

The Purpose of Womanhood?

by Shelle Rose Charvet

Meeting the football Mums for the first time. I need help getting Sam's belt through the tight football pants. "Just remember when you wash them to make sure the belt is tied up," the tall one told me. I nod, "Of course." Only as we are leaving does it dawn on me, that she had assumed I would be washing Sam's football uniform.

Home again. "How many of your friends do their own laundry and make their own lunches?" I ask my two teenaged sons. They look at each other and shrug. "I know someone who makes his own lunch," says Jason who is 16. "Well, he used to. Now he just goes home."

Last fall, beginning of the school year. The CBC morning radio show has a long discussion about what to put in kids' lunches. Incensed, I phone the radio and protest: "This is 2002! Our kids should be making their own lunches!" My buddy David from Temple phones a week later and tells me he heard my piece on the radio. "Wanna know what the guy after you said?" he asks. "He was almost crying as he said he'll always remember the care and love that his mother put into making his lunch." For several mornings thereafter, I could be found wet-eyed in the kitchen asking: "Do

you want mayonnaise on your bread?"

But I quickly regain my sense of purpose. I retake my vow: "I want my future daughters-in-law, should I have any, to be *grateful to me*." I listen as the women around me complain about how little their children and husbands help around the house. I can't help myself, I have to ask them: "Why are *you* cleaning up after making supper?" In reply, blank stares of incomprehension.

On a long drive into the country Sylvia bemoans to me about how much her daughter makes her spend on clothes: "It's never enough. She keeps whining about the next thing she has to have. I'm so fed up!" Am I the only person who thinks that giving teenagers a clothing allowance and helping them learn to budget is good thing?

I'm beginning to suspect that something deeper is going on. Women have been getting together for eons to complain about how no one appreciates everything they do for them. Then the next generation grows up and does the same thing.

Another friend tells me that years after she left home, her mother called

her to insist that she go home to do her younger brother's laundry as he was going to be alone for a week. He was 22 at the time. Here's another one: Frank, a professional who earns at least as much as his father, still lives with his parents at age 25, pays not a cent in rent, has his girlfriend to sleep over and his mother cooks his meals, makes his lunch for work, cleans his room and does his laundry. And she resents it.

Am I missing something here? Was I left out of a secret mother-daughter, friend-to-friend sisterhood? How is it that most of the women I know instinctively seem to have figured out that they are supposed to do everything for their families? And what is the point of this? Is it so that we can complain in solidarity when we get together? Maybe I have completely misunderstood the purpose of womanhood.

I need help. I'm now wandering around in the dark, no longer certain about my role with my children. For instance, do I *have* to enter my 13 year old's room and wade through the clothing, the CD's and the old coke bottles to find the source of that faintly rotting smell? Is this what I'm meant to be doing? Should I be scooping the rank droppings from the

litter box for the cat my boys insisted they would care for, if only I would let her move in. Does this mean that I shouldn't have helped Jason learn how to make the best crêpes in the whole family? Have I inadvertently impaired his future? Should I stop delegating like an executive and start doing everything around the house? Ought I to be compiling a list of all the ways I have sacrificed myself for my boys?

Perhaps all is not lost. I'd be willing to take a course. Or read a book. Or organize a panel of experts. I'd go see a therapist. In the meantime, if they would be willing to let me know about the sisterhood, I'd even pay dues. I'd come to the meetings. Anything to shake this feeling that I have walked a long way on a dubious path and I'm all alone out here!



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