

Reshaping the Vagina Monologue

The organizers of The Vagina Monologues asked me to tell you what I think the world will look like without violence against women. So many images flashed through my mind. In a world without violence against women, my friends Donna and Jordan and Rickie would be able to get health insurance. Molly would have been able to get an abortion without shame and fear and lying. Carlie would have never been raped. Nor would Rina. In a world without violence against women, Lynne and Karen and Brett would not have started their lives understanding that a cousin a brother a father can touch their private parts. And me? I wondered, how would my world, my life be different without the violence that's been done to me? That's when I realized the problem with writing this for you. Because I wondered, in asking me to write about a world without violence against women, when they said women, did that word include me? Maybe not. When we talk about a world without violence against women, I'm not sure we're talking about the same world or the same women.

To talk to you about what my world will look like without violence against women, I have to tell you about the women I know. And I have to tell you about their vaginas. I figure it's only fair to start with my own.

When I four years old, I started growing pubic hair. My mom took me to a doctor who told her I had a condition called Congenital Adrenal Hyperplasia. Congenital Adrenal Hyperplasia is one of the conditions that result in intersex: a person being born with sex or reproductive anatomy that someone decided isn't standard for male or female. It's what people used to call a hermaphrodite. At the time, I didn't know this. I only knew I had special hair that the other kids didn't have. Today, it's not really such a big deal that I'm intersex. It doesn't usually come up. But it did the night I saw the Vagina Monologues.

There I was, in a downtown theater in San Francisco, at the Vagina Monologues starring Eve Ensler. I was surrounded by hundreds of women and a few good men, laughing, crying, stomping our feet, clapping so hard our hands hurt. We were mothers, daughters, secretaries, writers, construction workers, sisters, friends, and coworkers, all together, united in our status as women and girls. Then Eve told the VFT, a real life vagina fairytale about a girl born without a vagina. She said one girl in Oklahoma told her she had been born without a vagina, and only realized it when she was fourteen. She was playing with her girlfriend. They compared their genitals and she realized hers was different, something was wrong. She went to the gynecologist with her father. On the way home from the doctor, in a noble attempt to comfort her, her dad said, "Darlin', we've got an interesting situation. You were born without a vagina. But the good news is we're gonna get you the best homemade pussy in America. And when you meet your husband he's gonna know we had it made specially for him." Eve concluded that Oklahoma loves vaginas.

The thing is, I know girls who were born without vaginas. Girls born with a condition, an intersex condition, same as the girl in the story. One of my friends, Kath, was born with fully functional ambiguous genitalia and no vagina. She was

born with sensation in her genitals, could enjoy touch, and experience sexual pleasure with her body just as it was. However, in our world today, it's standard procedure for girls with ambiguous genitalia like Kath to be given surgery as infants and a while later to undergo a vaginoplasty, surgery to create a false vagina. Kath was told she needed surgery, in order to be a real woman, to enable her to have sex with a man someday. She had the surgery. And lost all sexual function. She can no longer achieve orgasm or feel sensation. Her false vagina leaks, gets infected, and is literally falling out of her body. She and her parents were never told that the surgery takes away sensation and the ability to have an orgasm. They were never told that the surgeries are experimental and that they often fail. And perhaps most importantly, they were never told Kath could be a real woman, whether or not she had a vagina.

I felt hurt when I heard Eve tell that Vagina Fairy Tale. It hurt to be in a place where I was supposed to feel safe to be a woman, but instead ended up feeling like I was in a place that was promoting violence against women like me. So I wrote to Eve Ensler. And I feel so honored and amazed to be here. Tonight we really are helping create a world without violence against women because instead of someone standing here telling you that story, I'm here telling you this story.

In a world without violence against women, the girls I know born without vaginas will grow up without surgery, without fearing doctors, without fearing their parents, and without fearing that no one will ever love them just as they are. In a world without violence against women, these girls and their families will receive information, counseling, support and be taught acceptance of her body as beautiful and good. In a world without violence against women, these girls will grow up with the bodies they were born with, with the understanding that someday they may chose to have a vagina created for them, with the understanding that a vagina doesn't make them a woman, and with the understanding that we all need to embrace, that even if you are born with a vagina, that doesn't necessarily make you a woman either.

I know a girl who was born with a vagina, but she doesn't feel like a woman. I'm in love with her. She's my girlfriend. In the world we live in today, there are girls who grow up feeling that their outsides don't match their insides, that the gender they were raised isn't what they feel inside. Some people call this being a masculine female or butch or androgynous or transgender. My girlfriend gets ma'am sir ma'amed all the time. People stare hard at her chest, trying to figure out what she is. She never feels safe going into public restrooms. She can't even decide which one to use. She's been kicked out of the ladies room by security guards and fears violence from men if she's goes to the men's room. She's scared that if she uses the men's room, someone will find out she's a girl, and she'll get in trouble, get beat up, or be sexually assaulted. She's often afraid to go to the bathroom by herself, and as much as it mortifies her, she asks me to go with her. Not being able to use a bathroom safely is violence against women. In a world without violence against women, whether someone is a man or a woman won't have to be universally agreed upon and recognized simply for them to be able to go pee.

I want to tell you about another woman in the world I live in. Her name is Cindy, and she's transsexual. Now despite her penis, Cindy is more feminine than I'll ever be. She's gorgeous, men and women fall at her feet. But that's not the point. Point is, hundreds of women like her are killed each year, transsexual women who started out life as boys, even if that's not how they felt inside. You know these women, you know their names, they live and die in our neighborhoods. This last October, just 30 miles from here in the city of Newark, we lost Gwen Araujo, who was just 17 years old when she was beaten and strangled to death. In a world without violence against women, people will understand that some women are born with genitals that are considered masculine, that's just how it is. In a world without violence against women, all women, including women born with what are considered masculine genitals, will be safe to walk the streets, day or night, without fear. In a world without violence against women, transwomen, crossdressers and bigendered people will be able to find work, housing, healthcare, and loving relationships. No one will harass them because they're not a real woman or ask if they're a real woman, they'll just know.

When I dream of a world without violence against women, I see four women walking down the street holding hands. Three are wearing skirts. Under the first skirt is the vagina you've heard about all night. Under another skirt are genitals that would be called intersex, free of surgery, able to experience sexual pleasure. Under the third skirt is a penis, or the place where a penis used to be. The fourth woman isn't wearing a skirt at all—she's wearing baggy jeans, that show boxers at the top. All four women are smiling. All of them are free. I dream of women who hold their heads high because they live in a world where difference is embraced, rather than corrected, fix, obliterated or erased. A world where I learn from the women and girls around me about the myriad, multiple, varied and beautiful ways of being alive: joyful, silly, loving, and light. Because if I dream it can really happen, and then if I share the dream with you, it just might.

□ Thea Hillman, Berkeley, CA 2003