

MARGE PIERCEY

American feminist, poet and writer brings her vision of unity to Dalhousie. Marge Piercey is hopeful that feminism can end divisions in society—between feeling and doing, body and spirit, and men and women.

By SAMANTHA BRENNAN

Marge Piercey dreams of a world of unity.

She says feminism can act as a unifying force to end the dichotomies created by patriarchal society—the split between body and spirit, feeling and intellect, the personal and political, and women and men.

American writer and poet Marge Piercey passionately outlined her visions of feminism in the first of the three part Dorothy J. Killam lectures Oct. 11. Speaking to a packed house at the Rebecca Cohn auditorium, Piercey spread her vision of hope to the Halifax community.

Piercey says that feminism is the richest of three political traditions developed in the 19th century—anarchism, marxism and feminism.

"From anarchism I've learned a lot about the importance of process and marxism has taught me to always ask who will benefit from a decision. To me feminism is the broadest, most imaginative tradition."

She says this imaginative element is a necessary part of political movements.

"Having visionaries is vital to a movement that talks about restructuring societies."

Feminism has also succeeded in bringing a wide range of issues into the public forum, Piercey says.

"They were not regarded as public issues before but simply personal problems—rape, incest, child abuse, bettering in the home, the feminization of poverty, the lack of educational opportunities for working and middle class girls, the proliferation of pornography . . ."

She says the broad unifying scope of feminism is why many feminists find themselves working on related issues such as "issues of war and peace, the environment and issues of race and class."

Piercey said that while people may complain that they don't understand feminism it actually addresses society's most basic questions such as "What can I feed my family?" and "How can I make what I want happen?"

"In truth many of our most passionate concerns are no different from those of your dog." The audience laughed nervously.

And along with her sense of the absurd there's also an angry side to Marge Piercey. She's angry with the younger, upper class women "bedecked in the spoils of the women's movement" who refuse to call themselves feminists or recognize the contribution feminism has made to their own lives.

"They seem to me like people dressed in the skins of leopards and tigers complaining about the slaughter of animals."

Feminists today are both being attacked and taken for granted, says Piercey.

Her images are clear and sharp. When Piercey describes an anecdote or experience you personally visualize it and in turn share her anger.

"It's the evening news and we watch a woman fire fighter jump into her professional gear and mount the engine off to a fire, we see an attractive blonde medical student, articulate, confident. Both women tell us that they're not feminists, proud not to be one of those women. They're just competent they tell us and feminine too."

Piercey feels these attacks personally, saying "as I watch I'm aware of myself as a piece of furniture or carpet, something they're standing on."

But in the end Piercey blames the media for the image today's young women have of themselves and of feminism. She says that feminists are often defined by their enemies—patriarchal media and scholarship.

"Young women have bought the image of feminists as presented by the media—bra burners, women who simultaneously hate all men and want to be just like them." And again the audience laughter in nervous acknowledgement.

"We find ourselves programmed with images and desires we gave no consent to."

"Women look in the mirror and men look at their wives and girlfriends and both feel let down."

As an example of media manipulation Piercey pointed to the fall issue of the *Sax* catalogue.

She says that by showing young gorgeous women in glossy impeccable work conditions "the message is that you too can have it all."

Piercey says the media is calling to women—"Don't associate with those women who scream about rape and incest. Identify with your class and ignore the rest."

Women today don't want to marry Harvard business grads they want to be him and marry him later when they've launched their own career, she says.

Piercey warns women not to be fooled by this representation of successful women in the workforce.

"Women have been allowed to enter the workforce before . . . when it was needed."

She referred to the war years when women entered factories to work and were later called back to the home after the men returned from war.

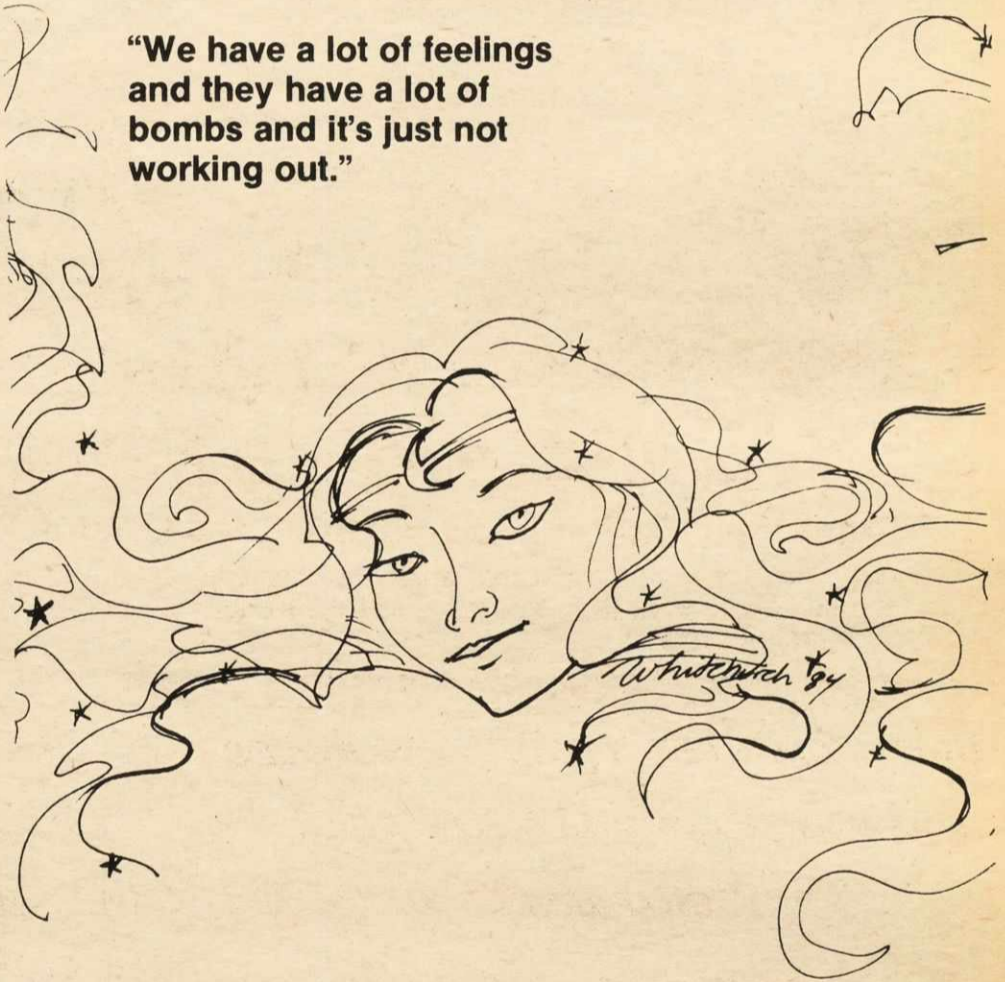
Like all of today's feminist visionaries Piercey could not help but answer the challenge of lesbian separatism. And she's also angry with that trend.

"If women who choose a man are rejected from the feminist movement it's not a women's movement it's a lesbian movement," said Piercey. "We have to get away from the quasi-official policy that lesbians are the only real feminists."

For Piercey these are divisions that have no place in a unifying movement. The movement towards unity will only succeed if women who love men are equal to women who love women.

It's this sense of unity though that forms

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the core of Marge Piercey's vision.

"We have to end this world of patriarchal divisions—of man and other, of me and the other, of whites and others."

But for Piercey the worst dichotomy is that which divides men and women—the duality of feeling and doing.

"Dividing the society into those socialized to feel and those who are socialized to do has just about ruined us as a society."

She says that we must rise to the challenge of unity of feeling and doing if we want to effect broad social change.

We must, each feel and care about every public choice and like the Iroquoia ask what effect each decision will have on the seventh generation, says Piercey.

"There's no frontier to escape to . . . you'll escape acid rain and pipelines only to find the trash of another freedom seeker."

And she admits the challenge of unity between women and men won't be easy.

"I think that as long as we are socialized to feel and they're socialized to do we don't share much. We have a lot of feelings and

they have a lot of bombs and it's just not working out."

In the end she always returns to a vision of hope.

Marge Piercey's "unity of being" involves a widening of scope and an extension of all traditional barriers.

"We have to learn to think beyond the family, and to extend the group we identify as 'we'."

Like feminism itself, Piercey travelled beyond the traditional boundaries society has created. She didn't so much speak as she did sing, it wasn't so much a lecture as it was a poem, and it wasn't so much an audience as it was a gathering of friends.

After all, ending these divisions is what Piercey's vision of feminism is all about.

This Thursday's Killam lecture, part two in the *Feminist Visions* series, will be Sheila Rowbotham. Mary Daly will be speaking on Oct. 25 and both lectures are at 8 p.m. in the Rebecca Cohn Auditorium.