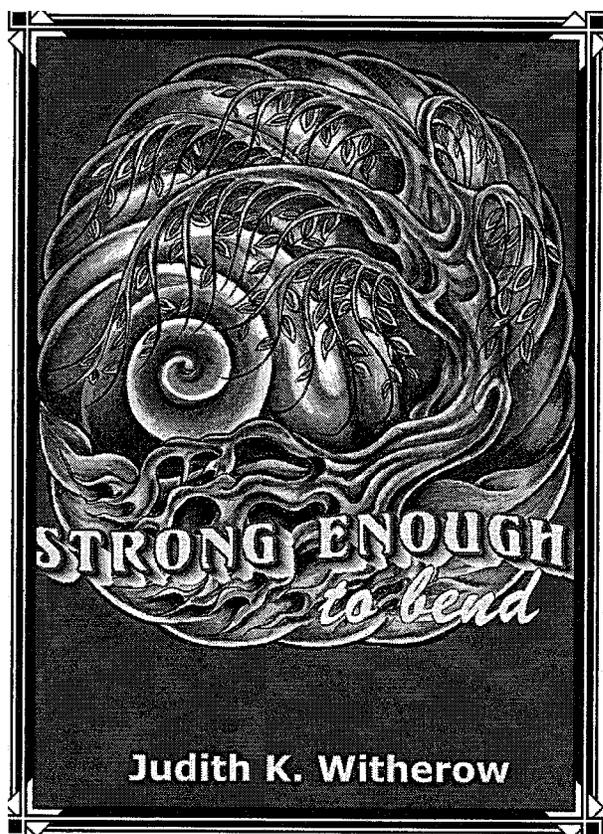


Book Review

Strong Enough To Bend by Judith Witherow

In the eighties Judith Witherow and I used to cross journalistic paths when our essays were published in feminist presses. We were the rare writers who wrote about poverty and classism. Other feminists addressing class oppression were mostly working class women angry at middle class feminists' prejudice against them.



Judith wrote about her childhood poverty as a First Nation woman in the Appalachian mountains with no running water, hungry bellies and her own and other family members' subsequent disabilities. I shed light on the poverty of single moms due to unpaid motherwork, puny welfare grants, non-supporting dads, and low wages.

I got to know Judith Witherow when she subscribed to MWV and her partner Sue volunteered as Welfare Warriors' web mistress. I learned that Judith and I had more in common, both of us having raised three sons before moving on to the lesbian nation.

Judith has now published an exciting book called *Strong Enough To Bend*. The title comes from a dramatic drawing of a bending tree on a wild blue sky which illustrates the book cover. Judith's daughter-in-law Andrea Witherow is the artist. She told Judith the drawing represents her life "because you always have the ability to bend without breaking."

In *Strong Enough to Bend* Judith shares obstacles and challenges she has faced, survived and sometimes overcome in her bold and fulfilling life as an author, mother, activist and lover. The essays and poems make up a compelling story of her life that is hard to put down.

Writing with both humor and anger, Judith describes growing up in the Holler with five siblings in a three-room shack, raised by hard-working parents--a Cherokee dad and Seminole-Irish mom. She describes collecting water from a trough running down the strip-mined mountainside and suffering from hunger

and cold and lingering illnesses.

Her stories both enlighten readers and challenge the prejudices so common in our poverty-hating culture. When she learns of a *Mother of the Year* contest she eagerly plans to nominate her mom who she reveres. But her mother's life picking and selling berries and 'piney,' cleaning homes, working in a factory, and raising 6 children didn't meet the racist, classist criteria of the contest. The ideal mother had to have 'successful' children, had to be active in a church, a good homemaker, cheerful and patient, a volunteer for civic causes and have time to take on all responsibilities as a National Mother. Judith wrote:

"She may have been unacceptable in this contest, but in my world my mother is without comparison."

Judith's mother was a woman who knew how to survive off the land created remedies to keep children alive, sacrificed for her children everyday, lived in harmony with the Earth, chopped wood and boiled water to wash clothes. She was tough. One day Judith's dad tried to drive to town to escape life in a bottle of wine. Her mom whacked out the car windows with an ax. After that he had to walk if he really wanted a drink.

Judith managed to finish high school, married, left the mountains with her three sons, and divorced her husband. She moved into the city with Sue who becomes the love of her life, the heart of her home, and the co-mother to her sons. Judith had always been a "tomboy" who liked to hunt, trap, fish and join her dad in sports. She could never tolerate dresses and "female activities". Her father accepted her as she was, a Twin Spirit woman.

When Judith met Sue, she fell for her hard--despite Sue being a middle class, white, educated woman. To impress Sue, Judith took her to a Turkey Shoot on their first date. Their deep abiding love has endured for over 40 years.

Sometimes Judith immerses herself in the animal and spirit world to describe the indescribable pain of her illnesses. In 'Wailing with the Wolves' she writes,

"The wolves are not outside the door. Over the past few lifetimes, but especially the last two decades, they have crept in one at a time until my house and head are filled with their presence. Sometimes if the Spirits are in a benevolent mood, I can keep the pack distracted for short shadows of time ... Most mornings I brush past my friends without so much as a word. It hurts too much to talk. I head for coffee, the computer and a fistful of pills. "

After several serious surgeries, Judith begins to suffer from bouts of paralysis. The doctor tells Sue that Judith probably has a brain tumor and should prepare to die. But tests eventually reveal that she has MS (Multiple Sclerosis). This begins years of drugs, paralysis, remissions and searches for answers. She tries holistic, western and herbal treatments. She learns that her grandpa and a sister-in-law's dad also have MS. And four members of another family from her town of 450 people have MS.

For years Judith struggles with painful skin lesions which doctors attribute to the MS. After doing her own research, Judith demands tests to diagnose the problem instead of prescriptions for more creams. Her battle ends in a diagnosis of yet one more incurable disease--Lupus. Both MS and Lupus are auto-immune diseases that primarily attack women.

Judith shares lists of drugs, herbs, patch removers, etc to help others facing these deadly diseases. She continues her search for relief, even allowing herself to be used for experimental drugs.

Through decades of disease Sue is Judith's rock. She provides physical, emotional, economic support. She is Judith's medical advocate which is so important when Judith is just too sick to deal.



Judith (right) with "Mother of the Year" Sue

Sue cares for Judith and the children when Judith cannot. She helps capture and cage their son's 4-foot long snake among other hilarious family escapades. Sue could surely qualify for a "Mother of the Year" award!

Judith never gives up her writing and feminist activism although her disability drastically curtails her mobility. Describing herself as a "Card Carrying Member of Medicaid," she warns that attacks on Medicaid and welfare in the 90's would lead to attacks on other populations, a prophesy that came true.

To close her book, storyteller Judith remembers the time "Mike Meets the Dykes." This funny but serious tale recounts Sue and Judith's tactics to stop Mike from assaulting his wife.

Read about success, caring, struggle, boldness, and resistance in this true story about one strong woman who fights like hell and never gives up.

Pat Gowens, Editor MWV, Milwaukee, WI

To order *Strong Enough to Bend*, Send \$14.95 to:

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