The Age of "Girls"

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Class of 2013

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Keywords
Surge, Surge Gettysburg, Gettysburg College, Center for Public Service, femininity, woman

Abstract
According to Google Search, knowing when you’re a woman is the fourth most pressing question on the interwebz this week. For this question to make the quintessential “top 4” in a search engine that answers over one billion questions every day leads me to believe there still remains a lot of confusion over the true transition into what Etta James so eloquently describes as a genuine W.O.M.A.N. [excerpt]

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THE AGE OF “GIRLS”

March 11, 2013

How do you know when you’re a...

Good kisser?
Pothead?
Medium?
Woman?

According to Google Search, knowing when you’re a woman is the fourth most pressing question on the interwebz this week. For this question to make the quintessential “top 4” in a search engine that answers over one billion questions every day leads me to believe there still remains a lot of confusion over the true transition into what Etta James so eloquently describes as a genuine W.O.M.A.N.

I recently discussed the topic with a friend of mine who confessed that, as an almost 23-year old working lady and Gettysburg alum, she had only recently realized that she was—in fact—a woman. She had had a conversation with her boss, who referred to her as a success. But not a successful person. No, she was a successful woman. Apparently no one had ever referred to my ladyfriend in this manner before. After telling me this—with eyes wide open, brow slightly puzzled—she searched my face for a response. So I did what I believed a vagina-wielding human being might do.

I high-fived her and welcomed her to the club.

As a 21-year old senior in the pit of this juicy peach that is Life, I remember my own earthquake of a womanhood-realization like it was yesterday. I was newly 17 in the Minneapolis airport, waiting to check my bags. In front of me stood a father with his five-year old son, visibly in a hurry to make their flight. The father finished up, gently directed the little boy towards security and said: “Come on, we don’t want to make this nice woman late for her flight, too.” He smiled in my direction and they both walked away. I looked behind me, searching for this “woman” of whom he spoke. But no one was behind me. For a millisecond I was puzzled. And then it hit me.

I was the woman.
And then my mind did this.
Okay so that’s a bit of an overkill, I’ll admit, but the point I’m trying to make is that when he told me I was a woman, I started to see myself as a woman. I was a W-O-M-A-N and Etta James became the most played artist on the Lindholm iTunes playlist in 2009.

In social psych and identity theory, this type of a situation falls under the category of “external affirmation,” the idea that we begin to understand ourselves by the way that people react to us. It’s this type of “social feedback” that helps us see ourselves as members of a certain groups over others. Tying this example back to womanhood, I understand my “airport” experience as part of the induction ritual that brings girls into the hallowed halls of the “Woman Club.” But why, in the case of my ladyfriend, did it take so long for this realization to occur?

There are a few theories out there.

As Michael Kimmel, author of Guyland (and all-around sociological badass), would say, in a culture where boys regularly become guys who then become men, girls seem to…well… stay girls. That is until they happen to one day magically become women, an event that seems further and further away from the reality of 20-somethings. Take the hit series “New Girl,” for example. Do we think Jess is hanging out with boys? Some would say “yes” and argue that many of the childish antics they get themselves into could easily qualify for placement in the “boy” category. However, at the same time they don’t quite seem to fit—you know, being almost 30 and living without parents, having jobs, and multiple romantic and sexual relationships… So then we call them men, right? Well… I love them, but they don’t really seem like men either. They are, as Kimmel points out, quintessential “guys.” Jess, on the other hand, can pretty easily be defined as a “girl” without feeling like it’s a misplaced categorization.

With the prevalence and success of shows like “New Girl,” “Girls,” “2 Broke Girls,” external affirmations of a “girlhood” that extends into ones’ early 30’s seems to be dominating our mainstream present.

But what is this magic? What is it that allows us to permit 33 year-olds Zooey Deschanel and Hannah Simone to realistically wade in the “girl-pool” that is Tuesday night television? Is it an extension of the collective “20-something” experience?

How would we react to 27 year-old Lena Dunham’s show if it had been called “Women?”

So many questions!

I’m aware that counterarguments could easily slight me on the charge of arguing about details in semantics, or could accuse me of perpetuating the idea that women are helpless to define themselves without the help of others. They could also tell me I’m using a narrow field of examples to illustrate my point and that Zooey Deschanel and Lena Dunham do define themselves as women. The fact is, I have the highest confidence in women to define themselves in any way they see fit, without the help or encouragement of others. I also have immense respect for Zooey Deschanel as an entrepreneur and businesswoman, and Lena Dunham as an fearless innovator, director, and producer.

The point I’m trying to illustrate is that there is a documented increase in the number of “guys” in the world, and yet the mutually exclusive categorization of females as either “women” or “girls” remains. In addition, it has become even more normalized to hold off on actively identifying females as women, and instead place them into a category that now could refer to either 12 year-old OR a 33 year-old.
Most importantly, I want to ask what this trend means for us. For 20-somethings. Or 30-somethings. Or for 18 year-olds, who can vote on women's issues but are told by the media those issues don't yet apply to them.

Because the last time I checked, girls' rights has yet to make it on the ballot.

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