

Having philosophized all summer about feminist issues I thought I had finally conquered my "feminine" conditioning. Little did I know that my intellectual theorizing would still be difficult to translate into practice. Even the best of concepts is, at times, hard to apply to "reality."

When I completed the "Philosophical Issues of Feminism" course this summer, my eyes had been opened to the subtle ways in which women are still manipulated in today's society (not to mention the obvious ones). It was an affirmation of all I had felt but couldn't quite express. A recent incident, however, made me realize how problematic it is to assert this new-found awareness.

One of my roommates, who teaches English as a second language, had an "end of term" party for her students. The dynamics generated by the vast mix of cultures were positive and cheerful. As the guitar travelled from hand to hand, each of us contributed a song from our own ethnic background. The atmosphere grew more lively with each performance and soon we began to dance. One of the men became particularly insistent on having the women present dance with him. As I was soon to discover, his insistence took on the form of physical aggression.

As one of the hosts, I felt it an obligation not to offend one of the guests. Despite my discomfort, I danced to several songs with the man, shooting desperate glances for help at my friends. Unfortunately, no one responded to my signals and my unease intensified when he began pressing his pelvis against me. At this point I disengaged myself and left to seek refuge in the bathroom. He followed me and pushed his way through the door behind me. Obviously aroused, he tried to kiss me and grabbed at my breasts.

Feeling at a loss and embarrassed by the situation, I didn't want to create a scene, hoping that he would eventually give up his chase. By this time, the guests had dispersed around the apartment. I tried to break free and find safety in the kitchen where most of them had congregated. The man, however, pulled me into one of the bedrooms on the way and shut the door.

Still trying to be diplomatic despite my fear (or, perhaps, because of it) I explained to him that coming from a culture where a woman's role is vastly different than in our society, he may have misinterpreted my consent to dance with him as a provocation. I also said that my objections are serious and shouldn't be taken as a game of "playing hard to get."

His response was a patronizing smile and a nod of the head as he said "oh yes, of course." Then, ignoring my words, he wanted to draw me closer. I finally found the courage to push him away forcefully and hurried out of the room into the kitchen.

The entire incident could not have lasted more than ten minutes but it had felt like hours. My boyfriend came up to me and asked if anything was the matter, sensing my obvious tension. I was furious not only with the man who had assaulted me but also with myself for not standing up to him more defiantly.

So why hadn't I fought this "battle" myself? I still ask myself this question. I could have easily embarrassed the

man by making everyone conscious of the situation or by hurting him physically. Intellectually I was perfectly aware of the fact that he was violating me and I have every right to defend myself whatever the social consequences. Why didn't I? I suspect that somehow both he and I knew that I wouldn't and he took advantage of it by becoming all the more persistent in his pursuit.

He probably also knew that despite my protests and outrage I actually felt guilty that I had maybe done something inadvertently to "lead him on." After all, didn't I return his smile at the start of the evening? Didn't I, at first, enjoy dancing with him at the start of the evening? Of course these arguments are ridiculous. My smile was directed at a new guest of the house not at a potential lover. I accepted the invitation to dance not as a seductive ploy but because I love to dance and would have shared the pleasure with anyone there.

I did nothing to allure or provoke this man, but twenty-four years of conditioning are difficult to overcome. In retrospect, I think that one of the reasons I didn't scream or hit him is that, beyond my intellectual assessment of the situation, was a feeling that I may really owe him something. As ludicrous as it seems, in some men's eyes, friendly and outgoing women embody the seductive temptress.

When my boyfriend asked me why I didn't just "punch the asshole" all I could do was reply that I was afraid to. Women are not taught to fight. Little girls are discouraged from getting involved in any conflict while boys are told to "stand up for themselves." Consequently, when my boyfriend was playing ball, tearing holes in his jeans, and slugging his buddies, I was trying on my mother's dresses, sewing clothes for my dolls and learning how to bake cookies.

I'm now determined to take a self-defense course. I know, however, that my true education will not be in simply acquiring the skill to defend myself physically but in convincing myself that I also have the right to use that skill.

I began calling myself a feminist two years ago, shortly after the Montreal massacre. However, I have actually been a feminist for as long as I can remember.

Recently, I read my diary from the angst-filled days of junior high. Along with the usual babbling about boys, clothes and parties, I found a complaint about how my efforts to go ahead in our math text book were ignored by my teacher. I felt she would have praised my male counterparts for such efforts.

I then thought back to my math teacher in high school who put his hand on my waist when I went to ask him a question about a test. No major horror story. No sexual harassment charges, even in retrospect. But somehow I did not feel he was listening to my question. I knew that I had to work much harder than my male classmates to earn his respect. It always bugged me that he talked to me as if I was a smart alec when I answered in class, or

furthermore, questioned his logic.

A lot of things have bugged me over the years. It bugged me when salesmen called me "Honey." It bugged me when Bob Barker took the elbow of each female contestant to guide her across the stage. It bugged me that I could not play baseball on my street when I was a kid. It bugged me that my legs were never as skinny as the women who modelled bikinis in *Glamour* magazine.

I started talking about the F-word two years ago at a student newspaper conference. I was part of a group establishing a national news campaign about sexism, in response to the Montreal Massacre.

We weren't just talking about violence and women, anger and women among other foreboding topics which I never felt I could relate to, but about feelings. I was surprised and comforted to hear that other women had felt the same way about similar situations with their family, boyfriends and

teachers.

Suddenly, my feelings became validated. So I was not a complete psycho after all. The same things consistently bugged others too.

This is what snagged me. Not saving the world, not standing up for my principles, not reacting against the opposite sex in response to some hellish experiences with men. Just plain-old self healing. When hanging out with feminists, it was okay to talk about what bugged me.

Later, I discovered how this ambiguous philosophy could help me deal with not only things that I found disturbing in the world, but also the aspects of myself with which I was dissatisfied.

It showed me how to accept certain things (e.g. my body) and change what I did not want to accept (e.g. my tendency to never get angry . . . to always assume I did something wrong.)

Admittedly, talking about feminism can get depressing.

There is no avoiding talking about the crux of why the things that bug me exist, and how it causes some extreme consequences. There were times when I felt super-saturated with horrific stories of rape and sexual harassment and any intellectualizing about the oppression of women in our society.

Recently, I started to have a sense of fighting for other women, who did not have the time, energy, opportunity, or education to fight for their rights. I was standing up for the people who were not as fortunate I have been in avoiding certain horrible situations. Not to mention the fact that the scary part was that it was becoming ever closer to home.

My father read an article about Week of Reflection the other day. "I don't believe it's so bad. One in Four? They're exaggerating."

"I wish it wasn't true, Dad." I told him of my friends who have nearly been raped, battered and

even threatened to be killed by their boyfriends. "I'm just lucky it has not happened to me . . . (I noted that it was difficult to know if I should add "yet")."

Now, when I walk into a room full of my parents' friends, I am dubbed The Feminist. Invariably, the topic turns to gender issues (without my suggestion). Surprisingly, the women are eager to express their perspectives. The men generally oppose our views. Some of the comments are encouraging. Some are infuriating. But it's okay. At least they are talking about it.

Chip by chip, the wall crumbles away.

Feminism has allowed me to identify what I don't like, helped me understand why I don't like it, and given me the strength and support to speak up and say I don't like it.

Thus, I am improving myself as I participate in changing the world.