

## « Myths about Andrea Dworkin », A speech by **Julie Bindel**

From the Andrea Dworkin Commemorative Conference, April 7, 2006.

Thank you; I'm really delighted to be here. Michael has stolen some of my thunder, in that he has spoken about the myths and the lies about her. If he were here, I'd have to kill him [laughter], but he's not. So, what can I do? I did also try, this morning, before I came here, to change my first name to « professor » or « doctor, » just to fit in with so many of you, wasn't able to, so I'm sorry about that. I'm just here in front of you as plain old Julie.

I want to start by telling you a little story about Andrea, and it's something that I said I would put straight if ever she died and I was still here, because it was one of the tiny, tiny injustices that really irked her.

I knew Andrea for about ten years, almost ten years by the time she died. In 2004, I had the honor to interview her for a piece in *The Guardian*. She was coming over to the UK, and she was primarily coming to find a publisher for *Heartbreak*, and it's fantastic that this book is out today, because, I mean, John will verify this, and her friends, that to her it was extremely important. This was the book that she wanted to write. And, you know, she said that she wrote it within about four months, it just tripped off the typewriter, or the PC that I think she started to use in the last couple of years. I had read the book just before I interviewed her, and it was a phone interview because I was in Europe and she was in the States, and one story that had really struck me was the story about Allan Ginsberg. Have any of you heard about how she admired Allan Ginsberg when she was a lass, when she was young, when she was an aspiring writer, and she thought this beatnik, whatever he was, was just the god who walked the earth, and she looked up to him. She eventually met him, and she thought him strange, but okay, and through a series of events, they ended up sharing a godson. And so by this time, Andrea herself was a very famous published writer and a very famous feminist, and of course she wrote, as in *Woman Hating*, as Sheila shared with us today, about violence towards women, about sexual abuse of women and children. And Ginsberg had a problem with this. Now why did he have a

problem with this? Because he was a child sexual abuser. Because he was a member, I think it was of the North American Man-Boy Love Association, which is what is known as a pedophile organization, and his particular liking was for 12-year-old boys.

Now this was a bar mitzvah. Now who are at bar mitzvahs? 12- and 13-year-old boys and girls. And so this particular day that Andrea got up and decided she would behave herself, was their godson's bar mitzvah, and she knew Ginsberg was going to be there, and that very day legislation had just been clarified about child pornography being illegal. Now she was delighted. She knew Ginsberg wouldn't be, so she tried to avoid him. And there's a photograph, isn't there John, of her standing with his arm around her—you know those awful photos at weddings and things, where you're going [laughter]—and he's there, and he kept following her around saying what's your problem, what's your problem, is it because of the legislation, this is why you won't talk to me, you're a nazi, you're an idiot, etc. And she said, yes, of course, I have a problem with it, because I'm a feminist, and I don't think that children should be abused and raped, which you obviously do. And he said, « Well, I've never met anyone with your views who's intelligent, » and she said, « Well, you havent been out much, have you? » [laughter]

And I was recounting this to her on the phone, and she said, [husky American accent] « Oh Julie, you've gotta put that in the piece. » And I said, « I promise you I'll put it in the piece. » And we then remembered in 1997 or something, when somebody from one of the British broadsheets had interviewed her, and she had told the Ginsberg story, but he was tragically still alive, so the lawyers run scared and took the piece out about Ginsberg being a child abuser. So I said, « It's okay, he is dead, isn't he? » [husky American accent] « Yes, he's very dead. » So I put this in my interview with her. And then when it came out, guess what? They had taken it out. And they had something really weird in there, like, so Andrea went up to Ginsberg and she said, « I think you're horrible, » and he said, « Well why, is it because of the legislation? » And I then said, « Well, yes, because you're

foul. » [laughter] And he said, « Listen to me, the Right want to put me in prison, » and she said, « Well, actually I've got a bit more imagination than that, I want you dead. »

The true story is that Ginsberg was a child abuser, a child rapist, and Andrea has so eloquently written about it in *Heartbreak*, and it really would I'm sure, wherever Andrea is, thrill her if you could buy it and enjoy all of it, not just that section.

So Andrea was a good friend, and she was someone whose work was very important to me, and I am not going to precede this discussion with what I disagreed with her about, because I think we've heard that, not everybody agrees with everything everybody says, but essentially I think what she did was, she allowed those of us who were quite radical to become more radical, and she made some of the liberals think, and I think that's extremely important.

She was a very very clever writer, and I think this is something that we lose; when we are talking about her controversial politics, we forget the fact that she was in fact someone who was a very eloquent and artistic writer. She was a very good journalist, and what was really really sad for me, in the last couple of years of her life, was the way that she would talk on the email or on the phone, about the fact that she couldn't get published in her own country, and it broke her heart. And I said to her, « But they love you in the UK, so when you come over, you can come and meet some of my editors, » thinking, « Hmm, would she write about different things? » These are really treading on toes here. Before then, of course, realizing that they wanted to publish her, not because of what she wrote about necessarily, that was a bonus, but because of who she was and because of how beautifully she wrote. And I took her into *The Guardian* newspaper, and she met these bright young things, who had maybe done women's studies at university, but certainly are more a part of the postmodern group than the radical feminist lot, and they just thought she was wonderful, and they talked about all kinds of issues to do with sexual violence, and at the end of the meeting,

they of course asked her to write for them, and she did. She wrote for various sections of the newspaper, and it would have continued, and she was a great loss, because what we needed at that time, and still need, is a voice like Andrea Dworkin's. The fact that she did get published in the UK I think really heartened her.

One of the myths about Andrea which is really prevalent is that she didn't hurt, that she didn't have a heart, that she didn't feel pain, and the nasty, horrible, foul cruelty that was in print and heard from feminists as well as male commentators, the Left as well as the Right, really did break her heart. Nothing I think broke her heart more than the fact that when she was raped and when she wrote about it in 2000 in *The New Statesman* and then in *The Guardian*, is that she wasn't believed, but that she wasn't believed in print. So she could bear the fact I think that people wondered if she had been raped or not, because we all hoped she hadn't been, some of us didn't know whether she had been or not, but I would hope that all of us with a conscience recognize that actually Andrea believed that she had been raped, and the nastiness, actually the vitriol that spilled out into the pages of the broadsheet press was staggering. Joan Smith, who is a feminist, who has written good feminist books and articles, was the first. She said Andrea must be mad, there's something gone wrong, it's terribly sad, isn't it. I met her at an event, just after she published it, and she said, « What's happened to Andrea? It's terribly sad. » Katherine Bennett, who writes for *The Guardian*, who isn't a feminist, who hasn't written interesting feminist books or articles, who is in fact a misogynist, [laughter] she went through a checklist of how Andrea couldn't really have been raped, including, well, she got the date wrong, the fifth of April wasn't a Wednesday, and anyway why didn't she report it to the police, and if she had been raped, you know, why didn't they draw the curtains, because you would think that they'd draw the curtains because they wouldn't want to be seen, and then bearing in mind that she understands exactly how you go and get support once you've been raped, how come she didn't do that? It must be a lie. She's totally gone mad. And there was more of this from other commentators. And the subtext was clear: Who would want to rape Andrea? Okay? That was the subtext. Now,

you may think I'm going over the top. Actually a very good feminist, who's written very good feminist books and articles, actually said this to me. She said, « Who'd want to rape Andrea? » And these are women, or these are people, who really do have an understanding, who should know better, who have an understanding of the fact that rape isn't about sexual desire as we understand it. Why would anyone want to desire a five-year-old sexually? But five-year-olds are raped.

And so she had that, that sniping, that snidey horrible commentating all the time, and there she was, in a great deal of pain. But she carried on. And it was a time I think many of us thought that she wouldn't carry on, and that she really had had enough, but she did, and in my interview with her, and when I then met her a few months later, she said, « You know, I thought I had given up, I felt like I was going to give up, I felt like I had nowhere else to go, but now I feel a new vitality, and I want to help women. » And that was her. That was Andrea refusing to give up, even in the worst kind of pain, the worst kind of circumstances, and the most horrible nonsense that was thrown at her over and over again.

Now I just want to read you one or two extracts from these horrible comments about her, and I'm not doing it to depress us all, or to give the impression that only bad things were said about Andrea. You could fill this room with paper containing the things that are said about Andrea which are good and better even than that, about the women's lives she turned around, that she saved, about the men that she helped to make think about these things, about the academics, about the scholars who she influenced, about the people that she gave pleasure to through her writing and her humor.

So the reason why I want to raise this as an issue is because I think it's up to us to know how cruel people were to Andrea. Some of us in this room were cruel to Andrea. Some of us said horrible things in print and in public about Andrea. But we really have to think, why was this allowed to happen? Why was it okay for Andrea to get all of this crap, over and over again? But then

to think about how she continued in the face of all of this. I'll just read you some brief extracts.

Now when Andrea died I wrote her obituary for *The Guardian* and my editor said to me at the time, « Um, you know, Julie, it's great, um, but you have to put something in about how disliked she was. » And I said, « It's her fuckin' obituary. » Do me a favor. Can you honestly imagine anyone else's obituary who was revered, some great thinker, some great male thinker, and you put in, « By the way, he was 'orrible, did you get — he wore polyester, wasn't it, oh god, he had a gorge, » I mean, just imagine. [laughter] So I said no, fuck you, and actually it's the copy deadline now, so get somebody else to do it. Anyway, so it went in as it were, without the horrible bits.

But Glynis Roberts wasn't quite so firm, it would seem, with her editor no doubt begged her to put in something horrible in the obituary in *The Times*. She said (this was the *Mail*, the *Daily Mail*), « Andrea Dworkin did nothing to convert anyone remotely suspicious of feminism. With her huge frame forever clad in shapeless dungarees, she wore the opposition down with her sweeping statements that women are sexual slaves who do not enjoy intercourse, and that men are essentially rapists. She even thought that high fashion was demeaning to women (you'll like this bit, Sheila), since it was often created by men. (Oh, that's the reason why!) [laughter] And presumably, her fondness for shapeless unisex dungarees. She teamed these with unflattering trainers, a rumpled t-shirt (John, you would think you could have done the ironing!) [laughter] and a veritable haystack of stringy unkempt hair, and a negligent attitude to her own massive weight. »

It was quite funny, actually, after Andrea died, I went to speak about her on Women's Hour. I waited for everyone on BBC [Radio] 4, and there was a clip of Andrea speaking, the last time she had been on Women's Hour, and she was asked, « Well, what about your hair? » She said, [husky American accent] « You know, my hair is very curly, and it's quite wild, but I promise you, it's very, very clean. » So I think she'd got over it. I mean, I think she had to grow a very thick skin to it.

And you know, somebody actually mentioned Will Self. Now Will Self interviewed Andrea in the late 1990s, and Andrea really liked him, and he really liked Andrea, and he came along to a memorial event that we organized in London just last September. And he thought she was a brilliant writer. He said one or two daft things in the interview about how she didn't want to stand up in front of him because she was so fat she didn't want him to see that she had got fat. I mean, if only he knew how little she cared about Will Self seeing how fat she was. But anyway. So Will came along to the memorial event, and I thought, that's nice of Will, isn't it. And then afterwards in the *Evening Standard*, he's got a little column there, and he said, « To the Greater London Assembly, where the Mayor's Women's Affairs Advisor had thoughtfully arranged for a memorial to be held for the great feminist writer Andrea Dworkin. The vast majority of the 200-odd present were women, and not just any old women. These were mostly radical lesbian separatists, [laughter] who eschewed so-called 'feminine frippery.' Speakers poured on as much scorn on liberal feminists as they did on the hated patriarchs. How curious it was therefore to observe that these women in their neutral trousers and jackets, sporting short haircuts and looking so much alike, didn't wear jewelry. » [laughter] Something is very wrong, isn't it. « Didn't wear jewelry. » [laughter] Let's continue. « Or if they did, only the most discreet jewelry. And they looked so much like, well, men. » He then went on to say that, can you imagine an anti-nazi rally where the speakers were wearing swastikas? Do you get it? No. [laughter] The nazis are the enemy of the anti-nazis, aren't they? So why would you then come along to say, the nazis are bad people but you're wearing what they wear, so why do we, as hating men, want to look like them? Yeah, I can see it's gone over your head. Anyway.

A particularly good one was, I think, because myself and Catherine Viner, a feminist who works on *The Guardian*, had both written things about Andrea that were true, and actually that were nice about her, because that is what she deserved, so they thought they better balance it out, you know, it being a liberal newspaper, so someone called Ivana Markin? I don't know, I think she might be in Feminists Against Censorship or something like that,

but she certainly had an axe to grind. « Dworkin's true legacy, » she wrote, « has been that far too many young women today would rather be bitten by a rabid dog than be considered a feminist. » And I think that Finn, who you've heard from earlier, might have something to say about that. She goes on, and it's too boring, and then she's back to the rabid dog scenario. « Feminism today is practically taboo again thanks to Andrea Dworkin. When you mention the word, pretty eyes widen in horror. 'But I actually like men,' my friends still say. 'And I want to be seduced,' Women of all classes don't want to be associated with a movement defined by the likes of Andrea Dworkin. And sadly, that is what the movement, something once so beautiful and extraordinary, has been allowed to become. » That was Andrea's legacy, she said, and we know differently.

So, that aside, I think for me, the really important legacy of Andrea's work, and I think probably the first one to say it, the first feminist to make these connections in print, was that you cannot just talk about one type of violence without talking about another. And we've heard about the domestic violence industry and how it's become cuddly, and everybody can talk about domestic violence because it's now accepted, and it's gender-neutral, and no one's really threatened by it, because you see all these posters of battered victims with their bruises saying oh dear me, poor me, what did I do wrong, and can't someone help me. What she said is, we've got to make sure that we advocate on behalf of the women who really can't speak for themselves and no one wants them to speak. So for example, women in prostitution. Women in prostitution, if they're pimped, they will, remember, have been beaten. They will have suffered domestic violence. They will inevitably have been raped. Sexual harassment is part of their job, and they will probably have been abused, sexually abused, as a child, and they will be beaten by punters. So for a woman who is working in the sex industry, she faces pretty much everything that we tend to compartmentalize. There are some women who have had everything happen to them. There are some women, through luck, or through circumstances, or just the luck of the draw about the men that they meet, will have had the misfortune to know what we are talking

about on every single issue that we can bring up today about sexual violence.

The last time I saw Andrea was in the UK, last October, and we were talking about a woman who had been abused into prostitution when she was a child, and she died, and when she was alive she did some extraordinary work to bring people's attention to the fact that actually nobody enjoys being in prostitution and it's never a job and it's never a choice and why the hell should women who've had the worst circumstances throughout their childhood be the ones to be, I think as she put it, a spittoon for men's semen, and I said to her, why do you think that the likes of Emma Humphreys does more work to help more women than those with more resources? And she said, and you may have heard her say this before, she said, « All women are oppressed. But those of us who've had child sexual abuse or who've been battered in a relationship with a man, or who've been prostituted, we're wearing very short leashes around our necks. Other women who've had the fortune to get to 16 or 20 or 30 who haven't been abused, are still wearing a leash, because we're women, we're a class, we're all oppressed, so their leashes are longer. But it's always the ones who wear the shorter leads who put themselves out more, and who do the most work. » And one thing that made me feel ill about the treatment that Andrea received throughout her life, was that when she spoke about being sexually violated, about being prostituted, about being beaten by her partner in Amsterdam, about being raped in 1999, what we heard then was those not believing her, because how on earth can a feminist be raped, who knows everything to do with being raped? Surely we can protect ourselves by being feminists and by being conscious of it, and anyway shut up, because you're a manhater, and if you have been raped the last thing we want to hear about is you and your analysis of being raped. When we have built this movement on the testimony of women and children who have been abused, who've been brave enough to come out and speak, and were it not for them, we would not be here today. So I really hope that we don't treat anyone else in the future as shoddily, as horrifically as we treated Andrea.

She wrote me some emails, thankfully some of which I've kept. No one can imagine that the last email I had, six weeks later she would be dead, and I was wishing that I had kept every single one of them. But a little extract from an email that she sent me in March, a month before she died. She said, « You ask how I am going on. I finished a piece on disability for *Guardian Weekend*. » (Which was published and which I hope you've all had an opportunity to read, it was published two weeks after her death.) « It's due in two weeks' time. I think I will keep it until then, in case I remember to put something else in or it reads a little differently. You know what it's like, small things are important. I wanted to do it very much. They wanted it to be personal, so it is very personal. I've never been treated with such respect by my editors, but I find it so hard to write. I just have to start earning a living again. The years of sickness have made that impossible for quite a while. I am still working on the book I wanted to do on American literature. I will not be going to the conference in Chicago on pornography. I have mixed feelings about it. It takes a lot of pressure off me. » (This is a conference that she was invited to that disinvited her because they could not afford to go over with someone who could assist her. She was badly disabled at that stage.) She said, « It means the pressure is off me, because I don't really have the energy. On the other hand, I feel as if the conference wouldn't be happening at all if not for my work over the last 30 years. So it's a mixed bag. Certainly better for my health. I feel strongly that it will be a good conference. » And then she said, « Please make a formal complaint about the fact that I wasn't invited. » Which I did. [laughter] So fighting to the end. « For the rest, I find myself easily exhausted and still have trouble concentrating on my work. Two hours and I'm done. This is very distressing to me, but I fought very hard for those two hours and I try to honor them, berating myself for not being able to do more. That said, I feel a new beginning. »

So I think what we have to take away from today and from the work that Andrea did is that were she still here now, she would still be fighting. There would be none of this nonsense about how she wants to retire, and she's burnt out, and she's had enough, and let the young women do it. She would

have continued. And so I think it is up to us. Some of us care about it, some of us don't, some of us are passionate, some of us are not, but we can be absolutely sure that we'll wake up tomorrow and men are still raping and abusing women, so unless we do something about it, they'll continue unabated. And I'm sure that's what Andrea would have wanted, for us to continue.

[applause]