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The Je Ne Sais Quoi of Coming Out



Crow's Caws

By Crow Cohen

I think the most profound change that occurred in those days was coming out from under the pervasiveness of seeking male approval. Because men rule the world and designate women to clean up the messes they make and stroke their male egos while they're at it, women were living their lives always in reaction to men.

Je ne sais quoi is a French expression I learned in college. (The other useful thing I learned in college was how to whistle shrilly using my fingers in my mouth. That skill comes in handy at sporting events — which I rarely attend — rowdy concerts, and in situations where I'm trying to impress the ladies). The expression literally translates as "I don't know what." Idiomatically it means a vague perception, an intuition, a feeling about something that you can't describe in words exactly. So here's an attempt to find words for my coming out as a lesbian feminist, an event, a process that was beyond words.

I did not discover I had the potential to be a lesbian until I was 34 back in 1977. (Before then, I had been married for thirteen years and had two children.) My attraction to lesbians was not identifiably sexual at first. I had met a group of them at some feminist movement activity, and I perceived an intense energy I had never noticed in women before — the first *je ne sais quoi* encounter. They seemed rowdy, adventurous, and free from something I could not put my finger on at the time.

When I finally threw my towel in with the Burlington Lesbian Feminist Community, I felt I was part of an historic era (we would have called it 'herstoric' back then) that was going to change the world — the second *je ne sais quoi* experience.

Everything we did felt symbolic. For instance, during those first "Take Back the Night" marches, 50 of us would surround one of those obnoxious fraternity houses notorious for "gang bangs" and chant "Castrate Rapists!" We were acutely aware that the boys had never heard such uppity women in their lives, at least not in such a large group. We somehow sensed that our actions were reverberating throughout the world. We figured that only lesbians would have the chutzpah to be so bold.

Eventually, I did become sexual with a woman, and an erotic energy was released that somehow never emerged when I made love with a man. Even though I felt very safe with my husband, whenever I found myself getting too erotic, images of pornography where men degrade women jumped around in my head and would ultimately inhibit me. When I felt that eroticism with women, I did not experience internalized disgust. Go figure. (The third instance of *je ne sais quoi*.)

But I think the most profound change that occurred in those days was coming out from under the pervasiveness of seeking male approval. Because men rule the world and designate women to clean up the messes they make and stroke their male egos while they're at it, women were living their lives always in reaction to men. Lesbian feminists started to bring to conscious-

ness how well women could get along without men if we so choose. We may still have to rely on their banks and institutions, but we didn't need them to muck up our personal lives on a daily basis. We didn't have to rely on them for spiritual, psychological, emotional or political sustenance. Some of us chose to continue to have men in our lives, for sure, but as a movement women had never weaned themselves from male control to such an extent since the days of Lysistrata. Talk about *je ne sais quoi*!

This aspect of coming out as a lesbian during the heyday of the women's movement has been, and will continue to be, a lifelong process. Actually, these days it has little to do with individual men in my life (of whom I have quite a few). But when I'm feeling my most empowered, I sense how free I am from caring what men think of me — whether they think I'm attractive enough, smart enough or rich enough. As a matter of fact, extricating myself from "the male gaze" often spills over into not caring in general how people judge me unless I specifically ask for their advice.

I think there may be something missing when a woman comes out as a lesbian and narrows the process down to "sexual preference." After all, with whom one beds down is actually a relatively small part of our lives, unless we're obsessed with sex which happens a lot these days — especially in the queer movement. I hope that those women who do stumble across lesbianism via their hormones eventually experience a release of *je ne sais quoi* somewhere along the line. If you do, I'd love to hear about it.

I suspect that those barely discernible feelings are connected to something much bigger than the both of us.



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