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Our Changing Sense of Self

THIS book was written by many women. Those responsible for seeing its completion form the Boston Women's Health Book Collective. This, in part, is who we are: we are in our mid-twenties and early thirties, mostly married or in (or have been in) some long-term relationship with a man. Some of us have had children recently. We are college educated (some of us have gone to graduate school), and all of us have spent a number of years living away from home either with female roommates, with men, alone, or in some varying combination. We have worked or are working. Most of us feel that unlike what we were promised in childhood, we were not totally fulfilled by marriage (a man), and/or motherhood (a child), and/or a (typically feminine) job. This is not to say that we have not grown a lot within marriages and with our children or in our work. Most of us see these relationships as continuing. But just being wife or wife and mother and viewing our work as secondary was too limiting for us. We needed space to do our own work or find out what work we wanted to do. We also needed space to discover who we were separate from these primary relationships so that we could become autonomous adult people as well as have important relationships with others.

We can talk only for ourselves, although we consider ourselves part of a larger movement of women in the Boston area—a group of great variety. We realize that the development of the ideas presented in this book comes from many women we know from other women's collectives as well as our own.

Coming together with women was exciting. We were individual women coming together out of choice and strength. Since we had patterned and focused much of our life around men, this was liberating. It was also liberating because we were legitimizing our need for one another. Most of us had gone to college, had lived with women, and so had had close female friendships with

women, but viewed this as a transitional stage leading up to a male-centered life. That was the traditional pattern, and that is what we expected of our lives. We felt that as young adult women we had missed close female friendships. Traditionally, the extended family provided close female contacts—women in unself-conscious ways providing support, sharing experience and wisdom with each other. Most of us were not living in cities where our families lived, and needed to create for ourselves a place and occasion for women to come together.

Coming together to do something about our lives was scary. It was admitting that we were not completely satisfied with the lives we were leading. We knew we would be standing back and taking a hard look at ourselves, and this aroused anxiety, fear of the unknown. Some of us fantasized that commitment to the women's movement and pressure from the group would weaken our ties with our men, children, jobs, life styles—we would lose control over our lives. We came to realize that this fear was unrealistic. No one could take from us what we did not want to give up. We were coming together out of choice. Our hope was to come to feel ourselves to be fuller, more integrated female persons.

Like most early women's groups, we talked to each other about what life was like for us, growing up female. The underlying purpose of this introspection and analysis of our past was to have some basis to figure out how we wanted to change the ways we thought and felt about ourselves. We could act on this new sense of self in our lives to create a broader sense of what it means to be female. To do this very personal work we made an accepting environment for ourselves—a place where we could talk and work together and think out loud. Probably the most valuable learning for each of us was learning to feel good about speaking for ourselves and being ourselves.

At first we feared disclosing personal information. We

each thought we might be ridiculed, rejected, misunderstood, gossiped about by the others. Many of us were friends before the group began and we were shy about getting into personal discussions about our relationships with men. Our fears of other women were exaggerated. We turned out to have a lot in common as women. And as we related to each other in more direct and honest ways, more genuine relationships were possible. On the other hand, we found it takes a long time to feel comfortable and trusting in a group. If we do not feel comfortable and trusting, there is probably some basis for it.

We also feared rejecting each other. We would see traits in others we did not want to see in ourselves, which were different from our own or which we did not like. We realized that as women we had been raised to be nice to everyone, to please everyone, and that we had not allowed ourselves to experience ambivalent feelings about ourselves and others. Facing this allowed us to be more honest with ourselves and others.

One thing that came out in talking together about growing up was that most of us felt we had spent a lot of time and energy in inner conflict during adolescence—trying to become selfless, sweet, passive, dependent children so that our princes would find us and we would live happily ever after. By the end of adolescence most of us had resolved the conflict by learning to conform to the feminine role, while suppressing qualities within

us inappropriate to that role— independence, activity, anger and pride. These human qualities which would have got in the way of our “femininity” were, logically enough, labeled by our culture “male.”

From our beginning conversations with each other we discovered four cultural notions of femininity which we had in some sense shared: woman as inferior, woman as passive, woman as beautiful object, woman as exclusively wife and mother. In our first discussions we discovered how severely those notions had constricted us, how humanly limited we felt at being passive, dependent creatures with no identities of our own. As time passed, with each other's support we began to rediscover ourselves. The passion with which we did this came from getting in touch with human qualities in ourselves that had been taboo.

We all went through a time when we rejected our old selves and took on the new qualities exclusively. For a while we became distortions, angry all the time or fiercely independent. It was as though we had partly new selves and we had to find out what they were like. But ultimately we came to realize that rejecting our “feminine” qualities was simply another way of going along with our culture's sexist values. So with our new energy came a desire to assert and reclaim that which is ours.

In no way do we want to become men. We are women and we are proud of being women. What we do want to do is reclaim the human qualities culturally labeled “male” and integrate them with the human qualities that have been seen as “female” so that we can all be fuller human people. This should also have the effect of freeing men from the pressure of being masculine at all times—a role as equally limiting as ours has been. We want, in short, to create a cultural environment where all qualities can come out in all people.

Changing Our Internalized Sexist Values

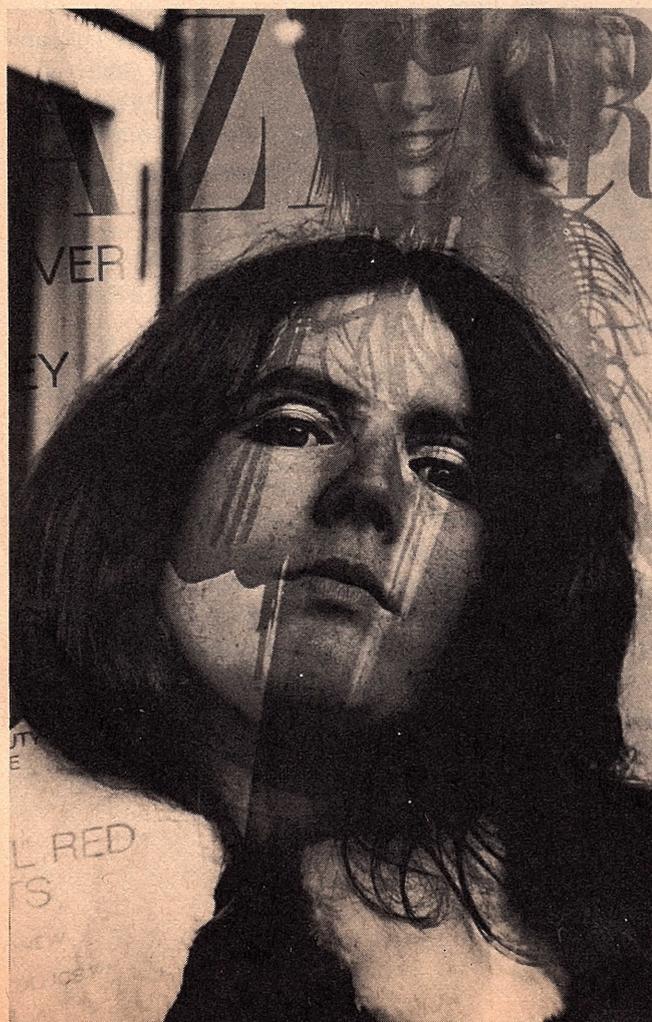
When we started talking to each other we came to realize how deeply ingrained was our sense of being less valuable than men.

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In my home I always had a sense that my father and brother were more important than my mother and myself. My mother and I shopped, talked to each other, and had friends over—this was considered silly. My father was considered more important—he did the real work of the world.

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In my home I got a complicated message. On the one hand I was told I was as important and as competent as men. In other ways I was told this was not true. Money



was set aside for my brother to go to college but not for me.

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In school we learned that we were expected to do well, but our real vocation was to be wife and mother. Boys were being trained for the important work in society. We learned that what our culture labeled important work was not for us, and what we did was not seen as important.

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I wanted to be a doctor, but I was told in direct and indirect ways that my ultimate ambition should be marrying a doctor and raising a family. I gave up my dream.

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I wanted to be an elementary school teacher, mostly because I had hated going to elementary school and I wanted to make it better for others. Although at first I thought this was important work, I learned not to value it because it was considered second-rate in this culture.

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The few of us who did not stay out of "male" work suffered the consequences. We had to choose between being a "brain" or being a woman.

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For me the evidence of my mental competence was unavoidable, and I never had any trouble defending or voicing my opinion with men, because I beat them in all the tests. Consequently, none of them would come near me in my first seventeen years of life.

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It was as if to be considered women we had to keep in our inferior place. If we challenged this we were treated badly and came to think of ourselves in negative ways.

Our learned sense of inferiority affected the way we thought about our bodies—our physical selves.

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I remember coming home from high school every day and going over my body from head to toe. My forehead was too high, my hair too straight, my body too short, my teeth too yellow, and so on.

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And when we evaluated our present situations we found that we still thought in sexist terms. Among our male peers we always found ourselves valuing what men said over what we said, and what men did over what we did.

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Every time my husband has free time he sits down and reads a book. We both have a sense that that is really important. When I have free time I sit and crochet or read, and it feels as if I am doing nothing.

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I genuinely enjoy loving and raising kids and setting up a home, but I have always felt that it was not important.

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I have a lot of talents. I like to paint, dance, and am sensitive to people and their needs, but whenever I demonstrate this I think, Anyone could do this.

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I look at the way we have divided up the space in our house. My husband has a little space that is considered his own, and I have no space that is mine. It is as if I exist everywhere and nowhere.

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We lived our lives as if there was something intrinsically inferior about us.

What was exciting through all this talking together was learning that what each of us had thought was a personal sense of inferiority was in fact shared by many women. This reflected a larger cultural problem: that power is unequally distributed in our society; men, having the power, are considered superior and we, having less power, are considered inferior. What we have to change are the power relationships between the sexes, so that each sex has equal power and people's qualities can be judged on their own merits rather than in terms of power. Although this problem is not easily solvable, at least the situation is changeable, since it is not based on biological facts. We know we will feel daily tension in recognizing the gap between our ideology and the realities of our everyday life caused by our resistance to change, male resistance, and external social structures not supportive of our ideology. Still, we have a direction we want to move in.

We looked at our present lives and realized how we were perpetuating unequal power relationships between ourselves and men. Many of the instances, which are numerous, are explored in this book. We never expected enough time and pleasure in sex, we never respected the questions we asked our doctors, we never expected men to adjust their lives to parenthood as we bore the child for both of us, we never expected men to take on some of the worry about birth control, we didn't take care of our bodies as if they/we mattered, we never respected the support and comfort other women gave us when we needed it. The list is endless. We began to see our relationships with ourselves, men, other women, and the social institutions in this country in a new way. To be able to see and feel the strength, beauty and potential in women was exhilarating. We began to feel prouder and prouder of ourselves.

We started considering what we had thought of as our weaknesses as our strengths. At the same time we were trying to become separate people. We began to really appreciate our capacity to empathize, to nurture, to be passive, and to be dependent. By empathy we mean the ability to identify emotionally with other people and be

sensitive to what their life events mean to them. Although this can be bad for us if we only identify with others and have no sense of self, this capacity of ours is valuable and ours to use when we choose. By nurturing we mean taking care of the emotional and physical needs of others—maintaining life. Although in the past we only maintained life and depended on men to do and act and build, this capacity to maintain life is valuable and ours to use. By passivity we mean the ability to sit back. Although in our past we were passive and not able to act when we wanted, now we realize that we can act, but it is nice to choose not to at times. By dependency we mean the capacity to depend on and rely on another person. Previously we had had no sense of self and *had* to depend on someone else. Now we can choose to be dependent, and we see this as a strength, because intimate relationships are dependent relationships. The list could go on. We are really coming to enjoy our talents and our abilities, who we are and what we do.

Still, as we grow and change we discover things about ourselves that we don't like—our limitations, our imperfectness, our mistakes—but we realize that these do not reflect our inferiority, but are part of being human. We are learning to tolerate parts of ourselves that we don't like and build on what we do.

Rediscovering Activity

Talking to each other, we realized that many of us shared a common perception of men—that they all

seemed to be able to turn themselves on and to do things for themselves. We tended to feel passive and helpless and to expect and need men to do things for us. We were trained to give our power over to men. We had reduced ourselves to objects. We remained children, helpless and giving other people power to define us and objectify us.

As we talked together we realized that one of our central fantasies was our wish to find a man who could turn us on, to do for us what we could not do for ourselves, to make us feel alive and affirm our existence. It was as if we were made of clay and man would mold us, shape us, and bring us to life. This was the material of our childhood dreams: "Someday my prince will come." We were always disappointed when men did not accomplish this impossible task for us. And we began to see our passive helpless ways of handing power over to others as crippling to us. What became clear to us was that we had to change our expectations for ourselves. There was no factual reason why we could not assert and affirm our own existence and do and act for ourselves.

There were many factors that affected our capacity to act. For one, the ideal woman does less and less as her class status rises. Most of us, being middle-class, were brought up not to do very much. Also, the kind of activity that is built into the traditional female role is different in quality from masculine activity. Masculine activity (repairing a window, building a house) tends to be sporadic, concrete, and have a finished product. Feminine activity (comforting a crying child, preparing a meal, washing laundry) tends to be repetitive, less tangi-



ble, and have no final durable product. Here again our sense of inferiority came into play. We had come to think of our activity as doing nothing—although essential for maintaining life—and of male activity as superior. We began to value our activity in a new way. We and what we did were as valuable as men and what they did.

On the other hand, we tried to incorporate within us the capacity to do more “male” product-oriented activity. Our motivation to write this book falls into that category. To be more specific: what began as conversation was translated into written papers, was extended into a course based on informal discussion and the presentation of some of the material we had learned, and culminated in the publishing of our papers as a book. During this slow evolution we became more and more motivated to work hard on our ideas—to refine them, to clarify them, and to present them in a form that would be accessible to other women. This sustained work on a tangible product is exciting to us. But throughout this process we have in no way sacrificed the quality of our relationships with each other, as men often do when they work together. We have genuinely collaborated with each other, which meant having good communication as we worked together. We devised our own form of working and doing within the social context we created.

Along with our more task-oriented activity comes a new sense of wanting to succeed. By wanting to succeed we mean getting recognition for what we do. By success we also mean an inner sense of having done something well. This ties in with our new sense of pride—feeling proud of what we do.

This is new for us. As women we have been taught to want to fail, or if not to fail, to walk a fine line between success and failure. We were never encouraged to use the full strength of ourselves. This new motivation to do and do things well is more risky. It involves taking and accepting responsibility because others are counting on us to come through with what we can do.

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I am aware that I am responsible to other human beings—my parents, my husband, my children, my friends. What greater responsibility is there?

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It also means that we have to maintain a rather consistent performance, according to our own standards. It also involves the strength to stand up for ourselves and what we can do while realizing that others may reject what we do, do it differently, or put us down. Still, it is worth these risks, because these are the risks of living.

With our new sense of strength and activity comes a new sense that it is all right to be passive as long as we choose to be.

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In lovemaking I have come to take great pleasure in taking a passive role as long as I actively choose it. I also know that I can be active. It is wonderful to know there is time to both give and receive love and caresses.

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We have also come to enjoy physical activity as well as mental and emotional activity. Again, the realm of physical strength is traditionally male. Once again we realized that we were active in our own ways, but we did not value them. As we looked at the details of our lives—the shopping and the cleaning—we realized that we used up a lot of physical energy every day but that we had taken it for granted and thought of it as nothing. We did avoid heavy, strenuous activity.

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I thought that girls did not have to be physically strong. They could do everything they needed with their heads. The fact is that some mental work involves a back-up of physical strength. For example, engineers and architects can become more experienced in their trades if they are physically able and have the strength and stamina to build machines and structures. I now feel that all desirable qualities and abilities are neither male nor female, but rather human, and I am trying to get the most out of my body, mind, and feelings.

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We are learning to do new things—mountain climbing, canoeing, karate, auto mechanics.



Rediscovering Anger

As we were changing we found we were frequently feeling angry. This surprised us and embarrassed us. We had grown up feeling that we needed to love everyone and be loved by everyone. If we got angry at someone, or they at us, we felt in some sense that we were failures.

We shared memories of our pasts. Nearly all of us had had a hard time expressing anger verbally or physically.

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In my family my mother expressed love and my father spanked me. My mother was super-uncritical of me and my father hypercritical. I learned that women are never disapproving or angry.

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I have very few memories of fighting. Each time I did I felt guilty and embarrassed.

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We did fight a lot at home, but I never made a public display of any anger or aggression. That was unladylike.

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We shared perceptions of our current situations.

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My husband has this habit of not listening to me when I talk. I get angry at him, but I don't tell him.

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I seem to put up with a lot of nonsense from people. It is as if I am always being the accepting, forgiving, and accommodating person.

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We began to admit that we had felt angry during our lives, but we had been using the anger against ourselves in hating ourselves. There were many ways we had learned to cover up our anger. It had built up for so long inside us that we were afraid we would explode if we let it out. We have come to realize that there are many aspects of our lives and our relationships that make us angry. Until we know and feel our own oppression we are not motivated to try to create constructive alternative ways of being and living. Many have accused us of being shrill. Our mood is far more complex. Our critics hear only the anger, and anger separated from real issues is a distortion. The anger that is in us is a starting point for creative change and growth.

Rediscovering Our Separateness

In our early discussions it became clear that we did not really feel ourselves to be separate, independent people. The men in our lives embodied or felt they were supposed to embody, freedom and independence. The women in our lives stayed at home, needed company, and were always dependent on those near them. They

embodied, or felt they should, dependency, need and connection. As we talked to each other we realized that as children and even as young adults we had never thought it would be possible to live without someone else, particularly a man. We trembled at the thought of being alone. But we realized that we were no longer powerless, helpless children. We realized that we could survive on our own and that until we felt confident of our ability to feel like separate people and take on the freedom and responsibility of being adults, we were not free to live with another out of choice. We wanted our coming together with another to result from choice and joy and not fear and necessity.

This is not to say that we do not seek relationships out of need and loneliness as well. Some of us who are married have tried to develop the capacity to feel like separate persons within the context of the marriage. Others of us in marriage or long-term relationships have decided to end the relationships or separate. Those of us who were not involved in relationships built up our own strengths. Each of us found her own way to become a separate person. The point was not that one way was better than another, but that it was freely chosen.

During this period of building up our own sense of ourselves we tried to find out what we were like on our own, what we could do on our own. We discovered resources we never thought we had. Either because we had been dependent on men to do certain things for us or because we had been so used to thinking of ourselves as helpless and dependent, we had never tried.

It is hard. We are forever fighting a constant, inner struggle to give up and become weak, dependent, and helpless again.

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I started making batiks again and have become very seriously involved in this craft. It still surprises me that I can create something other than a child. Each time I complete one by myself I feel alone and trembling. Also, each time I have to fight inner voices saying, You are not going to do it.

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I went with other women on a trip south almost two years ago. That was the first time I had gone on a trip without my husband. Several things went wrong with the car on the trip. When I came back to Boston I decided that I really wanted to learn how to take care and be in control of a car myself. I learned about auto mechanics. It required a lot of work and discipline. In a way I identify with the car. There is a connection between my feelings of wanting to take care and control of my life and the feelings of wanting to take care and control of my car.

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that throughout my life I wanted some work that is my own. I have come to realize that in my marriage my husband and I need separate time and space for ourselves to do our own work as well as time to be together. This would be more complicated if we had children.

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My husband and son have always been important to me, but I found that when my son was a few months old I was feeling unfocused and had low energy a lot of the time and was very unself-confident in relating to people outside my family. I joined with some friends who felt the same way and started a play group (cooperative child care) and began to learn to be a birth-control counselor. Over the past two years I have found the energy and talent to do this work, and the good people I work with have affirmed me as a person and a counselor. When I am home I am glad to be there. I still feel some conflict between my home-family self and my work self. But hard as it is sometimes, I do not want to give up one for the other.

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It feels so good not to have to walk around all the time worrying about what my husband, friends, other people are thinking about me.

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Although during the last five years of marriage I have worked in a variety of jobs, my major commitment is to teaching and teacher training. Although I got great pleasure from this work, I never acknowledged to myself

As we have come to feel separate we try to change old relationships and/or try to enter new relationships in new ways. We now also feel positive about our needs to be dependent and connect with others. We have come to value long-term commitments, which we find increasingly rare in such a changing society, just as we value our new separateness.

