Of Men and Women

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Cucumbers never need a round of applause, want to improve your mind, expect you to play Florence Nightingale during the flu season, answer your phone, borrow your car or have mid-life crises; they will never contest a divorce, demand a property settlement or seek custody of anything.

Cucumbers can get away any week-end and can really handle rejection.

Cucumbers don’t care if you’re a virgin; play scales on the guitar, try to find themselves, have sex hang-ups, leave whisker burns or fall asleep on your chest, care if you make more money than they do, leave you wondering for a month, use your toothbrush, roll-on deodorant or hairspray.

Cucumbers aren’t into meaningful conversation; aren’t jealous of your gynecologist, ski instructor or hairdresser.

Cucumbers always respect you in the morning, never leave you for another man, another woman or another cucumber.

Cucumbers won’t go through your medicine chest, tell you they’re not the marrying kind, leave hair on the sink or a ring in the bathtub; they won’t compare you to a centerfold, tell you a vasectomy will ruin it for them, eat all your food or drink all your liquor, pout if you have a headache, ask about your last lover, speculate about your next one, wear a leisure suit to your office Christmas party or ask to be put through med school.

The premise of this excerpt from “124 Reasons Why a Cucumber is Nicer to Have Around the House Than a Man” is admittedly a bit snide and fails to take into account the personal dignity and human potential of individual men. Yet every woman who reads it laughs sharply from time to time when she recognizes a particular truth in the jest. As much as I deplore categorizing anyone on the basis of race, creed, national origin, age or sex, I must admit there are some very basic differences between the male and the female of the species. I hesitate to bring this up. How are men ever going to be able to achieve their true state of humanity if we keep rubbing their deficiencies in? But perhaps if we recognize their areas of weakness, we will be better able to lend a hand in their development.

Any woman with an I.Q. of 80 or above has noticed at some point in her life that men don’t communicate the same way that women do. For example, if you ask a woman what she is thinking about at any given moment, she might say something like this, “I was wondering whether Jr.’s present educational situa-
tion is conducive to his intellectual development, whether the guest list for Saturday night’s dinner party is balanced in such a way as to encourage enlightening conversation, what I’m going to wear Saturday night and how much the phone bill is going to come to this month.” Comments like this are straightforward and to the point.

Ask the same question of a man. The most common response from the male of the species is, “I don’t know.” Why bother thinking if you haven’t the vaguest notion what you are thinking about?

Another question that will invariably be answered differently by members of the opposite sexes is, “What’s the matter?”

A woman might answer, “I am feeling very dull and uninspired today. My head is aching, I’m worried about my mother, I’m afraid of getting old and I don’t feel that you love me anymore.” No confusion there.

Unfortunately, not many men appreciate this kind of honesty and they respond in the worst possible way. “I just don’t understand you.” What is there not to understand? Assuming the individuals are speaking the same language, any person with half a mind could understand what the problem is at that given moment.

Now go with me to a typical house in the American suburbs and watch Mr. Everyman coming home from work after a hard day. He slams his briefcase down on the table, swears under his breath, flips the selector on the television set around, swears again, disconnects the television set, opens a beer and spills half of it on the antique end table.

Heaven help the wife who asks, “What’s the matter, dear?”

He spits the word out, “Nothing.” Really, if nothing were wrong, why would he act that way?

In the arena of personal relationships, communication gets positively muddy. A woman might say, “I love your eyes when they are so warm and welcoming. Your mouth is full and sexy and I’m crazy about the way your chest strains against your tee-shirt.” A very specific communication indeed, statements like this give a man something to meditate upon when he is feeling low.

Let a woman ask a man why he loves her and what does he say? “I love you and you’re my baby.” Ten years of the same answer and the woman begins to wonder if there is anything at all unique about her that inspires his passion.

Worse still is the man who will never tell his partner that he loves her. When she begs him to whisper sweet nothings in her ear, he answers, “Look, I’m here, aren’t I? What more do you want from me?” Do they really not realize that a woman might want a little more or are they just being stubborn?

Now I have as much sympathy for men as the next person. I realize that in general their upbringing tends to divorce them from their true feelings and that
this stifling of emotional growth takes a terrible toll. But the fact remains—it is damnably difficult to have a meaningful argument with a man. Their unshakeable control in the face of fire has driven many a half-crazed woman to more and more bitter recriminations.

Imagine a frustrated wife screaming, "You don't love me anymore! You stay at the bar drinking with the boys night after night and you never take me anywhere. I'm sick and tired of staying home by myself all the time. I'm lonely and I'm scared and I miss the happy times we used to share!"

A man faced with such a list of grievances often grunts a mono-toned reply, "Okay."

"What's okay about it? Don't you care that I'm miserable and that I need more from you than you are giving me? It's not okay! I'm desperately unhappy and all you can say is 'okay'?"

"Okay, okay." Notice the repetition here of the word that has already driven his mate to distraction. "I'm sorry."
The man in this scenario will generally be reduced to incoherent mumbling at this point. The issue here is the male's basic inability to get to the heart of the matter. It wouldn't take much to calm the troubled waters. Why can't a man say, "Honey, I'm terribly sorry that you feel we've grown apart. You must realize that every day I love you more than I did the day before. Let's leave the kids with my folks this weekend and go to a motel. Two days alone in a romantic spot might help us get to know each other all over again."

There's a place reserved in the Guinness Book of World Records for the first man who delivers that speech. If more men said such things, there would be far fewer divorces in this country. More likely, it will be the woman in a relationship who offers this helpful idea.

But oh, what hysteria rewards the wife who suggests a second honeymoon! "Are you crazy? Do you have any idea what the rates are at the Holiday Inn? First you nag and bitch at me day and night and now you want to bankrupt me. With a wife like you, who needs enemies?"

And there you have it. By attributing the wrong motives to his wife's suggestion, the husband in this scene has moved one step closer to the day when he will be eating a TV dinner alone in a tiny studio apartment.

Men often accuse women of immaturity and irresponsibility. But how many women do you know who still can't find a pair of socks in the morning when they're getting ready to go out? How many women leave their dirty underwear on the bathroom floor every time they take a shower? How many women would starve to death if their husbands failed to leave dinner prepared and ready to put into the oven before they went to a committee meeting?

True, there has been some improvement. Many younger men are making a serious effort to increase their nurturing qualities and to deal on a more personal level with their partners and their children. Why, only last week, in the middle of an intense disagreement about our goals and our means of achieving them, my husband offered to go to the drugstore to buy me a bottle of Midol. After the dust had settled and the broken glass had been swept up, I realized that he was trying to get beneath the actual words spoken to the underlying causes. I was touched. We now have six bottles of Midol in the medicine chest and I am very cautious about introducing any sort of controversy into our after-dinner conversation. The medicine chest will hold only so many bottles of over-the-counter analgesics.

Men are often much more willing these days to accept responsibility for parenting their children. A classic comment on this venturing of the male animal into uncharted waters can be illustrated by the man who agreed to watch his infant daughter while his wife went out shopping for the afternoon. After all the instructions were given and repeated back he pleaded, "Just be sure you come home before I have to change any dirty diapers, okay?"
They really do have nerves of steel, don't they? Men are willing to face the dangers of war, the uncertainties of the nuclear age and the grave consequences of a faltering economy, but they turn to jelly at the thought of an unsanitary pair of Huggies.

Perhaps the root of the matter goes even deeper than social conditioning and biological differences. I believe that the biggest obstacle men face in the world today lies in their much vaunted logic. Every man I know prides himself on his capacity for straight, clear, linear reasoning. If reason alone were the answer to the world’s ills, they would have been eliminated long ago. Reason tells us that war is hell, that greed is crippling to society, that nobody’s rights extend to the point where they deprive another of his rights and that the consistent despoiling of our environment will result in a grave lack of even the most necessary resources. Reason helps to pinpoint the areas of difficulty, but we really need something more to solve our problems.

I suggest that we systematically set about to introduce confusion and irrelevance into the education of young men. Let us teach them the intuitive gifts and help them to see past the precise, logical conclusions they are so used to dealing with. It is not their fault they have been traditionally cut off from ninety percent of their humanity. Logic is fine in its place, but women have known for centuries that not everything is logical. Maybe men feel comfortable believing in a reasonable world, but it is unfair to expect them to struggle with the increasing demands of our modern age armed with no more than a grasp of causal relationships.

This marvelous world we live in is full of paradox and surprise. It abounds with accidents of nature, unexplained realities and unseen truths. Let’s invite the opposite sex to share these secrets and the next time you ask your man what he is thinking, perhaps he'll say, “I was merely meditating on the unexplored wonders of paradoxical reality. I love you, you’re wonderful, do you mind that my underarms are getting saggy? And by the way, how would you like to spend the night tonight in a sleazy motel?”