



A farmer and his (or could it be her) possessions. This mural was on a side wall of a Main Street building in Pocahontas, Iowa. 1989.

GENDER: AN UPDATED PERSPECTIVE

Introduction

In the section “Gender Mactters” in my chapter titled “Wrestling with a Heritage,” written over 20 years ago, I addressed gender issues somewhat candidly but more timidly than I would now. Even so, I continue to weigh what I say about gender. There are many who might feel that talking about gender diminishes their appreciation of this book. Or there may be members of the LGBTQ+ community or its advocates who say that I do not truly understand the issues.

I share these thoughts not as a thorough and fixed exploration of gender issues but presenting my perspective that is ever evolving. I also have questions. What I write is meant to be part of the greater conversation in society—not leaving the conversation totally in the purview of those people in the media and on the cutting edge of gender.

Before moving ahead, I want to share some narratives from the past that are emblematic of my journey with gender issues. In some respects, in my early years, Mother and Dad were progressive in accommodating my countercultural interests. For instance, Mother gave into my request as a preschooler to have Buster Brown leather shoes just like the ones Charles had. Unfortunately, when I wore them to Sunday school, I felt out of place among the other girls who were dressed more femininely with the likes of Mary Jane patent leather shoes. I never wore the brown shoes to church again.

When I was five, Dad gave Charles and me a football as payment for cleaning up a pile of wooden shingles and other debris after our new corn crib was built. Dad would also take the two of us pheasant hunting with him and his fellow hunters. Also, for Christmas, Mother and Dad would give Charles and me identical gifts—Hopalong Cassidy costumes, American Bricks, or erector sets.

To their credit, Mother and Dad believed in quality education for all of us, and we all have college degrees. Also, for the most part, they treated us siblings equally in their estate planning. The imbalance that existed was not due to gender or marital status.

However, there were many ways that they were conventional. As an example, I liked to wear my hair short and straight, but when I was a teenager and a new school year would begin, Mother would talk about how all the nice girls were getting permanents and wondered if I didn’t think I should get one, too. I would acquiesce and go through the rigmarole, not only of the toxic chemical smell of getting a permanent either at the beauty parlor or at home, but also of putting my hair in curlers at night, having a hard time sleeping on them, hating how I looked the next day, and brushing my hair as much as possible, but unsuccessfully, to smooth out the awkward curls.

When Charles and I would come back to the house after a long day of working in the fields, his work was done for the day, but Mother still required me to help in the kitchen. Charles was allowed to castrate hogs with Dad and his helpers. I was not allowed even nearby the pen. Ironically, vice presidential candidate Sarah Palin and Iowa senator Joni Ernst have both bragged about castrating pigs.

At the end of family meals around Mother’s oak kitchen table, even when we siblings were older and some had spouses, she would say, “I want you girls to do the dishes and you men to carry out the garbage.” Why refer to the women as girls and the men as men or to assign chores based on gender? She could instead have simply trusted us to do our share of the work, or that she expected us to help with the dishes and carrying out the garbage. A bigger example is how my brother was the only one of us siblings groomed to make farm decisions.



Helen, high school freshman. 1959.



HELEN GUNDERSON

**The more I see of men, the
better I like my horse.**

Helen's senior photo and caption in
high school annual. 1963. *Photo by Don
Peterson Photography, Fort Dodge, Iowa.*

Gender discrimination at school included how teachers would commonly address students with a binary greeting, "Good morning, boys and girls." And at graduation ceremonies, the seniors processed to and from the stage in boy-girl pairs.

Rolfe did not offer sports programs for girls until I was a freshman in 1959. That was only because the district merged with the Des Moines Township district, which had a girls basketball team. Also, girls were either not allowed or at least were discouraged from taking vocational agriculture and industrial arts. In recent years, I was stunned when I learned from Charles that Mother and Dad did not allow him to take the ag and shop courses because they would have been beneath him and meant he had less time to take college preparatory courses. In contrast, my parents did not fret about my choice, when I was a senior, to drop out of chemistry class after the first day of feeling overwhelmed and instead took a second year of home economics. It was not a choice I would have anticipated, but I needed another class to fill my schedule, and by joining the class, there would be enough students enrolled in it to qualify for state funding.

Some stories may be funny on the surface but represent important underlying issues. For decades, I have been able to chuckle about my senior photograph and the caption under it in the high school yearbook. Some of my classmates were on the yearbook staff but were not transparent about their work, meaning the rest of us students had to wait to see what would be in the book for the first time when it was completed.

Customarily, there was a section of head and shoulder portraits of the graduating seniors. I had not remembered the other custom of printing captions under the photos. The caption the staff had chosen for me read, "The more I see of men, the more I like my horse." When I first saw it, I was perplexed and did not know how to react, and I have never been able to figure out who selected it and whether they had meant to be mean or show they understood me. They would have been correct if they understood I was terribly frustrated with male privilege and how some boys and men were jerks and got by with their behavior. Indeed, I did like being with my two horses, Pet and Beauty, which I received as Christmas gifts in 1954.

In my freshman and sophomore years at Iowa State, I belonged to a social sorority, Sigma Kappa, then deactivated from it. One evening, our guest speaker was a Mrs. Margaret Lange, social director from the

ISU Memorial Union. With her age, elegance in dress and grooming, svelte physique, and gracious demeanor, she reminded me of my maternal grandmother, Nanna, from Utah. Mrs. Lange spoke of being a lady as an ideal for our lives. I will always remember one of her suggestions—that whenever we walk through a door, we should look to see if anyone is behind us and hold the door for them. I continue that practice.

As part of the process of majoring in physical education, there came a time to write my application for the teacher accreditation program. Although I enjoyed physical education, I had no large vision or mission in mind for what I wanted to achieve except to get a teaching job. The questionnaire asked why I had chosen the field of physical education. I could not fathom a career where I would have to wear a dress, nylon hose, and dress shoes, and wrote that physical education was one field that I could enter where I could dress casually. Such small thinking. When the form asked about my life goals, I wrote about the desire to become a lady. Whew, it's hard now to believe I wrote that. But I regret both that there was such an emphasis on a certain ideal of what a female college student should grow up to be—a lady—and that I had so little confidence in myself or vision for my career. Maybe the lack of a vision was not a mere matter of gender; perhaps it could have happened to anyone.

I took a job teaching girls physical education in Duluth and later in Eagle Grove, Iowa, before going to North Dakota State University in Fargo in the fall of 1975 to work in sports information. Title IX had been passed a few years earlier, but my supervisor was giving little support to women's athletics. I would eventually file a discrimination complaint within the university. As part of that process, I visited the personnel office where a clerk handed me a folder and I waited to talk to the director. It was surprising to see that my undergraduate references from a decade earlier were in that folder. My advisor, Betty Toman, who had been head of the modern dance program and was cosmopolitan and flamboyant in style, had written something to the effect, "Helen Gunderson says in her application to the teacher education program that her goal is to become a lady. It will either be impossible or take a long time for her to ever be a lady." I had mixed feelings. On one hand, I wanted to chuckle, and on the other hand, I wanted to punch back. The recommendation from Dr. Barbara Forker, who had been head of the women's physical education department at Iowa State, commended me for having much more well-rounded interests than a narrow focus on physical education.

Gender Identity

In the "Genders Matters" piece written in the 1990s, I referred briefly to University of Iowa economics professor Donald McCloskey, who disclosed in a 1995 front page article in *The Des Moines Register* that he was changing from "he" to "she" and would be known as Deirdre McCloskey. On October 13, 2016, the *Register* revisited Diedre's story and posted an interview with her.

In contrast, there is Olympic decathlon champion Bruce Jenner, who announced in 2015 that he intended to change from "he" to "she" and is now known as Caitlyn Jenner. While Diedre has a rather conventional style and low-profile manner, Caitlyn comes across more like a fashion model or Barbie doll. Frankly, I am not that impressed with television personalities and fashion models and do not resonate at all with Caitlyn, especially the ways that she has seemed to want to be a spokesperson for transgender people.



Juniper Moore, self portrait. Circa 2019.

A member of my extended family has made the transition from their gender of birth to a new gender. In 2011, my nephew Jonathan Moore became my niece Juniper Moore. She seems comfortable with her journey and has experimented with her appearance. She has often dressed in styles that look like they came from the 1940s or 1950s and has taken selfie photos to document her progress. When I first read her Facebook post, announcing the news, I was happy to correspond in depth in a private email.

Excerpts from Helen's letter to Juniper November 21, 2011

I am aware from a source within the family and then seeing your Facebook page that you are dealing with some deep questions in your life. I don't want to presume to know what the details of your challenges are. But it sounds and looks like you are dealing with gender identity issues. How courageous of you. I don't fully understand gender identity issues. I do know that a mid-twenties woman from the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Ames went to seminary a few years ago in Berkeley, California, and while there, became a man. He has been the minister at the UU congregation in Salt Lake City. And I know that this fall, at the UU Fellowship, we had a guest speaker—a woman from Lincoln, Nebraska (or was it Omaha?), who has a young son who from a very early age—perhaps two—has insisted he is a girl. And the family has been very supportive.

I suppose that of us siblings in the Gunderson family, I am the one who has had to deal the most with gender issues. A lot of who I am has been a struggle with the favoritism given to boys and men in the family and community I grew up in. I loved farming, but there was no place in farming for girls except to grow up to be farmers' wives. I never did like girl's clothing. I did not like what I saw as the roles of women. There were times when I wanted to be a boy. But I never knew much about what the changes would involve, and I never was really serious about making changes. The neat thing is that I have been able to learn to be myself, follow interests that I like, dress pretty much like I want, be part of a faith community that accepts a wide range of people, and have a good circle of friends. I think of myself as being a person more than I think of myself in terms of gender. Of course, when I look in the mirror, I have to acknowledge that my body is that of a woman. I simply wish that gender was not such a big deal. I wish we could go through life genderless or without such great expectations about what gender means.

When Juniper was a teenager, she wrote an email to a massive list of people, including me. In it, she was somewhat hysterically sophomoric and insisted that people boycott a movie that portrayed Jesus as a homosexual. I wrote back and suggested that the key teachings of Jesus have to do with compassion and fidelity. To me, those are two of the most important elements in a relationship, regardless of the genders of two people. I do not have a copy of that letter and find it hard to articulate what else I said, for instance, about Jesus being interpreted many

ways in books and film, and that this movie would be one interpretation. I pointed out what I sensed was a homophobic attitude in the email and wanted to call Juniper on that attitude but in a gentle way. I had suspected that she was putting on a face of bravado that masked some underlying uncertainty about her own sexuality. As it was, a member of Juniper's family emailed to chastise me for what I had written, saying my remarks were totally unfair. Yet, one of Juniper's friends, a young man, wrote and expressed deep appreciation that I spoke up.

As it turned out, Juniper had known since a young age that her gender of birth did not fit her perception of who she was meant to be, and on each birthday, when blowing out candles, she wished she could change her gender. Although I do not know the details of what that has meant, her wish has come true. Once, Juniper visited me in Ames. I found it awkward to hide my curiosity and be fully accepting, but as we settled into our visit, we had some of the best conversations I have ever had with another family member.

My own attitudes related to gender have also evolved and are continuing to evolve. When I lived in Fargo, I had a crush on a man who was the senior minister at the Presbyterian Church, and my feelings toward him were part of what prompted me to enroll in seminary. I suspect there are many other people who have based their decision to attend seminary at least in part due to a crush on a minister. Even so, it seems folly to let a crush play such a significant role in a person's life.



First Presbyterian Church of Saint Helena, California. 2018.
Used with permission of Jonathan Eastman, Pastor.

From September 1983 to May 1984, I was a seminary intern at the First Presbyterian Church in St. Helena, California. While there, I had just as strong a crush on a woman who was a lay leader in congregation. One of my assignments was to attend meetings of the local United Presbyterian Women's Group. Harriet Nelson of Napa (just down the road from St. Helena) was successfully running that year to be moderator of the General Assembly of the United Presbyterian Church U.S.A. and visiting one of the meetings. The discussion moved to issues that were at the front of church politics, including acceptance of gays and lesbians. The women in the group seemed decades older than I and to be having reservations as though we were talking about a taboo topic. I chimed in to sooth their worries and my own nervousness and said something that I did not totally believe. "Well, I would think most women, if they

had the choice, would prefer to be in a relationship with a man.” I probably already knew, but would grow to understand even more, that there are women who prefer relationships with other women and that what I had said was a lie.

How often do ordinary people and leaders of all sorts, including politicians, say something they don’t truly believe in order to remain comfortable and popular?

Those crushes while in Fargo and St. Helena would not be my first or last. However, mine has been a life of celibacy that has become more comfortable over the years. I appreciate being single with a focus on friendship and an expanded definition of family with a reluctance to use binary labels to express who I am.

Even though I am comfortable now with who I am, in the early 1980s it was difficult to find any avenue, except eventually with a spiritual director and therapist, to talk about my strong feelings toward those two people. Considering the homophobia at the time, including my own internal fear of being considered lesbian, it was hard to admit I had deep feelings for another woman. Additionally, in that era, the Presbyterian denomination would not allow “avowed, practicing homosexuals” to be ordained—not even to lay leadership positions in the church. I have often incredulously wondered just what the word “practicing” meant in the collective mind of the denomination. Who people are in terms of gender and sexuality is tied to who they intrinsically are and pervades their whole being, not just what they do physically in bed or at a bar. How is it possible to not practice who we are—our true sense of being?

Juniper and others who have had the courage to break out of cultural molds in relation to gender and relationships have opened the standards of what is permissible in talking about these topics in the media, some churches, schools, and private social circles. This means more flexibility, less restriction of what topics are taboo, and the ability for more people to discuss matters comfortably in ways they never before envisioned.

Juniper has taught me some new terms. For instance, many people know about the term “transgender” but do not know the word “cisgender.” One means people who are uncomfortable with the gender designation they received at birth. The other means people who are comfortable with their assignment. I imagine there is a wide spectrum between the two designations.

I certainly have never been fully happy in my birth gender. That would mean I am not fully cisgender. However, although there were times when I was much younger and thought about what it would be like to become a boy, I realized that I do not want to be a man. Also, I am a naturalist, wanting as little dependency as possible on Western medicine, including the kind of surgical procedures and hormone treatments that some people undergo to change their gender.

It is puzzling to know how to define what it means to be a man or a woman. Consider the transgender woman who says, “From the time I was three years old, I understood I was a girl in a male body.” What was her childhood vision of what it meant to be a woman? Or what did a transgender man, who always wanted to be a man, imagine as a child what it meant to be a man?

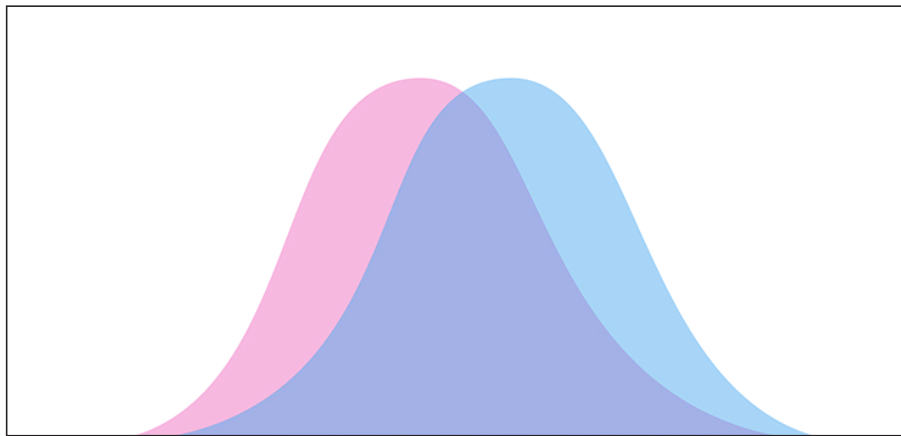
I doubt either Deirdre, Caitlyn, or Juniper could be tempted to define what womanhood is in universal terms—nor should they be tempted—but I would bet their definitions would vary greatly. And how is it that any one person can define what it means to be a woman—or for that matter a man or a human?

Non-Binary Perspectives

In the piece I wrote about gender in the 1990s, I wrote about the term “androgynous,” which refers to a person who has a balance of masculine and feminine characteristics. But what do the terms masculine and feminine even mean?

Consider these adjectives: tender, tough, tolerant, rigid, kind, mean, stoic, expressive, exploitive, nurturing, supportive, resourceful, resilient, strong, weak, creative, collaborative, independent, intelligent, mathematical, literary, wise, compassionate, inventive, cynical, grateful, and resentful. It would seem unfair and inaccurate to consider some of them to be masculine and others to be feminine.

Decades ago, I saw an illustration consisting of two bell curves placed side by side yet overlapping on a chart. One represented the strength of women and the other the strength of men, showing there was more difference in strength within each gender than there was between the two genders. An excerpt from an August 2011 article in *Psychology Today*, “Male and Female: The Overlapping Curves: What’s with the differences between men and women?” by Noam Sphancer, explains this concept:



Two bell curves illustrate overlapping range of strength of men and women. 2019. Illustration by Harrison W. Inefuku.

... the fact that average differences exist between men and women cannot determine how we perceive and relate to any individual man or woman. This is because our traits and abilities tend to be distributed normally, in a bell-shaped curve. The male and female distribution curves for the whole gamut of socially meaningful traits, behaviors, and attitudes, are overlapping. Therefore, even if we find that, for example, women are on average more nurturing than men, still those men who are above average on the male distribution curve may be more nurturing than those women who are below average on the female curve.

Understanding this point about the overlapping curves allows for a more nuanced, and more accurate, insight on the male-female debate to arise: average differences exist, but they should not be used to predict the ability, character, or behavior of individuals.

I like a word that is showing up in the lexicon of the English language. It is “agender,” as in people identifying neither as male nor female, but simply thinking of themselves as whole persons. Agender is also consistent with the notion of non-binary perspectives on gender. Gender is a spectrum. It would be so cool, in my estimation, if gender were neither so binary nor such a big deal in the shaping of people.

In 1984, when I completed a chaplaincy internship at the University of California San Francisco Medical Center the summer before my senior year of seminary, the interns visited the medical school anatomy lab, and I had little in terms of a mission. Then it occurred to me that I should ask to see what ovaries actually looked like. I was escorted to a cadaver where the students were examining the reproductive system of the female body. The body was completely draped except for the pelvic area, and there I was able to see the ovaries. With all the emphasis that society puts on a person being male or female, I was surprised to find that the ovaries were so small and receded in the pelvic cavity. I shook my head in disbelief that something so small could make such a big difference in how culture treats a woman. Of course, in general, there are also other ways that a female body is different than a male body, including hormones and the structure of the female pelvis and hip sockets to accommodate birthing a baby.

I do not have a Facebook account, but sometimes when having dinner with friends, I will use one of their smartphones and Facebook accounts to see what family members have posted publicly. Earlier this year, I saw that one sibling had posted an Internet meme that said women should not compete with men and try to do men's jobs but should do those things that only women are qualified to do. Obviously, a good meme is not that verbose, but that is the gist of what it said. In my mind, no work is in the domain of just one gender. And frankly, there are few things that only women can do that men cannot, and those are connected to a women's reproductive biology and organs such as ovaries.

Would fewer people feel the need to change away from their biological gender of origin if society did not have such rigid expectations of what it means to be male or female? Or what lessons should society be learning from people such as those who are overweight, for a person to be accepting of his or her body?

Gender Generalizations

At least two opportunities I experienced in my first two decades of life offered me significant exposure to women role models in environments that consisted mainly of other girls and women. One was at Camp Foster YMCA on East Okoboji Lake in northwest Iowa.

Each summer the camp offered something like seven weeks of camp for boys and another three weeks for girls. Men were in some of the key positions, such as Harl Holt, the camp director; Ron Ewing, the waterfront director; and Eric Wilkening, the caretaker. However, all the counselors, unit directors, and leaders for such activities as archery, riflery, boating, canoeing, sailing, horseback riding, and crafts were women. Imagine a dining room filled with round white tables each circled by the girls and their counselor from a specific cabin, talking and at the end of eating, singing camp songs—some tender, some rowdy. I had the good fortune of being at camp for 13 years, beginning as a camper in 1954 when I was nine, and eventually becoming a counselor, rifle instructor, then riding instructor during girls' camp and a dishwasher during boys' camp.

The second opportunity was at Iowa State, where I was enrolled in the department of physical education for women headquartered in the women's gym on the east side of campus. I was a freshman the second year that the university offered a major in physical education for women. Previously, a woman who wanted to teach physical education had only the option to major in another area and take enough courses to get a certificate, but not a major, in the program. We did take a few courses with men in the men's physical education program that was housed in the new Beyer Hall with a gym, racquetball court, Olympic-sized pool, sauna, and other features that had been built mainly for use by men on the west side of campus. Our women's program seemed in some ways like a women's college within the university, with its



Helen at YMCA Camp Foster on East Okoboji Lake near Spirit Lake, Iowa. Circa 1955.

small number of students who were all women and instructors who were all women. There was a distinct difference in philosophy between the two programs. The men's department was focused on athletics and competition, whereas the women's department was focused on education in which the classroom experience came first with intramurals and sports built atop the foundation of education.

I have a serious problem, however, with people who generalize about gender. In the past year, I heard a man say that if we truly want to get something done, put women in charge. Or in the agricultural realm, there are those people who claim that women are more nurturing of the land than men. Such a gross generalization grates on my nerves. Would anyone like to go back to the days when women were not encouraged in fields of math, science, and engineering because of generalizations about men having better aptitudes in those fields? I think not and that it would be wise to strike the claim about women being more nurturing of the land.

This past week, I received a business-sized envelope in the mail from Prairie Rivers of Iowa, a nonprofit organization located in Ames but serving central Iowa. The "About Us" page of its website says:

Prairie Rivers of Iowa plays a unique role in Iowa. As one of the only nonprofit organizations focusing on both conserving our natural and cultural resources and building stronger businesses and communities, we bring unique expertise to creatively address some of Iowa's most challenging needs. From assisting small communities in marketing themselves to travelers, to supporting students in becoming environmentally-literate citizens, to training the next generation of responsible farmers and producers, Prairie Rivers of Iowa helps Iowans create a stronger and healthier state.

I have high regard for the leadership of Prairie Rivers and the work it is doing but was curious why the organization was sending me a letter. When I opened the envelope, I was taken aback that the salutation said, "Dear Woman Landowner." The letter went on to say that Prairie Rivers was collaborating with the Women, Food, and Agriculture Network to promote a workshop called Women Caring for the Land that was focused on soil health and designed for female registrants. According to the letter, "nearly half the farmland in Iowa is currently owned or co-owned by women."

I get it that there may be women who own land who may want to learn more about farming and conservation to become more empowered to take a greater role in decision-making. And I get it that some women may feel more comfortable in an all-female environment, such as what I had at Camp Foster or in the ISU Women's Physical Education department. But it rankles me to get a letter addressed to me just because I am a woman. Why not promote the workshop to all landowners with the goal of educating all people who feel they are novices at understanding soil?

Not many weeks later, the PFI listserv forwarded a similar announcement, this time about a workshop offered by ISU and other sponsors designed for women to learn about marketing grain. I responded, asking other listserv readers about the rationale behind ISU offering a course just for women.

Margaret Smith, a former ISU Extension employee whom I have known through PFI since the 1990s and who mentored me when I began leasing land to Betsy Dahl, replied:

This is a great comment and question! I know from my previous work with ISU why this is being done. ISU offers grain marketing programs ALL the TIME and each year, mostly men come. They [the ISU Extension staff] found that by marketing a program specifically to women, they are more likely to get women to attend and ask questions without feeling judged by others who may have been marketing for a long time. Men can attend these sessions, but because of the marketing promo, they rarely ask to.

I also heard from two other PFI friends. They are married, farm together, and have been active in PFI almost since the beginning of the organization. The man was the first to reply, "Well, Helen, I'll dip my toe into the quicksand of your post. Maybe you are overthinking the issue. I'm guessing that the organizers of the sessions were thinking that women in a room full of men would feel intimidated and are offering more of a stress-free environment for them. Believe it or not, but a room full of women intimidates me. You are right, in a perfect world the women-only meeting would not be necessary, but we live in a world that is full of imperfection."

I responded to say I appreciated his willingness to enter the quicksand and added, "PFI is neat in how its people and programming are so comfortable, and I have never known PFI to feel a need to have an event for just one gender."

Two days later, the woman wrote, "In an area like ours, there are lots of big 'dog eat dog' farmers who think they know it all and want things done their way and right now. In their view, women are meant to cook, clean, and have babies. The result is that women rarely go to farm marketing meetings where there would be men. If they did, they would never say a word, even if they have a hundred questions. Women would be invisible and not considered equals in farming. Maybe younger brave women farmers would go, but not the average farm wife around here. PFI is different and truly a unique group of wonderful people."

On August 28, 2018, the Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation magazine carried the feature article "A Woman's Place" about two other women, one of their husbands, and me. On one

hand, I like the attention of being interviewed and having an article published about me. On the other hand, I am eager for the day to come when there is no further need to feature women in conservation and agriculture, but instead feature people because of who they are as individuals and their contribution to the organization or to society. True, much of the story of who I am has to do with growing up in a farm family with restricted options for being involved in farming and how I have grown in relation to agriculture since that time. However, that is not my whole story. The decisions I have made about farming are based on my values and the ethical issues I see in owning land. It is my unique perspective as a human—not as a woman. If it were a woman's perspective, why wouldn't my sisters all be joining in with a similar impact on the land they own?

Women Leaders and Role Models

In the political arena, I would never vote for candidates simply based on their gender. However, I admit that I love seeing the increase in the number of women elected to political offices. Here in Iowa, there has been a major shift in the highest elected officials of the state. In January 2015, Joni Ernst became the first woman from the state to serve in the U.S. Senate. Then in 2019, Abby Finkenauer and Cindy Axne became the first women from the state to serve in Congress. Also in 2019, Kim Reynolds became the first woman elected to be the state's governor. She had been the state's lieutenant governor and stepped into the governor's role in May 2017 after Governor Terry Branstad was appointed as U.S. ambassador to China.

There is much I admire about all these Iowa women in positions of political leadership, even though the perspectives of the Republicans, Ernst and Reynolds, are radically different from mine on many issues. The good news is that they have broken barriers that leave openings for other women in the future. Unfortunately, the state under Reynolds as governor with a Republican legislature is regressing in many ways, including reproductive rights, gender, and environmental issues.

I do like her, though. I met both Reynolds and Branstad at the state house at a ceremony for landowners when they shook my hand and presented me with a certificate in honor of my first gift of land to the Iowa Natural Heritage Association. I again met Reynolds when she was governor and shook my hand and presented me with a certificate for my second gift of land. Both Reynolds and Branstad are affable, but I prefer seeing her in the governor's role. Branstad had been in the position for far too long—from 1983 to 1999 and again from 2015 until he was appointed as ambassador to China in December 2016. In fact, he had become the longest tenured governor in U.S. history.

I also admit I like watching biographical documentaries, especially those of women. One major project that informs viewers of a variety of women's lives is a PBS series called *Makers: Women Who Make America*. Some of the people I have watched episodes about include: Sandra Day O'Connor, supreme court justice; Billie Jean King, professional tennis player; Carol Burnett, comedian; Linda Alvarez, owner of Alvarado Construction that built the Mile High Stadium in Colorado; Barbara Burns, coal miner; and Hillary Clinton, politician.

This past year, I was also impressed and motivated by watching the documentary about current Supreme Court Associate Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, titled simply *RBG*, and another about U.S. Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and three other women who ran for Congress. It is hard to explain the deep-seated feelings that I experience when seeing such strong women and understanding their stories. The feelings are beyond rational and sometimes bring me to tears. That does not mean I agree with all of them or find them superior to men.

My intent for beginning my project about the road I grew up on was a simple one of wanting to photograph the farms that remained there in the 1990s and learn more about the



Helen receives certificate of appreciation for her first gift of land to the Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation at the Iowa Department of Natural Resources Gift to Iowa's Future recognition day at the state capitol. Left to right: DNR Director Roger Lande, Governor Terry Branstad, Helen, and Lieutenant Governor Kim Reynolds, who succeeded Branstad as governor. 2012.

people who lived and had lived there. It was not my goal to focus on gender issues, but how could an exploration of rural Iowa life, or for any area of history, not deal with gender?

Gender was not a factor when I asked people related to the neighborhood if I could interview them. Both men and women spoke to me about many topics, including gender roles. It was fun just a few years ago to edit some of their comments about gender into a tight, seven-minute section of a video that I produced about women in agriculture. Yes, although I have said I look forward to the day when there is no further need to feature just women in a field that has traditionally been that of men, I attempted to show what women's roles had been in farming when I was young in contrast to the many versatile roles that women have in agriculture today.

Father Dennis Sefcik told me perhaps the most important story from the project related to gender. He claimed that his mother, Agnes Sefcik, born in 1909, did not learn to drive a car nor have any role in managing the family land until after her husband, Adolph, died in 2007. She was 57 at the time, got her driver's license, and became a strong, independent-minded farm manager for most of the rest of her life. Agnes died in 2007. As it would turn out, I was 51 when I began managing my land in 1997, and hearing about Agnes was a major inspiration for that milestone.

To be sure, my oral history project was limited. I interviewed the participants only once and did not conduct an in-depth anthropological analysis of their thoughts and stories. Also, no outsider truly knows what goes on within a family or the relative power that individuals have as a result of their gender. I did have direct knowledge of my family, but we were far different from many of the other families in the neighborhood. Mother had grown up in a city and had a college education. She and Dad had an understanding—spoken or unspoken, which I believe she wanted—that he would be the farmer and she would be the homemaker,

along with pursuing her other interests. That said, it is not as though the success of our farm can be attributed solely to my father. Certainly, Mother brought financial assets from her family to it. She also provided emotional support and intimacy, bore us siblings, fed the family, maintained the household, and was the one to arrange for her and Dad's social activities. Certainly, knowing who my father was, he would not have had the status in the community that he did or fared well as a farmer if he had been single.

Although I did not view any women in that neighborhood as being real farmers, there were indeed strong women. Norine Reigelsberger is the neighbor I knew the best. She was 15 years older than I, lived with her husband on a farm a quarter mile from our family, retired to town, and died in March of 2012. Norine was extremely competent in many areas and certainly would have been an asset to both their farming operation and Pioneer Seed business. Now her son Mick and his wife, Sue, live on the family farm. Sue is involved not only with the farm and seed business but is the county assessor. She and Mick had twin children. Young Joe was killed in a car accident in December of 2012. His sister, Kaitlin, who will be 30 this year, is also a strong woman. She has her business degree from the University of Northern Iowa and is highly respected as the controller for Ag Partners in Albert City.

I also know many highly successful women through Practical Farmers of Iowa and the ISU Graduate Program in Sustainable Agriculture. I am impressed by their knowledge, expertise, and variety of roles they hold in agriculture. It is easy to be in awe of them and be mind-boggled about how the opportunities for women in farming have come such a long way since I was a child.

It would be hard to have a strict definition of what it means to be a woman—or for that matter, a man—in agriculture. There are many roles for many people—not just those who own, manage, or operate land. There are soil scientists, managers, consultants, mechanical and agricultural engineers, crop adjusters, policy specialists, conservationists, entomologists, plant pathologists, repair technicians, truck drivers, veterinarians, local foods advocates, organic certifiers, cricket growers, cattle breeders, hog lot workers, field workers, USDA employees, business managers, retail clerks, accountants, sociologists, and historians.

Farming, although it might naively be viewed as an idyllic endeavor, is not apolitical. It is buffeted by politics. Always has been. Always will be. The patriarchal system of power does shape government policies and determines whose voices get to be heard and valued when making decisions. It is important, though, to recognize that individual men, per se, are not necessarily the culprits. Women can also perpetuate patriarchy and industrial agriculture. In the end, however, it is important to remember that we all eat and many of us cook. We can affect the state of agriculture and make a difference by investing our food dollars in purposeful ways, voting at the ballot box, speaking at city council and board of supervisor meetings, writing letters to the state house, and participating in protest rallies, regardless of our gender.



Agnes Sefcik. 1993.



Grandmother and granddaughter wear the same pearl necklace for their weddings. Left: Norine Arnold Reigelsberger. 1953. Right: Kaitlin Reigelsberger Krischel. 2014. *Photos from Kaitlin Reigelsberger Krischel collection.*