

# LOVE AND RESCUE IN LESBIAN RELATIONSHIPS

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Over the past few years I have sensed a growing climate of disappointment and even cynicism in the Lesbian community regarding the viability of our sexual relationships. I have heard certain despairing comments more and more frequently—particularly from Lesbians in their late 30's or early 40's who have been through at least one and often several serious, long-term relationships — comments which run something like this: Lesbian relationships just don't work; they don't last; we're too emotional, too unstable; it's too painful to break up; it's just not worth all the trouble and grief; we “merge” together, sex dies out; we run off with our friends; etc. In short, some Lesbians seemed to have concluded, in their more bitter and self-deprecating moments, that Lesbians just can't have good relationships, and stop just short of expressing the underlying homophobic thought, “Maybe it's just not natural, and we're really all sick after all.”

In the wake of this concern and disillusionment, many Lesbians have turned to therapy for help with their romantic partnerships. However, I am concerned that many therapists — even so-called “Lesbian-feminist” therapists — are continuing to emphasize family backgrounds and “damaged” personal histories as the major culprits in troubled Lesbian relationships, at the expense of examining the political nature of their clients' problems. In my experience, insights which are restricted to one's personal past are limited in their ability to help clients make major positive changes in their personal relationships. This is because psychodynamic therapy — the kind of therapy I am describing and which is still the prevailing therapy model taught in American universities — lacks a cohesive analysis of power, a theory of Internalized Oppression, or a set of concrete tools with which to fight internalized sexism and homophobia. In short, the revolutionary insight of the Women's Movement, “The personal is political,” has been sorely neglected of late in psychotherapeutic circles, where the emphasis seems to have returned — even among Lesbian feminist counselors — to a largely “the personal is personal” approach, with but a few crumbs of the political realities of women's and gay oppression tossed out from time to time.

The cost of ignoring the deeper psychological implications of economic and political oppression is great. This approach not only deprives Lesbian clients of valuable political insights into their behavior, but fails to develop useful tools for personal growth and change which emerge from such an understanding. Finally, an approach which over-emphasizes past and personal history often overlooks the ways in which a client's behavior patterns are being reinforced in the present by factors in her social and economic environment.

In this article I would like first to go over some of the general ways in which sexism and heterosexism affect Lesbian relationships, then illustrate how this external climate of oppression can appear within the personal dynamics of the Lesbian couple. In particular, I will discuss a concept known as *Rescue* and how it can be used as a tool to help lovers become aware of ways in which they may be contributing to unhealthy patterns within their relationship, as well as provide specific means of changing such dynamics.

Lesbians of course are not alone in questioning relationships and feeling discouraged about them: heterosexuals are in the same boat. Marriages are breaking up in greater and greater numbers, and women's magazines are filled with the despairing voices of straight women who have serious questions about the possibility of having good, long-term relationships with men. There are significant socio-economic reasons for this, having to do with the changing political and economic role of women and the family in our society over the past few decades. The family in industrialized Western society has now shrunk to its smallest size in the history of that institution, and places an unrealistic burden on the sexual couple to fulfill all our human requirements for community in an increasingly alienated and individualistic culture.

Apart from general problems facing the sexual couple in society, women as a group are economically disadvantaged in relation to men, earning 63 cents to the dollar that men do. For the Lesbian couple, in which both partners are targets of sex and sexual preference discrimination, the economic burden is doubled. In short, Lesbians as a socio-economic group tend to be poor, struggling, or marginal. Lesbians share the same economic lot (and often the same run-down neighborhoods, low-paying jobs, and other poverty stresses) as other disadvantaged groups in our culture. These economic realities impact heavily on the majority of Lesbian couples. Most studies of sexual relationships show that economic stress is *the* major factor in couple instability.

Heterosexual couples (or at least those legally married) in similar struggling circumstances frequently receive economic support from their respective families: bridal showers, wedding gifts, “hope chests,” family heirlooms passed down at the time of marriage, cash gifts, help with buying a first home, help with starting a business, and help with the care and education of the couple's children. By contrast, most Lesbians couples are not helped economically by their families; indeed, many risk being completely cut off financially when their sexual orientation becomes known.

Every Lesbian couple, whether economically secure or not, faces stresses involving the families' attitude toward the relationship, which more often than not is one of rejection and disapproval. At best the relationship is tolerated but rendered invisible: the couple is treated as two “roommates” devoid of sexuality or long-term commitment. Few Lesbian couples receive the kind of emotional support which heterosexual couples can expect: the recognition and good wishes of their family, friends, and community; emotional counseling and support from older, wiser family members to get them over the “rough spots;” positive reinforcements from role models provided by art, literature and the public media; and an accessible historical tradition buttressed by ceremonies designed to strengthen relationship ties.

Finally, perhaps the most psychologically damaging consequence of Lesbian oppression is the revulsion with which our love-life is greeted by mainstream society. It is particularly hurtful and damaging to women, conditioned as most of us are to seek and receive approval from others, to have the most intimate and generally most important aspect of our lives treated with contempt, derision, or complete silence. It is nearly impossible not to internalize at least some portion of this climate of rejection and hatred into our psyches and self-images from time to time.

In sum, the Lesbian couple wends its way in the world without mainstream support or approval, validation, visibility, role models, or even a visible historical context. It is no wonder — as Marny Hall, a Bay Area Lesbian therapist — has pointed out, that Lesbian relationships often become “havens:” enclaves forming a protective barrier to shield the couple from a “hostile world.” Just as there are forces in the culture constantly attempting to pull Lesbian relationships apart, there exists a counter-pressure within the Lesbian couple to maintain the relationship at all cost, as a crucial source of nurturance, self-definition, and mutual protection — even when threatened by internal conflict.

For most of us, our families served as the means through which we first learned about and acculturated ourselves to the dominant gender, class, race, and able-bodied culture in which we grew up. The attitudes and inequalities of the dominant culture therefore become internalized at a very early age, and continue to be taught and reinforced within us, both at home and in society at large, unless we make a concerted effort to counter these internal messages in an on-going process of “consciousness-raising” and political action.

One of the results of male dominance is that the desires and needs of women are constantly being denied and discounted. In place of pursuing our own feelings and ambitions, we are taught to substitute the needs of others, most appropriately the men we are intended to marry and the children we are supposed to bear. Thus are set in motion attempts to disempower us from the moment we are born.

The *fact* of women's subordination as a group becomes internalized in individual women as a belief that their personal needs are not important; that to ask for what they we want or to get their needs met is selfish, that they are only good and OK if they always put the needs of others first. Indeed, the accusation of “selfishness” — however subtly

communicated — has ironically been perhaps the greatest barrier to women's development of a strong sense of Self with which to *be* “Selfish”!

In Transactional Analysis, a school of psychology developed in the 1950s and ‘60s which focussed on the nature of interactions between people, a concept known as *Rescue* was developed.

“Rescue” can be defined in several different ways, none of them to be confused with the ordinary meaning of rescue — that is, coming to the aid of someone who genuinely needs our emergency intervention, such as a drowning child. The most common definition of Rescue as I will be using it (with a capital “R”) is the act of doing something you really don't want to do, or of doing more than your share of something.

EXAMPLE: Joann asks me to type a letter for her as a favor. Although I don't want to do it, and don't really have time to do it, I agree. I have been caught off guard by her request and thought it would be rude to refuse. My typing the letter in spite of this is a Rescue.

Simply doing a favor or a service for someone is *not* necessarily a Rescue (after all, we all want to do good things for people, or need to perform services we don't like because they just have to be done) but my doing the typing for Joann when—without the internalized feelings of guilt and the need to please which the request aroused, I would have said no—constitutes a Rescue. Two other helpful ways of defining Rescues are: 1) doing more for someone than she is doing for herself (except in situations involving disabled persons, children, or others rendered exceptionally powerless by this culture); and 2) not asking for what you want.

The act of Rescuing is one of the behaviors which give rise to the dynamic of the Rescue Triangle. The “Triangle” consists of three positions one can “play” in an interaction with someone else. What follows is an example of the Rescue Triangle in action:

EXAMPLE: Rhonda doesn't really like to go out on Friday nights: she would prefer to stay home and relax after work and just watch TV. However, her lover Juanica loves to celebrate their first night of freedom at the end of a week by going out to the movies, or a party, or *anything* rather than stay home. But almost every Friday night, at the urging of Juanica, Rhonda accompanies her lover to some outside form of entertainment, often staying up till very late. Rhonda agrees to this, even against her own inclinations, because she wants to please her lover, and is afraid Juanica will think of her as a drab, unexciting person for not wanting to go. Each time Rhonda goes out on Friday night when she really doesn't want to, she is “Rescuing.” After awhile, as the tiresome Friday nights pile up, Rhonda gets more irritated and uncomfortable about going out, and begins to feel more and more powerless by giving up what she wants. She begins to deeply resent these outings. In short, she will come to feel a *Victim* of her Rescues, and feel sorry for herself for having to be such a good and sacrificing person all the time. And in my experience, it pretty generally follows that anyone who has felt victimized by a situation long enough, will begin to feel angry about it. At this point, the Victim will move into the role of *Persecutor*: the accumulated resentment builds to an extreme point, and then erupts. The persecution phase may take any number of forms: an aggressive one such as a big fight; or more passive and indirect forms, such as withdrawing emotionally, making sarcastic comments, or other behavior designed to hurt and get back at her lover. In Rhonda's case, she persecuted Juanica by finally picking a big fight with her over some minor point one Friday night and making sure they both had a miserable evening.

I have shown how Rhonda played out the Rescue Triangle, but when one person has Rescued, the other has also necessarily played a part as well. In this transaction, Juanica noticed that her lover was less than lively on their Friday nights out. She would have liked her to be as excited as she was, but, not knowing the true cause of Rhonda's lack of spirit, thought perhaps Rhonda didn't find *her* to be a particularly exciting or stimulating companion. Juanica would have liked to be able to go out with one of her other friends instead or at least ask one of them to join the couple, but didn't because she was afraid her lover might feel hurt or jealous. So Juanica's Rescue was to go out on Friday nights alone with Rhonda when she really wanted to go with another friend or have other friends join them. As time went

on, she also grew resentful at the lackluster evenings she and Rhonda were having, and when Rhonda picked a fight one evening, she used the occasion to get in some choice “digs” at her lover in the ensuing fray.

On the other hand, if both Rhonda and Juanica had talked honestly to one another about what they wanted to do on Friday nights, the transaction could have looked like this (assuming there are no other more complex issues lurking beneath the surface):

JUANICA: It's Friday night, Rhonda! Let's go out and have some fun! I want to go see the movie down at the Roxie Theater.

RHONDA: I really don't feel like going out tonight, Juanica. I feel tired from work, and the traffic is always bad on Friday night. What I'd like to do is stay home and watch Miami Vice.

JUANICA: Well, I'm feeling too restless to just stay home: I really want to go out. I'd like to call Louellen up and see if she'd like to do something together; but I'd like to save the movie for tomorrow night, if you'll go with me then.

RHONDA: Sounds good to me.

In Radical Therapy, the concept of Rescue has been developed further and used in a more politically conscious way than simply as a description of role behavior conditioned by personal family history. For it is difficult not to draw a parallel between the role of Rescuer and the prevailing conditioning and expectations of women and other oppressed groups in our society. For women, the various internalized messages of sexist conditioning become the psychological motivations for Rescue, particularly within their love relationships, where such feelings become intensified. Many of these internalized messages consist of lies our society has told us concerning our own weakness, worthlessness, and powerlessness, or the powerlessness and weakness of others, who therefore need us to “save” them.

A number of therapists have written about many of the behavior patterns and attitudes I have discussed above, in terms other than that of “Rescue” or the “Rescue Triangle.” And in the examples I have given in this article, I do not mean to imply that Rescue is all that is going on in the transactions I describe. There are many other behaviors and beliefs produced by Internalized Oppression which are beyond the scope of this paper. Indeed, the concept of Rescue as I have used it is only the tip of the iceberg in terms of tools and approaches developed by radical and politically-minded feminist therapists. However, I think that the simplicity of its language, the neatness of the model, and its particular relevance to women's social conditioning, make the concept of Rescue especially useful in helping women with problems in relationships. I have yet to define these concepts to a woman client who has not immediately identified with the behavior they describe. This makes it an especially accessible tool with which clients can identify and solve relationship problems for themselves. In addition, identifying Rescues often helps to expose some of the more deeply-held negative beliefs which lie underneath. Given that women in general experience pressures to Rescue both from within and without, and that a Lesbian couple consists of two people with such conditioning, my experience has been that the Rescue model can be of particular help to the Lesbian couple.

For many women love and Rescue often become confused with one another. “Taking care of” someone else often becomes equated with “caring” and love itself. It is for this reason, as Lesbian therapist Barbara Sang has pointed out, that “one of the most salient issues that emerges in working with Lesbians in therapy is one's feelings that the other doesn't care enough.” Both partners will have a tendency to feel under injunction to be “on call” for each other's needs, although often one will be the heavier Rescuer than the other.

EXAMPLE: Mary has to attend a conference downtown on Saturday. Afterwards, she and her lover have made plans to go out to dinner at their favorite restaurant and go to a movie. They arrange to meet at the restaurant Saturday night. Joan has a car, Mary does not. Mary actually would like Joan to pick her up at the conference and drive both of them to the restaurant. Mary knows she will be tired after a long day of workshops and doesn't want to be riding buses for

an hour in order to get to the restaurant. She feels that it would be selfish of her to ask directly for a ride, so instead she drops hints of what she wants: she says they'll have to start dinner late because it will take her a long time to be there, she's going to feel pretty tired, etc. She feels sure her lover has heard and understood these clues. But Joan never does offer a ride, and all day at the conference, in the back of her mind, Mary's resentment grows. Her internal dialogue runs like this: "If Joan *really* cared about me, she would have offered me a ride; she would have *wanted* to do this for me... I would have done it for *her*," etc. By the time Mary reaches the restaurant, all the seeds for a miserable evening together have been planted.

In the above example, Mary's Rescue was not asking her lover for what she wanted. Her silence was prompted by having learned early on that good girls do not ask for what they want (this is known as "selfish" and "demanding"). This left Mary dependent on her lover's intuiting what she wanted and offering it without being asked outright.

The above examples of Rescue and the Rescue Triangle involve only single transactions between lovers. Let me now give an example of a Lesbian relationship as a whole, in which a Rescue *dynamic* has become the chief way of doing business:

EXAMPLE: Lenore is a very emotional, nurturing woman who really gives her all to a lover: as she likes to say, when she falls in love, she really falls in love. As the relationship develops beyond the first honeymoon period, it settles into a pattern in which Lenore loves doing everything with and for her lover, Jesse. She wanted them to live together right away which, in spite of her lover's initial doubts, they did. Lenore loves to take care of Jesse: she nurtures her through all her problems (which seem many), sides with her tiffs and arguments with others (which also seem many), does favors for Jesse whenever needed, gives Jesse money when she runs low, etc. In short, Lenore does a lot of nurturing and caretaking in the relationship.

Jesse was also passionate and romantic at the start of the relationship. Although she was worried about moving in with Lenore so quickly after they met, she agreed to do so, persuaded by Lenore's zeal and also out of practical, economic reasons of her own. In fact, over time, economic benefits which Jesse finds in her relationship with Lenore — being "tided over" economic rough spots by small loans, the cheap rent of their apartment together, etc. — begins to form a background of dependency needs which Jesse never brings up because she is ashamed of these thoughts and feelings. In addition, Jesse really enjoys being the center of her lover's attention and caretaking, and occasionally assuages her guilt over what Lenore does for her by doing something special for her or being particularly affectionate.

Although both partners are Rescuing in this relationship, it is easy to see that Lenore is more comfortable in the role of Rescuer, and Jesse as the Victim; or we could say, Jesse plays Victim, and therefore Lenore Rescues her. When Lenore does more than her share of work in the relationship, and does things for Jesse without having been asked to do so, she is making the implicit assumption that Jesse can't do these things for herself. That is the way in which Rescue contributes to victimizing one's partner. In this relationship, Lenore does indeed feel that Jesse is not really able to take care of herself in many ways. Lenore feels badly about Jesse's background of poverty and alcoholism and believes that Jesse has been "damaged" irreparably as a result, while she, Lenore, being middle-class and from a more stable family, needs less. Jesse herself probably has encouraged Lenore's Rescues by playing up all the ways she feels Victimized by life and society. There are of course many ways in which people are concretely exploited in our society, the most obvious being oppression by class, race, sex, sexual preference and disability. However, Rescue speaks to the way in which our behavior often unintentionally colludes with society's view of us as less-than-human, powerless Victims.

On the other hand, Jesse Rescues her lover by not speaking up for things that she wants — more time alone, separate dates with her friends, more concrete agreements about money — because she is afraid of Lenore's anger or hurt over these requests. At bottom, she has come to see Lenore as emotionally fragile, someone who could be shattered by her own moves toward independence.

Let's follow the relationship a little longer. After awhile:

Lenore feels super-invested in the relationship as a result of all her Rescues. She has consistently placed the needs of her lover and of the relationship above her own. Her formerly close relationships with her friends have begun to slide.

Jesse, on the other hand, has begun to feel increasingly angered and suffocated by the relationship. Although she is very demanding on her lover for love, attention and reassurance, she is also becoming more and more burdened by guilt and feelings of dependency which make her want to run away. Her shame about these feelings, her lack of skill in bringing up emotional issues and her fear of Lenore's reaction keep her silent about what is going on for her.

It is at this juncture that we can see how the dynamics in a Lesbian couple can differ significantly from the heterosexual model. While most men are conditioned to *expect* to be the center of their lover's attention and nurturing, and to feel comfortable in the one-up power position in which that places them, women are not. In addition, most men have careers and work lives that are not only their central focus but which offer them real power and privilege in the world. Most women do not. So where a man in Jesse's position might feel fine about the Rescues Lenore is performing, Jesse feels increasingly guilty and uncomfortable. And where the economic arrangements and expectations between men and women are usually quite well understood (even if unequal), in Lesbian couples financial issues and responsibilities can become obscured. I suspect that many Lesbians have quite a few issues concerning money which they do not make explicit in the relationship, often because they have a "romantic" or "politically correct" bias against bringing up such mundane matters: namely, that women in love shouldn't have to make financial agreements — they should just be able to "trust" each other and "share and share alike." For many women the financial issues are not so much related to power and status as is often the case with men, but instead involve their over-all sense of dependency or security within the relationship.

In the above example, if the dynamics described were to continue unchecked, one could expect a scenario in which one possible outcome would be that the person who most frequently plays Victim — in this case, Jesse — would eventually move into a role of Persecutor. She would then do something to hurt Lenore; subsequently, Jesse would feel guilty over her bad behavior ("How could I treat her so badly — she's so good to me") and would Rescue Lenore in turn: promise or do something she didn't really want to in order to make up. Guilt is the agent which propels players back into the Rescue Triangle game! One day, after repeated go-arounds of this kind by both parties, Jesse suddenly announces to Lenore that she wants to "take some space" in the relationship or "open the relationship up" to other lovers or — in the worst case scenario — Jesse conducts a secret love affair that eventually comes to Lenore's attention and ruptures the relationship.

As mentioned before, it makes sense that in a relationship between two women, the level of Rescue can be particularly high. In addition, the Rescue level can reach new heights because a woman lover often gives back more emotionally than men do. Indeed, the major complaint many heterosexual women have about men in relationship is that they don't "open up," are "afraid of intimacy," and are emotionally illiterate. Between women lovers, however, there is frequently a very high intensity of emotional sharing, intimacy, and nurturance, which can feel wonderfully exciting and satisfying. However, the down side is that at times the emotional heights of the relationship are gained at the cost of completely abandoning the analytical and problem-solving abilities of the participants, who as women have often had this side of their development discounted or discouraged altogether. In this whirlwind of emotions, real issues and concrete problems are never directly and cooperatively addressed. It is a relationship "culture" which one Radical Therapist has described as "Rescue Run-Amok." The high level of Rescue eventually results in almost continuous and sometimes abusive fighting (the Persecution phase), followed by guilty, emotional "make-up" scenes (Rescue), and back to fighting again. The fighting often takes the form of a series of escalating power plays. A power play is something one does in order to get her partner to do something that her partner really doesn't want to do. One example of a power play is my leaving the room and slamming the door in the middle of an argument with my lover. This effectively forces a stop to the argument or discussion in progress, even if my lover wants it to continue. Another example is that of my lover screaming at me in a public place, knowing full well that I hate "public" scenes. This will force me to agree to whatever she wants or to act complacently, in order to keep the scene from going on. In a bad

fight, these power plays can escalate to a point of violence: either actual physical battering, or “psychological battering:” yelling loudly, screaming hateful things to one another, making threats, etc.

While occasional fights and power plays are common enough in any relationship, their habitual occurrence becomes exhausting, frightening, and symptomatic of problems in the relationship which are not being solved. As for actual violence, it has no place in a cooperative relationship. However, lovers resort to power plays for reasons which are important to understand and find solutions for: generally, because they feel desperate, and do not know how to be heard or get their needs met in any other way.

Another form of “Rescue-Run-Amok” encountered frequently in Lesbian relationships is one in which the identities of both partners have become so-called “merged” or “fused” with one another. In such a relationship, both partners are Rescuing in such a way as to suppress conflict over differences or individual needs they might have. Although they typically share a great deal of time together, are mutually supportive, and generally content in their domestic “nest,” such couples have “sat on” a lot of their resentments and individual needs. They have done so for all the reasons that women and Lesbians are propelled to Rescue in our society, as outlined above, and particularly out of a concern that they might hurt the other's feelings, or that what they want is “selfish.”

In such couples, I have often observed an accompanying loss of sexual activity. Sexual expression begins to feel “incestuous” and inappropriate, and eventually dies out altogether. Keeping sex alive and well in a long-term monogamous relationship is a problem common to all couples, heterosexual and gay male as well. This type and degree of Rescue is sometimes encountered in heterosexual couples, with the same accompanying loss of sexual expression. In many cases, this falling off of sexual expression occurs remarkably early in the relationship—within the first year, and sometimes within the first few months. I believe that in Lesbian couples this is a phenomenon with complex roots (e.g., involving women's socialization around sex and internalized homophobia) and don't wish to overgeneralize as to its causes, but I believe its frequency in Lesbian couples lends yet more evidence to my thesis that the dynamics of Rescue — compounded in Lesbian relationships by the similar conditioning and cultural status of both partners — play a significant part.

The way to stop the Rescues and begin to equalize power in a relationship is to *ask for 100% of what we want 100% of the time*. As simple as this formula sounds, it can be an extremely difficult task for most women. Indeed, often my work with a client begins with helping her to get in touch with what she feels and wants, so conditioned has she been to put that aside.

In asking for what we want, it is important to ask for the whole 100%, and not whittle it down in size before we even put it out there. We are often in the habit of editing down what we ask for according to what we think our lover will agree to, or what we think we “ought” to ask for. So we wind up asking for 75% or perhaps even half of what we want. The problem with this is that we thereby deprive our lovers of valuable information about ourselves and our needs, and second, it leaves us with a poor position from which to bargain in attempts to negotiate workable compromises.

EXAMPLE: My lover tells me she wants to have a big party to celebrate her new job on a particular weekend. In thinking about her request, I realize that I really don't feel up for *any* kind of a party or social gathering. But I don't want to displease her, and I don't think I have a “right” to say what I'm *really* thinking, so I tell her that several friends would be fine, but I don't want a whole houseful of guests. In other words, I'm putting out about 50% of what I want, but she doesn't know that. She says she is disappointed that I don't feel like having a big party, but she's willing to go halfway and invite about a dozen people. Now if I really had had “several” friends in mind instead of zero, agreeing to a few more would not have been out of the question. But now I am trapped by the less than 100% I asked for, and agree to this “compromise.” In reality, however, I have Rescued my lover, and will be all primed for some level of Persecution once I have endured the unwanted gathering. My lover will be left scratching her head in puzzlement as I take out my irritation on her.

On the other hand, if I had expressed my not wanting to have a party honestly, my lover and I might have been able to discuss my feelings and find a way to take care of them and her needs as well. In this particular case, we discovered that the weekend she mentioned was very close to a lot of other big social dates on my calendar, and I was getting burned out. We worked it out by agreeing on a later date for the party that felt right for both of us.

In the case of Jesse and Lenore's relationship — if addressed at a point in the relationship when both were still committed to working through their problems together — the task of unraveling the Rescues would involve examining typical transactions between them, identifying the Rescues each is performing, and exposing the fears and guilt which propel those Rescues. They would then be ready to make agreements about how they would do things differently in the relationship in the future. The agreements would be based upon each partner's saying 100% of what she wants about any range of issues they are having problems with: household chores, initiation of sex, visits with parents, time alone, money, communication, etc.

The goal of cooperative negotiation is for each partner to get as much of what she wants as is possible, rather than for one to give up her needs for the other, or for each to argue over which is the “right” thing for them to be doing. It is in each partner's asking for what she wants that greater and greater equality is achieved in a relationship. Of course, by “equality” I do not mean “sameness” — most often each woman will bring very different qualities and areas of interests and skills to the relationship — but rather a balance of power, an alliance between two whole persons who are equally invested in and equally benefitted by the relationship.

Certainly some of the cynicism I have observed creeping into the community regarding Lesbian relationships has to do with a sense of let-down and disillusionment, now that a decade has gone by since the exuberant and idealistic 1970s. Those of us who were coming out in the Women's Movement at that time had some pretty rosy ideas and unrealistic expectations about the glories of women loving women. We thought that as liberated women, our newfound relationships with each other would *by definition* be equal and devoid of sexism. After a few hard knocks in the romantic department, we are coming to realize that as women and gays we are still the products and carriers of sexist and heterosexist conditioning. It took several thousand years for the institution of heterosexuality — epitomized by marriage and its associated meanings and rituals — to perfect itself. One of the reinforcing ideologies which this institution has developed over time is that of the myth of romantic love. Women in Western European culture have been conditioned to accept romantic mythology through countless novels, films, bedtime stories, television, family expectations, that have usually spared us the boring details of reality.

The components of the myth are as follows: Love Is All, True Love Is Constant Bliss, True Love Lasts Forever; don't look too closely at romance or the “magic” will disappear, the spell will be broken. In the Lesbian community romantic mythology has sometimes been elevated into a quasi-political position, in which the idea of applying one's mind to problems of the heart is viewed almost as counter-revolutionary. I have heard this position articulated somewhat like this: to “analyze” romance is cold, unfeeling, and “male.” It includes the idea that feelings are of paramount importance, taking precedence over mind and experience. Yet it is essential to the health of our relationships that our minds and hearts work together, to develop “realistic romance” rather than the Hollywood script we've been handed. The uncritical acceptance of this romantic myth by heterosexual women has been very convenient for men for a very long time: after all, if heterosexual women really looked that closely at the institution of marriage, they might perceive its institutionalized inequality. By the same token, if a Lesbian uncritically adheres to the kind of romantic ideology described above in the conduct of her relationships, she may be unwittingly perpetuating these same, internalized values and ideals. “Realistic romance,” on the other hand, is one which draws upon a woman's deepest intuitions, life experiences, and mental abilities in deciding what kind of person she can entrust with her love and emotions. It is one which combines passion and excitement with an honest exchange of criticism, cooperative problem-solving and realistic expectations of what a relationship can or cannot be.

I began this article with a report on negative assessments about Lesbian relationships which I had been hearing from Lesbians themselves. While many of these comments obviously reflected internalized homophobia, I also felt they pointed to genuine areas of concerns for Lesbians in relationship. It has been my purpose in this article to address

some of these concerns and to introduce some approaches and tools which I hope will prove useful. However, I want to underscore my belief that the single greatest obstacle to the health of Lesbian relationships is the societal oppression of gay women, and the ways in which that oppression becomes turned against ourselves. How many heterosexuals, for example, are prompted to blame their problems or disappointments in relationships on their heterosexual orientation?

As Lesbian writer Jane Rule has observed, “[a]s Lesbians who have until recently had no community, whose relationships have been themselves considered immoral if not criminal, we are for the first time in a position of declared responsibility, able to join together, able to describe for ourselves what the nature and value of our relationships are. We should not be surprised at how raggedly we have begun that process.”

The process of defining for ourselves the “nature and value of our relationships” is one not only of crucial importance for the Lesbian community, but also one with profound implications for all women and society as a whole. While our only guideposts in the past have been our own often limited and isolated experiences and a model of heterosexual coupling which is less than ideal for women loving women, we are now engaged in the great task of rediscovering the long history of Lesbian existence, rebuilding its rich traditions, and helping to restore the powerful community of women which became fragmented and suppressed so long ago. It is in such a community, and in such fertile ground, that the full flowering of women's love for each other can take place. During this time of great change and self-definition, it is my hope that we do not succumb to ways of looking at ourselves that internalize those very attitudes of shame, disapproval, and self-negation which we have fought so long to leave behind. In sum, as we work on those intensely personal issues of love and relationship, we ought not lose sight of their profound connections with the politics of our culture and our times.