

The Enemy Within

When I was 11 years old and talking in the schoolyard one day with a bunch of girlfriends from class, the discussion came around, as it did in those days, to “What are you going to be when you grow up?” At least three of us wanted to be actresses or models. Two had their sights already set on marriage, motherhood, and a house in the country. But one girl said she was going to go to medical school and be a doctor. This announcement was greeted with respectful silence (all those additional years of school!) until Martha, fat, bright, and at the head of the class, said solemnly, “I’d never go to a woman doctor. I just wouldn’t have confidence in a woman doctor.”

“Not even to deliver your baby?” I remember inquiring.

“Nope,” Martha replied. “Especially not to deliver my baby. That’s too important. Men doctors are better than women doctors.”

It has been many years since that schoolyard discussion and I can’t even recall the name or the face of the girl who had the ambitions, but I hope she wasn’t sidetracked somewhere along the line. But I remember Martha. Calm, the best student, everybody’s friend, more advanced physically than the rest of us— she had breasts, we didn’t— and utterly positive at that tender age that men did things better than women. I will never forgive her for being the first person of my sex whom I ever heard put down women. I considered it traitorous then in the schoolyard, and I consider it traitorous now. Since that time, I have done a lot of observing of that strange phenomenon, have been guilty of it myself, I think, and have come to the conclusion that woman is often her own worst enemy— the enemy within.

One of the hardest things for a woman with aspirations to do in our society is to admit, first to herself and then to others, that she has ambitions that go beyond the routine— a good marriage, clever children. Early on, we learn that men don’t take kindly to the notion of a woman entering the competitive lists. It is in the nature of power and position that those who have it do not relinquish it graciously, as all colonial peoples and all minority groups discover at a certain stage in their development. Well, O.K., so be it. But infinitely more damaging to our psyche is the realization that our ambitions are met with equal hostility— poohpoohed, sniffed at, scoffed at, ignored, or worse, not taken seriously— by mothers, sisters, cousins, aunts and friends, who won’t believe that we have set our sights on a different sort of goal than they have envisioned,

preferring instead to believe that our ambition is merely a “passing phase”—which, unfortunately, it often is because of lack of encouragement. . . .

I have seen women who admit to small hankerings of personal ambition (usually expressed by a modest “I’d like to do more at work”) throw up unbelievable psychological barriers to their own success. Two conversations I once had in the space of two days with a couple of young ladies who work in television will illustrate what I mean. Both women had neatly resolved their stymied careers with the oddest excuses I have ever heard. One thought she never could rise to a producer because she found the temperature in the film-editing rooms “too cold.” The other said she never felt comfortable “near machines.” To the first I answered, “Get a sweater.” The second rendered me speechless. Of course, what these women were really saying was that their femininity—not the fact that they were female— somehow made them unfit for the tough world of television production.

The risk of losing that intangible called femininity weighs heavily on many women who are afraid to compete with men for better jobs. This sad state of affairs has come about because of arbitrary and rigid definitions of what is masculine and what is feminine that our culture has relied on for a variety of complex reasons. We can thank the hippie revolution for knocking down some of the old criteria, particularly external ones like the length of hair and form of dress. But as long as such qualities as self-assertion, decision making, and leadership are considered masculine—and conversely, unfeminine—a woman who worries about her femininity will never make a go of it in terms of career.

It was men who made the arbitrary rules of masculine/feminine that we suffer under, but it is women who continue to buy the stereotypes. At the early women’s-liberation meetings that I attended, I was struck with how all of us were unwilling to assume leadership roles, and how often a sensible comment or brilliant new insight was couched between giggles and stutters or surrounded by self-disparaging phrases and gestures. Clearly, we were women who were unused to speaking forthrightly— without the frills and fur belows of “feminine” roundabout logic designed to make a point as gently as possible for fear of offending. Since we had nobody to offend but ourselves, this namby-pambying ceased to some extent with the passage of time.

But a women’s-liberation meeting is a very special crucible. In the world outside, the stereotype of the aggressive, castrating bitch is still posted as a warning to us. If a woman believes in the existence of this mythical creature— and believes in her own potential

transmogrification— her ease is hopeless. It astounds me that so many women remain convinced that a woman who functions in high gear in business, politics, or in the professions loses something intrinsic that is worth preserving. Personally, I have always felt that true femininity was rather indestructible. One look at the Irish revolutionary Bernadette Devlin should settle the matter once and for all. I suspect that this “castrating bitch” propaganda, a big lie, really, is perpetuated not only by insecure men but also by do-nothing women, the magpies who busy themselves with nothing more than nest-building. There is no getting around the uncomfortable truth that the militant stay-at-homes, the clinging vines, dislike and distrust their liberated sisters. I know exactly what I lost when I gave up pretending that passivity was a virtue and entered the competitive arena— some personality distortions which made me pirouette in concentric circles when I could have simply walked a straight line. And I know what I gained— self-esteem and a stretching of creative muscles and an exercising of a mind which had grown flaccid from disuse since the halcyon days of college.

A major tragedy of the female sex is that friendship and respect between women has never been highly regarded. During the dating years, girls are notoriously quick to ditch an appointment with a girlfriend at the sound of a male voice on the telephone. With marriage and family comes the suspicion that all other women are potentially “the other woman.” In an early episode of *The Forsythe Saga* on TV, Irene the adulteress tells Young Jolyon’s daughter, “Don’t you know that women don’t have friends? They have a lover, and they have people that they meet.” How pathetic, but how historically accurate.

There is nothing in women’s chemical or biological makeup that should preclude deep loyalty to those of the same sex. The sensitivity is certainly there, as is the capacity for warmth and love and fidelity. But until women cease to see themselves strictly in terms of men’s eyes and to value men more highly than women, friendship with other women will remain a sometime thing, an expedient among competitors of inferior station that can be lightly discarded. I, for one, would much rather compete with men than for them. This affliction of competition between women for the attention of men— the only kind of women’s competition that is encouraged by society— also affects the liberated women who managed to secure an equal footing with men in this man’s world. Watch a couple of strong women in the same room and notice the sparks fly. Many women who reject the “woman is inferior” psychology for themselves apply it unsparingly to others of the same sex. An ambitious woman frequently thinks of herself as the only hen in the

barnyard, to reverse a common metaphor. She is the exception, she believes. Women must recognize that they must make common cause with all women. When women get around to really liking— and respecting— other women, why then, we will have begun.