

Freedom for What? Lesbian Relationships and Responsibility

Author:

Thompson, Denise

Publication Date:

1984

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.26190/unsworks/677>

License:

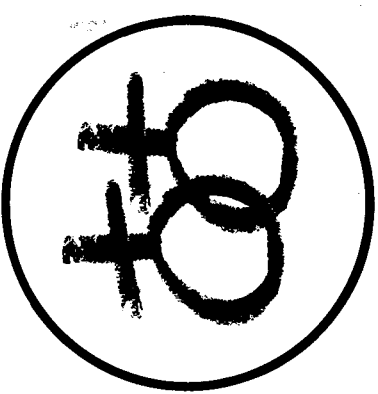
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/au/>

Link to license to see what you are allowed to do with this resource.

Downloaded from <http://hdl.handle.net/1959.4/43832> in <https://unsworks.unsw.edu.au> on 2024-03-29

ESSAYS IN LESBIAN FEMINISM

I. FREEDOM FOR WHAT?
Lesbian Relationships
and
Responsibility



Denise Thompson

FREEDOM FOR WHAT?

**Lesbian Relationships
and
Responsibility**

by

Denise Thompson

Published in Sydney by
D.A. Thompson
P.O. Box N2
Petersham North — 2049

National Library of Australia
Cataloguing-in-Publication entry

Thompson, Denise, 1940 —
Essays in lesbian feminism. 1. Freedom for what?
ISBN 0 9591052 1 2.
ISBN 0 9591052 0 4 (set).

1. Lesbians — Addresses, essays, lectures. 2. Inter-
personal relations — Addresses, essays, lectures.
I. Title. II. Title: Freedom for what?: Lesbian
relationships and responsibility.
306.7'663

© Denise Thompson, Sydney, 1984

(Some of you will know my personal reasons for writing this. Others of you can guess.)

Love is unconditional, i.e. it is not a reward for good behaviour. It doesn't have to be deserved. It is given freely with no strings attached. That is why the lover is so vulnerable. Faced with bad behaviour on the part of the beloved, there is **nothing** she can do. She can say: "I don't want you to do that because it hurts me". She can cry and scream and rage and weep. She can run to friends for comfort. And she can leave. She can walk out of the house, refuse to contact her lover, stay away from places where she might run into her, cut herself off from every kind of recognisably human interaction with her. But all that adds up to nothing because there is no defence against the pain. And the love remains because she put no conditions on it in the first place, and she cannot withdraw it even though the "contract" has been dishonoured and the promise betrayed, even though what was once a source of joy and comfort is now an agonising wound that at times seems to threaten life itself. That is why love is an enormous responsibility. We put our lives in each others' hands.

No, I don't know of anyone who has died of love, or, more accurately, from lack of same. Or I don't think I do. But I have heard of stress- (read "distress") related diseases. And I do know that we have "a drug and alcohol problem" in the Movement, and some of us smoke too much. I also know that (metaphorical) "broken hearts" heal. Or do they? Anyway, I have a more than sneaking suspicion that in the long run it is not the abandoned one who suffers the long-term physiological and psychic effects of evaded responsibilities. **Her** conscience at least is clear. (That is, when it is). She did all that it was humanly possible to do, and if she failed, then none of us is Superwoman. (We're still working on it). The one who breaks out in the stress-related disease after years of running away, is she who longed for love but was always terrified that her own commitment would find her "wanting" — pun intended, i.e. "desiring" but "lacking" the courage to make the commitment. And each new betrayal adds a new store of guilt, and each time the lid gets tighter and the pressure builds up, until **something's** got to give. Or perhaps it happens in gradual increments — the poison of the "lies, secrets and silence" leaches inexorably

throughout the whole system until the rot has spread so far it can no longer be denied. (My friend Marg Roberts calls this my theory of "natural justice". In other words, "they'll get theirs".)

There is one problem with this theory — it appears to be saying that anyone who suffers from certain illnesses is somehow to blame for her condition, that it is a punishment for past misdeeds. I admit that that kind of inference *could* be drawn from what I have said. Since I don't want to draw it, I will give an utterly blameless example of what I think is involved: A friend of mine has suffered from a particularly virulent form of arthritis for a number of years. Recently she had a remission — the symptoms vanished (apart from the residue of permanent damage), the blood tests were negative, and the pain was gone. This remission happened soon after she had spoken to the psychiatrist who had been treating her father just before his suicide. At the time of her father's death, my friend was an adolescent. She was sent away from home for some months, and was not even allowed to attend the funeral. No one spoke to her about her father, and for years afterwards she carried around with her an enormous burden of unfocused, unexpressed and unresolved guilt. She could not absolve herself of the guilt because she was denied the information which would have enabled her to do so — until she spoke to the psychiatrist. Neither my friend nor I are at all certain that her arthritis was cured because the silence which surrounded her father's death was broken. She told me the story at the time when my own daughters' father was dying, in order to illustrate the importance of allowing them to participate in their father's death, because they couldn't be protected from the grief, and silence only created worse problems. (I didn't need convincing). I have used the story to illustrate a more general point than the "they'll get theirs" one. The general point is the denial. Whether the denial is imposed from without on a relatively helpless individual, or whether it is imposed from within by a relatively powerful one, what is being denied doesn't go away. It stays and festers.

Whether or not the rot manifests itself as physical illness, I am not at all certain — that remains on the level of an interesting hypothesis. What I am certain about is that we do affect each other in innumerable ways, and that we have a responsibility to take that into account in our actions in relation to one another. If you have hurt another woman, then that is *not* only her problem — it's yours too. You may not be able to do anything to rectify the damage, although you can't decide that without long and serious consideration. But, at the very least, you can "wear it".

In the Women's Liberation Movement we're not very big on responsibility towards each other. We're very big on "rights" and

"freedom". And that's all well and good and necessary in its place. But what is its place in our lover relationships with each other? How can we go on demanding rights without responsibilities, freedom without even *asking* ourselves what that freedom is for, much less supplying an answer? We all know that we have a right to fuck whoever we want to fuck (the only proviso being that she wants to too). And we get very miffed if anyone looks as though she might be placing any impediments in the way of our doing it. But how often do we consider the responsibility involved in the intimate touching of another woman's body? How often do we consider the meaning that that act has for most women, ourselves included?

We used to think that lesbianism was the answer, that once we had got out of the sexual clutches of men (or because we had never been in them in the first place) there would be no more problems, or at least none that two good women couldn't solve together. (Yes, I know we weren't quite as naive as that, but that was the major premise we negotiated around). Now, some years after those first fine beginnings, many lesbian/feminists live alone, shocked and stunned into celibacy by the treatment they received at the hands of the women they loved. Others have embarked on a career of one woman after another, a few weeks here, a few months there, the occasional one-night stand, never caring very deeply about anyone, always very careful to be the one who leaves first. Others have relaxed gently and gracefully into celibacy, heaving a sigh of relief that they no longer have to perform what always seemed a fairly pointless exercise anyway (and not all of them live alone). Very, very few of us live in committed monogamous permanent (or intended to be by both partners) relationships, far, far fewer than would like to be. So what happened?

Well, of course, I can't say what happened in every case, but I can suggest a number of answers. In the first place, it seems to me that we misled ourselves by directing the big guns of criticism against men as "the main enemy", at the expense of a critique of "the enemy within". Now, I am not suggesting for a moment that that focusing of attention was an illegitimate enterprise — Women's Liberation fulfilled and continues to fulfil a vital need in exposing the innumerable dimensions of women's oppression by men: rape, incest, sexual harassment and pornography, women's domestic servitude and economic deprivation and exploitation, men's domestic violence, and so on and on and on. But I am suggesting that the time has come to take a good hard look at ourselves, especially those of us who have divested our private lives of the most obvious signs of accommodation to "patriarchal values", in order to direct all our energies towards women, as we used to say (or some of us did). Because by concentrating on the examination of the (indisputably large) "beam in our brother's eye", we missed the (not

inconsiderable) "note in our own eye". (The Bible's got it the other way around — it's the "brother" who's got the "note" in his eye. But I think my rearrangement is more appropriate for a feminist context). By so doing, we have avoided paying attention to our own implication in those same "patriarchal values". We've projected all the problems "out there", onto the men, and left ourselves "free" to fuck each other over with impunity, because we have no language with which to call ourselves to account, or provide a means of redress for the victims.

Oh, the victim gets plenty of sympathy. But that is almost invariably followed by a varied selection of platitudes to the effect that "nothing is permanent", that "everything comes to an end", that "time heals all", that she must "look after herself", and "go on with her own life". But for her it isn't ended — what has happened is that her comfort has turned into a nightmare, and she can't look after herself because she doesn't even want to go on living. And she can't see the relevance of "time" to anything at all because the pain feels eternal. Even the best of friends stammers helplessly into silence in the face of that. And her loneliness increases because after a while no one wants to hear about it any more. If she persists, she gets told that she "shouldn't have given her power away", that she shouldn't have put herself in thrall in the first place. If she continues to care for too long after she has been rejected, we begin to suspect that "there must be something wrong with her" that she keeps "hanging on" like that when she's no longer wanted. Where's her "pride"? we ask. And we're a little contemptuous of her because she trusted someone so much, and she's told that she "should have known all along".

And she's not allowed to be angry — that is an infringement of the "right" of her ex-lover to do whatever she wants to do. More importantly, her anger runs slap-bang up against a Movement taboo. Oh, we're allowed to be angry with men. But a woman who's been done over by another feminist is expected to be understanding and forgiving, or at the very least to keep quiet about it. We can assert boldly that: "Women who are angry fight back". But who can we fight when the enemy is one of us? Because if it "happens all the time", then "everybody" must do it, and since we're all lesbian/feminists here, it **must** be all right. So anyone who gets angry with another lesbian/feminist must be silenced as soon as possible, and come to accept the treatment she has received. And if she goes slightly mad (or even very mad) wondering who is responsible for the horror she is experiencing (because she can't for the life of her find out what it is that she did to bring this upon herself), then that is a small price to pay in the interests of "solidarity" — particularly if you're not the one who's paying it personally.

By concentrating so hard on the depredations of "the boys", we

have ensured that the question of how we manage our lesbian relationships has remained privatised. I have attended many discussions on "sexuality", but never have we discussed our own pain (not even on one occasion I remember, in 1982, when at least three of us were in the throes of abandonment by our respective lovers). We have referred blithely to the "monogs, the anti-monogs and the radical celibates" (I first heard the phrase used by Gaby Antolovich at one lesbian conference in 1978), but never have we discussed our own experiences of the explosive mixture of unmatched pairs of these different sexual negotiations. We've talked about such grotesqueries as "lesbian sadomasochism", paedophilia, and the titillating possibilities of casual fucking in the sauna (and I heard that some of us had actually done it); but never have we considered the implication for the quality of our lives of a series of lovers, one after another, all of whom are expected to be "friends" once the first trauma of rejection has passed. We congratulate ourselves on our ability to keep old lovers as friends, and never consider the price we might have paid in the deadening of emotional responses, the dampening down of passion and intensity, the damage to our integrity as women loving women.

It should be obvious by now that I have "come out" as a defender of committed, sexually faithful, and (let's not mince words) permanent relationships between women. Oh, heresy! I can hear the screams of outrage already: "What about our freedom! How can we be free if we've got to stay tied to one woman for the rest of our lives! It's a trap! It's no better than marriage!"

So let me clarify what I mean by "permanency". I am not making a predictive statement about the inevitable consequence of every one of our sexual encounters. I am not saying that every fuck should lead to life-long monogamy. A number of times I myself have needed that freedom to walk away because I have a distressing tendency to commit myself to female "moral highwaymen" — as my late ex-husband once said to me apropos of one particularly disastrous encounter: "Aren't you lucky you can't marry someone like that!" When I use the word "permanent" I am referring to the attitude with which we approach our sexual relationships. I am suggesting we take them seriously rather than casually, that we make a commitment to working through problems as far as is humanly possible (and, to be realistic, sometimes it isn't) instead of dumping and running at the first sign of a crisis, that we divest ourselves of the dogma that anathematises lifetime commitment, and that we examine very carefully what we mean by "freedom".

The kind of freedom which involves nothing more than the throwing off of constraints — "liberation" — is appropriate only in its proper context. Certainly it is vitally important to wage the fight

against an oppressive and exploitative social order which restricts the human potential of the many — including even the potential to live free from material necessity — in the interests of the elite few. (And it is always a salutary exercise to remember that, to the extent we are white, middle-class, able-bodied and well-fed, we too are members of the privileged elite. But then, when the bomb drops, we'll all fry together in one vast incendiary "siblinghood" anyway). But to what extent does this "freedom from" concept have any relevance in a relationship between one lesbian/feminist and another? What power do we have over each other that has to be constantly guarded against for fear of annihilation? We're very easy to walk away from — there are no laws against it, and our pain and rage are no sort of weapon at all.

Which leads me to another sort of freedom — "freedom for what?" What do we want to do with our new-found freedom now that we're "free from" the more obvious constraints of women's traditional role? Are we just going to live as isolated atoms of human existence, divested of all deep and enduring human relationships, keeping to the shallows of human existence, running away every time the monsters loom from the depths of our own minds? The "monsters" feed off fear and denial, and their power over us increases in direct proportion to our refusal to stand our own ground, face the fear, and harness that power in the service of our own.

So what is it that we are not facing? The problem as I see it is that we went straight into sexual relationships with women without being at all clear about what that entailed. We thought they would be different from and better than relationships with men, but we went no further than assuming that the "difference" would arise unproblematically from the fact that we were both women. This assumption was stated explicitly by early gay liberation: "By being who we are, we are in fact revolutionary". But the "difference" has turned out not to be unproblematic at all, and if this is the revolution, I for one feel like going home to mother.

I'm not suggesting that we ought to have been clear about it all right at the beginning. In my own case, I have only been able to gain any sort of insight by making all the relevant mistakes and learning from them. We can't learn **without** making mistakes. They only become a problem when we **don't** learn from them, when we keep making the same ones over and over again, in a rigid unvarying pattern which blocks our thinking processes, dams up the flow of memory, scrambles our emotions, and wreaks havoc in our own lives and the lives of those nearest and dearest to us. But a mistake that is learned from turns out not to have been a "mistake" after all — it becomes transformed into just another experience. And paradoxically,

it is the very realisation that it was a mistake which brings about the transformation.

But I digress. To return to the main point: Our sexuality was originally "negotiated" (if I may be permitted to use that term without its ordinary language connotations of conscious deliberation) within patriarchy. All of us have had to come to terms with our sexuality within a social order which separates the sexes into dominant active males and passive submissive females, where "sexuality" is a male prerogative because only they possess the requisite organ, where women are nothing but receptacles for that valorised appendage ("A woman is a life-support system for a cunt" — graffiti on a lavatory wall at the University of NSW), objects used for the pacification of powerless males and the gratification of powerful ones. For women in such a social order, sexuality **does** pose a fearful threat. That is not to say that the ordinary woman and man subscribe wholeheartedly to such attitudes and run their sexual lives accordingly. But what it does mean is that each woman (and man) must negotiate her individual sexual practice against a murky background of misogyny and phallic violence. It also means that that negotiation involves weaving a tortuous path between, on the one hand, one's own sexual desire and the benefits derived from acting in accordance with it, which include not only the experience of pleasure but also the social statuses based on it; and, on the other hand, the monstrous tendency of phallic sexuality to degrade and/or annihilate.

As I see it, there are three possible sexual negotiations women can make within a phallogocentric social order. I have called them: the Mother, the Whore and the Spinster — fidelity, promiscuity and celibacy. Each of these three contains its own inner contradictions, its own strengths and weaknesses. And although all three have been devised as accommodations to "patriarchal values", we have carried them with us, their pains and their terrors, their griefs and their guilts intact, wholly unmodified and still unconscious, into our relationships with women.

To take them in reverse order: the strength of the Spinster is her immunity to the enticements of the sexual power game. Her celibacy is deep, life-long and impregnable. Not only does she not indulge in sexuality, she doesn't want to. Although she may submit herself to it under the influence of social pressures — I am reminded of the Lady Somebody-or-Other who advised her daughter on the eve of her wedding to "lie back and think of England" —, she lacks the desire that drives, that reconciles a woman to her servile lot, that ensures she embraces it with passion. Because she "doesn't know what all the fuss is about", she remains impervious to the siren song of sexual desire. That doesn't mean she is incapable of love and commitment, but it

does mean that she has the potential for being less abandoned and more considered in her choices than those of us who "leave everything for love" and hang the consequences.

The disadvantage is that she has opted out of the game before it has even begun, and has denied herself the possibility of participating in one aspect of human existence. As a lesbian she misleads any lover who expects an on-going sexual relationship, unless, of course, she is clear about her own negotiation and includes that in the "contract" in the beginning. And if both are Spinsters, there is no reason why they shouldn't have a long and committed relationship, with less likelihood of sexual "straying" because neither is interested in the verandah of the grass on the other side of the fence.

The Whore is an enormously powerful negotiation in patriarchal sexual relations. She actually beats men at their own game. She uses their phallic desire to extract benefits (exemplified by money) from them, while herself remaining uninvolved. What is called (by men) "the prerogative of the harlot: power without responsibility", nicely expresses the efficacy of this negotiation — although I must hasten to add that the accusation is first and foremost a misogynistic projection. It is, after all, the men who have the money and hence the power, and if they are driven willy-nilly by their sexual urges, then that is their problem (or should be). And prostitution is an institution which enables men to fuck without responsibility. Now, while this negotiation is exemplified by prostitution, it is not confined to that context. The essence of promiscuity is the avoidance of commitment, non-involvement with the other beyond the sexual act. The woman who can hold herself aloof can walk away at any time, "free from" the engulfing tendencies of another person's needs. It is freedom of a kind, but it is a "freedom" which destroys any potential for on-going relationships, and which, moreover, men have always claimed for themselves (while demanding "purity" and "chastity" from women). And since it is a male prerogative, any woman who takes it up runs a constant risk of degradation, even in the post-"permissive society", because it is still men's interests which define what is permissible and what is not — the "loose woman" of the nineteenth century became the "town bike" of the 1960s. By avoiding one horn of the patriarchal dilemma — the commitment which tends to engulf — she risks impaling herself on the other.

Within a lesbian/feminist context, the question of degradation doesn't arise. It is not in women's interests to define other women as "whores". But the question of commitment does. And if we've already learned not to care very deeply, if we've already split desire from commitment so that we cannot allow our desire to trap us into caring for and nurturing and sharing our lives with another, then we have

rendered ourselves grossly inadequate as lovers of women who can. This negotiation may not have been entirely inappropriate as an adaptation to the phallic status quo — it is at least logical. If love is a trap, then love has to go. The most extreme version is the sexual desire which can go no further than a series of genital acts. A more common variation is to offer an implicit promise of commitment, with the aim of entrapping the partner instead, and then dumping and running on to the next "relationship", preferably "falling in love" so as to give the best high with the least amount of responsibility. (For who can gain say the grand passion which arrives with all the force of a natural event, quite outside the control of any mere mortal?) But whatever the variation, the Whore negotiation allows her to "have her cake and eat it too", providing an illusion of closeness while evading the responsibility of commitment. As such it is a typically male negotiation, demanding a right to sexual access without any of the "ties that bind".

(In parenthesis, I would like to quote Doris Lessing on this issue of the "promise". There appears to be a general misconception around the Movement that a "promise" is simply a matter of words, that if you haven't said anything then no one can call you to account for having "broken your word". In her novel, "The Sirian Experiments", Doris Lessing has one of her characters say:

Promises to not have to be verbal. By the fact that you involve yourself in a situation, becoming affected yourself as you affect it — that is in itself a promise . . . Have you not observed for yourself that if one disengages oneself from a process arbitrarily, then all kinds of connections and links and growths are broken — and that you yourself suffer for it?

It is this "promiscuous", "freedom from" negotiation which has prevailed among lesbian/feminists as the dogma of "sexual liberation", even to the extent that anyone who wanted something more than a series of transient relationships said nothing (even to herself) for fear of being labelled "possessive" and exposed as an "unliberated" woman. And ever time she was dumped, she smiled bravely, and shrugged (and wept alone) and moved on to the next "relationship". If she had learned her lesson well enough (and hadn't allowed herself enough time between to grieve), she could be the one to do the dumping next time. Or if they were both lucky, and managed not to care very much in the first place, they could part by mutual consent. And "Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow", Creeps in this petty pace from day to day, To the last syllable of recorded time" (presumably). Some revolution! It is true that such a negotiation avoids both horns of the patriarchal dilemma. It avoids the degradation because women don't have the social power required to hang such a brutal

label on other women (not unless they are "God's police" with the full force of "the boys" behind them). And it avoids the annihilation because you can't be trapped by someone it's so easy to walk away from. So those who imported this negotiation into lesbian/feminism have escaped scot-free — as long as we discount the varying degrees of emotional necrosis which result from this cavalier treatment of women's bodies and feelings (including our own).

Those who have been caught short by the liberationist dogma are those who, like most women, negotiated a sexuality which, in terms of that same dogma, has all the earmarks of women's traditional role. As such, it has been roundly trounced by the Women's Movement. And rightly so, because the Mother's nurturance has been used and abused by men, in their own as well as "their" children's interests, expecting and demanding unlimited satisfaction of their own needs, while any idea of nurturing the nurturers was literally unthinkable. The annihilating tendency of this negotiation was ably exposed by Freud. (There is no point in castigating Freud as the naughty boy who said such terrible things about women. He gave us a striking portrayal of the mechanisms which function to situate women in a phallus-obsessed social order; and if he failed to realise that such dehumanisation was crying out for revolution, that does not diminish the accuracy of his observations). My favourite quotation about what is expected from the Mother comes from his essay on "Femininity", written in 1932. He said:

A mother is only brought unlimited satisfaction by her relation to a son; this is altogether the most perfect, the most free from ambivalence of all human relationships.

You might be tempted to think that this injunction applies only to actual mothers — infants' demands are, after all, constant and insatiable, "unlimited" (although it is by no means self-evident that they should be satisfied by a single female individual on call 24 hours a day, 7 days a week for years). But Freud very quickly puts us straight on this point. A few sentences further on he says:

Even a marriage is not made secure until the wife has succeeded in making her husband her child and in acting as a mother to him.

So the "most perfect" (for patriarchy) pattern of women's sexual relationships is the mother/(male) child relationship. Now it isn't very flattering to men to be treated as children by women. But given that this is a man's world, there is a remedy readily available with which to soothe the male egos — misogyny. Freud called it "the universal tendency to debasement in the sphere of love" — he wrote a paper with that title in 1912 — and said that it was "a universal affliction under civilisation". He did not, of course, use the term "misogyny";

and he was more concerned with its effects on men — "psychical impotence" — than its consequences for women. Besides, he didn't mean to imply that men had a child-like dependency on women — he couldn't afford to see that clearly. He meant that women had to cater to men's needs in the same "unlimited" way they catered to the needs of children, that they had to be constantly at men's beck and call, that they had to annihilate any autonomous needs of their own in the service of men and children (although he didn't say so in so many words, and he was prepared to allow certain token exceptions among his own followers). That is the only way within patriarchal relations of power that a relationship can be "free from ambivalence", i.e. through the annihilation of one set of conflicting interests — the woman's.

Such a pattern was ripe for feminist criticism. But we've thrown out "the baby with the bathwater", because for most women this negotiation was the only acceptable one because it was the only one which offered any possibility for on-going human relationships, despite its tendency to engulfment. And women have always been aware of this tendency, and of the childish propensity of men to depend on women to accomplish everybody's shit-work. That is the dilemma within which the Mother has to negotiate — the balance between commitment and the price one has to pay for it. And because the price is potentially so high, i.e. the negation of her own autonomy, this negotiation requires sexual fidelity both on the part of the woman herself and of her partner. Because she is prepared to take on so much responsibility, she requires that her partner not degrade her by treating her as just another fuck, that he respect her as somebody special. But she has no power to enforce that, and wouldn't even if she could, because unless it's freely given it's worthless. And men have always taken advantage of that, and reserved for themselves the "freedom" to extricate their wonderful "tool" from the clinging body of one "possessive" woman and exercise its potency on as many of the appropriate receptacles they can manage to get access to in one short lifetime. (No, not all men. Not those whose humanity outweighs their masculinity, whose egos are not co-extensive with their cocks).

The burning question then is: if most of us have chosen the nurturing role in our sexual relationships, why haven't we been able to nurture each other? I would suggest that it is because we have fundamentally misperceived the nature of "freedom". We demanded, and took, our freedom from the grosser external manifestations of women's traditional role — from husbands, from heterosexuality in general, and from children. (Not from our own children, or not always. But lesbian mothers can on the whole forget the possibility of long-term relationships. By and large, we liberated feminists are even less

capable of coping with other women's children than men are. Lest that seem unduly harsh, let me say that a possible reason for that is that women perceive children's needs more clearly and are less able to walk away from them than are men. Hence they place heavier burdens on women than on men. In general, that is). By concentrating on the externals, we misled ourselves into the voluntaristic belief that "liberation" was simply a matter of walking away. What we managed successfully to ignore was what we brought with us. That process of denial was helped along by our unquestioning acceptance of a doctrine of sexual liberation, out of the Permissive Sixties by Gay Liberation, which debased the sexual act to the status of no more than a "good dinner".

To define freedom solely in terms of "freedom from" (which, as I keep saying, is all well and good in its right and proper place) carries with it the risk of misusing that "freedom" to justify running away, and to deny the fear which is the real source of our implication in our own oppression. The problem is not the fear itself — we are all afraid, and with good reason. The problem is the denial of that fear, so that we never get to see that we are afraid, much less what we are afraid of. And I see the Whore negotiation as one such denial — it ensures that we never allow anyone to get close enough to expose our vulnerability. Such a manoeuvre gives us an illusion of "strength" because we never put our defences in jeopardy. But the truly strong woman is she who refuses to crouch behind the ramparts, who ventures forth openly no matter what the risks, and faces the world head-on. Because for her, self-knowledge is far more important than safety. But her strength doesn't mean that she's invulnerable. On the contrary, because she has levelled her own defences, she is more vulnerable than the craven behind the battlements. (And if you really want to bring a strong woman to her knees, then "fall in love" and leave her for someone else. Even the strongest of us crumbles against an onslaught like that).

There can be no sisterhood unless and until we can face each other as equals, until our differences are seen as complementary rather than as threatening, until the "strong" woman is no longer the one who is invulnerable, but rather she who has exposed her vulnerability to pain and crisis in the interests of growth and self-knowledge. And we're not going to get there by mistaking vulnerability for weakness and dependence, and self-knowledge for arrogance and "putting other women down". And unless we accept that freedom is co-extensive with responsibility, i.e. that we are responsible for our actions (and that includes our emotions) because we are free — despite the undoubted constraints on us, but because of our knowledge of those constraints and our awareness of alternative possibilities —, then we can forget about loving each other. And lesbian/feminism will wither

away because it has nothing to offer women beyond what "the boys" were offering anyway (and even less sometimes), and because we didn't face our fear and overcome it, but visited its consequences on each other.

Sydney, May 1984.