

## SEARCHING FOR A STEAK SANDWICH

### *Why men have trouble expressing emotion*

by STEVEN OLIVAS, Ph.D.

*A scenario like this one occurs nightly in households across America:*

The husband, a good, decent man, walks past his wife (sitting at the kitchen table, staring blankly ahead) en route to the refrigerator. He opens it — stares, as if transfixed, for a few moments before returning to his senses — and hears from the general direction of his wife a heavy sigh.

The man cringes to himself, and continues to stare vacantly into the refrigerator. No, a steak sandwich has not yet appeared. But there's hope, we must never give up the search. . . .

Unthwarted, the wife sighs again, this time louder, with more emphasis on the expulsion of air.

Somewhere in the den, the family dog stirs in his sleep.

The husband, now knowing that this issue cannot POSSIBLY be avoided any longer asks the fatal question:

"Honey, what's wrong?"

The question contains a delicate balance of curiosity mixed with guarded masculine disinterest. The answer, which has been a part of this dance of futility since the invention of the miscommunication, returns in predictable fashion:

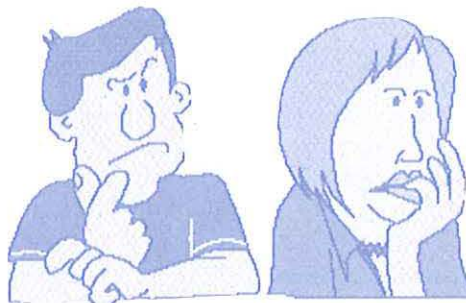
"Nothing."

The husband is stuck.

The wife is stuck.

The dog is asleep.

The cat died of stress several years ago.



reading the emotions of others. The exceptions, of course, are anger and lust — two emotions which men seem greatly capable of feeling (but perhaps maintain their difficulty in appropriately expressing).

From the earliest tribal days of human survival, men have been "trained" to ignore their feelings and instincts to better facilitate fighting in war, engaging in dangerous hunts for food, withstanding pain, and more recently playing NFL football. For the most part, these behaviors were very functional in the past. They taught men to face danger by suppressing the instincts of flight and self-preservation. In fact, as noted by

Christopher Kilmartin in *The Masculine Self*

(1999), tribes which were not threatened by others, and did not have a need to kill wild game for survival, developed largely egalitarian societies where men and women shared power and, for the purposes of this article, emotional expressiveness.

So. . . what are the consequences of this gender difference? Is it truly more "manly" to express tenderness through a whack on the rear end following a "great tackle?" A punch on

the shoulder to demonstrate that he is "interested?" A slow, deep, rolling, guttural (enough with the disgusting adjectives already!!!) burp to show that he appreciated a fine meal? Perhaps not, but there are some aspects of "maleness" which have ample opportunity to create discomfort and misunderstandings in relationships with women (and between each other — but we won't go there for now).

Take the above example. I'll bet that most of you anticipated the wife's response, and can project the husband's ham-handed handling of the discussion that is sure to follow. Women have been socialized (and again, I hate to speak in generalizations) to read the feelings of people around them. Think of the difference between a parent going through a list of possible emotions that the stuffed Pooh Bear is feeling as his head is crushed between a Tonka Truck and the broken-off remnants of an Easy-Bake Oven. For a daughter, the range may indeed be significantly more expansive (i.e. "Pooh looks

Ronald Levant, a psychologist from Harvard University, has spent the greater portion of his distinguished career studying men — more specifically, the way in which men are socialized to truncate their emotions. He coined the term "Alexithymia" to describe the symptoms of men who are largely unaware not only of their own emotions, but also incapable of accurately

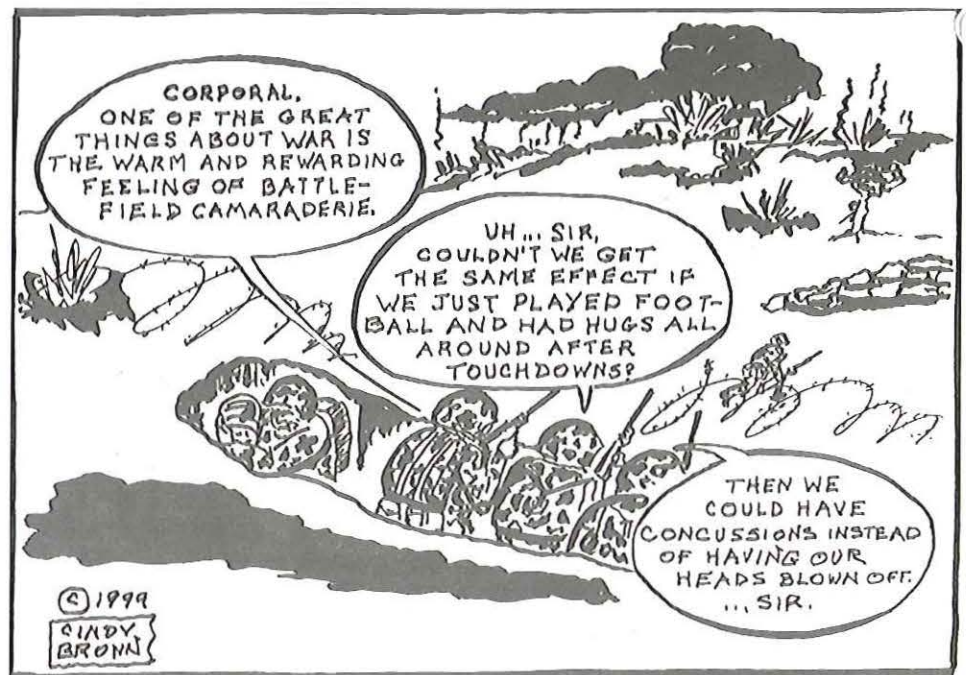
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## Why men have trouble expressing emotion *continued from page 1*

like he is feeling hurt, afraid, angry . . .” etc.) than the same exercise with a son (i.e., “Good one, son! Now let’s go rebuild the carburetor.”). Girls are taught to have a greater repertoire of emotional responses. So parents, do your children a favor by helping them understand these subtle differences between emotions by pointing them out as they occur. Believe me, it will pay off in the long run.

For the most part, men and women are trained to understand and respond to emotions (both internally and externally) differently. That is not to say that there is not a plethora of exceptions on either side — goodness, no! Without exceptions, the world might never have had the pleasure of experiencing Richard Simmons, or “Sable,” the current reigning WWF Women’s Wrestling champion (I am ashamed that I actually know this). No, without individual differences, we writers would have little use for the term *generally speaking*.

So, generally speaking, efforts should be made on both sides to understand the other. There are some specific exercises that can be done to achieve this



end. Men: this would mean to begin by taking inventory of the feelings you experience daily (as an aside, this list should not include such feelings as “hungry,” “tired,” or “really Really REALLY in the mood for a Three Stooges movie”). Put a name (or, a different “frame”) to the visceral responses that you feel. Then, take the time to force yourself to notice feelings in others. Write them down, maybe making a game out of seeing how many feelings you can recognize in others (i.e., begin to really take the time to notice). Hey, identifying what your partner is feeling may give you the edge you need!

For women: understand that this truncation is not being done on purpose. I have, as a therapist and teacher, heard many times that women are angry because they perceive this relative lack of emotional expressiveness and awareness as a part of a grand contrived “act” that men somehow orchestrate to drive their partners crazy. While this may be true for some (again, we are generally speaking here), the confusion that this attitude creates may widen the gap between the relationship partners.

To communicate more effectively with men, it may be helpful for women to speak in terms that are more behav-

iorally oriented. Linking a feeling to an action or bodily response (i.e., “. . . it feels like my stomach is tied up in knots when I get hurt like that”) will certainly facilitate both parties’ understanding of each other.

Remember, this is an effort for both sides — the man is using more feeling language, and the woman is using more concrete language. That, my friend, is how we begin to bridge the communication gap.

In closing, I hope that I am not understood to mean that the gap is natural and therefore good — quite the contrary! I hope the message you take away from this short piece is that the gap is real. That is, to understand that it exists is the first step toward reconciliation.

Oh, and the husband in the scenario above? Well he and his wife are doing just fine. In fact, I love her more now than I did even yesterday.

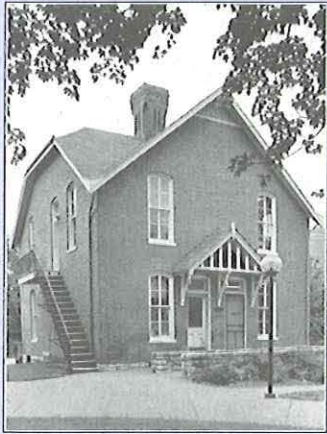
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# M Margaret Cuninggim Women's Center

## Calendar of Events

**PLEASE SAVE AND POST**

For more information on the events listed, call 322-4843.

# April 1999

## Tuesday, April 6

**Creative Life Planning Group** meets over lunch every Tuesday. New members welcome. Noon to 1:00 p.m. Cuninggim Center. Also meets April 13, 20 and 27.

## Wednesday, April 7

**Real Knockouts: The Women's Self-Defense Movement and the Transformation of Assault Prevention.** Martha McCaughey, Ph.D. appears as part of the year-long speakers series, "Celebrating the Struggle." 7:00 p.m. Wilson Hall 126. See article, page 5.

## Saturday, April 10

**Wander Warner Parks.** Take a study break or time for yourself and relax at Warner Parks, one of Nashville's best places to hike and enjoy nature. A van will leave the Women's Center at 11:00 a.m. and return at 2:00 p.m. To reserve a space, contact Hilary Forbes at 322-6518 or [hilary.forbes@vanderbilt.edu](mailto:hilary.forbes@vanderbilt.edu).

## Sunday, April 11

**Matinee Movie for Lesbian and Bisexual Women.** "Everything Relative" is a lesbian "Big Chill." Popcorn will be provided, but bring your own beverage and candy. Questions or directions, contact Hilary Forbes at 322-6518 or [hilary.forbes@vanderbilt.edu](mailto:hilary.forbes@vanderbilt.edu). 4:00 p.m. Cuninggim Center.

## Monday, April 12

**Book Group** meets to discuss *Chasing Dirt: The American Pursuit of Cleanliness* by Suellen Hoy. Facilitated by Janet Colburn. 5:15 p.m. Cuninggim Center.

## Tuesday, April 13

**An Evening with Ellen Gilchrist**, acclaimed novelist, poet and short-story writer, whose work focuses on Southern women. Part of the speakers series, "Celebrating the Struggle." 7:00 p.m. Wilson Hall 103. See article, page 5.

## Wednesday, April 14

**Brown Bag Lunch for Lesbian and Bisexual Women.** Faculty, staff, and graduate students will talk about "Being Out at Vanderbilt: What Has Your Experience Been?" 11:45 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. Cuninggim Center. If you have questions, contact Hilary Forbes at 322-6518 or [hilary.forbes@vanderbilt.edu](mailto:hilary.forbes@vanderbilt.edu).

## Thursday, April 15

**Reading Sisters.** This new book group focusing on the writings of black women authors meets to discuss *In the Meantime* by Iyanla Vanzant. Everyone is welcome to participate. Books available at the VU bookstore. Noon to 1:00 p.m. Cuninggim Center.

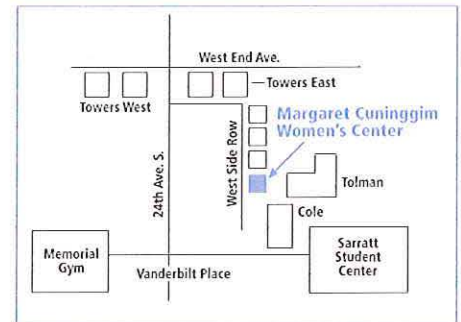
## Wednesday, April 21

**Talking to Your Kids about Alcohol and Drugs.** An information session for parents presented by Rhonda Venable and Nancy Anderson of the Psychological and Counseling Center. Noon to 1:00 p.m. Cuninggim Center.

## Wednesday, April 28

**Lesbian and Bisexual Women's Afternoon Tea.** 4:00 to 6:00 p.m. Cuninggim Center. If you have questions, contact Hilary Forbes at 322-6518 or [hilary.forbes@vanderbilt.edu](mailto:hilary.forbes@vanderbilt.edu).

## How to find us . . .



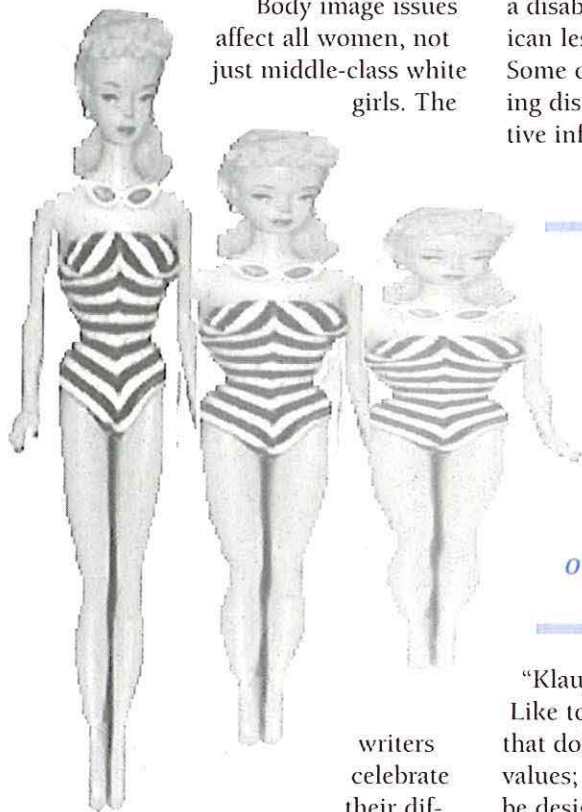
The Cuninggim Center is located in the Franklin Building at 316 West Side Row.



## Barbie at 40: still distorting ideas of body image

**T**wenty-eight young women of diverse backgrounds have contributed their thoughts about body image to *Adiós, Barbie: Young Women Write About Body Image and Identity* (Seal Press, 1998). The volume is edited by Ophira Edut, editor and founding publisher of *HUES* (Hear Us Emerging Sisters) magazine. Feminist author and activist Rebecca Walker wrote the foreword.

Body image issues affect all women, not just middle-class white girls. The



writers celebrate their dif-

ferences and discuss how and why they have cho-

sen to ignore society's overwhelming messages about appropriate body size, shape, color, and appearance. They use "their bodies to present a different image of beauty, of self. They risk alienation, harassment, even violence, to live

as they truly are." They take pride in their different bodies; they attempt to redefine and expand notions of beauty and hope that society will come to value difference.

Among the contributors are women of all shapes and sizes and ethnic backgrounds. The writers include a Jewish woman who refuses to have her nose straightened; an Asian-American athlete; women who decline to shave body hair; a disabled transsexual; a Mexican-American lesbian; and a woman with tattoos. Some of the writers have overcome eating disorders. Several describe the negative influence of the thin, beautiful, fashion-conscious Barbie. In

*"You're busted, Babs. You've been found guilty of inspiring fourth-grade girls to diet, of modeling an impossible beauty standard, of clinging to homogeneity in a diverse new world. Your time is up. Pack your bags and be outta the Dreamhouse by noon."*

—OPHIRA EDUT IN *ADIÓS, BARBIE*

"Klaus Barbie, and Other Dolls I'd Like to See" Susan Jane Gilman claims that dolls show young girls what society values; she illustrates how dolls could be designed to expand girls' horizons and their concepts of beauty.

Justine Cassell and Henry Jenkins are the editors of *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat: Gender and Computer Games* (MIT Press, 1998), a comprehensive study of a complex topic. Boys appear to be much more interested in video and

computer games than are girls and most computer games are aimed at boys. Most adults agree that it is very important for today's girls to be comfortable with technology and with computers; boys have an advantage if they are more familiar with computers and more eager to use them. The editors note that "these differential preferences are associated with differential access to technological fields as the children grow older, and this differential access threatens to worsen as technological literacy increasingly becomes a general precondition for employment."

Contributors, who come from a variety of academic fields or technical backgrounds, analyze gender roles and technology and discuss why certain types of games seem to appeal more to boys or girls. Some chapters cover the new girls' games movement and software aimed primarily at girls. There is some controversy over whether it is preferable to design games for females, or to broaden the appeal of mostly male-oriented products, so that more girls will be interested in them. Ideally these games should include strong female role models which could appeal to all children. Some contributors aver that stereotypical girls' culture should be valued and that computer games geared to these interests should be available.

The middle third of the book is devoted to interviews with women involved in the production of software at six companies, including Sega and Mattel. Mattel is the manufacturer of Barbie Fashion Designer, which, to the dismay of many feminists, is the best-selling children's software product ever.

# UPCOMING EVENTS *April*

## An evening with Ellen Gilchrist: stories of Southern women

"Sarah had expected Vanderbilt to be difficult, she had expected to have to study for hours every night, but it was not so. The stimulation of the classes and the teachers and the ancient old trees and the buildings and the feeling of learning turned her mind into a dynamo."

—FROM *SARAH CONLEY*, BY ELLEN GILCHRIST

Award-winning writer Ellen Gilchrist is known for her portrayals of passionate, willful Southern women, and her latest novel, *Sarah Conley*, features a Vanderbilt graduate as one of those memorable characters.

While at Vanderbilt, Sarah meets and falls in love with a fellow student, but ends up marrying his brother. Years later, a reunion in Nashville gives Sarah

the opportunity to renew the romance.

The significance of the Vanderbilt setting may be among the topics for discussion when Gilchrist comes to campus April 13 for "An Evening with Ellen Gilchrist" at 7:00 p.m. in Wilson Hall 103. Gilchrist's appearance, which is expected to include readings from her work and analysis of her task as an author, will be followed by a reception and book-signing.

Gilchrist was born and raised in Vicksburg, Mississippi, and now lives in Fayetteville, Arkansas. A former newspaper editor in New Orleans, she published her first work of fiction when she was in her 40s. Most of her stories are set in

the contemporary South, although she has ranged as far afield as ancient Greece (in *Anabasis*). Her 1984 collection of short stories, *Victory*

*Over Japan*, won the National Book Award.

The common element in all her work is the presence of strong female characters, many of whom recur throughout her novels and short stories. These women confront issues of life and love in typically outspoken and unapologetic fashion. Critics have praised Gilchrist's lyrical writing style as well as

her characterizations. "To say that Ellen Gilchrist can write is to say that Placido Domingo can sing," commented a reviewer in the *Washington Post*.



ELLEN GILCHRIST  
To speak April 13

## McCaughey prescribes 'knockout' for rape culture

For Martha McCaughey, campus rape prevention efforts do not go far enough. Instead of offering frightening statistics on the prevalence of rape, colleges should instead be offering self-defense courses for women students.

Only by learning to defend their own bodies can women truly "challenge the rape culture at its core," argues McCaughey, an assistant professor of women's studies at Virginia Tech and author of a groundbreaking book on the women's self-defense movement.

McCaughey's book, *Real Knockouts: The Physical Feminism of Women's Self-Defense* has drawn praise and criticism for its thesis that

feminism should emphasize resistance rather than victimization. "Women no longer have to ride sidesaddle, work in long skirts, or cavort in corsets. How is it that so many of us still don't know how to hit?" the author asks in *Real Knockouts*.

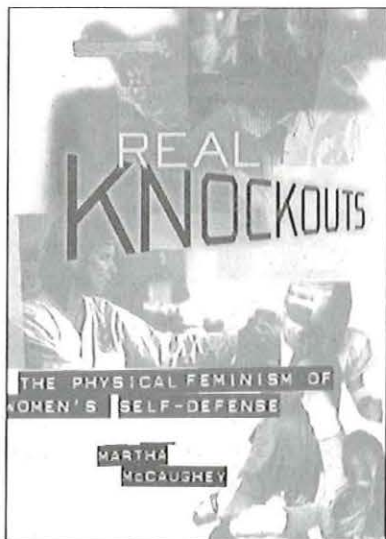
McCaughey will discuss her transformation from a "frightened feminist" to a self-defense advocate in appearances at Vanderbilt on Wednesday, April 7. At 7:00 p.m. in Wilson Hall 126, she will give a lecture that is free and open to the public. At 4:00 p.m. the same day, she will discuss her work

comparing male bodybuilding and female anorexia for the Social Construction of the Body Seminar at the Robert

Penn Warren Center for the Humanities.

In her book, McCaughey notes that growing numbers of American women are availing themselves of protection from possible assault: from pepper spray to handgun ownership, interest in self-defense is on the rise. McCaughey says her personal interest began after reading interviews with convicted rapists. Living alone in a first-floor apartment, "I couldn't come home in the evening and relax without checking my closets and all the other hiding places that the men talked about," she says. As a result, she took a self-defense class and eventually became interested in a scholarly examination of the self-defense movement.

McCaughey found that "a surprising degree of ambivalence about women's aggression keeps many feminists strongly opposed to, or at best, indifferent toward women's self-defense." But she argues persuasively that "self-defense is feminism in the flesh," a true knockout punch against the oppression of living in fear.



# Announcements

- Poet and songwriter Diana Darby will lead an eight-week **poetry workshop**, "Finding the Deep Voice," at the Women's Center beginning in May. Darby, who has written four books of poetry and worked as a staff writer for Warner Brothers, will help each participant find her own voice through the use of a journal. The workshop will also examine image, moment and the transformation line as mechanisms for finding a voice. Cost will be \$110 for students and \$160 for others. For more information, contact Darby at 353-1420.
- A conference for college women in scientific and technical fields will be held April 15 and 16 at the Oak Ridge National Laboratory in Oak Ridge, TN. **Science and Technology in the 21st Century — A World of Options for Women** will give students the opportunity to explore career opportunities in scientific fields by meeting with women scientists and engineers. Cost is \$25 and registration is due by April 5. To register, consult the Women in Science and Technology (WIST) web page at: [www.ornl.gov/orise/wist99/home.htm](http://www.ornl.gov/orise/wist99/home.htm).

- **"Three Views,"** an exhibit of works by three Nashville artists, will be on display at the University Club Gallery throughout the month of April. The exhibit includes 10 paintings by each of the artists, Ellen Caron Torrence, Susan



(From left) artists Ellen Caron Torrence, Susan Goshgarian McGrew and Sheila Baldwin.

Goshgarian McGrew and Sheila Baldwin. The women say their paintings have "contrasts and similarities" in concept, subject matter and technical approaches. One of the artists, Susan

McGrew, is a physician who works at the Vanderbilt Child Development Center. All of the women have shown their work at group and juried exhibits in recent years and their paintings are included in several public and private collections. After the April show, the exhibit will travel to other sites in Tennessee and Kentucky.



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