

# Independence from the Sexual Revolution

By Dana Densmore

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Dana Densmore has been active in the women's movement in Boston since June, 1968. She helped start *A Journal of Female Liberation* (No More Fun and Games, The Female State), and her main energies have been devoted to it, as she believes that the dissemination of ideas and analysis is the most critical need in making the feminist revolution. Her second priority is self-defense. She has studied Tae Kwon Do for two and a half years, the last six months with Jayne West's Feminist Tae Kwon Do School. She is a member of Cell 16, which puts out the Journal, and is in a feminist study group.

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We human beings are not creatures who spring from the earth, our integrity round and tight, our will free and objective. We are not only influenced by what goes on around us, we are conditioned and created by it.

Desires and even needs can be created. We are all familiar with the ingenious techniques of Madison Avenue to generate insecurity in order to offer their product or service as a means of assuaging the insecurity. The most effective techniques zero in on our fears of not being socially acceptable, not being loved, not being sexually attractive.

The seeds of this insecurity exist already in a society whose ideology of individualism isolates people and throws the blame for all maladjustment and failure onto the individual. We constantly hear the variations on this theme. It is used to avoid admitting that anything could be wrong with the way our society is set up. "If you can't make a satisfactory adjustment to life, it's your own problem: perhaps some professional help is in order." "Don't try to change the world; you'd better free your mind instead."

And we hear it thrown at us in response to the threat of female liberation. "You should be intimidated by being put down by men." "Leave your family if it's so oppressive." "If you don't like the way your lover treats you, you can get out of bed." "It's your own fault if you don't get good jobs; you let yourself be discouraged, you took the unchallenging, feminine courses of study in school."

The assumption implicit in all these things is the individualist ideology that if you are unable to do something which is theoretically possible (or which is thought to be theoretically possible) it is because of a personal hang-up and consequently you have no legitimate gripe. This isolates people and tends to make them insecure and unself-confident. They often can be brought to despise themselves because they see in themselves so many supposed weaknesses and psychological problems that prevent them from being happy, well-adjusted, and effective. This is a characteristic of our society and isolates all of us, not just the women. (However, women, being the most oppressed, are forced to blame themselves the most for their impotence and thus despise themselves the most and are most isolated and afraid and anxious that no one will love them.)

The very isolation the individualist ideology imposes makes us desire even more to be loved and accepted, and fear even more being unlovable. But we cannot escape our fears of being unlovable. "Who would want me?" we ask; "I have all these hang-ups." The solution offered to all this is often to open yourself up until you can merge selflessly with another person. In many cases it is explicitly sex. But the solutions all point to sex one way or another. Sex becomes magic, assumes a life of its own, making anything interesting, everything worthwhile. It's for this that we spend those hours trying on micro-dresses, loading up with jingle-jangle chains, smoothing on lacy white stockings and Instant Glow Face Gleamer.

It is this that many girls who would be most free to fight in the female liberation struggle are squandering valuable energy pursuing as an indispensable part of their lives. They lavish and dissipate their valuable time and talents and emotional strength on attempts to be attractive to men and to work things out with lovers so that "love" might be less degrading. And too often all they reap is demoralization, damaged egos, emotional exhaustion.

Under the banner of "not denying our sexuality" and pointing to repression in the past when women were denied the right to any pleasure in their bodies at all, many of us now embrace sexuality and its expression completely uncritically. As if present excess could make up for past deprivation. As if even total sexual fulfillment would change anything. Except-- is this true? --except private dead-of-the-night fears that maybe we really are the sexually frustrated, neurotic freaks our detractors accuse us of being. Are we chasing sexual fulfillment so earnestly because we have to prove that our politics are not just a result of our needing a good fuck?

Then there is the issue of orgasms. Among those who were never well-adjusted and womanly enough to psych themselves into an orgasm while being vaginally stimulated by a man, there are some who, when they discover that their shame and misery were not only not unique but in fact extremely common and due to very straightforward anatomical causes, react to this discovery by feeling that they must make it up by demanding all the physical fulfillment they had been providing the men all along and missing themselves.

What we lost wasn't just X many instances of physical pleasure. The suffering that countless women have endured because they were told that if they didn't have vaginal orgasms they were frigid--that they were neurotic and selfish and unwomanly and sexually maladjusted and unable to let go and give and secretly resented the power of their husbands and envied them--this suffering is staggering and heartbreaking.

The liberation of sexual equality and the right to sexual pleasure is the solution for the future. But is there any solution for the past? Is it a solution to go out and collect orgasms in order to make up for all those frustrated, self-loathing years? I say you can never make up for all that suffering, and certainly not through a mere physical sensation. And as for the psychological rewards of getting my due at last, I can feel no triumph in that, especially when I'm still fighting the old habits and old guilts that remain long after the intellect and the will have plunged on.

The worst part about it is that even with perfect sexual fulfillment, mutual guilt-free pleasure, we are still oppressed. After all, some women managed to have vaginal orgasms all along, and they were still oppressed; in fact, that was how you were supposed to *achieve* orgasm --by surrendering completely to the man's will, by loving being a woman and everything that that implied. Sexual relations in the world today (and perhaps in all past ages) are oppressive. The fact that your lover gives you an orgasm changes only one small part of that oppression (namely the part that dictated that you had to see yourself as a creature who was allowed only the muted, sensuous, semi-masochistic pleasure of getting fucked and never the direct active transcendent pleasure of orgasm).

If that were the only injustice, or even the major injustice, done us, we would be very well off indeed. In fact, we would probably be able to bear it without concern, certainly without misery and self-loathing. It's the general oppression and degradation we suffer in the world that causes us to be humiliated in the sex act, as Simone de Beauvoir points out. If it weren't for the sense of inadequacy and impotency we learn from all other aspects of our lives, we *would* kick our lover out of bed if he was arrogant, inconsiderate, or ungentle.

Some men do the dinner dishes every night. That doesn't make their wives free. On the contrary, it's just one more thing she has to feel grateful to him for. He, in the power and glory of his maleness, condescended to do something for her. It will never mean more than that until the basic power relations are changed. As long as men are the superior caste and hold the political power in the class relationship between men and women, it *will* be a favor your lover is doing you, however imperiously you demand it. And beyond that one thing, nothing else need have changed.

But the issue isn't just orgasm. We weren't even allowed to engage in sexual intercourse without giving up social dignity and the respect of men. We weren't allowed to love, to make love, to enjoy making love, even with our *husbands*. Husbands were commanded to love their wives, wives to obey their husbands. It was cruel and insufferably hypocritical.

But whatever we were denied in the past, it cannot be argued that access to sexual pleasure is denied to us now. Our "right" to enjoy our own bodies has not only been bestowed upon us; it is almost a duty. In fact, things have been turned around to the point where the "fact" (actually a smear device) that we do *not* engage in sex is whispered about and used by men to discourage "their" women from having anything to do with us. This is one development that makes me laugh out loud whenever I think about it. What would "Ask Beth" think about that! How can men pull this off with a straight face? They must be terrified indeed at the thought of losing their power to define what is proper for proper women. (For that power is exactly what we are challenging.)

The right that is a duty. Sexual freedom that includes no freedom to decline sex, to decline to be defined at every turn by sex. Sex becomes a religion, existing independently of the individuals who share its particular physical consummation. The media totally bombard us with it. Sex is everywhere. It's forced down our throats. It's the great sop that keeps us in our place. The big lift that makes our dreary worlds interesting. Everywhere we are sexual objects, and our own enjoyment just enhances our attractiveness. We are wanted. We wear miniskirts and see-through tops. We're sexy. We're free. We run around and hop into bed whenever we please. This is the self-image we have built up in us by advertising and the media. It's self-fulfilling. And very profitable. It keeps us in our place and feeling lucky about it (the freedom to consume, consume, consume, until we swallow the world). It makes us look as if we're free and active (actively, freely, we solicit sex from men).

And people seem to *believe* that sexual freedom (even when it is only the freedom to actively offer oneself as a willing object) is freedom. When men say to us, "But aren't you already liberated?" what they mean is, "We *said* it was okay for you to let us fuck you, that guilt was neurotic, that chaste makes waste; you're already practically giving it away on the street, what more do you want or could you stomach?" The unarticulated assumption behind this misunderstanding is that women are purely sexual beings, bodies and sensuality, fucking machines. Therefore freedom for women could only mean sexual freedom.

Spiritual freedom, intellectual freedom, freedom from invasions of privacy and the insults of degrading stereotypes--these are appropriate only to men, who care about such things and can appreciate them. Woman, remember, is a sexual being, soft, emotional, expressive, giving, close to the earth, physical, imprisoned by the frightening, disgusting, delicious, all too perishable flesh. For such a creature to presume upon the territory of transcendence is horrifying, unthinkable, polluting the high, pure realms of the will and spirit, where we rise *above* the flesh.

Unfortunately, the oppressed often adopt the psychoses of the ruling class, transformed, sometimes, until they seem no longer vicious and intellectually dishonest projections but a reasonable acceptance of reality (and for the oppressed, reality *is* in a sense what the ruling class believes). So we recognize that we have something of an intellect, and perhaps even use it openly with tolerant or sophisticated men. But we still recognize that insofar as we are also *women*, we are soft, emotional, expressive, giving, close to the earth, ruled at times by our sensuality, our profound, undeniable sexuality.

There are rewards for us in this. In losing ourselves in sexual surrender we bring that masterful, rational, hard, unemotional masculine man to abject, total, frenzied *need* of the flesh he likes to fancy himself above. And there is no question that for a woman sexual love contains as a strong component the desire to become powerful by merging with the powerful. She sees herself as impotent and ineffectual, him as masterful and competent. She longs for that sense of competence and the confidence that comes to him from knowing it's "his world." In the intimacy and ecstasy of sex she seeks to lose herself, become one with him.

Children who are told over and over that they are liars or thieves become liars or thieves. People who are told over and over that they are crazy become crazy. If you are told over and over that you are a being who has profound sexual needs the odds are very good that you will discover that you do. Particularly when other outlets are forbidden or discouraged. Particularly when it is emphasized that those who do *not* feel these needs are frigid, neurotic, sexually maladjusted (which for a woman means *essentially* maladjusted), dried up, barren, to be pitied.

This stigmatized too is self-fulfilling. A woman who cannot enjoy sex, for whatever reason (her husband, it may be, is repulsive to her either because of his style as a lover or because of the contempt with which he treats her out of bed), may become bitter believing she is missing her womanly fulfillment, the great soul-shaking pleasure that would make the rest of the misery of being a woman worthwhile. It's useless to claim that we aren't programmed to desire sex, to reach for it, to need it. Even when we know something is false our conditioning drives us to continue to act it out. In this case it is very difficult even to sort out what is true and what is false.

A woman in her forties wrote to me as follows: "Now I realize all that about its being an instinct, but I think there's something more to the story. When I reflect on my own past experience, I can rarely find a time when I was driven to it from inside need. I'm not saying if I didn't have it for a long period (which hasn't ever happened to me), I might not feel the instinct, but I'm saying we need some evidence of just how much because I suspect that even the minimum is far, far less than is believed. I know I talked myself into most sex probably looking for the 'earth-moving orgasm' which maybe was a hoax anyway. What if no one had given me those words with which I talked myself into it? I begin to distrust it all. Reminds me of that line from *Notes From the First Year*: sometimes you'd rather play ping pong."

No doubts there are some innate needs, or at least propensities. But a propensity can be culturally built into an obsession or culturally repressed, but sometimes simply by never inculcating it. I personally suspect that some form of sex urge may turn out to be innate. Human beings killed off before they had an elaborate social organization institutionalizing sexual intercourse and before full-page color ads in magazines urged women to "Be Some Body."

And if it turns out that this urge is not that strong, it might still be worth keeping (i.e., reinforcing) if it affords people physical pleasure or pleasures of intimacy. But it should be taken for granted that it must be pleasurable to *both parties*, always; which means it must never be institutionalized by law or culture. And if it is a basic "drive" felt by both men and women, there is no need to institutionalize it to ensure its survival.

What we "see" when we look inside may correspond very poorly with reality. We're saturated with a particular story about what we need inside. Moreover, we've been saturated with this all our lives, and it has conditioned us and made us what we are. We *feel* that we're in sex, but the issue is very confused. What is it we really need? Is it orgasms? Intercourse? Intimacy with another human being? Stroking? Companionship? Human kindness? And do we "need" it physically or psychologically?

Intercourse, in the sense of the physical act which is the ultimate aim of so much anxiety, plotting, and consuming, is not necessarily the thing we are really longing for, any more than, in the more obvious cases, it is the consumer products advertising builds up neurotic longing for. Physically, there is a certain objective tension and release, at least for a man, when excitation proceeds to orgasm. With a woman even this physical issue is much less clear: most women don't have orgasms at all, and very few always have them. I think we might all agree that *that* isn't why we go to bed with a man. In any case an orgasm for a woman isn't a release in the same sense that it is for a man, since we are capable of an indefinite number, remaining aroused the whole time, limited only by exhaustion. The release we feel, therefore, is psychological. A psychological tension to get this man, to possess him in a certain intimate sense, is released when we "get him" through his orgasm. We then enjoy the pleasure of closeness because *he* is more open to us (provided *he* is open, and doesn't just turn over and go to sleep, or jump up to attend to something else on his mind, his attention easily distracted now).

Without denying that sex can be pleasurable, I suggest that the real thing we seek is closeness, merging, perhaps a kind of oblivion of self that dissolves the terrible isolation of individualism. The pleasure argument doesn't impress me very much. A lot of things are pleasurable without our getting the idea that we can't live without them, even in a revolutionary context. I can think of certain foods, certain music, certain drugs, whose physical pleasurable compares favorably even to good sex.

Moreover, destruction of the sense of isolation through communication, community, human kindness, and common cause are all available from other women as you work together in the struggle against oppression. With other women you are more than friends, you are sisters. It would be a mistake to brush off too quickly the spiritual strength to be gained from sisterhood, or overestimate the solace in the arms of a man, just because that is, traditionally, women's only resort.

What I want to suggest is not that sex is by its *nature* evil and destructive, but that it is not an absolute physical need: the assumption that it *is* an absolute physical need is evil, and the patterns of behavior that grow out of that assumption are destructive. Most of us recognize that sexual relationships often turn out to be evil and destructive in a society where dehumanization, exploitation, and oppression of women is so deeply embedded into the culture. What we seek is the exception, the rare case where we have, or think for a little while that we might have, the right guy and the right circumstances.

But even in love we are limited when we believe that we must screw to express love. We are programmed to think that not only is sex the only way to demonstrate or prove our love, it is the only (or best) way to express it. And in this dangerous and alienating society we are always very anxious to demonstrate, to prove, and to express our love, and to have the affections of our lover demonstrated, proved, and expressed to us. For men this is doubly compelling because sex for a man is the only or best way to prove or express his virility, both by the demonstration of sexual potency and by the imposing of his will on her.

To the extent that this is true, then, we are conditioned to that one mode of expression and turn to it uncritically. But we need to develop new nonsexual ways of relating to people, to men as well as women. The obsession with genital sexuality, and screwing in particular, cheats us out of a world of rich possibilities. We think that love is sex love, genital sex love. Therefore we can't love women or men we aren't sexually involved with or interested in. Affection too is identified with genital sex and except for children, pets, and a few close relatives, all physical affection must be limited to our assigned male sex partner. Even communication, human contact and understanding, is assumed to be available only in the intimacy of genital sexual contact.

All desire for love, companionship, physical affection, communication, and human kindness therefore translate to us into a desire for sex. This is pathetically narrow, impossibly limiting. Especially since it can be asked with some justice whether it is very common to obtain this communication, this human kindness, this companionship and affection we seek. It's what we want, all right, but we must ask of it, as we ask of the patent medicine which promises just what we want: does it really do that? And if not, perhaps it is, in practice, a fraud.

In fact, as women have frequently observed, sex can be a fast way to ruin a good relationship. Either because the man just can't treat her as an equal when he's so personally involved, or because he doesn't know how to treat a woman equally in a sexual relationship, or treat her as a secretly or subconsciously after the conquest all along.

Another problem is that men have a different view of love and sex than women do and most women do not know this. They assume they are making equal and similar investments. Studies have been made of what men and women think love is, what love means to them. Affection and companionship are first on the women's lists, with security and other elements following, and sex turns up as number 8. Men reverse this with sex first. Companionship and affection are secondary goals for men. This orientation of men, coupled with the set of cultural attitudes (and fears) men have towards women, make the sexual love relationship a poor place for a woman to seek communication and human understanding.

However, as long as we are able to make clear demands of a relationship, to insist that the man fulfill certain requirements or we shall do without him, thank you, then we can keep our heads above water. These requirements might be: (1) He is sexually interested in me, not just interested in sex with me the one who is closest at hand. (2) He is not indifferent to me aside from the sex; he has tender feelings, loyalty, perhaps even love for me. (3) He respects me as a person, is willing to discuss things with me, does not browbeat me, lecture me, or disparage my opinion or projects.

It is when we are not free, or do not feel free, to make such a set of minimum demands on a relationship that serious trouble arises. And we are not free when we are in the grip of the false conditioning that decrees that we need sex. We are not free if we believe the culture's ominous warnings that we will become "horny" (what a callous, offensive word) and frustrated and neurotic and finally shrivel up into prunes and have to abandon hope of being good, creative, effective people. We are not free if we believe that we, like the lower animals, are driven by something which is not only instinctual but mindlessly, hopelessly, ineluctable. If we believe all that, then, due to the rarity of good, healthy, constructive relationships between men and women in the world today, we will be forced to accept, even seek out, evil and destructive relationships where we are used, and accept that humiliation in return for the privilege of "using him."

If it were true that we needed sex from men, it would be a great misfortune, one that might almost doom our fight. (Meanwhile, the belief that it is true can serve the same function.) Fortunately, it is not true. When we seek sex it is by conscious, intelligent choice. We wish to experience through intimacy human kindness, communication, back-to-the-womb merging and oblivion, childlike openness. We do it because we think it's the right thing to do. We may be mistaken. We may only think it's the right thing because we think that we will turn into neurotic bitches if we don't do it. But we *don't* do it because we are sexual beings who cannot "deny our sexuality." According to this argument, to have sexual feelings, or an energy that could be rapidly converted into sexual energy, and yet to choose not to engage in sexual intercourse but rather to expend that energy on something else which seems, at the moment, of higher priority, is to "deny" our sexuality.

This is what men have done to us all along. (They do not apply the same logic to themselves.) Because they only relate to us sexually they conclude that we are just sexual beings. If we then function on any other level, something is seriously out of joint since in effect we are "denying" that we are primarily sexual beings. But in fact, it is only if we are *merely* sexual beings, *exclusively* sexual beings, that choosing to put our energy elsewhere indicates any kind of denial. (The great scientist or artist or writer who puts all his energy in his work is not *denying* anything-- that would be to insult him; he simply feels that the day is only so long and for this particular time his work is the most important thing to him.)

Personally, I recognize that I have sexual feelings. Their exact nature and origin is open to debate, but I have no doubt that there is an objective, physical reality involved at least to some extent. However, I, and I alone will decide what importance these feelings have in my life as a human being. We are not living in an ideal society, and "post-revolutionary" characters or life styles might well hinder revolution or make it impossible. The fact that in a good society women might want to produce children, at least until the perfection of the artificial womb, is no reason for me to take myself out of the struggle by having children now under these conditions. Similarly, the belief that sex would have a place in a good society does not necessarily mean that we must engage in it now. That decision must be based on the objective conditions of the present.

Let me say something about the objective conditions of the present. We are crippled people living in an evil and destructive world. We have a great deal to do beyond the mere business of living. There is much work that needs to be done, and not, by any means, just the work of liberating people and making a revolution. There is the work of rebuilding ourselves, learning to know ourselves and our potentials, learning to respect ourselves, learning to respect and work with other women. We must overcome all the self-destructive patterns we have been taught in a lifetime of being female.

This work of reclaiming ourselves and making a revolution in women's minds in order to free all of us is the most important work. If a particular sexual relationship or encounter is convenient, pleasurable, and pleasurable, if it is not demeaning or possessive or draining in any way, you might decide to choose to invest some of your precious self in it.

But remember how precious your time and your energy and your ego is, and respect yourself enough to insist that the rewards be equal to the investment.

