

Interview

Diane Eller-Boyko, R.N., L.C.S.W.

Ms. Eller-Boyko is a Jungian-oriented psychotherapist in private practice in Redlands, California. Married with two children, she is a conference speaker and has appeared on several radio and television programs. She is interviewed here by Joseph Nicolosi.

JN: There are very few psychotherapists working with transitioning lesbians, so I'd like to take the opportunity to let people know what you do. Please tell us about your work.

DEB: A client will come to me because she's been involved in lesbianism. She'll tell me—in words more or less like this—"Connecting with another woman felt like an ancient longing fulfilled. A homecoming." When I hear this, I know that something of the feminine is missing within her. The feminine ideal—creative, expressive, intuitive, receptive, empathic, connected to matter and spirit—has somehow been lost.

JN: And what does this mean?

DEB: In falling in love with another woman, she is really seeking to connect with herself. Looking at lesbianism developmentally, I would suggest that she is seeking to unite with the archetypal "good mother." Of course, this isn't a dogmatic blueprint for every lesbian-identified woman; we're all unique. But this fits most of the clients I've seen...and it's my own personal story.

JN: So you, yourself, transitioned out of lesbianism...

DEB: Yes, with the help of a very wise and skilled Jungian analyst. As a psychotherapist, I believe I can take a client no further than I have gone in my own developmental process. So I have to stay deeply connected to my own unconscious in order to be able to facilitate the same connection for my clients.

JN: So how does therapy begin?

DEB: Usually, by looking at the client's close relationships. And it should be no surprise to the client that the archetypal "good mother" rarely exists. How many of us have mothers who modeled the feminine in its truest form—that were available, empathic, present, and fully receptive? With lesbians, the mother has very often been unavailable. During the course of our sessions, this will usually become apparent. The mother was most likely preoccupied and unavailable, was disconnected from her own femininity, and often had negative attitudes toward men.

JN: How do you define the feminine?

DEB: The feminine reality is...a very rich, connected, sensual, receptive, wise, nurturing, embracing experience.

Femininity honors heaven and earth, embraces body and spirit, and of course, is the essential complementary element for the masculine. To you, what I am saying may sound poetical, wistful, magical—perhaps nonclinical. But if women are to be reached, we have to see what they see, and speak the language they speak.

JN: And what is that language?

DEB: We connect with the feminine within ourselves through dream images, stories, and creative expression.

JN: That's so different from the way my male clients connect.

DEB: Women can't be reached through traditionally masculine lines of thought—logical, analytical, devoid of emotional expression. A woman is drawn to other women because she seeks heart and soul connection. Perhaps she was never able to get it, because society expects her to be out working and providing for herself instead of puttering in her garden. She comes to recognize the zest, color, vitality, creativity and soul that are really the essence of being feminine. For it is in *being together* through this language, this feeling tone, that women find nourishment.

JN: What areas do you explore with the client?

DEB: We look back not only at the individual's past, but we also look back culturally, historically, religiously...back to a time and place when the feminine was alive, creative, honored...associated with the sacred. To a time when women were honored for what the feminine offered, and men were honored for their masculine strength and "doing." We trace back culturally as well as psychologically to the feminine core of our being. Looking back helps the client see the cultural and religious shifts, and the shifts in her own psychological development, that started an erosion and devaluation of the feminine spirit.

JN: When you spoke about the feminine essence I flashed on my mother, and I also flashed on Jennie, a former secre-



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tary of mine, now retired, who was the essence of empathy and womanliness.

DEB: The true feminine, I think, has been lost. Today's feminist is angry, aggressive, masculinized, and has lost her sacred place in the home.

JN: ...And in our culture.

DEB: Our culture especially honors the masculine—strength, dominance, achievement, striving. That creates in many women a neurotic split from their authentic natures. The woman represses the inner hurt and pain, and starts to identify with the masculine. It is out of the unhealed places of the wounded feminine psyche that she becomes aggressive and loud. Many women today are depressed, shut down, and overfunctioning.

JN: There seems to be a strong, militant feminist element in our culture.

DEB: And lesbianism quite naturally allies itself with this feminism. In the lesbian community you hear, "You don't need a man, you can do it on your own." Or, "What good are men? They only want one thing. Who needs them?" This, combined with a rebellious attitude toward the idea of receptivity, is part of lesbianism. Yet receptivity is the very core of the feminine. Rather than championing a war against men, we must bring back the life-giving spirit of the feminine—in ourselves, and in our culture.

JN: And you see much of this relating back to the mother?

DEB: I think it does. Mothers who cannot honor the feminine in their own natures become unavailable, dull, depressed, angry, compulsive—living by neurotic rituals which they use in order to fill the empty core of their being. Their daughters are wounded by this. And so the daugh-

ters carry on this wound to the feminine spirit for yet another generation.

JN: How do you help your clients connect with the feminine?

DEB: Through looking at how they're living their outer lives, and seeing how that severs them from being connected with the feminine within themselves. That is where the nourishment will come from. I'm trying to connect her with that reservoir within herself.

When she has been filled up by the feminine, she will find the nourishment she needs within her own depths. Only when she has been nourished by that deep connection, can a woman move on to connect with the masculine.

JN: So finding the feminine within herself is the work of therapy.

DEB: Yes. When a woman has rejected her own femininity, she pays a price. Because in seeking to unite with other women, she is trying to unite with herself, and this type of union will not, ultimately, heal the psyche. With another woman, she will have only the illusion of wholeness. The shadow, representing those real developmental needs that

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were never met, will continue to haunt her.

JN: As you're speaking, I just can't help but think of my work with men—how they need to get in touch with the masculine within themselves, and how they did not get it from their fathers.

DEB: Yes, I think it tends to be a generational legacy. The mothers were often separated from their own feminine identity, so there was a psychic split. They've become much more masculinized, which is to become the doer, the achiever, very goal-oriented. Women have become fighters who say, "I can be like a man." And so they had to sacrifice something of themselves that was very rich and beautiful.

JN: Our culture is confused.

DEB: It is. So moving on from that point in therapy, we continue to go deeper. A lot of it is simply "being present" with that woman and making a connection. I work a lot with dreams and symbolic language. I work with whatever the pain source is, the shadow.

JN: Then you're proceeding with the work from a Jungian perspective.

DEB: In terms of symbolic language, yes. I want them to start connecting with the feminine experience...something that is artistic, alive and colorful. That is the essence of what the woman is striving to connect with in another woman. When she connects that way, lesbian feelings may surface because she thought it felt kind of sexual. That emotional, rich experience becomes sexualized. But it's not so much about sexuality. The connection with another woman takes her into her own inner life, into that part of herself where she starts to experience her own feminine nature. That is part of the hunger for God that we humans all feel, the natural drive to connect and feel that soul experience. That's why, often-times, lesbian relationships feel like soul connections.

JN: With my male clients, these guys also have a powerful need to connect. But they want to have that bonding in a more exciting, physical kind of way. The masculine approach is more like, "We're going to go climb a mountain and wrestle together."

DEB: Yes, it's very different. And some of the women I know—writers, movie makers—are finding this connection through the women's movement. There is something there that is offering them richness. If we're going to work with women, we have to understand why they're so pulled to this movement, instead of pooh-pooing it as being nothing more than a group of man-haters.

JN: Some of the men I work with were into the gay movement, and they found a sense of freedom and liberation there—even if it later proved to be shallow—because they

could drop the masculine pretense they maintained in order to feel acceptable in a straight world.

But to go back a little, I'm interested in hearing you describe this ideal of a kind of self-confident, individualistic, living-out of one's gender. It's attractive to men, too. Because when I ask my men, "What is your male ideal?" they say they're drawn to a man with a masculine, outgoing, self-confident, bold nature.

DEB: Yes. But in this society, a girl gets messages that encourage her to enact a certain role that severs part of her feminine identity. She grows up with all the billboards around her, objectifying her, make her nothing more than an object for male sexual gratification.

JN: It's a culturally created caricature. It's a cardboard figure, and she's trying to live it.

DEB: But femininity doesn't mean making yourself into a caricatured sex object. A woman can be earthy and wear baggy

clothes. That is part of the feminine, too—being connected with the earth, growing her herbs, doing the creative nurturing, toiling with the earth. And there's another misconception—that she must be passive and always place herself last. Therapy works to remove all of these misconceptions. But women must commit to stay in therapy long enough. For men it's an explicit sexual thing, but for women, they're not in pain, and they don't have the sexual agony. They can stop the sexual behavior more easily and still find a group of women to be friends with and get a certain nurturance.

The women who are more likely to continue in therapy have the spiritual-moral springboard from which they approach the issue, and they want to develop a more integrated, connected sense of the feminine self. They often say, "I don't want to be single for the rest of my life—I would like to become able to connect with a man."

JN: What about their being sexually responsive to a man... how does that come about?

DEB: (laughs) With a very accepting man! A lot of it is trust—a feeling of safety—so the woman can shed some of the old masculine persona and be able to let down and connect with the feminine heart of herself which she has never ventured into.

But as I mentioned before, all of these thoughts represent my own story. They don't fit every client, and I certainly won't impose my experiences on a client if they don't match her own reality. What I've described is a representation of what I've experienced. I had to uproot the old feminine, and replace it with the new feminine. My story doesn't end today, neatly wrapped up. For all of us, growth is a lifelong process of developing and individuating. ■

Closeness with another woman takes her into her own feminine nature...that's why same-sex love can feel like a "soul connection."