

Exceptional Women are Our History and Our Future:

Feminist Therapy Center Stage

The first in a series of reader stories of feminism.

*From the forthcoming book: **Fear is the pathway to freedom and joy**
from the edited chapter called **Feminist Therapy Center Stage***

By Doris Jeanette, Psy.D.

When I first encountered feminism I thought to myself, "I have not let sexism affect my life. I am 50-50 with David." David was my beloved husband and best friend. I even had proof that this was true. David and I both went to graduate school at the same time and graduated at the same time. We both cooked and we both cleaned. This proved my case that sexism had not affected me.

I never would have married a man who wanted me to wait on him or thought he was better than me. After seeing the role my mother played with my father, I made sure David and I were equal. I said to myself with absolute confidence, "I am not affected by sexist conditioning, finitely not. No, not me. "

From the moment David and I came back East to do our internship with the state of New Jersey, we were exposed to education to help us become more conscious of racism and sexism. We were required to attend workshops to raise our awareness of sexist therapy and racist therapy.

In 1976, after my post doc was completed, I was working as a staff member at the Behavior Therapy Unit. Diane Chambless, an older staff member at BTU, asked me to join the Feminist Therapy Collective. The Feminist Therapy Collective was on Lombard Street in center city, Philadelphia, a half block away from my current home.

This collective was the very first Feminist Therapy Collective that was composed of professional women. Of course, those of you who know herstory know that California had the very first feminist therapy collective in the whole world. However they were composed of non-professional women. Didn't we feel superior? Yes, we did, we all had professional degrees!

Philadelphia for those of you unfamiliar with our great city is the home of many firsts. We are the city of sisterly love as well as brotherly love and not only stand for the American Revolution we stand for tolerance and justice for all. This is the major reason I am



still here. We are a very diverse group of people who basically get along with each other.

The first time I entered the Feminist Therapy Collective on Lombard Street I felt all warm and cozy. I was immediately comfortable and at home. It was more like a living room than an office because it was a real home with a real kitchen. I felt excited to be part of a group so actively involved with improving the quality of therapy.

Soon I was put to work. I was to be trained by an older member. The moment I sat on the pillows in the group room up stairs on the second floor, I quickly became extremely uncomfortable. The goal was to teach me to conduct and lead groups on my own. My stomach flipped and groaned. Once again, I did not know what I was doing.

After my first month with this group, I thought, "Groups are ineffective. They do not go anywhere, do anything or help anyone." I was sure of this. I was a behavior therapist. I had just finished my post doc with Joe Wolpe and was working as a staff member with him at the Behavior Therapy Unit. The way we did therapy was clear-cut and simple. A presenting problem was diagnosed; a complete learning history was taken. This could take weeks.

Next a solution was mapped out with a hierarchy. Part of each session was spent teaching the client how to relax their body. This also took hours of time in the office leading them through relaxation exercises in the big black, comfortable lounge chair.

Clients were instructed to practice breathing and relaxing at home every single day. When they came back to the office, once a week, I relaxed them even more into deeper and deeper relaxation, in the lounge chair. As soon as they were able to achieve a relaxed state in the office with me, I desensitized them to their fears. Step by step in their imagination.

Sometimes a client was taken to the funeral home and desensitization in vivo, in real life, much like the Mother of Behavior Therapy did, Mary Cover Jones, with Peter. Over the course of 8-12 months, their fears diminished. They could cross the bridge, make love to their partner, go to the funeral home, walk pass a trash truck and leave the house. Success was achieved. They felt good. I felt good.

They left knowing how to breathe and relax, skills they could use for the rest of their life. They also knew how to face their surface fear. I felt like I had made a difference in their life.

With groups, nothing was clear-cut and effective, so it seemed to me. After another month of feminist therapy group sessions, I told my

fellow feminist therapists who were all sitting in a circle around our coffee table "I feel inadequate. I do not know what to do. I don't know how to use groups to help people." This was during one of our many regular meetings. Suddenly every single head in this circle turned toward me and looked at me in surprise. It was as if I had said something terrible. It was as if I was in the spot light. There was a brief moment of silence as they gasped for air. Then in unison, they gave me a resounding, "You are not inadequate." Silently, I thought, "Yes I am inadequate. And groups don't help people."

After they told me I was not inadequate, they offered me advice, "Groups are the best way to do feminist therapy. Keep trying and you will learn to be effective. We have to raise our awareness of how we have been treated differently. We have to help ourselves and our clients overcome these deep feelings of inferiority. We have to learn to relate equally to women instead of condescendingly."

"Heavens, I don't think I am relating condescendingly to my clients, am I?" I wondered and looked at my behavior. I had noticed that some of the male therapists at the BTU did act arrogance with their clients.

Of course, I had noticed men ran the show in every job I had worked in NC, Texas and NJ. All the professionals, men and women automatically assumed the woman client should stay in a certain role with their husbands without ever challenging their beliefs even a little bit.

Even in graduate school at Baylor my professors told me during my performance feedback that I should, "Wear dresses more often," I never did. And that I was too "Willful." I wasn't sure what they meant, but I was sure if I had been a man they would have encouraged my assertiveness instead of punishing it.

Another interesting fact is David and I was not "allowed" to work at the student-counseling center at Baylor. Neither was Judy. Just the three of us couldn't work directly with the students. This I noticed and wondered, "Why not?"

David's father was a Baptist Preacher and I was raised a Southern Methodist and we were legally married. We requested over and over again to work at the student-counseling center. We were denied over and over again. All the other students were placed there instead of us. The three of us were sent to the VA or the mentally retarded center or the community center.

David had a beard and I didn't wear a bra and Judy was a New York Jew. Everyone else was allowed to interact with the students for all the years I studied at Baptist Baylor. Just the three of us were not

allowed to be close to the students so we could affect them in any way.

Here on the East coast, we were encouraged to relax and learn new, exiting ways to help people. David and I were being trained to teach Assertiveness Training Groups and having a ball exploring our own ability to be therapeutic with people. We loved to make love and talk learning research. We were so close and life was sweet.

After delicious, emotionally fulfilling lovemaking, my breasts melted deep into his chest, I would say, 'David, how can I apply variant learning principle to who is suicidal?' David would say, 'Doris, does, she have any avoidance behaviors?' 'She has been raped, of course she has avoidance behaviors.'

"Can you get her to talk about it?" "Yes, she will talk about it and I know the details, over and over again. Her story is awful; she has been raped more than once. The last time she was left to die in an alley in North Philadelphia."

"Gee, I don't know what to do Doris," David empathized, as he held me closer and squeezed me tight. "It is sad and painful," we lamented as we held each other with tenderness and drifted off to sleep, safe and sound in our newly purchased, South Philadelphia home.

At FTC we were determined to deliver quality psychological care to women, which was not sexist or biased. Since we, as women, were brainwashed into being sexist, naturally, we had to become aware of how much we rejected our own basic nature.

Therefore, to further my own personal growth, I joined a women's consciousness raising group in my neighborhood in Germantown. The group helped me become more aware of sexist ideas, thoughts and ingrained assumptions I took for granted. I felt supported in my personal growth, but I was not sure what else I was getting out of spending time with these women. Women in my CR group spent a lot of time complaining about their problems. This did not help me. I could not see it was helping them either.

I noticed the same thing happened in the groups I was being trained in at FTC. Certain women dominated the groups and I didn't know what to do about it. The other leader did nothing, she just let them complain and complain. Week after week, they complained about the same problems with so and so.

In my own CR group, which did not have any leader, I started to direct the conversation to something helpful to me. This made me feel more comfortable and powerful. I was getting braver and more

assertive. This was about the time the lightning struck me on the way back from the grocery store. Once again, what I thought was true was not true. Once again my denial was exposed.

I was wrong, dead wrong. I had been seriously affected by sexist conditioning in my past, southern, learning history. I was not as equal to David as I thought. There was nothing wrong with David. David was as much a feminist as I was; he was into his own personal growth. Robert Bly excited him. The same Robert Bly, who later wrote about the long, trailing bag. David was actively involved in the men's' moment which was spearheaded by Robert.

That bolt of lightning that hit me over the head on the way back from the grocery store helped me realize the truth. I was sexist. I had been conditioned to wait for and on others. I was trained to please others and to think of them first, even with David. On the outside everything looked equal, but on the inside, I did not feel like I acted on the outside.

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