

“What Women Really Want”
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Meditation:

Let's say a guy named Roger is attracted to a woman named Elaine. He asks her out to a movie; she accepts; they have a pretty good time. A few nights later he asks her out to dinner, and again they enjoy themselves. They continue to see each other regularly, and after a while neither one of them is seeing anybody else.

And then, one evening when they're driving home, a thought occurs to Elaine, and, without really thinking, she says it aloud: "Do you realize that, as of tonight, we've been seeing each other for exactly six months?"

And then there is silence in the car. To Elaine, it seems like a very loud silence. She thinks to herself: Geez, I wonder if it bothers him that I said that. Maybe he's been feeling confined by our relationship; maybe he thinks I'm trying to push him into some kind of obligation that he doesn't want, or isn't sure of.

And Roger is thinking: Gosh. Six months.

And Elaine is thinking: But, hey, I'm not so sure I want this kind of relationship, either. Sometimes I wish I had a little more space, so I'd have time to think about whether I really want us to keep going the way we are, moving steadily toward . . . I mean, where are we going? Are we just going to keep seeing each other at this level of intimacy? Are we heading toward marriage? Toward children? Toward a lifetime together? Am I ready for that level of commitment? Do I really even know this person?

And Roger is thinking: . . . so that means it was . . . let's see . . . February when we started going out, which was right after I had the car at the dealer's, which means . . . lemme check the odometer . . . Whoa! I am way overdue for an oil change here.

And Elaine is thinking: He's upset. I can see it on his face. Maybe I'm reading this completely wrong. Maybe he wants more from our relationship, more intimacy, more commitment; maybe he has sensed -- even before I sensed it -- that I was feeling some reservations. Yes, I bet that's it. That's why he's so reluctant to say anything about his own feelings. He's afraid of being rejected.

And Roger is thinking: And I'm gonna have them look at the transmission again. I don't care what those morons say, it's still not shifting right. And they better not try to blame it on the cold weather this time. What cold weather? It's 87 degrees out, and this thing is shifting like a damn garbage truck, and I paid those incompetent thieves \$600.

And Elaine is thinking: He's angry. And I don't blame him. I'd be angry, too. God, I feel so guilty, putting him through this, but I can't help the way I feel. I'm just not sure.

And Roger is thinking: They'll probably say it's only a 90- day warranty. That's exactly what they're gonna say, the scumballs.

And Elaine is thinking: Maybe I'm just too idealistic, waiting for a knight to come riding up on his white horse, when I'm sitting right next to a perfectly good person, a person I enjoy being with, a person I truly do care about, a person who seems to truly care about me. A person who is in pain because of my self-centered, schoolgirl romantic fantasy.

And Roger is thinking: Warranty? They want a warranty? I'll give them a goddamn warranty. I'll take their warranty and stick it right up their

"Roger," Elaine says aloud.

"What?" says Roger, startled.

"Please don't torture yourself like this," she says, her eyes beginning to brim with tears. "Maybe I should never have . . Oh God, I feel so"

(She breaks down, sobbing.)

"What?" says Roger.

"I'm such a fool," Elaine sobs. "I mean, I know there's no knight. I really know that. It's silly. There's no knight, and there's no horse."

"There's no horse?" says Roger.

"You think I'm a fool, don't you?" Elaine says.

"No!" says Roger, glad to finally know the correct answer.

"It's just that . . . It's that I . . . I need some time," Elaine says.

(There is a 15-second pause while Roger, thinking as fast as he can, tries to come up with a safe response. Finally he comes up with one that he thinks might work.)

"Yes," he says.

(Elaine, deeply moved, touches his hand.)

"Oh, Roger, do you really feel that way?" she says.

"What way?" says Roger.

"That way about time," says Elaine.

"Oh," says Roger. "Yes."

(Elaine turns to face him and gazes deeply into his eyes, causing him to become very nervous about what she might say next, especially if it involves a horse. At last she speaks.)

"Thank you, Roger," she says.

"Thank you," says Roger.

Then he takes her home, and she lies on her bed, a conflicted, tortured soul, and weeps until dawn, whereas when Roger gets back to his place, he opens a bag of Doritos, turns on the TV, and immediately becomes deeply involved in a rerun of a tennis match between two Czechoslovakians he never heard of. A tiny voice in the far recesses of his mind tells him that something major was going on back there in the car, but he is pretty sure there is no way he would ever understand what, and so he figures it's better if he doesn't think about it. (This is also Roger's policy regarding world hunger.)

The next day Elaine will call her closest friend, or perhaps two of them, and they will talk about this situation for six straight hours. In painstaking detail, they will analyze everything she said and everything he said, going over it time and time again, exploring every word, expression, and gesture for nuances of meaning, considering every possible ramification. They will continue to discuss this subject, off and on, for weeks, maybe months, never reaching any definite conclusions, but never getting bored with it, either.

Meanwhile, Roger, while playing racquetball one day with a mutual friend of his and Elaine's, will pause just before serving, frown, and say:

"Norm, did Elaine ever own a horse?"

Sermon:

What do women really want?

Let me begin, this morning, by throwing myself on the mercy of the congregation. I can't, now, recall what I was drinking at the time I came up with this title. Only that for a brief, isolated, time a lapse in judgment allowed this idea to escape my brain and find its way into the newsletter – all before I could fully grasp the precarious – and potentially dangerous – situation that awaited me the moment I stepped foot in the pulpit. History is replete with examples of those who have merrily sauntered forward into disaster without giving good thought to the predicament which awaited them. Custer comes to mind. The

remainder of examples are all hazy, but I am quite sure that most of them involve men as well.

So, let me then take this opportunity to point out what some of you may have already suspected. I possess a genetic shortfall I have a fairly common genetic problem where part of my 23rd chromosome is missing. Compared to most of us in this congregation, who proudly claim a 23rd chromosome containing 1000-1500 genes, I have a paltry, undeveloped end of my chromosome that is able to express a mere 25 genes.

It is speculated among those who share this disease with me that these missing genes are what make us unable to watch TV without holding tightly to the remote control. It has also been a hypothesis that the missing genes are the ones responsible for the imagination necessary to properly strategize how to get all the pee into the toilet. And, I have decided this morning, these genes must also be responsible for selecting appropriate sermon titles.

This being the case, I will say that I have never before experienced such an enthusiastic response to an announced sermon. Actually, a better description of the reaction to this title might be, “expressed disbelief.” Followed by a giddy, “I dare you.” Sort of the same response you’d offer when your spouse asks if you’d like to see them stop a water balloon with their face.

The title of this sermon, for some, has all the compelling nature of being offered a front row seat to a train wreck. You suspect it’s going to be gruesome. You hope no one gets seriously hurt. And you wouldn’t miss it for the world. At least, I suspect that’s the take on it by those among you with all 1500 genes on your 23rd chromosome. Few women can resist seeing pretentious masculine arrogance punished just a little. And when a man purports to explain what he has never experienced – and give advice where his own life shows no credible evidence of success – most women just want to make sure they get one of the water balloons.

So I don’t begrudge you your enthusiasm. I do, however, confess to being a little dismayed by a few of the men in the congregation who called or wrote me in the last couple weeks. Upon reading the newsletter and recognizing the danger in such a sermon, they felt it only right to warn me. But clearly, their concern was not really for me. But, rather, for their own well being. Because I see that most of them chose to stay home today, using the excuse of the Super Bowl, but really trying to avoid being part of the collateral damage.

Many of these men who called had expressed disbelief saying that it was futile, ludicrous, and even fool-hardy to try to explain what women really want. They were quick to relate the moments that almost all men were familiar with, the moments remarkably similar to what I described in the meditation, wherein the company of a woman they hoped to court, they struggled desperately to figure out what it was that would put them in good favor with a woman – or at least determine how to avoid mortal danger in the most precarious of conversations. Grasping at straws for a ‘safe’ answer like a man playing

Russian roulette. In the end claiming ignorance, saying that women and men are just too different to figure out. Like being a different species altogether.

The stories, although familiar – and amusing – were pitiful. Concluding with the weak argument that women are simply too foreign to even try to understand. That men and women are not only different animals, but that we are so alien, in fact, we are from different planets. But, when considering this irresponsible default position we must look beyond the spinelessness of men because, of course, this is an argument that has received tremendous support from women as well.

The John Gray phenomenon, that men are from Mars and women are from Venus, swept the country – even the world – in the 1990's. It attempted to point out that gender differences between men and women can explain respective social behaviors which often put the two sexes at odds with one another. That the reason for the conflict, for the 'battle of the sexes' so to speak, is biological and ingrained and there is little we can do about it except accept it. This was the light bulb that blinked on above the heads of the day-time TV talk show hosts. And the prevailing wisdom of those in the check out lines in supermarkets.

The problem with this theory is that it hasn't done anything beyond catering to the common desire to pronounce the problem unsolvable. All this theory and supposed wisdom hasn't improved the fate of women. Or men. Or the relationships they share. Despite millions of copies of the book being sold, millions of divorces still occurred. As do millions of incidences of both sexes not getting what they want. Despite the lecture tours, the bumper stickers, the journals and daytimers that came out of this phenomenon, our society's unequal distribution of power and systemic misogyny still continues. The problem with the book is that, for many people, it not only offers an explanation of inevitable unhappiness. But an excuse, or justification for it.

In order to offer something even remotely useful and/or resembling the title of the sermon, let me back peddle a little. And considering the degree of hot water I've stepped into let me back peddle a lot: to the 1830's and '40's. And let's go to a small town in upper New York – Seneca Falls.

Back in this time, women did not vote, speak in public, hold office, attend college, or earn a living other than as a teacher, seamstress, domestic or mill worker. Further, a woman could not make contracts, sue in court, divorce an abusive husband, gain custody of her own children, or own property – not even the clothes she wore. A community like ours – largely middle class – usually had women who *could* rule over their own domestic sphere. But, legally, their husbands controlled them. And even though individually, some of them expressed their desire for equality, it wasn't until 1848 that this began in earnest when a handful of reformers in that small town of Seneca Falls, New York called together “a convention to discuss the social, civil and religious condition and rights of women.”

And among those women was 32 year old Unitarian Elizabeth Cady Stanton who helped hammer out a list of grievances based on the Declaration of Independence, denouncing the inequities in property rights, education, employment, religion, marriage and family law, and suffrage. At the First Women's Rights Convention, before 300 women, she presented the document which read, in part, "We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men AND WOMEN are created equal."

A journalist for a Philadelphia newspaper wrote that it would be foolish for the women of the convention to sacrifice their status as "wives, belles, virgins and mothers" for the sake of equal rights. And because of such social and family pressures many women did remove their names from the document. But another convention was held in Rochester and the momentum grew. Soon women were finding the courage and the mutual support they needed to take up the fight for their place in society. Soon women were campaigning tirelessly for three primary things: voting rights, property rights, and temperance.¹

I confess, when I read about Elizabeth Cady Stanton and the early women's movement in seminary, I was perplexed by the whole notion of temperance. I had studied it before in high school and college, and it was always explained to me as the effort to restrict the sale of alcohol. It was explained that it was like prohibition. I figured that it was something that came out of this country's puritanical nature. But I still couldn't quite understand why it was particularly a women's issue. But later, when I became more familiar with issues of women in those times, it became more clear.

At a time when women could not own property, nothing prevented a man from spending his entire paycheck on drink and neglecting to pay the rent. At a time when a woman could not represent herself in court there was no recourse for her when her husband came home drunk and violent. At a time when she had no rights to claim custody of her children, she had no ground to stand on in the case of paternal child abuse. The struggle for temperance was a woman's crusade for much more than a moral argument against alcohol. It was for her own – and her family's – physical, emotional and financial safety.

Which brings me to the reason I am preaching this sermon today. Does anybody know the significance of this day for women? Today is Super Bowl Sunday. It has been reported that this is one of the days of greatest domestic violence against women.² Although this statement is contested, and may not actually be the case, one cannot contest the degree of violence most women have to contend with simply because of her gender.

- Around the world, at least one woman in every three has been beaten, coerced into sex, or otherwise abused in her lifetime. To make it worse, the factor of betrayal is involved since the abuser is most likely someone she has known well.³

¹ Anthony Center for Women's Leadership, Rochester, NY

² This information is alternatively contested and supported by various sources.

³ Heise, L., Ellsberg, M. and M. Gottemoeller. *Ending Violence Against Women*, December 1999.

- Somewhere in America a woman is battered, usually by her intimate partner, every 15 seconds.⁴
- The single most common occasion for a female homicide is following an argument with a man.⁵

What does a woman want? Of course, that is really for a woman to decide. But I thought it was a pretty safe bet to assume that one thing she might want is to live in a place where she doesn't constantly fear for her own safety.

The truth is that we have come a long way since the days when women were the property of men. But statistics of violence and the real life everyday threats many women face clearly show that we have not come far enough for women to enjoy the freedom and the opportunity that most men take for granted.

Take, for example, the kinds of professions that women can occupy. We may take it for granted that we are in a 'liberated society,' but that is only when we don't consider the facts. Like realizing that many positions of power and influence are still not available to women. It may be surprising to some but there are still over a third of our churches in the US that will not ordain a woman. Although Olympia Brown was ordained as a Universalist minister in 1863, other denominations have maintained defiance of that trend.

It is probably not surprising that civil positions of power are no different. Women hold less than 14% of the seats in our US congress.⁶

And women's place among the heads of companies has progressed only minimally. The percentage of women holding 'clout titles' from executive vice president to CEO's increased from 1.9% in 1995, but is still less than 8% as of 2002. And 71 of the top Fortune 500 companies still have no female executives.⁷

Although equal pay was passed in 1963 (when women were paid only 59 cents to the dollar men were paid), we have only managed to increase it to 76 cents today. Over the course of a career, the average woman is shorted approximately a quarter of a million dollars due to the wage gap.⁸

What does a woman really want? Of course, that is for a woman to decide. But I'd be willing to guess that women really want that quarter of a million.

It's been 31 years since 1973 when the Supreme Court decided on Roe vs. Wade and gave women the right to choose. Of course that right is threatened more than ever now – often by men who occupy the pulpits, platforms, papers and the programs air time streaming into America's consciousness, who feel they know better what choice a woman

⁴ UN Study on the Status of Women, Year 2000.

⁵ Sewell, Marilyn; "Wanting Wholeness, Being Broken," (1998)

⁶ CAWP – Eagleton Institute of Politics – Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey.

⁷ Del Jones, "Women gain corporate slots," USA TODAY, 11/19/2002.

⁸ NOW Newsletter, April 4, 2003.

should be making. And what would these same voices of power be saying that women really want? All you have to do to find out is to follow the chain of money and power. Read the advertisements in magazines, on TV. See what is being put on the shelves of our country's shops and stores. Much of what is being marketed and sold sends the subtle message to women that she needs to be smaller in order to be desirable in society.

When I was researching for this sermon, I got on the internet looking for sites on violence against women. Three pop ups in a row came up. The first was of a tiny woman with an exposed midriff with the caption, "say goodbye to that cellulite." The second, for a "reducing pill," was a woman in a bikini saying, "look younger and feel radiant." And the last one was a model with next to nothing on except a tape measure around her waist. It said, "Drop up to 30 lbs. in 30 days." The message is to get small. Virtually the only marketing that clearly asks a woman to increase her stature are advertisements for breast enhancement.

And the message of getting small doesn't stop with appearance. These same messages are being conveyed in our schools of higher education around how a woman should act. A study was conducted at Harvard College in Boston (long associated as a Unitarian institution) that looked at how much verbal participation students of each gender enjoyed during a typical class. It was suspected that men would probably talk more. But what do you think they found? Of 50% more, 75% more or 100% more, how much more do you think men talked vs. women? Try 250% more (two and a half times as much).

Why didn't women students talk as much as men? One explanation is that women prove to be extremely vulnerable to interruption. Numerous studies have demonstrated that in mixed-sex conversations, women are interrupted far more frequently than men. The comments of women were confined to 'bursts' lasting only a few seconds, while male students typically kept on talking until they had finished. Moreover, once interrupted, women sometimes stayed out of the discussion for the remainder of the class hour.⁹

And the message to stay small enters into the emotional arena as well. Dr. Harriet Lerner, in her book The Dance of Anger talks about how many women spend a lifetime learning how to re-claim their own emotions; many of which they have stuffed down after noticing the disapproval some emotions bring in our culture. Most men's inability to deal with women's anger or assertiveness leads to experiences where women who express their feelings get written off as shrews, 'femi-nazis,' 'witches' or the something that rhymes with 'witches.'

What do women really want? That's for a woman to decide. But I think it's reasonable to expect that women really want the right to experience a full range of emotions without being told to censor themselves by the men who can't handle it. And, what's more, I think it may be reasonable for them to expect to have a few more female role models to look up to in our culture and history books, feminine metaphors and archetypes to use and, heaven forbid, perhaps even imagine a God who is not afraid to express HER 23rd

⁹ Krupnick, Catherine, 'Women and Men in the Classroom: Inequality and Its Remedies'; Teaching and Learning Vol. 1 (1985)

chromosome. Maybe if there were a few more prominent goddesses of vengeance, men wouldn't be the only ones with a right to anger.

It's true, not all women want the same things. Not all women feel held back in this paternalistic culture. Not all are uncomfortable running against the tide on an uneven playing field. Some might be happy having allies like John Ashcroft who recently led the call for more men to join together to stop violence against women. Some are happy knowing there's an organization like the Promise Keepers out there who are helping men learn how to lead their families according to the biblical dictates and upgrade the role of his wife from a husband's 'servant' to a 'helpmate.'

But some are a little wary. Even cynical about these concessions from those calling the shots. Some, like Meg Barnhouse, wonder how much real progress is being made in women's rights by these people. How much real intent is behind a Promise Keeper's 'promise?' "Let them come back," she writes, "from a Promise Keeper's rally knowing how to ask their wives how they are doing that day, who they talked to, what their hopes and fears are and let them listen to the answers. With the TV off. Let a man come back from a Promise Keeper's rally knowing how to ask his wife three questions in a row, about herself and her life and listen to the answers, his wife would faint from joy, he would get more sex, and I'd become a Promise Keepers fan."¹⁰

The kind of cynicism Meg expresses here is not surprising. Women have lived for a long time without a voice, without power, without authority, without respect and without recourse. And, not only are they living out lives of diminished returns because of it, but society is impoverished because of the advances it fails to discover by keeping one of its most powerful resources so far below its potential. And not only that, the men who think they are living out their full capacity are just fooling themselves.

I, for one, have realized that my fate, my ability to succeed and live up to my potential is dependent on this institution living up to its potential. And how can this institution live up to its potential when its major constituency continues to live within a society that systemically oppresses them? For those of you who don't have the statistics, it might help to know that of the active members here at UUMAN, over 90 are women. Less than 60 are men. UUMAN has 5 board members who are women, including our president and vice president. We have only 4 board members who are men. And, the real kicker, we have seven paid staff. I am the only man.

When I say that my success is dependent on women, I'm not just giving you the politically correct line you want to hear. I'm speaking out of desperation. And I'm telling you the truth. I want, more than anything, to make sure that the women of this institution get what they really want. Not only for their health but because my health is tied to theirs. That's why I decided to do this sermon. Not to be perfunctory or pretentious or arrogant. But to see if I could figure out what it was that women really wanted. So that I might help. And I have learned something. So here it is.

¹⁰ Barnhouse, Meg; "Waking Up the Karma Fairy"

What do women really want? I'll tell you what I think. What women really want is to look into their lives and see a man, a powerful man, a strong man of stature and standing, who will look at them with sincerity and integrity and say those three magic words she has always dreamed of hearing from a man: "I don't know." And then watch as he waits around to listen. To hear what she thinks. What she wants. What she needs. And then be willing to make sure she has the room and the resources to do what is required.

I will say that we stand today, even with all the advancements in women's issues, at a precarious place. There is cynicism and resentment between the genders. I know because in my research I came across a number of sites on the internet like "menarepigs.com." And I could feel the slight air of disdain mixed with the disbelief around my giving a sermon like this.

There is work to do at healing this discord. Men need to be able to listen more. And see it as their calling and in their best interest – to be an ally in a woman's pursuit for true equality. In the words of concentration camp survivor, Elie Wiesel, "Let us remember that what hurts the victim most is not the cruelty of the oppressor, but the silence of the bystander."

And there is also work to be done by the women of our society. Even the women right here. Women need to continue being clear and giving voice to what they want. To work through the cynicism that comes from having been long ignored and dismissed. And that will be hard.

I should say what surprised me the most about writing this sermon was not that women deserve better. But that after asking over twenty women in this congregation what I should say about "what women really want" not one of them was willing to tell me what she thought. But all were eager to come and witness as I struggled to come up with an answer on my own. We need to work together and learn to walk somewhere above cynicism.

What do women really want? A place where they are heard. Where they are known. Where the people around will honor them by asking for their ideas and treating them with value. In Women who Run With Wolves, author Clarissa Estes gives this answer: a partner and a place where she can "find her true names...to apprehend and comprehend the numinous substance from which she is made...to stay with it. [To find ways to honor it. And renew it. And respect it.] And to sing out her names over her."

To the Glory of Life.

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