

Sisterhood - does it grow in every climate?

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I have worked to see myself
through the eyes of my friends,
my neighbors, and my students,
through the eyes of women
I do not even know.
I may have cleared a small stone
here and there
in the path to new relationships,
but it is an uphill job.
Struggling to imagine myself
on the other side of the obstacle
blocking the path -
feeling myself to be 'the other'-
leads to the even greater struggle
of pushing away
this boulder of misunderstanding.
The work seems equally hard
whether it implies reaching out
to a total stranger
or to the partner
who might otherwise become one.

And it takes at least two.

I first came to Switzerland with my parents when I was eleven. As refugees from Sudetenland (now Czechoslovakia), we had lived in Germany from 1946 until 1955. Unlike my parents, I was still young enough to learn the Swiss dialect without the accent that would mark me as a foreigner. I was twenty when my British husband and I signed our marriage contract in Geneva in 1965 that read "*l'homme est le chef de la famille et la femme dirige le menage.*" Happy to get married, I had thought this division of roles no more than amusing. A year later my husband and I left for Philadelphia.

When we came back to Switzerland in 1971, we moved to a small farming village at the southern end of the Lake of Zurich. After the dirt, the traffic and the oppressive summer smog over Philadelphia, the clean streets and well-kept houses of this Swiss village were a relief. I had forgotten the joy of petunias, geraniums or carnations decorating windows that were open to the sunshine. And here they were again, the boxes carefully balanced in the white window frames overflowing with blooms bright red, pink, white and blue. They seemed to reach out to me, welcoming me back. The warm air was filled with the clean smell of hay spread out in the sun to dry. Farmers were busy turning it over or raking it into neat rows and piles for the tractors to pick up. The women followed the machines in their wake, raking up the few stalks the tractors had missed. I could not help thinking that this was a good place for our son - barely 18 months old - to start his great adventure of meeting the world.

The five years in America had given me much. I had learned to appreciate the openness with which

new ideas were met. I had learned that changes could indeed be brought about, but that their initiation depended on individuals ready to accept the risk changes require. I had also learned that life did not just happen to me, but that I had a choice in directing it. So I started my life in the village full of energy and good intentions, led by the old proverb 'where there's a will, there's a way.' But I was only twenty-six, too young to understand that my attitude was too different. I was 'American' they said. My offers of help were interpreted as interference; the oatmeal cookies I had passed over the hedge had not left the intended sweet taste. There was much I had to learn.

Our house sits on a plateau about 600 feet above the village, surrounded by 30 or so similar houses. There is a small grocery store a mile from us; the supermarket is in the next little town, two miles from our house. When we first moved here, most of the families had one car. Shopping then was a major expedition. Pushing my son in his stroller, I would walk to the supermarket in the late afternoon. My husband would pick us up there with the car on his way back from work. There were days when our walk past the cows grazing in the fields, past the pretty farm houses with their gardens full of flowers and thriving vegetables, was a real pleasure. But there are many days of rain, of fog and ice in this picture-postcard country. And I was pregnant again.

So I suggested to my neighbors that we find a way of sharing a car. The general response showed me how little I had grasped the situation. "But then the other women will see what I buy," is what each of them told me. If the words were not identical, the spirit in which they were said was the same.

Most of us had small children, which made it difficult to do anything alone. My trips to the gynecologist were exercises in keeping my toddler out of mischief. I mentioned to some other mothers that we could take care of each other's children a few hours a week to allow each of us some freedom. But my innocent idea was not met by smiles that would have reflected the beauty of the surroundings. The concept of solidarity among women was as yet nowhere on the horizon, certainly not on the one bordered by the Glarner and Waeggitaler mountains and Lake Zurich. In retrospect, it seems that we all had to prove to each other that none of us could be replaced by someone else in our role as mother.

Those women had everything, or so I thought. Security on a political and financial level, a network of family around them, roots, a healthy life in beautiful and orderly surroundings. What made it so difficult then to be friendly and outgoing? Why was it they could not live WITH one another but insisted on living NEXT to each other? My own insecurity, however, was such that it interfered with my judgment of the situation. I felt it was I who must be doing something wrong; I coiled up in my shell, hurt and misunderstood.

Our second son was born, and I was kept busy and happy watching two little boys discover their world. I wanted to be a good mother and give them everything I had not had - roots, security, warmth, enough space to grow. Yet, I don't think I was altogether content; there was this bit of me that yearned for a mental challenge. With no nurseries or playschools until the children start kindergarten at the age of five, there was little I could do in the way of a job. I started to give private lessons in English at home. A year or so later this effort developed into a part-time teaching position at the community college in the next town. There I could work evenings when my husband was at home to look after our boys.

I recall standing in front of my class of fifteen women who had left the security of their homes to learn English with me once a week. Getting my books out of my briefcase, I came across a magazine on women's issues I had brought along for a colleague. As it was the first of its type in Switzerland, I thought it might interest them, too, and held it up for all to see. "Is that something 'feminist'?" one woman inquired. Without waiting for my reply, she addressed the class: "We don't

want anything like that, do we?" The other women nodded their heads in agreement or were silent. Their reluctance to inquire into new ideas in no way reflected the openness that meets the tourist when he travels through this beautiful country. I was disturbed by their negative attitude, and I asked myself the same question that has puzzled me ever since I came here: "Why is their outlook on life so rigid? Why will they not even find out what the new ideas contain?"

In spite of these challenges, the teaching experience was successful enough to give me some of my self-confidence back. I started thinking about creating a play group for Michael, who was four. I did not understand or heed the warning that this new idea would bring me 'nothing but trouble.' I could see only positive aspects. The group got under way, to the pleasure of the mothers and children who shared the experience.

Some weeks after we had started I received a call from a woman who wanted her little girl to join. I explained to her that this meant she also would have to participate as we mothers took turns working with the children. She liked the idea and agreed to come. However, it was not long before the phone rang again. "My husband won't have it," the lady said, crying. "Since the boys hadn't had a playgroup," her husband had argued, "why should the girl? And anyway, didn't she have enough to do around the house?" He also objected to his wife joining any group of which Mrs. X was a member - the Mrs. X who was "bossing everybody around" (including himself) on the church board.

Another similar incident comes to mind. I had been upset for some time over the very dangerous exit from our school, where in the winter the children would slide down a little slope right into the road. There are no school lights or speed bumps or any other safety regulations around the school. A serious accident was, therefore, only a question of time. Strange enough, the other mothers who were as concerned as I was, did not support me in getting the authorities to act. The usual answer was a hunching of the shoulders accompanied by "they do what they want to do anyway." The 'they' were the politicians who seem to be in office not by the votes of people like themselves, but somehow through an act of God that could not be questioned. The various parties involved referred the problem to a still higher 'they' over which they had no jurisdiction. A gate was eventually installed, but only after my indicating that I would submit an article about it to the local newspaper.

I had not got involved in the issue because I had wanted to "make myself important with it," as my neighbor reproached me a few months later. Neither had it been my intention to "organize people," or "run everything." My work in the playgroup and my teaching activities were also interpreted as acting against traditional feminine ideals. If my actions had left the wrong impression, how could words convince my neighbor of the opposite? I was stunned. I was devastated. It was a long time before I was able to let this painful scene resurface in my memory, before I could bear to examine her accusations objectively.

A few years after that confrontation this same neighbor came to ask me for my signature on a referendum in favor of a common start of the school year in Switzerland. Oblivious to her past argument against female involvement, she explained to me - in what appeared to me my own words - how important it was that everybody accepted responsibility for the community. She herself was working part-time in the old people's home and was feeling better than she had for years. My bewilderment was complete. What had moved her to change?

Was it simply a question of time? Had I overrun her with my ideas? I had been fortunate to have the opportunity to meet people of different backgrounds and life styles in America and England, whereas my neighbors had never even moved out of the Canton. Maybe I had also not given enough thought to the great differences between these societies. I had simply expected that ideas could easily be transposed from one country to another. I certainly had not realized that foreign

ideas - as constructive as they might be - had to go first through a process of adaptation in order to be acceptable.

I can now understand that my neighbor's anger was because my participation in a playgroup and my part-time job seemed to show that women were not necessarily 'predetermined' to spend all their time at home and that compromises could, indeed, be found that were not harmful to a woman's home and family. I had disturbed her convenient attitude that women cannot and need not bring about changes because "they have no time." She had stamped 'feminism' and 'emancipation' as bad words because they implied change. As "*l'homme est le chef*," she did not have to be responsible for her own life or for anyone or anything outside her own household. Having learnt not to ask too many questions, I will unfortunately never know what had moved her to change camp.

Because of my husband's job, we were able to return to the USA for two extended stays. With the children at school all day, I took the opportunity to enroll for courses at the local universities. This experience together with the distance gave me a new perspective which helped me to understand that a large part of my difficulties in Switzerland were not so much due to me personally, but resulted from a clash between the traditional values of Switzerland and the more cosmopolitan ones I had picked up in America. This realization did much to smooth my hurt feelings. And later when we were back again in Switzerland, it made me less defensive. I no longer felt offended when my neighbor preferred to look intently into her laundry basket rather than notice me on the other side of the hedge. It gave me the strength to be once again the first to shout a cheerful "*Grüezi*" across our differences.

The experience at the university also gave me a new awareness of how much support women were indeed able to give each other in so many different ways. And if I eventually completed my college degree at the ripe age of 40, it was largely thanks to the unwavering support I got from my women professors and fellow women students. I felt myself to be part of a common struggle - the struggle of balancing the roles of student, mother, lover, cook and chauffeur. For the first time I came to appreciate this sisterhood of women, and I have been looking for its existence ever since - on both sides of the Atlantic.

The first incident that comes to mind in Switzerland happened at the local supermarket on a horrible Tuesday some months ago just before noon. My son Michael was due home for lunch in a few minutes and rushing to transfer my purchases from the counter into my shopping bag, I dropped the eggs. Of course it was not the small box but the one with the dozen! The assistant who was called to clean up the mess gave me one disdainful look before proceeding to mop up the eggs. I could understand that - with lunchtime closing only five minutes away, I had upset the entire routine. But my apologies remained without an echo. I felt like a naughty child caught in the act. How could I have been that clumsy? I looked around for a sign of understanding from the other women shoppers - a tiny smile perhaps - that would show me I was not totally inhuman, that this accident could have happened to them also. No, their faces portrayed no such possibility. It would NEVER happen to them. I thumped my food into the back of the car, and in my anger locked the car key into the trunk. "*Typisch Frau*," I heard the man say to his wife as he got into the car next to mine. There were nods of agreement over my stupidity, but no smile, no offers of help from his wife or the woman parked on the other side of me. Empty looks again. Fortunately, I found someone in the nearby garage to open the car for me.

One of the interesting things about the feeling of sisterhood is that you always know immediately when it is present. You also know when it is absent, as it was that day. But I do recall its magic presence at another supermarket, this one in Harrison, NY. It was on a Friday, around 5:30 p.m. at the Shopwell cash register. In my usual hurry, I had left my wallet with my money and check-cashing card at home, something I only realized when it came to paying. The cashier had already

rung up my order and the cash register would remain blocked until I had paid for my groceries. Without the slightest trace of irritation, she just leaned back on the counter and pleasantly told me to go over to the supervisor for help. The line at this time of day was long, but still the woman behind me told me to relax and "Don't worry, dear, it has happened to me, too." The other faces further down the line were also not drawn taut with frustration but seemed to accept human imperfections as a fact of life. I was angry with myself but was saved the pain of feeling ostracized.

As regards friends I have had a long time, I have experienced 'sisterhood' everywhere I have lived. The same applies to women who meet to share a common interest, such as a language course, a gymnastics group, or a pottery class. It seems easy to be supportive of other women one KNOWS in some way, as if sharing one interest assumes a common basis in other respects also. In these circumstances, there is little disparity. But what about when women meet as strangers - on a bus, in a doctor's waiting room - where support is granted solely and spontaneously because there is some form of immediate trust and intimacy based on our shared experiences and commonality of purpose? When trying to recall such situations, I remember many smiling faces: some black, some white, some Asian, a few Swiss, but most of them American. Why is it, I asked myself, that sisterhood - so widespread on the other side of the Atlantic - grows so sparsely in this mountain climate?

Is it a question of need perhaps? In America, the early settlers - both women and men - could not have overcome their hardships without relying on the help of strangers. Having left behind the secure network of family support in their originating countries, women were forced to reach out to strange women in order to survive. The experience has, I believe, shown the American woman that she can, indeed, make it without a large family to fall back on for help. This in turn freed her from the boundaries of the clan and oriented her towards other women - an orientation which laid the seed for 'sisterhood.'

In Switzerland however, certainly in this typically rural part, the traditional family with all of its cousins and nieces, aunts, great-aunts and grandmothers used to provide the necessary support for physical and social survival. But with more and more farmland turned into housing estates, the large family is increasingly losing its basis of existence. Social mobility becomes a requirement forcing the traditional families apart. Isolated in an apartment or confined in the fenced- and hedged-in garden of a one-family house, the Swiss woman of today clearly needs the interaction with other women but her traditional up-bringing has not only left her in the false belief that she "does not need strangers," it has also not taught her how to reach out to strangers. I recently saw an advertisement in the local newspaper where a young woman living in an apartment block with her two children was looking for another woman to share some interests. What a round-about way to glimpse through the sparkling white curtains into another woman's home!

This attitude of "not needing" help from outsiders is compounded by an almost innate distrust of strangers. The only way I can interpret this is that for many centuries anyone from beyond one's own valley was considered a potential adversary. The threat of being overrun by strangers was always there. And, of course, this fear persists. Only now the threat is not physical but directed against the homogeneity and highly-prized identity as members of a closed group. It takes the form of a foreign work force and of 'city folks' moving into villages, destroying the feeling of security "where everybody knows everybody else." It is not the ground for spontaneous interactions.

America, on the other hand, has been spared this threat of being attacked from just across the valley. Its people have not needed to become "defensive." Except for the small minority of native Indians, everybody could be classified as a foreigner. People of many races, traditions and cultures came to live in the same land, making it necessary to be tolerant and open to what is new and different. (Also immigrants, almost by definition, were more the type of people willing to accept the risk of

change and confrontations with strangers.) Women were forced into contact with women who not only wore different dresses, but spoke different languages and had different values. Except in the areas where the Indians lost their fertile fields to immigrants, the newcomers did not oust natives. The ground to be worked on was new to all of them, and women who moved in later did not necessarily threaten the existence of the present population. There was plenty of space for everyone, plenty of space for 'sisterhood' to take root.

The educational system in America represents this principle of tolerance by emphasizing the development of the individual. Like all systems, it has its flaws, but on the whole American children come out feeling good about themselves. The sheer thoroughness of the Swiss educational system does bring forth a well-trained and well-disciplined work force, but at the expense of spontaneity and creativity. It does nothing to enhance an individual's belief in his or her potentiality. The system also is still geared to a division in roles and as a consequence, women come out believing themselves to be less capable of great things than men do.

Such an educational system and the general attitude it fosters do nothing to give women a belief in their own potential, both as a worker and a person. Is it surprising then that many of them lack the self-confidence and self-esteem to reach out to other women? Confused about their possibilities, these women use words like '*Feministin*' or '*Emanze*' to slander other women, words which in German have only negative connotations. Before sisterhood can develop, there must be trust in oneself as an individual. Only then is it possible to be tolerant and accepting of others. But this trust is defined by the soil and by the climate. 'Sisterhood' cannot grow without the right conditions.

The overemphasis on role behavior still ruling Swiss society with an iron hand further aggravates the trend already set at school. It does not free a woman to share whatever talents she possesses. Forced into a role, she comes to share a common martyrdom instead: suffering the restrictions of being a woman is made only bearable if other women suffer the same restrictions. It is hazardous to leave this coziness of a majority, when acting on one's private beliefs is coupled with loneliness. It takes a strong personality, indeed. I, for one, have often found myself wavering between standing up for what I believe is right and conforming to the Swiss norms because I also would like to 'belong.'

I was on the train to Zurich last week. The lake passed by in its picture-postcard beauty, the serenity of the few boats taking in the light breeze was contagious, and I couldn't help smiling at the woman across from me. But it dissolved as she looked through me at an advertisement on the wall. The woman on the other side of the carriage studiously carried on knitting, no smile of mine would break her concentration and inveigle her to share the lovely moment. A few seats down the aisle, a young girl - the clean-American-student type - looked my way. I chanced another smile and was rewarded by one in return. The lake was beautiful again. Waiting to get out of the train, I stood in front of her in the aisle, so I asked, "Are you American?" "Yes," she answered, "but do I look that American?" "Its partly that," I said, "but what really gave you away was that you smiled." "That's funny," she said. "No, it isn't," I answered.

I do not doubt that Swiss women will become more liberal and outgoing. Social and legal improvements for girls and women are bound to be made which will lead to less undermining of womanhood, femininity, female power or whatever it is called. The structure of society will change as Swiss women are exposed to different life styles by the media and by 'foreign' residents. An emphasis on equal job opportunities for boys and girls must also lead to achieving a greater consciousness and respect for individuality. And this, I believe, will lend women the necessary trust in themselves to reach out and to share. And, I hope, to smile.

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