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25. 12 Steps to Heaven (1989)

Cath Jackson

- Is having 'somebody to love' the most important thing in your life?
- Do you constantly believe that with 'the right man' you would no longer feel depressed or lonely?
- Are you bored with 'nice guys' who are open, honest and dependable?

Then, lady, you are *sick* and do I have the cure for you.

Robin Norwood's *Women Who Love Too Much* is the latest — oh, if only it was the last — self-help text to cross the Atlantic, sweep to the top of the bestseller lists and spawn a nationwide cult of women's health groups working around its suggested 'program of recovery'. Norwood's thesis is that women can be addicted to men in the same way as we can be addicted to drugs, alcohol, high carbohydrate foods. Women who repeatedly find themselves involved in destructive relationships with 'unhealthy, unloving partners' are suffering from 'loving too much'.

WWL2M, first published in the UK in 1986, and its sequel *Letters from Women Who Love Too Much*, have spawned WWL2M groups all over the country. A recent survey of Well Woman Centres reveals that WWL2M self-help groups are among the top three most popular, together with sexual abuse and compulsive eating. *WWL2M* has upstaged not only classics like *Fat is a Feminist Issue* but all the other 'I've been there too' and 'female-friendly' how-to books covering women's sexual and emotional well-being, from incest survival to the joys of heterosex. By the devastatingly simple tactic of including everything from compulsive eating to apparent frigidity as sub-clauses to its own thesis, *WWL2M* has made itself a seemingly impossible act to follow — although this may be wishful thinking on my part.

'Loving too much' is, says Norwood, the inability of women to detach themselves from destructive, physically and/or emotionally violent relationships with men. Typical of the whole genre of self-help books, Norwood is careful to point out that she herself, although currently working as a therapist, is not writing as an objective expert; she is 'a woman who loved too much most of my life'; she not only understands; she has been there too. Again in common with others of the genre, *WWL2M* is written as a series of case histories interspersed with analysis and solution, building up to the 'Road to Recovery' in the final chapter.

The case histories are pathetically repetitive: Jill, 'pert and petite, with blond Orphan Annie curls', who can never keep her man; Trudi, who drove her car over a cliff because her married lover chucked in their relationship; Lisa, artist and 'beauty', who married a Mexican transvestite to get away from home and then got involved with a drug-addict who slashed all her paintings; Brenda, the bulimic model, whose alcoholic husband Rudy sleeps around with other women.

These women, says Norwood, have all grown up in a 'dysfunctional home in which (their) emotional needs were not met', and this, she believes, is the root of their problem. It is an analysis which now also dominates establishment explanations of child sexual abuse: the family is 'dysfunctional', not the abuser.

Her definition of 'dysfunctional' is pretty encyclopaedic, including alcohol or substance abuse, compulsive behaviour (obsessive eating, working, cleaning, dieting...), 'inappropriate sexual behaviour', constant arguing and tension and more. Another major factor is that villain of the piece, the absent, emotionally distant father and his sidekick, the clinging, demanding, over-emotional mother. The child from such a home only feels 'comfortable' in an adult relationship which reproduces the 'dysfunctional' pattern of her family, with its emotional highs and lows, intensity, violence and threat of rejection. It also makes her desperate to win affection and approval, to patch up the cracks, to compensate for her own unmet emotional needs by 'becoming care-giver, especially to men who appear in some way needy'. She constantly makes excuses for the behaviour of her man and puts up with psychological and physical violence and abuse because this, says Norwood, is the only way she knows how to relate intimately.

So how do we know when we are 'loving too much'? When being in love means being in pain we are loving too much. When most of our conversations with intimate friends are about him, his problems, his thoughts, his feelings — and nearly all our sentences begin with 'he...', we are loving too much. When we excuse his moodiness, bad temper, indifference or put-downs as problems due to an unhappy childhood and we try to become his therapist, we are loving too much. When our relationship jeopardises our emotional well-being and perhaps even our physical health and safety, we are definitely loving too much.

Recovery is achieved through individual therapy combined with the so-called 'twelve step program' of the Anonymous groups — Alcoholics Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous, and other such 'survivor' groups. Recovery is the ability to sustain a relationship with a 'steady, dependable, cheerful, stable' man — 'nice... even if... a little boring'. Recovery is also the ability to transcend the initial 'chaotic emotional experience' of first love and go on to the 'ever-deeper exploration of what D H Lawrence calls

“the joyful mysteries” between a man and a woman who are committed to each other’ — a combination of Agape (‘feelings of serenity, security, devotion, understanding, companionship, mutual support, and comfort’) with Eros (passion).

Only the utterly blinkered heterophile would deny that women all too often find themselves trapped in an unhappy relationship with a man, ranging from the demanding and unfulfilling to the outright violent and abusive. Nor is there anything controversial about Norwood’s analysis of the ‘game’ where each partner adopts a particular role and both become locked in a repetitive pattern. Relationship counselling commonly includes the simple ways to defuse these circular ‘games’ which Norwood herself suggests: to this extent *WWL2M* is a practical and useful manual to tuck under the marital pillow and does no doubt offer great comfort to women locked in the stranglehold of a stale and embittered relationship.

The problems with Norwood’s thesis come when she goes on to elaborate her theory of ‘loving too much’. For, says Norwood, women involved in a destructive relationship are in the grip, not just of an unhappy partnership, but of an addiction to ‘dysfunctional’ relationships with men of such intensity it warrants the classification of a disease.

I am thoroughly convinced that what afflicts women who love too much is not *like* a disease process; it *is* a disease process, requiring a specific diagnosis and a specific treatment. (*WWL2M* p. 187)

More than that, it can be a fatal disease: ‘Whatever the apparent cause of death... loving too much can kill you’ (*WWL2M* p. 195).

And beyond that still, ‘loving too much’ is an inherited, physiological disorder that is passed from addicted mother to addict daughter, like some faulty gene:

Lisa in relation to Gary, like her mother in relation to alcohol, suffered from a disease process, a destructive compulsion over which she had no control by herself. Just as her mother had developed an addiction to alcohol and was unable to stop drinking on her own, so Lisa had developed what was also an addictive relationship with Gary.

In combination the ‘dysfunctional’ family background and the predisposition to addiction make for disastrous consequences:

Many women like Margo, because of their emotional histories of living with constant and/or severe episodes of stress in childhood (and also because they

may have inherited a biochemical vulnerability to depression from an alcoholic or otherwise biochemically inefficient parent), are basically depressives... Such women may unconsciously seek the powerful stimulation of a difficult and dramatic relationship in order to stir their glands to release adrenaline... (WWL2M p.183)

So we start with the outlines of the fairly typical 'how to be a happy heterosexual' text and end with a fully fledged pathology, underpinned by plausible, sub-Freudian psychobabble. Norwood's breadth of examples makes it easy for her reader to identify with enough 'symptoms' to be convinced. It amounts to a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Susie Orbach's *Fat is a Feminist Issue* (FIFI) was, if not the first, certainly the most influential of this breed of self-help therapy texts. Whatever its failings, FIFI has the undisputed merit of genuinely applied feminist principles. Orbach took the radical step of 'naming', identifying as a disorder, what was widely assumed to be a symptom of female inadequacy. Women who were overweight, who ate quantities of food beyond their physiological requirement, were not 'greedy'; food obsession was a rational response to women's gender-specific social circumstances: to the pressure to conform to male definitions of acceptability and normality; to women's powerlessness. Food obsession was, Orbach proposed, clearly linked to the self-hatred engendered when, denied the power to change the situation, women are left with only themselves to punish and blame.

Orbach used explanation to achieve understanding and, by explaining, provided the basis for recovery. More than that, she placed recovery in the hands of women themselves, outside conventional psychiatric and therapeutic medicine. An important part of that was that Orbach claimed herself to have been a compulsive eater; thus she was not an objective expert pronouncing on other women's failings, but a co-sufferer and a proven 'survivor'.

Norwood appears to start from the same spot, that of 'naming' and 'sharing' as a recognisable condition what is commonly perceived — by men and women alike — as female inadequacy. But gradually, as the book unfolds, what began as a description of all-too-common patterns of heterosexual relationships mirroring the inequalities of power between men and women, becomes a description of a specific, medical condition. With mesmerising simplicity she reduces a complex and universal situation to a single-issue, individual problem that will respond only to a specific prescription, the 'twelve steps' to recovery:

...I have never seen a woman who took these steps fail to recover, and I have never seen a woman recover who failed to take these steps. If that sounds like a guarantee, it is. Women who follow these steps will get well. (*WWL2M* p.198)

And thousands upon thousands of women read her books and say, 'Yes, that's me'.

Dear Ms. Norwood,

I just purchased a copy of *WWL2M* and I have had to stop reading it at work because my cries of 'Oh, my God!' are disturbing my boss. (*Letters from WWL2M* p.51)

Dear Ms. Norwood,

I fit the prototype in your book quite exactly, and if I had known you, I would have been quite upset that you wrote about me and spread my intimate thoughts and feelings on the pages of your book for the world to see.

So what's the problem? Many of us are only too familiar with the desire to develop some concrete physical ailment on which to pin the mental and emotional misery we feel. Thus, perhaps, the enthusiasm with which we take on board as a medical 'condition' pre-menstrual tension; thus the enthusiasm with which women accept the premise that the menopause is a deficiency, a disease in fact, for which hormone replacement therapy is a 'cure'. But what does this approach mean in terms of heterosexual relationships?

When Erin Pizzey put forward her theory that women in violent heterosexual relationships were biologically addicted to violence itself, there was a widespread outcry and condemnation from feminists. Pizzey's theory was that women who stayed with, returned to or repeatedly got involved with violent men were hooked on the high they got from the rush of adrenaline when the fists began to fly. Feminists pointed out that such theorising was simply reclothing the old argument that women 'ask for it' in pseudo-medical jargon. It was, they said, letting men off the hook yet again. It was also paying court to the convenient convention that women are 'martyrs' to their biology; that women cannot help themselves when it comes to the dictates of their glands.

Beyond that, it was a recipe for passivity. What would be the point of walking out of a violent relationship if you were doomed by your hormones either to return to it or to repeat the pattern? What was the point of looking for other reasons for violent

relationships, such as inequality of power, male violence, male ownership of women and children, women's limited freedom of choice, if the cause was biological?

Yet here we have Norwood putting forward a theory that is different only in the words she uses. The approach differs from common prejudice only in suggesting that women actively seek and stay in violent relationships not because we like it but because we are too sick to leave. Yet, for this 'genetic disorder', she offers only a social cure — behavioural therapy. The contradiction takes your breath away with its enormity: it also utterly destroys her argument.

Nowhere does Norwood seriously question the nature of heterosexual relationships themselves. Indeed in *Letters from Women Who Love Too Much*, she takes pains to distance herself from any implication that 'loving too much' is a strictly heterosexual syndrome. With disarming innocence she writes: 'I seem to have inadvertently implied that I thought all relationship addicts were heterosexual. I know better than that'. The truth of the matter is that, herself a heterosexual, 'that was (and is) the variety of relationship addiction I know and understand best'. Too late she realises the awful implications of her narrow focus: that what she describes is intrinsic to the heterosexual nature of the relationships she analyses.

Norwood works entirely with the assumption that the sexes are in all ways equal protagonists. She writes about choice:

Most of us who love too much are caught up in blaming others for the unhappiness in our lives. while denying our own faults and our own choices. This is a cancerous approach to life that must be rooted out and eliminated... When you let go of blaming others and take responsibility for your own choices, you become free to embrace all kinds of options that were not available to you when you saw yourself as a victim of others... (WWL2M p.224)

What about the dependency created by lack of money, the presence of children, the physical and social vulnerability of women without men? These factors are, it seems, just avoidance tactics, 'contingencies' that women use as an 'excuse' not to 'recover'. The very potent emotional and practical factors which govern women's freedom to stay in a damaging relationship are dismissed as symptoms of the addiction itself. Pathologising the situation allows Norwood to skip lightly over the very ordinary fact that, having invested their financial and emotional security in a relationship, women are understandably reluctant to abandon it for the terrors of the unknown and understandably keen to believe him when he promises to change.

Norwood's Alcoholics Anonymous-based programme of recovery fits perfectly with this concept of the guilty victim. 'Anonymous' programmes are heavy with pseudo-Christian overtones. The process of recovery follows the identical path to Christian redemption: transgression, confession, avowal to no longer 'sin', redemption/recovery. Like Christianity, they are confused about predestination and free will. On the one hand, they work on the assumption that an addiction has a physiological root cause — inherited 'allergy-addiction'. On the other they demand that the individual admit personal blame for their failure to resist the addiction. An addict is predisposed to addiction, just as man is born to sin: recovery is begun by an admission of guilt and responsibility just as salvation can only follow an admission of sin. In both cases redemption can only follow a 'surrender' of will to a 'Higher Power'.

If there was any doubt that Norwood holds women individually responsible for their mental and physical abuse at the hands of their partners, her 'RA' (Relationships Anonymous) programme makes her position all too clear. Women should, she says, learn to 'surrender' any attempts they are making to exert control over their lives ('control' in the hands of women is a very dirty word in the Norwood book), or over the lives of their partners or children; 'accept' their partners' unacceptable behaviour; become 'selfish' — that is, put themselves and their own needs first; learn to love themselves; overcome their fear of rejection and, finally, re-engage in 'the sexual realm' in a new way which 'requires not only that we be naked and vulnerable physically, but that we be emotionally and spiritually naked and vulnerable as well'.

When the going gets tough Norwood has a selection of 'affirmations' to take the pain away.

Twice daily, for three minutes each time, maintain eye contact with yourself in a mirror as you say out loud...

I am free of pain, anger and fear...

I enjoy perfect peace and well-being...

All problems and struggles now fade away; I am serene...

I am free and filled with light...

and more, sung to the tune of *ad nauseam*.

It is yet more of the deception — and self-deception — applied to women over the centuries to lull, daze, numb them into an acceptance of the status quo. Often it is only when the lulling and numbing, the distracting fails, that the violence really begins. Indeed it is significant that books like *WWL2M* only really took off when feminists

began to actively and vociferously question the inevitability of heterosexuality, when women began, in large and organised numbers, to fight back.

Norwood's whole approach appears to rest on masking the harsh reality of the here and now by advocating a new addiction in its own right. Reading the *Letters* it becomes painfully obvious that many of Norwood's readers need help in overcoming their addiction to self-help itself.

Ms Norwood,

I've just finished reading your book. I thought after the first few pages I would never pick up that book again. I cried because I found out that I had yet another disease. I'm already a recovering addict and alcoholic. I've been in Narcotics Anonymous and Alcoholics Anonymous for over a year... I've been in therapy for a year and a half and I've also been in two rehabs. I'm an adult child of an alcoholic and I probably qualify for Overeaters Anonymous.

Norwood is simply offering women yet another distraction, another fake solution; yet another addiction with which to mask the anguish of women who have — for want of a more subtle description — been fucked over by men.

That women are buying *WWL2M* and following its programme in such numbers is a sign, not of its worth but of the extent of women's need to find an answer to the question: 'How can we stop men doing all this to us?'. It is also vivid proof of how unhappy the majority of women are with their heterosexual relationships. What Norwood describes as an extreme has been seized on by so many women that it is almost impossible not to conclude that what she calls 'loving too much' is, in fact, to her readers the norm.

Comparison with a parallel book written for men makes this analysis even clearer. *The Casanova Complex* is for men what *WWL2M* is for women. According to the author, Peter Trachtenburg (himself a 'recovered' Casanova), some men are addicted to multiple relationships, constant 'womanising', one night stands and chronic infidelity. The reasons for this 'polygyny' are, says Trachtenburg, again the 'dysfunctional' family upbringing: the absent father, the over-dominant mother.

To be a Casanova is to conquer and manipulate women, to *act* on them. What a relief to those who in childhood felt colonized and invaded by omnipotent mothers and still fear being subjugated as adults! Every time these men seduce women, they turn them into drugs — inanimate objects that can be ingested and then disposed of.

Here, yet again, an extreme expression of the power imbalance in male-female relationships is pathologised and excused away. The irony is that, intentionally or otherwise, Trachtenburg is using the vocabulary of radical feminist condemnation of the institution of heterosexuality itself.

And what, according to Trachtenburg, are the motivations for men to abandon this way of life? They may, says Trachtenburg, lose their jobs, lose their friends, run the risk of catching AIDS or, worse still, discover

they are too old to attract new partners and find themselves alone, without the comforting supports of age, and afflicted with desires that they no longer have the means or health to satisfy (*Casanova Complex* p.270)

It's like capitalist industrialists suddenly going green: not because they have any genuine respect for or belief in the philosophy of conservation or regeneration but because they have suddenly woken up to the harsh fact that they are running out of the very resources on which their continuing viability depends.

The Casanova Complex is the mirror image of WWL2M. Together they attempt to conceal behind pathology the inescapable fact that heterosexual relationships in the context of socially endorsed sexual inequality are 'dysfunctional' by definition.

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