

## INTERVIEWS

## Divided by Gender: An Interview with Jane Elliott

Joanie Eppinga

On the day after Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated in 1968, a third-grade teacher in Riceville, Iowa felt impelled to give her students a visceral experience of discrimination that they would never forget. She divided them into two groups and told them one was genetically inferior to the other. The next day, she reversed the hierarchy. It was a powerful exercise the children never forgot, and one which propelled teacher Jane Elliott to national attention. Our editor interviewed Elliott 40 years later, on February 4, 2008, just before the Democratic nomination process, on the topic of “Hate and Gender.”

*\*Editor’s note: Any opinions expressed by the interviewee are hers alone and are not necessarily those of the Institute for Action Against Hate.*

EPPINGA: *In 1968, you conducted your famous Blue Eyes/Brown Eyes exercise, in which you told your third-graders that children of one eye color were superior in intelligence and were not to play with children of the other eye color, resulting in the supposedly superior group’s tormenting of the “inferior” group. Do you see sexism as having the same sort of divisive quality as racism?*

ELLIOTT: Oh yes. It’s not something we’ve been able to grow out of. I live in a retirement community now, and it’s just as prevalent there among the older people.

EPPINGA: *You’ve been traveling around the world for decades now doing these discrimination exercises with educators. At what point did your topic segue from racism to sexism?*

ELLIOTT: I started segueing into it on the second day. Actually it was first. I started with sexism. I was teaching boys and girls in a farming community, where women were seen as adjuncts—add-ons. If you saw a commercial for machinery, males were pictured with it—never women. Women were maid-servants of the Lord. My father was a Baptist, so—his outlook on *that* was different, but not on who was the more valuable in our family: it was obvi-

ously the males. That's the way it was with the students who came into my classroom. So I fought sexism from day one in my classroom.

EPPINGA: *How do you see sexism expressed most frequently in the 21st century?*

ELLIOTT: In promotions. In expectations. In the anger now that is being generated by the fact that there are too many women on college campuses—there aren't enough men going to school today, into college today.

EPPINGA: *Whom do you see expressing that anger?*

ELLIOTT: College administrators. I talked to a college president who said, "We've got to do something about the imbalance between men and women on this campus." I said, "We've worked for years to get into higher education, and now you're telling us there are too many of us?" He said, "There aren't too many women, there are just too few males." Females who get into higher education are then going to be in positions of power in corporations, and that's very threatening for males. We're scaring them to death right now!

EPPINGA: *And how do you feel about that?*

ELLIOTT: They *should* be scared to death! (*laughter*) After we do the exercise, the first thing that happens is, some male says, "If women get power they're going to want to treat us the way we've treated them"—which says very plainly they know how they've treated us, and they don't want to be on the receiving end of that. They underestimate the intelligence of women. We are not going to do to men what men have done to us. We *know* what that does to productivity. We *know* what that does to relationships. We *know* what that does to a person's self-esteem. We are not going to do that to men—but that's their major fear.

EPPINGA: *Are you saying that you believe that people who have been oppressed learn enough from the experience that they are not going to become oppressors?*

ELLIOTT: Yes, I do. I really believe that. Look at South Africa—it's quite different. . . Look at this present election. I think it is really going to tell us whether we really believe in equity between males and females. If Clinton doesn't win, I'm going to take that as a sign that we haven't come very far where sexism is concerned. Because we're still going to have a wealthy, young, likeable, macho male in the White House—or an older male in the White House. It's still going to be a male.

2007/08]

## DIVIDED BY GENDER

119

EPPINGA: *But how can you separate out whether people are voting on the basis of gender or because of the candidate's stance on the issues?*

ELLIOTT: This one, the Democratic thing, is going to look like it's on the basis of race. And then if Hillary gets the nomination, it's going to look like it's about gender. It's so unfortunate that these two minorities came into trying for this position at the same time. Bing Crosby said, "Frank Sinatra has a voice that you'll hear once in a lifetime, but why'd he have to come up in my lifetime?" and that's exactly the situation Hillary and Obama are in. They're both very positive individuals. We're going to have to choose between those two minorities.

EPPINGA: *Would you like to see Clinton get the nomination?*

ELLIOTT: Absol—Yeah! I'd like Obama to wait for eight years until he has enough experience for that job. It isn't about the color of his skin—it's about the depth of his knowledge.

EPPINGA: *How do you see the subjugation of women affecting women, and society as a whole?*

ELLIOTT: I see it being tremendously expensive as far as productivity is concerned. And creativity. And commitment. And being willing to persevere. We teach young girls at an early age that they aren't "as much as," and so many of them continue to believe that—for a lifetime! Think of all that they could have done if they had been told, as young men are, "The world is your oyster." But women aren't told that, and so we lose a tremendous amount of really good stuff. It was only a few years ago that they even put an entry for "Women" in the encyclopedia. Television—in the advertising on television, some woman is asked to clean the stool, and a man's voice comes out of the wall and tells her how to do it. That kind of thing. People in positions of power that you see, even in commercials, are male, and generally white males.

EPPINGA: *You're making me aware of things I had never consciously noticed.*

ELLIOTT: Nobody really notices until they start thinking about, "Well wait a minute, why did that little girl just say 'Sugar and spice and everything nice.' That's what Hillary's supposed to be made of. . . and 'Along came a spider and sat down beside her, and frightened Miss Muffett away'?" I told my third graders, "No no no —'and she stomped on it!'" (laughter)

EPPINGA: *Do you see any ways in which males suffer from the subjugation of women in our society?*

ELLIOTT: Sure—they die young. We have elevated males to a position of such power, and we are quite certain that they are so brilliant, that they have to live up to an image that is quite unreal. They spend their lives trying to be superior to 50% of the population, and they aren't—and we make them responsible for everything. So women don't have to be responsible! Unless they choose to be. Now many, many women whose men leave them at an early age have to *then* be responsible, but men die young! And it's because we put all the responsibility on them. If we reinstate the draft, as we very well could do, women won't have to register. They don't have to register now. But I go to college campuses all the time, and when I ask, "How many of you have registered for the draft?" only young men stand up. But when I ask women in the audience if they want the Equal Rights Amendment, they all want that! But they don't want equal responsibility. And that's killing our men at an early age. When a young woman gets killed or wounded in Iraq, there's a big to-do over it. Young men, particularly Hispanic/Latino young men, come home in body bags, and you scarcely notice that their names are in the paper. This is all so racist and so sexist and so unfair.

EPPINGA: *You've said that racism is not human nature—it's a learned response. Do you believe the same thing is true of gender prejudice?*

ELLIOTT: Yes.

EPPINGA: *How are we taught that women are inferior?*

ELLIOTT: Well, for instance, when our second child was born, the doctor came out into the waiting room (men used to wait in the waiting room instead of into the delivery room) and said to my husband, "Well, it only took you two to get a good one. It took me four before I got a good one." My husband said, "What do you mean?" He said, "Well you got a boy! You got a good one the second time!"

My daughter is now 51 and she's trying to get a job. Try to get a job as a 51-year-old woman. It's a very interesting experience. If she were a 51-year-old male and were slightly graying at the temples, she would be seen as distinguished. Women are seen as *extinguished*. It's still going on. It's bad for all of us.

EPPINGA: *Do you think we've made any progress in this realm?*

ELLIOTT: Oh. . . (*sigh*). As long as the biggest news on television is Britney Spears' hair, we haven't made a whole lot of progress. As long as we judge

2007/08]

DIVIDED BY GENDER

121

people by their measurements—you never see the measurements of a *man* on television! No, I don't think we've made a lot of progress.

EPPINGA: *You once told an attractive young woman to “Get over cute—get competent!” What did you mean by that?*

ELLIOTT: I got older, and I realized that, even though I was cute when I was younger, that doesn't last. I think it's Judge Judy who says, “Beauty fades. Stupid lasts forever.” And I think she's absolutely right about that. If you trade on cute for long enough, you can get by on cute until you're about 45. And then you look around, and there are a whole lot of younger, cuter people vying for the position that you want, and you go to ask for it, you try to get it, and somebody's going to say to you, “Well you see, I see you as cute, I don't see you really as competent.” Because you've been cute all your life! You can't use cute forever. As my dad used to say, “What you put inside your head they can't take away from you.” Get smart! Get educated! Get trained! Get qualified! Eventually looks won't matter anyway. Eventually you're going to have to *know* more than you look.

EPPINGA: *You've said that you hate doing the discrimination exercise, that you hate the necessity of it, but also that actually doing it is draining and gives you migraines. I'm wondering how doing the exercise all these years has changed you internally.*

ELLIOTT: It has totally changed the way I see the world. I used to think that it was okay just to be what I am. What I am isn't good enough. Because what I am is a white, Christian woman, raised in a so-called Christian household, who was quite certain that I was okay. I'd read the book *I'm Okay, You're Okay*, but I didn't realize the title should've been *I'm Okay, You're Okay—As Long As You're As Much Like Me As You Can Possibly Be*.

I'm serious about that. I've had to leave a whole lot of ugly stuff that I believed behind in order to understand other human beings. For a long time that wasn't necessary. As a white female in the United States of America, my number one freedom is the freedom to be totally ignorant about those who are different from myself. My number two freedom is to deny that I'm ignorant. And my number three freedom is the freedom to say to people of color who accuse me of being racist, “Well, you took it wrong.” They're expected to understand that their perception is wrong and that my perception of reality is the only one that is real. If you haven't read *Women's Reality* by Anne Wilson Shaef, go read it. The whole book is about the fact that we live in different realities. You'll make a suggestion to a man and he'll say, “What's the matter, you crazy?” because his reality isn't the same

as yours. I don't live in the same reality that women of color live in. Our realities are different. They're equally valid, but they are totally different.

I didn't realize that. I thought, "Well everybody thinks the way I do, because obviously I'm a good Christian woman, so I must be right." No. I'll never, ever say to a group of students again—and that was a real big mistake in that film [Frontline's *A Class Divided*—to treat others the way they want to be treated. No, no, no. I don't have the right to treat others the way *I* want to be treated—I have the *responsibility* to treat others the way *they* want to be treated. Big difference. But see that's the Golden Rule. I believe in the Platinum Rule—Do unto others as others would *have* you do unto them. And in order to do that you have to *ask* them how they want to be treated, you have to *listen* to the response, and then you have to *do* what they ask you to do. Big difference. Ultimately, it's all about power: who has it, how they got it, what they're going to do to maintain it, and what others have to do to get a chunk of the action.