

The Habit of Freedom: Liberating the Colonized Mind

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A counselor specializing in midlife transitions for women startled me a few years ago when she confided that she had stopped telling her clients to love themselves. “That was absolutely the wrong advice,” she told me. When I recovered from my surprise enough to ask what she was suggesting to women instead, she said, “I tell them to act like they love themselves. I realized that in this culture, if a woman waits until she actually loves herself to act that way, it may never happen.”

Indeed. For me, her paradoxical advice sums up both the problem and solution imposed by the conundrum of oppression: Because we are taught to hate ourselves, and since self-hatred insures both our collusion with the system of dominance and its continued success, then in order to stop the cycle in our own lives and to transform society as a whole, we must begin to love ourselves—or at least act as if we do. Speaking in these abstractions, however, the process seems as simpleminded as a bumper sticker: Act Like You Love Yourself—Until You Do. Or I (heart) Myself...Really! followed, of course, by a smiley face. I am reminded of comedian Linda Moake’s definition: Affirmations are lies I tell myself until I believe them. If the solution were so simple, however, I wouldn’t be writing this essay, and we’d all be busy experiencing creative fulfillment in the feminist utopia.

Virginia Woolf outlined the dilemma a different way in her classic treatise on women and creativity, *A Room of One’s Own*. After describing in great detail the history of social and political obstacles faced by women, Woolf concludes that even if a woman has “five hundred pounds a year and a room of her own”—that is, adequate money, time, and privacy—her creativity will remain undeveloped unless she also practices “the habit of freedom.” Since women have lived restricted lives for so long, she observes, we are not accustomed to freedom, and even when we establish an encouraging environment, freedom is not automatic or comfortable for most of us. Instead it is something we must consciously choose and then practice. At the time she wrote this, in 1929, Woolf thought perhaps a century of optimum conditions and serious commitment might show some results. With only thirty-odd years to go since her prediction, I feel a need to pick up the pace. Although women have made great strides over the past six decades (after all, many of us are now allowed to vote, read, own property, and in some instances receive payment for our labor), I believe our collective creative genius remains virtually untapped. It’s time to move on to the next phase. I want to practice the habit of freedom.

It’s hard to fight an enemy who has outposts in your head.

*Sally Kempton*¹

To understand the habit of freedom—what it is, exactly, and how to do it—a deeper appreciation for our present condition might be helpful. How *are* women convinced to collude in our own oppression? Some analysts have compared the socialization of women to the domestication of animals, and I have found the analogy to be at once profoundly

useful and enormously disturbing.² Proceed with caution. Freedom is not for the faint of heart.

Imagine a homesteader somewhere on the great plains in the last century who determines a need for horses. He decides to capture some feral creatures from the high mountain desert and turn them into draft animals, trained to do work for humans. These first recruits are understandably reluctant, and the farmer has great difficulty hitching the horses to the plow, much less getting them to pull it. The animals have no inclination to do human work; indeed they constantly attempt to flee, and they resist the harnesses, bridles, and bits. Eventually, after much effort, the farmer is able to break their will sufficiently, and the fields are finally plowed. These are not, however, the best draft animals the farmer will ever have.

When the first foal is born, the farmer begins. As soon as the tiny horse stands up, the farmer places some strips of leather over her back, not cinching or tying them in any way, but simply creating the sensation of weight, however slight. Soon he belts them lightly beneath the belly, and after the foal becomes used to this, he slides a bridle - but no bit - over her head, letting the reins lay loosely on her neck. As the weeks go by, gradually and with great care the farmer introduces the various tools and bindings that will allow him to harness the horse's energy and direct it to his will, his work. This is an education of sorts, the farmer creating a world for this horse that is vastly different from the world of her parents, who have a memory of freedom. Under this training, the horse becomes an excellent draft animal, docile, tolerant, and yielding, with no thoughts other than those he has placed in her mind. The farmer is very pleased and he names her Bessie. This process is repeated for many generations, until the farmer is renowned for his superb draft animals, and his stable is filled with obedience.

It should be noted that as animals are trained in this way, their musculature and skeletal structure actually begin to conform to the harnesses, bridles, and other restrictions, so that over time the trainer succeeds in altering their physical, as well as their mental, being. Although the transformation by this taming process is gradual, it is ultimately quite thorough.³

Taking a moment to reflect on this analogy, we can see how the socialization of women to accept and collude with male domination has also been a gradual and thorough process. We are not born into this world innocent and wild with minds full of freedom but as heirs to some five thousand years of "education." Surely, our bodies must remember the effects of the corsets, girdles, stays, hoop skirts, painful shoes, and other restrictions that harnessed centuries of our fore sisters to the whims of men.⁴ Today we continue to starve or stuff ourselves, pare away or plump up parts of ourselves, in order to conform, or to grieve for failing to conform to those same whims. Our minds are colonized by values that destroy our creativity, freedom, and will. Our hearts bear the scars of ancient rape. In other words, the compliant nature of women is a creation many generations in the making, and our memory of freedom is a product of imagination, not experience. A further subtlety to ponder is the rather obvious fact that if male dominance were natural, there would be no need for the extensive systems of coercion to enforce it.

Back on our hypothetical farm, years go by. The farmer dies, leaving his property to his only child, a daughter. She is a radical feminist, having left the farm early on to pursue her interests at a university in Wisconsin, Michigan, or California, and she's been to her share of womyn's festivals. When she returns to take care of the family business, she looks out at the stable of obedience and thinks, "This is my farm now. These horses are captives! This is dominance and subordination, and I'll not have it." With revolutionary zeal, she marches down to the corral and sees Bessie, old and tired now, as tame as a horse could ever be. The daughter remembers the horse from her childhood and aches for the years of servitude Bessie has endured. She opens the corral gate wide. "You can go now, girl. You can be free!"

The daughter waits expectantly for the horse to trot through the gate, back to the high mountain desert of freedom. But Bessie does not move. She does not trot through the gate. She waits for instruction, she wants to know when the next work shift begins, and when the next meal will be put out. She does not move toward the freedom beyond the corral. She does not know what lies outside the gate.

Frustrated and bewildered, the daughter realizes that in order to free the horses, she can't just let them go. She must teach them what freedom is. In fact if she takes them out to the wilderness and leaves them, they will die, for their knowledge of how to take care of themselves has been erased. They are domesticated, tamed, dependent. Like her father, the daughter must reeducate the horses, but her task is to gradually introduce them to freedom and the skills that will enable them to survive. Bessie will probably never leave the corral for good, but she can enjoy a life without harnesses and spend long afternoons wandering around the prairie. The daughter will start with the young ones, taking them to the high mountain desert to roam for days at a time, leaving oats and hay near the stream. Gradually the horses will learn about freedom, and the next generations will be different.

For women, the corral is the patriarchal construction of gender. It has surrounded us for over five thousand years. We cannot fathom what lies beyond a society consigning women to inferiority through its laws, institutions, and customs. For most of us, the prospect of leaving this corral is terrifying, and rightfully so: It is all we know. Without our harnesses, our bridles, bits, and saddles, we do not know what to do or who we are. Faced with the open-ended mystery of freedom, often the misery we know is preferable if only for the comfort of its familiarity. There are stories of circus elephants, accustomed to being tied to a post, who never venture beyond the circumference of the rope even when it is removed. After hearing the draft animal analogy, a workshop participant said with great pain that her dog would carry its leash to her when it wanted to go out, never thinking it could go out unleashed.

Admittedly the draft animal analogy is grim, intended to attune us to the fact that women did not arrive at this point overnight or even over a few generations. This knowledge gives our struggle the dimension and dignity of history, and in view of it we do not expect to overturn our situation quickly. This awareness helps cultivate a certain compassionate patience alongside our urgency when working for change, both in society and in ourselves.

But women are not draft animals, and comparing our socialization to the domestication of horses does break down at a crucial, heartening point. Speaking of women, Marilyn Frye notes, “Unlike nonhuman animals, this one matches the exploiter in intelligence and fineness of physical abilities, and this one is capable of self-respect, righteousness, and resentment.”⁵ I take this to mean that despite our legacy of oppression, our context of domination, and our colonized minds, women are capable at any moment of choosing to practice the habit of freedom.

We all need to make a conscious break with the system. bell hooks⁶

I have been the farmer’s radical daughter, and I have felt her impatience toward myself and other women. In the early 1980s, after consuming large quantities of radical feminist thought (Mary Daly, Adrienne Rich, Susan Griffin, Audre Lorde, Andrea Dworkin, and others), I felt a surge of ironic liberty having finally grasped the existence of institutionalized sexism. An epiphanal frenzy followed this insight, and I declared I was no longer a fembot, a slave to the culture, a colonized mind, but a free woman. I had seen the corral’s gate, and I was outta there. It was history. Period. End of patriarchy. Simple. Or so I thought.

I was disappointed to discover that despite my astute intellectual grasp of the situation, in the privacy of my thoughts, feelings, and dreams, the oppressor still influenced me. I continued to act like a good workhorse when left to my automatic responses, my habits. They kept me steeped in self-hatred and obedient to the core. Clearly there was more work to be done. Recognizing the unjust system was only the beginning. Much like the farmer who constructed a new reality for the wild horses he wanted to tame, and the daughter who wanted to free them, I needed to create a support system for the new way of being I had claimed. To the extent that I was able to perceive it, collusion was no longer an acceptable option.

Suddenly I became as fascinated with my daily routines as a traveler in a foreign country. I began an intimate scavenger hunt, looking for clues that would crack the code of my conditioning. Where was my harness, my bridle, my bit? Who were the uninvited guests lodged in my mind, and what were they telling me? What messages was I incorporating—literally—without scrutinizing their meaning? How did I carry my leash to the door? In the subtle web of my daily choices, I discovered profound opportunities for practicing the habit of freedom. Each small, conscious shift from automatic obedience to self-determination thrilled me. Mary Daly has named this process Roboticide.⁷

One of the first areas to come under my scrutiny was clothing. I decided I would wear only clothes that were absolutely comfortable—no cinching waistbands, no high-heeled shoes, no awkward but fashionable styles. I would not don my own harness, bridle, or bit. On a physical level, I refused to give my body the message of restriction or discomfort merely to win acceptance. I was amazed at two things: how deeply satisfying this daily act of rebellion was, and how little difference it made to the people around me. That is, choices I made to conform to some imagined standard were largely unnecessary.

Another daily experience that came under my scrutiny was conversations with men. I noticed how often men interrupted me, and how I was programmed to defer without comment.⁸ My psychic bit removed, I encouraged myself to interrupt their interruptions, to say, simply, "I'd like to finish my comment." Once again I was amazed that the world did not come crashing down as I exercised my freedom to speak and my right to be heard. Instead, more often than not, men apologized and listened.

I found simple acts of self-nurture to have startling power. For a while I bought a single cut flower each week and placed it on the dinner table or nightstand so I could watch it blossom and smell its fragrance. At first I could hardly tolerate such reckless indulgence, but the minor expense purchased a powerful message: I deserve beauty. Making time for long baths, preparing healthful meals, and conscientiously muting the commercials on television or choosing not to watch it at all contributed to a personal environment of encouragement and clarity.⁹

My journal took on special significance during this time. Recording my experiments with the habit of freedom, I began to notice the script of my internalized oppressor. It was the relentless inner critic saying, "Who the hell do you think you are? You'll never succeed. Don't dare talk back. Get back in line!" These admonitions echoed messages absorbed from the misogynist culture, and I realized that the internal critic - to whom I felt so responsible - was in fact on the payroll of the patriarchy. Each time I sent the inner critic to the time-out chair, I was able to evoke the loving aspects of my essential self - the intelligent skeptic, the wise elder, and the angel of optimism.¹⁰ Before long, the patriarchal values I had unwittingly internalized no longer had a bullhorn inside my head.

The habit of freedom, then, is the essential self in action. As the draft horse sheds her harness, we shed our obedience to the culture of domination and follow the voice of our own integrity out the gate. Each one of us must necessarily do this for ourselves, but we needn't go it alone. Beyond the confines of the corral, we must find one another to create a community of affirmation, encouragement, celebration, and pleasure, where we can be lovingly challenged to develop our full potential. As Gloria Steinem suggests, "If women have just begun to realize how deeply our self-esteem has been undermined by centuries of woman-hating cultures, perhaps only the constant presence in our lives of a woman-loving group can help us believe in our authentic selves."¹¹

The point is...to imagine women not enslaved, to imagine these intelligent, willful and female bodies not subordinated in service to males, individually or via institutions (or to anybody, in any way); not pressed into a shape that suits an arrogant eye. Marilyn Frye¹²

How would an untamed human female act? What would she look like? How would she make decisions, and on what basis? The image of such a creature is almost impossible to imagine, yet if we are to become free women, we must learn to imagine the impossible. With a defiant leap of faith, we break the closed circuit of collusion and oppression when we begin to love ourselves - or at least act as if we do.

The transformation from fembot to hothead may start with an epiphany, but liberating the colonized mind is in fact a lifelong endeavor. The habit of freedom, much

like the automatic obedience it replaces, is the outward manifestation of an internalized value system; but this one must be chosen consciously, meticulously, moment by moment. It is the global paradigm shift of values we long for, up close and personal. At first these increments of mindful change may seem infinitesimal, but practicing the habit of freedom has a cumulative effect. Its ultimate expression is revolution.

Not long ago, I awoke from a dream, a perplexing image that lingered in my mind until I followed it. What I saw was a group of women, running. I think of course they must be running from some danger, but as I watch them more carefully, I see they are not afraid. Their faces are full of joy, and they are running together solely for the pleasure of feeling the wind on their bodies. Where they are, there is nothing to fear.

NOTES

- 1 Sally Kempton, "Cutting Loose," reprinted in *About Women*, ed. Stephen Berg and S.J. Marks (New York: Fawcett, 1973).
- 2 See Marilyn Frye, "In and Out of Harm's Way: On Arrogance and Love," in *The Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory*, and Susan Griffin, *Woman and Nature*. Readers familiar with these works will recognize the roots of their brilliant analyses in this essay. To those who work lovingly with animals, know that I appreciate your intentions (especially with dogs!) and do not mean to disparage them.
- 3 I am grateful to Annie Conn for information about horse training.
- 4 My own distant cousin Cornelia Willson died at age twenty-four in 1860 from asphyxiation when she tied the lacings of her corset too tightly, pulling them from a bedpost. "Stovepipe" waists, measuring about eighteen inches, were much admired at the time. My great-grandmother noted that Cornelia "died for beauty." (Evie Sartor Byrd, "Highlights of Family History 1700-1952," private paper).
- 5 Frye, "In and Out of Harm's Way," 59.
- 6 bell hooks, "Feminist Revolution: Development through Struggle," in *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (Boston: South End Press, 1984).
- 7 Mary Daly, *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978, 1990), 56.
- 8 For a thorough guide to conversational politics, see Deborah Tannen, *You Just Don't Understand* (New York: Ballentine, 1990).
- 9 See Jennifer Loudon, *The Women's Comfort Book* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1992) for a compendium of self-nurturing suggestions.
- 10 For basic guidance on journaling, see my book *Internal Affairs: A Journalkeeping Workbook for Self-Intimacy* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1990).
- 11 Gloria Steinem, "Helping Ourselves to Revolution," *Ms.* 3, 3:29, and *Revolution from Within: The Politics of Self-Esteem* (New York: Little, Brown, 1992).
- 12 Frye, "In and Out of Harm's Way," 76

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