

Tuesday, May 18

Day 1

With the sun shining and the day full of promise the fast has begun. Up early we got dressed in our whites with purple sashes. We squeezed into two little cars and were on the way.

The Springfield Capitol looks like any other state Capitol in the U.S. The parking lot was packed with cars and not a human in sight. Probably everyone was already inside working at their desks. After landing two spaces, we locked the cars and walked unnoticed to the building, rode the elevator and opened the door to the press room. It was fantastic! People were jammed in like jelly beans, packed against the walls and into every corner. The press was there in full force: AP, UPI, NBC, ABC, CBS, CNN, NPR and all of the local papers. In the crowd there were contingencies from the Illinois Nurses Association, the AFL-CIO, the Illinois Religious Committee for the ERA and the former president of NOW, Wilma Scott Heide. There were so many I can't imagine who they all were. People were crying audibly. People wanted to shake our hands. People were acting as if they had been waiting as long as I had been preparing for this moment.

The press was mixed. There were several who were visibly moved and there were some who were openly

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disrespectful. One man was a real jerk shouting that we were absolutely ridiculous, which embarrassed others.

Sonia stood at a podium and read our statement:

We have gathered today in Springfield, Illinois to begin a solemn fast for the ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment. By making visible women's deprivation and by witnessing to women's deep hunger for justice, we seek to turn the hearts of the lawmakers to fulfill the Constitution's 200-year-old promise of equal justice under law.

Fasting has been a part of momentous developments in this country. On May 28, 1774, Thomas Jefferson and other founding fathers inaugurated a fast "to implore a divine intervention to avert the destruction of our civil rights and to turn the hearts of king and parliament to moderation and justice." The fast, by unmasking the injustice of British rule, stirred the hearts of the colonists, led directly to a call for a Continental Congress, and made revolution inevitable.

Two hundred years later, women are still struggling to gain our civil rights, and so today we begin our dialogue with the Governor and state legislators of Illinois: Governor Thompson, will you join with us in seeking democracy for the women of this nation by committing yourself to majority rule in the House and Senate? Mr. Speaker, will you open your heart and seek justice for us? Will you bring the rules change to a vote on the floor of the House?

Does the State of Illinois have the courage to do the will of the American people who overwhelmingly desire the ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment?

We have chosen to fast in Illinois because it poses the greatest challenge to ratification. This is true because it operates under the least democratic procedures of any state presently facing a decision about the Equal Rights

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Amendment. It has, despite all logic, insisted on a 3/5, rather than a majority, vote for ratification.

In this crisis in our country's history, when it seems -- unbelievably -- as if our Representatives are about to ignore our commitment as a nation to justice and democracy, and repudiate the American dream of equality, this fast is the most formidable call to conscience we know how to make. We hope the spiritual energy and enlightenment we generate will ultimately free both the oppressed and the oppressors from the cycle of injustice in which we have been bound.

We invite people throughout the United States to join us in the fast, either in their home states or in the Capitals of unratified states where the Equal Rights Amendment is under consideration. We invite the Governor and legislators of Illinois to join us in fasting to clarify their role in molding the destiny of this nation.

Perilous times in human history demand extraordinary focusing of spiritual power and love. These are perilous times for women. This fast is our act of love.

Then we all stood up and offered to answer questions. One reporter wanted to know why, since we were all from out of state, we had taken issue with Illinois politics. Although I wanted to tell him to call any eighth grade civics student, I actually told him that it was an amendment to the nation's constitution and not state politics. They asked each and every one of us why we were there and why were we willing to fast for the ERA. My answer was that this is the first time I have been able to put my body and my heart in the same place with the same intensity.

From there we went to the Governor James R. Thompson's office. He agreed to see us. He is a very tall man and seems slick to me. He gave us the expected

party line as he faces re-election in the Fall and the press was present. He said he was very sympathetic and in favor of equal rights, but he is not in favor of a rules change in the House.

The inner politics of Illinois' vote is particularly twisted and I am just starting to understand it. For any other bills on the floor, the requirement is a simply majority vote of fifty-percent plus one vote. They have been able to stonewall the Equal Rights Amendment by setting a higher standard of three-fifths. It would easily pass if it only needed fifty-percent plus one. Also Speaker George Ryan could hear a motion for a rules change but has flatly refused. He is creating an out for legislators to say they support the ERA but their hands are tied by the demands of the three fifths rule.

We left the Governor and paraded out to the rotunda. It is a busy place, a cold marble hollow noisy place. High heels skid and wingtips squeak. For most it is a crossing station and never a destination. For us it is the center of the universe. We unrolled our banner and proudly stood next to it. We were proud of ourselves, proud of one another, proud of our ancestors and proud of our cause. The photographers were excited to have a new subject and the press was buzzing.

A state official came over to tell us we could not sit on the floor and that chairs are not allowed in the rotunda. We were informed that there is a fire law that forbids sitting. We may be feeling strong today, but this is going to become a major problem. Our commitment is to be in the rotunda every week day 10 A.M. to 2 P.M. until the ERA vote. Since this could last more than a month, it could mean wheelchairs or worse. Thankfully the Illinois Nurses Association came to our rescue and got clearance for seven folding chairs for exactly three hours each day. They also made arrangements for us to have our weight and blood pressure checked daily in the nurse's office on

the third floor. We were directed to go there two at a time.

When it was my turn to go to the third floor, I found myself in the elevator with a dozen ladies dressed in red and white. I stood in the back and overheard them plot their wicked plan. At exactly noon they would go to the rotunda newsstand, buy Snickers chocolate bars, march over to the fasters, unwrap the candy and eat them right in front of us. It wasn't funny enough that these women actually thought we would overthrow our dedication to equal rights for a Snickers. What was truly funny was that last night we gorged on four boxes of chocolates.

Up at the nurse's office the press crowded outside the glass door with full view of the scale. The cameras were posed to snap and document our weight. To gain control of this situation, one of us stood in front of the scale for the other. We have every intention to inform the press of our weight loss in one grand total, not individual amounts. The whole time I was on the third floor, I just wanted to get back to the rotunda for the Candy Bar Action.

Just as they had conspired, exactly at noon, the red and white ladies went to the newsstand and bought Snickers candy bars. They walked fifty feet, stood directly in front of us, unwrapped the bars and, with intent and passion, committed their political action. Aside from the irony of it all, it really made me wonder -- What are people going to think about this? What do people believe will deter us? The truth is nothing will deter us and the fact that they don't see it makes me feel lonely.

After the stint in the rotunda we went back to the church and had a few hours to ourselves. The actual church, in this maze of rooms and offices, is beautiful. It is all painted in high gloss white. I sat in a pew for a very long time and just stared. In front is an enormous cross,

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maybe fifteen feet tall. There is no body but rather a whip on one arm of the cross and a crown of thorns on the other. What on earth is that about? How could the congregation find it inspiring to see a whip wrapped in a circle dripping down from the cross bar?

Why do Christians want to think of their founder in agony and pain. Why not in triumph and glory? And why is the man in the classroom posters so wimpy? Are these people reading the same gospels that I studied? I read about a revolutionary Jew who was killed for his dissent. After teaching high school classes on the New Testament fourteen times, it is perfectly clear to me that he was a threat to all establishments, Jewish and Roman alike. Now he is being used to benchmark contemporary social behavior. Does the radical always dissolve into the conventional? Is it just a matter of time before the masses reduce a revolution and use it as a form of control? Once gender equality is the convention, will society find another group to oppress? I wonder who it will be.

I am tired, not hungry, just tired.