

Introduction

by Men Against Pornography

Over the past twenty years a substantial body of feminist testimony and scholarship has emerged about the ways that women have been violated and used in the production and consumption of pornography. Not yet heard are the voices of men speaking honestly about their use of pornography and its impact on their lives. With the launch of the online anthology *Quitting Pornography*, that's about to change.

Men Against Pornography is an activist group of profeminist men in New York City who want to help create sexual justice and who believe that pornography stands in the way of it. Since our founding in 1984, we have received numerous requests for personal advice. Men (and sometimes their partners) have written us asking for help in dealing with their pornography use and in struggling against its negative effects on their sexuality and relationships. Quite frankly, we did not know how to answer. So we issued a call for personal stories from men about their experience quitting pornography. The result is this anthology, the beginning of a public conversation among men that, to the best of our knowledge, has never happened before.

Guessing that different men might find different means of quitting pornography effective, we asked each contributor simply to tell what method worked best for him. For starters, we suggested these possibilities:

- Personal trial and error
- Counseling
- Therapy
- Activism
- Going "cold turkey"
- A 12-step recovery program
- Behavior modification
- Religious conviction
- Consciousness-raising group
- Honest dialogue with partner or friends
- Life changes

We decided it was not our job to agree or disagree with any particular man's chosen method (even though as individuals we might not choose or recommend every method listed or described). Instead, we thought that our most important responsibility was to support each contributor in telling his personal truth, as honestly as possible (and we offered the option of anonymity if that would make his public telling easier).

We hope that this assortment of personal stories will offer encouragement, and perhaps useful counsel, to other men who also want to quit--who may already know their own "why" and are now seeking their own "how."

We have intentionally created a nonjudgmental safe space for men to explore pornography's role in their sexual lives. To preserve the integrity

of each man's voice and personal experience, we have not substantively edited or altered the content of anyone's submission. The views expressed are each author's own.

These stories move beyond defensive excuses for pornography--so common today in our culture--toward a truthful examination of the ways that pornography has manipulated men's sexuality and damaged men's relationships. We believe these collected writings are an important first step in understanding the ways that pornography stands in the way of men's achieving real intimacy in real equality. We also believe that many men of conscience will find here the beginnings of practical hope.

Because this anthology is online it can grow, as more and more men come forward to tell their own story. You are invited to listen in on this first-ever public speakout. And if you feel so moved, we welcome your own voice as well.

[Return to QUITTING PORNOGRAPHY table of contents.](#)

This online anthology is © 1997 by Men Against Pornography. All rights reserved. This text may not be copied, reprinted, or otherwise used in any form without the express written permission of the copyright owner.

For more information, or to contribute to this anthology, contact
Men Against Pornography, Box 150786, Brooklyn, NY 11215-0786, U.S.A.

This page hosted by



Get your own [Free Home Page](#)

Toward Seeing Women's Humanness

by Carl Seele

The first pornography I was exposed to was displayed in newspaper racks. It showed pictures of naked women on the cover, with sufficiently large-enough oval blotches to cover up their nipples and genitals. I remember looking at these pictures with curiosity. My friend and my brother saw my interest and made some comment to me that made me feel embarrassed about my interest. From this exposure, I began to learn that such pictures have an appeal to some people and that this appeal is considered to be worth investing money in.

During puberty, I wasn't really exposed to any pornography except the kind I would occasionally see displayed in the newspaper racks, which I never bought. I read my mom's *Ms.* magazines, which occasionally had accounts or comments by women about how they objected to being seen and treated as sex objects by men. At this age I had developed an ideal of treating people fairly and I took such accounts and comments seriously. Nevertheless, it was hard to see women and girls as anything but sex objects; I was so constantly aware and aroused by their breasts and genitals and other differences from males. In short, I eroticized gender. But I knew that this conflicted with my ideals and I felt very confused inside and this confusion was to last many years. But at puberty, sexual arousal was instantaneous and felt natural and hard to argue with.

Except for what I would occasionally see at newsstands, I never was exposed to pornography during my early and middle teen years. But I had been witness to countless number of ads featuring women in skimpy clothes and bikinis, and the ads usually were not for clothing or bikinis. Pornography's influence extends far beyond the genre itself. Anyhow, from such occasional exposure, and from those ads, and from what I was learning from other boys at school--who would come up to me and say things like "What would you do if you came home and found a naked woman lying in your bed?-- and from things you pick up in this society growing up--like learning from the movies that sex is about a male making moves on a female who "ideally" gives in and enjoys what he does to her--from all this my sexuality came into being as a knee-jerk response to images of female body parts, and as fantasies involving male domination and female submission/humiliation.

But the critiques I had read in *Ms.* from women of men seeing and treating women as sex objects stayed with me, and, to appease my conscience while I was fantasizing, I would imagine myself in the female (submissive) role. I even tried to eroticize men and become gay, so that my conscience could rest easier. But ultimately I know that that was just trying to escape from a conflict instead of dealing with it, so I didn't feel comfortable with that either.

During my late teens and early twenties, my conscience did capitulate a lot and sometimes it disappeared altogether, obliterated by a this-feels-so-natural-and-automatic-so-how-could-it-be-wrong? attitude.

When I turned eighteen, I felt happy about it because I knew it meant that I would at long last be old enough to buy *Playboy* and to even see X-rated movies. I bought several *Playboys* before I went off to college. I would take them home and imagine myself kissing, touching and having intercourse one of the women pictured while I masturbated.

After I had gone off to college and lived in the dorms for a while, I started to move away from pornography, partly because of what my conscience was telling me, but also because I started to become more aware that my sexuality was getting a larger and larger compulsive part to it. Actually both of these things were interrelated; I found myself often giving in to desires to masturbate or fantasize with certain images in mind and I often became very frustrated at my loss of self-control whenever I masturbated or fantasized compulsively. I think I knew on some subconscious level that in order to feel in control (and my life was chaotic enough the way it was), I needed to have my sexuality be more in accordance with my conscience.

I still often felt so strongly pulled to go out and see an X-rated movie, but I didn't want to give in to that compulsionlike feeling, and so I never did. On the other hand, I did go out and buy the "high-class" pornographic books of David Hamilton, which featured photos of girls and young women in "natural" settings, and only a few of which featured complete nudity. These books didn't seem objectifying, as they appeared to me to be not much different than other photography books featuring humans as subjects. Still, I was only fooling myself, by thinking that they didn't objectify girls and women and that they were natural and not set up. Also, I still masturbated to the pictures of the girls and women, while fantasizing about kissing, touching, and having intercourse with them.

Besides an often-but-not-always-around discomforting conscience, and discomforting feelings whenever I gave in to my desires to fantasize/masturbate, there were other reasons too why I wanted to move away from pornography. Ultimately, I began to realize how empty/alienated I felt over fantasizing/masturbating while thinking of certain images and/or consuming pornography. I knew I could never have what I fantasized about, and to keep longing for something I could never have wasn't something I could comfortably live with. In other words, it felt pathetic, when what I really wanted, and had since junior high, was to have a girlfriend and closeness and intimacy. While I was in junior high, I felt very shy around girls and this made it hard to ever become close to any, as did my constant awareness/arousal over their bodily differences. In college, I began to realize, perhaps on a subconscious level, that consuming pornography would only make it harder to get closer to women, as it would just intensify my eroticization of their body parts/differences, and thereby make it harder to really listen, understand, and relate to them. So for these reasons too, I began to give up pornography.

But giving up pornography for me was more like a process than a one-time thing. I distinctly remember the day while I was in college when I threw away my David Hamilton books in a garbage bin behind the dorms; but then only a few months later, when I lived at a housing co-op, I "read" a few issues of *Penthouse* and *Playboy*, and masturbated to the photos of women. I think I did this because I would still feel the urge to see them sometimes and because at the co-op, they were so readily available for checking out. Anyhow, I gave up doing that after several months.

After college, with one exception discussed further below, I never consumed anymore pornography. I think it just seemed too much like a pathetic thing to do, as it was getting in the way of what I really wanted out of life. Still, the addictive quality of certain thoughts, images, and themes of pornography had some allure for me. I remember when the movie *Tattoo* came out during my mid-twenties and I saw the ads for it featuring a naked woman all tattooed, and I knew this movie was about that woman's humiliation by a man who tattoos her while she is drugged, I felt a very strong desire to go see it, as humiliation was one of the things I eroticized. But I was able to resist this desire, which felt compulsive to me, and I didn't want to give in to compulsion.

My sexual fantasies were still very much pornography and media inspired/induced. At least though, I didn't usually feel like I had to go out and buy certain images to masturbate to--I think I had for the most part broken free of that, and seen the compulsion for the pathetic, mentally unhealthy thing that it is.

During this time too, I would read romance novels that were presumably for women (and so reading them didn't prick my conscience as much), that typically featured a man advancing or forcing his way on a woman, the woman resisting, but then eventually becoming turned on to him and to what he was doing to her. I think these novels are kind of pornographic in a way, even though they don't ever get categorized that way, in that they would often eroticize male domination and female submission, and featured a major conceit--that the man knew more of what the woman ultimately wanted than she herself did. I was aware of that conceit while I was reading them, but still used these books to get off. I gave them up after a couple of months, again because of the feeling that I was engaging in an empty/alienating/useless/pathetic activity.

I think then that quitting pornography for me was based on a desire to free myself from compulsive addictive thoughts and behavior, and a realization that I could never get what I want if I continued to be under its spell, and my conscience telling me I was thinking of women as sex objects, which conflicted with my ideals. I think the biggest stumbling block to quitting was my knee-jerk arousal/desire to pornographic images and the addictive pleasure that masturbating to such images produced.

Pornography was never directly involved in my sex life, in the sense that I never tried to enact scenarios that I had ever seen or read about. On the other hand, I do remember once constantly embracing a woman from behind while she was standing up, after I just had sex with her. I would move my hands and touch various parts of her body, while she was dressing. I think that this behavior was pornography-induced, in that it wasn't mutual sexual behavior--it was just me feeling her up some, for the addictionlike pleasure it gave me. She did not seem to mind what I was doing, but it was clear to anyone who cared to notice that she wasn't really into what I was doing either. Another time while having sex, I started touching a woman's genitals in a fast, aggressive way that hurt her. When I realized I was hurting her, I stopped. I was never a sadist; I just acted the way I did because I thought such intensive activity was what sex was about, that sex was about reaching a crescendo and devoid of feelings of vulnerability, tenderness, subtlety, humor, and deep affection. Pornography and the media's pornography-influenced representations of sex are the reasons I felt that way.

Quitting pornography didn't make me feel any better about myself, because there was still a lot of other things to feel bad about myself. But I think it did help me begin to see women's humanness for the first time.

Unfortunately I did still have pornography- and media-inspired/induced fantasies, which typically involved themes of male domination/female submission, with me in the female role to appease my conscience somewhat. These fantasies I suspect continued to keep me from seeing the fully human side of women, and so helped to keep me somewhat disconnected from them. After I read the feminist works *Intercourse* by Andrea Dworkin and *Feminism Unmodified* by Catharine MacKinnon, I began to replace some of these fantasies with ones reflecting equality and affection, and I began to fantasize less and less. But still the turn-on potential of the old fantasies persisted, and I have only recently given up all fantasizing. I see the humanness of girls and women more now than I ever have before.

The exception or relapse that I mentioned earlier occurred in my late twenties. In early puberty, I started to eroticize gender and develop fetishes for girls' breasts and genitals. But also, perhaps because girls frequently went barefoot whereas the boys didn't where I lived (I was really teased once when I tried) and therefore going barefoot also seemed gendered, and because it seemed a sensual thing to do, one that was off-limits for me, I started to fetishize girls' and women's bare feet. This fetish, like the others, lasted for quite some time. So when I saw an ad in a newspaper for photos of women's feet when I was in my late twenties, I had a desire to buy them and I gave in to that desire. When I got the photos, though, I just looked at them for a few minutes and then threw them away. I did not want to masturbate to them--it really felt like a pathetic thing to do, so I threw them out. Outside of that once incident, I haven't bought or used pornography in twelve years.

Carl Seele is a librarian, loves animals, and is trying to understand I and Thou.

Return to QUITTING PORNOGRAPHY table of contents.

This online anthology is © 1997 by Men Against Pornography. This essay is © 1997 by Carl Seele. All rights reserved. This text may not be copied, reprinted, or otherwise used in any form without the express written permission of the copyright owner.

For more information, or to contribute to this anthology, contact
Men Against Pornography, Box 150786, Brooklyn, NY 11215-0786, U.S.A.

This page hosted by



Get your own Free Home Page

Be Yourself

by Anonymous

Close friends and family throughout my life have told me, "Be yourself." Their concern and support sustained me through difficult crises. Knowing me, really understanding me in ways I couldn't, with a loving distance from my problems I could never share, they told me to watch with my heart. I wanted desperately to "be myself," but I wasn't sure who that was. I thought I had to create somebody amazing; all they wanted me to do was relax and be comfortable with myself, enjoy my own company. I have to listen, "think," and respond with my heart. I am complicated: My emotions, concerns, memories, needs, personality, pleasures and pains are interconnected. "Be yourself" means taking the energy to look at all this.

For me, pornography gives and takes. It gives me a physical rush, but at the same time takes away my self-assurance and my confidence. That's how I stay hooked; that's why I keep using it; that's where it digs in deep and keeps me doubting myself.

Using pornography I feel distressed. Sometimes I feel pessimistic. Other times I feel depressed, discouraged, and hypocritical. I have all these great ideas about how useful it all is. And sometimes these feelings go away. I think my problems are solved then. But they're not--is this what "freedom" feels like?

My thoughts and emotions are inseparable; working together they give meaning to my experiences. I am mistaken when I believe that what I think about something--like using pornography--is more important than how I feel about it. That creates cognitive dissonance, and opens the door for guilt, shame, and blame to enter. There is no genuine self-respect without respecting the rights, experiences, and dignity of others. And others cannot respect me if they do not validate my rights, experiences, and dignity.

My emotions tell me how things are going. They let me know I am alive. Although I may be confused by my feelings, they are who I am. Ideas and theories, however, I can appropriate and discard at will. They are abstractions, not located in time or space, and therefore not physical. Emotions are physical: I can feel them when my muscles tense up, when my stomach drops, when my heart races. They are forceful and valuable reminders of who I am and what I should be doing. Emotions are crucial to understanding where I am coming from and where I am going. How I *feel* is vital to making decisions.

Being dependent upon pornography I feel ashamed, unforgivable, trapped. I often feel afraid, vulnerable, addicted, used. I am unnerved about the rest of my life. I want to quit. This feels humiliating.

I quit pornography over and over. I tried activism, personal trial and error, going "cold turkey," behavior modification, and

consciousness-raising (reading about sexual violence by men against women). Pornography was still a habit that wouldn't go away. I lacked trust in myself and acceptance and affirmation of my self as an integrated person. I tried to be honest in relationships with others, but at the same time I kept my dependence on pornography a secret from them. I wasn't *being* honest, I was "trying" to be honest, and edit what I didn't want them to know. In effect, I was denying that it was more important to quit, so I predictably failed to quit.

When I say "I am trying" to do something, I postpone examining and confronting my very observable behaviors. All this mental activity becomes an intellectual exercise--disassociated from my experiences and emotions. I also fail to take into account my motives: I am suddenly addicted, it just "happened"--where did my memory go? I resist my feelings. I can't figure out how this quitting thing worked. I believed for the longest time that it didn't.

My body reacts to the titillation of pornography. No amount of opinion, debate, censure, or praise alter that. The rewards for masturbating to pornography are pretty strong; immediate gratification is something I've grown up constantly seeking out. But inevitably my feelings offset this stimulation. In masturbation to visual (or verbal) images I focus on my body last. I don't have to like my body because I am not paying attention to it. The erotic sensations my body is capable of are never fully explored--the quick thrills pornography delivers stop that.

I have to continue to be honest. I must carefully watch and understand how, why, and when pornography affects my emotions, self-esteem, and the way I think about and relate to others. It's only a mystery--only a "secret"--if I hide from it and don't accept it as my responsibility. I use that fear as a substitute for a caring, accepting relationship with myself. I can make a conscious choice to stop using pornography. I can make a choice of whether or not to participate in the exploitation, whatever the level or intensity--I can never be certain "it hurts no one."

Consuming pornography I am consumed. I feel embarrassed, disgusted, powerless, weak, like a failure, mixed up, adrift. At times I feel worthless, inadequate, resentful, lonely, inhibited.

If I am to break free from pornography, I must be patient. I must take things slowly, investigate kindly--this is a process, after all. I can be aware, honest, and exact about--not excusing, not condemning--how I respond to it and how it impacts my choices. I can ask others for help. I can let them know that this is hard for me and that I don't want to be alone. My experiences, environment, sensations, and responses create the context for my emotions. I have to look at what really goes on, the choices, the mistakes. I need to accept these emotions as part of me and integrate them into my self-concept.

Growing up male in this society I have not learned how to accurately name my feelings; I have the privilege of not having to be responsible for them. Growing up male I feel a sense of entitlement to sexual pleasure regardless of the costs. Everywhere I see advertisements, commercials, billboards, magazines, movies, television shows, repeating the message that I "deserve more." More pleasure. More enjoyment. More fun. I should have (and can have) what is coming to me. I paid my dues, I earned these rewards. I shouldn't be without them.

Coincidentally, I have this fear of being without pornography. It keeps me hooked on it. I can't make fear leave. I feel threatened, helpless, and

guilty. I need support and validation; I need to hear my friends or my family tell me I'm okay. If I believe I am an "okay" person regardless of whether or not I use pornography, it's easier to face being without it. I can't hide behind that and become complacent, but I can stop being so hard on myself. I exaggerate my blame as much as I downplay my responsibility.

If I make up excuses for why I use pornography (and I can tell when they are just excuses, rationalizations), they tend to strengthen the grip pornography holds over me. I believe these stories, even though I invented them myself. I cannot really understand who I am, what I'm like using pornography because I believe using it is a "natural" part of me, when it clearly is not. I cannot reconcile that image of myself with my experiences, with how I feel. It's important not to take myself too seriously; after all, things may be very different from the way I see them. I have to confront my fear that I will be lost without pornography by my side, in my reach, in my head.

I keep on using pornography trying to feel good about it. Trying to feel good about myself using it. But wanting and needing pornography over and over, I don't feel good. Really, I feel tricked, desperate, like I'm going around in circles. I feel as if I am failing and I don't know why.

Worrying about life after pornography keeps me using it: "One more time and I quit, one more time to prove I don't need it." I worry, I stress out, and I've put in my time. I am concerned about it, I believe it must stop. If I keep it out of my sexual relationships, it becomes a "secret." Then I have to hide my secret because I am terrified of rejection. I also don't want anyone to condemn me; that will only make things worse. Maybe what I need most of all is someone to listen to me, to hear what I'm going through, to allow me to spill this huge secret. Someone who is sincere, who knows me or is willing to get to know me. Someone who will be attentive, but won't let me get away with being dishonest, with exaggerating things. I have to ask for things I need, and not be threatened that someone else cannot fulfill all my needs. When I am leaning on someone else, I am unbalanced and inevitably fall over. Building friendships, and the mutual respect and support they offer, takes time, energy, and commitment. It lessens those fears of being "all alone."

Many times, however, I get defensive about using pornography. I can't find someone to listen to me and I can't meet my own needs.

Being dependent upon pornography makes me feel uptight, defensive, pitiful. It makes me feel insecure and despondent. I hate feeling like this.

I resist quitting; I think how unhappy I will be without it. I don't focus on how unhappy I am with it. If I wish to stop using pornography, to stop being used by pornography, I must honor myself by accepting who I am, and stop looking to others to quit first. There is no honor in pornography. I have to ask others for their input if I want to gain some perspective. This is hard to do. It's pretty easy to see what threatens me; I could make a list. I must be committed to being truthful about my habits, worries, and reactions and confront them openly, day after day. Until I decide to quit, I will not quit.

When I use pornography I feel discounted, pathetic, angry-- Why? Why do I feel uncertain, at fault, cheated? Why do I feel agitated, paranoid, alone? The "answers" are complex, individual, and require rigorous, mature self-appraisal and integrity. I must put things in perspective. I have to acknowledge that I can change and that I already have changed in

many ways. Then I accept change. And change comes.

We hear that since pornography is already out there, we must use it, buy it, steal it, borrow it, make it--or, at the very least, defend it. We hear this over and over and over. At some point, we start to believe it. On some level, it begins to "make sense." I am not supposed to ignore it: It's inevitable, it's a part of me, I need it, it enhances my life, I collect it, my life has been leading up to this, I deserve it, it is my life.

I have to admit that although pornography exists, I am not in any way obligated to use it. I do not have to use it. I do not need it at all. I can masturbate for free (or I can learn to), without anyone making any profit, without anybody coercing anybody else. This shouldn't come as a surprise, but it does. Just because I quit pornography doesn't mean that I can't masturbate or that I won't want to.

Once I recognize why and understand how I interact with pornography, once I reconnect my emotions with my thoughts, I find I have little of which to be afraid or confused. The fog lifts. I see myself more clearly. I can weigh the costs, and see how pornography serves no authentic purpose in my sexuality; it inhibits it. Then I let go of "needing" it. I give myself permission to give it up, to see it for what it is. And that is where change occurs; that is where I break out of the cycle of dependency. Philosophizing surely doesn't make wanting pornography go away.

Self-knowledge come when I ask myself these questions, when I listen to my emotions, and decide what is really going on. Do I really need pornography? Or are those who sell it trying to convince me that I do? Are they creating a demand to meet their supply? Am I free to decide for myself whether it should occupy a part of my life? Or am I pressured into believing that it is an irrevocable part of who I am? If I am afraid, then why? Who does my addiction serve? Who benefits?

Having asked the right questions, I can make thoughtful decisions and stand by those decisions. It's not something someone else could do for me. I am responsible for my needs. I can be happy if I have respect for myself and the dignity of others. There is no honor in exploitation. It's important to honor and value my life. It's my responsibility to be truthful with those I love. It's important to be honest with those affected by the consequences of my actions.

Quitting pornography, I feel happy, at ease, positive. I feel accepted, strong, calm, confident, honest, trustworthy, able, joyful, valued, terrific, myself. I like how easily things fit together. Quitting pornography, I feel: better.

Return to QUITTING PORNOGRAPHY table of contents.

This online anthology and this essay are © 1997 by Men Against Pornography. All rights reserved. This text may not be copied, reprinted, or otherwise used in any form without the express written permission of the copyright owner.

For more information, or to contribute to this anthology, contact
Men Against Pornography, Box 150786, Brooklyn, NY 11215-0786, U.S.A.

Unraveling a Web of Lies: A Personal Story

by *Steven Hill*

Females and males learn a gender role as we are growing up, much as an actress or actor learns to memorize their stage roles. Males and females learn how to respond to certain situations, how to relieve certain tensions and frustrations, how to act and behave in public and private, and how to achieve certain success and achievements.

The roles that men and women learn are distinct. At a certain point, usually quite early in life, culture steps in, first in the guise of parents, then teachers, peers, and television, and says to the powerless infant: "You want love, you want approval, you want security, here is how you may obtain it; *and*, boys will do this, girls will do that." Thus, from the earliest of ages, acceptance and approval, which to the infant mean his/her very *survival*, are hooked to certain conditions. And these conditions are steeped in our sexist culture. Thus, boys and girls learn to mimic the responses that will satisfy the conditions that have been established, in order to find success and approval in the world.

My own experience of growing up as a male in this society is illustrative. I was raised in a white, middle-class, Roman Catholic, southeastern Connecticut male gender role. I and my four brothers were groomed to be "successful"; that is, to be outstanding athletes, valedictory scholars, Ivy League graduates, lawyers, professionals, and, yes, even the President of the United States--in short, to be powerful men. My only sister did not receive as much encouragement as her brothers, particularly for her athletic prowess, which was considerable, and is currently employed in the traditionally female occupation of nurse and is a wife and mother of two children.

My oldest brother (I was the third oldest child, second-oldest son) was a highly successful athlete, and very popular with his high school female peers; he had a reputation as a "stud." I was envious of this, and wanted the same athletic achievement and notoriety.

One of the indications of being a success for a man, I learned early on, was his ability to attract the "right" woman. This was the first "lie" I learned.

About the seventh grade and the onset of puberty, my male peers began to outgrow me. Suddenly I, who had been a child sports star, could not compete with the best of my male peers on an athletic level. Nor, consequently, on a "stud" level--the bigger, more mature males were more popular, more obviously sought after by the girls, more "cool" than myself.

This fact added to, and was multiplied by, my shyness toward and inability to express myself about the subject of sex. I don't recall either of my parents ever discussing the subject of sex with me. What I learned I

had to pick up from the schoolyard, locker room, television, and movies. At some point in the ninth or tenth grade, my oldest brother finally talked to me briefly about sex and contraception. It was my only direct lesson in the "birds and the bees." In fifth grade, I had my first ever girlfriend, and my most outstanding recollection of her is that we hardly ever spoke to each other! The same was true of another girlfriend in the seventh grade. I never told anyone in my family about either of these girlfriends. They were frightful secrets for me, and I was very self-conscious in front of parents, siblings, and peers about the subject of girls, girlfriends, and sex.

Within my family dynamic I was a "pleaser," always trying to make things "perfect"--playing the role of peacemaker whenever my parents had one of their domestic fights/arguments (memories of the few times my father struck my mother are still vivid to me); or by rushing around to clean up the house before my mother, the primary housekeeper, arrived home from work; or stubbornly insisting I wasn't hungry when the family went out for ice cream so that my parents could save money and perhaps not have to work so hard. There were constant financial pressures and the feeling that there was hardly enough money in the house, so that my father (the "protector") would inevitably fix the appliance, furnace, or water pump that had broken down, rather than call a repairperson, and he would inevitably become frustrated and rageful, and scream at my mother--another fight.

My parents worked hard to provide a living for a family of six kids. Looking back, it seems to me that there was actually more than enough money in our household. We were hardly poverty stricken; in fact we had the basics and then some. However, my parents did not at all enjoy the way they earned their money. My father was a cigarette salesman and then a high school teacher and often worked second jobs; my mother did graphics layout for her mother's "penny saver" newspaper, and then worked various management positions for a credit union. And the *expectations* of climbing the middle-class social and economic ladder of material wealth and achievement, and of having the children produce a "better" life than the previous generation, were such that it was impossible to ever be satisfied. Our middle-class lifestyle was one of becoming, gaining, winning, attainment of goal--the second "lie"--as opposed to contentment with simplicities and relationships, creativity, and enjoyment of being and the process of discovery.

All of these familial and societal pressures on a young male--me--resulted in my slowly reaching for a fantasy world as an escape, to find fulfillment and to find satisfaction, as a way to enact the male role informed by the web of lies that I had come to believe. What I could not measure up to in actual fact I made up for in a world of make-believe. To appear cool and tough, late in high school I started hanging out with a few friends who drank alcohol, smoked pot, and consumed other "recreational" drugs. Though some of us were athletes, we went to parties at homes when parents weren't there, and also at the drive-in movies. At times our talk was tough, crass, and cynical; we imagined ourselves to be the wildest and coolest, and we bragged of fabricated or hopeful conquests of girls. All the time we worried if we really measured up, secretly pined that our penises were too small, and wondered in silence when we would lose our "virginity," thereby "becoming a man," and if we really knew enough about sexual intercourse to actually commit the act. Amazingly enough, I managed to be all this while still maintaining a straight-A average in high school and participating in high school athletics. In other words, I was very "normal," and by many standards a "success." But when the standards for success are built on a

pack of lies, you can never be successful enough.

Some time during my freshman or sophomore year in high school I discovered the hidden stash of pornography in my father's drawers, and began to have regular, once or twice a week, masturbatory fantasy sessions with these magazines. From these magazines, and from other forms of media such as television, movies, and advertisements, I learned how a "beautiful" woman was supposed to look and act. According to my rough calculation, by the time a boy is fifteen years old, he has been exposed to some thirteen *million* images of how a "beautiful" woman is supposed to look, move, and behave. I learned how to relate to women by controlling the image of her.

I learned that these "beautiful" women were available to me as sex objects, that they were available for my enjoyment and consumption, and what's more, that these women *enjoyed* this status. Their beauty, I learned, made these women desirable to us males; the glamour and pizzazz of Hollywood and Madison Avenue made them appear highly paid and successful. They seemed to me to be powerful creatures, with power over my sexual potency and my self-approval. Furthermore, I learned that somewhere out there was just such a "beautiful" woman waiting for me; all I had to do was "be a man." All I had to do was "go out there and get her." In fact, many of my high school female peers were putting quite a lot of time and effort into making themselves look like these beauty images, and some were quite successful at it.

So I knew what I wanted, what I needed to win. In the meantime, until I managed to "win" such a woman, I could imagine; I could fantasize and masturbate. Over the next several years of high school and college, I fantasized and masturbated to the images in *Playboy*, *Penthouse*, and other magazines countless times. If I didn't have a porno magazine available, or the swimsuit issue of *Sports Illustrated*, I would open up to the swimsuit and underwear sections of the *Sears* catalog. I would spread them out on my bed, or wherever, and flip from page to page, searching, searching, for the *perfect* picture, the perfect image, thousands and thousands of images.

I also began to fantasize about the girls that I knew at school. I would imagine making love to them in my bed at night, while laying on my pillow as if it were their body, fantasizing their faces, their bodies, their expressions as they reached orgasm. And I always imagined that they *loved* having sex with *me*. In fact, I came to enjoy these sessions, at night before I fell asleep. In the safety, warmth, privacy, and security of my own bed, as I gave myself physical pleasure and orgasms, I could imagine making love to any woman or girl I wanted--the long list included famous movie stars and actresses, the most "beautiful" girls I knew in school (but could hardly talk to), my girlfriend's friends, virtually anyone. I could "try out" any woman I desired. There are many, many women trying to achieve a resemblance to the Beauty Image, to greater and lesser degrees; they were all fair game for me to imagine them as mine. And of course, each month my father's latest issue of *Penthouse* would arrive in the mail. Any one of these images, or even all of them, could be possessed in my mind.

My fantasies were not overtly violent; I do not recall fantasies about forcibly raping women, though a favorite, titillating rapelike scenario was one in which the woman or girl at first said "no" but eventually acquiesced, and of course loved the sex and me.

Did being barraged by these images--those of the mainstream media, of

real-life female peers, and especially of pornography--and the fantasies they inspired, day after day, year after year, affect my behavior and my relationships with females? There is no doubt in my mind that the answer to this question is "yes." I learned to continually sift women who I knew or met through my pornographic, media-conscious, beauty-image "eyes," and judge them first and foremost by whether or not they physically "attracted" me.

I recoil now at the memory of times like when I tried to "cop a feel" from a female peer in a car at the drive-in movies, visions of "the Fonz," James Bond, my oldest brother the "Stud" whispering in my brain, while she stiffened and tried her best to pretend like it wasn't really happening. Or drunken experiences in which I chased female peers around at parties who really wanted nothing to do with me. Yet I thought--I thought I had been *told*--that the cooler I acted and the more alcohol I drank, the more she would want me. Actually, the drunker I got the more I *harassed* her. Other drunken experiences: in which I "made it" with a young woman whom I then totally rejected the next morning when I discovered how "ugly" she was to my "beauty image" eyes. Or the few times when I managed to win the "beauty" of my eye, and felt a tingle of success and achievement that was enhanced by the praise and envy of my male peers. One of these times, my "prize" soon rejected me; another time I soon rejected my prize. The latter time I discovered that I didn't know that much about how to have an ongoing relationship. I also discovered that once the thrill of the catch was over my prize no longer attracted me. In fact, once I looked beyond the red lipstick and black-mascaraed eyes, I discovered to my horror that my "prize" resembled a younger version of one of my late aunts! Truly, the gender terrain was playing mind games with me, and I unfortunately was playing them with the women I was attracted to.

I can remember times, during nighttime walks through neighborhoods, as I felt the orange glow that emanated from living room windows like jack-o-lanterns, and imagined that inside the house there was the perfect warmth of a woman's body. Perhaps I could catch her undressing, I fantasized, a woman with that body, that shape, with that face, with those breasts; and I would fantasize that maybe, just maybe, the woman inside the house would not refuse me if I walked in. Were those letters and photographic escapades in *Penthouse Forum* really true? I wondered. Couldn't they happen to me?

If these scenarios suggest a rapist mentality in the making, they are all the more frightening because I have been so "normal." I was no different than my male peers or other men I have known. There was a tape loop going round and round my head that said: " 'Beautiful' woman, *if* I possess her, *I* must be successful." Instant approval, instant gratification, invested with power and approval of my culture. I was frequently "attracted" to women who were the classic beauties and weren't very friendly or pleasant to me, and the women whom I liked and whose company I most enjoyed, I often was not attracted to. This left a huge gap between my sexual desires and my actual, physical experience of sex with another human being. During my teens and early twenties, this led me into far too many pathetically foolish situations, including ones in Venezuelan whorehouses and with Haitian prostitutes. I am not very proud of these experiences today.

In this gap pornography and sexual fantasy thrived insidiously. In pornography, a voice would whisper to me, the captions would state, how much the model, the "beautiful" woman, wanted me. In pornography, I possessed this beauty image already, she was totally

mine, I could do with her what I wanted; she told me anything I wanted to hear. She approved of me, she wanted me, I was a success, I did not have to compete for her, or be a sport star, or a genius, a millionaire, James Bond-cool or Rambo-tough; I did not have to be a perfectly competitive economic unit. For a couple of bucks, I had control over this source of my approval, could escape from the pressures of our competitive economic system: I could conquer and dominate these photographic beauty images. And in the privacy of my bedroom at night, I could also experience this same control over the real-life beauty images that I knew, the high school girls who took the time and effort to reshape their bodies into the current beauty image. In the late 1970s, this standard included a body size that was (and still is) anorexically thin, which meant that these young girls, unbeknownst to me and my male peers, were excessively dieting and/or bulimically throwing up their food in order to achieve the success and popularity that that beauty image represents to them. How enmeshed and insidious it all turns out to be, this convoluted reality behind the hoopla we call "physical attraction" and "romance."

Seven years ago, while still in the midst of this mind-set, I began a monogamous relationship with a woman who was in the final stages of recovery from fifteen years of eating disorders, including anorexia, bulimia, and compulsive dieting. I had never heard of this predominantly female malady. But what this meant was that I, who was attracted to fashionable beauty images and pornography as a way to fill up my needs for approval and reinforce my masculinity, was now involved in a relationship with a woman who had almost *killed* herself trying to embody that thin beauty ideal so that she could realize her needs for approval. In fact, when we first had met some six years before our reunion, this woman was in the midst of a bulimia-anorexic mind-set and 30 pounds lighter. Upon seeing her again six years later, I had a difficult time accepting the sight of her full 155 pounds on her five-foot-seven-inch frame, now healthy and nearly recovered from the ravages of eating disorders. Over a period of two years, our relational patterns forced us to examine this phenomenon. Together, and not always peacefully, we began to unravel the phenomena of pornography, beauty images, eating disorders, and gender roles. We questioned these phenomena in our personal lives, and we began to perceive their sociocultural origins.

Unravelling this tangled web so that I may live a fuller life has been neither a simple nor a smooth process. It has taken a willingness to suspend my needs for control and dominance; it has meant steps backward as well as forward. My process has involved examining my "relationship" with pornography, as well as my "physical" attractions: who am I attracted to, what body size, what personalities, what are my expectations of these beauty images, how do they make me feel? Why is one shape of leg or hairline or breast size or nose more attractive than another? Why do we have so many expectations for our physical appearances, and demands that we dress up and "perform" for each other in elaborate rituals? Why don't we see each other as uniquely beautiful? Why don't we accept ourselves as we are?

I have also gained invaluable insight from reading feminist literature about pornography and gender roles, both historically and today; and from living with a strong, feminist woman who insists upon her right to be accepted as a whole human being. Therapy in its time has also been helpful; as has listening to the stories of men and women, and also of myself. Challenging sexism and the dictates of my society, culture, and government, both inside as well as outside myself; giving voice to my unconscious experience, via poetry, dream analysis, and visual art--all of

these things have been helpful at one time or another. It has taken a willingness to be on the road, still arriving, I'm not sure where, but I'm going there anyway.

Besides, I know where I don't want to be.

To be continued . . .

Steven Hill is a writer whose work has been published widely, including in the Los Angeles Times, The Nation, Ms., On The Issues, San Francisco Chronicle, Christian Science Monitor, Oakland Tribune, Seattle Times, National Public Radio affiliates, the anthologies Making Violence Sexy: Feminist Views on Pornography (Teachers College Press) and Transforming a Rape Culture (Milkweed Editions), and many others. An anthology of his writings, Where There Is No Vision, has been published on the Web.

[Return to QUITTING PORNOGRAPHY table of contents.](#)

This online anthology is © 1997 by Men Against Pornography. This essay is copyright © by Steven Hill. All rights reserved. This text may not be copied, reprinted, or otherwise used in any form without the express written permission of the copyright owner.

For more information, or to contribute to this anthology, contact Men Against Pornography, Box 150786, Brooklyn, NY 11215-0786, U.S.A.

This page hosted by



Get your own [Free Home Page](#)

How I Gave Up Pornography

by John Rowan

[Reprinted from *Achilles Heel* magazine with permission of the author.]

Over a year ago I wrote an article on heterosexual pornography for this issue [of *Achilles Heel* magazine]. It basically said--"I hate sexism but I like pornography--isn't that curious?"--and it went into a lot of personal detail about my history. The collective rejected it and suggested that I should read more of the feminist literature on the subject. I felt very hurt by this rejection, which affected me so strongly just because the article was so personal. I went very quiet and licked my wounds for a while. That was phase one.

But I did go and read a lot of the feminist material, and found out a lot more about how offensive women can find pornography.

We were then able to look at pornography material not as entertainment in any sense of the word but rather as a kind of political media published by men and for men to perpetuate male authority and female submission.
(LaBelle)

And so I wrote a second and quite different version of the article, which included a lot of quotes from the feminists, and went into quite a full discussion of the slogan of Robin Morgan--"Pornography is the theory, rape is the practice"--using the latest research on rapists.

But my conclusion was that in spite of all this, I still liked pornography and still responded to it in much the same way. Again this was rejected by the collective, who thought that the quotes were great, but the rest of it was pretty thin by comparison. And the personal element had almost disappeared amid a welter of quotations and statistics. This time the rejection didn't hurt so much, because the article wasn't so personal, but it was still a facer after so much work. That was phase two.

. . . pornography functions to perpetuate male supremacy . . . because it conditions, trains, educates and inspires men to despise women, to use women, to hurt women.
(Dworkin)

It seemed that I was stuck. I'd done the thing two ways, and I couldn't think of a third way. The collective was concerned, and called a meeting to discuss what could be done. But before the meeting took place, I was able to get into a situation where it was made possible for me to split into two, and have a dialogue between my two sides--the side which opposed sexism and the side which liked pornography. Let us call them PRO-porn and ANTI-porn. The dialogue went something like this:

ANTI: How can you look at porn, when you know it's so demeaning to

women?

PRO: I like pornography. Like that joke a few years ago with one man saying "Pornography is getting worse, isn't it?" and the other man saying "That's funny--I thought it was getting better." I use pornography to masturbate over--I think that's what it's for.

ANTI: But don't you see that there's something hostile about pornography--it's a real put-down for women to be spread all over the page like goods to be bought and used? It's painful and degrading.

PRO: When I was fifteen or sixteen, I wanted girls desperately, but I was never able to fuck until I was twenty. It was intensely frustrating to be with them and never to get what I really wanted. What was so precious about their cunts, I felt, that I couldn't get access to them? I felt convinced that they would enjoy it as much as I would. It was a kind of competitive thing: Who was going to win--me with my Yes or them with their No? But they won all the time. I did all the work, I felt, and got all the excitement and all the frustration: They didn't have to do anything, but they won all the time. If I had dared to admit it, I was angry with them and would have liked to punish them. When I see women in porno magazines opening their legs and pulling their cunts apart, it's as if somehow I am getting my own back on all those girls who wouldn't open their legs for me when I was sixteen. And these women are better-looking anyway. "There--you see--it wasn't so hard, was it?" It's as if I was proving that I was right all the time.

ANTI: But there's something sick about that, isn't there? You must admit that it's quite indefensible to hang on to those feelings for all that time, instead of just dumping them as you grew up.

PRO: Well, in my therapy I found that my resentment at young girls for not giving me what I wanted was tied up with my resentment at my mother for not giving me what I wanted, back when I was a baby. When they said "No" it was extra painful because of what I had made of my mother saying "No" back then. But I didn't know that at the time.

ANTI: That's no excuse. People often blame things onto their mothers, but if you really have been in therapy, you should have got over that. How dare you use that as an argument! Haven't you got anything more convincing than that to offer?

PRO: When I was forming my critical opinions about sexuality, we talked about being pro-life, and being sex-positive. We saw the majority culture as being sex-negative and anti-life. So being in favor of sexual freedom was not only agreeable and exciting; it was also ideologically correct. Reich's ideas would have fitted into this very well, if only I'd known about them at the time. I still think there is something in this--the people I see in therapy are still often suffering from anti-sex distortions that they acquired in childhood.

ANTI: That is using a partial truth to back up a total lie. You know very well that "sexual freedom" turned out to be a con trick played on women, by means of which they were told that being really free meant being exactly like a man, with a man's responses and a man's reactions and a man's assumptions. And pornography repeats that con, in an even more deceptive and offensive way. The most oppressive thing about pornography is that it's a stereotyped man's world, where stereotyped men's wishes and whims are one-sidedly played out at great length, with no concessions at all to the idea that there might be a woman's world, or

a human world, where women might have different wishes or whims or where men might be less stereotyped and one-sided. It is a boring and repetitious world, where men really do "only want one thing," as the old taunt has it. Pornography reinforces the myth that there is just one right way to be sexual--perpetually randy. It feeds just one set of fantasies, instead of somehow doing justice to the variety of ways of being sexual in the world. It's telling you the way it's supposed to be--but only one version, the version that fits best with a patriarchal society.

PRO: But lots of fiction does that--and not only fiction. The whole culture picks up on the normality of sexual relations where men do it and women have it done to them. Why pick on pornography? The stories in magazines are sometimes very good. I prefer the modern stories, which are often told from the woman's angle, and generally respect the woman's right to an orgasm and not to have babies, to the Victorian stories, which are generally very exploitative. The old stories are very male-dominant; the more recent ones much less so.

In real life, men are very reluctant to give women orgasms other than with the prick. In pornography men are only too ready to do anything and everything to encourage women to come. I like that, and I wish it were more widespread.

Obviously some pornography does reduce women to objects of pleasure. But the pornography I like best shows women as *subjects* of pleasure--owning it, often initiating it, certainly participating fully in it, getting satisfaction from it. Being an object is bad, but being a subject seems fine to me.

ANTI: But can't you see that it is all so conditional? Women are only admitted to pornography on condition that they like having sex with men; there are lesbian and masturbation scenes, but the women involved like men too. So it's not only predictable, boring, and repetitious; it's totally deceptive too. It pretends to be about freedom and pleasure, but it's actually about compulsion and money. It's men who profit from the magazines and books, men who publish and own them, men who basically despise--look at Linda Lovelace's *Ordeal*, for example.

PRO: I admit that there's something distasteful about the money that is made from sex. When I buy a magazine, that seems okay, but when all those other men buy so many thousands and millions of magazines, that's not okay. And men making huge profits--the women get fees, but the men get the fat profits. There's something gross and suspect about it; it makes me feel unclean by association. Prostitution even more so. In itself it's not so bad, but the money and the men who tend to own and control it--that's all horrible. The in-fighting over the vast profits to be made--something disgusting about all that. The unacceptable face of capitalism--and a half.

ANTI: How can you admit all that and still like pornography?

PRO: Women without clothes on are sexy. If I saw one on the street I would look, if I saw one in the park I would look, if I saw one on the beach I would look. It's natural to look, it's instinct, anyone would look. So now here's a magazine giving me a good look. I'm grateful to it, and to the women who take part.

ANTI: Women don't like to be looked at in that automatic way. It's the machinelike aspect of it that's so suspect. You're like a robot--you see a tit and your eyes swivel--you see a wet cunt and your cock goes stiff--it's

like a program. And it's a program that goes against women and their interests--it actually freezes women into a fixed role that they can't escape from--it's so incredibly narrow. It stops you seeing so many other things.

PRO: What I do know is that I just respond so positively to naked women. It lifts my spirit, not just my cock. I remember a film of Bob Guccione's that I saw once, with women doing various things, including running about in the country somewhere. And I just remember the grace and power of one woman running--it was a beautiful sight, an inspiring sight, not anti-woman in any way.

ANTI: But it's a *man's* version of women. It's still got this one-eyed vision. It may make you feel good, but what does it do to women? Does it make them feel--"That's what I am aiming for"--or does it make them feel--"I am inferior by comparison"--or "That's not *my* idea of women"--or "I don't like her doing that for men"--or what? The point is that a woman's reactions are not predictable, but your reactions are all too predictable. You talk about being sex-positive, but what you really mean is being prick-positive; you talk about being pro-life, but what you really mean is being pro-cock. It's not the same thing.

In pornographic books, magazines and films, women are represented as passive and as slavishly dependent on men. The role of female characters is limited to the provision of sexual services to men.
(Longino)

And at this point a strange thing happened. I had been using a red cushion for the PRO character, and it had a certain red glow about it up to this point. But now I had what amounted to a full visual hallucination: I actually saw the glow go out of the red cushion; it became dull and ordinary. And I realized that I had been investing the PRO character with a lot of idealized charisma. Or something like that. I had been seeing it as standing somehow for real biology and common sense, a sort of foundation of healthy animal instinct. And really it was nothing like that: It was a false male story, put about to serve the interests of the patriarchal system.

No, the feminist objection to pornography is based on the belief that pornography represents hatred of women, that pornography's intent is to humiliate, degrade and dehumanize the female body for the purpose of erotic stimulation and pleasure.
(Brownmiller)

And from that point on the dialogue simply consisted of the PRO character giving in more and more, and agreeing in the end to give up pornography.

Now what does this mean? It is not that I have stopped responding sexually to women or pictures of women or to erotic stories. It is that I have decided to give up buying and reading and supporting pornography, on the grounds that this will make me a more consistent anti-sexist man. A better fighter for the cause, a lesser embarrassment to my comrades and friends, a more consistent and coherent person.

Normally I am very suspicious of decisions like this: They often represent a moralistic and unrealistic commitment that lasts about as long as a New Year's resolution. But in this case I feel as if I've really learned

something about my overvaluation of the "healthy male attitude" to sex. I have seen through it; I can't be taken in by it any more. And this is what really makes the difference for me, and takes away my defenses.

I remember, about ten years ago, how I used to say to people--"All I really want is one good fuck a day, and I'll be happy." I can now see how absurd that was. It has nothing to do with the other person involved: It doesn't even *mention* the other person involved! It is a robot-ego type of remark. But at the time it seemed the epitome of robust masculine good sense. And now I can see that it's just as stupid to ask for one good wank a day--there's nothing particularly basic about that, either.

We are unalterably opposed to the presentation of the female body being stripped, bound, raped tortured, mutilated and murdered in the name of commercial entertainment and free speech.
(Brownmiller)

There are lots of different types and styles of pornography. In this article I have mainly been referring to the commonest and most overt, easily obtainable stuff, in magazines like *Whitehouse*, *Park Lane*, *Escort*, *Fiesta*, *Club International* and *Men Only*. The vast majority of pornography available on the open market is not violent, and contains little overt suggestion of violence. It was not until I visited Denmark that I even saw any pictures of women being bound, chained, and whipped. I remember how upset my ten-year-old daughter was when we brought the magazines home and showed them round. We had to explain that the lady was not really suffering in the way she seemed to be, that she was an actress pretending to be hurt--but her natural reaction did make a strong impression on me. It seems obviously right to oppose this kind of thing, which is very much a part of the whole world of pornography, and it seems to me that we have to accept the feminist case that there is a connection between this kind of violence and the more ordinary porn I have been writing about.

Pornography is a hate campaign; make no "liberally sophisticated" mistake about that. It is a campaign to humiliate and brutalize all females, women and children. If it continues to succeed, we will be back at the bottom of the barrel--all of us--and for generations to come . . . This is not a pretty time. If my assessment is correct, it is a time of war.
(Lederer)

My own experiences in therapy lead me to believe that most men hate most women, deep down; certainly some of the psychoanalysts have found this. For example, Robert Seidenberg says:

In the unconscious of men as found in psychoanalysis, there is a deep-seated fear and loathing of women. All the songs of love do not displace this underlying contempt for those "unfortunates" with gaping wounds where a penis ought to be.

I don't want to labor this point at length here, because it doesn't really connect with my own experience as I have been describing it, but it comes pretty close--just another part of the same wood, perhaps. So I think that those women--like Andrea Dworkin, for example--who do see a deep connection between violence toward women and seemingly innocuous soft porn must be right.

Perhaps it is too easy for me and other men to dismiss accusations of rage and sadism, and maybe we do have to go even more deeply into this troubled area. I feel as if I've made a definite step in the direction of opposing pornography, and I feel good about that as far as it goes. But I wonder how much further I have to go.

21 June 1982

*John Rowan's latest views on this subject are to be found in Chapter 9 of his book *Healing the Male Psyche: Therapy as Initiation* published by Routledge in 1997.*

References

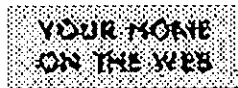
- Brownmiller, S. (1976) *Against Our Will* (Penguin).
Dworkin, A. (1974) *Woman Hating* (E. P. Dutton).
Groth, A. N. (1979) *Men Who Rape* (Plenum Press).
Lederer, L. (ed.) (1980) *Take Back the Night* (William Morrow).
(Contains most of the quotes used in this article.)
Seidenberg, R. (1973) "Is anatomy destiny?" In Jean Baker Miller (ed.)
Psychoanalysis and Women, (Penguin).*

Return to QUITTING PORNOGRAPHY table of contents.

This online anthology is © 1997 by Men Against Pornography. This essay is copyright © by John Rowan. All rights reserved. This text may not be copied, reprinted, or otherwise used in any form without the express written permission of the copyright owner.

For more information, or to contribute to this anthology, contact
Men Against Pornography, Box 150786, Brooklyn, NY 11215-0786, U.S.A.

This page hosted by



Get your own Free Home Page

Choice

by Brian Nichols, Men Stopping Violence

The thing that will change prostitution is not legalizing it, but by putting an end to it, stopping it. And I don't believe that men want to do that, I think women are going to have to do that.

--WHISPER woman

My work on myself and with other men at a batterer's-intervention program in Atlanta, Georgia, has convinced me that I stopped using women as pornography when I chose to. When I used women as pornography, it was my choice to walk through the door, to open the magazine, to start the video. What happened around me that I might have used to explain my use of women as pornography is still happening--the availability of women as pornography, my feeling lonely or elated, events going wrong or right in my life. Now I choose to react to them differently. I find this a simple foundation for everything else which follows, the story around my choice.

The story is largely memories of use of women as pornography and the impact on my body and behavior. I call my memories a story because they are informed and interpreted memories. My hope in remembering is to share the pressure of recounting men's violence to the public and convincing them of women's reality. When men step forward and say, "Yes, it is true. I used women as pornography and I know it is harmful to women because I remember my life," then it is not so easy for women to be called crazy, or accused of lying about or desiring abuse. I think men have a moral obligation to remember, because while remembering men's violation is crucial for women, remembering alone can be a re-victimization and further abuse of women. My story is also important because I can use it to take responsibility for my actions, to assist men in remembering their use of women as pornography, and each of us can use it to deter ourselves from making the choice to use women as pornography.

At this point in remembering I would guess I was ten when the older brother of a friend called me into his room. I was lucky; this man was interested only in showing me his collection of women as pornography, and not interested in molesting, assaulting, or raping me afterward. Many of the men I have talked with about using women as pornography tell me that the man who first showed them women used as pornography then assaulted them. In each case the pornography was aimed at heterosexual men. I tell this truth for them and to expose the power relations that are implicit in using women as pornography.

I remember the impact of first using women as pornography in my body. I had difficulty breathing and felt pleasurable, particularly in my chest and feet. I felt beside or above myself. I had an erection. I can remember what the man's room smelled like and where the pornography was hidden. From this point forward my use of women as pornography

escalated over two or four years to a consistent use of three or four times per week until I graduated high school. I kept ten to twenty magazines in my room, *Hustler* and *Velvet* being typical of them. I acquired them by stealing from other men, except for once when a male friend and I found a paper bag full of women used as pornography discarded along the road.

When alone, I used women as pornography to masturbate. Using a vibrator I would often cum two to four times. I think I masturbated before I used porn; using women as pornography escalated the use and made it more external, rather than from within myself. I remember that I had favorite photos or stories or simply words beneath pictures that would consistently give me an erection. I would imagine myself with the woman in the picture, in the place of the man, and place my name in "her" words. I especially got erections from thinking the women really enjoyed what I was doing.

Nearly all men and boys in my life used women as pornography and thus in addition to what I stole from them it was available all around me. My stepfather, a boyfriend of my mother, my father's business partner, my friend's fathers, all used it. Many other boys had collections that they kept between mattresses, in garage attics or tree forts. I can recall today who had magazines depicting women as pornography, where it was kept, and what sort it was. We boys knew where it was, and consciously chose its use among other activities. It was both simply an option, and also something different. We knew it was both something good and usual and also different or restricted or punishable.

The hiding places created these complex dynamics. The box in storage areas made possible the adult look-the-other-way and our defensive denials of "nothing" or "just looking for something." These dynamics among boys and our fathers set up the secretive smile-nudge type of references that became commonplace code for exclusion of and access to women. This pattern of secretive double reality, guilt of use, fear of punishment combined with the sheer impression of using women as pornography and its influence. It also makes realizing the influence difficult. I have a long series of memories, realizations, and flashbacks when I think about using women as pornography rather than a solid awareness and memory.

Around the age of sixteen we began, in different groups, to watch videos that use women as pornography. VCRs were in most of our homes, and so we commonly had the option of many different places to watch. I and other young men acquired false identification to ensure our ability to rent them (sometimes we were carded). I think this was an important escalation in use. Although they may appear trite, there are crucial differences between the collective use of pictures and of videos. The simple additions of sound, sexist dialogue directly from women's mouths, erect penises, and intercourse occurring on women's bodies create a profound and intense difference in the use and the effect in our bodies.

Watching videos together created a shared arousal and experience that was more intense than when two boys looked at two different magazines. We responded by using more degrading terms for sex and women and more often transposing the two. The collective use bonded us in understanding that women were excluded from a visceral experience revolving around access to the body of a woman and then imposed on the women in high school with us. The language used in videos and by us was enacted through discussions and evaluations of women, jokes that held women and the sex in contempt and degradation and mixed sex and

violence. Terms such as doing the nasty, boning, going for the goal line, fish, twat, and cunt became more common.

This community of use and personal use culminated when I went with many other young men to Florida for spring break in 1985. We went to three strip bars while there. I remember seeing many women and evaluating them with my friends. We spent money so they would kiss with us and do a private dance. I remember the woman I danced with seemed very far away.

My slowdown in using women as pornography was mostly unconscious. I think it primarily happened because the community of use ended with high school graduation (1985), and I did not join another (largely because I dropped out of college). After graduation I used women as pornography irregularly, and more in response to feeling discomfort or pain. There were two periods of consistent use of about one and three months in 1991 and 1992 respectively. This use was very alone and shame filled, however. By this time I had learned some about the harm done by using women as pornography and using alone was different than using with other men all around.

When using women as pornography I often numbed out or disassociated from my body. Between the impact of sensation on my body, the sense of power, the secretive nature of the use and the relationships with other boys, it was easy for using women as pornography to become and remain a method of avoiding childhood pain and trauma. When I slowed down using women as pornography, I replaced them with using alcohol, though there were times I used them together. The use of alcohol and using women as pornography was more important than friendships, because friendships revolved around shared use, and I left those who did not use. There is truth that using women as pornography helped me get through, and that it hurt me in the process. But as much as it is true, it is difficult to acknowledge because I fear that I or others will use it to justify or explain my choice or their choice. When I think of this I ask myself a helpful and important question I first heard from others: Will I wait until I feel good to make choices that are safe for women?

I think three things were particularly supportive in choosing to stop using women as pornography, and in choosing not to use today. First, education about what pornography is what I learned from it and realities for women used in it and for all women. Second, admitting and being accountable for my use of women as pornography, and other abusive behavior I have done, and the effects on women. Third, having consequences for any future use of women as pornography.

Considering first what I learned from using women as pornography: My use had a profound effect on me, forming what I thought about sex and women, and transposing the two. Even with the presence of sex education in my home and school, using women as pornography was my primary sexual education. This was partially because of the sheer repetition of use and the physical feelings generated. In addition, sex education classes and books were laughed at by us boys, because they were ideas about sex. Using women as pornography actually was sex through the feelings generated, shared experience with other boys/men, and orgasm. That was powerful and unarguable, because the learning was unconscious.

As I used women I was learning contempt and hatred for them by the very act and by the content. For instance, I remember first understanding that there were women being photographed; until that time this had not

occurred to me. Then I can remember first remembering this on my own, without the shock of being reminded. That is why I use the term "women used as pornography," because it reminds me consistently that women are in the pictures. This is also why I included a quote at the opening of this essay from a woman used as a prostitute. For me, the only difference between using women as pornography and as prostitutes is time. For the woman, there is no difference, as when the pictures were taken she was used as a prostitute, and then I used her as pornography.

Then I remember realizing that women in my life did not and do not say the words beneath the pictures or the script in the video. And in fact the women used in production do not say these things, although they are portrayed as such. These words are written by men, and they express our desire to have sexual access to women. The words taught me to mix sex and violence, to sexualize most interactions with women, to assume women were flirting with me, telling me without saying it that they wanted intercourse, and to think that sex is liberating.

I learned that pictures are sex acts for the people creating them and for me, not the expression of ideas. To say "Women are not as important as men, men deserve access to women's bodies, and women deserve to be degraded, humiliated, beaten, raped, tortured and killed while being photographed for men to later watch and masturbate to" is the expression of an idea. To do it, however, is an act.

I also realized how I had separated using women in advertising and using women as pornography. Now I think there is little or no difference between women used as pornography to sell other products and women used as pornography to sell the picture itself. Although I criticized the use of women in advertising, I thought that pornography was okay. I think I had no elaborate or consistent reason for why; I just created a division that justified my use or possible use.

As I learned that the pornography industry is set up to degrade, hurt, rape, torture, and kill women. I came to terms with my use, and what it meant for the women in my life. Considering how much I had learned from using women as pornography, it is not surprising to me that I committed rape. I realized this in college through learning about date rape. Now I know that using women as pornography put together sex, violence, degradation, my assurance that I knew what was best for her, and disassociation from my body during sex. When men assign the words "I want it" to women and picture that, then I can say "I'm gonna give you what you want," having heard from other men through using women as pornography what it is we want women to want. I used pressure, coercion, and not checking in to touch women in ways they did not want me to, including intercourse.

I also used harassment, such as unwanted public touching and turning words sexual or sexualizing statements of women. As I think of repeatedly using women as pornography, I remember how the pictures sexualized all situations, and I think this is what I was doing. Also, when sexual with women I asked them questions in ways that I now understand were trying to get them to speak as the dialogue accompanying women used as pornography. Finally, when I thought about my use of woman as pornography before I understood the institution and the harm it does, I thought that my use was positive because what turned me on was pictures with women having pleasure. But when I was sexual with women, their pleasure had to adhere to my understanding of what their pleasure looks like and how it happens.

In addition to what I learned from my use of women as pornography, the assumptions of male privilege that I held also maintained my choice to rape. By male privilege I mean roughly that what I wanted I had a right to, that what I wanted would happen. I will not elaborate on this further because the focus of this article is understanding what I learned that helps me choose to not use women as pornography. And it was realizing my violence and abuse, and their connection to using women as pornography, that was the key in stopping my use. I choose to stop using women as pornography because I learned it was harmful to women in general, to women used as pornography, and to the women around me. My reaction to realizing over and over what I had done was and is a complicated interweaving of disgust, fear, anger, rationalizing, and denial. Since that time I have been slowly educated, and learned to give up parts of my life, including the use of women as pornography. While learning to change, I think I've never been consistently challenged by feminists to give up anything that does not in the end make me a fuller person.

But to accept the challenges to change I have to replace the thought/reaction "What can I get away with?"--which I learned partially from the double reality of using women as pornography--with committing to stopping. I can use women as pornography. I unfortunately live in a country where I have a choice I should never have had. I was exposed to it in a way and context in which there was no way for me to understand what I was learning and its harmful effects. But that is not reality today. Using women as pornography is not falling off the wagon--it is an act of violence, because the women in the pictures are being violated, and I am supported in making violent rather than nonabusive choices.

Therefore, I have created a system of accountability. Men in my life would hold me responsible if I used women as pornography, and would be extremely disappointed and angry. Having people around who expect me to be fully human is important. In addition, I have developed consequences for any future choice to use women as pornography. I would take out a warrant for my arrest and plead guilty to pandering. I would give money to organizations such as WHISPER [Women Hurt in Systems of Prostitution Engaged in Revolt] and CPA [Council for Prostitution Alternatives]. I might enroll in a class to change my behavior, or attend twelve-step meetings, or whatever it would take to stop. I would like to make the decision not to use women as pornography cellular, where it doesn't *feel* like a choice in my body, although it still is.

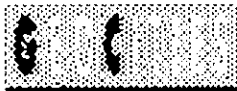
The realities of choice and responsibility are painful ones. Using women as pornography is an institution with devastating impact. The challenge I want to pass on is to stop. Make the choice to stop using women as pornography. Do what it takes to stop, if it means telling your employer, clergy, or therapist about your use. Insist that you want to stop, and ask for help. It is crucial to go to other men and not to women, because other men have similar experiences, and because it is not women's work to change us. Do what it takes to create consequences for your choice to use women as pornography, to create a community of accountability that will expect you to make nonabusive choices and hold you responsible if you do not.

Return to QUITTING PORNOGRAPHY table of contents.

Nichols. All rights reserved. This text may not be copied, reprinted, or otherwise used in any form without the express written permission of the copyright owner.

For more information, or to contribute to this anthology, contact
Men Against Pornography, Box 150786, Brooklyn, NY 11215-0786, U.S.A.

This page hosted by



Get your own Free Home Page

Unsplitting My Sexual Self

by Scott Muskin

I have never been addicted to pornography. Instead, I have been addicted to another kind of lie that encompassed my entire sexual self. It is still with me, and it is not unlike pornography's illusion. I was an illusion too, presenting myself as something I was not.

The summer before my first year of junior high I went to summer camp. Hardly any kids from my hometown would be there, and I was excited at the chance to remake myself in another environment. These new kids would not know as the slightly odd, certainly not "with it" kid still stuck in elementary school and still thinking board games made for a fun Saturday night. These kids at camp would not know that I had never been to the roller rink except on school skating nights, that I had hardly ever kissed a girl, and that although over the one summer I actually did have a girlfriend, the pleasures of riding my dirt bike and camping in Tom Devlin's backyard made me literally forget her. At summer camp there would be only fun, friends, and a sparkling lake.

I *was* able to remake myself. The clique of cool kids from Minneapolis took me in. I was there in the darkened--and supposedly off-limits--spare cabin when Jeff Friedman revealed his recently acquired treasure: a slick, thick copy of *Playboy* that his brother, a counselor, had brought back for him from a day-off trip to Duluth. On the cover a woman in a black see-through shawl pouted from behind a mass of blonde hair. As Jeff flicked the pages I watched with the same erection that pushed up from the crotches of the other boys who had been invited to the viewing. But I didn't say much, didn't have the enthusiasm of Adam Paulson--*Jesus Christ those are big tits*--and I certainly didn't ask to look at it later by myself, like several other guys did. To me the pictures were dangerous. Not because I had any idea that pornography manipulates, but because I knew what you were supposed to do with it, and that scared me.

This fear had reached new proportions since a few days earlier, when, fortunately for me, I was in on a late-night joke. Jeff, Adam, and a few other cool guys in my cabin had conspired to make another cabin mate, Allen, believe that they were going to play a game that night called Spluey. In Spluey, everybody gets into their bunks, after lights out when the counselors have left to carouse about in town, and when someone says "Go!" everybody begins to masturbate. The feigned object is to be the one who comes first, announcing so by yelling out "Spluey!" After almost half an hour of playing, though, the cool guys weren't really doing it; they were pretending, stalling, and offering Allen helpful tips and encouragement. "Rub the tip," or "Use some spit to glide it."

I needed no such encouragement, because I *really was* masturbating, while at the same time pretending to be pretending to be masturbating. It was a complex act. But I had never come before, and as I got close to that mystery, I got scared, and I stopped.

Allen didn't.

I can still see his face in the glare of six flashlights whipped out to display the evidence: his penis still thick and wet with semen. Everybody laughed, even the kids too chicken to play the game. We all laughed at Allen's shame and absurdity as he tried to talk his way out of it--*It's spit. I just wanted to see what you guys would do*--and then left the cabin for the bathroom.

The game, I believe, frightened me into numbness and denial. *Thank god that wasn't me*, I thought. *But I'm not like Allen*. And I looked at Allen as "poor Allen" from then on, even though I had been right there with him during the game, physiologically at least, until he was caught. I was one of the cool guys, and even though we were all sorry for being so mean, I failed to see Allen as the same as me.

"Spluey" works as a joke because of the cultural paradox inherent in masturbation. Allen could believe we would all be beating off because he knew that's what boys do, and this knowledge led him to trust us. Yet therein also lies the cruelty of the joke, for the other side of the paradoxical coin is the shame, the flashlights and taunting adolescents. The message of the game is "Everybody does it, but nobody but a fool would ever actually *do* it."

* * *

"Spluey" in this sense is a metaphor for my sexual development. I had learned elsewhere that what was supposed to be true was not. A school film I recall showed how a penis becomes erect: a graphic of the blood flowing into it and pushing it up, as a voice-over said, "Most people masturbate, but whether you do or do not, you are normal." The entire class moaned when they heard this. Apparently the film was a lie--you were only normal if you did not masturbate.

But I didn't need a film to tell me masturbation was going to be a frustrating aspect of life. I felt the urge every night and faced my friends' scorn of "jerk-offs" every day, whether at camp, at home in the neighborhood, or at John H. Beveridge Junior High. Hardly a lunch period passed when someone wasn't put down by saying he "beats off." It became even worse in high school, when those who beat off would be contrasted with the "normal," "cool" guys who, they would have everyone believe, were having so much sex they didn't need masturbation. Telling a story about how some girl rubbed your penis raised you to new heights of cooldom, but even a faint reference to doing it to yourself made you the social equivalent of a leper.

I learned very quickly, like Allen that night, that I would have to inhabit two worlds. The "real world" of my friends and family and television insisted overwhelmingly that normal people don't masturbate. And then there was the world of my own body with its equally overwhelming urge to rub away late at night. I faced shame on the one hand and ignoring what my body was telling me to do on the other. Allen got caught in the crossfire. I saw his fall, determined not to let it happen to me, and entered a double life so powerful, it is still with me today.

* * *

This new life was a challenge. I had to do what my body desired in private and then act as if I disdained that behavior with my friends and even my family. I became very good at it indeed, I learned to laugh

instantly at any reference to "jacking off." Sometimes, like that night of Spluey, I even had to pretend like I was doing it--to get a laugh out the guys, to fit in in the locker room, whatever--while pretending like I was pretending. I knew when I slipped up, too, like when I told Chris Poel that the paper says most men do it and why are we so uptight about it? Chris proceeded to tell everyone sitting around us on the bus what I had said, and I immediately had "dork," "beat-off," and "faggot" flung at me. I regained my bravado, the episode only toughening my act like a day lifting weights toughens muscles.

Part of learning the act, for me, meant eschewing anything associated with beating off. Pornography was number one. Anytime a *Playboy*, etc. was passed around, I abstained. My argument was that if being a nonmasturbator was cool, then showing disdain for porn only made me cooler. If the logic was that only dorks who can't get girls need to beat off, then I only strengthened my hand by saying that only dorks who can't get girls need to look at them in magazines. I also didn't come into much contact with such magazines. My parents did not, like other parents I knew, keep them around the house. All we had was TV commercials that associated sexy women with beer or products, but certainly with good times and, more important, normalcy. My father would say, probably in a well-meaning attempt to bring me out of my shell, something like "Almost makes you want to drink beer, doesn't it?" or "I wouldn't mind being in *that* bar!" The closest thing to traditional pornography we had was the *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit issue, which I snuck away sometimes and used to masturbate with. But those pictures of "sexy," "ideal" women reminded me of the "real world" and that I was supposed to be finding and getting into bed with similar women, or at least their adolescent counterparts, or at the very least *something* akin to them and of their gender. I was certainly not supposed to be rubbing my penis against their images in a magazine. No, I preferred to break with society in the dark, alone, at night, where there were no hearkenings of the way I was supposed to be, the "real" me. Even when cable came with its illicit soft porn or the Playboy Channel glimpsed through the wavy lines caused by the source scrambler (you'd think *Playboy* technology could do better than that), I watched exclusively by myself and even then rarely. Watching other people doing what I was supposed to be doing only brought the "real" world up against the world I knew, and that made me feel like a loser and a fake.

Eventually I became *too* good at my act. I would wake up to find myself in my sleep, my body choosing to do what my mind had insisted was inappropriate. One time I had been to a party where a girl wanted to kiss me and did, and this made me feel on top of the world, until I woke from my sleep that night on the verge of orgasm, my hand pulling on my penis. As the semen shot from me I became incensed at myself: A young woman was interested in me; I did not *need* to *do* this. Many times after moments like that I would lay down ultimatums: *This was the last time. I am through being a loser.*

Or I would create elaborate self-deceiving situations of the "if this, then this" variety that would determine whether or not it was my destiny to indulge. My favorite was the even/odd test on my digital clock: even I would, odd I would not. Somehow, if odd came up, I always kept looking until even appeared: 3:25 . . . 3:25 . . . 3:25 . . . 3:26, and that would be that. I would give in, but it was with a sense that I was *forced* to, that there was no other choice--in other words, I was absolved.

In this way I began even to fool myself. My act was so good that I had taken it to heart. In my head were two sexual selves, one hidden away

and never thought about (and certainly never *talked* about) and another out there in the world, facing life with bravado and kissing girls. If I "screwed up," as I called it, and masturbated, I would immediately dump the experience into that void that didn't exist, like my semen flushed down the toilet, and I was free of it forever. Even when my mother caught me pulling up my pants in my room when I was supposed to be doing algebra, I could wipe the experience away. It didn't exist, because real people don't masturbate. In one sense I was simply going easy on myself. But in another, very real sense, I was splitting myself apart, forcing myself into two sexual realms, one existing as society required and scared to death, and the other actually me, but ashamed to admit it.

It goes beyond lying, this internal split; it comes from years of literally thinking masturbation was something nobody in the real world did, that real people belittled, and that therefore *the real me* didn't do. Some other me was responsible for it, some part of me that I had relegated either to nothingness or to absurdity and juvenility. My sexual self was a fractured picture that was not real and was not fully me. I had closed off the masturbating part of me, and at its first inklings, then, I lost the ability to talk frankly, truthfully, or completely about my sexuality.

I struggle with that loss today. I am married now, and although my wife and I have been readers and discussers of sex and sexuality issues for quite some time, we still find it difficult to talk about the actualities of our sex life together. What do we like? How do we feel about what we've done or not done? What would we like to do? If we don't talk about it, things don't change, and we both lose out. And I ask myself: Are the answers to those questions, along with perhaps the ability to ask them, found deep in that space that I convinced myself does not exist? How can I find my way back there, that place I visited only to deposit unwanted parts of myself, when I have spent years making certain that I covered my tracks?

* * *

But that ability to talk and to know myself is not all I lost into that void. I lost people, too. My junior year in high school, when a friend had a party in a house his parents had just bought but had yet to be furnished, I lost Lindsay Dickinson. Up in one of the bedrooms empty of furniture and lacking in wallpaper or pictures, Lindsay became my first sex partner. I say partner, but I might have been by myself on that carpet smelling of Scotchguard--I had, I realize now, placed Lindsay into that same void, that place where the masturbator in me resided. It could have been a communion of sorts, if I had been waiting there too for someone to find me. But nothing could be farther from the events of that night. I had been trained to have it be just the opposite, to *not* be there. After all that time pretending that I didn't need to masturbate, it is ironic that I wasn't fully there with Lindsay. This was supposed to be my triumph. But the lie was too complete--it would not tolerate the self that belonged to the actual experience side of my split to be present. I had been trained to deny to my last breath that that self actually existed. So Lindsay was alone there, and I, on top of her, was as well.

Similar situations occurred. I am frightened now to think of them, to wonder how close they came to coercion, betrayal, or force. And why not? I was so versed in the lie. On a very real, day-to-day level, I had entered sexuality by boxing up my socially inappropriate experiences and labeling them as nothing--I was living an officially sanctioned sexuality, not one I had created myself. In this context, I could literally masturbate one night and completely wipe away the experience the next day. I could

literally be one person with my hand on my penis and another person in the "real" world. Why not with Lindsay or the others? Why not wipe them away too? How easy it was not to talk to them afterward, how easy to make them unreal, nothing. If my facade was to hold, it was inevitable.

What crimes such situations can allow do not need to be mentioned. Yet I don't believe I relegated my partners to complete nothingness. I don't believe I wiped them away enough to allow for rape. Perhaps Lindsay or the others would disagree, but as with all lies, the truth tugged away at me. I had not fooled myself completely enough to ignore humanity, and eventually I discovered the feminist thinking that changed my life, talked to women and other men about their sexualities, and opened up a space where my own life and experiences could be examined with new eyes.

Yet, needless to say, most men do not have that opportunity. I am quite certain my adolescent experience paralleled those of most, if not all, the boys I grew up with. To varying degrees, whether like Allen or like his cruel tormentors, they were all pretending to be pretending. Are they not still? Have they not become experts at deception? At football games, in fraternities, around the corporate water cooler? How has the internalized splitting they experienced debilitated them in their relationships with sex partners, life partners, or themselves as it did for me? And in this male-oriented culture of ours, how has this mislabeling kept us from dialogues critical to healthy society, about condom use, say, or prostitution, or rape, or homosexuality? How many people have died because of it?

From my experience, I can only conclude that these larger issues, all of great importance to a just society, are integral to this masturbation paradox, this myth. Like Allen in his cabin bunk, we feel it, and it hurts us. If sexuality had been more widely and intelligently discussed in my school or in my home, I may not have divided myself against myself. If I had been exposed early on, say in elementary school sexuality classes, to the facts about what our bodies desire and how we should feel about those desires, and if I had known that all my peers had sat in those same classes experiencing the truth as a community, my life may have been much different. I may not have had two selves, and I would not have been ashamed.

Today I am a proponent of masturbation. It clears my head, reduces stress, and does wonders for insomnia. Sometimes I sing to myself or place myself before a mirror. I am vigorously trying to undo a decade of vanishing acts. I am tired of disappearing. That is why today I still eschew pornography. It is so easy for me to put those pictures into that old space, to call them nothingness, to wipe them away like semen from their pages. I suppose pornography proponents would say that to use those images in such ways is okay, that such objectification and purposeful misrepresentation can be healthy. But not for me, not with my sexual history, not with the things I've seen, or not seen, in myself. I don't want nothingness or image--I've misrepresented my whole life. I want now the peace to touch myself and bring myself to orgasm and recognize that it is me and a damn fine activity indeed. I want long moments in my wife's arms as we slide along the continuum of sex. I want to look into her eyes and have her know she is not in that void, that I have not split myself away. "I am here," I will say. "I am real."

Scott Muskin is a writer living in Minneapolis, Minnesota. He is currently completing a collection of short stories.

Return to QUITTING PORNOGRAPHY table of contents.

This online anthology is © 1997 by Men Against Pornography. This essay is copyright © by Scott Muskin. All rights reserved. This text may not be copied, reprinted, or otherwise used in any form without the express written permission of the copyright owner.

For more information, or to contribute to this anthology, contact
Men Against Pornography, Box 150786, Brooklyn, NY 11215-0786, U.S.A.

This page hosted by



Get your own Free Home Page