

ONE WOMAN'S STORY OF TRANSITION

I have been asked to tell you my life-time story of transitions.

When I was younger I was told how to put an elephant into a matchbox. You merely looked at the animal through the reverse end of a telescope, reduced its size, picked it up gently with tweezers and placed it in the box.

I could find no such way to telescope my lifetime experiences of adjustment. There are too many tales that simply won't go into the box. So you might say that I am giving you the truncated version.

There has been a lot of talk at this conference about the grass roots. About*them*. I speak as a grass root.

There was a time when the three of us-my mother, my father and my preschool self - with the scarcely appropriate tools available and except for a gallon can of kerosene for the lamps and lanterns- had the energy problem all solved on a one hundred acre farm in northern Indiana.

We were on our own, except for occasional community efforts, and the tasks to be done determined our lives. Mother's skills and efforts, like dad's, were valued and were essential. Her labor in the house, the garden and the orchard, and caring for the chickens was sufficiently rewarding economically to keep us fed and clothed. Each week the eggs were sold to purchase food staples and cloth for sewing and the long time accumulation of egg money covered my college costs.

For a long time I had this fantasy that one fall day I sailed off to college on the back of a Rhode Island Red rooster. How's that for a sexist concept? It was the hens that had laid those eggs. The rooster had only crowed about it.

But there was no question about it. On that farm I was essential. It would have collapsed without me to fetch, stir, push, churn, gather, watch and to think. Sometimes I was needed most in the house and other times in the fields or at the barn. All tasks were open and waiting for me. I was measured by the energy, strength, knowledge and, yes, the intuition I could bring to the task at hand.

I preferred the our-of-doors--the open spaces. The fullness of my being was interwoven with all of nature.

On the farm I had few limitations. But in gradeschool that changed. I learned early on that, in the larger world, there were some tasks and options open to boys and not to me. I found that the boys simply were not going to allow me to play on their team, even if I could match their skills. I made the transition and accepted that as a way of life.

I went to the city, the county seat, for my last year of High School. Right off I got the message that country kids were considered to be hicks, odd, simple and naive. I was old enough now to recognize the pain of exclusion, of being an outsider.

In this transition, I incorporated my diminishment into my sense-of-self by hiding--by crossing over. Embarrassed by my back-

ground, my rural parents, by everything that defined me as an outsider, I began to live the lie that I carried with me for decades. I began to deny my self.

At the University I kept my rural background, my shady side, hidden and continued to apply myself with vigor to academics and girls' athletics. Soon, however, the message started coming through to me that there was something basically wrong with the nature of a woman who made the dean's list, or any academic honorary for that matter, and, what's more, a woman interested in participating in athletics was definitely unfeminine. No man would want to marry such a woman and since my real fulfillment would come through marriage and motherhood I was on the road to self-destruction.

Now I began relinquishing the pride I had in being able to perform well in academics and athletics and turned my attention to extra curricular activities such as student government. But I kept trying there, too. After college I stored the keys, the medals and the awards in a little brown box and hid that, too.

After teaching mathematics for five years I married a man who did not hide his ^{awards}, whose sense-of-self would never be threatened by a woman's intellectual ability, or athletic prowess, or rural background. That did not mean, however, that he understood my increasing sense of being less than fully human any more than did I.

HIS PROFESSIONAL STAR BECAME OURS. When the two of us became

one he took the head and continued on his trajectory toward that STAR out there in the Real world-the world of economic remuneration. I, in the other world, with the body, sought to get the back-up systems together.

In this transition I turned to the home management experts who had it all outlined step by step. I was on my way to making house-work a profession. I planned and I evaluated. I washed on Monday, ironed on Tuesday, worked on the budget and the books, attended to household and personal shopping, gardened and worked on the lawn and did community volunteering on Wednesday and Thursday and on Friday I cleaned. Keep it clean. Keep It Clean. KEEP IT CLEAN!

There was one thing that I must keep uppermost in my mind. Out there in the real world there were demons that the HEAD must confront day after day. It was essential therefore that I be caring and compassionate when he came home. He must be nurtured for the next day's battles.

What of me, the body? I didn't even know how to ask that question. I was unable to factor myself into situations. In collusion with the experts I continued to smother my sense of self, believing I had no eggs to sell.

But real fulfillment, they had said, would come not only through marriage but through motherhood. In 1941 I was pregnant. War rumors were in the air. He, the HEAD, was called to join in anti-submarine research. So, while the head produced sonar patents, I, the body, in a strange town, produced progeny.

Patents one can lay aside. Progeny one can't. Now I had to adjust to a whole new routine not loudly publicized ahead of time. The experts of the day claimed that infants grew best when the daily routine was repeated with no deviation. The clock and the scales took over my life. Every four hours on the hour--nurse, weigh, nurse, weigh--the exact number of ounces were prescribed. The goal, perhaps, was to turn the child and me into automatons.

Most of you know, as I do, that the little widgets pull at the heart strings. One is devoted and their slave from the beginning. There is no greater blessing in this life than the new born child who is wanted. In the beginning we wanted four. The three that we had supplied us with great satisfaction, plenty of on-going commitment and the challenge of continued involvement and change---nursery school, scouts, sports, music lessons, dance lessons, church school, PTA camping trips, educational trips...

Oh yes, back there some place ^{the allies} had won the war. Following the STAR we had moved again to the midwest. He, the HEAD, wearing gray flannel suits was now aimed upward in the corporate structure, and I, the body, wearing my high heels, was adjusting to being a corporate wife giving dinners, parties, teas. I was somehow juggling the roles of housemaid, supermom, corporate wife and community volunteer.

I did it all, but a real lethargy plagued me. The gray fog settled. I was caught in the "problem with no name" as it was called by Betty Friedan in the Feminine Mystique. As I look

Back, I realize that it was the self-renewing trips to the farm, to the open spaces, that sustained me during this time of trying to meet others needs.

The children went off to college and then scattered around the country and abroad taking up their individual lives. We became grandparents. After twenty years of permanence, we became mobile. The STAR drew us first to the west coast and then to the east. A heart problem for my husband travelled with us. My widowed mother, in declining health, now came, too. My being centered on ministering to their needs.

And then, quite suddenly it seems, I was alone. (My husband and my mother died within six weeks of one another). No one needed me. Being needed as a daughter, a wife, a mother had been my identity. I had lived vicariously. In a way, I had died with them. It was a death of self. I mourned the three of us.

That was seven years ago. I was sixty-one. The adjustments were endless. After a time I began posting notes to myself: Keep Pushing. The Future is Now. Don't Count the Candles. It's a Condition of the Mind--If You Think You Can Fly, You Can. Keep the Ego on the Move.

And I returned for a time to the farm in Indiana. I had managed it for mother in her later years and it was now mine. There, amidst the growing grain, the thrust for life, I sought a renewed identity.

What did I have to build on? I made lists of personal hopes, strengths, resources. Out of it all came the obvious answer. I am female and growing older. I would focus on those aspects of my reality.

That was the conscious part. I am now convinced that I also embraced again that childhood self so long smothered in the dark shroud of socialization.

This late blooming sense of self is built on those very aspects of outsidership that I had experienced in my life-time. I claimed my special abilities as a woman and as an elder. I also claimed my rural beginnings and my mind.

I wasn't alone. Other women were also in transition, reclaiming their identities. They became my experts. I concentrated on feminist thought, read only women writers. For sixty years patriarchal thought had determined my reality. I have come to believe that this bias, which permeates our existence as does the air we breathe, is false because it is partial. Patriarchal thought is dependent on dominance and power-over and it has brought us to the brink of global destruction.

New ways of perceiving are developing. Reality is being re-conceptualized by those who historically have coped with life and relationships as outsiders. Reconceptualization is an endless undertaking but one that must go on side by side with the shorter term adjustments we are forced to make.

My current commitment is to do my best to seek and identify, in my own experience and in that of others, the unclaimed strengths, the means of coping, that outsiders, those who have tended the back-up systems of society, unknowingly share and bring that perspective into the larger view.

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