

"I Was Afraid to Be a Woman" (continued)

Do you think that life has any meaning?"

"I do," he answered me very seriously. "And perhaps just faith that there is a meaning is enough to sustain us while we search for this meaning. But this search cannot be made at the expense of our life's duties."

"But how can one cook hamburgers and be concerned about the World Series before one has answered this question?"

Committal to a Life Task

"We are all committed to this," he said, "by the very fact of our humanity. We have to do our life task. Who else is going to do it? Some of us come to these questions sooner and can give our lives a certain direction. Some come to them later, having already assumed a life role and many responsibilities. Some never come to them at all. In any case, working toward a solution of these problems can never be a substitute for carrying on our job in life."

I was allowed to go home for an overnight visit about this time, and this was when I got the first inkling of a situation that might have been tragic, but which turned out to be a huge factor in my growing-up process. The children talked incessantly about a friend of mine—I'll call her Babs—and all that she was doing for them. She had taken one to an ear specialist, another to a fair. "Here's where Babs and Daddy took me for a walk." "When Babs was here the other night—" I was certain by the time I had had another visit home that my husband and Babs were having an affair.

Before he left me at the hospital, I asked him, and he said that it was true. Babs' husband had been in Europe for several months, and they had fallen in love. I said, "Then you really don't love me at all now?" I had known it for years, I guess, but I wanted now to put it into words. My husband was kinder than I had ever remembered him as he answered me. "I know you're a fine person," he said, "and I can't understand why I don't love you, but I don't."

I was terribly jealous, not of Babs, but of them both because they had love and each other. But I was relieved, too, because here was real evidence that my husband was a man of immature values. I hadn't just been imagining his immaturity all these years.

I told the doctor about all this the next day. "Now can you get mad?" he asked me. "And let off some steam?"

I said, "I don't honestly feel mad." I told him how I did feel, and he listened carefully. (He always listened intently.) When I finished, he said, "Now let's talk about what we're going to do about this." That "we" was about the nicest word I'd ever heard. I felt as though we had pooled our strength and as if no problem

were too big to handle. That same day the doctor told me his residency at the hospital would be up in about a month, and that he had a job in the fall as a psychiatrist at M.I.T.

I asked him point-blank, "Will you be able to see me through this thing?" And without a flicker of hesitation he said, "Yes, I will." (I have often thought that this was a crucial point for me. I knew the doctor had just broken up with his fiancée, that his personal life must be in a state of upheaval, that he mustn't have any clear idea how I could continue in therapy with him, and yet he had undertaken a journey with me and he was going to finish it. This example of devotion to duty in spite of personal heart-break meant more to me than ten thousand words on the subject.)

This meeting ushered in a new stage in my development. Afterwards I began to try to think of solutions for my various problems, using the doctor as a sounding board. We didn't always agree, and I was learning that you can disagree with someone without losing respect or affection for him.

During this time I went home frequently for visits. There were some agonizing scenes between my husband and me. Once I took the wedding ring I had given him from his finger and threw it out into the garden. Then I ran out into the meadow near our house and threw myself down on the ground and cried for half a day.

Once we sat up all night talking and talking. This night stands out in my memory because we were so much ourselves. We didn't speak in anger or hatred, but just as two groping people.

To Be Loved

I asked my husband how it felt to love, as an adult, and be loved in return. "For a time," he said, "it is wonderful. You feel so important and attractive and wanted. You'd give the world, if you could, to the person who makes you feel this way. It's a feeling that can't last forever, of course," he told me.

I said, "I don't suppose it can."

He went on, "Now that you are home—now that there are all these problems—well, it's different."

"Love shouldn't change with external conditions, should it?" I remember asking him. "It should be based on something so deep, so true that even death can't destroy it."

"Ideally it should be that way," he said. "But what is that something supposed to be, I wonder?"

"I don't know," I said. "I think it would have to be based on a sort of secret inner knowledge of another person's integrity and a complete acceptance of your common humanity and fallibility."

We talked about other things, each of us searching for something we had shared. Our first Christmas with the crooked Third Avenue Christmas tree, our pre-dawn parting when he went to sea, our names for each other, our dreams for the children. At dawn we went into each other's arms and both of us were crying.

I said to him that morning, "What a strange, sad night this has been, and it has been a good night in a way. We've been real, together. Not two make-believe people. I feel as if we could begin again in a different way." He didn't say anything, but I couldn't get over the feeling that any two people of good will could live a good life together. Overwhelmed by passionate love seemed less important than a certain inclination of the will toward sort of giving.

It was late spring when I came home from the hospital to stay. The doctor believed that the next skirmish in my fight to grow up had to be waged on home ground.

My good friends came around, and there was no strangeness or self-consciousness at all. Everyone knew about my husband and Babs, and we talked about that some, but mostly we talked about our gardens, our children, our ideas. It seemed to me that I was able to enter more deeply into these friendships now, to expose my thoughts more freely, and to listen to others speak with a sort of inner ear. I began to feel a kind of solidarity with my children and my friends that I had never known when I was seeking it so ardently and exclusively in my husband.

I continued to visit the doctor, who was still at the hospital, and one day I told him that I was thinking very seriously of getting a divorce. We agreed that since Babs hadn't been the original cause of our difficulty—a divorce might be a drastic action to take at this time—separation might be better, with the understanding that this separation would last as long as Babs and my husband were seeing each other.

Strangely enough, this separation was quite a happy period for me. The children were really fun. They were emerging now as little people, and I made up my mind to let them be whatever they were and not try to invent personalities for them as I had done for my husband. It seemed to me now that my true job in relation to them was to see that they were fed, clothed, educated and brought into contact with values by which they could lead meaningful lives where their skills and interests led them. With the discovery of a certain objectivity in my attitude toward the children, I noticed something that had been rather new to me: a feeling of smugness over the