

The Women's Health Collective Table July 29, 2016

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

When I first arrived in the country from Australia, I was a post-doc at UCDavis. Every year, in the spring, they held a Whole Earth Festival. It attracted several thousand attendees. It's a day of music and performers, luminaries like Timothy Leary and Wavy Gravy, dancing on the lawn in front of the stage, food, jugglers, magicians, fire-eaters, solar power, belly dancing, dachshund races, massage tables, face painting, people reading your cards, palms, horoscope, aura, iris and telling you about your past lives. They even had frozen yoghurt. Women wore flowers in their hair. Pennants hung from flagpoles. It had the air of a medieval festival. I looked forward to it every year.

One year there was a booth run by the local women's health collective. A gaggle of women, their backs to me, blocked my view of the table. None of them were waving me over to look. Hello! Men hold up half the sky too. Some of us have women in our lives. We want 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 walked on.

I passed by the booth a couple of times. From a distance of about 20yds, I saw a poster about lumps in breast tissue. There was 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; no-one was teaching you how to do it and women weren't doing it by themselves.

I'd read about checking out your partner too; it was on posters everywhere, but reading about something practical, just doesn't cut it. You only know you can do it, if you've done it ... and got it right.

The real problem was that no-one was showing you how to do it. To test yourself out, you need a properly calibrated boob. Well here it was. This was my big chance. I had to get my hands on this thing.

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 expected that some part of my life might be with a woman. Maybe we'd have kids. I didn't want to be left without a partner and our 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 her 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 the state of my car.

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 ever I needed to know anything, I would be told. I figured this wouldn't be till I was married, and even then I expected the information to be sparse.

Fortunately I didn't have to wait for marriage. For my education as a man, my mother entrusted me to the traditional educators of boys, the masters and boys of an all boys military school.

As we all know, you can't become a man in the presence of females; 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 different ways. You couldn't risk compromising this delicate step in a boy's development, by having females

present anywhere in his life.

The consequences of failure here were too horrible to countenance. Your peers were always on the lookout for anyone headed for failure, quickly bringing you back into the fold ... by beating you up.

(look serious, talk slowly and carefully)

Of course, everyone here knows the fate of the failures ...

(tense pause)

they turn to ... the theatre ... where they write ... and perform ... comedy sketches.

In keeping with the rest of my education, I learned about females, without any input from females. I would learn all I needed from males - my peers. My peers in turn had received their education about females, through a multigenerational chain of males.

I learned about females through disinformation, disrespect and dirty jokes. I was thus fully prepared for women, when I first met them in college.

I knew exactly what women were for ...

and what to do with them.

(dead pan)

You find one of them ... to marry ...

they will cook for you ...

and raise your kids ...

so you can go ... fishing.

30yrs later, the women of the health collective were perpetuating the same type of relationships with men that my mother had planned for me.

(indignant)

Now, how could the world possibly be a better place, by me NOT knowing how to detect lumps in breast tissue?

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, with the rubber boob, the listener stops me mid-story, waving their hands and says "Hold on Joe! Why are you interested in finding lumps in women's breasts?".

Of course everyone here instantly recognises the sex of the people who ask this stupid question. You're right, every one of you; it's both men and women. It's an equal opportunity concern.

I visited many other booths that day at the festival; the solar power booth, I looked at the car engines at the low emission car booth; I bought a

frozen yoghurt. No-one asked me why I stopped at any of these booths.

Everyone understands why I spend 5hrs a month cleaning and flossing my teeth ...

it's so I'll look like a movie star.

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 from breast cancer, leaving me grieving for my partner and our children without a mother, their response is

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

You'd think this would be the end of it. But it isn't. There's more. The next thing they say is

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

(confidently)

"No, I wasn't."

I was planning ahead. I'm just that way. I learned about contraception before I needed it too; afterwards is too late.

At this stage the listener realises that it's pointless trying to have a rational conversation with me and they walk off waving their arms and muttering.

So there I am, standing back from the women's health collective table, with the rubber boob, guarded by a gauntlet of women, with their backs to me. Do I just stand there, hoping some friendly person will invite me to step forward and check out the rubber boob ... or ... do I push my way in and just start?

(shake head in certain disbelief)

There was no way I was going to get this right, of course. What if I do it all wrong and the women snicker at me? It was too intimidating. No guy can handle being laughed at by women. I realised this challenge was beyond me. I walked on ... again.

However, as the day wore on, I kept orbiting the women's health collective table, with rubber boob, as if magnetically drawn to it. It was always surrounded by women. No-one ever looked up at me, to encourage me to step forward.

Then, at the end of the day, with the sun setting, most of the stalls packed up and gone, and with the festival almost deserted, once again, I came upon the women's health collective table with the rubber boob.

This time, there were no women. The table was manned by ... a lone guy. Thank goodness ... it was a guy; I wouldn't have to feel awkward.

(look at the rubber boob on the table)

There, in the middle of the table, for all to see, was the rubber boob.

I looked around.

(look around)

There wasn't a woman in sight.

(sigh of relief)

The guy raised his eyebrows in acknowledgement.

(look around for women, but don't say anything)

(mock bravado)

I strode boldly up to the booth. "What's the deal?"

(circumspect)

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 every other time I enter the world of women, I was on my own.

(look apprehensively at boob)

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. You can't just go and put your hand on it. 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. Women would laugh at me for being inept.

I checked again. There were no women in sight.

(look at audience)

I was safe. I put my hand ... gently (swallow in fear) ... on the rubber boob, to get a sense of it. It was ... firm ... and rubbery.

I started to gently knead the rubber boob. It felt completely homogeneous; I couldn't find any lumps at all. If anyone had been looking, it would have been obvious that I was a novice and it was my very first time checking a breast. I was just fumbling around and without a clue what I was doing.

(fumble around, looking clueless)

Just then, a woman appeared behind my right shoulder, inches from me.

(pull back your hand, like you were a naughty boy)

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, first 3 times as the hawk, the rest as me.)

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 rubber 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.

(look like you're having trouble keeping your hand to yourself)

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. Tomorrow every woman in town would know how inept men are.

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 be spending 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? Lump number one.

I moved through the rubber boob, squeezing it hard between my fingers, looking for more ball bearings. The hawk moaned again, 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. Lump number two.

Now that I could recognise a hard lump, I squeezed my way through the

rubber boob again without finding any more. I'd found all the hard lumps.

Now what?

(look puzzled, scratch head)

What if there were soft lumps with similar firmness to the rubber boob?

I worked my way slowly through the rubber boob again, this time squeezing gently and looking for subtle changes in firmness. I found a slightly harder spot the size of a crouton. Lump number three.

The hawk was agitated. She shifted from foot to foot, behind me, 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. Lump number four.

By now I knew this rubber 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 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 rubber boob was as real as I had. I worked my way through the rubber boob, pushing down hard with my thumb, finding a flat lump against the chest. Lump number five.

That was it. If there were any more, I wasn't going to find them. I'd done what I could.

(anxious)

I looked up at the guy. "how'd I do?"

(loong pause, look anxious)

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

(at the festival, the guy was quite flustered, like "err, we didn't expect anyone to get them all, it's been so long since anyone has got this many, that I can't really remember how many there are in there, yes you got them all, I don't think anyone else did this today.")

(turn to the hawk)

...

(at this point I was quite intimidated by the hawk)

(big pause, then go from being put out, to cocky, to inquisitive, to

friendly. Don't speak till people stop laughing)

(turn to audience)

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

(turn to hawk)

There I was, face to face with an empowered feminist. Who was she? Why had she taken an interest in me?

(turn to audience)

We'd only met minutes beforehand, when without hesitation, she'd stepped forward and publically declared an interest in me, standing by my side.

(turn to hawk)

Who was this fair maiden, this princess, this angel, who'd stood at my side through all my trials?

(turn to audience)

For her, I'd faced down and fought fire breathing dragons. For her, I'd swum mighty torrents. For her, I'd climbed icy mountains. For her, I had proven my valour; I was prepared to save her life.

She knew a lot about me, already. If we'd been dating, it would have taken her months to find out this much about me. It was her turn to lay her cards on the table or we would never see each other again. She should pick out a flower from her hair

(take out flower from hair, curtsy, present flower to brave knight)

and present it to me

"well done brave knight"

... and then take her leave ... or ... she could just stand there, looking me in the eye. In that case, I'd ask if she'd like to share a frozen yoghurt.

(look at her again, in a friendly manner, as if hoping for a positive response)

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 once 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?"

(as the guy, shake head saying no)

I didn't even get a booby prize.

As far as I can tell, I was the only male that day, that approached the women's health collective table. We weren't welcome.

Men want all women, not just our companions, to be healthy, happy and living your own lives. We're just as interested in women's health as women are. Our problem is that the information isn't as readily available to us. I hope someday that men will be seen as partners for women and 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.

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 chest), it would seem threatening to a woman in the audience.

This story has two points.

The obvious one is the irony of a table run by a 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. It is pitiful that an organisation like the women's health collective, is setup this way.

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?" Yes I did. But this story is about my heart, not my head. I thought this would be obvious, but apparently 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 communicating in a low bandwidth situation in a way that both parties treat each other with respect. We all know that most offers to engage in dialogue 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 moment. It's like you're on a hike and you have the rare occasion where you meet someone. 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 in your life 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.

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.

Attempts at high bandwidth communication early on will be seen as being forward or clueless. 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 certainly was prepared to do so. I'd been training 20yrs for this moment. If that's all it takes, then I'll do it. I did it and a week later 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 either.

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. In reality, I knew that this girl was not self conscious about being seen anywhere. I didn't know how to react. I reacted with complete disbelief, 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 (much later), I was impressed to see how graceful 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. The only males left are the descendants of those who were prepared to fight. The others didn't pass on their DNA. Politicians use men's willingness to fight and die for their freedom, and the freedom of the women and children at home, to further their own personal agendas, tainting the honour of all men.

If you don't believe that women have no understanding of why men are prepared to go to war, show me a passage in a book by a feminist, where she thanks men for defending her and her 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 about men, 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.

Not one woman, feminist or otherwise, has ever thanked me for being prepared to die in Vietnam, to save the women and children of Australia. I admit I wasn't looking forward to the possibility of dying or being severely injured. I was fortunate enough to serve in a role that didn't take me out of the country, but I did accept that it was my duty to my country and my society. It was only later that I realised that my country didn't care about me, and was prepared to send me to die in a rice paddy in Vietnam, a death that would not have helped Australia or anybody in Vietnam.

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 asymmetry 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 on the part of the male 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. In 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? What if she had other virtues and her misunderstanding of the situation could be fixed? If you're performing, you don't 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. One of you has to be the person who lays their cards on the table first. In the case of the performer, you have to perform first. At the women's health collective table, I first had to be willing to be tested.

As a male, it seems that I have to initiate the interactions. From talking to females, it seems that they send signals that the males miss. The female's signals look too much like standard polite conversation to the males. Females think they're initiating too. Naomi Wolf talks about how women see themselves as having to do all the heavy lifting in relationships (eg book a table at a restaurant, for an anniversary dinner).

It would have been difficult for the hawk to acknowledge me passing the test, but at the same time indicate no personal interest in me. In the sketch I had her doing this by handing me a flower from her hair, curtsying, saying "well done brave knight" and taking her leave. In the confusion of the moment, it's likely I would have wondered if this was an invitation for me to declare a personal interest in her. One of the problems is that in the US, people never see each other again and are rarely connected through common acquaintances. In Australia, it's likely that the hawk and I would run into each other again ("oh, it's you, haha"). We would have an opportunity to try another round of low bandwidth communication. In the US, you only get one attempt; connecting in a one-shot interaction is difficult.

In the case of the women's health collective table, the hawk tested me and I passed. But she didn't understand what had happened and she threw away the results (she actually 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 save her life, and 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 woman, unless she's in her heart.

Something else that struck me was the number of people who asked why I was even interested in women's health at all. I'm not just interested in women's health. I also want women (and people) to clean their teeth, get vaccinations, eat well, exercise, drive safely and get regular sleep. No-one asks why I'm interested in those things.

After one presentation a woman with a PhD, my age (so she would have seen the same posters as I did) and knowledgeable about public health, said she didn't remember partners being included in educational material about finding lumps in breasts. Being a woman, she may have ignored that part of the information. I wasn't anywhere that I would be reading material directed at women. Being a scientist and reading scientific journals, it's likely that I read about public health efforts to screen for breast cancer and that getting women to examine themselves either by themselves or with partners, was not working. I expect my information came through the academic world, rather than posters at bus stops.