

Thanksgiving Celebration Readings-

1. Words of Wisdom

Never let it be said that women had no influence on Society before the 19th Century but those who we know of tended to be powerful, rich or educated.

In the beginning of the battle for equality were the revolutionary thinkers. In France, in 1791 Olympe de Gouges presented her Declaration of the Rights of Women and Female Citizens to the legislative assembly but was rejected. Article 1 stated

“Woman is born free and remains equal to men in her rights. Social distinctions should be based only on the common good.”

And a year later Mary Wollstenecraft in A vindication of the Rights of Women wrote

“There must be more equality established in Society, or morality will never gain ground, and this virtuous equality will not rest firmly when founded on a rock, if one half of mankind be chained to its bottom by fate, for they will be continually undermining it through ignorance or pride.”

Two hundred years later parts of the original declaration were included in the United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Discrimination against women

“Discrimination against women, denying or limiting as it does their equality of rights with men, is fundamentally unjust and constitutes an offence against human dignity.”

Back in the 19th Century there followed a long fight not just for the vote, but for a woman to be considered a person in her own right and no longer dependent on her husband or father for everything or beaten or sent to a lunatic asylum on a whim. To begin the fight women needed the support of benevolent men to act as champions but in the words of Millicent Fawcett, President of the National Union of Women’s Suffrage Societies

“However benevolent men may be in their intentions, they cannot know what women want and what suits the necessities of women's lives as well as women know these things themselves.”

When some women, fed up with the slow progress to suffrage, urged violence she added

“I can never feel that setting fire to houses and churches and letter boxes and destroying valuable pictures really helps to convince people that women ought to be enfranchised”

And then realising that the outbreak of the First world war would play a significant role in the fight for the vote bravely said (in the face of a largest female move to pacifism)

“Let us show ourselves worthy of citizenship whether our claim to it be recognized or not”

Last year we celebrated the centenary of the first woman to get the vote, but the fight continued. The NUWSS changed its name to the National Union of Societies for Equal Citizenship to mark the change and Eleanor Rathbone spearheaded the fight

“Continually measuring women's wants by men's achievements seems out of date, ignominious, and intolerably boring. ... Now that we have secured possession of the tools of citizenship, we intend to use them not to copy men's models but to produce our own.”

And as she took her seat in Parliament

“The struggle for the right to become politicians in itself made women into politicians.”

When the full franchise was received in 1928 Mrs Hubback suggested that they should take the Women's Institutes as a model on which to build a town organisation for the ordinary married woman, with quite a simple programme but the emphasis on agriculture and food were irrelevant to women living in towns. Dame Margery Corbett Ashby looking back on this time said

“We felt it would be much more in keeping with our philosophy and policy if we gave women in the towns not only training in and enjoyment of arts and crafts but also training in the responsibility of citizenship. Our programme was comradeship, arts and crafts and citizenship”

And from the Women's Leader (NUSEC) magazine in 1929

“When we talk of women's organisations, we forget how limited their influence really is. Only a small percentage of towns have groups of women voters organised on strictly non-party lines. The women's movement of the new period inaugurated by the last General Election with its complete franchise cannot afford to do without the towns, and the point of view and the co-operation of townswomen. We cordially welcome the proposal of N.U.S.E.C. to start Townswomen's Guilds which, like women's institutes, will be both social and educational in character. The newly formed guilds will bring Townswomen together, irrespective of creed, party or social standing, and with the strength that is found in union will enable them with confidence and understanding to take the rightful place in the running of the community.”

The benefits of Townswomen's Guilds were further promoted by Margaret Bondfield in a subsequent magazine

“For the women in the small towns little has been done to enable them to develop their gifts and to express themselves in creative work. And to develop those powers of mind and judgment which would enhance their value as individuals and as members of the community in which they live. The Townswomen's Guilds give this opportunity “

So, Townswomen began its ethos of women supporting women and while not being part of the feminist movement continue to fight to make the lives of women better. Here are some words of wisdom that we can take to support us.

From American Cultural Anthropologist Margaret Mead

“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.”

And

“Never depend upon institutions or government to solve any problem. All social movements are founded by, guided by, motivated and seen through by the passion of individuals.”

And

“We are continually faced with great opportunities which are brilliantly disguised as unsolvable problems.”

From the USA we also have wise words from former first ladies including this from Eleanor Roosevelt

“A woman is like a tea bag; you never know how strong it is until it’s in hot water”

From Hillary Clinton

“Women are the largest untapped reservoir of talent in the world.”

And from Michelle Obama

“We’ve got a responsibility to live up to the legacy of those who came before us by doing all that we can to help those who come after us.”

But American Women do not have the monopoly on words of Wisdom

We have this from Marie Stopes

“People who know the truth have no business to allow the powers of darkness to silence them on any point that matters.”

And from Dora Russell the writer, educator and peace activist (and often overshadowed as the wife of Bertram Russell)

“Because men have so long ruled the world, it does not follow that the philosophy by which they have ruled it is the correct one.”

From our first woman Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher we have

“If you want something said, ask a man; if you want something done, ask a woman...”

From our most popular writers we have this from Catherine Cookson

“If you’re not making mistakes, then you’re not making decisions”

And from JK Rowling

“It takes a great deal of courage to stand up to your enemies, but even more to stand up to your friends”

Most recently the Duchess of Sussex said last October

“Suffrage is not simply about the right to vote but also about what that represents: the basic and fundamental human right of being able to participate in the choices for your future and that of your community”

But what better words to finish with than those from Millicent Fawcett that appear on the statue in Parliament Square and let us be thankful to all those who have, or continue to, follow this advice.

“Courage calls to courage everywhere, and its voice cannot be denied.”

2. ODE TO A WONDER WOMAN

A WOMAN, THEY SAY- NOT AS STRONG AS A MAN
A WOMAN THEY SAY- CAN'T DO WHAT HE CAN
BUT I BEG TO DIFFER AND HERE IS MY PROOF
A WOMAN IS SUPER- AND THIS IS THE TRUTH!

HER HEART IS AS BIG AS THE INFINITE SKIES
SHE PUTS ON A SMILE STRAIGHT AFTER SHE CRIES
THERE'S SIMPLY NO END TO HOW MUCH SHE CAN LOVE
HER CARE IS UNENDING, A GIFT FROM ABOVE

A WOMAN CAN CURE WITH A KISS ON THE NOSE
SHE CUDDLES AND LISTENS AND TICKLES SMALL TOES
THERE'S NEVER A MOMENT WHEN SHE ISN'T TRYING
SHE'S THE ONE THAT IS NEEDED WHEN CHILDREN ARE CRYING

A DAY IS A LIFETIME WITHOUT HER BESIDE YOU
TO CALL YOU AND CHEER YOU AND LOVE YOU AND GUIDE YOU
A SISTER, A FRIEND, A LOVER, A MOTHER
A WOMAN IS ALL THINGS UNLIKE ANY OTHER

SO COME ON YOU LADIES LET'S GIVE OURSELVES CREDIT
WE JUST HAVE IT ALL, WE KNOW IT, WE GET IT
TOGETHER THERE'S NOTHING THAT WE CAN'T ACHIEVE
STAND UP, HELP EACH OTHER, SUPPORT AND BELIEVE

3. Celebrating 90 Years

**TG is celebrating ninety years!
Years full of laughter, friendship and tears,
Companionship making our lives complete-
A handbag reserving us a seat!
Although it's not really the thing to do
It's nice to think someone cares about you.**

**We have such a history, we should be proud,
Tell others about it; shout it aloud!
Our roots are in 1865
With the Kensington we came alive.
Then the Suffragists came on the scene
Bringing our colours of red, white and green
(red for courage, white for faith, and green for hope)
Keep them in mind, it will help you cope.**

**The first guilds were formed in 1929-
Haywards Heath, Romsey, Moulscumb and Burnt Oak-
Soon all four were doing fine.
By the end of that year things were really humming
26 Guilds appeared and many more were coming.
In 1930, Scotland, and Wales in '33
Formed Guilds and still the movement was growing steadily.
In 1939 when Britain went to war
The Guilds had grown to 544.**

**In 15 years' time there were 1620
Women flocked together, of enthusiasm there was plenty!**

A Townswoman from Guildford felt her life was unfulfilled
When she moved to Northern Ireland and couldn't find a Guild,
So she started instigating and in 1965
The Irish TG began to come alive.

In 1979, in the Albert Hall, was our Golden Jubilee
The Golden Bond celebration was received with enormous glee.
But it's not all fun and frolics within the Townswomen's Guild:
Many projects have been fought for and ambitions been fulfilled.
In response to the Princess Royal we raised a lot of cash
For the Nutrition Unit in Dhaka, Bangladesh.
For rooting for the future after the winds and gales
We planted trees in England, Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales.
We lobby Parliament on issues of the day
And you'll find that people listen when Townswomen have their
say.

Life is so full in the Townswomen's Guild
And the more you're involved the more you're fulfilled.

There are lunches, seminars, days to attend,
Committees to join, letters to send.
Wherever you travel in the UK
You'll find a townswoman along the way;
You'll start to chat, because of the link,
And you've made a friend, it's simpler than you think.
So give thanks to God for the friendships you've made
Through 90 years of TG, and don't let this movement fade.

Ellen Jenkinson