

The Thought Connection

"Look Ma, No Boots"

by Christine Burton

I am woman. Well, I used to be woman. Before that I was girl. And before that . . . ? I'll explain.

At three, wanting to get on with my life, I insisted on learning to read and write. My mother bought books with sugar bowl money. In school, the principal didn't know where to put me -- ready for the fifth grade but too small to fit fifth-grade desks. They put me in third grade.

Poor Miss Elkins. I spelled girl: g-i-r-r-r-r-r-r-r-l. "You're so bright; why can't you learn to spell it correctly?"

After three sons, my mother wanted a daughter. On that August morning in 1905, they must have been quicker than usual to peek between the legs of the emerging infant. When told he had a sister, I'm sure my twelve-year-old brother shouted with real male disgust, "It's only a girrrrrrrrrl!" From the age of eighteen months (my earliest memory), that's what I remember hearing.

It didn't take much longer for me to realize that my world agreed with him. He was never corrected or punished. A male child verbalizing the assessment of society, who could blame him?

Because girls were expected to be quiet and meek, my parents and teachers never guessed I was growing up with a severe case of low self-esteem, that was to last for sixty-six years. When the pubescent bumps on my chest grew larger than boys'

chest bumps, in secret I bound them painfully for many months with white strips of clean cloth from the household rag bag.

At seventeen: "Mom, why am I called a woman?" "Because Bible says woman came from man. You're made like a man except you have a womb. You are a womb-man but they leave out the "b."

"Why am I called female?" The male part of the word is plain. The fe comes from fecund. Means you have the babies."

Babies? I wanted the respect given my brothers. "You've always been a bit of a problem," she'd say. "You're not ladylike. Keep your knees together."

How could I ever become an astronomer? Unheard of for women in 1922. Surely my mother understood my pain. At the age of 21, she had pled with her mother to let her go to business school. Unheard of in 1891. "What can I do?" I asked her.

"You'll have to pull yourself up by your bootstraps." I knew that meant I was in an impossible situation.

Many, many years later I realized I was a human reject because I had no penis. A non-penis person was valued only to the extent that a male took her into his household and his life to serve him. In history and anthropology, I was lost in Man. In Science, I was lost in Homo sapiens: (sapiens has got to be a misnomer). In The Well of Loneliness, I was "God's mistake," or "an invert." There I glimpsed an identity, but still no name that fit me. When first I

learned I was Lesbian, joy was born. That was in the days of butch OR femme. I chose butch, naturally. Wasn't anything female inferior?

All through the years, in business, in mainstream social situations and activities, I was still only a woman, excluded from the profession I had come to want more than any other: symphony conductor. I became a drudge.

I observed that my brothers, bathed in clean clothes, were acceptable. But my lips and cheeks were not red enough. My eyelids weren't blue, my eyebrows had the wrong shape and should be darker. My fingernails should be very long. If I'd wear high heels my hips would wiggle interestingly when I walked. My large breasts weren't the right shape, a bra would lift them higher towards my neck. Even the clean smell of me should be sprayed over with a manufactured liquid, said to entice men. And my body was all wrong, too many curves.

Until the twenties, women had no boots. Then women won the vote. By the sixties they were edging the lid off the pressure cooker and women began to find their bootstraps. So that was why I was hearing "only a" less, and "woman" more.

In stores, slacks hung between the skirts; I stopped trying to keep my knees together. I threw away my dresses and bra, cleaned the colored chemicals off my face, cut my fingernails and at age sixty-six I bought a rundown business. In ten years I increased it by 700%.

Now I am womyn, no longer a crutch to the life of another human my destiny to make him feel big and important. That anachronistic cultural ideal is passe. We wimmin are alive.

Look Ma, I don't need boots. I am womyn giving birth to myself.

Copyright 1989 by Christine Burton

New York Times from page 9 behind the scenes. Writers should praise the Times for its retraction, but insist that more stories be written about the gay and lesbian community. Write: Max Frankel, NYT, 229 W. 43rd St., New York, NY 10036.

HAVE OITM DELIVERED TO YOUR DOOR!

By subscribing, not only will you guarantee prompt delivery of the newspaper to your mailbox (in a discreet plain envelope, of course), but you will help underwrite the sizable cost of assembling, printing, and distributing the newspaper. In addition to subscriptions, we welcome contributions to support our continued existence. Checks should be made payable to Out in the Mountains or OITM and sent, along with this form, to: **Out in the Mountains, P.O. Box 177, Burlington, VT 05402**

Name _____
Mailing _____
Address _____

One-year (\$15) _____ Low-income (\$7) _____ Donation (\$ _____)

I'd like to get involved in the newspaper. Let me know how I can help.

EVERYONE'S BOOKS

71 Elliot St., Brattleboro, Vt.
(802)254-8160

~BOOKS~RECORDS~
~PERIODICALS~POSTERS~
~BUTTONS~CARDS~BUMPER STICKERS~ for human liberation & social justice

