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Reflections from the Fence

If you ever take a psychology course you will learn about Sigmund Freud and his view of development. According to his theories, children go through a period of latency in late childhood and before puberty, when children's sexual interests become dormant. I have come to believe that children enter a very fanciful and romanticized version of sexuality during what was called the latency period, where children routinely play out themes of attraction and admiration. Since this development time period is very much tied to the development of competence, it is no surprise to me that perceived competency in the opposite sex is an important element of romance that develops in these years. As girls, we become attracted to boys who outshine their peers! This is also the same time period most girls develop a change in their experience of the complicated dynamics of empowerment, connection, and power. At the same time many boys are feeling better about themselves, many girls are feeling worse.

When I was young I couldn't wait for school to let out! I knew I would be able to sleep late, visit my grandmother, swim, ride my bike, and have a lot of fun in my semi-rural neighborhood. In my neighborhood there were a series of quiet middle class homes that surrounded a large parcel of land that the developer hadn't been able to purchase. That land parcel was right in the middle of the neighborhood, and included a huge area of pasture and grazing horses. There was an old wooden fence that surrounded part of the area, and I suppose the owners were fairly magnanimous as they never complained about children sitting on the fence, dangling legs, and stroking the manes of horses who would visit the peripheral property hoping for treats.

As if attracted to the bullrings in Spain, the boys of the neighborhood would take turns hopping off the fence and running to a diagonal point of property where they would hoist themselves back onto the fence, flushed with the victory of surviving the inner circle of imagined danger. Occasionally a particularly brave young man would hop into the arena and hide for a while behind a rocky burg, and come out charging and yelling as if he was Geronimo himself. I think I pretty much idolized those brave boys of the pasture, never for a minute realizing that none of those horses had a bit of territoriality or aggression in their nature. If anything, they would gaze at our antics in quiet disregard, more interested in a morsel of grass, than the row of bicycles casually tossed by the fence.

That same summer our small community opened a community pool. I didn't know how to swim, but I enrolled in swimming lessons and before I knew it I was staying afloat in a reliable fashion, never adept at any stylized stroke, but very accomplished at treading water for long periods of time. The place I chose to tread water was in the deep end, with a privileged view of the diving board and those courageous boys of summer. No surprise, the same cavaliers of the pasture were the brave souls who would cannonball off the diving board, and later develop more sophisticated abilities to perform a near perfect swan dive.

You know, I don't remember any girls my age learning to dive that summer. Maybe off the side of the pool, but I don't remember even one girl diving off that spring loaded diving board. I think I was eleven. That was the same year I developed my menses and left the "anything's possible" world of childhood, to feeling embarrassed, private, and cautious. After all, how could a young girl's identity exist in both the world of menstrual blood, pain, and "God forbid" pregnancy, and the world of freedom, of conquest, exploration, and "lions and tigers and bears". It was dashing to feel vulnerable and incompetent as a young girl. The more you admire a flock of hearty young boys, you are left feeling like you can't

measure up, except through traditional paths of sexuality, which become forefront within a few short years. No wonder sexuality is a common way adolescent females regain personal power.

It has been decades, and the complete transition beyond the vulnerability of menstrual cycles to post-menopausal life, to realize that boys and girls, men and women, face different types of fears and develop different types of courage. Men are made for the battle, women for the long haul. I don't think one is better than the other. I don't think this is something we need to attempt to change. I think it is just one more reminder to me that we are all part of this perfect design that reflects the dual nature of God, the Universe, or whatever you believe in. The Yin and the Yang. It is only much later that women step into their own shoes. By middle age, many women are feeling far more competent and comfortable in their lives than their husbands. This reverse in role identity can cause much marital discord. After all, what happens to a man when there is no more battle to fight – often times the slow descent into depression.

Over the course of a life time, in many relationships with those of the opposite sex, we will have times when we idolize a young boy's courage, feel characterized by our sexual desirability, feel subjected by our husband's willfulness, and feel disappointed our husband is no longer the image of vigor or competence. We are all largely influenced by sexual scripts out of our conscious awareness and part of the very preservation of our species. As women, it is important to know that each stage of life will bring different feelings toward the opposite sex, and that these feelings and our ability to engage with men will change over time. We will interact since our early years with issues of power and attraction in a delicate balance that is influenced by development, individual temperament, the inexplicable differences of the sexes, the society we live within, and our own values and beliefs.

None of it is easy. All of it is worth it. In my belief system, we are meant to live out Gods' differences between men and women, so that we balance change and acceptance. Women grow into courage, men grow into compassion. We neither one have the goal to become the other, but realize that the union of these dualities creates a necessary harmony to raise children, to make a difference in our communities, and to sustain bonds that grow in stability over time. This of course is marriage, and that is a different discussion.

Ms. Yankov invites you to comment on this article to her email: maggiyankov@aol.com.