RIDDLE OF THE SEXES

"Sex: the pleasure is momentary, the position ridiculous, and the expense damnable." -- Lord Chesterfield.

"What does a woman want?" -- Sigmund Freud, confessing his male frustration after thirty years of research.

As I approach my 70th year, I thought I might try to analyze the often mysterious underpinnings of heterosexual relationships between men and women. (I cannot speak to gay, bi-sexual or transgender relationships, because I know nothing about those.) My observations are strictly based on my own life experiences and insights, and must be taken generally, and in an open and non-offensive manner. (To my women readers: you may disagree with some of my depictions or theorizing, but you must know I am not criticizing or attacking your wonderful gender! I can only expound my views from a masculine perspective. I welcome your opinions, as always.)

First, a few biological facts: the male sperm cell is the smallest cell in the human body, whereas the female egg cell is the largest. A normal man can theoretically father 50-60 offspring with 100 different women in any given calendar year, whereas a woman can only deliver one child per year. This last fact makes women innately more cautious and selective in their choice of a mate. A male can retain fertility and sexual performance his entire life if he remains healthy, whereas a female's fertility definitively ends at menopause.

Men and women are both hormonally ruled by testosterone (M) and estrogen (F). These hormones vary throughout one's life. Testosterone produces physical strength, aggression, and competitiveness. Estrogen produces nurturing, empathy, and cooperativeness. Both of these attribute sets are necessary in fostering and maintaining a dynamic society.

Depending on one's genetics and upbringing, a boy can grow up gentle and shy, or morph into an ultra-marathoner, Navy Seal-type. A girl can be very delicate and sensitive, or she can be blunt and combative. It all depends on the ratio of testosterone and estrogen in the bloodstream. As men age, their testosterone production (and corresponding muscle mass) gradually decreases. I read once that around age sixty, married couples are at their most content because their testosterone-estrogen ratios are about even for the first time. Men can become more caring, more mellow and relaxed, and be better intuitive listeners than perhaps they were in their youth.

Although they are quite different in many ways, both sexes must deal with three needs regarding their sexual lives -- the physical, the social, and the spiritual. I will speak first of the pure, physical sexual urge and the desires inherent. Then I will touch on the long-traditional societal mores of dating, marriage, parental roles, and child-rearing. Finally, I will address the spiritual aspects of male-female relationships. If these three deep human needs are met concurrently, you will have a blissful, life-long union. But if any of the three is lacking or out of harmony, the couple will have many, many unhappy problems. From my life observations, I would say that only 10% or so of all couples are realized and enlightened together in all three of these crucial aspects. Hence the majority have violent arguments, miserable marriages (which may or may not end in divorce), dysfunctional families, poorly raised and confused children, desertion, spousal abuse, even murder (the #1 victims of killing are usually family members).

Think of popular song themes, or novels (either modern or going back centuries) or movies about male/female relationships. Probably three-fourths of them are about lost love, lies, heartbreak, loneliness, cheating on one's partner, fighting and arguing, walking out in disgust on a relationship, adultery, etc. Only one-fourth are about happy, fulfilling, long-lasting relationships. Why is there so much more conflict and negativity? I would lay the blame at basic communication failure between the sexes, and not seeing/understanding what is real from the other person's point of view.

Here is the sexual chronology of a typical modern male: Puberty hits strong, with the first nocturnal emissions and the startling appearance of pubic hair and the lengthening of the penis. The taboo of masturbation is discovered. The young man's first explosive orgasms and ejaculations are remarkably powerful and desirous. He notices the arousing physical changes in his teenaged female neighbors and school classmates. Girls during this phase are unknown, mysterious creatures! The male adolescent fantasizes them being naked. He wants to touch their skin, their hair, hold their hands, and later he wants to kiss and hug them in secret. These are his prime thoughts and motivations. This is the all-consuming physical attraction impulse brought on by raging testosterone.

When the young man initially sees a young woman, he notices her curving body shape from afar. As he gets closer, he notices her breasts and her hips/buttocks (depending on her stance), and her legs if they are exposed. Upon close, seeing her face, he then notices her eyes, lips, and hair. He is not thinking about listening carefully to her, or talking meaningfully to her, or considering her feelings. He wants to mate. He wants sex at all costs. That 'prime directive' is all he thinks about; sometimes, he will have an automatic erection in public, and he will awkwardly try to hide this normal physical reaction. A young man on a date will promise, lie, pretend, and agree to just about anything to take the woman to bed and have sex. Intercourse can be repeated several times over a relatively short period of time at this stage. This is the physical man in his prime. There is virtually no thought of societal norms or spirituality at this point. The needs of the penis rule. Losing one's virginity is also an unforgettable milestone, an experience so primal and timeless that it approaches the realm of the fantastic. The male feels invincible afterwards, and craves sexual union more and more.

Often, the woman is surprised or upset when the man wants to leave soon after sex. This is because his urge is to copulate with as many different woman as possible at this point in his sexual evolution. He is not really interested in any kind of commitment or lasting relationship. It's all about the physical thrill of first meeting, then the sexual initiative and coupling.

Some men with arrested development will stay in this phase well into their thirties or even forties -- the so-called 'playboy bachelor' -- but most men will calm down physically by their late twenties and become aware of their standing in the official hierarchy of their given community. Religious traditions, parental encouragement, and/or peer pressure often enter in as well. Aggression and competitiveness are wisely channeled into accepting responsibility, learning how to solve problems, and honing mature leadership skills. Men in society therefore outline a career path through advanced training or education, and then plan on finding a wife, buying a house, and having children. Marriage and family now becomes the prime focus. The new challenge is transitioning from many casual sexual partners to just one. Romantic love slowly supersedes carnal lust. Men learn more of the skills of toleration and compromise, and may be surprised that they are actually interested in the thoughts and feelings of their spouse. Women are finally seen as fully three-dimensional humans rather than as one-dimensional 'physical-only' beings. Devotion, sincerity, and long-term commitment become the new goals, while still satisfying his somewhat more subdued sexual needs. A man's sexual energy is also channeled away by the time needed for -- and the work devoted to -- fatherhood. He becomes innately protective of his wife and children, and proud of his role in his family's financial security. If the man's societal and physical needs are understood and supported by the woman in his life during this transition, he will be in happy harmony and be a loyal husband. But if he is frustrated and beset by nagging, petty arguments, public chastisements, or unreasonable demands, he will be miserable, and the marriage itself will be in jeopardy. He will inevitably look elsewhere for emotional acceptance, comfort, caring, and support.

Thirdly, there is the spiritual component. Often this will not become apparent until the couple is older and the children are grown and moved away, and one is retired from one's career. There is time now for reflection and introspection. Human beings are much more than mere mammals, I believe, and the earlier a person realizes this truism, the more fulfilling life can become. There is a discovery process whereby you understand the meaning of what your life was/is really all about. While sex still exists between older couples, their relationship evolves more into an enduring level of lasting friendship and the shared memories of life's accomplishments. Tender words and cuddling, and affectionate touching, may now be expected and welcomed more than actual coitus. Peacefulness and contentment can be the rewards of our senior years, and steadfast love and support in times of sadness or illness are its final duties. But failure to acknowledge the spiritual aspects of life can cause senior couples to divorce once their children are grown, because there can arise a sense of emptiness and a new feeling of lack of purpose. Some couples are shocked when they realize that they are now strangers who neglected each other's needs during those busy, vibrant, younger years.

So, what do men like and dislike in a woman? The guys of my generation generally like confident and intelligent yet feminine women who don't mind wearing dresses and skirts. Men like alluring long hair on women. Men also like women to be open, fresh, optimistic, and have a good sense of humor. Meanwhile, turn-offs for a potential date or mate are: excessive make-up, smoking, long claw-like fingernails, body piercings other than perhaps for earrings, and tattoos. The chief (again, generalized) complaints by men against women are: they can be too moody, they talk too much, they obsess about food and finances, and that they can go 'ballistic' when they are angry over un-intentioned words or events -- sometimes even holding a grudge and/or seeking eventual revenge.

Yet women to their benefit live longer than men. They can endure pain better and longer (their bodies evolved over millennia to bear children), they are better at verbal and non-verbal inter-personal communication skills, they engage in less risky behaviors, and they tend to be more practical and reality-based. There are currently more women than men in colleges and graduate schools in the United States. Women have assumed leadership positions in government, business, medicine, and the sciences in numbers unheard of a generation ago. The trajectory towards the public equality of the sexes is assured. I am heartened by this fact, especially for the sake of my wife and our daughter -- both accomplished professionals.

That being said, I still find -- in my humble opinion -- that it is the male of the species who is the more dreamy, the more romantic, and the more idealistic -- rather than the female. The urge to explore, the actions of courage and sacrifice under danger, and the challenges of creative inventiveness are still strong male traits worth acknowledging.

In the final analysis, it is up to all of us to instill in the next generation of boys and girls an understanding of the vital importance that both men and women bring to our continuing civilization. The mysterious riddle of the sexes may never be fully understood, but over thousands of years, we are still, at least, making good progress...

THE END

by Jack Karolewski

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