

In A Woman's Shoes

A few days ago I had a horrible yet enlightening experience. I don't believe this description is overly mysterious or unintelligible since it is often the most disagreeable episodes in our lives that compel us to examine our beliefs about ourselves and other people and perhaps make some positive changes. Well, a week ago last Friday I resolved to make some changes.

I attended Warren Farrell's workshop "Why Men Are The Way They Are," the purpose of which, as I saw it, was to aid women in discovering what forces might shape men's attitudes toward women, and to allow them to experience first-hand what men go through when interacting with members of the other sex. During the first segment of the program Dr. Farrell identified socialization, peer group reinforcement, fear of rejection and pressure to be successful (I may have missed a few) as the constituent elements of the negative attitudes men can develop toward women.

The lecture/discussion was informative and interesting, and I found myself nodding in agreement with most of what was said. Yet in retrospect I find that I was listening with at best a kind of cool objectivity; it never occurred to me that I could use the discussion as a guide for examining my own beliefs about women. It was because I have so vague a notion of what I would be like to be a woman's shoes — having practically your whole being defined by your physical desirability — that the last part of the workshop had such profound influence on me.

For twenty minutes, during two role reversal exercises, I got to play the part in which the women of our society are cast: it was all at once frightening, embarrassing, anger-provoking and misleadingly alluring. The most powerful lesson came from the male “beauty contest” participated in by a good number of the men attending the workshop. At first I thought it was kind of funny to be lined up in front of a room full of women, both young and old, gawking at us, whistling and screaming “take it off, baby!” After being coaxed into removing our shirts to the cheering approval of the female audience, I spotted a few familiar faces in the crowd as well as a photographer lurking in the back of the room. Beginning to panic, as photos of my pale, somewhat-out-of-condition body would surely be plastered over a page of the *Nexus* when they reviewed this embarrassing charade, I imagined myself as the laughing stock of all my friends. It was at this moment that the word “reputation” took on a whole new meaning for me: I suddenly felt the fear implicit in “reputation” for women: the fear of being regarded solely as a body, worthy only of solicitous stares and ridicule, the fear of exaggerated claims and boastful talk over which you have no control, and, underlying all these, the fear of being considered something less than human. The humor of the situation had worn off by this time, giving way to a growing

Strangely enough, though, I was genuinely disappointed when I wasn't selected as one of the finalists. And herein lies the most lethal trap of all: I was actually willing to allow myself to be viewed exclusively in terms of my physical attractiveness if being viewed in this manner would pay off in ego gratification. If, by being judged attractive by the women, I could gain even the slightest feeling of control over them, I'd be willing to go along with the game a little longer. But what a price to pay. I was seduced into believing that my physical attributes could be a source of power over somebody as long as I surrendered all other personal qualities I might have possessed. I was willing to become something less than human.

The male beauty contest was an experience I'd rather not repeat, yet the saddest thing of all is that what I tolerated for twenty minutes is probably endured by many women for a lifetime. In a society where, for every \$30,000 the average man earns per year the average woman takes home \$16,800, where many women are constant victims of media sex-exploitation, where "true fulfillment" for a woman seems contingent on finding a successful husband since she rarely can earn enough herself to raise a family, it's no wonder that a lifelong beauty contest becomes one of the only options available to women. Society's message to women is clear: if you want to succeed you have to be pretty, and to be pretty you can't be threatening to men.

Having been judged by what my body looks like and having felt the dehumanizing effects of this experience, I can safely say that I won't see just a shapely figure anymore when I look at a woman. I'll see an entire human being who might have the same hopes and fears that I would have had if I were in her place. If I learned anything last Friday I learned that men and women are more alike than they are different. We share a common bond of humanity, and when we're ready to view one another in the light of our shared humanness, we'll undoubtedly realize how equal we really can be.

Womanwise is a weekly column coordinated by the A.S. Commission on the Status of Women. All students are encouraged to use this editorial forum to express their views on and encounters with women's issues. If you are having trouble expressing yourself in writing, we would be glad to help. Contact Melissa Eastman or Sandra Shewey in the A.S. Office, 961-2566. Articles can be submitted to the *Womanwise* box in the A.S. Office, third floor UCen.