

# UP

## One Man's Journey to Feminism

**Peter W. Pruyn**

he / him / his\*

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Cover photo: 7,500 feet over Galveston Bay early on a Saturday morning. ©2020 Peter W. Pruyne.

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Content warning:  
Contains descriptions of physical and emotional violence

\* Pronounced "prine". He/him/his: This is the set of pronouns I ask others to use when referring to me. People who identify as transgender or gender nonconforming may use pronouns that do not conform to binary male/female gender categorizations, such as "they, them, theirs."

## How I Decided to Give This Book Away

I once had the opportunity to speak with a prominent American author close to the release of his sixth book. In discussing its publication, he lamented that he didn't like the title. He then confided that his publisher wouldn't let him call it what he wanted to.

Here was someone who was pre-eminent in his field not being able to choose the title of his own book. Something felt deeply wrong about that. Market research notwithstanding, as the reader of an author whose work I admired, I would want to know what title he wanted for his book.

I never forgot that.

Many years later, I went to an author talk about a memoir of sexual abuse and recovery. The author shared that it had taken her *ten years* to find a publisher. Along the way she was given every rejection excuse under the sun—some directly contradictory of each other. One publisher told her that no one reads that kind of book. Another said that there were already too many books like this on the market. While I admired the author's persistence, I felt I had better ways to spend my time.

I gradually became aware of multiple authors who only had horror stories to tell about pursuing publication. In the course of writing this memoir, it became clear why: the publishing industry is a patriarchy. As an industry, publishing's priority is making money. As a patriarchy, books are typically marketed by cultivating a cult of personality around the author to elevate their perceived social status.

No thank you.

More recently I became acquainted with Emma Watson's online feminist book group, Our Shared Shelf. The group has more than 225,000 members all over the world. Every two months, moderators choose another book for the group to read and discuss. It was illuminating to understand the intricate constraints the moderators took into account when choosing a book for the group. The ideal book was one that had been out for several years to increase the chances that it had been translated into multiple languages and would be available all over the world. It turns out even a book such as Toni Morrison's classic *Beloved* (published more than 30 years ago with more than 75 editions all over the world) was still extremely difficult for many group members outside of the U.S., Canada, and the U.K. to obtain.

This made a deep impression on me. It revealed another kind of privilege I live with in the U.S.: I can get pretty much any English language book I want whenever I want while much of the world is left out. I couldn't help imagine a model of publishing that would give electronic versions of books away for free in developing countries while still selling them to those who can afford it. As one example, more and more academic journals are now using such so-called 'open access' models.

Around this same time I randomly attended a panel discussion of print artists. Some discussed their involvement in the "zine" community, artists who make their own handmade magazines and distribute them in a gift economy amongst each other. I learned about the creation of an artist's union with the unlikely name Impractical Labor in Service of the Speculative Arts (ILSSA). Their motto? "As many hours as it takes!" For this group of artists, the work is its own reward.

I reflected on the untold hours I had spent writing, researching, and refining this book—and how intrinsically rewarding it had been. "As long as it takes" and "the work is its own reward" resonated more deeply than anything else I'd heard. Even if no one else read it, I would still be glad that I wrote it.

As I began considering how to bring this memoir out into the world, I weighed all the above and once again asked myself, "Why am I doing this?"

The majority of humanity has a trauma history. Yet, the majority of humanity will never receive treatment, setting up the next generation to experience inter-generational trauma all over again—with women usually getting the worst of it. This global reinforcing loop is one of the saddest things I know.

I reflected on the review process I was going through with each draft of the memoir. For each draft, I found 5 to 10 people to give a copy to for feedback. It's difficult to describe the complex emotions that came up each time I wrapped a copy and put it in the mail to someone. The resulting debriefs were some of the most meaningful conversations I'd had in my life. I noted how quickly most reviewers transitioned from commenting on my story to reflecting on their own story. The book was giving them permission to have conversations about their own lives that they had never had before. It was making a difference. That made the next round of gifting even more rewarding.

It occurred to me: what if ... I just kept doing this? What if I just gave the book away? Wouldn't that best serve those who would never otherwise have access to it? It felt good to think about—scary in some ways, too, but good.

In an extraordinary act of synchronicity, just as I was seriously considering these thoughts, a remarkable documentary film came out entitled, simply, *Gift* (2019). Inspired by Lewis Hyde's book *The Gift: Creativity and the Artist in the Modern World*, the film explores four examples of gift economies: an Indigenous Canadian potlatch<sup>128</sup>, an inhabited art museum in Rome, the participatory art of artist Lee Mingwei, and a beekeeper who builds a bee-shaped vehicle to give away honey and mead. The lesson was unmistakable: gift-giving is an intervention for patriarchy.

It felt like the universe was helping me clarify my intentions: I'm not trying to make money. I'm trying to make a difference. Once I removed money from the equation, the right thing to do became obvious. The medium isn't the only message; the distribution is, too.

Contributing to humanity's understanding of the relationship between the imperative of gender equity and the promise of trauma recovery feels like a legacy worth investing in.

And that simply feels good.

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<sup>128</sup> A traditional ceremony in which an in-coming chief gives away their wealth to the tribe. See <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Potlatch>.