

## Preamble

*"I wrote this piece because women in their 40s and 50's during the 1970s were facing a demographic dearth of available men, and the women's movement then (at that time in its history) had the paradoxical effect of supporting their ability and right to be without a partner, yet denying the fact that this was understandably painful for those women who so wished for a partner.*

*I wrote it because something felt uncomfortable about denying such a need. I wanted women to not have to pretend they don't care when they actually are aching for an intimate partner. Most of us have a healthy need for an intimate relationship. And it does hurt to not have one.*

*I am interested to hear from any and all women who want to discuss this issue as it exists currently. Younger women, with a life ahead of them, can still feel like they will never find a good partner. It is rarely an easy search but it is a noble and worthwhile one that can be handled with care and dignity.*

*A relationship in which two people want to keep trying to learn how to love each other is worth searching for. In the meantime, learn the art of living alone in the best way that you can and enjoy what it can offer you as well. Many of us need to refine the best ways of being alone – I prefer to call it learning to be with ourselves, a skill that is essential to develop, even, at times, in the best of relationships. You will be learning a precious art.*

### How Could This Have Happened to Me? The Phenomenology of the Relational Void

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This article is addressed to women, now in midlife, who assumed that they would find a way to combine both desires ie to have an intimate partner and to engage in the serious pursuit of a career, but who have since found themselves in a state of unremitting unchosen singlehood.

The topic of a dearth of suitable partners for women in midlife began to appear in the 1980s. In 1986 The New York Times confirmed what many midlife women had been dreading i.e. that in a study by Bennett and Bloom, there was statistical proof that women over 35 had only a 5% chance of finding an appropriate mate. The chances were even smaller for women with advanced degrees. While much can be said about the psychopathologizing, politicizing, stigmatizing and trivializing of what is frequently (and quietly) experienced as a tragic situation, this article will explore what Rucker has aptly called the "relational void" and the phenomena of a particular kind of existential loneliness that such women may be facing for, perhaps, the first time in history.

In the 1990s the predicament of the woman in a state of unremitting singlehood underwent an apparent transformation. The popular press emphasized women's ability to live well without falling

prey to the weakness of a need for a man. Recall “A woman without a man is like a fish without a bicycle”. Women were now supposedly able to seamlessly adapt to life without a partner by turning toward other meaningful relationships, vocations and avocations.

If, however, one takes seriously Gilligan’s reworking of female development in which she locates the supraordinate strength of female identity being in its relational capacities, one has to reach the conclusion that women have placed themselves in an untenable position. Any method designed to invalidate such a deep human need is destructive: better to call a spade a spade and to be free to be very sad about it.

In “Cupid’s Misses: Relational Vicissitudes in the Analyses of Single Women” Rucker makes a significant contribution to the understanding and treatment of this “endangered” population. Society as a whole, including single women themselves, tends to pathologize the woman who is in a state of unchosen singlehood. Such women frequently enter treatment with the hope of being able to figure out what is wrong with them i.e. (since being alone is seen as proof of a personal problem) so that they can work through the problems in order to find a mate. This creates a situation in which the patient, trying to find some meaningful way of participating in a solution to her problem of aloneness, can end up feeling that she is indeed its cause.

“The relational void has not been, and cannot be transformed; it can only be obscured.” This is for very particular reasons which Rucker states as follows “It is virtually impossible for the qualities of primary relatedness to be experienced in isolation from a mutually desired, continuous, physically intimate relationship with another adult. The need for primary intimacy is either met by the presence of a suitable other or left unfilled: it cannot be resolved, and its gratification cannot be self-generated”.

The fact is that, while there must be women in mid-life who have chosen to remain single, others who have adapted to singlehood, as well as other woman whose emotional difficulties preclude the likelihood of finding an intimate partner, we are all aware of women who are both desirous of as well as capable of maintaining a relationship with an intimate lifetime partner who may simply never find one.

### **The Phenomenology of the Relational Void**

Rucker posits the necessity of a primary intimate bond which provides exclusivity, loving mutuality and continuity in an adult version of Winnicott’s (1974) holding environment. The value of such a form of relatedness is something we may take for granted without articulating just what an intimate relationship provides. A relational bond is often a ticket to participate in the social milestones of life. The presence of a viable partner amplifies the resources brought to bear in any given life situation.

From the psychological perspective, a working intimate bond captures aspects of childhood while challenging mature capacities. It provides opportunities for humor and for passion- alternate psychic domains which may be essential for providing us with relief from life’s harshness. Perhaps such relatedness, which affords novelty and familiarity, can be thought of as rejuvenating our capacities for communication and communion. On the other hand, like the Vietnam Memorial, unremitting singlehood makes an eloquent statement through the painful presence of an absence.

## **What if something happens to me?**

The initial stage of the relational void may be ushered in by a single dramatic circumstance. Alone at night and not feeling well, a single woman realizes that she needs help yet is, in some newly sensed way, really alone. Being suddenly sick (in the middle of the night), causes her to realize that something could happen that “nobody would know about”. She reasons that she has family and friends who love her, but the realization persists and develops. Reviewing friends and family mentally, she becomes aware that each of them is involved in relationships which are primary for them, and this is what she knows is lacking in her life. The thought is now fixed in her mind: no one is thinking of her *first*.

One woman described her entry into the relational void as follows: “I was walking down the streets with my friends, and all of a sudden I fell into a crack in the sidewalk. I started to scream, but no one heard me. They just kept walking.” In addition to panic and social discomfort, this situation distresses her sense of self in other important ways. A relatively healthy woman who finds she compromising values, behaviors and standards in order to not be alone may find herself in a state of serious cognitive dissonance. Much energy goes into maintaining her self-esteem and poise while she quietly says “This can’t be happening to me.”

First encounters with the awareness may result in denial or anxious avoidance. One woman pursued a partial relationship with an interesting but unavailable man, despite her knowledge that she would eventually have to face an unpleasant ending. She felt compelled to see him yet ashamed and worried about the condition of her usually health value system. Another woman, with many coupled friends, attended such a gathering but was shocked by intensity of her envy and jealousy.

## **Who should I leave my album to?**

Rucker compares a deeper immersion into the relational void to the phenomenon of a phantom limb - “nothing is there, but it always hurts.” When a woman begins to face that this is, indeed, happening to her, there is shock and outrage. While women newer to the relational void may desperately seek a partner, now they turn away from unsatisfying relationships preserving precious energy for inner sustenance. One woman, comparing herself sardonically to a camel storing up water for a desert crossing, used nostalgia and the sharing of old memories of relationships to remind herself and others of her capacity to connect. Another found herself masturbating “defiantly”; she described these experiences as essential because they helped her to maintain a lively relationship to the vitality of her inner life.

Another woman with a rich life in the arts, education and traveling, wondered about the meaning of a gap in her photo album, between the ending of one significant relationship and, many years later, the start of a new one. She knew that she had been professionally productive during the years between the two relationships. She realized that she had felt too uncomfortable traveling alone to ask anyone to take her picture. She also acknowledged that she did not really feel the same wish to retain her memory of events during this interval. Finally, she wondered who she would leave her photo album to after her death.

## **My fantasy has run out**

As the women under discussion continue into their late forties and fifties alone, it is clear that “this is indeed happening to me”. Issues of mid-life i.e. menopause, aging, dealing with aging parents, etc. co-exist with advances in professional life and the inclusion as a valued friend into the milestones achieved in the worlds of relatives and friends. Life goes on, with the relational void as a silent presence asserting itself with greater or lesser salience.

Socially, the missing of the first milestones of adult life, marriage, children, divorce even, are well in the past. Only rarely do friends or family inquire regarding the prospects of potential partners. This may be due to tact, awkwardness with the situation or even relief that the problem is not expressing itself with outward urgency. By mid-life, most people have had firsthand contact with one or more forms of misfortune, and unremitting singlehood cannot not lay claim to undue sympathy.

A continuous lack of intimacy can erode a social sense of belonging which in turn affects self-esteem. While many women get involved in productive and creative pursuits, they still describe states of exhaustion of periods or “dead” time in which the voice of the void is deafening. Winnicott’s “think not of trauma, but of nothing happening when something profitable might have happened” applies here.

As life goes on, what happens to the woman in a state of unchosen unremitting singlehood? Such prolonged deprivation can make one prone to attacks from internal bad objects, precipitating bitterness, envy and depression. But perhaps years of such loneliness could affect the stability of representational world itself, creating a kind of involuntary defacto meditation process. Women who have experienced such moments of void report a terror which resembles that of the advanced student of meditation. This may bring them to the brink of a dimension claimed both by psychology and spirituality i.e. an encounter with emptiness itself.

Engler (1994) compares the advanced stages of meditation to the experience of traumatic loss. He describes a period of “unprecedented mourning, which is a double mourning”, for the loss of attachment to the external world (which is considered not as difficult) as well as the loss of attachment to the internal world itself (when most students of meditation quit). This process is exquisitely personal and painful as “cherished moments flood back that you do not want to know”, as they are extinguished in a process of “grinding stone upon stone”.

One woman in psychotherapy realized the presence of such a sequence. In her late thirties, she had complained that she had no steady intimate partner. In her early forties, she discovered masturbation to be a source of psychic sustenance, but worried about the potential for compulsion. But later, as she continued on alone, she discovered that she could not longer connect with this source, as “my fantasy life has run out”. This was more terrifying than the thought of being alone in the social sense; it meant a loss of self! Feeling thus estranged she concluded that “this must be the end of the line”. Work life, friendships and family were all going well, as she had finally learned to recognize the limits of their genuine good will and empathy. But she felt a profound sense of detachment and moments of terror.

The treatment process itself had narrowed. Was this an emotional hunger strike, a depression, or simply a winding down of her inner life? Was this an active attempt at renunciation? And, if so, could renunciation be considered adaptive in such a situation?

## **Conclusion**

The relational void cannot be resolved (in the psychodynamic sense), nor can its gratification be self-generated. Yet, we all need to live on in the psychic lives of others. Disavowal of this need or suppression of the dilemma itself, by any method, amounts to a process of emotional invalidation. What can the world of psychotherapy offer for the woman experiencing the relational void?

States of loneliness and of emptiness (of which the relational void is a subset), appear to be relegated to discussions of psychosis, severe personality disorders or massive trauma. It is to her credit that Fromm-Reichmann, a psychiatrist and single woman of significant accomplishment, wrote her last paper "On Loneliness". She identified loneliness as "the states of mind in which the fact that there were people in one's life is more or less forgotten, and the hope that there may be interpersonal relationships in one's future is out of the realm of expectation or imagination". The implication is that of a psychic foreclosure, the natural sequelae of a prolonged relational void. The Buddhist view, on the other hand, emphasizes an active leaping into the void with nothing to stay the fall, in a heroic attempt to encounter the true nature of reality.

One treatment approach which combines aspects of radical acceptance of life as it is in the moment, mindfulness practice and coping skills has been developed by Linehan. Her paradigm, based upon Zen practice and distress tolerance teaches patients to bear pain skillfully. Pain and distress are part of life; invalidation or denial of this tenet leads to increased suffering. Mindfulness is a proactive encounter with the nature of the void itself.

Radical acceptance of pain and distress as unavoidable aspects of life can serve as an alternative to the invalidation and/or frank denial of the pain of the situation. Acceptance of the suffering is not to be equated with approval of the situation. The question is how to bear pain skillfully. This type of mindfulness practice could be a proactive encounter with the nature of the void itself, which is both unique and universal.

Gerald May's concept of willingness vs willfulness articulates one of the challenges of radical acceptance as follows:

"Willingness implies a surrendering of one's self-separateness, an entering into, an immersion in the deepest processes of life itself. It is a realization that one is a part of some ultimate cosmic process and it is a commitment to participation in that process. In contrast, willfulness is the setting of oneself apart from the fundamental essence of life in an attempt to master, direct, control or otherwise manipulates existence. More simply, willingness is saying yes to the mystery of being alive in each moment. Willfulness is saying no, or perhaps more commonly yes, but ...But willingness and willfulness do not apply to specific things or situations. They reflect instead the underlying attitude one has toward the wonder of life itself. Willfulness notices this wonder and bows in some kind of reverence to it. Willfulness forgets it, ignores it, or at its worse, actively tries to destroy it. Thus willingness can sometimes seem very active, and assertive, even aggressive. And willfulness can appear in the guise of passivity. (May, p. 6)

Validation of the suffering that occurs all too often for women (and men) in this specific situation can go a long way to restore dignity and help one to live and to appreciate life as it is in the moment.

A final point of interest in writing this paper may be relevant here. While all the women involved in contributing ideas and examples expressed a serious interest in the topic, only two, who was recently married, felt that they could bear discussing it in any detail. This may be due to the intrinsic ineffability of the situation as well as to the discomfort in conveying it.

### **Postscript August 2008: Good News**

In an updated review of the Bennet, Bloom and Craig Study, Newsweek Magazine (2006) described a brighter situation suggesting that 90% of baby-boomer women (and men) either have married or will marry. While acknowledging the technical difficulties in forecasting as well as the cultural shifts during changing times, it seems that the old data significantly undershot the chances of a woman above thirty finding a marriage partner. And a more current study (Goldstein and Kenny, 2001) estimates that 90% of baby boomers will eventually marry.

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