

# The Women's Health Collective Table September 21, 2014

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Suggestions and feedback from Steve Carson, Judith Hutchison, Heather Mann, Jocelyn Drum, a class by Kevin Allison, Anoo Tree Brod and members of Anoo's classes (Sharon Isner - who pointed out that this was also a rite of passage story, allowing me to understand it better, and Sandi Walker).

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When I first arrived in the country from Australia, I was a post-doc at UC Davis. Everything was different in Davis; I was missing 25yrs of friends. None of the activities that I did for fun were available to me. One thing I did like was the annual Whole Earth Festival, which attracted several thousand attendees. It's a day of music and performers, luminaries like Timothy Leary and Wavy Gravy, dancing, food, frozen yoghurt, jugglers, magicians, fire-eaters, solar power, belly dancing, dachshund races, massage tables, people reading your cards, palms, horoscope, aura, iris and telling you about your past lives. Women wore flowers in their hair. Pennants hung from flagpoles. It had the air of a medieval festival, but without the rats or the black death. It was a bunch of fun.

One year there was a booth run by the local women's health collective. A gaggle of women, with their backs to me, blocked the view of the table. None of them was waving me over to look. Hello! Men hold up half the sky too. Some of us have women in our lives. We want our women healthy. Women's health is everyone's concern, not just a concern for women. We need information about women's health as much as women do.

This is not how you run a table on women's health. They should have included a man in the planning. (Shrug.) I kept on walking.

I passed by the booth a couple of times. From a distance of about 20yrs, I saw a poster about lumps in breast tissue. and a rubber boob on the table, Maybe it was a teaching aid for finding lumps.

This was the era before mammograms. There were no good methods for breast cancer screening. Health authorities were encouraging women to check themselves out either by themselves, or with their partners. Articles on how to check for lumps were as common as dieting. It was a difficult sell; women weren't doing it. I'd read about it too, but reading about something practical, just doesn't cut it. I'm an engineering type; you only know you can do it, if you've done it and got it right.

In the case of breast cancer, not knowing what a lump felt like, is matter of life and death. My father died when I was too young to know him from similar avoidable ignorance. Not growing up with a father and not having a man to do manly things with, coloured my

education as a male. I had two friends who had the same hobbies and interests as their fathers and they did things together all the time. It turned out that I developed an interest in the same hobbies as my father; electronics, cars and machine tools. I would have loved to have done those things with my father. Instead of learning about cars and tractors from my father, starting about 10yrs old, like my cousins did, I had to wait till adulthood, when I bought my first car. Then I learned from one of these friends and his father.

I expected that some part of my life might be with a woman and maybe we would have kids. I didn't want to be left without a partner and my kids without a parent, as happened to me, through a preventable death.

I could reasonably expect a potential partner to ask early on if I knew how to check breasts for lumps. It's in the same class of knowledge as contraception and knowing how the rest of her body works. It turns out that most testicular masses in men are detected by girlfriends. I should be able to do the same for her breasts. I should at least be as aware of the state of her body as I was of my car.

My mother grew up in the depression, in an era when selling contraceptives was illegal. My mother's education about women's bodies was that they were none of the business of dirty minded little boys like myself, thank you very much. If I needed to know anything, I would be told.

For my education as a man, she handed me over to the traditional educators of men, the masters and boys of an all boys military school. As we all know, you can't become a man if there are any females around; you'll be distracted from the toughening up needed to reach the top of a pecking order based on intimidation. A male's education is a touchy business. It can easily go catastrophically wrong in so many ways. You couldn't risk compromising this critical step in a boy's development, with the presence of females. Failure here would lead to the certain end of society as we know it. Your peers were always on the lookout for anyone headed for failure, bringing you back onto the tried and true path, by beating you up. Of course, everyone knows the fate of the failures; we turn to the theatre, where we write comedy.

At this boy's school, I received the traditional education about females. This education came from my peers, who in turn had received their education about females through a multigenerational chain of males, all of who had learned about females from other males. It was a staggering effort to preserve this hard won and arcane knowledge in the absence of any input from females. I learned about females through disinformation, disrespect and dirty jokes. I was thus well prepared for females, when I first met them in college. I knew exactly what I was supposed to do. You find one of them to marry. They will cook for you and raise your kids, while you go fishing. 50yrs later, the women of the health collective were fostering the same type of relationships with men that my mother had wanted for me.

How could the world possibly be a better place by me not knowing how to detect lumps?

I've told this story to a few people and everytime I get to the bit where I'm walking past the women's health collective table, the listener stops me mid-story and says "Joe, why are you interested in finding lumps in women's breasts?". This is both men and women, so it's an equal opportunity concern. I visited many other booths that day at the festival; the solar power booth, no-one had any problem with that. I looked at the car engines at the low emission car booth; no-one had any problem with that. I bought a frozen yoghurt from a vendor. No-one asked me why I stopped at any of these booths. Everyone understands that

I spend 5hrs a month cleaning my teeth, so I'll look like a movie star. Everyone understands why I'd go to Lamaze classes, where week after week, you spend hours watching movies of women exploding. However as soon as I tell them that I'm prepared to spend 5mins/month to prevent my partner's drawn out and agonising death, their response is

"why the hell would you want to do that?"

You'd think this would be the end of it, but they aren't done yet. The next thing you get is

"You weren't actually dating anyone at the time, right?"

"No."

I wasn't. I was just planning ahead. I could have explained that I went to the trouble of learning about contraception before I needed it.

My explanations all sound nice, till I realised that my behaviour was governed by Darwinian selection. If, instead of reading a fishing magazine, you do something to ensure that your partner survives till your children reach adulthood, you'll produce more descendants. Survival of the fittest. That's all there is to it. It's that simple. The explanations I've just given you for my actions that day, are only post-DNA rationalisation; I actually have no free-will and I'm just a slave to my DNA. Yeah, truth is, my DNA made me do it.

So there I am, standing back from the women's health collective table, guarded by a gauntlet of women. Do I wait to be invited to check out the rubber boob? Do I push my way in and just start? What if I do it all wrong and they snicker at me?

It was too intimidating. No guy can handle this. I walked on.

However, as the day wore on, I kept going past the booth, as if magnetically drawn to it. It was always surrounded by women. No-one looked up at me to encourage me to step forward. Then at the end of the day, with the sun setting, and with most people having left the festival, I found the booth deserted, except for a lone guy. Thank goodness ... it was a guy; I wouldn't have to feel awkward.

There, in the middle of the table, for all to see, was the rubber boob. I looked around. There wasn't a woman in sight. There would be no-one to snicker at me.

The guy raised his eyebrows in acknowledgement. I strode boldly up to the booth. "What's the deal?" It was a teaching aid, a rubber boob, with lumps. If I wanted, I could try to find the lumps.

Any clues? Nope. He wouldn't tell me anything; the number of lumps or their texture. Wouldn't you know it; just like with every other attempt to step into the world of women, I would be on my own.

I had a problem. If you're a guy, you need a lot of permission to touch someone's breast. Some part of my brain thought the rubber boob was real. I don't know how this works, but I knew I didn't want to touch the rubber boob, while anyone was watching, particularly women, who would laugh at me for being inept. I checked again. There were no women in sight. I was safe. I put my hand gently on the boob, to get a sense of it. It was ... firm.

I started to gently knead the boob. It was completely homogeneous; I couldn't find any lumps at all. If anyone had been looking, it would have been obvious that I was just fumbling around and not knowing what to look for.

Just then, a woman appeared at my side, inches from my right shoulder. She was peering over my shoulder like a hawk. She was slightly in back of me, so I would have had to turn around to look at her. She didn't say a word. I could hear her breathing (stop and

breath 7 times into the mike). When the other women left, she must have stayed behind, hiding behind a tree, waiting for an unsuspecting guy like me to step forward and touch the boob. It didn't feel like a friendly approach. However she wasn't actively interfering, so I decided to pretend she wasn't there. I didn't look at her.

Having found no lumps at all in the rubber boob on my first pass, I started to panic. What if I couldn't identify even one lump? The hawk would snicker at my ineptitude, justifying the women's decision to exclude men from the table. I realised I was doing this on behalf of all men. If I failed, men would continue to be shunned by women's health collectives, no woman would touch me with a 10 foot pole (barge pole) and I would spend the rest of my life alone.

I kneaded more firmly, quite firmly in fact. The hawk let out a groan. Was I not doing it right? With the extra pressure, I immediately found my first lump. It felt like a ball from a rear wheel ball bearing. It was huge. How could I have missed it? Number one.

I moved through the boob, squeezing it hard between my fingers, looking for more ball bearings. The hawk moaned, not in a good way. I found a lump like a grain of rice. Was this a regular node in a breast (say a duct) or was this a lump? How in the hell am I supposed to know? I had no idea. How come we're not taught this stuff in high school?

The guy was watching me. I raised an eyebrow in his direction, hoping for encouragement. He tipped his chair back onto two legs, looking straight up into the sky, his hands clasped behind his head. He was inscrutable. I rolled the small hard lump carefully between my fingers. I declared it a lump. Number two.

Now that I could recognise a hard lump, I squeezed my way through the boob again without finding any more. I'd found all the hard lumps.

Now what? What if there were soft lumps with similar firmness to the boob? I worked my way slowly through the boob again, this time squeezing gently and looking for subtle changes in firmness. I found a slightly harder spot the size of a crouton. Number three.

The hawk was agitated. She shifted from foot to foot, but remained silent. Was she hoping I would hurry up and finish quickly?

Next I found a larger volume of slightly firmer texture. It actually felt like a thin piece of kitchen sponge or at least what a piece of kitchen sponge felt like encased in rubber. Number four.

By now I knew this boob like the back of my hand. I was rapidly gaining confidence. I saw that, once you'd familiarised yourself with your partner's body, this would be quite easy.

Now, where else could you hide a lump? A place where you can't squeeze from the sides, that's where. A flat area against the chest. I pushed down, the whole weight of my body behind my thumb, directly onto the boob. The hawk let out a cry of alarm. She thought the boob was as real as I had. I worked my way through the boob, pushing down hard with my thumb, finding a flat lump against the chest. Number five. That was it. I knew there was no more. I'd done it.

I looked up at the guy. "how did I do?"

Of all the people at the festival, I was the only one who'd found all the lumps.

I turned to the hawk, vindicated.

The hawk was about my age, pleasant looking, and a little bit shorter. She had flowers in her neck length blonde hair. She was confident and self assured, although a little apprehensive.

There I was, face to face with an empowered feminist. Who was she? Why had she taken an interest in me? We'd only met minutes beforehand, when without hesitation, she'd stepped forward and publically declared an interest in me. Who was this fair maiden, this princess, this angel, who'd appeared at my side? For her, I'd faced down and fought fire breathing dragons. For her, I'd swum mighty torrents. For her I had proven my valour by showing that I was prepared to save her life.

She knew a lot about me. If we'd been dating, it would have taken her months to find out this much. It was her turn to lay cards on the table or we would never see each other again. She should pick out a flower from her hair and present it to me saying "well done brave knight". As she handed me the flower, she could curtsy and then take her leave, or she could just stand there, looking me straight in the eye. I'd ask if she'd like to share a frozen yoghurt.

She turned on me as if I'd beaten her up. "yes, but look how you treated it!"

"Well, do you want me to find all the lumps, or don't you?" She stormed off, leaving me alone again.

I turned back to the guy; "Do I get a boob-master button for my tie-died T-shirt?" He leaned back in his chair, hands clasped behind his head. Nope. "take it home with me?" Nope. I didn't even get a booby prize.

As far as I can tell, that day I was the only male who'd looked for lumps in the rubber boob. We weren't welcome. Someday I hope that women will realise that we want all women, not just our companions, to be healthy, happy and living their own lives. We are just as interested in women's health as women are. The problem is that the information isn't as readily available to us. Possibly it's the same problem women face learning about cars. Someday I hope that men will be welcome at women's health collective tables.

In the meantime, I did walk away with a prize of sorts. I left the festival knowing that although it was my first time, I was the best, even if I would never see the woman I did it with again.

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Use physicality, like cocking eyebrows, looking to side (show don't tell). Do this slowly; you want the audience to be you - you aren't delivering content - you are delivering a feeling. Show your discomfort. It's OK to speed up at the end when you're onto something. Look at audience, don't read.

From Sharon, pushing down on and grabbing a boob that is horizontal (on a table) doesn't seem threatening (to women). If I was holding my hand up, as if the boob was vertical (like on a woman's body), it would seem threatening to a woman in the audience.

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This story has two points.

The obvious one is the irony of a table run by the women's health collective, set up to prevent dissemination of information about women's health. This should be no surprise to anyone and itself is not worth writing about. The purpose of most organisations is not the stated one of helping the members; instead the organisation is a front for the agenda of the people who run it.

The point that's of interest to me is the difference between my expectation of the young woman standing behind me (the hawk) and her response to what she saw.

Courtly love is a way of behaving with someone of the opposite sex, in a publically accountable way, until you know them well enough to start high bandwidth communication. It's like being polite. In modern society, the rituals are different, but you're still need to accomplish the same thing.

In Australia when I grew up, most women that I knew would have understood the theatre of the moment, and what was going on in my head. If interested, they would step on stage with me, assume their role and watch me for acknowledgement. After all, this is what we were all doing in adolescence and is what adolescence is all about.

In the US, I quickly found that when I talked about such things I was regarded by women as a neanderthal, an anachronism, an oppressor and part of the patriarchy. I think these women are feminists. I realised I didn't fit in

here and decided to shut up. I didn't change my mind though.

I've read this piece to many women in the US and they don't get it. They say things like "did you really think you would live the rest of your life alone if you didn't find any lumps?" Well yes. But this story is about my heart, not my head. That should be obvious. It's not. Another said reassuringly "well you know there are lots of women out there just waiting for some man to come along and marry them".

This is not about finding someone, anyone to marry. This is about sizing each other up in a low bandwidth situation in a way that both parties treat each other with respect. We all know that most offers will be declined. Even in the case that the offer is declined, it should be possible for both parties to be glad of the interaction. You should be able to look back remember that the other person was part of your life, even if for only a short time. It's like you're on a hike and you meet someone out in the bush. You say hello, find out where each of you has come from and where you're going. You both wish each other well and then go on your separate ways. What could be better than that?

The problem is that people get the signals wrong; they misinterpret or miss them, they send the wrong signal, your expectation of the other person may be wrong. At this stage probably nothing can be done to save the situation, but sometime later, when you meet them again you can always apologize. "Sorry, I was mean/thoughtless/clueless." Maybe you can laugh. You don't have to get a match, but you do have to make the other person's life better for the interaction.

Often when courting you don't get the signals right; you miss them or you misinterpret them. Often you're not sure what signal you want to send. You're in a low bandwidth situation with a limited number of tokens available to send as signals. You can talk better to your friends about the new person than you can to the new person. The signals you send must be able to be declined without either party losing face. The system is designed so that missing a signal looks the same as declining. Either party must be able to unilaterally discontinue the process of getting to know each other, without anyone losing face. (You may be hurt, but you haven't lost face.)

I found that I wound up with a set of signals to let the female know I wanted a girlfriend. I didn't wind up with any signals to show that I wanted the female as a friend. Having a female as a friend was inconceivable when I grew up.

Attempts at high bandwidth communication early on will be seen as being forward.

In a When Harry met Sally situation, a signal like "want to be friends?" can only be met with the enigmatic, low bandwidth "I don't know". If this is accompanied by a smile, this is still an invitation to keep talking. You may have qualities other than being good at low bandwidth communication. Any other reply and you don't know whether it's a "no", "I don't want to reveal" or "I don't know". This question can't be gracefully declined. There is a lot of information needed to characterise liking someone. It's not a signal you send early on in the relationship.

The only high bandwidth communication possible early on is about yourself, not about the two of you. The other person will feel excluded and will likely think you're an idiot, or at best that you "don't get it".

Well this is how it is for introverts. Extroverts are different. I don't know how they work. (I don't think they know either.)

An example of low bandwidth communication:

A girl I liked once said to me "I dare you to do this. If you do I'll be your girlfriend." Of course those weren't her words. Instead her offer was the easy to decline, offhand, low bandwidth "no-one would ever do this". I couldn't imagine why not. I'd been training 20yrs for a moment like this. I did it and in a week I had a new girlfriend. As part of the dare, there were complications. I had a gf at the time. She was a good friend of the girl who made the dare. I traded a sweet faithful gf for one who was more exciting, but more than I could handle. The new relationship didn't last long. I don't think the two girls were as good friends afterwards.

Another example: I remember a girl declining a date invitation. The reason? She'd just had bands put on her teeth and was self conscious about being seen in public with them. This girl was not self conscious about being seen anywhere and I didn't know what to say. I'm sure I reacted completely disbelieving, but I had to accept that the answer was no. I'm sure she was at another party that week, with someone else, bands and all. Later (probably much later), I was impressed to see how gracious she had been. She declined, but if anyone wanted to know why (they didn't) I had a face saving explanation. Thanks Lindy. I hope you've had a happy life.

Feminists have no understanding of why men accept being trained for war, and accept dying in war. We do it to protect our country, our homes, our women, our children. If men hadn't done this in the past, we would all be slaves now. Politicians use men's willingness to fight and die for their freedom, to further their own personal agendas, tainting the honour of all men. If you don't believe this, show me a passage in a book by a feminist, where she thanks men for defending society with our lives. I'm not asking her to thank those who destroy and pillage. Compare this with the number of passages men have to read in books by feminists, calling us arseholes. I remember in the US, women telling me that my interest in war was pathological; all men were fascinated by war, we're just that way - it's a sickness.

Bearing children is more expensive for a woman than for a man; it will consume her body if she doesn't get enough food, she cannot defend her children from other men by herself, and (in the worst case) she has to be prepared

to devote herself full time to raising the children till they are independant.

A man only needs to impregnate the woman and he's done. Any more is optional. (However if he's a hunter, he'll need a woman to feed him on his return from an unsuccessful hunt.)

I expect most, if not all, men understand the assymetry of child rearing. We might expect that those who don't, have been selected out of the gene pool by the process of women looking for mates. A woman has to select the right mate. We understand that a woman first needs to test our valour and virtue, whether it be in the hunt or in battle. (Do I want this person as the father of my children?) The female doesn't consider whether she likes the male (do I want this person as my companion?) till he's passed these tests. Protestations of undying love are nice, but they can wait.

At the women's health collective table I was being tested. With the arrival of the hawk, the stakes became much higher. It retrospect it's easy for someone to say that the hawk was not a good partner for me and I shouldn't have worried about passing her tests. But I didn't know that. What if her attitude was part of the test? If you're performing, do you first look at your audience and say "They're all arseholes. It's OK to give them a bad performance."? No. You do your best. If the audience responds favourably and wants to interact further, only then do you have the option of finding out who they are.

In the case of the women's health collective table, the hawk tested me, I passed and she threw away the results (she threw them in my face).

This was an opportunity lost for both of us.

There were more important things to her than preventing breast cancer. There were more important things to her than acknowledging a male, who was prepared to submit to her testing. It's possible that she didn't recognise that there was a test going on before her eyes, for her benefit, initiated by her arrival. Presumably her head was full of doctrine. She was in her head. She was not in her heart.

You can't have a relationship with a women unless she's in her heart.

Something else that struck me was the number of people who asked why I was interested in women's health at all. I want people to clean their teeth, get vaccinations, eat well, exercise, drive safely and get regular sleep too. Does anyone need to know why I'm interested in those things too?