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Woman, Art Thou Being Liberated?

It was about noon when I arrived at the Bremmer's home. Cynthia and Steve had invited me to their ritual gathering for Midsummer's Day. I'd been looking forward to taking a break from class work and driving to Reston, Virginia, on the outskirts of DC, for a relaxing get-together with some old friends.

In the cool air-conditioned kitchen, I was enjoying bantering with Karen Crofton, an acquaintance I hadn't seen for many months. But outside in the patio, I began to sense that something exciting was going on. The discussion was getting louder and louder until someone yelled for Karen to come out. It was Janet Duliak, a long-time friend. "Karen, help us out. We are talking women's issues and sex, your favorite topic," she said teasingly.

"Well, you've come to the expert," said Karen. "Ask me any question you want."

What did you think about the *Sex and the City* series?" Janet asked.

"Hmm, ask me another one. Actually, I missed most of the last season." Karen turned to include me saying, "On the other hand, Ricardo and I were just talking about his having watched the entire series, so why don't you ask him?"

"What!" exclaimed Janet, somewhat befuddled. The men in the group seemed just as surprised at a revelation that they assumed I would prefer to have kept a secret.

"How about that, anything to get aroused, uh?" said Janet.

"Not really," I said grinning. "I'd been doing research on entertainment programming and decided to take a look at this series. It interested me, and so, I ended up watching all six seasons. in ten very long weeks."

At this point, Deena Skopf, one of Cynthia's single friends, joined the group. "So, what did you think of the final episode?" she inquired brusquely. I didn't like the look on her face. All week long, I'd been looking forward to this day of reveling when suddenly I felt like I was stepping into a minefield.

"Well," I hesitated, "I found the ending somewhat disappointing."

I hadn't even gotten the last word out of my mouth before Deena snapped,

“Why would you feel disappointed? Would you have preferred a sad ending? Just because *you're* still unhitched doesn't mean that others aren't entitled to a little happiness.”

I liked Deena, and assumed her comment about me stemmed from her own sense of discomfort, so I wasn't offended at all. Instead I was interested in her point of view.

“Deena, you've just hit on one of the sources for my disappointment, and it has nothing to do with me being single,” I said. “My concern with the show is the agenda it propagates.”

“Are you suggesting there was something inherently perverse about the series?” interrupted Cynthia.

“I wouldn't say perverse; *concerned* would be more accurate,” I said.

“Oh, and what exactly had you so concerned?” she pressed.

“It had to do with how the series dealt with the various issues and the nature of visual communication; in other words, how the program's amusing format reinforces certain values and behavior patterns that are constant throughout the series.”

“I don't know what you're referring to,” she said, seemingly interested in my opinion.

“Take what the entire series was about, four women in their thirties on the brink of being left behind, marriage-wise. The show made it very clear that all four were eager to get married but felt dejected because they couldn't find a suitable partner. Their friendship—how they bonded with each other—is what tied the series together. Even the critics agreed that this support was one of the most important messages being conveyed to viewers. Over and over again, the program insinuated that this friendship was a legitimate alternative to a reality that many women face today: not *ever* getting married.

“Yes, aaaand?”

“How do I put it? While the program didn't send an explicit message that women should remain single, quite often it insinuated this alternative. For example, at times when any of the four would become dejected over their man-issue, the *who needs men* attitude prevailed. Compare this to real life where quite often we're all being confronted by the notion that a person can't find happiness without a soul mate. If you take a look at all of the dating services found on the Internet, TV, newspapers and magazines throughout the country, the cultural message that emerges is loud and clear: nobody wants to be alone.

“So, judging by the many articles that were written about the social impact of *Sex and the City*, I think many single women looked to this program to provide answers to their real life situations.”

“You are suggesting that the program misled them,” Deena observed with a

slight frown appearing on the horizon.

“Think about it,” I replied. “Sisterhood and friendship were supposed to be the main themes in the series. The hunt for someone to marry or to feel wanted and be loved, and the disappointments they all went through were continuous motifs throughout the series.

“However, if you take a broader look, and this is what you can gain from watching it all at once, you see something quite different. First, their friendship competed with, and often ended up losing to, the quest of finding a partner. But, while the series proclaimed that their friendship was almost sacred, toward the end, one begins to realize that the man-woman relationship started to become more important than the supportive relationship they had enjoyed throughout the series.

“One begins to sense that the support role had played its part. By the end of the series, each of them had their own guy, suggesting that the man-woman relationship is what really counts, since in our society husband/wife or boy/girl friend relationships tend to absorb more of one’s time than friendships, even strong ones.

“So what I found perturbing was that the show degraded sisterhood by making a means to an end, a temporary crutch that each of the four women relied on until they were able to settle down. Sisterhood was deceptively presented throughout the series as the likely alternative to remaining single. Then, towards the end, the program switched course and ended up playing Cinderella, suggesting that, eventually, every woman finds her prince. Many of the show’s followers, I presume, were able to find happiness through Carrie and her friends; thus the draw.

“Of course, it was a vicarious happiness, that’s all the audience was left with, and that’s why I truly think the series took a lot of people for a ride.”

Deena slowly walked away from the group without saying a word. Maybe she’d been one of the many artificially inseminated, bilked of emotional investment, by the large doses of *Sex and the City* make-believe happiness.

Cynthia, then spoke up. “Well, talking about behavior patterns, I’ll tell you, I did watch quite a few of the episodes throughout the years. And one thing that did bother me was how indiscreet all four of them gals were. They shared their intimacies with men with one another, just the way guys talk about women. Talk about a double standard! Most women actually criticize this type of behavior.

“And look at how they demeaned the men they were with! I mean, I would never dare to put down the guy I date. Nevertheless, I remember one episode when Miranda finds out that her boyfriend and husband-to-be, Steve, leaves marks on his underwear, and derisively tells Carrie something like, ‘what is it with a man,’ an underhanded generalization, by the way, ‘who is too lazy to wipe off his ass!’

“Or Charlotte, telling her judgmental sorority friends that her (first) hus-

band is incapable of having an erection; or Carrie, supposedly in love with Aidan, referring to him as *the man*, in sort of a deprecating and detached manner as she criticizes the engagement ring he's given her.

"When men behave like this, we nail them! And, here are these four women acting like men."

"I agree," I said. "Those are some of the values the series sold to its audience."

"Cynthia, do you mean to say that we should not talk among ourselves about the problems we face?" Janet asked, somewhat disturbed by her friend's remarks. "What's a woman to do when she feels like hell? When she needs someone to listen, or someone to provide a word of advice? Isn't that what friends are for?"

"I'm not talking about that," replied Cynthia. "I'm referring to not showing respect toward the person you're with. You would think this person reflects, at least to some extent, who you are and what you value in a man. If that weren't the case, why be with him? I don't think it says much about you when you feel the urge to ridicule or denigrate your companion. I don't care whether you're talking to a good friend or an acquaintance!"

"Instead, I think you might have been referring to something different, Janet; I'm talking about the need to find someone to listen to your problems and help you. That's the role of the marriage counselor, the priest, rabbi, or a very good friend you can trust to not divulge your personal problems to the world.

"I remember that I used to talk about my marriage with my friends. Not always, but at times, and inadvertently, at social gatherings things would get back to Steve.

"One day Steve said to me, what was it that you said, honey," she turned to ask one of the many who had joined the group to listen. "Do you remember?"

"Yes, I do," said Steve. "I said it felt as if we're no longer alone in bed anymore. Sometimes, I sensed that we were in the company of some of your friends, and that didn't like it."

"Yeah, that was it, and you looked so troubled that from that day on I learned a lesson on intimacy. In a relationship, intimacy implies trust between two persons. I wanted to respect that part of my marriage as well as Steve's privacy, since I would expect the same from him. He deserved that much!"

Deborah, another close friend who quietly had been taking in all the conversation joined in, "Let me put in my two cents. I watched the show on a weekly basis and soon became addicted to the program. What I found amusing was how the program portrayed men.

“I’ve never seen a greater collection of screwballs. I found this disturbing, because the impression the episodes left us was that all men are jerks. Perhaps with the exception of Aidan, and Steve toward the end, all the men who paraded throughout the series, including Big, were basket cases!

“Looking back, I can see where Ricardo is coming from. At times, the show seemed to be implying that, since men were jerks, maybe staying single would not be so bad after all.”

I had no idea that my initial comment about the series would unleash so much criticism, but there I was trying to hide among others when all of a sudden someone called out my name.

“I suppose Ricardo doesn’t count himself among the jerks, right?” said Janet out loud.

I had to respond. “While I don’t consider myself an all American jerk, admittedly, I have acted like one on several occasions,” I replied. “The point Deborah is trying to make, however, is that, while men certainly are not perfect, they’re not jerks all the time, and that was the unstated message the series sought to convey, deliberately or inadvertently, to its audience. In doing so, the program projected negative stereotypical behavior on religion, family, marriage, even sex.”

Erica, an outspoken young feminist I’d met before in New York, leapt into the conversation pool, “I think the series distorted the concept of the modern independent woman as well.”

“How so, if I may ask?” retorted Janet who was still a bit overwhelmed by the discussion.

“How so? Four rich, beautiful, superficial women rely on their friendship only as a consolation prize. The friendship functions mainly to pick up the pieces when the men screw up.

“I would certainly hope that the women of this country are not as self absorbed and man-crazed as the show conveyed; talk about being completely politically, socially and humanly unaware!

“They have their careers, friendship, private lives, and so forth, but their lives still revolved almost completely around men. Is that the image of an independent woman?

“It pains me to see women depicted as glorified socialites who care about *shopping*, a sisterhood based on false or *disingenuous* security, and *men*. There was very little about anything they did that was socially relevant; no insinuations that maybe there were women striving to make a small difference or positive contribution to this society!

“Did we see any value placed on women functioning as responsible or good citizens, or *humans* for that matter? These women operated in their sheltered little world of themselves, their careers and their men and knew little else of the

world around them. Is that a positive image of women to convey?"¹

"There you go," I said. "However, not only were men being poorly portrayed; social institutions didn't fare any better. For example, although religion is practically shunned, the times it surfaced, the message is invariably negative.

"Or, take the family. The show suggests these women are so independent they don't need families to survive. The program insinuates that not only can they make it by themselves, but that they should! Then, of course, we come to marriage.

"Remember, since the beginning of the series, all four women were looking to enter into permanent relationships, likely marriage. Well, toward the end, two of the four women are married, Samantha lives with a guy, and Carrie appears as if she, too, will get married, which eventually she did.

"Nonetheless, throughout the series, the show continuously depicted marriage as hypocritical, flawed, inconvenient, and weird."

"I agree, Ricardo," said Erica, "however, I think there's an explanation for this. I think that their caricatures illustrate a fundamental conflict that women face today: the push and pull that exists between the feminist call to be a strong, independent, career-oriented woman and what many women, feminists included, still feel they want: the companionship of a man who can meet them on an emotional, spiritual and intellectual level.

"Does this mean we're going to strap on our aprons, kick off our shoes and relegate ourselves to baking cakes and having babies for the rest of our lives? Absolutely not. It means that we simply seek the accompaniment of a worthy person throughout our lives. What's wrong with seeking that? The desire for companionship doesn't imply weakness, it's simply a manifestation of a human instinct to find balance and validation from someone else.

"This applies to men and women alike," she continued. "Women can say they do not need men, and vice versa, but the reality is that everyone, regardless of gender, at some point in their lives, seeks the companionship and love of another person.

"Although the two behaviors illustrated in the series may seem to be in conflict, it depicts a very real and very genuine inner struggle that women today face. There is so much emphasis and pressure placed on women in the workplace, and women assuming and striving for top positions at all levels of society that women are beginning to criticize each other for not being good enough feminists."

As she took a breath, I noticed all eyes were on her. "The pendulum is beginning to swing the other way, though. Before, and by *before* I mean before Second Wave feminism, if a woman didn't express her desire to have a family, be a mother, and enjoy the companionship of a man, she was chastised.

“Now, it’s the opposite. As a young feminist, I know. Many feminists will criticize women who *do* express a desire to have a family for not being feminist enough. This critique has made for a pretty large gap in the feminist community that could become a chasm because it’s becoming increasingly difficult to fill.

“The fact that these *Sex and the City* women seem to say and represent one thing in their reliance on female relationships and do another by ending up with men may be a contradiction, but is a very real dichotomy, and effectively depicts the struggle between what we as women feel we *should* do and what we *want* to do.”

“In that case,” I said, “what are we to make of these four women after six years of vicariously living with them? That all the time they were really looking to get married because society dictates it, certainly before you hit forty, because in a way, companionship is nice, it’s enjoyable, and much preferred, emotionally speaking, to being alone.

“And if marriage is what it takes to end years of frustrations, dejections, rejections, you name it, well then, marriage it is! The series’s message was that marriage is a lousy state, but what the hell, it beats being alone, and who knows, it might even bring some happiness, maybe.

“I find these tendencies all the more disturbing because, under the rubric of being *entertainment*, the series conveyed a distorted view of important aspects of our society to a mesmerized, and thus, emotionally captive, audience.”

Laurie then spoke up, “Ricardo, are you going to tell us that there was nothing positive about the series?”

“It’s difficult for me to give you an answer that you may like, Laurie. Obviously, the acting is fabulous, and there is a great deal of humor. But, again, if you think of TV programming as an eighteen-wheeler truck, constantly delivering sets of values and attitudes to a very receptive audience, well, then it depends on whether you like the stuff being delivered to your door.

“My concern is that men and women buy into this stuff because of the wrapping; the glitter, the irreverent humor, sexual freedom. But in the end, the series failed to provide meaningful answers to the anguish these women experienced at times.

“Instead, it offered trivial means to allow them to escape their internal conflicts. The program definitely asked very profound questions. What concerned me were the answers it provided; they were not profound.”

“Fine,” Laurie replied, “why can’t we just accept that these episodes were simply about how the two sexes interrelate with each other?”

“I don’t think anyone would dispute what you just said, Laurie,” I said. “They are fun stories! But these fun stories project *attitudes*. Take the issue of being judgmental. Being judgmental of each other’s action is taboo for these four women. How else could we explain how the three of them are merely amused at Samantha’s behavior as she goes from man to man to woman,

pretty much as kids go after the ice cream truck? Even hitting on a priest is fair game! 'That's Samantha,' they say. But, what about being judgmental about men. Well, that's not only acceptable to them, it's a must."

"I have to go along with that, too," said Erica, already on the edge of her seat. "The series suggests that just because women are women, they're entitled to the right not to be criticized by their woman friends, which should be a never-ending and unconditional source of support and love.

"Unfortunately, my idea of feminist support is slightly different, and I would hope, somewhat healthier. For women to write a blank moral check to other women based solely upon the fact that they're *sisters* and have been through this life together is negligent and irresponsible friendship.

"Friends, *especially* women friends, have the duty, the obligation, and the responsibility to one another to help each other portray a positive image of what it is to be a feminist, and criticism of blatantly stupid, dangerous and irresponsible behavior is not just an exercise in good friendship, but plain common sense.

"This is not to say, of course that women don't have the obligation as well to listen to other women and not pass judgment based on a difference in personal or moral opinion, but in cases where the behavior is clearly excessive and unhealthy, as was the case with Samantha, it is ridiculous to defend, encourage and dismiss it just because she's a woman.

"Irresponsibility is irresponsibility no matter which way you slice it. Irresponsible behavior should be gender blind, because irresponsibility results in hurting another person or ourselves, which isn't excusable based on gender or anything else."

When her storm subsided, I added, "I'll tell you what concerns me, Erica. If you feel so strongly about what you have just said, think about what the series conveyed. That was not art imitating life; that was entertainment helping to create reality, and inviting others to imitate it.

"Because of the entertaining and informal manner in which the program was delivered, most of what these four women did was viewed as acceptable behavior, both in private and in public."

"Could you by any chance be suggesting that the message was wrong simply because you don't agree with it?" Cynthia countered.

"I think the issue is not whether I disagree with the message; I think one can make a strong case to show that that the message itself is incompatible with the image of an assertive, strong-minded, independent woman."

"Hold on!" said someone whose face didn't look familiar. She got up from her chair and walked toward me and said, "it sounds like you would want to impose your own views on everyone else!"

"Not at all." I turned to look directly at her. "It's about the selling of values

and attitudes and their social consequences.”

“Would you tell us what were some of the messages that were being sold to us throughout the series?” she demanded.

“A central message was that women can be as independent as men,” I said, “and that . . .”

“What’s wrong with being independent? She interrupted me.

“Nothing wrong with being independent. I was going to add that the program is asking women to buy into the view that men don’t have a monopoly on casual sex; that women can play the same game.”

“That’s right! she said. The program told us that women can be and should be assertive; that we can dump men and treat them they way they treat us. Sure. Why would we have to be dependent on men who are jerks? Women can be just as successful as men.”

She came in loud and clear, I thought. Her assessment of the program was, in my view, quite accurate. Refusing to accept Erica’s critique of feminism, she bragged about women wanting to be every bit the same as men.

“Forgive me if I come on so strong, since I don’t know you, but I get the impression that you want to take us back to the fifties,” she said. “By the way, I’m Lena.”

I nodded, accepting her apology. “Lena, I’m not against women liberating themselves from the culture they were subjected to through the sixties. But I think we’re talking about two different types of liberation.”

“I sense that there is a double standard in what you are saying,” said Lena.

I was baffled. “Are you suggesting that women should try to be like men?”

“Why not?” she said. “Tell me, why shouldn’t women be like men and share in the glory and the perks?”

“Interesting question,” I replied. “Tell you what, I will answer that question after you tell me what makes you think that men are such a hot example to follow.”

“What do you mean?” Lena said.

I remained unmoved by the enraged attitude I saw in her eyes. She stood up. Her whole body was rigid. Her date, I don’t know if it was her husband, attempted to hold her hand trying to calm her down, but she roughly pushed away.

“Lena, for years I have thought that, overall, women are better human beings than men” I said, “and if you . . .”

“Whaaat? Now, that’s a first,” said Janet.

“Yeah, let’s hear about this one,” added Cynthia.

“Ricardo, don’t go there, please” said Perry, Laurie’s husband. “Just remember that you go home by yourself. We have to go home with them.”

“No, no,” said Cynthia. “I’d like to hear this. I have always believed what Ricardo is saying, but I have never heard it coming from a man.” Edgar, an old

buddy of mine got up and left the room. Perry followed him "We're going for beer," one of them said.

"Edgar, please, stay," said Teresa, his wife, expressing disappointment at her husband's behavior."

"You, too, Perry. You never know, something good may stick, after all," added Laurie.

They stayed, and I said to myself, prepare to be crucified, although I wasn't sure whether it would be the men or the women who would do the hammering.

"Guys, think about the traditional male stereotype. According to this stereotype, what do men stand for? We are known to be the strong gender. Traditionally, we have been the breadwinners, so we're perceived as being more independent. We're the prototype of the *macho*, which supposedly provides us with a license to talk dirty and to chat among each other about our sexual prowess and our adventures with women. We're told that while women get all emotional we are the rational ones; cold and dispassionate thinkers. So cold, in fact, that we can afford to be insensitive to women if we wish.

"We're closer to the animal kingdom than women are, because we're rough. We don't cry. We don't dare expose our feelings or to talk about them; instead, we take it on the chin, like men are supposed to do. For us, casual sex is a form of entertainment at best, and a *natural* need for gratification at worse.

"We pride ourselves at being devoid of feelings when making important business and political decisions, yet when it comes to love, we let a different part of our anatomy do the talking.

"We go to strip joints and objectify women because that's what men are supposed to do. So, we rob women of their dignity when we commercialize sex, both in prostitution and pornography. We also leave the toilet seat up, and we seem to be in need of someone to clean after us. We like to keep a certain degree of physical distance from one another to feel secure. We say hello to other men, including our sons, with a handshake. God forbid kissing our sons!

"Of course, because we are who we are, we command power and money along with higher paychecks than women. On account of the above, we've been told that we have earned the right to be in command, so we ask women to defer to us.

"If you take this stereotype into account, what attitudes may we say characterize men's behavior? Well, it shows that men can be courageous, hard workers, honorable, responsible, and independent; as well as aggressive and violent, insensitive, self-centered, power-centered, emotionally repressed, arrogant, messy, hypocritical, seekers of sexual gratification, domineering, selfish, abusive, and sexually insecure.

"On the other hand, women are known for being *softies*; as I said,

they're too emotional. They're neat, they like flowers, candlelight, holding hands; they abhor fighting and violence; they believe in sharing. They're unquestionably more affectionate among themselves, they actually kiss each other! Probably because they're not as manly as we are," I said in a low, secretive tone.

"Nurturing, now that's a novel concept to men, and something that is very womanly! Perhaps because women beget and sustain life within them, they are more sensitive to life itself outside of the womb as well. After all, who devotes more time to their children, often after having to put over forty hours of work each week, men? The social and political repercussions of this attribute can be enormous.²

"And when it comes to sex and sharing feelings," I said, "tenderness, commitment, fidelity, and openness are more traditionally female traits, even though I don't think these are gender-related attributes, but cultural. What I'm trying to say is that, in a woman, her vagina, more often than not is next to her heart. Her vagina may be quite active, but her entire person tends to become emotionally involved. On the other hand, it's so alien for men to behave like that.

"Continuing with our stereotypes, once a man finishes the sexual act, he turns over and lights up the traditional cigarette, pleased with his skill and happy at having pleased his mate.

"And, aren't women critical of this selfish and insensitive behavior on the part of men?"

"Yes, and it's so ironic," argued Cynthia. "We're critical of this behavior in men while that's the whole point of *Sex and the City*: that women are capable of being just like men."

"I'll go even further," I said. "We conveniently label women *slutty* because they have casual sex, forgetting that men created and perfected the behavior. Women are simply catching up now. Even traditional religion has always blamed women for seducing men, to the point of blaming them for causing original sin! Let's face it, why are we so easily seduced? Is it because women are so good at it or because we're so damn horny all the time? In which case, why can't we blame ourselves?"

"So we're the original sluts," said Perry.

"Numero uno! We're number one," I said.

"So, tell me, ladies, you still think that women should emulate men? Tell me, who is, by far, more responsible for road rage, men or women? In business, who mostly makes the decisions with little regard to individual or social consequences, but with high regard for profits?

"And when it comes to discrimination at the work place, who does it best? Who steals the most, men or women? Who's responsible for committing most violent crimes? Who's the spouse-beater? Who wages war the most? Who exhibits less parental responsibility? Who gets the other pregnant and then

walks away?

“Now, tell me, why in the world would women want to imitate men? Instead of women bringing men to their way of thinking, why would women be so eager to be like men?”

“Look at the way *Sex and the City* promotes the image of the modern single woman through Carrie. Like the gang member who packs a pistol or a knife for protection, she packs condoms in case she wants to get laid. And we're talking about Carrie, supposedly the most sensitive of the four; the one who believes and wants 'real love, ridiculous, inconvenient, consuming, can't-live-without-each-other love.'

“I read in *The Washington Post* that a well-known female writer made the observation that *Sex in the City* was not about sex, that sex was only a sideshow. Well, sideshows are supposed to be on the side, but in six years and more than eighty programs, there is at least one sex scene in all except sixteen shows.

“And, there's male-type vulgar sex talk in all except two or three shows. In many of these instances, talk is about casual sex, the one-night-stand, usually following feelings of dejection, loneliness, or disappointment in the lives of these women. Quite often, sex became these women's alcohol bottle. Too often, their hearts became completely separated from their vaginas.”

“But Ricardo, it's only entertainment!” said Teresa.

“That's the problem! Teresa,” I said, “which is why sex becomes so casual. Most sex scenes in the show were totally gratuitous, a salacious gimmick seemingly required in programming today in order to market it. Anyone who pays close attention would see that for himself. The same thing happens in many of today's movies. Now, when you're being bombarded with these messages during several years, you don't think it will have a social impact?”

“I think that we tend to overlook a powerful social phenomenon: the entertainment media sanctions behavior by the mere fact that it shows it. Once a form of behavior appears in the media, people consider it to be acceptable, public behavior, namely because the taboo is broken. Once broken, the taboo is no longer. The end result is that casual sex is as unremarkable as brushing your teeth.”

Once again, Erica got back into the conversation. “From my standpoint, the question is not just if women should be like men; it's if women actually can be like men,” she said. “Sure, women can have all the casual sex they want. They can use men for sex and objectify them much like they themselves have been, but does this really make us feel good as a women, and moreover, as people?”

“I don't think that men objectify more naturally than women do, but I think that men are socially and environmentally conditioned to objectify more freely. I have more faith in humans than to believe that the behavior of objec-

tification is inherent in men or women. I think one of the things that most hurts me personally as a woman, and I've heard this from several other women and girls, is not the fact that there is a double standard between a sexually promiscuous man and woman; it's the fact that many men are actually satisfied by casual sex; they can have sex with a woman without making love to her.

"On the other hand, most women have a harder time having sex devoid of some kind of emotion, mainly because they are the recipients of objectifying behavior more often, so why would they go and do it to someone else?"

"Even if the sex is casual, there is some measure of compassion, consideration for the man's feelings and respect for him as a human being. This is not always the case with men, and it is this lack of consideration, for lack of a better term, that provokes the desire in women to act like men in their attitudes towards sex. It's the knowledge that a woman can be used for sex and then literally turned out in the morning like an insignificant and uneventful notch on a belt that pushes women to say they want to be like men with respect to attitudes towards sex.

"Unfortunately, it's this stereotype of men that leads women to assume that if she's being slept with, she's automatically a notch. Instead of women trying to prove a point about the inability to reconcile the difference between a man's idea and values and a women's perspective on the issue, perhaps we should explore why men can have and justify casual sex easier than women can."

Teresa spoke. "What I see is that in pursuing sexual freedom women, in effect, are succumbing to men. It's not so much that they are trying to be like men as much as they are giving up their way of being by deciding to accept men's terms."

"No, I don't think that at all!" said Deena, who by now had rejoined the group. "I sense that we realize that we are financially independent, and that has taken us into a different realm. I think the view that Ricardo expresses converges with the fact that becoming more independent is giving us a certain potential.

"There's a lot of sexual pressure in our culture stemming from literature, advertising, and the entertainment media, in addition to the fact that our friends get married and we look around and suddenly we see that we're alone. So what do we do? We go for sex. In effect, I think that casual sex has become the modern equivalent of booze when we cannot handle the pressure; even worse, we want to get drunk so we can lose our inhibitions and have sex in order to be cool! Behaving like this has become our strange way of showing to the world that, baby, we have arrived! We may not have a penis, which is why men like us; they need us! That realization, as crude as it sounds, makes it possible for us to play the same game men play. Gosh, I hate to agree with someone who is critical of my generation, but yes, we're imitating men."

"This isn't just something women do in relation to sex, Deena," said Erica. "We do it in politics and business, too. How often do we see a woman in a

position of real power using her femininity to throw her weight around to influence change? Expressing a truly feminist or feminine point of view in politics and business is still seen as a weaker, more illogical way to pursue political or professional objectives. So what do women do? They do one of two things: rather than set the standard themselves, they assimilate themselves into male power, abandoning their femininity. Or, they revert to the traditional female stereotype and play the role of the political *mother*, so they don't seem threatening.

"Sure, we're making progress with women achieving positions of power, but when we really look at what these women represent in these positions, we need to consider if that is a positive and healthy image to portray of women. They become women who don't resemble the women they represent because they've abandoned their femininity to play power politics or women who are kicking it back to the 1950's and reinforcing antiquated gender roles. Are these women really representative of modern women, or are they settling and assimilating just to be in the positions they are?"

"But guys, we can't deny that the woman's liberation movement hasn't empowered us," said Leticia, a long-time activist in the pro-choice movement.

"No one's questioning the movement," I said. "Beyond empowerment, the movement has emancipated women in many regards. It has opened vast opportunities to women to realize their potential that for so long had been muffled. At the same time, and following the law of the pendulum, along with gains there have been excesses."

"Well, let me put you on the spot, Mr. Equal Rights Opportunity man. Give me examples of what you consider excesses," she asked.

Steve got up, "Hey Ric, don't answer that one yet. This time I do want to get a beer, but I don't want to miss this for the world. You have no idea what you've gotten yourself into."

"Go get your beer," I said, giving him a friendly shove. "I don't need your support. Take independence. Independence today is the cry of the modern and the post-modern woman. By joining the workplace, through education and with the help of government, women have become more independent and more assertive. However, being independent and being assertive are two different things.

"Personally, I think an assertive woman is an asset and a healthy element in a marriage; not so an independent woman. And before Leticia decides to throw the knife she is holding at me, let me be clear: and neither is an independent man. In the past, independence worked well for men who enjoyed being married to a submissive woman. It was easy being *macho* then. But while a relationship can survive within the independent-submissive equation, albeit in a rather abusive and revolting manner, it would be very difficult for a

relationship between two independent persons to endure.

“To begin with, if the two are married, by definition, neither one can be said to be independent. Instead, *interdependence* sets in, and the sooner the better, one would think, for the sake of the marriage.

“Whether in matrimony or some sort of committed relationship, when two persons decide to live together, the idea is to share a common life, or as a Brazilian bossa-nova song says, ‘to dream a dream together.’ In order for the marriage to stay healthy, each side has to sacrifice something. That’s when the independent person becomes less so in order to become interdependent. But what I see happening is that in their desire to follow in the footsteps of men, quite a few women want to go into a relationship telling the world they’re very independent. And they carry a rather big chip on their shoulder, daring men to tip it off.”

“I’m going to disagree on this,” argued Erica. “I actually think that a relationship between two independent people is the best and most healthy kind. If one or both halves of a couple forfeits independence, what you have is a co-dependent situation based upon the *need* to be with the other person, rather than the fact that you *want* to be with them.”

“It’s interesting that you bring out the need/want dialectics,” I replied. “I think we only disagree on the fine points, Erica, and that’s because of how we define the terms. I don’t understand why we should downgrade or neglect our needs. After all, I can choose my wants; whether to be with someone or not or whether I want something or not. But we don’t have much freedom of choice over our needs. Needs are basic to being human, whether they be physical—say water, air, food, shelter, and yes, sex; or emotional—such as security, the need to love and to be loved; or spiritual—our need of God, the supernatural, or whatever is out there.

“These needs cannot be forsaken; they are vital to becoming a full human being. So, it’s not that I want to love, but that I *need* to love, just as much as I need water and air. This need, far from making me dependent as a child, makes more than what I am by myself.

“Moreover, taking our needs into account makes us humble, which is not a bad trait. It says that we’re not supermen or superwomen; that we need each other, whether to share laughter, support each other emotionally, physically, and spiritually, watch TV together, or take a stroll every evening.”

“Ricardo, what I meant to say was that independence in a relationship gives us the choice and strength to stay or leave, and what makes the relationship worth something is the choice, the *conscious* decision to stay, that we make on a daily basis.

“This choice can only come from independence, because without maintaining a sense of individuality, one or both will lapse into the pattern of *need* versus *want* and become dependent.”

“I agree, but I’ll make a caveat. In my view, the goal is to be able to internal-

ize that *want* and convert it into a *need*. Initially, it's a conscious decision I make, no doubt about it. But, eventually it becomes the fruit of loving the other person. Is this still the love of an independent person? Of course! Except that once we internalize or appropriate such behavior, love becomes so powerful, assuming it's real, that the *choice* part sort of disappears, as when he says, 'It's no longer a matter of choice; I simply love her.'

"My point is that authentic love conditions one's behavior, and to the extent it does, it makes us less independent, but only in the behavioral sense. In other words, I no longer can leave the dishes dirty if I want to; I no longer can pack my bags and go where I want to, and so on.

"If my commitment is real, it's freely entered, and it's binding, too. As opposed to those golden handcuffs that tie us down to a job we don't like, this type of interdependence is like a set of enchanting handcuffs, ones you enjoy wearing."

"What about men's excesses?" asked Deena. "I'm sure you guys must be guilty of something, right?"

"Plenty," I answered. "Nothing as bad as men who discriminate against women and who feel they have to do it."

"Again, Mr. Equal Rights Opportunity man, will you go out on a limb?" asked Leticia with a smile.

"Take the situation at the Augusta National Golf Club. Women are not allowed to become members simply because they are women. What's obnoxious about the policy is what it says about those who are members. Frankly, I don't know how these men can possibly face their wives or their daughters and tell them that they cannot become members at Augusta because they are women.

"Mind you, I don't see anything wrong with men getting together by themselves over a weekend. I don't see anything wrong with women getting together to bond. But the idea that a woman is denied membership at a country club because she's a woman is so abhorrent that it truly blows my mind. Those who go along with denying membership to women on account of gender aren't just denying it to women. They're denying it to their wives, their mothers, their sisters, their daughters, their female friends. Gender is closer to us than race in this regard, much closer.

"One wonders if these men hate women, think very little of them, or forget the fact that they owe their being able to become members at Augusta to a woman: their mothers."

"But tell me, what do you say about the professional golfers who play there, earn hundreds of thousands of dollars, yet don't feel it's their responsibility to do anything about it?"

"Are they any different from the regular members?" I asked. "Are we talking

about a special kind of men whose consciences have a permit to feel and behave differently? No, I don't think so. On the other hand, maybe they are truly different from regular members in that they are all public figures. They enjoy the adulation of millions. Millions see their behavior, so their attitudes help to reinforce current prejudices and discriminatory practices.

"To hide behind the *I am only a guest* or *I don't own the place* excuse is, in effect, taking sides. Non-involvement is the equivalent of being involved, this time on the wrong side of the issue, I'm afraid."

"That's one more public abuse we have to take. It's good that you feel that way Ricardo. I'll take any amount of pity from men if that will help our cause."

"Pity? What in the world are you saying?" I asked. "Leticia, this is not about pity. It's about recognition. It's about being forced to open one's eyes to realize that women have been at the end of the receiving line throughout history."

"Along with poor African people, women are the most abused and underappreciated group of human beings in the world, particularly given who they are, what they do, and what they can accomplish by themselves."

"Tell me something, why do children carry their father's last name? What have fathers done in the lives of their children to deserve such recognition? Deposit a simple drop of semen, while enjoying themselves at the same time? Who carries that child for nine months? Who puts up with the delivery, the post-partum blues, the nurturing, looking after the children, often while having to work, too?"

"I would gladly surrender such recognition. It's the mother's last name that children should carry! Women deserve better, but not out of *pity*. It's simply a matter that we men are an overvalued stock. So, it's about balancing the currency; it's not about pity."

At this point, Cynthia asked us all if we preferred to continue our discussion or to eat and postpone it until later. Deena wanted to continue, "Why don't we stay for another twenty minutes? If we break this up, we won't come back, and frankly, I am enjoying this. I move to stay."

We all decided to stay.

"Ricardo, given that you believe that women are superior to men, maybe women should take over and run the world," said Steve, trying to make fun of me.

"Hey, I am all for it," Edgar remarked. "Men have been taking the hits throughout history for everything that goes wrong. So, let women take over if they think they can do a better job!"

"That might not be a bad idea," I said. "However, let me rephrase what I had said about women being better human beings than men. What I'm suggesting is that rather than women trying to compete with or imitate men, why not use their feminine traits more actively, more energetically, both in public and private life."

“Far more to the point, I wonder if our society wouldn’t be better off if men were less *macho* and instead incorporate those stereotypical female traits that, mistakenly, and according to our culture, make men and women look weak or unintelligent.”

“Oh, sure, that’s all we need,” said Perry. “To become girlie-men. We’ll be the target of ridicule, Ricardo!”

“Perry, let those who at times allow their testicles to do their thinking for them deal with their own insecurities. Let’s face it, maleness doesn’t complete a human being anymore than femaleness does. A true human being is a composite of the best of both elements. There’s nothing novel about it; it’s been said before. The only problem is that we men haven’t been listening.

“True, anthropologists and historians might tell us that the weight of a male-oriented Western Civilization and old-fashioned syncretism of Christian and pagan religious traditions have conspired to prevent these female traits from flourishing.

“I am not suggesting that men ought to shed their rationality, their valor, or their physical traits. I guess what I’m trying to say is that our society might be better off if women were to retain the distinctively or stereotypically feminine—I think I just created a word—traits instead of seeking to imitate the worst that men have to offer. On the other hand, men would come a long way if they could stop repressing those positive traits that ignorance identifies as being feminine.

“This, I think won’t be easy to accomplish, in part because the entertainment media is not helping. In my view, the media is actively promoting a different agenda, both because there is more money in it and because people buy into that agenda.”

“How so,” asked Laurie?

“Look at what Hollywood is feeding us! Women who are as vulgar as men are. That was unheard of in mainstream America in the 1950s or the 1960s. And, the slogan, ‘we have come of age,’ has been accompanied in the last three decades by ridiculous excesses. Did we think that Hollywood was going to leave women behind when it came to violence and aggression? Of course, not. We went from the very feminine *Charlie’s Angels* in the 70s to ferociously kicking, shooting, punching gals in the Twenty-First Century. In the last several James Bond movies, Bond’s female counterparts and partners are as lethal as Bond himself. This image is not reality-created but rather entertainment-led. Nonetheless, I’m sure we all understand the movie industry rationale: what’s more appealing in a movie, sexy, macho-style women or male politicians in miniskirts and padded bras trying to make the world safer for democracy?

“We have to face the fact that it’s just a lot easier for Hollywood to exploit women than to exploit men; and unfortunately women put up with it,

sometimes gladly. As long as these conditions persist, the struggle to improve society is likely to continue to be, well, just that, a struggle.”

“Okay,” said Erica, “but, we need to think about who’s responsible for this, because women lose either way. If they choose to perpetuate and assimilate into the culture of violence that men have been largely responsible for creating, they are assimilating to an image of themselves they did not create.

“Even in big Hollywood action movies like the latest *Charlie’s Angels* that depict women in tight leather suits being just as violent as men, women are not the directors. And, if they decide not to perpetuate this image, their other option is to assimilate into another image of themselves they did not create: the Stepford Wife, Suzie Homemaker ideal. There’s very little in between in the public sphere; it’s rare to see a woman acting like herself.

“To be fair, the two images on opposite ends of the spectrum have been perpetuated by women; however, I don’t think they were created by us.”

“Okay,” said Teresa. “So men and women have to change. But, tell me, Ricardo, how far would a man go in changing himself to please the one he loves?”

“Well, I, uh, I don’t know, I guess that . . .”

“He’s hesitating!” said Deena, pleased by my unexpected shyness. “Teresa, you just put him on the spot. How nice!”

“I’m glad to see you’re enjoying this, Deena,” I said. “But, if you wish, I’ll give it a try. I think it’s a very interesting question because it goes right to the heart of a topic that *Sex and the City* seldom dealt with: love.

“The series dealt with sex a lot. It dealt with passion, romance, marriage, but unless I fell asleep at times, it didn’t provide much in terms of a definition of love between a man and a woman. I’m not talking about Carrie’s ridiculous definition during the last episode; that was infatuation she was referring to.

“So, let’s see, you’re basically asking how far a man should go in loving a woman. Well, I think the answer lies in how we define love. Tell me, how would you define it?”

“Sorry, it’s the other way around,” Deena replied. “I’m interested in knowing how a man views love, and whether love is closer to his heart or to his genitals.”

“Fair enough. Why don’t we first provide a definition that we may all agree upon and take it from there. Let’s start by describing what I think love is not or should not be. Love is not sex; sex may be part of love although not always. Love can most certainly be felt, but we can’t reduce love to a feeling, such as passion; or to what scientists tell us is a temporary chemical reaction occurring in our brain when we feel strongly attracted to someone else to the point where we want to surrender ourselves to the other and care about the other.

“If we were to define love as a temporary or inconsistent reaction to an intense emotional feeling, sometimes referred to as infatuation, well, how could we possibly build or establish some sort of permanent relationship? Why commit yourself to someone on this basis? Why start a family? Why start something that—according to these scientists—will evaporate, will fade, from time to time before your very eyes?

“Nonetheless, if love’s target is not oneself, at the very least we can establish that love is always about the other. Love is not self-centered; it’s other-centered. If we disagree on this, we can’t go any further. Agreed? Good!

“This means that love is not about me being loved by another but about me loving someone else. If this is the case, then love is not about letting go and surrendering to the other. Love is about willingly and willfully—that is, freely and intentionally— caring for the other, nurturing the other, pleasing the other, giving of oneself to the other, forgiving the other, listening to the other, being sensitive to the other’s needs, sacrificing for the sake of the other. In other words, putting the other ahead of you constantly, or, since we are only human, at least most of the time. Now, this type of love doesn’t have to be temporary; it can be as permanent as you may desire or as deep as you are willing to commit. The only thing standing between this commitment and the loved one, other than the daily struggles and problems that affect us all is, you. To put it in different words, the only obstacle to love is your willingness to overcome your selfishness to continuously love . . . the one you love.”

“Without feelings or emotions?” complained Deena.

“No, No,” I said. “In many instances feelings and emotions will be present and likely will drive one’s behavior. At other times, feelings will follow the willful decision to do any of the above actions; and yes, sometimes it will feel as if love becomes a dutiful responsibility, as when you grudgingly decide not to buy a set of golf clubs so that your child may go to summer camp or because your wife needs new clothes for her new job.

“Now, part of the reason we don’t love enough, I think, is that we don’t quite know what love is, and once we find out, we see how difficult it is to let go of ourselves. This confusion has a lot to do with the ambiguous and deceptive signals we continuously receive of love. It’s no wonder that during the last episode of *Sex and the City*, Carrie thought she was looking for love when, instead, she was seeking to be loved, and to be loved like a little girl, without the other ever letting go of her! “I think that what we need are modern indicators of loving behavior, so that we may at least know how we need to behave. It’s ironic, but in my view, the best definition of love ever given by a human being goes back thousands of years.

“We find it in Paul, 1 Corinthians 13. However, don’t read this section while thinking of Paul in terms of a Jesus follower. Forget even that he believed

in God. Read that section instead, as if it were a sociological and psychological piece devoid of all religion. Since we live in a scientific age that demands empirical indicators and specific measures of behavior, Paul provides us with a host of concrete attitudes of what love is. I used these indicators once for a graduate paper I wrote on political behavior: love is patient; he said. It is kind; it is not envious; it is not boastful or arrogant. Love does not insist on its own way. It is not irritable or resentful. Now listen to this one, 'love does not rejoice in wrongdoing; it rejoices in the truth.'

"Look it up and see the extent to which we measure up against this yardstick. So, to answer your question, if it's within the realm of my possibilities to change, including some amount of sacrifice, most definitely, I should, and I would. And by the way, this principle applies to men as well as to women."

"Let me ask you," Deena said. "Since I presume you believe the series distorts the concept of love through all the sex that goes on, don't you believe that sex is an important aspect of love? You seem to be knocking it down."

"On the contrary," I couldn't help smiling as I replied. "Sex is a very important part of love; at least it's one of the aspects of love I enjoy the most. However, I think sex can very easily be disassociated from love, as it happens during casual or uncaring sex.

"To me the biggest lie that goes on in our society is when two persons say to each other, *let's make love*, when in effect all they want to do is have sex. I think the reason we perpetuate this tale is because we're embarrassed to say, *let's have sex*, or because our Puritanical background continues to masquerade our devious intentions by forcing us to rely on nobler terms.

"About your question, Deena, I don't know if you remember, around the tenth episode of the third season of *Sex and the City*, a rare incident occurred that partially explains the difference between sex and love. The protagonist, of all people, was Samantha, she who likes to be attacked by sharks but would not mind being nibbled by a thousand minnows at the same time.

"In this episode, she has the flu and calls on Carrie to tell her how bad she feels. But, as it happens in life, while experiencing sexless moments, Samantha begins to feel withdrawal symptoms. At that very moment her repressed emotions, her real self, begin to speak. She is crying disconsolately and, remember, she's the one who is always either getting it or giving it. Well, all of a sudden she cries out to Carrie: *It does not matter how much you have, if you don't have a guy who cares about you, it all means shit. There are two types of guys, the one who cares and the one you have sex with.* And she ends by lamenting, *we are all alone, Carrie.*

"Now, that was deep! Mind you, Samantha doesn't quite understand the difference between sex and love. She is looking for someone to possess her, to reaffirm her sexuality, not someone to love or someone to care for. But in the process, she has, somehow, managed to see her life beyond and independent of sex, and that was progress!

“So, going back to your question, what is the difference between sex and love? In my view, sex without love is like a sugar cone without the ice cream in it. It may be enjoyable, but I don’t think the enjoyment is as deep and as long lasting as when you’re in love. That’s my answer; now, let’s go eat or the food will get cold.”

“Just one last question, Ricardo,” said Deena. “By what authority are you saying all this? After all, aren’t we listening to someone who has failed, not once but twice at marriage?”

She was right, but her question was superficially valid. It all goes back to the issue of whether a tainted messenger can deliver a credible message. And, of course, from a logical standpoint the answer is, yes, he can. “Deena, I think we all can accept that human beings learn from their mistakes, from others’ and from their own. I’m no exception. From my perspective, divorces are awful, and like any other major failure, when you lose a war, a legal case, an election, you ask yourself, ‘where did I go wrong?’

“Were there things I could have done better?” you ask yourself. You begin to psychoanalyze yourself, and if you are willing to accept responsibility, usually you come up with interesting revelations. So, in a nutshell, my so-called “expertise” comes from having failed, not once but twice, as you pointed out.

“That said, I don’t think it would be a good idea to remarry and get divorced several times in order to get more experience. It’s not a game, although many treat it as such.

“I think our hostess is waiting on us, so, why don’t we finally get something to eat?”

As the group rose, still buzzing with fertile conversation, I noticed that the sun had hit its highest point as we wandered into the shade and to the down-side of the longest day of the year.

Endnotes

¹ Erica is no fictional character. She’s all too real. The quotations are hers.

² I owe this very valuable point to ... who else, a woman, and former work colleague of mine.