

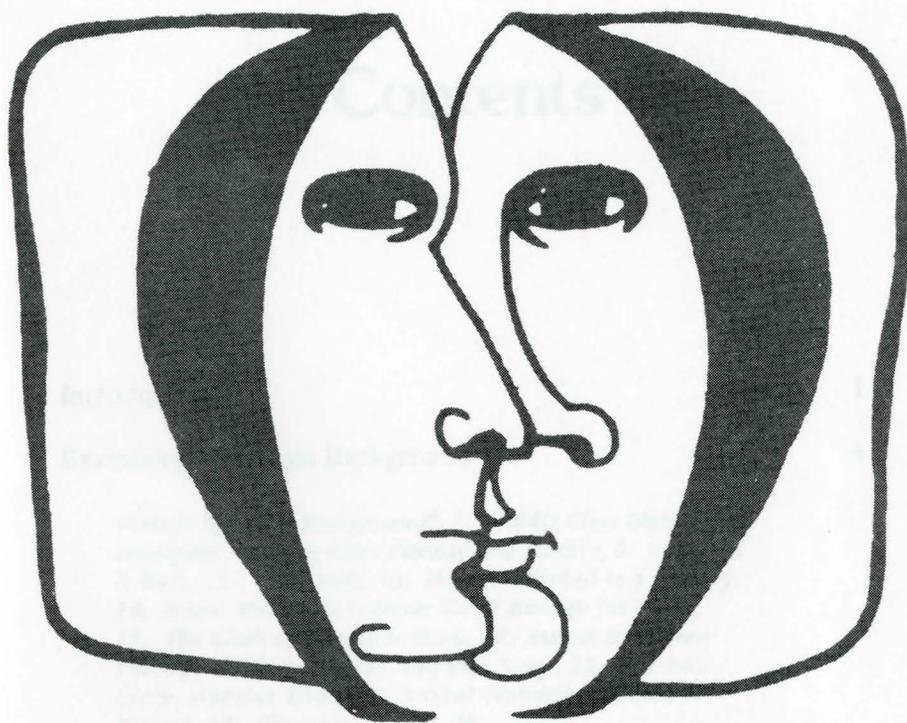
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CLASS AND SELF-IMAGE:



A Women's Group Talks
About Personal Power
and Powerlessness

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Introduction

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Introduction

(a) *Who We Are*

We are members of a women's group which met from 1974 to 1977. We got together to support each other around some issues in our lives—our relationships with friends and lovers, men and women, our work relationships, and generally to talk about how we felt about ourselves. In this process we uncovered the class issue; it came from the *inside out*. That is, we did not choose as a goal to deal with the class issue. Instead, we found that in order to understand how we related to each other and to others outside the group, we came to a point where we had no choice but to begin to recognize differences in privilege and orientation that we could then label class. Nearly all of us have been to college, but our growing up years happened in very different classes.

As we talked about our class backgrounds, we discovered that class has affected our self-respect, our optimism/pessimism about our own lives and relationships, in a variety of social situations, and in formal organizations. Our class backgrounds have exposed us to different experiences and these experiences have affected how powerful, competent or assertive we feel.

The discussion of class influence on our personal lives was so important to us that we wanted to share with others some of the experiences we talked about, a little of what happened to us as we focused on class differences, and a brief discussion of some in-

sights that we gained as a result of the process we went through and are still involved in. We see the examination of class influence on our personal lives as an on-going process which continually brings us to re-examine previous conclusions that we have arrived at.

We hope that by sharing our experiences as well as our ideas, we will generate more discussion about class in a very personal way. We also hope that we will get feedback from you the reader both on what we have to say and how we have said it. Feedback from our friends who have read parts of this paper has helped us to think about facets of class influence that we had not considered before. Each criticism that we have gotten from our friends makes us look forward to hearing from strangers. We invite you to participate in this continuing process of breaking down the barriers that separate us from ourselves and others.

We found that talking about our past and trying to understand the influences of our class background on our present relationships was a hard thing to do. Without each others' support we could not have done it at all. You, the reader, may find it tough going to know what to do with all of this. Without other people to talk to about where your experience connects with ours and where it doesn't, and the feelings that may come up, it could seem like a futile effort.

If you would like to get together with other people to talk about some of these issues, send us a note. We will try to get interested people in touch with each other. Contact us c/o The New England Free Press, 60 Union Square, Somerville, Mass., 02143.

(b) What We're Learning

A class society maintains a certain set of values and assumptions that make us feel either proud or lousy about ourselves, either better or worse than other people. In the United States these values are based on the assumption that we are all free to be what we want to be—that differences in income, education and work are a result of our own efforts. This makes us believe that people with more income, more skilled work, more education and more power are somehow "better" people; they have shown more initiative, better motivation, greater intelligence than people with "lower" status. The American myth tells us that power, income and

education are freely and equally available to everyone, and that our failure to achieve them is due to our own personal inadequacy.

In reality, access to power and opportunity are clearly related to the class, sex, race, and nationality to which we belong. We live in a society where the natural resources and wealth of most of the world are controlled by 2% of our population, where 62% of our workers earn less than what is considered by the Bureau of Labor Statistics to be the basic standard of living, where unemployment is currently 7.4%. The few who control the resources take far more than they deserve of the profit and economic surplus that result from the labor of the many who do the work. The true value of what we have earned is not returned to us. A few are secure in their riches. Most of us are surrounded by an atmosphere of scarcity, haunted by insecurity, afraid to lose whatever we do have. We learn to hate and fear those who have less than we do, for anyone else's getting more means that we will end up with less.

Just as the economic value of most labor is not returned to those who do the work, the psychological rewards are also withheld. Instead of being able to feel good about what we do, we end up feeling that we are not "good" enough, and not as good as those who have more money, success, or power; this contributes to maintaining the status quo: if we don't feel we are good enough to deserve more we won't begin to challenge the structures of power that limit us. For this reason, it is important that we begin to understand ways that we put ourselves and others down.

As we attempt to challenge the structures of power within and among ourselves, we will begin to change the definitions of power. We will be stronger and find it easier to unite to change the external power structure that keeps us all down, that denies all of us control over our own lives and divides us from ourselves and others.

Trudy Foote

Susan Holbert

Ilze Petersons

Badgie Rankin

Carlene Taillon

Examining Our Class Background

The following areas of discussion helped us discover feelings and attitudes that seemed to be class based—attitudes that played a large part in determining how much we respected ourselves and others as we were growing up, and how we feel about current situations and relationships.

Jobs

Our opinions concerning the value of our parents' work reflects society's opinions, and influences the way we see ourselves. The importance given to our parents' work affects our own ability to accept ourselves. The jobs that we have held ourselves likewise influence our self-esteem. We discovered that our attitudes toward our ability to function, our competence at work and in the world, are affected by society's attitudes towards our parents' and our own behavior.

Family Social Life

Similarly, we have internalized society's attitudes regarding our parents' possessions. This became clear when we discussed our feelings about the houses in which we were raised—how our own homes compared to our friends' homes, how comfortable or uncomfortable we felt about having friends visit us. We also compared our clothes and other possessions to those of others, and had definite feelings

of pride or discomfort attached to these comparisons.

Another aspect worth examining was the type of social life our parents led—the organizations to which they belonged or didn't belong, who was entertained and how much, affected how we felt and feel socially.

Role Relationships Within the Family

The role each individual acts out in a nuclear family setting can be seen as partly the result of how class attitudes have affected that individual. For example, an upwardly mobile brother could consider himself better than those in the family who aren't. Or the mother might give the most praise to a child for good grades than for anything else. While another child might be praised for being the most attractive according to society's standards.

Intimate Friends and Lovers

Examining how we have chosen close friends and lovers can reveal a pattern that can be linked to class background. We may look for friends or lovers who appear to have a higher status than we have. We sometimes tend to shy away from those who appear to be more like we ourselves are. Or we may have found it easier to be with those from a lower status than ourselves—feeling we were more secure with our superiority not threatened, by having to compete.

Glimpses of the Process

The following selections are glimpses of revelations we had in the group and as individuals. It is not a complete description, but rather a sampling of how we approached looking at the way our class background has affected each of us. Some are autobiographical sketches. Others reflect the way we experience class structures now. A few combine the past and present. We have included a few poems, a couple of dreams. It's not the whole picture, but it is a sketch containing fragments of our experience.

What Is My Class Background?

Through all the discussions in the women's group, I haven't been able to identify my class background. My father was born in

Russia. He only got as far as the eighth grade before he went to work in a factory. But he's a self-educated, self-made man and by the time I was 6 or 7 (and he was 45), he was earning a comfortable income. Before that time my family and I lived in a slummy neighborhood in a four-family house—all occupied by extended family. We moved to our own house in a middle-class neighborhood when I was in the first grade.

I went to an elite college and felt very alienated from the upper and middle-class people there, but I didn't know why. I always identified myself as middle-class.

After I got out of school and had to find work, I started feeling less a part of the middle class. I tried teaching, social work, etc., but felt very uncomfortable with the clothes, appearance, mannerisms and values I was supposed to have in those middle-class positions. I didn't keep any job more than six months and the progression went toward less income and status with each job, as I was more comfortable with increasingly less responsibility. I was unable to assert my own appearance, personality or values in work situations because I was intimidated. But since I was ostensibly on an equal footing and class status with everyone else, I couldn't understand why and blamed it on some personal neurosis.

During the course of our women's group's discussion about class, some tension arose between working and middle-class women. Although my family childhood experiences seemed like those of the middle class women, I felt that my understanding and outlook lay closer to that of the working-class women.

The fact that I didn't suffer from economic hardships has always seemed like the only factor to be considered in identifying what class I come from. I certainly would never consider myself to be a working class person. But although my parents had a comfortable income by the time I was growing up, a lot of their emotional patterns were established under conditions of poverty and economic insecurity. My father's lack of formal education always caused him a great deal of anxiety, because if his business ever failed (as happened to many of his associates) he felt he could never get a decent job.

Both my parents had a lot of hostility and resentment toward middle-class posturing and "keeping up appearances". My mother would advise me that life would be easier if I became well-off like this or that relative, but she also let me know that she viewed their lives as showy on the outside and empty on the inside. My parents never lost a sense of powerlessness about their lives, nor did they

lose respect and understanding for poor and oppressed people.

I am only coming to understand how emotional factors contribute to a sense of "class" belonging, and how they support or undermine our ability to identify with our inner selves and with other people. I hope through this process to understand better some of the complexity and implications of class feelings. Hopefully, recognizing them will help us to break down the psychological as well as material class barriers that keep us divided from ourselves and each other.

Middle Class Blues

I come from an upper middle class, intellectually oriented, family. I received lots of affection and attention and plenty of material things. I went to summer camps, took piano lessons, went to college where I had many opportunities to develop myself. I have a lot of warm feelings toward my parents and my whole family. I grew up feeling I had some power over my life. My father's career as a minister, a college chaplain, a college teacher, and now a foundation executive, helped give me a good sense of self worth. His work is respected by society, and therefore, by some sort of patriarchal osmosis, I felt (and feel) respected, too. When I was growing up, I didn't even envy the richer people who were just after money: my family wanted the "important" humane things.

I knew that sometimes I felt miserable, but it was hard for me to take those feelings seriously. I had been used to looking at myself as privileged which was reinforced by people around me. Now, as I begin to express and take seriously those miserable feelings, I find it is difficult to express my sad and angry side, but I find it very comforting and rewarding when I do. It is a relief to take my own pain seriously.

In many situations I am uncomfortable when I am unable to speak out clearly about what I want. Sometimes, I don't even know what I want since I am not used to thinking seriously about my own needs. My mother, father and older sister all talked a lot which didn't leave me a lot of space, and I am just now beginning to learn how to take enough space for myself with my friends and family. Also, in my family, although there was a lot of talking, my parents didn't speak out clearly and directly about

their feelings. I don't ever remember my parents raising their voices to each other. There was a lot of hostility and resentment at times, but it went on in veiled and hard-to-understand ways. I began to learn that anger was an emotion adults don't (or shouldn't) have. Now I feel a great need to develop the emotional part of me. Being refined and contained and sophisticated, in an emotional way, is what I learned growing up. I am trying to grow beyond that now.

At the times when I have only looked at the privileged part of myself I easily fall into feeling guilty about everyone who is poorer or more oppressed than I am. I want to cry out for all the undernourished people in third world countries and in the U.S., for all the people in Indochina who fought and struggled for peace, for poor people everywhere. But when I take my own pain, my own oppression seriously, I am not crying FOR them, I am crying WITH them, with sadness, with anger and with rage, because I am also crying out for that part of me which has been trampled on, too: the lonely, neglected part of me.

This is certainly not to deny that other people's oppression is worse than mine, but I don't want to spend a whole lot of time deciding who is more oppressed. I feel good identifying the source of my pain as the same source of other people's pain: the capitalist system channels us all into limiting roles. As I struggle to express my needs, as I fight to break out of the bonds that limit my growth, I am fighting the same system that holds us all down. I also want to support other people's struggle against sexism, racism, and class and economic inequality, because in the most basic sense, it is my struggle, too.

Immigrant Working Class Fantasy and Reality

When I was one year old my parents fled from Latvia just before the Russian Communists invaded and drove out the German Nazis. Till I was seven we lived in Displaced Persons Camps in West Germany. In 1950 we came to this country.

We lived for a year in Texas on a millionaire's ranch where father was a ranch hand at \$75 a month in a house that had no running water, an outhouse with a wasps' nest in it, armadillos in the back yard and dead rattlesnakes across the road the mile we

walked to the tin lean-to where we would wait for the school bus. In school they gave me a new name because they couldn't pronounce the real one.

Mother cleaned the boss's house: they had leather chairs and a piano that mother would sometimes play when they were not there and a pool table and wicker tables and father beat the boss in a game of chess and mother got accused of stealing a coke from the refrigerator and gave them a piece of her mind in very broken English. Mother also gave a talk to the charitable ladies at the high school about our "fascinating" experiences with the help of an English-Latvian dictionary. All those ladies whose own immigrant past had been forgotten looked at us with a mixture of pity and curiosity, when we went to church on Sundays.

I remember I stayed at the foreman's house one night because they had a daughter my age, Joanne, and it was a fancy dark house among rocks and cedars and they had a tile bathroom with a tub and running water and I was frightened at the strangeness of it all and wanted to be back in the bed my brother and sister and I shared even though one night we had found a scorpion beneath it. I know that father was ostracized by the other ranch hands because he offered his canteen to one of the black ranch hands one day. I know that father and mother read to us: novels, stories of life and death, plain living and heroism, a chapter each night. And all this time I know that I thought in Latvian and only in school was learning to speak English.

But all those things I write about as if they were photographs. I've told them so many times and they sound unreal. When I hear them with other people's ears they sound like curiosities that we were treated as then. I haven't been able to take seriously what those experiences meant to me, because they are no more real to me than those photographs.

Leaving Texas, the first 8 years of my life fade into Trying to Become Acceptable in America. My past and present don't count for much for now I am in the land of equal opportunity. My past is like a dream I can't recall because the here and now intrudes with its demands and definitions. And like the dreams I can't remember, the vagueness of my forgotten years makes me uneasy.

We moved to Chicago where our relatives had moved. Father and mother were treated like children who were not too bright because they couldn't speak English. We children translated to them. Interpreted them to the shopkeepers and we in-

terpreted America to them. "This is how they do things in America." We struggled to explain phrases like "take it easy", "everything's OK", "it's alright"—when it was hard to "take it easy" when working hard was a necessity and doing your best no matter how menial and boring it was one source of pride. Mother worked at Jefferson Electric as a coil spinner. She would often complain about how hard the work was, the strain between the workers who were pitted against each other by piece work.

Father had completed the eighth grade in Latvia yet he would talk about how much he had liked discussing philosophers such as Schopenhauer when he was a boy. He liked even more to tell stories of his childhood as a shepherd on a farm in Latvia. His dream was to live again the simple life in the country. His dream for us was to get college educations and become professionals, so that we would never have to endure the hard work and humiliation of laboring in a factory. Yet he looked with some disdain on the intellectuals, the "educated" Latvians who had come over at the same time we had. They were conceited, pretentious, and didn't care about what they had to do to get ahead.

They managed to buy a house—an old house which was two blocks from the factory where my father worked. We were so excited to have a whole house that was ours. But it was an old house with all furniture from salvation army stores. We kids dreamed of someday living in a modern brick bungalow: all clean, stainless steel and olive green plastic refrigerator and washing machine to match. That to me was middle class. I dreamed of having a father who wore a shirt and tie to work in an office. A neatly coiffed mother who kept an immaculate house and who could give me advice such as I found in magazines such as *American Girl* and *Seventeen*.

I dreamed especially of having parents who didn't fight all the time, who didn't have scenes, who didn't get drunk, but who always spoke reasonably and rationally, were self-confident and secure. I hesitated to invite friends over to my house, I thought they would see it as a dump. Would find my parents odd. I didn't encourage my parents to go to PTA. The teachers would be condescending to them. I would be embarrassed. But along with that shame, I felt a certain pride because my parents didn't believe that material things were what mattered most. They often criticized Americans and other Latvians who were quickly becoming Americanized for being materialistic. More important than having fancy furniture to show off, was having people feel

comfortable in our home. More important than having an immaculate house was a beautiful garden to enjoy working in and then sitting in the evening and enjoying the smell of roses, the lilies of the valley, the violets. The most important quality that was looked for in other people was simplicity and unpretentiousness.

We the children were the source of our parents' pride. They, our parents, were the source of our shame. We loved them but why couldn't they be different. I convinced my mother to wear lipstick, gave her a permanent to make her look more like the other mothers. We children had conversations which were totally incomprehensible to them. We would take over the kitchen and talk late into the night about wisdom we found in books—explanations of the world which was so confusing and seemed so unfair to us.

Sunshine & Rain

You were a child
Raised to see the sun
Bask in the glow of
All's right with the world
And if a shower came along,
Well, every cloud has a silver lining . . .

I was a child
Raised feeling the shining sun
Was a brief intermission
Between raging thunderstorms,
Tornadoes, floods,
But when the sun came out,
I did see rainbows.

Reading books
And watching you on TV
I felt we must be very bad
To be the only ones
Lightning hit
Through deluges of tears.
But I was sure you didn't see
The rainbows

With the sun blinding you.

And now it's hard for you to see
The rainbow of my soul.
For we both seeing dark clouds
Fear lightning and thunderbolts,
Believe only sunny days
With white fluffy clouds
Make the fruit trees grow,
At least, the fruit that's picked,
To bring a good price in the marketplace.

You came to me unknowingly thirsty,
Looking for rain to parch
The desert all that sunshine made of you.
My lightning bolts of feeling
Illuminate what's buried deep in you.

I came to you longing for
The sun to make the rainbow re-appear.
But both of us looking to the sun,
Miss the rainbow,
And while my clouds weep blood,
Yours stay bottled in your soul.

You fear if they should out,
There'd be an explosion
That would rip you apart
And make me run from your pieces.
And I fear all my rain
Will chill you to the bone
And you'll go flying to the sun,
Familiar and warm.

The Furies

This poem comes from anger felt by a woman from middle class background towards a woman from working class background. This anger was part of the struggle within the group.

The furies of war torn lands lodged in the cells of your body,
The insults and humiliation heaped on refugees, immigrants and
factory laborers that surrounded you,
Your family pattern maintaining you as The Understanding One that
disabled you from focusing on yourself,

These. . . .hit me in my soul and hurt me, too !!

Can I be angry at you?
 you, who have helped me so much,
 you, who have enabled me to have more confidence in myself,
 you, who have known so much sorrow

NO !! I am sick of thinking too much of your needs !!

NO !! I am angry at you and at me !!

Your insecurities drive you to make people love you !!

I got caught, too !

I am confused.

 How much do you want to know me?

 How much do your insecurities drive you to know me?

I can't stand your dishonesty.

 I love your honesty.

I can't stand your deception and hypocrisy.

 I love your search for clearness.

I am sick of deep emotional conversations followed by distance. . .
 emotional goodies without any meaning.

My Dad Worked in a Factory

My father worked in the same factory making basically the same parts on a machine the whole time I was growing up. He would come home after being at work from 7 until 4 each day, eat supper, do some work in his workshop downstairs, and then snore in his chair until it was time for bed. Never did he complain or talk about his job, even to tell us what he actually *did* there for all those hours.

There were lots of other factory daddies in my neighborhood, and the other kids around didn't ask what your dad did—they knew—they could see him coming home with his lunch pail at the same time most of the other men were arriving home. It was when I began making new friends outside of the neighborhood that I recall feeling a little bit less important than they. Jean would say "My daddy's an engineer." And Marsha's dad was a bank executive. Then it would come to be my turn and I'd say, "My dad works in the Veeder-Root factory." Oohs and aahs for everyone but me. . . Even though I would say it with as much enthusiasm as these other kids did! I knew I was not ashamed of what he did; after all, we ate well, we had our own little house, and I had plenty of toys and clothes. (That is, we were secure except for the few times the shop went out on strike.) What my father did was real, it was part of our life, yet to some others apparently some factor was lacking in all this. This was the start of what I'd call a major contradiction in my life.

After a few times of the above described situation happening to me, I began to feel sort of blank in those situations, because my feelings were all mixed up and I saw no way to resolve it but to stay with friends who I knew wouldn't judge my family for how my daddy earned our money. My dad's own silence regarding his job served to fuel my own confusion. So the job thing definitely got in the way for me, but not because of anything wrong or weird about us. I just couldn't understand for the longest time. . .

Where You're At Is Never Good Enough for Them

Looking at class influence is not simple. How do you categorize a woman who was brought up working-class, is not married, has no children, and works in a "professional" position, making enough money to be able to work part-time and live comfortably? That's me, and these facts can be a definite source of confusion in a person's life. But certain things about the medical hierarchy and my position in it have become clear to me over the years. . .

My current work role is that of a Gynecology (or Family Planning) Nurse Practitioner. It is a unique role, in that I do basically what a Gynecologist does—I examine women, diagnose all kinds of infections and pelvic problems, and treat them. I prescribe with a doctor's permission. I also fit diaphragms, and insert IUD's. But, I feel I am in a position to do more than a doctor; I can relate to patients as peers because I can directly identify with them. I constantly share with women, as patients, what I learn through examining their bodies. I feel I've been able to steal knowledge which is not meant to be mine, since I don't have an MD, and plough it right back into the source—*us*.

When I was working in a clinic which served a mostly middle-class college-age population, patients would often reveal to me what I feel is a class bias by asking me why I didn't "go on" to become a doctor. No, I feel strongly that becoming a physician would win for me a sorry gain of money, prestige, and a professional distance from co-workers and patients. This is not to mention that I cringe at the thought of all the competing that medical school entails. I feel it would crush my spirit.

Now I am at work in a working-class setting and I find people, as patients, asking me this question: "Did you need a B.S. or an M.S. to do what you're doing?" This question shows how much we've all been brainwashed into thinking "the more educated you are, the better you are." (And the more power you have.) I feel proud and fortunate to be able to respond to this question with a "No". To me, practitioner stems from the word "practical". It is a practical working skill. At the time that I took the three month long practitioner course, one needed only to be an R.N. to apply. I had jumped at the opportunity, knowing it was what I dearly wanted to do, and also knowing full well



Steven Halpern



Nadine Rosenthal

that in a few years' time, the skill would no longer be open to R.N.'s.

I resent with all my being the current trend which is forcing nurses to get their B.S. degree. To be an R.N. already and be forced to go to college to be validated for what you already are, is a direct insult! Three year diploma programs, such as mine, are being shut down everywhere. The options are being closed to working-class women in this country. They will soon have only the options of being a Licensed Practical Nurse, or a Medical Assistant, which are lower status positions, lower paying positions, and very hard working ones at that. These are the house-wives of the hospitals and institutions. To me this is a serious class battle being waged at this very point in time.

The Clash of Classes at Work

A short dream—the influence of a middle-class revolutionary type male on working-class men. . .

“A large lunchroom is filled with noisily talking men at a factory at lunchtime. One guy is lecturing the others, telling them they are sugar and caffeine addicts. So they change their diets, and the next time you see them at lunch, they are all nodding out and no one is talking to anyone else.” (Note: their shitty jobs have remained the same, so without artificial stimulants, and with too rapid a change in diet, the men are overcome!)

Master & Apprentice

I got myself into a work situation learning to make furniture from men. I went into the situation very inexperienced in dealing with that whole area of life and not knowing anything about carpentry. This difficult situation was compounded by the fact that in this work situation there was no respect shown for the learning process, for the fact that I was opening myself up to something I knew nothing about. All the respect that was given to anyone in the situation was dependent on their mastery

and all the pride they took was in the external product that they had produced.

There was very little respect for being able to and wanting to learn. I was afraid to turn the machines on and off—I just didn't know what was going to happen. They had forgotten what it had been like for them to learn. They didn't convey a sense of process: either I was a master cabinet-maker or I was nothing. They also labored with a tremendous insecurity because they had to be the best and of course there can only be one best. And they know that even if they may be the best for that moment, someone else may come along who will be better.

Because of the competitiveness involved, my boss set certain standards for what was correct. He would say, "This is the most efficient way to do this," and that carried weight even with me. Since efficiency was most important, people in the shop were hardly communicating with each other. They would come in in the morning and would not even say "hello" to each other. I would say to myself "I can't live in this world of silence," and I would say to them, "How are you?" and feel that I was being criticized for it. Luckily, the situation was so extreme that I could see my way through it and struggle against the tendency to react to anything they said out of their position of power as being right; and to refuse to accept their view that anything I said was some crazy inexperienced thing. They made me feel that because I didn't know how to make cabinets my whole life experience was invalidated. They didn't accept that I had much to offer in terms of how people related to each other and that that experience could be useful in creating a more productive and fulfilling work environment for us all.

This is a poem that came out of a response to more than a male/female conflict. It came out of different class experiences of two people involved in a relationship. I learned from the relationship with a middle class person better attitudes about accomplishments and tasks and the ability to carry through on those tasks. As a working class woman, I didn't have any models for doing creative work and had learned only to avoid work and the pain I saw work as. The man I was involved with had some of the experiences of a working class life since his parents weren't

professionals and he himself could not fit into the academic and acceptable middle class styles and pressures. But his father was a skilled worker and both his parents were college graduates. He had models that stressed the joy in doing. I wanted to take on his family as my own because of their creativity and optimism. He wanted to take on my family as his own for what he had seen of the depth of emotions and feelings that my family was capable of. This poem is a tribute to our struggle to love our differences.

Ted's Poem

Your child's hands
eagerly explored the wood,
Happily hammered
on the gift of doing.

I will learn.

Your young man's eyes looked to the future
I will work.
I will learn.

The block of wood was
a thought-filled gift.

Rushing with strength and hope
into the world
You labored long and hard.

I will learn.

The learning intense.
And now from those sweat weary years
your learning is rewarded.
Pride well-earned.
You turn and say,
This is my stability.

Away from the tasks,
In the world of
love
anger
tears

questions
needs,
Friends come and go and
leave you confused;
Unstable in your life.

The anchor of work is steadied by years
spent learning.

The knowledge of your heart is adrift,
Learning neglected,
and sometimes rejected
as too hard, mysterious.

Not mysterious,
just unused like my woman's muscle
at your labor.

"Don't quit," you say
"I know it's hard but I know
you can learn,
I see it in you."

I say the same to you.

Respecting our years of learning
The roots of love grow secure,
Stable.

We will learn.

August, 1975

The Box Story

This is a story about boxes and about one woman's box in particular. You may think that this woman's box is strange because she lives in it. But in this story the woman finds out that everyone lives in boxes.

She thought she was very quiet; sometimes she felt that she actually tiptoed through life. It made her want to scream.

But the words on her box kept stopping her. They were always there.

When she frowned at them or even when she kicked them,
they only disguised themselves.

When she saw them most clearly, they looked like this:

No disturbance from me means no questions from Them

No questions from me means no questions from Them

No questions means no rejections

The box that held her had no windows:

No windows meant no spying from Them

No spying meant no disapproval

But *she* couldn't see very well through the cracks in her box
—things outside seemed blurry and frightening.

So sometimes she left her box to learn more about the
world—she bounded out with a smile.

No frown from me means more attention from Them

No anger from me means no anger from Them

But she was lonely and felt that no one really saw her.

So she tried to fit a few special people inside her box.

But her box seemed to trap her friends.

It seemed irrational and confused

Or it seemed manic and depressive

Or it seemed dusty and barren and boring

And she felt embarrassed and ashamed.

So she decided to spruce up her box—that was the Answer.

She decided to take on the ways of the World.

Yes to my work and doing—approval from Them and me

Yes to their work and their doing—forget my past,

forget part of myself

It felt better, it felt a little stronger.

But it was never enough.

Somehow she was still lonely.

Then some friends started talking about their boxes.

Boxes that trapped them

Boxes built in families and in one society

And all the boxes were held together by self-doubt.

There were phrases pounded into the boxes.

The phrases were very powerful.

And the people in the boxes couldn't ignore them.

Some phrases on middle class boxes said:

Things will be O.K. for me as long as I'm productive

I should be stronger—if I can't meet my needs by myself
I should ignore them

I feel guilty—somehow, I'm not sure how, I've been
privileged

I have to help other people, but I can never help them
enough

I want to see and hear about feelings

But no one has seen or heard about mine, not even me

Some phrases on working class boxes said:

Nothing will be O.K.

I can't be productive, I'm too weak and emotional

Even when I'm self-disciplined my work isn't valuable

I feel my own oppression, I feel the oppression of others—
and it overwhelms me

Or, I feel my suffering but it's hard to define—

It must be my fault

As she talked about her box and heard her friends talk about
theirs, something strange began to happen.

The boxes began to get weaker.

She found herself punching hers and yelling at it and putting
holes in it.

And it felt Good.

But something else began to happen.

She started putting new words on her box.

Sometimes she knew she was putting them there.

At other times she was surprised to see them.

Her box began to seem less confining, more helpful—it was
lighter, airier, even colorful at times.

She was amazed to think that her box could become her
Friend.

It said good things like:

You are Important

You have Important feelings

You have Important ideas

What You do is Important

You can share your feelings, your ideas, your work

Maybe the feelings and ideas will change

Maybe they'll grow

Maybe they'll be ignored or rejected

But You can decide for Yourself what is Important
to You



Phyllis Ewen



Phyllis Ewen

The words sounded familiar.

She realized that the women who were sharing ideas and feelings about their boxes, were also saying these good things to her.

And somehow she was less lonely.

And somehow she liked herself more.

The Box Story: Another Look

My father is a truck driver; my mom is a housewife and for ten years was a clerk. I remember in school the teachers saying, "If you don't study hard you'll grow up to be ditch diggers or truck drivers." Sometimes I wanted to stand up and yell, "My dad's a truck driver" and see what would happen—sometimes I had visions of the teacher gasping, grabbing onto a desk, and not knowing what to say except, "Well, I. . .well," and then I'd walk out of the room. Unfortunately, I never acted out my fantasy, not believing I had the right. More often I felt I had something that I should hide. When I filled out forms in school and was asked for "Father's Occupation," I'd slide my hand over the answer. Sometimes I'd feel that it was none of "their" business, other times I'd realize that I was becoming confused about my dad's job.

When I was in high school there seemed to be more things that I wanted to hide about myself. I was attracted to, and became friends with, a group of girls who came from a wealthier neighborhood. Their lives seemed so colorful to me. Their fathers included lawyers, teachers, an accountant, an architect. They entertained, took trips, attended cultural events, had a swimming pool or a house down at Balboa (on the California coast). I was afraid of being a bore or sounding stupid to these girls. Why couldn't I talk about my exciting trip to Europe and all the things I learned there? The father of my closest friend was a minister, her mom, a social worker; their house was right around the corner. I think her dad's income was less than my dad's, their house like ours. But there was such a difference in atmosphere—they would have such intelligent conversations and I'd go home saying, "Why can't my family be like that."

Thinking about class has really helped me put my experiences and abilities into a new framework. I don't have to put

myself, my family, or other people down, because we haven't had certain experiences or don't possess certain knowledge. The things I want to learn are much different than they used to be. Instead of envying people who have travelled extensively, or know a lot about something, I try to remember that I can feel good about the work I put into understanding myself and this society. I can feel good about finding ways to put new ideas into practice. Instead of putting myself or other people down for not being more intelligent, more social, or more verbal, I can ask myself what I have of value to offer in a situation, and ask that other people and myself take responsibility for discovering or giving our individual contributions.

Verbal - Nonverbal: Which Is Better?

From 1971 until now I've been in various women's groups. For a long time I was the non-verbal one. I've always felt a resistance to being verbal and using lots of big words. This stems from my family background. My family never fully swallowed the middle-class line. We couldn't, because my French-Canadian father neither reads nor writes. So my way of responding to the world was to try not to get too caught up in being articulate; a restraint I chose out of loyalty to my Dad and his class roots. Only now am I really beginning to explore the difficulties and the specialness of illiterate people.

After I became aware of my non-verbal role I was really smug about it—I thought “non-verbal is better”. Then I began to see that I suffered for my role in not letting myself express my feelings. And that can be a powerful position because when one person is feeling something intensely in a group, yet not saying so, the others know, and can begin to feel shitty for not “bringing you out”, or for wondering if they have oppressed you.

In the long run a position of moderation would be best for me to choose, one in which I would share myself more, and yet not be copping out on Dad. Yet it is difficult to do, especially if I am in a group that shows no recognition of class differences. It is these groups that I have dropped out of when there was no support.

Choosing Friends

In grammar and high school the majority of my friends were from very similar working-class backgrounds. They lived in similar houses, dressed and acted much like I did. Yet as I grew older, at about the 7th grade, I began to want with all my heart to get into other circles of friends. These circles unspokenly barred me entrance and I never knew why. The kids in them looked different—wore more expensive clothes and belonged to lots of clubs. They were considered class leaders, they seemed confident when they spoke in front of groups. They were active in sports, too. In short, they were popular! So I tried to be more that way by spending my parents' money and then my own after-school-job-money on John Meyer of Norwich clothes and Bass Weejun loafers. But somehow I still didn't feel like I looked right or acted right. I must not have because I never made it the way I wanted to. I also tried to join lots of clubs and only one or two wanted me. Eventually I developed a great resentment and a feeling of failure which I quickly turned in on myself. I did a pretty good job of convincing myself I was worthless, even though I had good friends and I made near-perfect grades. (This grade business was the only way I was able to compete by their standards.) These worthless feelings were with me for a good long while after puberty—almost 10 years.

Discussion: Roles We Play

Roles We Play: The Division of Behavior Labor

As we have talked in our women's group about feelings of helplessness, inadequacy, and anger in relationships, certain patterns have emerged. We have talked about relationships with men and women, with sisters and brothers, with parents, on the job, in organizations, with friends and with ourselves.

In relationships with friends, men or women, we found we fall into roles. We see each other as aggressive or passive; talkative or quiet; dominant or submissive; angry or controlled. All of us end up feeling that we are not recognized or appreciated for our total selves. We have categorized ourselves and each other and efforts to express different facets of our feelings or talents go unrecognized.

As we talked, we found that this specialization has roots in our families. Long before we had friends or lovers, we were members of families where there was a division of behavior labor. For example, a brother specialized in being The Aggressive One; the older sister was The Understanding One; the younger sister was The Angry One; the father was the The Controlled One and the mother was The Emotional One. This kind of specialization tends to limit our expectations of ourselves and others.

The roles vary from family to family but the circle is re-

stricting and painful to everyone involved. Those who have specialized in being emotional, angry, spontaneous have little energy left for doing creative work that is considered productive in this society. Those who are controlled, reasonable, intellectual, have repressed feelings and are alienated from themselves and others in relationships. But while this specialization is damaging to everyone, it has hurt the self-esteem of some people more than others. Those doing "socially" productive work are given the most respect; control, reasonableness, intellect are recognized and valued by all. Those doing manual or emotional work are taken for granted, put down or punished.

In male/female relationships the women in our group often felt vulnerable, insecure, demanding, complaining and unappreciated. We demand love and respect and end up feeling we don't really deserve it. We let ourselves be open and end up feeling weak. We feel we are being tolerated, that we are a burden when we let ourselves be emotional.

*Class Society Establishes A Hierarchy
of Behaviors that are Valued**

The reward of certain behaviors and punishment of others is a reflection of the class society within which our relationships exist. We all live and work in a society where certain kinds of labor are valued above others. The physician, the scientist, the professor, lawyer or architect is rewarded with money and status; the factory worker, truck driver, or housewife are considered inferior. Even if one is rewarded monetarily, as in the case of a truck driver who belongs to the Teamsters, union wages are not a reward given out of inherent respect for the labor performed, but out of the fear of a necessary service being withdrawn. In the case of the housewife, the labor is seen as necessary, but her work is not rewarded with wages. The "reward" of "love" given a mother or a wife is often out of guilt about services performed for free, rather than out of respect for the labor performed.

The psychological rewards available to professionals and intellectuals reinforce the value of their skills. The degree of control over one's own life and the amount of satisfaction derived from work are greater for some than others. Those in professions are able to experience some control over their own lives. A doctor is able to experience some self-respect for the work she/

he initiates, defines and performs. A laborer has much less to be proud of. A worker in a factory is dependent on his or her boss for providing the materials with which to produce. The boss determines when and how that work will be performed. And finally the boss appropriates the product and profit from that labor. Self-respect does not come as much from doing satisfying work as from the sense that the wages earned will help to support the family, possibly help the children to become professionals. A mother's sense of self-respect often comes from feeling herself a martyr: she is good because she continues to do work that no one recognizes, but everyone needs and profits by.

In a culture where reasonableness, politeness, self-control are valued so highly, the working class person often feels less self-respect than the professional or intellectual. Someone who comes from a family where college education has been available for generations has been trained to see cause and effect, to categorize, to intellectually consider, to understand rather than to experience and express emotions spontaneously and directly. The working class person may more often get carried away by emotions and reactions, may feel controlled by them. The danger of being overpowered by emotions is great because the working class person has many bad feelings to express: worries about having enough money to pay for food, rent, clothes, education of children; feelings of inadequacy; humiliation, exhaustion, boredom from work. Efforts to contain these feelings can result in self-destructive behavior such as alcoholism and/or depression and/or explosive bouts of violence toward family or others. Since society teaches that feelings are bad to express, they are often contained. When they do come out they are often hysterical, violent and monstrous which reinforces the rationale for not expressing them in the first place.

Neither the person who controls emotions, nor the one who is controlled by them is "happy" but the repressed person has the backing and approval of society. Women's greater expressiveness is accepted, sometimes feared, but rarely respected. Men are punished for showing too much emotion or affection and are put down as being effeminate. The positive value of being connected to emotions rather than being in control of them is lost to most of us. We have been taught in many ways that dealing with emotions distracts one from doing "socially" productive work. We have found that being emotionally open

leaves us vulnerable where politeness is used to control—the most polite person manipulates others by his or her “respectability”.

* We found support for our analysis of what behaviors are most valued in a class society in the analysis presented throughout the book *Hidden Injuries of Class* by Richard Sennett & Jonathan Cobb. Basing their analysis on interviews with working class men, they develop why so many working people feel inadequate in terms of how a class society maintains itself through an ideology of most desirable characteristics of an elite as opposed to the “average” person, one of the undifferentiated masses.

*The Strong and the Weak:
Class Conflict in Relationships*

Through the system of rewards and punishments, the class society establishes that there are the powerful and the powerless, the strong and the weak. A polarity is set up which ignores the interdependence and necessity of all kinds of labor, all kinds of behavior. Dependency relationships are established on all levels: on the job, at home, with friends, with lovers.

The “strong” reasonable person feels burdened by responsibility and guilty about his/her own privileges. The “weak” emotional person feels powerless and resentful about the control the “strong” one has in the relationship. The weak person takes the blame for not being more like the “strong” person. The “strong” one rarely blames him/herself for not being more like the “weak” person, since the need to be in touch with and express feelings is not valued. The “weak” person feels that s/he, in order to maintain the relationship, has no alternative but to please the “strong” person. The “weak” person’s desires are put out of the way temporarily in an attempt to meet the “strong” person’s desires. But soon the “weak” one begins to feel that the “real” self, the one that has been put down and away, is unloved. Then demands are made on the “strong” person to prove that the “real” self is loved. The “strong” person’s assurance “Of course I love you,” is never enough.

These demands made in isolation end up reinforcing the powerlessness of the “weak” person. The “weak” person is in the position of having to ask the “powerful” one for respect, some recognition of his or her own value and power. But the boss always knows he can get himself another worker, the man knows that there are other women who will submit to him, the

polite intellectual has the whole world telling him or her that s/he is right. This is why individual struggles are self-defeating to the powerless in any situation. Their real power is not recognized "until the well runs dry". Men who have complained all their lives about the "ball and chain" fall apart when their little woman dies. Intellectuals are bored with each other's company and become fascinated by bizarre behavior, the extreme emotional reactions of oppressed people—it has to be bizarre and foreign enough so that they still can feel themselves removed from it.

We all have experienced this polarization in our lives. All of us have experienced being the powerful one or the powerless one. We all know that the conflict that arises out of the polarization hurts both individuals, even though the "powerful" one usually "wins" in terms of the standards of this society. The people who tend to "lose" most often in this society are the poor, women, and minority groups. But no matter where we are on the socio-economic ladder, we are all familiar with powerlessness. It's simply a matter of degree.

*Redefining Power: Changing the Polarity
into Creative, Collective Strength*

As we examined class conflicts in our women's group, we became aware how important it was for all of us to recognize the strengths and weaknesses of emotions and spontaneity as well as those of reasonableness and rationality. Both are necessary for warm, intimate relationships to grow. Both are necessary for us to be able to unite effectively and begin to change the class society which so narrowly defines strength and weakness. Our personal power comes from being able to value ourselves fully. Our collective power comes from the pressure we can exert because of knowledge we have and articulate. It comes also from our sense of outrage at injustice, our anger at being misled, cheated, divided and lied to. Those 2% who now hold the power fear the knowledge that will expose their illegitimate power. They also fear the anger and love that moves us to do something about it. Together.

An Overview

All of us (with one exception) grew up in one of two clearly defined classes. Four of us came from the working class. Three of us grew up in families in which both mother and father worked in factories doing semi-skilled labor. One of us had a father who was a truck driver and a mother who was an office worker. The other three members of our group came from upper middle class families. One father was a successful doctor, another a well-to-do businessman and the third a minister, professor and foundation executive. The middle class mothers were housewives and did no wage labor outside the home.

As we discussed our childhoods, we discovered many similarities with each class in our parent's attitudes towards work, life-styles, and perceptions of the world and themselves—attitudes which appeared to be related to the kind of work our parents did. But we also found differences existed among us within each class.

Within the working class group, one family was first generation immigrant, the father and mother poorly paid. Another family was second generation immigrant, the father illiterate. This family's standard of living was higher due to the fact that the still-meager wages went to support only one child as opposed to three in the first family. The third family's standard of living was the highest since the father was a truck driver belonging to the Teamsters union and earned better wages. Similar differences

in standard of living existed among the middle class families as well.

Despite these varied childhoods, as adults, the members of our group shared similar life styles. All of us had been to college and had common attitudes about the world developed during the late 60's and early 70's. At the time we were meeting, none of us were married or had children and we all lived in communal households.

While there were differences in status, pay, and satisfaction derived from our work, our class positions tended to be less clearly defined and more in flux than those of our parents. At the time we were meeting, among the women from working class backgrounds, the two women from the first generation immigrant family were doing secretarial work; the woman from the second generation immigrant family was working as a gynecology nurse practitioner; and the daughter of the truck driver was an occupational therapist. Among the women from middle class backgrounds, the daughter of the businessman was an apprentice carpenter; the daughter of the doctor was doing clerical work and the foundation executive's daughter was working as a day care center teacher. Objectively we seemed to be in very similar situations and perceived ourselves very differently.

Exploring which of our attitudes are class based has been a difficult process since we are used to seeing differences in attitude as "personality" differences. We often see our attitudes as part of ourselves. When our attitudes are challenged, we feel our very beings are threatened. We feel our integrity as individuals being questioned. We feel individually responsible for the attitudes we hold: "That's the way I have always been. . .it's me. I feel proud of my individual (good) attitudes and what I have achieved. I feel ashamed of what I have not achieved and attitudes that somehow I know aren't good." This often makes us want to hide our "bad" attitudes, cover our mistakes—it makes us want to defend ourselves when our attitudes are challenged. "If you take my attitude away, you will be taking me away."

We are plagued by this individualism even though we have all grown up as part of the "scientific" generation. Freud took away some of our individual responsibility by tracing personality differences to what happened to us as infants. Anthropologists have shown us that the culture different people live in affects their personalities. Sociologists have demonstrated how differences in environment create different attitudes. Skinner has

shown the effects of different kinds of conditioning on behavior. Those of us who have had some form of higher education have been exposed to thinking in terms of cause and effect. And still it has been difficult for us to understand how much of our environment has helped to form our "personalities". Since we know that we are not totally determined, we find it hard to come to terms with the extent to which our attitudes and behavior have been conditioned. We know we are more than the sum total of our experiences and we also know that our experiences put us within certain frameworks.

In an attempt to define what was determined in our lives many of us went through a phase of blaming our parents for what failings we had. Freud had focused our attention on their shortcomings as parents. We could look back on our past experiences in the family and see ways that we had been treated that had been harmful to us. Our parents were bewildered by this blame. They shouldered much of the responsibility but felt hurt and angry at being criticized when they had only done what they knew how to do. They had tried to do their best, making many sacrifices. But even as we blamed our parents, we still felt individually responsible for our shortcomings. Some turned to psychoanalysis. Others to drugs. Some found a way to transcend the conflict by turning to Eastern religions and merging with the totality of the universe.

Another step in trying to discover how much our environment made us who we were was the women's movement. When we as women began to talk about some of the insecurities and fears that we had, we found that other women shared these feelings and we found comfort in discovering that many of our attitudes and those who mistreated us stemmed from a male-dominated society which did not value and respect women as much as men. As some of us stopped blaming ourselves for some of our "weakness", we found new strength to try things we had never thought of trying before.

But as we found new strength we often challenged the men who were closest to us to show us that they were not like Men. We said to them: "You have been raised in a male dominated society. You have been brought up with certain privileges as a male. You have male attitudes which you take for granted but which put me down." We found men becoming defensive. They would reply: "Treat me as a person. Don't make me prove myself all the time. I'm not a helpless pawn of the conditioning

I've been exposed to. My so-called privileges do not make me happy." And even as we blamed men, we still felt individually responsible for our shortcomings. After all, there were some women who could do more, were more confident. There were also men who didn't measure up in a male-defined society.

The incomplete answers that feminism gave us led us to examine class. When we began to talk of class differences in our women's group, those of us who came from working class backgrounds found that we shared insecurities which came from our own and other people's views of our parents' work and amount of education. We also shared strengths which we had taken for granted and considered unimportant. We blamed middle class people for not valuing the experiences we had gone through and for putting us down without realizing it. They took their confidence and their accomplishments for granted.

And as we criticized "Middle Class Attitudes" and "Middle Class Privilege" the women in our group who were from middle class backgrounds began to feel that their experience was being treated as irrelevant, that they were constantly having to prove that they were not all those things we said about "Middle Class People". The same kind of seemingly irreconcilable conflicts that we had had with our parents and with men we knew surfaced. We were all bewildered by this development. This kind of conflict weakened us all. Two of the women, one from an upper class background and one from a working class background, dropped out of the group.

Two other women, Becky from an upper middle class background and Lisa from a working class background lived in the same house and had shared a long friendship and similar beliefs. Though they came from very different backgrounds, participating in the anti-war movement and in the women's movement had brought them to the same point: trying to redefine success, work, relationships; attempting to weed out bad patterns from the past and to discover new, more humane ways of living, working, and thinking. The focus on differences in background created a conflict which could not be dismissed.

As Lisa focused on her early life in a working class family and experiences that had shaped many of her attitudes, she quickly and easily identified with other working class women. She found it "natural" to support the other women from working class backgrounds, and to pick out failings in Becky which seemed related to her middle class background. Becky felt she was not

appreciated for what she had to offer. She did not want to respond with guilt—she responded with anger. But it was a silent anger. Other women in the group encouraged Becky to express her own pain. . . the inability to express what she was feeling, the vagueness of unexpressed anger and hurt. And as she did so, Lisa recognized that she had felt the same kind of pain within her family. For within the working class family, the woman had often played the middle class role of being reasonable, polite and helpful at the expense of her own feelings. She had shared the feeling of guilt about being more privileged than her angry emotional sister. Becky pointed out to Lisa that she, who had prided herself for being more direct, was often vague and indirect about her own feelings—the very thing she had criticized the middle class woman for. Lisa pointed out to Becky that she did not show her feelings of insecurity, her fear of not measuring up, of not being as competent as others—that she had experienced the same feelings but was not identifying with them.

The seemingly irreconcilable conflict was created by both women locking themselves and each other into roles which had kept them from being able to identify with each other's experience. In the course of examining the conflict and trying to deal with each other, we found that we all have experienced the powerful and powerless roles. We all have experienced class-conflict in our relationships and within ourselves.

It is important to recognize that we experience the powerful and powerless roles to different degrees so that we can respect each other's unique experience. But we found the need to turn from the interpersonal conflicts to looking at the structures of power that create those conflicts: structures of power that are in the real interest of only a few. And it is in the interest of those few to keep us separate, to make us turn in on ourselves and on each other so that their power will not be challenged. It is in their power to reward some work monetarily and with status and to not reward other work, since they control the wealth. It is in their power to feed us images of what we should be since they own the newspapers, television stations, support the politicians and intellectuals who justify the present system of inequality.

We still struggle amongst ourselves against attitudes that put us or others down. Sometimes it's painful and we want to turn from each other and seek individual fulfillment. It is discouraging to find old conflicts still crop up when we think they have been dealt with. But each time they crop up we find it a little

easier to resolve—we can catch ourselves falling into old patterns and call each other and ourselves for giving in to them. Attitudes that we have held for so long are hard to change, we need continual support from each other, since the old attitudes are reinforced each day by the world the wealthy define as their own.

As we try to stop blaming ourselves for our failings and ego-tripping about our strengths, we can begin to appreciate more our individual differences, respect the unique energy and strength that each one of us has, as well as our limitations. Our individuality takes on a new meaning. When we recognize our interconnectedness, we find it necessary to encourage each other's strengths and help each other to overcome weakness—to some degree we all share in both. We recognize that by *competing* for individual power, we undermine our real collective power. No matter how much individual power we may get, we always feel insecure. By *affirming* individual strength in ourselves and in each other we have a vision of being able to see ourselves as pieces in a jigsaw puzzle where each piece is unique but has its meaning only when connected to others.

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