

"People Keep Asking Me What Androgyny Means"

(The following article is based on one that appeared recently in *The Christian Science Monitor*. It was adapted from a speech Dr. Mary Rowe gave at Association of MIT Alumnae Centennial Convocation.)

"Should men be able to cry sometimes, if they want to? Would not more men join the nurturant professions—and care for children and colleagues—if they felt they could?"

"And why is it so hard for women to be innovative, financially independent? Why can't they have wider career options with better chances for success?"

"In other words, I think we need a new vision of men and women at home and at work, an androgynous vision."

Dr. Mary P. Rowe, economist and special assistant to the president and chancellor of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), was discussing her own particular point of view, as an economist, in the reorganization of the work lives of men and women.

"Androgynous people express spiritually both 'masculine' and 'feminine' qualities to the extent that they choose," Dr. Rowe explained. "They can be gentle and strong, wise and tender, dynamic and passive at times. Androgyny means that what people do in areas now sex-stereotyped shall not be determined by sex-typing but by personal choice and ability."

"Many people believe that our women are supposed to be passive, adaptive, patient, responsive, receptive, unaggressive, and dependent, and that our men are supposed to be aggressive, competitive, hard-working, and powerful—masters of women, leaders of men. Many believe this has worked pretty well. And others often ask me, 'Even if we haven't gotten along very well with our stereotypes, what makes you think we'll change?'"

What will change the status quo?

Some pretty strong forces are moving us toward androgyny. Two hundred years ago, on the farms, men and women both worked more or less without salary, side by side in a joint enterprise for survival. Their work days were usually from dawn to dark. They had four or five children, perhaps, and both parents reared and trained these children.

Then men began to leave the home work place. They earned money; some gained status, power. They found more male colleagues. Women took responsibility for most homes and children.

Little by little, in modern factories and offices, the paid employment of men became separate from home (except for business entertaining). Men got used to being personally taken care of—without directly taking care of others. They delegated new care-taking duties to a new female occupation—the office wife.

On the other hand, women got used to being supported. And as mechanized kitchens and packaged products appeared, along with more and more apartments, for the first time in history some women found their only job to be caring for one or two small children.

The right to salaries, to status, to power remained predominantly with men. "Work," meaning paid work, became a male right. Caring and nurturing and loving became a female right. Objective processes, rational thought became man's pride. Subjective, intuitional processes became women's province.

Unpaid work was left to women. And our society came so to value money that a full-time homemaker with five children and all her husband's business entertaining will say she "doesn't work."

Do you see changes in the future?

Yes, irresistibly. I've described only a stereotype, but that stereotype is giving way. For instance:

The textile industries and World Wars I and II drew women into paid work. Then in the 1960's, strong demands for workers in occupations that are now stereotyped for women pushed them further into paid work.

The old idea that "biology is destiny" is no longer true. The birth rate is down to fewer than two children per family, and pressures are strong to limit family size.

Day care is more acceptable.

Smaller homes and more services outside the home are bringing changes, too.

Rising family expenses, together with increasing numbers of single, widowed, and divorced women are keeping the employment of women expanding.

Aren't people satisfied with the status quo?

I think they are not. We hear many questions being asked by hard-working men and women. "Why," women ask, "are we basically restricted to 10 or 12 'women's' occupations, out of the hundreds that exist? Why are we paid 60 percent of men's wages, and why is this wage gap still widening?"

By the same token, men have some questions: "Why should we fight the rat race? What did I spend my life for anyway, if my children don't know me or care for my values?"

Many women would like opportunities to be assertive, perseverant, ambitious, self-confident, creative, independent, to work with other adults, to receive equal pay for equal work. Many men would like chances to be tender, nurturant, warm-hearted, sensitive, expressive. Men want equal satisfaction for hours lived.

How shall we provide these new options for men and women so they can be androgynous?

We must break stereotypes in men's and women's thinking. And stereotypes start early. I know a PhD study of men watching their babies in a hospital nursery. The interviewer says, "What do you think of your baby?" The replies are either "Look how vigorous, how angry, how athletic, how active!" or "Look how dainty, how cuddly, how cute!" and we can guess which sex gets which comments, even though the father obviously doesn't have any objective knowledge of his child.

We need to break stereotypes in children's books, in newspapers, in the office, on TV—especially on TV, which our children watch so many hours a day.

The androgynous life requires new options for work, new ways, for instance, for shared jobs in the home and out of the home. At a nearby college the first couple to share an academic appointment was really eyed askance. Now, a year or two later, there are many shared appointments. And because work and home are nearby at that college, the couples find it easier to share home and work.

Suppose we re-structure work options between husbands and wives. Many families wouldn't change at all; they like their divisions of labor. And of course, in millions of families both parents already work inside and outside the home. In fact, one third of all

mothers of preschool children already are in paid employment and at least one fifth of all child-care arrangements of such mothers are the fathers. But if we had equal pay and no stereotyping, I'm convinced many fathers would choose to be house-husbands—not necessarily life-long, but happily for a year here, a summer there. And many mothers would choose more paid employment. Probably many young parents would choose, if they could, to



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work both inside and outside the home—say three-quarters time in paid and unpaid employment for both father and mother.

The androgynous life requires support of extended family structures that really will work. Families often used to have live-in grandparents or servants. Not today. Now we need good child-care centers in apartment buildings, at work, in high schools, near foster-grandparents programs. Federal programs to pay retired persons in child programs would be important reintegrations of age groups.

Will the coming of androgyny take time?

Of course it will. Because of social structures and stereotyped thinking. Some people ask, "What of biological differences? Aren't men better adapted to the rugged competitions of paid work, and women to homemaking?" This is a fair question. But here are my own responses to it:

First, the structure of work has changed. For instance, a university president is not required to be a hunter, shooting buffalo. His or her real function is to listen, to take care of people, to nurture and to build. Certainly most of our executives today could happily be androgynous in that they must play the so-called feminine roles much of the time: They must get along with everyone, they must soothe, care for, harmonize.

Second—and this is important—our knowledge of sex differences derives mainly from reports of observations that exclude the middle, which exclude the overlap where the sexes are similar. Dozens of studies of sex differences depend on item analyses that dropped the 80 or 90 percent overlap between the sexes to report the 10 or 20 percent male/female differences.

Androgyny doesn't require 50-50 distributions in every profession. It suggests that the 80 or 90 percent of men and women who share similar aptitudes be in similar jobs with similar job ladders.

There's another important social question that has to do with children and family life. I recently reviewed dozens of studies on the effects of maternal paid employment. With Dr. Mary Howell of Harvard, I believe there is little

evidence that maternal employment by itself will help or hurt children and family life. Instead, we learn mothers who work in paid and unpaid employment, in accordance with their wishes to do so, have happier children and families. That is, it seems better for children and families if parents work where they are happiest—a cliché, perhaps, but also a profound philosophy underlying the theory of androgyny.

If androgyny is such a reasonable idea, why are we slow in embracing it?

I think it's partly because of deep feelings we all have. You know Pogo's statement, "I have searched and searched for the person who is in my way, and I have found her—and she is me!"

Some of our deepest conflicts come from half-buried feelings, the result, perhaps, of our teaching competition instead of cooperation, of the battle-of-the-sexes philosophy that maleness and femaleness are mutually exclusive conditions. For too long, we've believed that men should suppress their tender, nurturant selves, women their rational, instrumental selves.

But as we contemplate androgyny, begin to reorganize toward it, all of us will often be deeply ambivalent, cautious, thoughtful. Power, status, money, security seem to be at stake. But I believe we can reduce our anxieties as we understand ourselves better.

For instance, many research studies show that we build inner conflict into women about success. My own generation of women was taught to fear success in paid employment, taught that it would bring ruin into one's personal life. For example, for a wife to be more creative in the labor force or to be paid more than her husband is a situation women avoid like the plague; and that attitude automatically limits the extent to which they will innovate or seek well-paying jobs.

Therefore a whole generation of modern feminists have taken the issues to be far more "all or nothing" than they need to be. Many of these women have felt that they had to give up men, marriage, and children to gain equality. But is not this accepting an old wrong polarization of issues—career or family, instead of working toward androgyny? (By the way, though, I certainly wouldn't criticize any individual for choices she felt she had to make. For although I believe androgyny is possible, getting there isn't easy.)

How does a woman learn to choose androgyny rather than polarization and militancy? How can we learn a commonality of family interests rather than a divergence?

We've learned some fascinating facts that can help us. For instance, the old cliché that "behind every successful man is a supporting woman" has, we find, a corollary: For most women, having a true career choice depends on supportive males. Fathers have enormous influence on the careers of their daughters, we find. Male peers, husbands, and mentors are crucial to the career options of the women about them. In this society, an integrated and successful life (combining paid work and unpaid work) is most likely a woman's inheritance from a man. Without male approval and encouragement, most women in our society relapse into the "all or nothing" choice or make unsuccessful attempts at career and family.

Have you had supportive men in your life?

Yes. A brother, a physician, several mentors, and friends—but let me also say I have a most remarkable mother.

Why are men in general reluctant to let women "in?"

Many reasons can be given: Fear of "momism"; the theory that it's unwomanly for a woman to be "show-off." The complaint, "who'll be left at home to look after me?" is still another. Some men fear that if women can create life and also be creative on the job, "what's left for me?" Will I be obsolete? Many men, trained from childhood to repress emotion, find it hard to believe that they are really needed interpersonally.

But there's considerable evidence that these feelings are not characteristic of secure and interdependent men. Many men easily outgrow these early discomforts as success, marriage, and children bring them an identity and security.

Men and women both need chances to grow in all these matters. Many women, for instance, need to outgrow their dependence and to take responsibility for themselves. But many have lacked the opportunity to find themselves and to evaluate themselves in the outside world. As unpaid housewives, they do not know what they are "worth" in our monetized world. As housewives consider entry into the paid labor force, they may feel their "opportunity cost" is zero, and they may undervalue themselves and their skills. The combination of isolation from the monetized economy and discomfort about success leads many women to low self-esteem and also to resentment against men.

Can we dissolve these polarizations?

Polarizations between the sexes and inside us—between our nurturant selves and our instrumental selves—are not right or necessary in the world to come. We are moving toward each other and toward our other halves. I believe both men and women have much to gain from androgyny.

Men learn that their options to sing, to decorate, to garden, to play, to cry, open up huge areas of self once blocked off. Their relations with women become much deeper, much less scary. And their women complain less, as they, too, see what financial responsibility and paid employment are like.

Men on the whole, gain options to love. Women stand to gain equal pay for equal work, and enormously wider opportunities for independence and status and creativity. Women, on the whole, gain options for their work. Wider opportunities to love and to work mean more variety, more interest, more companionship, more joy in the 24 hours of the day. Androgyny means wider choice of both love and work for both men and women.

But could this all be just foolish idealism?

Let me paraphrase a statement by Catherine Stimpson: An androgynist insists that grief may be lessened or transformed through cooperation and will. We've all seen the tragic vision of culture crushing personality; of power, too often assigned to one sex, running wild into war and corruption; of widespread loneliness and massive human waste. Yet the androgynist assents, silently or out loud, to the possibility that some tragedies will become obsolete.