

Egg On My Face

November 2013, Siân Robinson Davies

Over the last couple of weeks quite a lot has been going on. I have overheard people saying different things, so I thought I'd try and explain, or at least put my point of view out there.

Earlier this summer a friend of mine, Cathy, invited me to join a feminist reading group that she is part of. I wouldn't have said I am interested in feminism any more than lots of other subjects, but I decided to join because I had only moved to Edinburgh a few months previously, and thought it would be a good opportunity to meet interesting people. I also enjoy discussing ideas in groups.

It was good. We read some fairly heavy going stuff, like Judith Butler and Irigaray, but it was interesting and all the other women in the group were smart and articulate. They were also very good at expressing their opinions, and in a way I suppose I sometimes felt a bit intimidated by them. Or not so much intimidated, but they were able to communicate their thoughts so clearly that I often felt nervous to speak.

But we did some nice things together; we went to see a documentary that was part of the Edinburgh Film Festival about Billie Jean King, who was a world leading tennis player throughout the sixties and seventies. She did a lot for women's tennis. It was at a time when the number of women's tournaments was decreasing, and she worked to create more opportunities for women to play professionally. She also campaigned for equal prize money to be given to men and women.

I found the film very moving and there was one thing that particularly stayed with me afterwards; Billie Jean King described being young and becoming aware that the opportunities available to her were very different to those available to boys her age. She also realised that she was good at tennis, and thought that if she could become the best, then she could use that visibility as a platform to speak out about equal opportunities. This made me think a lot about my own reasons for self-improvement, whether I aim to get better at things for the sake of those things in themselves, or whether there is a set of values that I want to promote.

The film also clarified some thoughts that had been muddying around in my mind during the feminist reading group meetings, because of its specific focus on professional sport. I learnt from the film that, in tennis, the reason men and women don't play each other professionally (apart from in doubles) is because men will always have the advantage due to their upper body strength. This made me wonder whether having professional women's tournaments was solely a way of providing

women with the opportunity to play in the same capacity as men. This might be reason enough, but I couldn't help but wonder, if the rules of the game disadvantage women, maybe we should think about developing another kind of game, a game where power, strength and domination are not the key attributes. Why was the focus of so many of our conversations about women's rights, how to get opportunities for women, rather than first thinking about whether we actually want those opportunities? So I wondered whether Billie Jean King's fight for the winning woman to be able to have the huge cash prize that is available to men, was the right fight. But I was worried those were sexist thoughts and I was worried the feminist reading group would think I was conservative for voicing them, so I didn't say anything. Instead, I found myself saying less and less and feeling more and more distanced from the discussions.

All this was at a time when I had begun to cycle more. Being fairly new to Scotland, and with it being a beautiful summer, I was trying to cover as much ground around Edinburgh as I could. You don't need to go far at all before you are in the countryside. Another thing I particularly love about day rides is stopping at farm shops. Where I live in the city, there aren't really any good local fruit and veg places and I end up buying everything from Lidl, so I always take a pannier when I am out cycling and fill it with food on route.

Last week I did a ride out East of Edinburgh to North Berwick along the coast. It's about a fifty mile round trip. One of the first things I noticed when cycling in Scotland is the number of golf courses; there are so many golf courses you wouldn't believe it. On this particular ride I passed about four or five. Incredible.

Anyway, on my way back I stopped in at my favourite farm shop, Fenton Barns, and I bought a load of stuff. In fact I bought too much; as I was packing my pannier outside, I realised not everything was going to fit in, and stupidly, I had bought a box of eggs, which I was worried might break with the vibrations from the rough road surface. So I nipped back inside and asked for a plastic bag to put the eggs in and I hung it over my handle bars in a bit of an ad hoc fashion, but as I didn't have far to go I thought it would probably be ok.

I set off and at the point where the path rejoins the main road again, just after the village of Diddleton and before Muirfield golf course, the tarmac is particularly smooth and slopes gently downhill, meaning that I was able to pick up a good amount of speed. I was going at a fair pace and I was preventing the bag from swinging with my little finger, but a woman with a large camera on my right caught my attention and at the same time the bag somehow found its way between the spokes of my wheel. This caused my bike to stop instantly, but not me or the eggs; we continued together forwards, over the handlebars and through the air. Fortunately there were no cars behind, but unfortunately there was man in front. He wasn't directly in front, he was

on the edge of the pavement, but mid flight, both the eggs and I managed to clip his shoulder, knocking him off balance, before we hit the ground.

I guess there are a few moments which I don't remember because of the shock, but I eventually sat up and looked over at the man. He was in his early sixties, smartly dress, apart from the eggs. He was crouching, supporting himself with his right hand and he had an annoyed expression on his face. He looked up at me and when we made eye contact he corrected his anger, out of a kind of politeness I suppose.

I asked him if he was ok and he asked me if I was ok. He asked me if I had hit my head, and on raising my hand to my forehead found that I had forgotten to put on my helmet that morning. I hadn't bumped it though and said I was fine. Then he lifted his finger to his cheek, pointing, and said, "You've got something there." I wiped it with my sleeve and thought to myself that it was kind of him to worry about my appearance when his suit was such a mess. His concern only added to my embarrassment and really, I just wanted to get out of there. After offering him my number so that he could charge me for his dry-cleaning, which he refused, I pushed my bike around the corner, found a bench, sat down and got my bearings back. I ate a scone to get some sugar into my system, because I remember being told that's what you're supposed to do.

When I felt a bit more orientated, I cycled home.

The next day there was a feminist reading group meeting and I had decided to join in on this one because they were reading *One Dimensional Woman* by Nina Power, which is about feminism coinciding with the rise of consumerism, and I felt like it started to address some of the questions I had been thinking about in relation to the Billie Jean King film. It was also a slim volume, so hadn't taken me long to get through.

I left the house and was walking along the street with the book under my arm, when a woman in her early forties came towards me. As she got closer, she stopped and faced me as if she wanted to say something. I also stopped. She then held up her hand to give me a high-five. I responded by giving her a high-five, and then she just smiled and nodded at me and walked off.

Now, I find that the majority of the encounters that I have with people in the street are based on some kind of aggression or power play, so this was a moment where I felt excited about the possibilities for interactions with strangers. I walked on, smiling to myself, trying to figure out what had made her do it. I thought maybe she had clocked the copy of Nina Power that I was holding, but wasn't sure.

I continued along the street and ahead of me was the newsagents where I often buy

milk late at night. Just in front of it stood two men, one slightly older than the other and they were looking at a newspaper together. As I got closer, they glanced at me, then looked back at their newspaper, then looked again at me, then back at their newspaper. Their staring was pretty unapologetic and I found its directness quite confrontational. As I got a bit closer, the older of the two shouted, "You can throw yourself at me any day of the week, love", which I wasn't very impressed by. I had to pass them though, so I continued, attempting nonchalant body language. As I got even closer, the younger one held up the newspaper and pointed to a picture. I had to go a bit closer to see what he was pointing at, but I could now see the headline, which read, "Lady Lunges at Golf Exec". The photograph was of me lunging at the gentleman that I had collided with the day before, and the eggs appeared to be coming directly from my hands.

I had an aggressive grimace on my face, and he had an expression of, what can only be described as, fear. There was no bike in shot.

As I read the story I learned that the man who I was supposedly lunging at in the photograph, Peter Dawson, was the chief executive of the Royal and Ancient Golf Society. Peter Dawson was one of the men responsible for the continuation of the no-women members policy at Muirfield golf course, the golf course I had been passing at the time of the accident. Apparently, Muirfield had received a lot of press coverage earlier in the summer, because it was where the Open Championship had been held in July and many had been unhappy with the choice of venue, due to the club's gender discrimination. The press seemed to be enjoying the opportunity for revisiting the subject.

The two men attempted banter with me, but I could only hand back their paper and run to Cathy's place. I felt like all the people on the street were staring at me. I felt exposed and a bit panicked. I arrived at Cathy's place, rang the bell and was buzzed in.

They sat there looking at me and affected congratulatory sounds like, "What the hell?", "Nice one", "Crazy". Sarah said that she had been to Muirfield golf course when the tournament had opened to protest, but that she only stood at the entrance with a placard. "Eggs and everything", she said and I said, "No, no, I didn't attack him." And they said I shouldn't feel like I had to justify it to them, that they totally believed something like this needed to be done, something a little more extreme. I insisted that it had been an accident. Then they were even more incredulous. I had to repeat myself many times, explaining over and over again, with them asking different questions. As they began to understand they went quiet and then began to laugh and so did I and everyone was quite excited.

But I was still feeling quite weird so I made my excuses and headed home. I called my mum. She said that it would all blow over in the next day or two, because that's what happens with the press: it's all excitement one minute, and then the next minute, no one even remembers your name. I sensed a hint of bitterness in her tone, but I didn't ask because I was I feeling comforted by her words. I just wanted to get on with things and tried to do normal stuff for the rest of the evening.

The next day a journalist from the Scotsman called and asked me for a telephone interview. Because of what my mum had said the night before, I hadn't even thought about any continued discussion on the subject, so I didn't know what to say, but he was being persistent, (I guess that's how they get stories) so I hung up rather abruptly and immediately started to realise that I needed to figure out what I was going to say.

I thought about the consequences of telling them it was an accident, and I started to worry that might be a hindrance to those fighting for equal opportunities for women and perhaps even prevent women from ever being able to join those golf clubs in the future. I also thought about the woman who had given me a high-five in the street. I thought about her disappointment on reading that it had been an accident.

Then I started to think about the consequences of going along with it, of saying that I had done it out of dissatisfaction with the no-women members policy at the golf course and everything Peter Dawson stood for, dispute him actually having been quite kind on the day that I crashed into him. I thought, maybe I can help change those policies, maybe I can help feminist movements and I suppose a small part of me wanted to be that person who was willing to go that extra leap for the thing she believes in. I'm not the kind of person who finds conflict easy and I was seduced by the idea that this could be a way that I could be that courageous figure.

It was at this point that the phone rang again. It must have been only moments after I had hung up, which made me realise how fast thoughts are. It was the same journalist again, but this time he was just asking for a statement or a quote that he could print. And before I had time to think it through properly, I replied rather too quickly by saying, "He fucking deserved it."

And following that quote going to print, I have begun to receive letters of thanks. I heard that Muirfield is thinking of allowing women members to join, with the golf course directors saying it has nothing to do with my actions, while women's groups saying it is entirely down to me. A couple of days ago, Alex Salmond's secretary got in touch to ask if I would be happy to meet him and have my photo taken with him. Alex Salmond is a keen golfer and boycotted the Open Championship due to the issue of gender discrimination. But then I started to wonder whether he only wanted to be photographed with me in order to garner support for the upcoming independence referendum, and I still haven't made up my mind up on that one yet,

so I have been worried about getting dragged into something I'm sure not about. It has been a bit overwhelming.

Anyway, yesterday the Sun printed an expose, with Peter Dawson giving his side of the story, explaining it had been an accident and that I had made it all up. They quoted an "anonymous friend" who corroborated his story. I don't know if that person was their invention, or whether it was someone from the feminist reading group, but either way they made some low swipes at feminist movements and the whole thing was pretty humiliating.

So I don't know what's going to happen now, but I suppose I just wanted to let anyone know who has read those articles, and who might read about the story in the coming weeks, to bear in mind that these situations are complex and one doesn't always have the time to think through all the consequences of one's actions. It's not even to do with time, it's just that the world is chaotic.

—

With thanks to Alex Fernandes, Augusto Corrieri, Catherine Payton, Daniella Hughes, Geraldine Snell and Tom Nolan for the helpful feedback.