. Her husband was from a prominent New York family as well. The first of their five children was born when they had been married for a year. Shortly after the birth of their daughter, Anna, Elizabeth’s husband began to demonstrate the symptoms of tuberculosis. Following the birth of their third child, her husband’s business failed and he filed bankruptcy papers. By this time, Elizabeth’s father had died of yellow fever and Elizabeth and her husband became responsible for Elizabeth’s stepbrothers and stepsisters as well as their own children. Soon the Setons had two more children.

Her husband’s health was steadily deteriorating. Elizabeth, her husband,

and the eight-year-old Anna departed for a trip to Italy. The trip was to help him recover his health. Family friends cared for the other four children. The crossing took two months according to the story. When they arrived in Italy, the three were detained in a lazaretto for a month due to the threat of spreading yellow fever that was prevalent in the U.S. After a month, they were released from the lazaretto. Within days, her husband died. Friends in Italy cared for Elizabeth and her daughter.

Elizabeth stayed in Italy with the friends for several months. During that time, she experienced a religious conversion. Raised as an Episcopalian, she embraced the Catholic religion through her Italian friendship. She returned to New York and was scorned by her family and friends for her new religion. Her lack of resources and the need to care for her children caused her to embark on a working life.

She moved to Baltimore since she was no longer welcomed in New York. In Baltimore, she was a teacher. She was persuaded to go to Emmitsburg, Maryland and established a school there. Elizabeth Seton, through her work in Maryland, was credited with being the founder of the parochial Catholic school system in the U.S.

Elizabeth formed a group of sisters known as the Sisters of Charity of St. Joseph. The sisters focused on education, schools, orphanages and working with the poor. This religious community spread throughout the U.S., Canada, Bolivia, Puerto Rico, Japan, Italy and the Bahamas.

Throughout her work, she was accompanied by her children and constantly involved in their lives. She faced the tragedy of Anna's death from tuberculosis and Rebecca's death following an accident. Elizabeth reported the difficulties she had with her two sons during their youth and young adulthood. They were frequently in trouble and experienced difficulties in work settings.

She died in 1821. Elizabeth Ann Seton was canonized in 1975 as the first American born saint.

Her story is a woman's story. The small building at 7 State Street, New York City tells the story of one woman. It would be easy to miss both the building and the story. There are many women's stories that need to be told.

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