

BLUES AND PASTELS

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[Assignment: Write an essay in which you reflect on how your upbringing differed from the upbringing of any siblings you might have of the opposite sex.]

After eighteen years of growing up with two older sisters and a twin brother, I can safely state that women are definitely brought up differently than men in the Jenkins family.

To best illustrate this, I will compare and contrast the upbringing of my brother and me to the upbringing of my sisters. Let's flashback to when I was growing up. What better place to start than in the bedrooms?

If we were to go back and observe the rooms that my brother and I had, you would have no problem deciphering the sex of those who occupied it. As you ignored the "Beware Don't Enter!" sign on my door and entered my blue room, you would have to dodge the long rows of military toy soldiers, stiff and in position for the next invasion. If you attempted to decipher my messy bed covers, you would notice that they were top of the line Superman cartooned. The walls hide underneath the many posters of sports heroes and legends, cover-girls and the like. I think that you get the gist of what the "boy room" in the Jenkins household looked like. Now let us walk down the hallway and observe the room of one of my sisters. Once you have seen one of their rooms, you have seen both of their rooms. As you turn the handle of their brass door-knobbed door, you should already have on the sunglasses. The array of colors that you will see can't possibly be good for you retinas. If you get past the blinding pastels, you will see many pictures of past events with their girlfriends. After you are done pulling the plethora of Girl Scout pins and patches out of your bare feet (bare feet so that you don't get the carpet dirty), you will notice a wall covered with a select kind of poster: posters of the "hottest male rock of pop group in the world." As you can see just from a brief tour of our rooms, gender difference is by all means obvious. Let's leave our little flashback and return to the present. I could definitely tell that my parents wanted "girls to be girls . . . and boys to be boys."

Yes, my parents definitely brought us up differently. I remember waking up Saturday mornings, running downstairs to watch my series of funny and often violent cartoons. I remember being rejected for what seemed to me stupid foreign shows like "Days of our Lives" and "General Hospital." My parents didn't mind if my sisters watched shows like that, but would the sparks fly if my father ever caught my brother or me watching them. (Whoa! The memory is chilling!) My sisters are three and four years older than my brother and me. So when we were nine, and my sisters were a physically more mature twelve or thirteen, you can imagine the feelings that arose when my parents told me that I had to walk my sisters to various places. Now you tell me what in the heck a little Gary Coleman look-alike like me is going to do if his sister is attacked or messed with by some eighth graders? I realized later in my adolescence that my parents just wanted me to understand that it is a male's responsibility to protect the ones he loves. Therefore, while my sisters took piano lessons and tried out for cheerleading

teams, I was taking Kempo (a form of Tae Kwon Do) and participating in every athletic thing going.

As I started to mature and realize that girls really didn't have "cooties," or "girl germs," I noticed how my parents treated us differently in the dating game. For starters, my parents had to know where my sisters were going at all times. They had to know whom they were going with, who would be where they were going, and what time they were going to be back. Of course, if my sisters were going to a party my parents absolutely made sure that the parents were present. If my brother and I wanted to go to a party, the usual procedure would be for one of my parents to be informed of our destination. The response that usually followed was, "Be home at a reasonable hour."

Definitely, it is clear that my parents raised my brother and me differently than they did my sisters. Last year when my family had one of our frequent family meetings, we talked about plans my brother and I had to go to Cancun, Mexico with a few of our friends for Spring Break. When my parents said that we could go, one of my sisters asked why when she was the same age as we were, she was not allowed to go. She had wanted to go to Daytona Beach, Florida with four other girlfriends whose parents said that they could go. The discussion that followed only reinforced my previous statement. My parents had worried that because she was female, she would not be safe. They were totally uncomfortable with that idea. They went on to explain that the reason that my brother and I were allowed to go was because we were male and they felt a lot more comfortable because we knew how to protect ourselves. My next question was why my parents hadn't made my sisters take Kempo since they were seven? I enjoy it now, but back then when I first started, there were times I wished that I could have been playing Beethoven like them.

Following that question came a long uncomfortable pause. My father started, "You know son, I really can't tell you. I guess that much of that has to do with your mother's and my upbringing. When we grew up men didn't cry, men didn't wear pink, and men knew how to hold their own. I mean my mother was always cooking for my father, and my father always brought home the money . . ."

"You know, Bill, you are right," my mother interrupted. "That is how I remember my mother and father being. They raised me and my sister to be just like the little dolls that we played with. I remember days when I was learning to cook inside, and my brothers were learning how to box and fight outside. I used to hate it. I used to feel like, 'Why can't I ever do what they do?'"

"Exactly, Mom." It was my sister's turn. "Times have changed. I mean, sure wives still cook for their husbands, but you have women in high-paying corporate jobs, with men answering to them."

"They know that, Christinal" I yelled at my sister for inferring that my parents were ignorant of the times. "They know that times have changed." I sat back in my seat to listen; I had contributed my ten cents.

My mother continued, "I promised myself that if I had girls I would never let them grow up the way that I did, in a stereotypical womanly role from the past. Lord have mercy! I am just like my mother." A much needed chuckle broke the tense room.

We continued to talk for a good hour or so and I came out a totally new and enriched Bill Jenkins. I taught myself how to play the piano and I learned that there definitely was a difference in the way that my sisters and I were raised, and that was stereotypically. My dad made sure that we were well-mannered, and knew how to treat women. He put us through twelve years of martial arts so that my brother and I grew up to be strong and protective of women. We chopped wood, did house repairs, fixed cars, went to sporting events, played sports. My mother taught my sisters how to sew and cook, how to paint their nails, fix their hair, study, and be polite and courteous. That family meeting that we had was great. I knew that my parents really believed in getting away from the stereotypical upbringing of my sisters, by brother and me. Since that one day, I have acquired many more skills. I have learned how to cook, play piano, sew, clean toilets, and just about every other chore thinkable. I guess that my mother was taking a vengeance out on my brother and me for her stereotypical past. One day, I was vacuuming, and she was outside shooting hoops with my sisters!

I can't recall the first couple years of my sisters' upbringing, maybe because I wasn't born yet. Whatever it was, I wish that I got the same. Both of my sisters skipped grades. My oldest sister is graduating at the top of her class from Illinois School of Law, after four years of full scholarship playing women's basketball at Iowa State University. My younger sister is in medical school at Indiana University, after graduating at the top of her class from a full academic scholarship at Purdue University. I realize that my sisters were brought up differently than my brother and me; I just hope that our futures are half as bright as theirs appear to be. Maybe I should have learned how to paint fingernails?