

Fifteen

witness to love: between generations

WOMEN who choose to love must be wise, daring, and courageous. All around us the culture of lovelessness mocks our quest for love. Wisdom is needed if we would restore love to its rightful place as a heroic journey, arduous, difficult—more vital to human survival and development on planet Earth than going off to slay mythical dragons, to ravage and conquer others with war or all other forms of violence that are like war. Wisdom is needed if we are to demand that our culture acknowledge the journey to love as a grand, magical, life-transforming, thrilling, risky adventure.

As wise, loving women, our gift to girls of all ages is sharing everything that we have learned on our path to

love. I say "girls of all ages" because, just as pathological patriarchy has for generations encouraged men to remain emotionally crippled adolescents, there is a new breed of young women (the *Ally McBeal*, *Sex and the City* kind of females) who are also being encouraged to remain in a state of arrested development, to be emotionally underdeveloped, adolescent girls forever. The recent film version of *Charlie's Angels* provides a perfect cinematic portrayal of this syndrome. In the working world as the well-paid "servants" of the patriarchal man behind the scenes, Charlie, the angels conduct themselves as the equals of or superiors to men, whether in intellectual skills or in killing strategies (they murder as unemotionally, as brutally, and as swiftly as any macho man), but when it comes to romance, to love, they dither and titter and giggle like girls. They lose their minds, their perspectives. Behaving like underdeveloped adolescents is the sexual allure that ensures the angels will receive desired patriarchal adult male attention. These images send the message that to be an emotionally healthy adult woman is to be undesirable.

In our real lives, women who behave like emotionally underdeveloped girls (even if they are pretending) are often abandoned as they age by men who need the presence of a young and/or girlish female to feel powerful, potent, in control. Sadly, the harshest lesson learned by many females who spend their twenties and early thirties

acting like adolescent girls to woo male attention and favor is that physically aging often leads the men in their lives to turn away no matter how girly the women act and appear.

Wise older women who love offer to younger generations our lived experience gleaned from heartache, suffering, mistakes—all the plain old everyday experiences that helped us, yes, at times forced us, to become more aware of the pitfalls we need to beware, avoid, and eliminate if we are to love and be loved. When I witness the low self-esteem, the lack of self-love in brilliant young females in their late twenties and early thirties at the best institutions in our nation, females who have grown into womanhood at a time when women have the greatest degree of gender equality our nation has ever known, females who have had the benefit of feminist thought, movement, and achievement, it becomes all the more evident that there is a serious problem somewhere, a failure of thought and insight.

When I first saw the film version of *Charlie's Angels*, all I could think about was how glad I was to be in my forties and not receiving a cultural mandate telling me that I must be superwoman in the world, girly-girl on the home front, and have the tight flesh of an Olympic athlete, while maintaining an ability to submissively throw myself at the feet of an all-powerful symbolic daddy named Charlie. The contradictions in this message are obvious. No wonder, then, that we have a nation of twenty- to thirty-something

females addicted to antidepressants, angry at feminism, with crippling low self-esteem. No human could measure up to the standards mainstream culture sets for them. Life-threatening stress and depression are major factors in their lives as they struggle to be better than men on the job just to prove they are equals while grappling with the issue of emotional development and fear of being alone.

When I did lectures and workshops on my book *All About Love*, the only thing this group of powerful well-paid professional young women could say was "Who has the time for love?" And even more dire was their posing the question "Who needs love?" My generation of women learned the hard way that we could have all manner of success in our careers and still be undermined by crippling low self-esteem. Now we know that the most feminist action any female can take on her behalf is doing the work of creating positive self-esteem, the foundation of self-love. For it is that grounding that prepares us to love fully and well. Whether we do the work of being an astronaut, a lawyer, or a garbage collector, or whether we happily choose to be self-employed or a stay-at-home homemaker, wise women know that self-love will determine the degree to which we will feel fulfilled by any of these tasks. This is why longtime feminist activist and therapist Phyllis Chesler writes in *Letters to a Young Feminist*, "In my time, older women told younger women very little about what it takes for a woman to become whole, stay

whole, and survive. If they had, we'd have understood, awhile ago, that our first and greatest search should have been for ourselves, not for a prince (or princess), no matter how charming." Early on within the contemporary feminist movement, it was easier to blame patriarchy for all our female woes, rather than look within to see the ways in which we fail ourselves, the ways we self-sabotage.

Indeed, there is now a whole generation of individual women who came through feminism, who fought the good fight, who prevailed in all areas of their lives, who suddenly in midlife embraced anew old sexist ways of thinking about femininity. All around the world, females were shocked when activist Jane Fonda retreated into being a "subordinated rich man's wife." Most recently she has come to her senses and is now telling the world in popular fashion magazines how boring it was to give up on herself. Yet her betrayal of feminist thinking, of her own efforts to construct healthy self-esteem that is not based on whether you have a powerful Charlie-man in your life, has received far more attention than her confession that being a self-actualized woman in charge of her life is far more fulfilling than standing by your man, even if he is one of the richest men in the world. As Fonda put it, all this power just made him all the more "demanding" of her time, of her space. The relationship was engulfing. How can anyone be genuinely surprised by the outcome of this bonding, since it

represents the traditional patriarchal model of marriage, the wife being absorbed in the identity of the husband?

Importantly, there are powerful twenty- and thirty-something new women who are in marriages in which they are the dominant parties. They may make more money than their partners and also make, unilaterally, the lion's share of decisions for the couple. These "bitch-goddess" girls often rule and have the power to assert dominion in ways that patriarchal husbands once did, setting the terms "my way or the highway." That they gain their power at the expense of male subordination is not a reflection of feminist success. It is a mark of the failure of feminist thinking to change the dominant patriarchal notion that in every relationship there is a dominant and a submissive party.

Sadly, I have found that heterosexual couples (and their role-playing gay counterparts) are often far more willing to reverse roles than to give up on the notion that there should be a hierarchy in which one person is the top and the other person is the bottom. In the aftermath of feminist change, it has become most evident that few couples are willing to do the work of love that would make mutual joy possible in partnerships. Since so many young women and men, as well as their elders, do not know how to love, it is easier to strike a bargain using the old norms of top and bottom, of dominant and submissive.

Mutuality, like love itself, must come through work. Wise women know that the happiest, most fulfilling committed partnerships (legalized via marriage or not) are those in which mutuality is the core value, in which the spiritual growth and development of each individual matters. Building the emotional space where mutuality can emerge takes time. Wise women who love know we have to leave time for love. Most folks will say that their loved ones matter most to them, but when you look at what they actually do with their time, it becomes evident that what they claim to love the most receives the least attention.

Women and men, girls and boys, must restructure how we spend our time if we want to be loving. We cannot be overachievers and perfectionist performers from kindergarten on in our public lives (the world of school and work) if we are to learn how to love, if we want to practice the art of loving. Genuine love requires time and commitment. And this is simply the case for love in the context of partnership. Self-love takes times and commitment, particularly on the part of those who are wounded in the space where we would know love in our childhoods. New women today, the late-twenties and thirty-something crew, are as reluctant as their patriarchal male counterparts to make time for love. Wise aging women know that one of the keenest regrets a large number of females experience in their lives is failure to understand early the power and meaning of love. Not only would that knowledge have

afforded an understanding that would have prevented them from ending up emotionally abused and battered, it would have ushered true love into their lives sooner rather than later.

My hope for younger generations of women is that they will examine the unfulfilled spaces of their lives soon and boldly, unabashedly choosing to do the work of love, placing it above everything. Again and again it must be stated that when I talk about doing the work of love, I am not talking simply about partnership; I am talking about the work of self-love in conjunction with the work of relational love. Visionary feminist thinkers were among the first group of people to call attention to the disservice we women do to ourselves when we act as though it were important only to find the right partner, someone to love, rather than to choose a circle of love. When we place emphasis on building a beloved community, of which having a partner may be an essential part but not the whole, we free ourselves to lead joyous lives as single folks, and sometimes if not always as celibate folks.

Celibacy is often a liberating self-loving choice among women for whom the search for sexual pleasure has consistently led them down a self-sabotaging path. Writing about the reasons many contemporary heterosexual women choose celibacy in *The Coming of the Cosmic Christ*, Matthew Fox explains, "As women increasingly develop their awareness and consciousness and to the extent that

men resist doing the same, a sociological situation will prevail where many women will in fact not be able to find men of their calibre and consciousness with whom to share their lives. . . . Many women are finding celibacy a better alternative than being victimized in abusive relationships." Joyless sexuality is not life-affirming. Within patriarchal intimacy, many women have sex against their will and desire. Their partners may or may not be coercive. Many men would be shocked to find that their female partners are pretending sexual interest and feigning pleasure they do not feel and never feel.

The feminist movement many of us entered converged with sexual liberation. And like many young women today, we believed that it was important to prove our equality with men in the world of casual and meaningless sexual hedonism. Few of us feel that our lives or our sexualities were in any way enhanced by these exploits. Often the fun was not in the sex but in transgressing conventional sexist taboos. It was not cool in those days, nor is it cool today, to talk openly, about the desire to have sex within a loving relationship. One of the most talked-about passages in *All About Love* from the chapter on "Romance: Sweet Love" was this one: "The best sex and the most satisfying sex are not the same. I have had great sex with men who were intimate terrorists, men who seduce and attract by giving you just what you feel your heart needs then gradually or abruptly withholding it once they have gained your trust."

And I have been deeply sexually fulfilled in bonds with loving partners who have had less skill and know-how. . . . Enlightened women want fulfilling erotic encounters as much as men, but we ultimately prefer erotic satisfaction within a context where there is loving, intimate connection." This is equally true for loving men. Therapist Fred Newman puts it this way in *Let's Develop: A Self-Help Guide to Continuous Personal Growth*: "the best kind of sex, the sex in which there's the least amount of pretense—the most gratifying and satisfying sex—is sex you do with the person in your life with whom you are most open." Not one woman in midlife that I interviewed for this book saw sexual conquest or sexual satisfaction as the proving ground for whether her life had meaning. All too often, many of the women I interviewed who chose male sexual partners felt dissatisfied with the types of sexual relationships they have had within patriarchal culture.

The most fulfilling, satisfying sex happens with the context of mutuality of consensual longing and desire. Andrea Dworkin reminds us in *Intercourse*: "In fucking, one's insides are on the line; and the fragile and unique intimacy of going for broke makes communion possible, in human reach—not transcendental and otherworldly, but an experience in flesh of love." Way too many young women are still having sex they do not want in casual and committed partnerships for fear of displeasing the men in their lives. Wise women who love know that girls of all ages must

dare to take their erotic beings seriously. That means nurturing as early as they can in life a healthy relationship to their bodies, to sensuality and sexuality. The rise in sexual sadomasochism both in everyday life and in our intimate lives seems to be a direct response to the unresolved changes in the nature of gender roles, the fact that so much gender equality exists in the context of the same old oppressive patriarchy. Let's face the fact that it helps to eroticize domination if you feel you can't change it. Women and men do not know what to do, what roles to play. Sexual sadomasochism broadens the playing field, gives everyone access to more roles, without creating concrete changes in the ways power and affection are distributed in relationships, in our public and private lives.

Wise women who love have only just begun to create the maps of liberatory feminist sexuality, to chart a journey for women and men that will let us embrace sexual passion in ways that free rather than bind. We do know that women of all ages must continue our quest for sexual agency, that this is part of our assertion of healthy self-love. Knowing how to give love, we also recognize the love we want to receive. ~~And that is a form of power.~~ When females of all ages love our bodies and our beings, we are able to set appropriate boundaries, to make choices in which our well-being is enhanced as is the well-being of those with whom we choose to share sexual pleasure.

Self-actualization is no easy task. And it may well be

that there remains a body of women who find it easier to target men, to blame them for all that remains unfulfilled in their lives, than do the work of love. Wise women who love know that no matter the strength of patriarchy, women must assume accountability for changing our lives in ways that empower, for choosing to love, and for learning through love ways to overcome all the barriers that exist to keep us from being fully self-realized. Assuming responsibility for one's life, for one's happiness and well-being, is an integral aspect of self-esteem. Patriarchal men have often envied females the sexism that makes it acceptable for females to look to someone else to make us happy. This is the crucial myth wise women debunk for the young women coming along today, coming forward into midlife.

No one can bestow happiness or lasting joy upon us if we have not found the way to joy within ourselves. Self-knowledge is the way to find out what the secret of joy is in our individual lives. We may find our greatest joy in partnership, in community. Given the interdependent nature of our lives, of life on the planet, to share in communal encounter is vital for our survival. But the joy we share must come from within, must be rooted in our own soulfulness. It has been only recently in our cultural history that individual women have dared to speak openly about the importance of women's nurturing our souls, our spiritual selves. The bashing feminism gets in popular media keeps many folks from knowing that contemporary

feminism served as a catalyst for spiritual awakening for many women, by telling them that the care of their souls mattered.

Celebrating a woman-centered spirituality that honors the Earth, the interconnectedness of all life on the planet in *Lost in the Land of Oz*, Madonna Kolbenschlag praises the female quest for union with the divine, for spirit-filled life: "Gradually I discovered through the medium of other women what I did not know and love in myself. My own experience and that of other women opened me to myself, to my reality as a woman, and to the Holy within me . . . I have learned in the company of whole and holy women to exorcise the unreal, to celebrate and ritualize the true and the real, to speak and have a new language, to feel the spirit through flesh and matter, to see everything—from within—as if creation were the Womb of God where, although we experience darkness and obscurity, there is also warmth, nourishment, movement, growth, connection, and delight." Wise women know that we must attend to our spiritual being. And there is no freedom to be found and relished when all is not well with our souls.

Learning to love has made it possible for us to care for souls and to rediscover the spiritual vision quests of female ancestors who offer us their guidance and wisdom. Every woman should have, in her circle of love, companions of her soul. Soul nourishment sustains us when all the trappings of power, success, and material well-being lose

meaning. To face life in all its fullness and complexity, what I like to call "the good, the bad, the ugly, and the obscene" without falling into corruption or despair, we need a soul that stands ready, to be our comfort and our shield. That soulfulness, that delight in facing and living life, comes to us as we journey on the path to love, as we search for love. It is the abundant gift.

True love is generous and ever replenishing. Wise women who love are not afraid to open our hearts to younger women so that they can speak to and with us about their deepest fears, needs, longings, and aspirations. Breaking down false boundaries created by sexist thinking that separates us, we lay the groundwork for true sisterhood to emerge, a solidarity through time and age that links generations of females together in strong ties of everlasting love.