



# Stepping Back:

## THE RETURN OF PASSIVITY?

Leslie Olsen

*Une enseignante se plaint du fait que la féminité retourne à ce qu'elle était dans les années cinquante. Elle dit que les jeunes filles basent leur popularité sur les vêtements plutôt que sur la réussite scolaire. Elle pense que l'école secondaire, dirigée en grande partie par des hommes, n'est pas l'endroit idéal pour stimuler le féminisme.*

I stopped one of my female students the other day, as she came bounding into the English offices, to ask her why her legs — bare and clearly visible below her tennis shorts — were covered with large bruises. Laughing and clearly delighted I had asked, this young woman indicated each bruise came from a fellow student, each of whom was a male. More alarming than her response, however, was

that this highly intelligent and mature young woman wore these assaults against her body as her badges of popularity, for they indicated success more prestigious than any award the school could offer.

As I talked further to her it became obvious that my young friend had mistaken the intent of my obvious concern, for she quickly added that the bruises had occurred "in fun" during her community recreation class and justified this by adding that she bruised easily.

Now I am not "lacking in a sense of humour and mean-spirited," two traits of which I was accused recently after expressing a similar opinion — but to me the incident typifies the self-deprecating values and attitudes held by the majority of today's young women. My eighteen-year-old friend allowed others to demean her to maintain her popularity and avoid

censure by male friends. By doing so, she has indicated a malaise common among female teens: a lack of respect for herself as a female person.

It is, of course, not surprising that this lack of personal respect is endemic among young women; strong models are notoriously lacking for young females who are seeking to establish values. The cultural images depicted by the media most familiar to teenagers often display the popular, beautiful woman as one who is fun to be with because she is passive, submissive, and non-threatening to her male companion. High schools, dominated by male teachers, male administrators, and male biases, are unlikely breeding grounds for feminist values. They, in fact, reflect the media stereotypes rather than encourage independent-thinking young people by their consistent commitment to such exploitive fun as "slave days" and graduation

banquets which only females who have been "asked to go" by a male graduate feel comfortable attending. Is it any wonder that my young woman equates her passivity with popularity and allows her sense of self-respect to be eroded for its preservation?

Of course, not every young woman shows such disregard for herself, but most high-school corridors I frequent do suggest that *at least* the image of passivity has returned to haunt us. Let us consider the mini-skirts, midi-tops, and thonged headbands so popular among the young women I see. The acceptance of these costumes, reminiscent of attire once seen only on cocktail waitresses, clearly indicates the power of the media to sell an image. In keeping with this newly purchased image, young women consciously stand, sit, and walk in a way which maintains the "femininity" so desired by the clothing's designers. Assisting further the return of this passive, vacuous fashion plate is the rediscovery of adornment: first, make-

up becomes increasingly popular, and then "Bondage, The New Spring Look" for hair.

So what? we might say. Fashions change and the desire to belong, so strong among young people, coerces their pocketbooks. Perhaps, but external images willingly chosen belie an internal value position. Clothes have always denoted the wearer's anger, restlessness, confrontational spirit, or desire for acceptance. The styles today's young women don hark back to the passivity and alluring femininity of the 1950s. What is more alarming is that their values do too. Unfortunately, even the most articulate and aware young woman seems all too ready to covet this image in a mistaken effort to gain self-worth.

For example, a young woman — remarkable because of her strongly articulated feminist views — recently entered and won the Miss Teen Vancouver contest. She, by her own admission, recognized the sexist nature of the contest yet chose to enter it to prove young

women are not just "pretty things." Yet the irony of her original desire and victory escaped her; the adulation of her peers and the prestige afforded her by her award did not. The actions of my young friend disturb me because, in the absence of strong feminist role models and after a constant barrage of media stereotypes, her actions represent a compromise of an original ideal, a compromise she now believes is justifiable.

Today's young female high-school student remains for me, at least, an anomaly. She is better educated and curiously more aware than her counterpart of the 1950s. Yet her easily co-opted values and willingness to justify the cultural stereotype entrench her place in society. My young friends are anachronisms just as surely as their values are, and we should all be sadder for it.

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