

Women in Pants 2007

Is it not the case that the very concept of the “feminine” is a patriarchal invention, an ideal projected onto women by men and vigorously defended because it functions so well to keep men in positions of power and women in positions of service to them?

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For the first 28 years of my life I tried to fit into the categories I was told were appropriate to me. I tried to be feminine, heterosexual, Christian and mild mannered. But the older I got the unhappier I became without knowing why. I didn't feel real, I felt like I was play-acting most of the time. From the outside I appeared normal, but I felt weird inside. I became increasingly depressed. I started drinking and smoking cigarettes as a teenager and by the time I was 28 I had a serious drinking problem, chain-smoked, was divorced after a three-year marriage, and had been in psychotherapy for three years.

On Good Friday, April 11, 1966, I was admitted to a mental hospital after what appeared to be my second suicide attempt. It was the first day of Spring break for the community college where I taught philosophy. To celebrate I got drunk with friends in Ann Arbor and ran my car into a parked car in the middle of the night. My head went through the windshield and I was taken to the emergency room of University Hospital where I had been six months earlier after taking an overdose of aspirin. After stitching up my head the doctor called my psychiatrist who called my parents. They came to get me and drove me to Mercywood Mental Hospital. I went more or less willingly. I didn't have the energy to do anything else.

When we arrived I was taken to an office to sign the admitting papers. My psychiatrist had told me it would be best if I signed myself in, it would look better on my record, he said. My mother went into the office with me, my father waited outside, I think he was embarrassed and ashamed to have a crazy daughter. The admitting nurse filled out the form for me; I probably didn't look capable of doing it myself. A gauze turban was wrapped around my head covering the stitches running from the middle of my right eyebrow, up my forehead to the top of my head. My head was pounding; it felt like someone was inside with a pick ax trying to get out. “What's your religion,” the nurse asked. “None,” I said. “I have to put something here, are you Catholic or Protestant?” “Neither.” “It's o.k. honey,” my Mother

whispered, “she just wants to know if you want a priest to visit you.” “I don’t want a Priest.” The woman checked “Protestant.”

Next she took out a paper for me to sign saying I would agree to any treatment the doctors deemed necessary. “Does that include shock treatment?” I asked. “Yes,” the nurse admitted. “No,” I said, “I won’t sign it.” My mother tried to reassure me by saying Dr Schaeffer, my psychiatrist, wouldn’t have recommended this hospital if they were going to do anything *bad*. “I want to talk to Schaefer,” I shouted over the hurricane in my head. The nurse argued with me but finally got my doctor on the phone. When I told him my concern he told me I was right, I did not need shock treatments and he promised me I would not get any, he told me that my concern for my own treatment was a healthy thing. But he said, “you do have to sign the form in order to be admitted to the hospital.” So I did. I knew I needed help.

Before I could be taken to my room all the things I had brought with me – my clothes, toiletries, and books - were taken away and examined for dangerous items. When the inspector came out she told my mother (I was standing right there but she addressed my mother) that I had only brought slacks but that I had to wear skirts here at all times. She sent my mother back to my apartment to get my skirts. Fortunately I had some. I was required to wear skirts to teach, not even the women students were allowed to wear pants to class. Evidently women in pants are dangerous. In addition to pants we were not allowed to have razors, scissors, nail clippers, or anything that could be dangerous to ourselves or others.

Once I got through the obstacle course of the admittance procedure, I was taken to my room by two chunky men in white tee shirts and white drawstring pants. The head nurse on the floor showed me to my room on one of the women’s floors. I had a room to myself but shared a bathroom with Betty who was in her late 40’s. She told me she was in the hospital because her husband found her “hysterical” in her nightgown in the middle of the night in a cemetery whaling and crying. When I asked her why she was in the cemetery she said she actually didn’t remember going out there, “I went crazy,” she said, “That’s why I’m here.” As the days went on I learned that Betty’s only child, a son, had been killed by a hit-and-run driver and that she became very depressed and hopeless and then one night her husband found her at her son’s grave. “I tried to be brave,” she said, “but I cracked.”

Betty was having shock therapy, as were most of the women on my floor. I may have been the only one who escaped the treatment, my doctor kept his word. One day I watched

while Betty was made ready for her treatment. A special table was wheeled into her room, it was attached to a squat metal cabinet that plugged into the wall. Betty's wrists and ankles were strapped down to the table, she was given a shot that made her drowsy and then electrodes were attached to her head. At that point I was told to leave the room but I can imagine what happened next.

Most of the woman had memory loss for at least a day after their treatment and they seemed dazed for about three days after that and then they did seem to feel better and not so depressed. In an attempt to relieve my depression the doctors gave me pills. I had been taking antidepressants and tranquilizers before I came to the hospital but they didn't seem to be helping much. The drugs were pretty heavy duty in those days and very addictive. In the hospital they experimented with dosages and combinations and watched me closely. Many of them made me high, which I didn't mind at all. Each patient was weighed every morning. Few of us had the *right* weight according to the hospital chart. I was too thin so I sat with other thin women during meals and we got extra food. Betty was too fat and she sat at a fat table and ate less food.

When I gained weight I got points toward my discharge. It was well known among the patients what activities and attitudes earned points. One of the older repeat patients told me that if I went to the beauty parlor in the hospital and got "prettied up" I'd get a whole lot of points. I couldn't bring myself to do that but when the head nurse told me that staying in my room and reading was antisocial behavior, I got one of the women to teach me how to play cards and joined the games in the lounge, remembering to keep my legs crossed properly, smile, and make small talk. I think this was my winning performance, I'm sure I got lots of points.

The dances were a bigger challenge. A selection of male patients also participated and I knew I'd get points for dancing but most of the men were so drugged up that they didn't have the energy to ask anyone to dance. Women weren't supposed to ask men to dance although we could dance with each other. I didn't have the nerve to ask a woman to dance. I liked the dances because we got to sit at small round tables, drink coke, and talk. There were women there from other floors in the hospital and we shared our stories and talked freely about being crazy. I liked those women. I think I lost a few points at the dances.

I really wasn't in the hospital very long. Once the drugs started working I knew I didn't want to be in a mental institution. Instead I returned to college teaching. I recognized

certain similarities between the academic institution and the mental institution but academia was definitely better than the mental hospital.

Within a few months I met Shireen who reminded me of some of the women I met at the dances in hospital but she was happy and energetic and full of self-confidence. I fell in love with her and found myself. With Shireen I felt whole. I had been using so much psyche energy keeping the truth about my sexuality out of conscious awareness that I didn't have the energy or desire to live. But Shireen was proud to be a lesbian and I was proud of her and of us and I told all my friends about our love. We accepted an invitation to be interviewed about being lesbian by a psychologist at Michigan State University. The interview was taped and later played on several TV stations.

I arrived at the TV studio for the taping directly from work wearing a skirt and sweater, high heels shoes, nylons, and earrings. The psychologist seemed disappointed in me. He remarked that I was "too pretty to be a homosexual." "I bet you could get lots of men," he told me. His wife was doing the interview with him and she agreed saying I didn't really look the part. They would have been happy if I'd worn pants.

Eventually I left the institutions of academia and lived on the edges of the dominant culture participating in the women's liberation movement and identifying as a radical lesbian. It was during this time that I stopped wearing skirts and other clothing that was uncomfortable or felt unnatural. After leaving college teaching I worked for four years as a house painter on an all-women's crew. In my mid-forties I went to massage school and opened my own business. I enjoyed the work but after about twelve years I became restless and felt a spiritual longing and a desire to study and write.

In 1996 I enrolled in Sancta Sophia Seminary. After several years of study I became a candidate for ordination and was required to give a sermon. I felt passionately about the content of the sermon which was based on a statement made by Thomas Berry, a Catholic priest. He said that at the beginning of Christianity there were two holy books, the Bible and the Book of Nature. Berry believes it is time to put the Bible on the shelf and study the Book of Nature. I worked hard on the sermon and looked forward to delivering it. I wanted to put my best self forward, my true self. I bought an attractive light lavender pants suit for the occasion.

The morning I was preparing to make the five hour drive to campus I checked my email and found out that I was expected to wear a skirt to give my sermon – "if you don't

have one,” my advisor said, “we’ll dig one up for you.” I was shocked. I had expected to have some conflict with this institution but I never dreamed it would be about my pants.

I was deeply shaken but this time I was older, I hadn’t just gotten drunk and run my car into a parked car. I wasn’t depressed and I liked myself. So I refused to be admitted to the institution of the church under these conditions. In the end I gave my sermon in pants.

Telling me that I must wear a skirt to give the sermon was not about my clothes it was about the institution of the church, the attempt to look normal and acceptable and non-threatening.

A woman in pants, especially a woman who is comfortable in her body, is a threat.

Something was crazy here but it wasn’t me.

I left the seminary after ordination but a year later I joined the graduate program. I was comfortable there and it felt good to be studying, writing, and discussing my papers. During this time I team taught a class with the Dean of the seminary and she offered me a job in the graduate program after I completed my degree.

I spent a year writing a dissertation about the role of the women’s movement in the evolution of consciousness. As I prepared for my Orals it was suggested that I wear a skirt for my presentation. I assumed this was a joke although I didn’t think it was very funny. I had assumed that the ridiculous issue of the skirt versus the pants was over. But that was not the case and even though I passed my Orals and received a PhD, I was told, in a roundabout indirect way, that my clothes did not measure up and that unless I could change the way I “presented” myself, the job offer was withdrawn. I took my diploma and got out of there as fast as I could. I had completed another cycle of my life.

I initially joined the seminary when I was 58 years old. At that time I was experiencing what astrologers call my second Saturn return. My first Saturn return lead me through the darkness of myself to my awakening as a lover of women. The second helped me find my spiritual path. During my years at Sancta Sophia I realized that study is my spiritual practice. ‘Philosophy’ comes from the Greek meaning love of Sophia or love of Wisdom. The study of certain philosophers and spiritual teachers transports me and fills me with a sense of awe, expanding my vision, giving my life meaning and increasing my capacity for relatedness. It is in communion with Wisdom that I have come to know myself and at the same time am stretched beyond myself to a greater identity and a clear awareness of presence of the divine being Sophia in my life.