

Screaming Purses

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In 1989 I completed my Ph.D. at the University of Wyoming in geology and have taught science at universities since. However, American education is now out of balance with its emphasis on the STEM fields. We need the arts.



A Screaming Purse

A November 3rd [New York Times article](#) reported the decreased life expectancy of poorly educated whites due to drugs, alcohol, and suicide. The causes for the behavior aren't clear, but that didn't slow the assigning of blame to Progressives:

Their goal is to dismantle traditional norms and rules for family life. They push to dismantle gender roles and other foundational categories that ordinary people use to orient themselves and make sense out of their lives. They advocate for drug legalization and doctor-assisted suicide as well. The upshot: reliable guides toward a normal life are removed, and potentially destructive behaviors that rich people either avoid or discretely manage are normalized. The most vulnerable pay the cost.

Deadly Progressivism by R.R. Reno. First Things, 11/4/2015.

Being a Progressive myself, my initial impulse was to think, “So progressives make it harder for a bunch of rednecks to beat their wives, lynch blacks, and feel better about their masculinity by beating up gays? And because of those changes, these rednecks have to get drunk, do drugs, and shoot themselves? Well good riddance—they would have voted Republican anyway!”

Not very compassionate, I admit. Nor very helpful. Falling into anger and blaming someone is a trap. That anger can quickly get turned inward, leading to despair, depression, and the resulting addictive behavior. Instead, progressives need to provide an alternative, more-empowering response, such as through recognizing and harnessing our own creativity, something first modeled for me by Gail Shive.

When I was in grad school in Wyoming, one of my professor-friends began dating Gail, an avid bicyclist and a [blossoming artist](#). I am fortunate that she shared with me her story. She grew up on a farm near a small town in Nebraska, married for the first time at 15, and later moved to

Wyoming. According to her [Artist Statement](#), Gail made some poor decisions as a teenager that resulted in what became 24 years in an abusive marriage.

Gail told me that during her first marriage she sought help from her Lutheran minister. His advice, like that of too many ministers and priests, was to endure it for the good of the church, to please God, to avoid bringing shame to the family, because she couldn't make it on her own, or some other load of crap that men in positions of power ladle upon the powerless. (In the antebellum South, *Servants, obey your masters* was a favorite sermon topic, and the South I grew up in didn't seem to have advanced far beyond that.) When Gail's husband lost his job and went looking elsewhere for work, she says, "Because he was gone, I didn't have his negative energy to face daily. . . and I gained strength emotionally."

Gail began taking classes at Central Wyoming College. Too often the Rick Santorums of the world undermine a college education as the place where Satan has his greatest success. (See [\[here\]](#).) In reality, college helps empower people, especially women, to stand up to abusive power structures. An abused woman has little choice until she recognizes she has one and finds the resources to make the choice possible. For Gail, her choice became clear from a chance meeting on the bus she rode to college:

A shy, mousy woman from Hudson [Wyoming] got on one day and sat near me. She said, "Here is a paper that helped me a lot. You should read it and see if it helps you." It was *The Violence Cycle*. My mouth fell open as I read it. I realized what we [(I and my husband)] had been experiencing over the years was predictable and changeable. It outlined the escalating steps in the cycle of violence, how to step out of it, and what to do instead. I realized our next step was [going to be] me in the hospital.

Gail says the encounter changed her life. Instead of ending up in the hospital, she ended up in Laramie, Wyoming. She gradually began focused on art, expressing her pain creatively. One of her early art-class assignments was to use *found objects* as the basis of a display. When visiting a salvage shop, she found an old purse that became the foundation of a series of *Screaming Purses* that has gained her national exposure. In her Artist Statement, she says,

Recently, I realized I should have been screaming all those years. Rather than holding the screams in I decided to paint a series of "screaming purses." Now those screams are out in the world where they belong.

My friend, Peter, now her husband, usually accompanies Gail to her shows. (He's quick to tell people, "I'm not *THAT* husband.") Together Gail and Peter have created a wonderful life ([\[here\]](#)) with the kind of meaning *First Things* says we Progressives took away from people. Peter and Gail are happily growing old—not doing drugs, getting drunk, nor committing suicide. Gail has risen far about the *uneducated white woman of decreasing life expectancy* described in the NY Times article. She says she's let out the last of her screams. Gail's art and life show a creative way out of despair for others to follow.

For us Progressives, Gail offers a challenge. When a person needs to leave an abusive marriage, Progressives can help by pushing for women's shelters, providing financial assistance, and educating people that spouse abuse is not an acceptable, normal *gender role*. But can we help them also in creating the meaning *Deadly Progressivism* accuses us of destroying? I think so, by helping empower creativity. In the Bible Belt where I grew up, I was raised to think a person was born with a talent or born out of luck. It's that thinking that truly makes *the most vulnerable pay the cost*. Instead, becoming good at painting, writing, acting, comedy, or dance is mainly a function of devoting the focused, disciplined time needed for constant improvement. (See [The Talent Code](#).) It takes time, opportunity, and encouragement, often unavailable to those who need it most. We Progressives *must* support affordable education and the arts, if we truly want to make progress.