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Before Her Time

Change. Some people embrace it. Some people fight it. And some people go about it in bizarre ways. Despite her unorthodox approach to life, Mary Edwards Walker can teach the youth of today many valuable lessons. Born on a farm in 1832, Mary would go on to be a pioneer for change her whole life. She would never back down. She would never quit.

Mary Edwards Walker was raised to question everything. This made her examine many things that were considered normal in her era. Discovering that trousers were much more comfortable to work in on the farm, Mary began wearing men's clothing. She also wore bloomers frequently. Of course, wearing men's clothes was not considered socially acceptable for a lady. But she didn't view them as men's clothes. When she was once ridiculed for wearing trousers she retorted "I don't wear men's clothes, I wear my own clothes." Her attitude of independence and questioning, as well as her choice of attire would remain with her for the rest of her life.

Mary's questioning spirit grew as she grew. She had a hunger for books when she was young, particularly medical books since her father was a doctor. This thirst for knowledge continued to grow, culminating when she attended Syracuse Medical College, from which she obtained her medical doctorate. She was only the second woman at the school to obtain this degree. She married and set up a joint medical practice with her husband. Unfortunately, their business was not very successful because people of the time didn't trust female physicians.

Failure at private practice would not deter Mary. She set her sights on the military. Shortly after Mary separated from her husband, the War Between the States broke out. As was customary for her, Mary was going to push the normal standards. She went to Washington to request a commission in the Army as a Surgeon. When her request was denied, she volunteered as a nurse. While treating patients she began to suspect that not all amputations were necessary. As a result, she would often counsel patients to stand firm and not let the doctors amputate. Later in her life, many of the soldiers that she had advised to keep their limbs wrote to her thanking her for her kind advice. Many informed her they had made a full recovery. She continued her quest to become a commissioned surgeon, and her efforts eventually culminated when she was appointed a Contract Acting Assistant Surgeon as a civilian. While this wasn't exactly what she was hoping for, she had at least succeeded in becoming a surgeon during the war.

After Mary became a surgeon, even though she was technically a civilian, she wore a surgeons uniform. She made the uniform herself and was very proud to wear it. The uniform did have one downside. When she was caught by the Confederates, they thought she was a spy. Despite being female, she was not given any special treatment. Eventually her health broke down in prison. Her illness would have lasting effects on her including damage to her eyesight. Soon, there was a prisoner exchange for doctors, and she was released. Regardless of the fact she was never in the military or combat, President Andrew Johnson awarded her the Medal of Honor in 1865 by executive order. In 1916, her medal was rescinded along with many other recipients after it was determined they were ineligible to receive the award. Since the government didn't require the medals to be returned, Mary triumphantly wore hers until her death on February 21, 1919. In 1977, her Medal of Honor was reinstated by President Jimmy Carter. To this day, Mary Edwards Walker remains the only female to receive this distinguished award.

Mary's independent spirit and strong passion are traits many people have. What she had that most young people today seem to lack is the resolve to press on in the face of adversity. The perseverance she showed despite being faced with continuous resistance is astounding and inspiring. Prior to attending The Eighth Annual James Caster Symposium on the Civil War, I had never heard of Mary Edwards Walker. Now I know not only of a strong and resilient woman not afraid to speak her mind, but also of a female surgeon during the Civil War, a prisoner of war, and a pioneer in women's rights in The United States. Regardless of whether you agree with the stances she took on issues or the way she went about pursuing change, you can learn to persevere in the face of adversity and never give up, never give in. No matter how much push back you receive, you can stand firm. Mary Edwards Walker did.

Bibliography

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