

## Paper Straws, a Lifetime of Activism

SCENE: A blank stage, a single bentwood chair with a red, woven mat. A small side table with re-usable metal cup full of ice water. It's purple with 'female' symbols and the Spanish phrase "Soy Feminista" on a sticker.

A woman is sitting in the chair. Her hair is blonde with streaks of teal and green and blue and a hint of purple. She's short. She's curvy. She's wearing faded jeans and Ryka sneakers and a t-shirt that has peach and blue hands forming a heart that she got from a fundraiser for RAICES.

She takes a sip of water, then begins to speak.

WOMAN: I bought a package of paper straws a few months ago. I saw this info-meme-thing – I never know what those are called; do you? Anyway, I saw one of those charts about how it was easy to say that all plastic straws should be banned but that for some people with disabilities bendable, plastic straws are the only things that allow them to drink in public, so maybe it shouldn't be a ban. Maybe it should be a strong suggestion that *if you are able* to use something other than a bendable, plastic straw you should use an alternative.

So, I bought this bag of paper straws, and I could feel the cashier looking at me, like, here's some white woman with colored hair buying designer straws, and she thinks that's gonna change the world.

But the thing is.

I've been changing the world all my life.

For example.

I am three years old. I hear my grandmother speak in whispers about how some woman I don't know is a (whispers) lesbian (normal voice) and I don't know what that means, so when Mommy gets home from work, I ask:

"Mommy, what's a lesbian?"

And Mommy says, "well, when two men love each other, they're gay, and when women love each other, they're lesbians."

And in my three-year-old heart, this is perfectly natural, so I say, "Well, I must be a lesbian, too, Mommy, because I love you." And Mommy laughs and says, "You keep thinking just that way.

(WOMAN takes a break to drink some more water and re-center herself.)

WOMAN: Or how about this: I am five or six, and I've brought this really great book to school show-and-tell. It's called *Where Did I Come From*, and it's an age-appropriate explanation of how babies are made. Now, the pictures are not particularly explicit –

I mean all the parts are there but they're kinda cartoony, and the sperm are wearing top hats and bow ties – but it also uses real names for body parts. None of this whosis and whatsis and peepee and thingy. Real words. Proper names. And sure, it's super heteronormative, but, come on, it was nineteen-seventy-six.

I got in trouble for bringing deviant and inappropriate materials to school. My teacher was apologetic when she called my mother, but, "Some parents were offended by their children being exposed to information they didn't feel they should have."

I am seven years old and the second grade reading class is too easy for me, but the fourth grade workbook is written in cursive, so I am sent to the special education teacher to learn cursive writing ahead of schedule. The school board has a fit. The special education teacher (who invites local kids over to her house to bake cookies and watch movies on weekends – it was Colorado in the seventies) reminds them that 'special education' is for *all* children who fall outside the norm, not merely for those who are behind it.

(Another pause. Another sip of water. WOMAN is antsy. She paces the stage while she speaks.)

WOMAN: I am twelve years old and performing in a sketch at a "Ban the Bomb" rally in Modesto, California. I am twelve years old and being arrested at my first protest: Lawrence Livermore Laboratory.

I am thirteen years old and my parents are forming the Modesto chapter of the global organization Amnesty International. Scholars, thinkers, and activists from around the country come to help us get it started. The night before one of our events, I get up in the wee hours to get a glass of water and Joan Fucking Baez is sleeping in my living room, and I almost trip over her face.

I am fourteen years old, and I've only been in my new school for four days, but Walter Mondale and Geraldine Ferraro are speaking and I'm invited to go, and I say, sure. The rope breaks and Jonathon from my dance class and I end up becoming the rope line. I am fourteen years old and I am shaking the hand of the first woman to run for vice president, and no, she doesn't win, but she shows me that strong women come in all flavors.

(WOMAN comes back to the chair. She picks up a scarf that was on the table. It's white cloth with purple and black female signs on it. She sips water. Takes a beat. When she speaks again, her voice is a little deeper. A little more careful. A little older.)

WOMAN: I am eighteen years old and my best friend at college tells me her family fled Taiwan because they were too political, but her brother refused to leave his university, and she fears she may never see him.

I am nineteen years old and I see an ad in the paper for a new coalition forming, a group to protect reproductive rights in Silicon Valley. I tell my mother we have to join. I work for her, at that time, and that summer, as Operation Rescue stages an all-out attack on abortion clinics throughout California, our offices become a counter-demonstration headquarters.

And I learn... oh, god, I learn so much.

I learn the difference between a demonstration and a protest.

I learn that when you go to either, you have to have people with you who aren't participants, but whose whole job is to watch you, and help you if there's trouble.

I learn that bubble ordinances make all the differences, and that when it comes to intersectionality, reproductive rights, gay rights, and gender identity rights have much more than you might think on the surface.

Truth: If it were not for organizations like ACT UP and QUEER NATION abortion rights would be WAY worse than they are now.

Truth: For all the intersectionality we have managed, we still ignore our brothers and sisters of color more often than not.

There are death threats against people I love.

There are undercover cops watching our house.

And then the summer is over.

And I am twenty.

And another year passes.

I am twenty-one, and I'm lying on the light rail tracks playing Becky Bell in street theatre.

I am twenty-two and I am singing Peggy Seeger's "Engineer Song" at a completely different sort of event.

I am twenty-four, and I'm in South Dakota and I'm marrying a man I met on the internet and my mother says, "Can't you just live with him first," but I can't because I know his heart, and it's true.

And my midwestern husband gets a fast education in my normal-to-me radical-to-him politics.

And when we have our after-the-fact celebration my gay friend M-with-the-purple-docs stands up with him.

My politics don't change.

My views broaden.

My circle of friends expands to include, not just friends who are LGBTQ, but also friends who are poly, friends who are non-binary, friends who identify as bi-gender. I have writer friends and improv friends and board game friends and activist friends and dog rescue friends and...

And I reach my thirties, and then my forties, and I see the world changing. I see boomers and millennials having a war about which generation is more fucked up, while my generation is caught in the crossfire. And you know what?

I don't care.

I don't fucking care.

I'm tired of having to constantly vote and argue and vote and argue over points we thought we'd won. I'm tired of this constant one step forward, two steps back. Millennials blame Baby boomers and Boomers blame Millennials, and Gen X gets caught in the crossfire, and who fucking cares.

We're all in it together and I don't know about the rest of you but I'm TIRED.

I'm tired of supporting soldiers but not war, and I'm tired of standing on the side of love (can I do it sitting down?) and I'm tired of having to make sure everything I eat is organic, grass fed, free range, fair trade, and gluten free.

I confess! My new laptop came from China! And I felt so guilty about it that I made an extra donation to Habitat for Humanity.

(But there isn't an American computer company that can make what I got from Lenovo for a comparable price.)

So, yeah, I'm tired, and when I'm tired, I pick fights and just last night I yelled at my husband who cooked and cleaned all summer while I was recovering from surgery for not recycling a bottle. A single bottle. And when he looked at me and asked why it mattered, I almost – almost – shrugged and said it didn't...

(The lights go dark. There is a thunder clap. There is lightning. There is the sound of rain. When the lights come back, WOMAN is sitting on the floor downstage center, with her water)

WOMAN: The starfish saved me from a fight with my husband.

Look. You know the story? right. Of the little girl on the beach who sees the starfish stuck on the shore and starts throwing them back into the sea?

She's doing that, and a man comes up to her (it's *always* a man) and asks, "Why are you doing that? You can't save them all. It won't make a difference."

But the little girl is smart. She knows. She says, "It'll make a difference to this starfish."

I can't march anymore. I spent two years walking around with a torn ACL, and last year I had surgery and I'm still in the last part of rehab for it.

I protest with my dollars now.

But I still protest. I still ACT.

I still throw that one starfish back into the sea.

Sometimes it's by recycling one single bottle.

Sometimes it's by choosing a black-owned restaurant or shopping at a gay-owned chocolate company.

Sometimes it's by buying a t-shirt to support RAICES.

And sometimes it's by buying a bunch of paper straws.

(WOMAN walks to the center of the stage and raises her fist high. Defiant) .

BLACKOUT