The Value of a Voice: Learning from Jane Franklin

By Susan M. Fitzpatrick, PhD

In a recent New Yorker article and in her upcoming book, Harvard historian Jill Lepore provides, at long last, a public voice to a most interesting woman living in an age when women did not expect to exercise influence in the public sphere (scholar.harvard.edu/jlepore/publications/prodigal-daughter-writing-history-mourning). The woman is Jane Franklin, the younger sister of the very famous Ben Franklin. Lepore constructs a compelling case that the very different lives of Jane and Ben are due less to some uneven distribution of innate ability and more to the limitations of opportunity imposed along gender lines. It is painful to contemplate the talents and abilities that have been and are being squandered by a lack of access and opportunity.

I recommend that you take some time to read and reflect on Jane's story. I have a suspicion that many of you will feel, as I did, that despite the gains made by the ensuing generations, there is still a little bit of Jane in each of us. Women in the STEM professions still lag behind their male peers in visibility and recognition as a number of recent studies attest. The reasons for this uncomfortable fact are numerous and complicated—but not insurmountable.

In many ways I dislike thinking about “being Jane.” It’s more fun spotlighting the many successful and influential women I know and celebrating the accomplishments of AWIS members and the valued contributions they make to their chosen fields and professions. But putting myself in Jane’s shoes, even if I don’t intend to take more than a few steps in them, reminds me of how frustrating it would be to lack the opportunity to give voice to my life and my work.

Thankfully, today, women in the STEM professions not only have individual voices, they also have their AWIS voice—the rich, booming, hard-to-ignore voice that comes when many speak together as one. It can be tiring for any single person to keep raising awareness. It is not fun to have to be the individual voice calling out the lack of women at the podium, in the news, or at the helm. AWIS, through its public policy programs and communication outreach efforts, takes some of the weight off your shoulders and makes sure that the issues and concerns of female STEM professionals are part of the ongoing STEM policy conversations both nationally and locally. A respected voice among policy and decision makers, this issue of AWIS Magazine highlights just some of the ways that AWIS is speaking out on your behalf and getting heard.

As an AWIS member and supporter, you are part of a larger voice for change, for success, and for opportunity. Jane would be proud.