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The fragrance of feminism

Lavender is the most versatile of the essential oils, with both reviving and calming effects. In a recent randomized controlled trial, patients in the ICU who received aromatherapy using oil of lavender reported significant improvements in their mood and levels of anxiety.¹ Objective measures of the physiological responses of these patients, however, indicated no such improvements. In the absence of physiological data we are reluctant to grant aromatherapy medical legitimacy, yet who among us is not uplifted by the scent of a rose or the aroma of freshly baked bread? Perhaps the power of such fragrances resides not in their essential properties but in the memories they prompt. While some of us might associate bread with a home-town bakery and roses with a lover's fresh kiss, others, cognisant of the birth of International Women's Day, might recall the events of Mar. 8, 1908.

On that date 15 000 women, mostly garment workers, marched through New York City demanding shorter work hours, better pay, voting rights and an end to child labour.² They adopted the slogan "Bread and Roses" to symbolize their quest for economic security and a better quality of life, as depicted in song:³

As we go marching, marching in the
beauty of the day,
A million darkened kitchens, a thousand
mill lofts gray,
Are touched with all the radiance that a
sudden sun discloses,
For the people hear us singing: Bread and
Roses! Bread and Roses!

As we go marching, marching, we battle
too for men,
For they are women's children, and we
mother them again.
Our lives shall not be sweated from birth
until life closes;
Hearts starve as well as bodies; give us
bread, but give us roses.

As we approach Mar. 8, 2000, few would dispute that women have made considerable economic and social progress in Canada, although some women might be too busy to appreciate it. Of family physicians with children at home,⁴ the women reported working an average of 90.5 hours per week in professional and unwaged activities whereas the men averaged 68.8 hours. The men spent an average of 11.4 hours per week on child care whereas the women spent an average of 39.7 hours per week. To some of us these differences represent choices, but to others they reflect barriers. For the sake of the latter group it is important that men and women continue to transcend conventional gender roles in the quest for roses.

As so poignantly illustrated by the gesture of Rose of Sharon in the last pages of Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*,⁵ the act of transcendence reduces to an instant, the recognition of need and the willingness of the one to offer and the other to receive. Perhaps after 100 years of feminism the challenge lies in remaining open to the gesture. The alternative, as in the case with lavender, is to stick with convention and certainty, to disregard the whiff of revivification and the possibility of pleasure.

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