

AUTONOMOUS WOMAN

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OPENING WORDS

Opening words are from Carol Gilligan's book, In a Different Voice. It is one of many statements collected from women in her study of women's moral choices. "As a woman, I feel I never understood that I was a person, that I could make decisions, that I had a right to make decisions. I always felt that I belonged to my father or my husband in some way, or church, which was always represented by a male clergyman. They were the three men in my life -- father, husband and clergyman -- and they had much more to say about what I should or shouldn't do. They were the authority which I accepted. It only lately has occurred to me that I never even rebelled against it. I still let things happen to me rather than make them happen, than make choices. I know all about choices, I know the procedures and the steps and all, but I think there is less responsibility involved when I avoid choices.

"If you make a dumb decision, you have to take the rap. If it just happens to you, well, you can complain about it. I give up choosing; I claim to wish only to please. But in return for my goodness, I expect to be loved and cared for."

ADDRESS

When I was a girl, I often listened to my father speak, since he was a minister. When I grew up, I married a businessman, but he became a clergyman, so I could continue to listen to a man speak. It is appropriate that the topic of claiming autonomy as a woman finds me standing up here speaking while my husband sits there listening.

Today I want to consider two questions: Are women destined to take second place in the man's world? And what does a woman have to do to claim autonomy?

Certainly the case that this is a man's world can be made easily. Virtually all of the power of government and politics is held by men. Men earn more

money for the same work and are more likely to be in more prestigious and financially rewarding professions. We women view the world through men's eyes, since men do most of the writing, most of the research, and most of the theorizing, even about us.

Men are the protagonists in most fiction, and our language is biased in favor of men. Men are our cultural heroes, and even God is depicted as masculine. Anthropologists have given up looking for matriarchies for there is no evidence that there ever has been a truly female-dominated culture. This might indicate that women are destined always to take second place in a man's world.

There is, of course, another side to the picture. Society could be seen as similar to a great, magnificent tree. The branches and the leaves are the accomplishments of men. But for a tree to be great, it must be nourished by an equally great root system -- just as big, just as strong, just as magnificent, but mostly invisible. Women have been the root system of civilization.

This root system is not found in history books. It is commonly acknowledged to in the aphorism "Behind every great man is a woman", and the joke about the man making the big decisions about foreign policy, while the woman rules the roost. Every man who makes his mark in the world depends on women to heal his wounds, to meet his needs, to inspire him, to give him strength and to do the detail work.

I could continue this theme and show how women's unique gift for relatedness deserves more respected in our society. Instead, I want to emphasize the importance of no longer dividing people by sexes, between those who are capable of strong intimacy and those who are capable of autonomous action. It is both an ideal and a possibility that all people are capable of intimate belonging and of being autonomous.

My thesis this morning is that biology and culture conspire so that most women develop their relatedness at the expense of autonomy. There is a converse tendency which I will not much discuss for men to develop autonomy at the expense of relatedness. Both traits are important to human welfare. The task for women now is to develop autonomy without giving up their special ability to build strong relationships.

The women's movement has raised our consciousness about sexual stereotypes and thereby helped to free us of them. The problem with stereotypes is that we hold them up and say, "This is what women are

like, and therefore this is how I should be." It has been important for me to say, "I am a woman and therefore I am how a woman is." We are each of us an ultimate authority on what it is to be a woman, or a man.

Having said this, I'm going to be making some generalizations drawn from research and observation to demonstrate a struggle that I believe most women face in today's society. At the same time, I want to acknowledge that each one of us are very different people. If I say something in my stereotyping which doesn't fit your experience, that is to be expected.

Before I finish today, I want to present what I think we women need to do to claim our autonomy, but first I want to explain how biology and culture conspire against female autonomy. Let's look at some of the biological and then the cultural differences between women and men.

Obviously, men's bodies tend to be bigger and stronger. If men and women were going to arm-wrestle to decide, each time, who cleans the house, women would clean most houses.

During most of evolutionary history, women spent much of their maturity either pregnant or nursing. Women were therefore, vulnerable and in need of protection from predators and other men. Women's vulnerability was further increased by their bonding to a helpless human infant, who is dependent for a prolonged period.

Throughout evolution, women may have been selected for their ability to care for infants. Women would have to be able to tolerate a symbiotic attachment in which one is never alone and is totally responsible for the needs of another.

While women were spending a good proportion of their lives in biological reproduction, for men reproduction has always been an in and out affair. Men have been free to roam far from the nest and to be the protectors for women and the next generation. Evolution would therefore have favored men better suited to dealing with danger.

Additional biological differences between the sexes do support the great divergence in reproductive function. Women's brains are shaped and structured differently. They are electrically different, chemically different, and have different strengths and vulnerabilities. We don't fully understand all the implications of these differences.

One difference which has clear implications is that women have higher levels of serotonin, a chemical

in the brain. Serotonin is a neurotransmitter chemical which dampens aggressive behavior. So women, the nurturers of infants, are less likely to be disruptive or violent in their relationships. Women are biologically less aggressive, and indeed, this is found to be true across cultures.

At the age of two or three days, girl infants are found already to have greater responsiveness and aptitude for relationship. Girl babies are more reactive to human faces and voices. They are more apt to start crying when another baby cries. They are more sensitive to touch, taste, and pain.

These preexisting biological tendencies are amplified by culture from the moment of birth. Let me summarize some of the facts that we know from research.

Boy infants are handled more vigorously, even though oddly enough, they are less sturdy. Mothers are more responsive to girls' cries, more apt to drop whatever they're doing to comfort a girl in distress. In one study, researchers played a recording of a baby crying. Some people listening to that crying baby were told that it was a girl and some people were told it was a boy. Each participant was asked to guess how the baby was feeling. Those who believed the infant to be a girl interpreted the cry as an expression of fear; those who believed the infant to be a boy interpreted the same cry as an expression of anger.

I believe this research shows that in our culture we hold up a mirror to baby girls that depicts them as fundamentally fearful and needy, whereas we assume boys to be rugged and aggressive.

The shaping of a girl's personality continues throughout childhood. The very structure of the family even supports girls in emphasizing relatedness, while at the same time pressuring boys to become autonomous. Babies of both sexes all over the world are cared for primarily by women. Both boy and girl babies first become attached to, love and identify with a woman. Then around age 2, the boys discover that they are male, different, not like the woman. They have, then, the task of rejecting their early identification with woman. With great difficulty, they must separate and reidentify with the more remote figure of the man. The boy's sense of autonomy is greatly accelerated by this leap in primary identification away from mother.

Girls are not forced by our family structure to make a similar autonomous leap. Instead, a girl grows up day by day next to her same sex parent. She continually sees her mother being a woman and gradually

takes for herself the role and task of womanhood. Unlike boys, her gender identity is not threatened when she feels needy or cries like a baby. The greatest fear for a girl then becomes the loss of her connectedness to others, which she has not had to experience.

Other research shows that girls are further developed along these lines by an upbringing which emphasizes obedience and responsibility to others. Boys, meanwhile, have learned to fear intimacy, since they must rigidly reject their intimate baby experience of female identification. The emphasis in their training is on self-reliance. Parents are also more tolerant of boys' aggression.

Women's fundamental concern with being related and fear of being alone have some far-reaching consequences for them. Psychologist Carol Gilligan found that women are more likely than men to associate achievement with violent consequences. Something will surely go wrong if I succeed or if I'm the best. Men, meanwhile, associate closeness with violence, believing that with intimacy, something will surely go wrong.

Psychologist Matina Horner also found that women fear achievement and success. Smart girls have been found to underestimate their ability and their performance. What is the relationship between women's fear of achievement and their fundamental fear of separation?

Late one night when I was in college, I was trying as usual to do all of the learning for a course at 3 a.m. the night before the exam. I asked myself, "Why do I handicap myself this way?" And an answer popped into my mind: "Achievement does not equal femininity. To do my best would make me unfeminine. If I were the best, where would I find a man to look up to, and where would I find a man to give me purpose in life? No man would love me."

This seems bizarre in some way, but this reasoning is not unique to me. Many women fear that doing their best will cost them relationship, and therefore are willing to sacrifice achievement.

Some of us here probably can identify in their own childhood many of these developmental trends. Undoubtedly, some of us have had unique experiences that do not fit this pattern, but all of us, as adults, must compete with a cultural stereotype of woman that portrays us as less autonomous and less respected than the men.

A researcher named Broverman and others investigated how psychotherapists see a healthy woman.

First they asked the therapists to identify the traits associated with a healthy man, then a healthy woman, and then at another time, the traits associated with a healthy adult. The result was that the healthy adult, sex unspecified, was almost identical to the healthy man. The healthy woman was seen as submissive and passive, less independent, less adventurous, more easily influenced, less aggressive, less competitive, more emotionally excitable, hurt more easily, more conceited about appearance, and less objective. Generally speaking, the healthy woman was described as being less autonomous, and less healthy than a man.

This conclusion is more than an isolated research phenomenon. So-called human psychology is in fact male psychology. Male theorists develop theories from observations of males and then notice that women don't measure up. Freud built his theories around the experiences of boys, and when contradictions arose between his theory and data from girls, he explained the contradictions as women's developmental failure.

Piaget said in his book, On Moral Judgment and Child Development, "Girls seem to have a different mentality. So I'm going to leave girls out and work with boys." Of course his conclusions are applied to all people.

Lawrence Kolberg has studied moral development and delineated successive stages of moral maturity. Kolberg, too, found the responses of girls and women to be confusing, and so used all males in his studies. He discerned, using the boys, a predictable pattern of development towards rights and justice. When females are evaluated according to this pattern, they are demonstrably inferior to males at all ages.

Fortunately for us, a colleague of Kolberg's, Carol Gilligan, noticed that it is illogical to apply a standard derived from males to females, and she initiated research that reveals a corresponding female line of development, which emphasizes not rights but responsibility and caring.

The conclusion that should be drawn from psychological research is not that women are less healthy or less developed. The conclusion that should be drawn is that women have a specialized orientation which is not captured by male stereotypes. The scale of moral development for women emphasizes caring and responsibility -- traits that would enhance any man who learns to respect them. Similarly, women must develop their sense of individual rights if they hope to experience their own autonomy.

Up to now, we have been considering how both biology and culture conspire to develop women's ability to relate at the expense of autonomy. Now let's turn to the second question: What is autonomy and how do we get it?

According to Webster's, autonomy means self-governing. Psychologists have used the word to indicate a sense of one's own self as important and inviolable, a trust in one's own thoughts, feelings, wants and choices. It includes the ability to resist the urge to please in order to take a stand, alone if need be.

As I've said earlier, men tend to develop autonomy at the expense of relatedness. A certain portion of the female population also does this. These are often girls who are only children or the oldest of sisters and who have had a close relationship and identification with their fathers. Some of them may have been in effect their father's son. Other women seem to blossom into autonomy following divorce or the death of their husbands. In facing loss and loneliness, they found more strength to be themselves, and of course there was no longer a relationship to be risked by becoming stronger. The ideal is not, like men, to surrender relatedness for autonomy, but to be autonomous without giving up relationship.

A fairy tale may help us to look at this: The Frog Prince. Once upon a time, there was a princess crying next to a well. A voice asks, "Why are you crying, beautiful princess?" At first she doesn't see who has spoken until the question is repeated, this time clearly coming from the mouth of a frog. "I've lost my golden ball in the well," she tells him. "I can get it," he says, "but what will you give me if I do?" "Anything," she promises. "I will get your golden ball if you will love me and let me eat from your plate and sleep in your bed," says the frog.

The princess agrees, desperate to have her ball. The frog climbs into the well, returns and gives her the ball. "Oh, thank you", she says, and she runs quickly home.

Later, she is in the palace eating dinner with her family when she hears some schleppy steps on the stairs and a thump on the door. When she sees that it is the frog who has come, the princess slams the door. She explains to her father about the ball and the promise, and her father says, "Open the door to him. My daughter will keep her promises." So she did.

Next, the frog demands, "Let me eat at your

plate." Again, the father insists. The frog eats greedily. The princess decides to fast. "Now take me to your bed," he says when he has finished eating. Reluctantly, the princess carries him upstairs and puts him down in the corner of her room. She gets ready for bed and is about to crawl in when the frog says, "Put me in your bed with you." She picks him up and looks at him there in her hand and kisses him. Poof! Gone the frog and a handsome prince stands before her. She marries the prince and lives happily ever after.

What I've just told you is the modern version. The original Grimm fairy tale, written after centuries of retelling, ends quite differently. The princess and the frog are in her bedroom. The frog says, "Put me in your bed." The princess picks up the frog, looks at him and SMASH, she splatters him against the wall! Poof! A handsome prince stands before her!

What do you suppose happens next? When I told the story to a friend, she thought the prince would say, "Sorry, princess, if you had loved me, we would now marry and live happily ever after. Goodbye." No, that's not what the Grimm's fairy tale says. What the prince actually says, in the Grimm tale, is "Thank you, princess, for breaking the spell that cursed me to be a frog. Marry me. I will love you forever." Very different from the modern version.

What might this story mean? Let me describe it using the symbolism in two ways. First, let's imagine that the frog is a representation of a man and the golden ball represents the unity and magic of childhood. At the point where she loses her golden ball in a deep well, she meets a man, who is a frog, but he has one benefit: he can give her back her identity. And so she makes a deal. She agrees that she will love this frog and live with him and eat with him if he will give her back her golden ball of identity. Once she becomes Mrs. Frog, she has her identity, but now she does not want to eat and sleep with this frog. But another man, her father, insists, and enforces her agreement. She doesn't want to lose her relationship with her father and her family, so she feels she has to keep her promise.

In the modern version, we are taught that if the woman is obedient, she will be rewarded. In the centuries old version, however, this princess wins her handsome prince through a powerful expression of anger.

Imagine yourself holding in your hand a slimy frog, knowing that you must love, eat with and sleep with this ugly creature. What woman in her right mind

would kiss a frog, a demanding one at that? By being true to her experience instead of obediently loving, she brings out the princely nature of the man.

On the surface, men may seem to want a placating woman, but more deeply, they yearn for a strong woman who can confront them when appropriate and sustain them when needed.

There is a second interpretation of the story in which the frog is a disowned part of the princess's own nature. The princess has been trained to be obedient and pleasing. She has learned to suppress her more masculine, aggressive and powerful side -- in Jungian terms, her animus. When she loses her golden ball, she feels helpless and powerless to go into the depths after it. Although she sees the animus as repulsively unfeminine, she makes a commitment to it in order to regain her lost sense of unity. Her animus gives her the courage to climb down into that dark, dirty and dangerous well. But then she has to live with this froggy part of her nature.

In smashing the frog, she in effect takes it into herself. She becomes the powerful, aggressive energy and "Poof!" she can claim it like a prince.

To make my conclusion, let me draw from this fairy tale some practical means for claiming autonomy. First, for a woman to become autonomous, she must recognize that biology and culture have conspired to create in her a fear of separation. While this fear supports her natural inclination toward relationship, it must be actively overcome if she hopes to take the risks necessary to becoming fully autonomous. Some women transcend their fear, like our princess, in one daring move. However, behavioral psychology tells us that fear is best overcome by repeatedly experiencing the fear in small doses.

Whenever we take risks that involve potential success and failure in our personal life or our work life, we are expanding our ability to be autonomous. Whenever we risk expressing ourselves, asking for what we want, especially from a man, we become more autonomous. Whenever we carve out some time for ourselves alone, time not for pleasing anyone else but for doing something for the satisfaction of doing it, we experience ourselves as autonomous.

Whenever a woman encourages the intimacy-loving side of a man, she is claiming her autonomy. Whenever a woman enables a man to be involved with babies, she frees a future generation from this vicious circle.

Ultimately, to be autonomous, a woman must be willing to experience a very specific kind of pain. This pain comes from recognizing a fact of life. To be autonomous is to experience myself as alone, separate, and individually responsible.

At least at death, we will each experience ourselves alone. Similarly, we are actually alone as we walk through life, no matter how caringly we relate to the people who will walk the path with us. The autonomous woman knows that she travels on her own two feet.

CLOSING WORDS

The closing words are a statement from another of Carol Gilligan's research subjects. This woman is describing herself from a new framework, that of an autonomous woman: "My concept of goodness has expanded to encompass the feeling of self-worth, the feeling that I am not going to sell myself short, and I am not going to make myself do things that I know are really stupid and I don't want to do. Instead of doing what I want for myself and feeling guilty over how selfish I am, I do what I want to do because I feel my wants and my needs are important -- if to no one else, then to me. And that's reason enough to do something that I want to do."