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Sisterhood and the Small Group

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*Henry Ray and Vicki Lee
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SISTERHOOD AND THE SMALL GROUP

Contrary to a variety of popular images, Women's Liberation is not a movement of hardened and coldly unfeeling females, shouting rhetoric, hating men, and scorning "unliberated" sisters. Nor is it a movement that demands "instant liberation;" women do not have to leave their husbands and lovers, abandon their children, throw away their make-up, burn their bras, quit their jobs, or sleep with each other in order to be part of the movement. Indeed, even those most involved must continually struggle to come to grips with changing concepts of ourselves.

Liberation* is a constant process—and for a woman whose liberation involves in great part an end to her loneliness and isolation from other women, it would be both agonizing and impossible without their support. And to provide this support, women have organized the "small group"—the strength of our movement, through which women reach out to each other, grope together, grow together. It is our best means of raising consciousness, our most effective organizing tool, and, at the same time, our most human structure.

Every Sunday night I meet with 10 other women. Two high school students, two high school teachers, a social worker, 3 college students, 3 drop-outs. We came together originally through a Resistance women's mailing; later some of us brought friends. Marilyn and Janice are sisters, Kay and I, quite accidentally, are old family acquaintances, Ronny and Paula close school friends, Bette knew none of the others until our first meeting.

Our first discussions were fumbling, in our enthusiasm we would jump from topic to topic as new ideas flew from one to another, fragmenting the political from the personal. Until we realized that we had to begin with our most potent political force—our lives. And the best way to do that, we discovered, was for each of us to speak about her life—her childhood, her family, her friendships, ambitions, lovers, husbands, career. A method in itself revolutionary; a way of breaking down one of the strongest bulwarks of our society—the belief that an individual's perceptions of herself cannot be understood by anyone else; that individual

*I do not believe that anyone—male or female—can achieve true liberation under capitalism. In this article, however, I am primarily concerned with those changes that we can make in our lives, the ways we struggle, and the changing of our consciousness.



Photo: Dana Davies

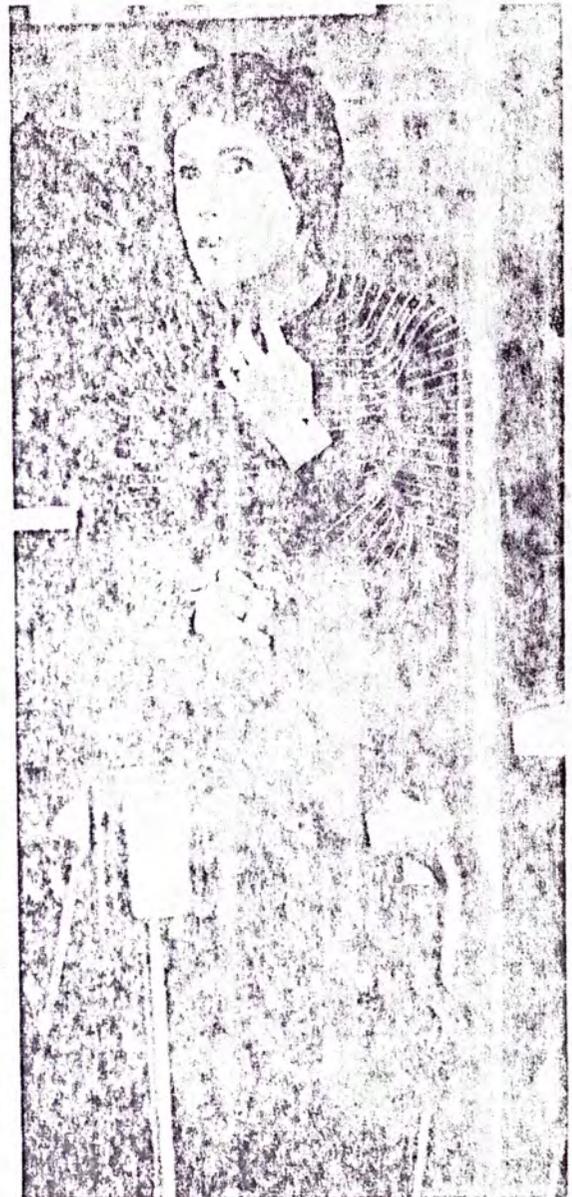


Photo: Dana Davies

problems must, therefore, be dealt with in isolation and loneliness.

For the past few months each meeting has been devoted to one of us—to listening to her “story,” dealing with her life. And, indeed, though backgrounds, specific experiences, and current situations vary (e.g., Mary comes from Texas, was raised as a Southern Baptist; she and Sandy and Bette “came of age” in the 50’s; Paula is from a wealthy Midwestern town, the rest of us from New York, New Jersey or California) we can meet on a common ground, having each been brought up and socialized to play the role of woman.

For many of us this openness demanded a tremendous, sometimes overwhelming emotional effort, one which necessitated the laying aside of life-long inhibitions. In our society it is always a risk to relinquish the security of anonymity, one of the few securities allowed us. In this case, we each had to overcome the additional fear of losing the support and friendship of the group. How did any of us know to what extent we could trust each other? How could we know that we wouldn’t meet with hostility, disapproval, ridicule? These fears, though real, proved to be unfounded. In fact, our group has drawn much closer since these intense personal analyses began.

As we grew to know each other better, we began to fall out of the group roles that we had assumed. I no longer felt the need to be a leader, Ronny began to see herself less as the group scholar or group mentor, Bette no longer acted as our most knowledgeable link to other women’s groups. Marilyn and Linda stopped being the “not quite committed.” And we began to relate to each other as individuals and as friends.

Listening to other women, learning about their feelings, their weaknesses and strengths, their fears, their experiences, has helped me to accept myself as a woman; I’m not the only one whose sexual initiation was difficult and painful; I’m not the only one who won’t open her mouth in a large group unless I know the indisputable truth and even then, only if I’ve rehearsed it a dozen times; I’m not the only one struggling to overcome dependency on men, to experience healthy relationships with both sexes.

But perhaps most important to me—to my self-image—was the realization that the dynamic woman is not a rarity, not an aberration of the natural order. *Every woman in our group is an exciting person*; we don’t cackle; we’re not incurable gossips; and we are likeable—something American women don’t often think about each other—or about ourselves. For me, to enjoy women “en masse” was an almost totally new experience. I, who had always shunned all-girl groups, all-girl schools, now look forward to my all-girl meetings as one of the high points of my week. I know now that if women are dull, if women are docile, if women are difficult to work with, it’s only because that behavior has been expected, in fact demanded, of us, and we’ve learned to see ourselves that way.

But now we’re uniting against such programming, and that unity extends across the nation. Debby, who was in our group until she moved to California, sent us a letter about her small group there:

“Several people live in communes, one girl is pregnant and unmarried, another wants to be but is afraid she’ll lose her job, another girl just divorced her husband, another is living in a women’s commune and not

seeing men. A few undergraduates, 1 or 2 graduate students. A girl who never was told about orgasms or the clitoris and of course is living with a guy. The group is a lot different from the one in New York. While there seems to be, on the whole, a much less developed social consciousness, people are eager to talk about the most intimate things and do so with an amazing frankness and lack of inhibitions. . . . We’ve had long talks about masturbation and lesbianism—talks so honest, that at times I’ve had trouble participating because of my own hang-ups. . . . In a way this is what I want—for a while I felt I was losing touch with my gut feelings; intellectualizing.”

Since Debby’s left New York, we have begun to discuss “those most intimate things,” but it has been difficult for us to examine our own sexuality on more than a superficial level, a difficulty in great part due to the age range of the group (17 to 36) and the resulting gaps in our sexual experiences.

The concept of women’s liberation and participation in the movement has made profound differences in many lives. Shattered illusions replaced by more deeply meaningful realities. Not all pleasant or easily acceptable. As a step towards an ultimate goal—better relationships with men and women—we often have to sacrifice, at least temporarily, those we now have. Until both men and women can better understand what those relationships should be, and until society allows more creative exploration of relationships. For some, this means broken marriages. For Kay, who is thankful she became aware of women’s liberation while she is still in high school, it means, “Because of what I now know and feel, I probably won’t want to have many of the relationships I might otherwise have desired, but I can see myself having fewer, stronger ones.” For Bette it has meant a greater self-esteem, the strength and ability to do what she wants, rather than what is wanted of her. For Sandy it may mean motherhood outside of marriage. Mary, the only woman in the group with children, would like to move into a commune with her family. Ronny has begun to use her maiden name and to explore living apart from her husband. I, too, have given up my visions of myself becoming Mrs. Somebody Else. Which is not to say there aren’t many contradictions in our lives—in my life, specifically, there are many: in relationships with some women whom I still see as threats, with men on the demands I still make of them, with my boy friend (especially), with my parents, in my job.

What is often, however, our greatest obstacle is guilt. Guilt that comes from taking care of our own lives. Guilt that is very real for women brought up to be caretakers of husbands and children, to sacrifice their needs for their family’s. Or for those of us in the broader political Movement, taught to see our struggles as trivial, even frivolous, next to those of the Asians, the Africans, the Latin Americans, and in this country the blacks and the workers. Guilt that has kept me out of the Women’s Movement for a long time.

But it’s beginning to go away. I’m growing stronger, more confident, though sometimes I have to fight to make it, show. And that’s when I know I can turn to my sisters. And I know they’ll understand.

—Ronnie Lichtman