

The Housewife's Moment of Truth

By *Jane O'Reilly*



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Last June, 40 people were lying on a floor in Aspen, Colorado, floating free and uneasy on the indoor/outdoor carpet, eyes closed, being led through the first phase of a “Workshop in Approaching Unisexuality.” It would turn out later that the aim of the exercise was not to solve the problem of who does what and to whom, but to reveal to the participants that adjectives such as warm, violent, soft, timid, peaceful, and aggressive are not necessarily definitions for male or female.

We closed our eyes and cleared our minds. Slowly we perceived a lake in the distance, and as we walked toward it, the surface became smooth as a mirror into which we could look and see our reflection. There was no reflection. Infinitely slowly, we began to evolve into the animal that most expressed our own ideas of ourselves—of our sensual selves. Minutes passed and we became aware of the other animals around us. At last we opened our eyes and those

animals that felt like it did whatever seemed natural. Most of the women twittered or purred. Most of the men growled, or attempted to wag tails. I was a cat, black, with a lovely long tail, sitting under a red geranium in a sunny window. We formed groups in our part of the conference-room forest, and told each other what we had become.

“I was a snake,” said a beautiful young woman, a professional designer. “As I was moving through the grass, enjoying my slithering, curving progress, I realized I had no fangs. No bite. I couldn’t even hiss. My only protection was that I could change color in reaction to the people that passed by. I started to go through my garden and I saw that there were panthers draped over all the lawn furniture. I went into my house, and there were panthers everywhere, filling every chair, curled up in groups in all the rooms. They were eating, rather elegantly, and no one paid any attention to me, even when I asked if they wanted anything more to eat. I was interested, but I was different, and finally I withdrew.”

The women in the group looked at her, looked at each other, and ... click! A moment of truth. The shock of recognition. Instant sisterhood. “You became a *housewife*,” we said, excited, together, turning to the men to see if they understood. “She is describing a housewife. Do you know that?”

“Hmm, yes, well, uh ...” they said, sensitized for the morning, but eager to recount their own stories of becoming spotted leopards in green forests, of turning to griffins with human heads who know and see all. The next time, or perhaps the time after that, they will recognize the click! of recognition, that parenthesis of truth around a little thing that completes the puzzle of reality in women’s minds—the moment that brings a gleam to our eyes and means the revolution has begun.

“The women in the group looked at each other, and click! The shock of recognition... One little click turns on a thousand others”
Those clicks are coming faster and faster. They were nearly audible last summer, which was a very angry summer for American women. Not redneck-angry from screaming because we are so frustrated and unfulfilled-angry, but clicking-things-into-place-angry, because we have suddenly and shockingly perceived the basic disorder in what has been believed to be the natural order of things.

One little click turns on a thousand others. I had been sitting in that Aspen room, feeling a very liberated cat—alone on my window sill, self-sufficient and self-enclosed, able to purr or scratch as I chose. I was fooling myself. If my

free-association had had any connection with my actual life, I would have evolved as a pig. But I followed the pattern of my socialization: cued by the word *sensual*, I became a nice, domestic cat, sitting under a healthy well-watered geranium, watching the sunlight fall through a clean window, over a dust-free window sill, across a polished floor. The room was cozy, with a tea tray by the fire. In another five minutes of meditating evolution, I would have jumped off the window sill and started curling around the leg of a dog.

In fact, parables are unnecessary for recognizing the blatant absurdity of everyday life. Reality is lesson enough. In Houston, Texas, a friend of mine stood and watched her husband step over a pile of toys on the stairs, put there to be carried up. “Why can’t you get this stuff put away?” he mumbled. Click! “You have two hands,” she said, turning away.

Last summer I got a letter, from a man who wrote: “I do not agree with your last article, and I am canceling my wife’s subscription.” The next day I got a letter from his wife saying, “*I am not cancelling my subscription.*” Click!

On Fire Island my weekend hostess and I had just finished cooking breakfast, lunch, and washing dishes for both. A male guest came wandering into the kitchen just as the last dish was being put away and said, “How about something to eat?” He sat down, expectantly, and started to read the paper. Click! “You work all week,” said the hostess, “and *I work all week, and if you want something to eat, you can get it, and wash up after it yourself.*”

In New York last fall, my neighbors—named Jones—had a couple named Smith over for dinner. Mr. Smith kept telling his wife to get up and help Mrs. Jones. Click! Click! Two women radicalized at once.

A woman I know in St. Louis, who had begun to enjoy a little success writing a grain company’s newsletter, came home to tell her husband about lunch in the executive dining room. She had planned a funny little anecdote about the deeply humorous pomposity of executives, when she noticed her husband rocking with laughter. “Ho ho, my little wife in an executive dining room.” Click!

“I do not agree with your last article, and I am cancelling my wife’s subscription”

Last August, I was on a boat leaving an island in Maine. Two families were with me, and the mothers were discussing the troubles of cleaning up after a rental summer. “Bob cleaned up the bathroom for me, didn’t you honey?” she confided, gratefully patting her husband’s knee. “Well, what the hell, it’s

vacation,” he said, fondly. The two women looked at each other, and the queerest change came over their faces. “I got up at six this morning to make the sandwiches for the trip home from this ‘vacation,’” the first one said. “So I wonder why I’ve thanked him at least six times for cleaning the bathroom?” Click! Click!

Attitudes are expressed in semantic equations that simply turn out to be two languages; one for men and another for women. One morning a friend of mine told her husband she would like to hire a baby sitter so she could get back to her painting. “Maybe when you start to make money from your pictures, then we could think about it,” said her husband. My friend didn’t stop to argue the inherent fallacy in his point—how could she make money if no one was willing to free her for work? She suggested that, instead of hiring someone, he could help with the housework a little more. “Well, I don’t know, honey,” he said, “I guess sharing the housework is all right if the wife is really contributing something, brings in a salary... .” For a terrible minute my friend thought she would kill her husband, right there at breakfast, in front of the children. For ten years, she had been covering furniture, hanging wallpaper, making curtains and refinishing floors so that they could afford the mortgage on their apartment. She had planned the money-saving menus so they could afford the little dinners for prospective clients. She had crossed town to save money on clothes so the family could have a new hi-fi. All the little advances in station—the vacations, the theater tickets, the new car—had been made possible by her crafty, endless, worried manipulation of the household expenses. “I was under the impression,” she said, “that I *was* contributing something. Evidently my life’s blood is simply a non-deductible expense.”

In suburban Chicago, the party consisted of three couples. The women were a writer, a doctor and a teacher. The men were all lawyers. As the last couple arrived, the host said, jovially, “With a roomful of lawyers, we ought to have a good evening.” Silence. Click! “What are we?” asked the teacher. “Invisible?”

In an office, a political columnist, male, was waiting to see the editor-in-chief. Leaning against a doorway, the columnist turned to the first woman he saw and said, “Listen, call Barry Brown and tell him I’ll be late.” Click! It wasn’t because she happened to be an editor herself that she refused to make the call.

In the end, we are all housewives, the natural people to turn to when there is something unpleasant, inconvenient or inconclusive to be done. It will not do for women who have jobs to pretend that society’s ills will be cured if all women are gainfully employed. In Russia, 70 per cent of the doctors and 20 per cent of the construction workers are women, but women still do *all* the

housework. Some revolution. As the Russian women's saying goes, it simply freed us to do twice the work.

It will not do for women who are mostly housewives to say that Women's Liberation is fine for women who work, but has no relevance for them. Equal pay for equal work is only part of the argument—usually described as “the part I'll go along with.”

We are all housewives. We would prefer to be persons. That is the part they *don't* go along with.

“That broad ...” begins a male guest who Hasn't Thought.

“Woman,” corrects the hostess, smiling meaningfully over her coffeepot.

“Oh, no,” groans the guest. “Don't tell me you believe in this Women's Lib stuff!”

“Yes,” says the hostess.

“Well, I'll go along with some of it, equal pay for equal work, that seems fair enough,” he concedes. Uneasy now, he waits for the male hoots of laughter, for the flutter of wives rushing to sit by their husbands at the merest breath of the subject of Women's Liberation. But that was three or four years ago. Too many moments have clicked in the minds of too many women since then. This year the women in the room have not moved to their husbands' sides; they have ... solidified. A gelid quality settles over the room. The guest struggles on.

“You can't tell me Women's Lib means I have to wash the dishes, does it?”

“Yes.”

They tell us we are being petty. The future improvement of civilization could not depend on who washes the dishes. Could it? Yes. The liberated society—with men, women and children living as whole human beings, not halves divided by sex roles—depends on the steadfast search for new solutions to just such apparently trivial problems, on new answers to tired old questions. Such questions as:

Denise works as a waitress from 6 a.m. to 3 p.m. Her husband is a cabdriver, who moonlights on weekends as a doorman. They have four children. When her husband comes home at night, he asks: “*What's for dinner?*”

Jonathan and Joanne are both doctors. They have identical office hours. They come home in the evening to a dinner cooked by the housekeeper. When they go to bed, he drops his clothes on the floor and she picks them up. In the morning he asks: “*Where is my pink and orange striped shirt?*”

“We are all housewives, the people to turn to when there is something unpleasant to be done”

In moments of suburban strife; Fred often asks his wife, “Why haven’t you mended my shirt and lubricated the car? *What else have you got to do but sit around the house all day?*”

How dare he ask such a question? What sort of bizarre social arrangement is post-industrial-revolution marriage? What kind of relationship involves two people sharing their lives without knowing, or apparently caring, what the other does all day?

According to insurance companies, it would cost Fred \$8,000 to \$9,000 a year to replace Alice’s services if she died. Alice, being an average ideal suburban housewife, works 99.6 hours a week—always feeling there is too much to be done and always guilty because it is never quite finished. Besides, her work doesn’t seem important. After all, Fred is paid for doing whatever it is he does. Abstract statistics make no impact on Alice. “My situation is different,” she says. Of course it is. All situations are different. But sooner or later she will experience—in a blinding click—a moment of truth. She will remember that she once had other interests, vague hopes, great plans. She will decide that the work in the house is less important than reordering that work so she can consider her own life.

The problem is, what does she do then?

The first thing we all do is argue. We present our case: It is unfair that we should bear the whole responsibility for the constant schema of household management; that this burden should be implanted, inescapable, like Mrs. Ramsay’s boeuf bourguignon, in our minds.

Soon, we find out that argument serves no practical motivational purpose. We may get agreement, but we will never get cooperation or permission. Rebuttals may begin at the lowest level: “It is a woman’s job to wash dishes.” Men at a higher stage of enlightenment may argue, “Why do we need a washing machine? I wash my socks and we send everything out.” They simply cannot understand that we are the ones who must gather and list and plan even for the laundry we send out. It is, quite simply, *on our minds*. And *not* on theirs.

Evenings of explanation and understanding will still end with, “Honey, do I have any clean shorts for tomorrow?” Most women will decide that it is not worth making an issue out of shorts.

In fact, underwear is as good a place to begin as anywhere. Last summer I carried the underwear downstairs, put it in the hamper, sorted it, washed and dried it, folded it, carried it upstairs, and put it away. One day, I decided that as an act of extreme courage I would not carry the laundry upstairs. I put it on the couch in the room with the television set. The family moved it to one side of the couch so they could sit down. I left it there. I put more on the couch. They piled it up. They began to dress off the couch. I began to avoid the television room. At last, guilty and angry, my nerve failed and I carried the laundry upstairs. No one noticed. Out of that experience, I formulated a few rules, which I intend to follow as soon as I finish the painful process of thinking about the assumptions that make them necessary.

(1) *Decide what housework needs to be done. Then cut the list in half.* It is no longer necessary to prove ourselves by being in motion all day and all night. Beds must be made and food cooked, but it is unfair to demand that the family share the work if your standards include cooking like Julia Child and bouncing dimes on the bedspread. Beware of useless and self-defeating standards. It is preposterous and not unusual for a woman to feel her house must look as though no one lived there. Who’s looking? Who cares?

(2) *Decide what you will and will not do.* Keep firmly in mind the notion of personal maintenance as an individual responsibility. If children cannot put away their clothes and therefore cannot find them and have to go to school looking like ragpickers—well, presumably they will learn from experience. Their appearance does not make *you* a bad person. (If you can acknowledge and act on that fact, you are becoming liberated.) If you spend four or five hours a day driving your children places, ask yourself why. Are they cripples? Are there no safe streets they can walk along? Why? Seizing responsibility from children has been women’s way to compensate for their own lack of responsibility for themselves, and it has resulted in two generations of non-adults.

(3) *Make a plan and present it as final.* There will, of course, be democratic argument, but it is only fair to state your purpose. Not that anyone will pay attention. They will laugh nervously and expect life to go on as usual. Do not be distracted by sophisticated arguments, such as, “Well, let’s take the relative value of our days.” Yes. Let’s. When your husband sits down at his desk after dinner, to use his brain, do you murmur, “Poor darling,” as you wash up, tidy

the living room, start the wash and check the bathroom for clean towels? Why? A game of role reversal can be most enlightening. A wife who figures out that his important business meeting is no different from her P.T.A. committee meeting may opt for equal hours—and quit her own work at five o'clock.

Another diversionary remark is: “But honey, this isn’t a business agreement. This is a home. It is a question of helping each other reach fulfillment.” In my home, when I am working against a deadline, I sit in front of a typewriter and shout, “More tea!” The whole family hustles in with more tea. I call out, “Go to bed,” “Get some lamb chops.” It is an emergency situation and they all spring to, helping me fulfill myself. But *I* am still in charge of remembering to get the lamb chops. It is a problem that may not be solved in my lifetime.

“You can’t tell me Women’s Lib means I have to wash the dishes, does it?” Almost equally difficult is deciding who does what. Men will always opt for things that get finished and stay that way—putting up screens, but not planning menus. Some find washing dishes a peaceful, meditative experience. It has to be worked out. The important thing is to get the argument away from philosophy and onto assigned chores.

(4) *Think revolutionary thoughts.* The nineteenth century ended 72 years ago, but we are still trying to arrange our households according to that “ideal” image of family life. Think of something new. I know a man and woman who decided to stop eating dinner. She had been rushing around putting children to bed, and then laying on a candlelit dinner with three kinds of food on the plate for her husband. They liked chatting at dinner. He helped clean up. They never finished before ten. But one night they discovered that both were dreaming of long cozy evenings reading by the fire. So they have skipped the ritual feast—and replaced it with sandwiches. They get up earlier and have family talks at breakfast. Who knows what daring innovations may follow? He may demand an end to success based on overtime. Both may demand less homework so the children can assume some responsibilities.

This is, after all, part of the revolution we are talking about. The woman in Aspen who imagined herself a snake happened to be a nursing mother. One day a complaining note appeared on the conference bulletin board saying: “Why are there crying babies in the tent? Signed, Father of Five.” The conference was discussing designs for the future, and Father of Five learned that in the future, children, and their mothers, will no longer be quarantined. *Someone* does not have to take care of the children, *some* *two* will share them.

(5) *Never give in.* Empty one dishwasher, and it leads to a lifetime of emptying dishwashers. Remember that nothing will ever get done by anyone else if you do it. If you are the only person who worries about it, perhaps it isn't worth worrying about. If it is very important to you that you not live in a sty, then you must persuade everyone else that what is important to you counts.

It is very hard not to give in. One evening recently two men came to our house for the weekend. "When shall we eat?" they asked, beaming. "Whenever you want," I said, bravely. "I'm not cooking, I'm working tonight." They cooked, while I held myself in my chair by an incredible effort of will, the words blurring before my determined eyes. The next day, I expiated my guilt by going the whole route, including homemade bread. "Ah!" they said. "How wonderful! You are a real woman. And working, too."

(6) *Do not feel guilty.* I have never met a woman who did not feel guilty. We can post signs in our hearts and on our walls saying: "It is not wrong to inconvenience my family—it is making us all responsible, ego-strong adults." But when a man we are attached to goes out with a button off his coat, we—not he—feel feckless. The only near-cure is to have something more interesting to think about. Even if "something to do" means going back to easy courses in school—back to the point where we abdicated for marriage—it is a beginning, and we are older now and will learn rapidly, because at least we know we want things some other way.

(7) *Expect regression. And remember, the next step is human liberation.* The slightest mischance in my life makes me want to fling myself into the protection of someone else's bank account. And yet I still speak of "our money" as clearly separated from "my money." Occasionally, men become liberated and it is a dreadful shock. "I'm not going to work this year; I need to think," announced a friend's husband. She had spent seven years in his care and keeping and then, as she put it, "Finally I get my own business going and *he* wants to lie around all day." Why not? Women who say, "I like my freedom—I have my day organized and I can do what I like with my time," forget that men are entitled to some of that freedom. They are also prisoners of the rigid structure of their roles and jobs.

"Men do not want equality at home. A strong woman is a threat, an inconvenience, and she can be replaced"

I cannot imagine anything more difficult than incurring the kind of domestic trauma I describe. It requires the conscious loss of the role we have been taught, and its replacement by a true identity. And what if we succeed? What if we become liberated women who recognize that our guilt is reinforced by the

marketplace, which would have us attach our identity to furniture polish and confine our deepest anxieties to color coordinating our toilet paper and our washing machines? What if we overcome our creeping sense of something unnatural when our husbands approach “our” stoves? What if we don’t allow ourselves to be treated as people with nothing better to do than wait for repairmen and gynecologists? What if we finally learn that we are not defined by our children and our husbands, but by ourselves? Then we will be able to control our own lives, able to step out into the New Tomorrow. But the sad and solemn truth is that we may have to step out alone.

The more we try, and argue, and change, the more we will realize that the male ego will be the last thing in this world to change. And the *last* place it will change is at home.

Some women pride themselves on the intransigence of their men. I have always taken pride in the liberated attitudes of mine. And yet, last weekend, when I buckled my seat belt in the car, he growled: “You don’t have to do that with *me* driving.” My God! We were back to Start; he was threatened by my safety measure. How do we argue with feelings like that? With the constant demands to bolster and boost egos grown fat and fragile, with the blocks and jealousies and petty meannesses that drain off our energies? Too often the only way to find ourselves is to leave.

Men’s resistance is more subtle than simply leaving the dishes unwashed for a month. A woman I know was married for seventeen years to a man who threatened to smash her sculpture whenever they fought. He complained continuously about the cost of her tools, he laughed at her work in public. When she finally left, she was dazed to discover that the critics found her work excellent.

I have a friend in Cleveland who left high school to marry. She raised two children and worked nights in her husband’s office. When she went back to college, it happened mysteriously that they had an exhausting fight the night before every exam. When she still got high marks, he took credit for encouraging her.

I know a writer whose husband never once read her work. She visited an analyst who declared her role conflict a character defect. Her husband told the analyst he wouldn’t mind his wife’s inadequacies so much if she did something. “But she does write,” said the doctor. “Oh. That,” said the husband bitterly, dismissing the work he would eventually feel reflected credit on him, but only after their divorce.

No, the question of housework is not a trivial matter to be worked out the day before we go on to greater things. Men do not want equality at home. A strong woman is a threat, someone to be jealous of. Most of all, she is an inconvenience, and she can be replaced. They like things as they are. It's pleasanter.

I had never realized how seductive the role of master is until the other day. I was watering a plant, and the water began to run on the floor. I stood where I was and moaned about the puddle until the live-in babysitter dropped what she was doing and brought me the rag it would have been easier for me to get. She, at least, was not saying, "Don't worry darling, let me take care of it." But my excuse was ... I have more important things to think about than housework.