

Getting it together

Human liberation needed

By BOB TRENZ, PhD

Times are changing. Little girls are playing baseball. Big girls are trying for careers formerly sought only by men. Cigar-smoking, competent females are being called

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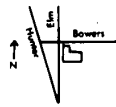
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"madame chairperson." Quiet housewives are taking loud stands against stifling roles and stifling husbands.

My own personal reaction to this apparent revolution was, at first, a quiet snickering at burning bras and unisexual clothing. It seemed like another fad. Then I was pleased to see how much more assertive and capable women had become "overnight." I began to see that militant feminists were correct in attacking institutions and attitudes that favored one sex and handicapped the other. I converted to feminism along with millions of other former male chauvinist pigs.

But now, I am beginning to see things differently. Instead of pleading, "guilty," over thousands

of years of suppression of women, I am now seeing that men, too, have been bound by sexism. Of course, the suppression of men has been much more subtle. In fact, it has almost seemed that it was our idea.

Men have been the bread-winners, sportsmen, political leaders and industrial managers of our society for centuries. Why? Because, supposedly, those were the most rewarding roles of our culture, the ones that feminists are now claiming for their sisters.

But I really wonder how enviable those roles are. I see countless men who are bored and discouraged by their jobs, but are unable to leave them because their families depend upon them for financial security. Liberated women in leadership roles are finding the same dilemma.

EVEN IF these highly prized male roles were worth as much as they seem, the most intolerable suppression of men occurs outside the job world anyway. It occurs in the nursery when fathers are seen as assistants to mothers, especially when breastfeeding is the only feeding method used for infants.

Fathers stand aside as their wives perform most of the vital functions of childcare, pitching in a little help when asked, becoming the playmate, provider, and sometimes disciplinarian. No wonder most men are mystified by the deep attachment and extreme satisfaction that mothers feel for their children; they dismiss it as the "maternal instinct" and feel grateful that they don't have to change more diapers.

Emotionally, too, we are stifled by our masculine roles. John Wayne, Peter Gunn and James Bond have trained us, along with our fathers, that A Real Man only cries or shows weakness at very profound moments. A Real Man, we have learned, controls his fears, maintains his cool and never displays his insecurities. Real Men, it turns out, have vastly more heart attacks and ulcers than women. Not to mention that Real Men will never know the extreme ecstasy of deep emotional involvement or true intimacy.

LESS IMPORTANT, but intolerable male suppression also occurs in the home-making and avocation spheres. Men are kept out of the kitchen, except when dishes need to be washed, by wives who prepare all meals and complain about

their roles as cooks as though these are boring and unfulfilling drudgery.

But what can they expect? How can their husbands really appreciate the artistry and skill that goes into a cake "made from scratch" or a gourmet meal, when he has never participated in anything more creative than warming a can of beans or barbecuing a steak?

For years, such extremely satisfying activities as raising houseplants, arts and crafts, and sewing at home have been safely and exclusively in the hands of women. With few exceptions, Real Men have stayed away from such "stified" activities. They have shunned the childcare and handicraft sections of the newspaper for the sports pages. In fact, most newspapers reserve these columns for the "Women's Section."

A sad side-effect of this "male mystique" is the consequent gap between male and female human beings. The male classically feminine or masculine a person becomes, the less that person can understand and respect the members of the opposite sex as fellow human beings. The Real Man sees women as flighty, over-emotional and "victims" of a powerful maternal instinct.

From his perspective, women seem to be filling in their boring lives with "meaningless" hobbies such as flower arranging. To the Real Man, women are necessary as sex objects and housekeepers; but he wishes they could be more interesting, like men.

TO ME, the suppression of men by stifling roles is one of the greatest tragedies of our times. I don't believe, however, that the solution to the problem will come with mass burnings of sport sections and barbecue aprons or with marches. It will come only when individual men and women see that it's time for their own human liberation, a liberation from any rigid roles or expectations that keep people from being all that they can be.

Questions for Bob Trenz may be sent to: Life Department, The Observer & Eccentric, 1225 Bowers, Birmingham, 48012.

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