
C**Los Angeles Herald Examiner**Thursday, August 31, 1989

**Connecting**
Cathryn Ramin

Suffering from sensitivity

MY FRIEND SAM thought he'd had a sociological revelation. "I've finally figured out what women want," he announced last week, over coffee.

I informed him that this discovery was probably worth big money. "For most of my life, women have said that they want men to be more sensitive," he explained. "We guys took this to heart. We read books on the subject. We tried to get rid of our old-fashioned, dominant male traits. We learned to cry. None of this came naturally, but we thought it was what we had to do to attract and keep a woman."

In the past year, Sam said, he'd realized that there had been a major misunderstanding. "I thought women were serious, that they really wanted men to *feel* things," he said. "But I was wrong. Women don't want sensitive men. They want men who are sensitive to *them*. And there's a big difference."

I thought this one over, and I suspected that Sam was right. Women never stopped wanting self-confident men, men who walked with a bit of a swagger. If we'd been honest, we would have told men that we wanted them to stay tough and masterful, except when they were dealing with our very tender sentiments. We'd have told them that it was their job to get the timing right on this.

INSTEAD, WE INSISTED that they put their macho impulses in cold storage and become softer, gentler people.

This seemed fine for a while, but it began to wear on us. Men who had become veritable fountains of feeling appeared to us to be awfully wimpy.

Sam said that he was positive that the tables had turned. Sensitivity had become an undesirable trait in a man. "Last week, I was sitting at dinner with my girlfriend, telling her how bad I felt that my boss hadn't said anything about the drawings I turned in on my last project. I told her that I felt sad, hurt and unappreciated. She turned to me and said something like, 'Buck up, pal, and be a man about it, you can't let these things get to you.'"

Sam was aghast at her response, he said. If she'd let him know that she was deeply hurt by something her mother had said on the phone, and he'd offered her the same words of advice, he figured that she would have dumped her dinner in his lap and walked out the door.

"I think," he said, "that women would like us to slip back into many of the old roles, although they want us to continue to split the housework, of course. They want us to be stalwart and levelheaded in the face of crisis. They definitely do not want us to cry. They want us to be very aggressive and decisive, especially in business. Sensitivity has no place in this."

I asked Sam what he planned to do with all the feelings he'd unearthed over the past 15 years. He could hardly take his macho impulses out of cold storage, drape them over his shoulders, fill the box with cast-off sensitivity, and slam the lid shut. For better or worse, sensitivity had become a part of the male psyche.

"IT'S UNFAIR," Sam agreed. "Men are being asked to rearrange their personalities for the second time in their adult lives. I don't know if we can take it, as a sex. Some guys seem to be falling apart. They don't know what they're supposed to do anymore."

Sam looked very perturbed. I guessed that he was one of the guys who was suffering. Or maybe he thought he was the only guy who was suffering.

I decided to change the subject. "Let me tell you about this really upsetting thing that's been going on with my best friend," I said to him. "She just had a baby, and she never goes anywhere or does anything any more, and we can't find anything to talk about, and we're growing apart. It makes me terribly sad."

Sam looked at me with immense compassion in his eyes. "Tell me more about it," he said. "I think I know how you feel."

And I did. ■

Cathryn Ramin's column appears on Mondays and Thursdays.