

*In the Hearts of Women*

ISABEL ALLENDE

THE TANNER LECTURES ON HUMAN VALUES

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ISABEL ALLENDE, a literary legend, a social activist, and a feminist icon, is now in the third decade of a career like no one else's. She has sold more than fifty-one millions books worldwide, in more than thirty-two languages. Her novels and memoirs have established her as one of the most respected Latin American writers—one of the most respected writers, *period*—the world has ever known.

Onstage Isabel Allende translates the famous magical realism of her prose into an astonishing presentation that weaves together her family history, her literary trailblazing, and her uniquely forged insights on social justice, feminism, and political and personal freedom. Allende is a true romantic, in the best sense. She talks with humor and wisdom about the sorrows and the heart-stirring beauty of the human condition. The massive audiences who laugh, and occasionally cry, at her talks are a testament to her boldly imaginative works, which have brought together more than three generations of readers.

A native of Chile, Allende was forced into exile following the assassination of her uncle President Salvador Allende. Since then, she has written seventeen books, including *The House of Spirits*, *Eva Luna*, *Daughter of Fortune* (an Oprah pick), and *Ines of My Soul*. Her nonfiction includes *Paula* and *The Sum of Our Days* (2008). She is also the founder of the Isabel Allende Foundation, which promotes and preserves the fundamental rights of women and children to be empowered and protected. The *Los Angeles Times*, echoing readers young and old, calls Allende “a genius.”

Should I thank you for including me in this intimidating lecture series? I am not easily intimidated, but the purpose of the Tanner Lectures is “to advance and reflect upon the scholarly and scientific learning relating to human values. This intention embraces the entire range of values pertinent to the human condition, interest, behavior, and aspiration.” Maybe I should not be here at all. I am just a storyteller; I have no capacity for linear thinking: I have been a mother too long. Scholars study one star among zillions in the universe. I get lost in the vastness of the sky on a clear night. My mind works in circles and spirals, so please be patient with my babbling. I promise it does get to a point, eventually.

In this prestigious lecture series one is expected to speak about what one knows best, so I will speak about what is in the hearts of women.

Here is a little story.

Long ago, in a legendary city in Baghdad, a thief was brought to the Caliph, who sentenced him to the usual punishment: his right hand would be cut off. The man fell onto his knees, begging for mercy; he was very poor, he said, and had taken the apple to assuage his hunger. The Caliph, who loved riddles, offered to pardon the thief if he answered correctly just one question. And the question was: what do women really want?

The thief gave it some thought and replied: “Oh! Caliph, the Believer! There is no God but Allah! What women really want is to be heard. Listen, and each woman will tell you what she wants.”

It was an astute answer, and the Caliph dismissed the executioner.

What is in the hearts of women? I have been lucky enough to work with women and for women all my life, yet, when preparing this speech, I could not answer the question spontaneously because the answer is not simple. When in doubt, turn to the Internet, so I Googled Caliph’s riddle. I stumbled upon self-help manuals with titles like: *Learn What Women Want* and *Get Laid*, and I found several sites of advice from men to other men on how to get chicks. For example, this one: what women really want are tough guys, be aggressive and confident, don’t give away your power, lead and be demanding; your needs come first—she likes that.

I gave up on the Internet and turned to real women and to my own heart to ask them and myself what it is that we want.

What do women want today, in the twenty-first century? Obviously, the priorities are different for women in Darfur than in New York, but there are points in common, the first one being that *we all want safety for our children and ourselves*.

Women are biologically programmed to protect and nurture the offspring of the species. That is our mission: to give and preserve life. When threatened, men's reaction is fight or flight. Aggression is triggered by adrenaline, enhanced by testosterone. When threatened, the feminine reaction is bonding: they make a circle and put the offspring in the middle. Bonding is triggered by oxytocin, enhanced by estrogen. This bonding hormone is so amazing that some psychiatrists are using it in couples therapy. Partners inhale oxytocin in a nasal spray in the hope of reaching a compromise instead of killing each other. I tried it with my husband. It did not work too well; maybe we did not use enough.

In the August 22, 2009, issue of *Time*, there is a heartbreaking report about Swaziland, a small landlocked country on the South African border, where one in every three people is HIV infected. A journalist, Catherine Maternovska, was sent to assess the situation. In a small abandoned town, she found a rundown complex of rough cement-block buildings where truckers slept and dozens of girls between the ages of fourteen and twenty earned their meals as prostitutes. Catherine met a sixteen-year-old girl named Mbali, who at the beginning refused to talk to her, but opened up when she was offered some crackers, which she wolfed down. She was a runaway, her parents were dead, she had been abused and raped, and she was HIV positive. She had nowhere to sleep unless she found a man. Sometimes she went without food for two days. She explained that a man without a condom pays more and she needs the money, so she takes him. "I am so tired, these men are so rough," the girl sighed. The journalist, who is no rookie and has heard similar stories in Haiti, Zimbabwe, Tanzania, and many other places in the world, burst into tears. "Don't cry," Mbali pleaded, holding her face. The distressed journalist asked Mbali what she needed most, and the girl answered, "Someplace safe. Someplace to be a girl. Someplace where I won't have to have sex with men anymore."

How simple: a place to be safe. But there are very few safe places.

Women, like all human beings, *want to be valued*. Girls are still sold into premature marriage, forced labor, and prostitution. Millions are not even allowed to exist. Now that the technology to determine the fetus gender is available, females are aborted and millions of girl infants go missing. There is a new word for this: *fetuscide*. This is causing a shortage of brides in China. In many developing countries it is a misfortune to have a daughter, while sons are cherished. Midwives are paid less if the baby is a girl.

Ten years ago I was in India, driving with a friend across the province of Rajasthan. It was hot and dusty, we were tired, and the car engine was

overheated. The driver decided to stop. We were in the middle of nowhere; there was no village or well in the vicinity, only a large acacia tree. Under the tree we saw five or six women and a few children. My friend and I approached the women. We did not share a language, but very soon we were touching, smiling, laughing. We gave them all the silver bracelets that we had bought a few days earlier in a market. And then it was time to leave. The driver was honking. We said good-bye and headed for the car. One of the women came running after me and placed a small bundle of rags in my hands. I thought she wanted to give me something back in exchange for the bracelets and tried to tell her that it was not necessary, but she insisted. I opened the little package and there, among the rags, I found a tiny newborn baby.

Before I had time to react, the driver tore the baby from my arms and gave it back to the mother, then pushed me into the car and drove off. It took me a few minutes to react; I could not grasp the meaning of what had just happened. "Why would she give me her baby?" I asked, totally confused. "It was a girl. Who wants a girl?" was the driver's explanation.

The bias against girls did not happen only among the poor; in fact, middle-class couples who plan on a small family often abort a female fetus that would take the place of the boy they want. The percentage of missing girls has been among the highest in the middle-income, highly educated nations of the Caucasus: Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia. Brutality or neglect against girls is not mitigated by wealth or education, even among immigrants to Europe and the United States; some families still practice female genital mutilation, or they do not provide proper health care and schooling for their daughters. One would expect empowered mothers to fight for their daughters, but the cultural prejudice is so strong that they also prefer boys.

In many places women are denied the most basic human rights; they have no control over their bodies or their lives. Domestic violence crosses all lines of nationality, religion, race, class, income, and level of education. Women are raped, beaten, mutilated, set on fire, disfigured by acid, and assassinated. In Juárez, Mexico, hundreds of women have been killed in the past few years with total impunity. The police and the government are not interested; they are just women. If it were not for some journalists who have pursued the story, we would not even know about these crimes.

*Women really, really want peace.* It is a matter of survival. In any war, 90 percent of the casualties are civilian, and among them, 75 percent are women and children. They are also 80 percent of the fifty million refugees worldwide, displaced by armed conflicts.

Gang rape on a massive scale is a weapon of war. Rape destroys the lives of women and girls and the social fabric of the community. It has such a profound and damaging effect that now men are being raped, too. By means of rape the militia and the soldiers break the back of the civilian population. The victims endure horrible physical and psychological trauma, and the survivors face stigmatization. They are forever soiled. Sometimes raped women and girls are expelled from the villages or even stoned to death. This is yet another case in which the victim is blamed for the crime of the victimizer, yet another case in which the victims have no voice.

A few weeks ago I heard a speech by Gloria Steinem at the Omega Institute in upstate New York. By the way, this woman is seventy-five, and she looks great. Being an activist works better than plastic surgery. Steinem proposed the creation of a national organization of women against guns in the homes, in the model of Mothers Against Drunk Driving. A domestic violence act occurs every fifteen seconds in the United States. If there is a weapon in the house, chances are that eventually it will be used against her.

Kevita Ramdas, president of the Global Fund for Women, the largest nonprofit foundation in the world supporting women's human rights, goes much further. She proposes to demilitarize the world, a goal that can be achieved only by women, because they have nothing to gain by war, they are not seduced by the macho appeal of militarization, and they suffer the effect of armed conflicts directly: bombs, raids, occupation, and invasion by foreign armies, local militias, militant nationalists, warlords, and so on, not to mention the devastation of the land, the communities, and the families.

The United States spends the staggering sum of \$640 billion a year on the military, more than all the other countries of the world combined, and it has no enemies to speak of. 9/11 was a pretext for a 70 percent increase in the budget for the military. No wonder we are broke! If women do not take action, there is no hope for peace. This is what the women in Liberia did after the brutal years of civil war, with a cost of two hundred thousand lives. They bonded, even physically, arm in arm, and forced the men to depose of their weapons and reach a peace agreement.

*Women want connection.* Since the beginning of time women have gathered around the well, the store, the crib; they have gathered in fields, factories, and homes; they want to be heard and to hear other women's stories. There is nothing more entertaining than gossip! Our nightmare is

to be left out of the circle, to be ostracized, because alone we are vulnerable and lost, while together we thrive. We want family, a circle of friends, community.

Recently I went to Africa on one of those comfortable safaris for the privileged with a crew of handsome rangers to put up the tents and grill the meat. No wild game, mind you, just lamb from the local market. It was very instructive to watch some species during the mating period; the alpha male hordes as many females as possible, to the detriment of the young males, who remain single and roam the periphery of the herd, trying to sniff any female when the alpha male is not watching. In some species, the alpha male spends all his energy marking his territory, controlling the females and fighting other males, so he has almost no time to eat, gets weak, and soon is defeated by a rival. Then he spends the rest of his life in exile, licking his wounds of humiliation. The reign of an alpha male among gazelles, for example, lasts an average of three weeks. While the males are fighting for dominance, the females are giving birth, breastfeeding and protecting their offspring, bonding with each other, and, in the case of carnivores, hunting to feed everybody, including the lion king. But I am not trying to draw any conclusion here; I am digressing. I really wanted to tell you about human female bonding.

I was with my family in a resort in Rusinga Island, a beautiful place on the shores of Lake Victoria, in Kenya. Manicured lawns, cascading fountains, palm trees, black waiters in white shorts, armed guards. It had been my daughter-in-law Lori's idea to visit Rusinga Island. Lori runs my foundation, whose mission is empowerment of women and girls, and she had heard about the Kibisom Project and wanted to meet Esther Evelyne Odhiambo, the woman who founded the group. In 1996, when Esther moved from Nairobi to Rusinga Island, she realized that AIDS was destroying the heart of the community. Every day, an average of six people died of AIDS, mostly young parents who left behind orphaned children, often HIV infected. The care of the children fell upon the grandmothers. Esther and her friend Elizabeth got to work. First, they gathered the women to help and support each other, get information, find ways of making some money to feed the kids, and try to stop the epidemic. The women, who until then believed that AIDS was caused by witchcraft, learned that it was associated with polygamy and prostitution. AIDS was not the only problem. There were malaria, tuberculosis, and malnutrition; no health care to speak of; illiteracy; pollution; no clean water; and exploitation of children in the fishing industry.

Lori and I left the walled compound of the hotel and walked on the dirt road to the Kibisom community center in the house of its founder. It was not difficult to find; we just followed the singing. Esther Evelyne Odhiambo is a striking woman, smart, witty, strong. She greeted us in English and showed us around. There was a lot of activity. Some women were at work making soap and hand-pressed paper; others were cooking in large pots, watering a small vegetable garden, and caring for several kids. Sitting in the shade was a tall woman, all skin, bones, and wrinkles, dressed in a bright-blue and yellow wrap, with an infant sucking at her sagging breast. We must have looked surprised, because Esther laughed. She introduced us to that great-grandmother, who said she was probably eighty. She was raising eight orphaned children and breast-feeding the youngest. According to her, no matter how old you are, love can make milk flow.

Kibisom brings women together. The older women protect and care for the younger ones and the children. Women acquire practical skills: they work in uniform making, crafts, construction, agriculture; they build water-gathering roofs; they care for the sick; they feed the hungry and the disabled; they provide schooling for young children. But most important: they are connected and they help each other. They are widows, single mothers, abandoned wives, and pregnant adolescents. They paused in their work and sat in a circle to share with us a cup of bush tea, red and pungent, and tell us their lives. They all had sad stories, yet they did not look sad. Any pretext was good enough for them to laugh, make jokes, tease each other, and make fun of Lori and me. They told us about domestic violence, rape, abuse, poverty, and the terrible grief of losing their children to AIDS and to know that some of their grandchildren would also die soon. Later they waved good-bye to us, singing. They are always singing, those ladies!

Women tend to share. Envision women of all races, creeds, and ages sitting in circles in a village, a kitchen, a prison yard, a laundry room, a factory, sharing their stories, struggles, and hopes, weeping and laughing together. How empowering that is! According to Jean Shinoda Bolen in her book *The Millionth Circles*, a critical number of women gathered in connected circles can tip the balance of power and end the patriarchy. It is long overdue! We need parity and balance. Give the feminine a chance. I mean not only a critical number of women in the management of the world, but balance between the feminine and the masculine in each of us. Men need to free themselves of the cartoon masculinity imposed on



them, just as women stepped out of their traditional roles in the sixties and proved that they could do whatever men did.

*Women want love*, of course. Our brain is wired for love. Otherwise, we would not put up with snotty kids, let alone men, would we? We love them no matter what; we are willing to sacrifice ourselves for love. We even believe in romance! Well, not all women. Me, for example. I have never been able to write romance novels. I have tried for years because I wanted to be rich and famous like Danielle Steel, but I just could not get the hang of it. In my youth I made some money on the side translating romance novels in Spanish. I had to change a little of the dialogue here and there so that the female protagonist would not come across as completely feeble-minded, and then I would get carried away and change the ending. Sometimes Prince Charming ended up helping Mother Teresa in Calcutta, and the heroine, a beautiful tall blonde with big boobs, ended up smuggling weapons in the Middle East. When the publishers got wind of my improvements, they fired me.

Love is a tremendous force. Years ago I wrote a short story about a couple who meet by chance, they like each other, and they try to make love but cannot because both are traumatized by their past. They have been tortured, and their dark memories get in the way of intimacy. I wrote a sentence that I later regretted. I wrote that fear is the strongest emotion, greater than hatred or love. That is not true. Love trumps fear; love trumps everything.

Allow me to quote Dr. Martin Luther King. He said, "One of the great problems of history is that the concepts of love and power have usually been contrasted as opposites so that love is identified with the resignation of power, and power with the denial of love. What is needed is a realization that power without love is reckless and abusive, and that love without power is sentimental and anemic."

Isn't that an extraordinary statement? I understand it as an invitation to use love and power to transform our civilization. The generation of women's liberation had to be tough to succeed in a male-dominated world, but now it is time to acknowledge that we are emotional creatures. We can have open hearts, and that does not make us sentimental or anemic. This is not for women alone. Men can also be loving—in fact, many are even more so than most women. In my son's generation the stale gender stereotypes seldom apply. Men can also live with an open heart, not afraid of not knowing or of showing vulnerability. After his divorce, my

son took care of three babies in diapers. He did it with incredible dexterity and no fuss. “You are like a mother, Nico,” I commented once. And he immediately replied, “No, I am just a father.”

I could go on for another hour talking about what women want, but I am running out of time. Let me finish with a last thought: *women also want beauty.*

In every culture, even in the most stressful times or in the midst of extreme poverty, women aspire to beauty. They adorn themselves with whatever they can get their hands on: shells, flowers, paint, tattoos, piercing, fabric, complicated coiffures, jewelry. They adorn their children, their homes, and they even try to adorn their men. This never quite works. I have spent twenty years trying to improve my husband’s appearance against his will, with little results.

However, it is not personal physical beauty that I am referring to, but a beautiful world. Women and men—when they are not caught up in the trap of power without love—aspire to beauty.

Before being decimated by white colonizers, the elders in Native American tribes, men and women, led the community. Before any important decision was made they considered the wisdom of seven generations before them, and then they asked: *is this good for the children, and for the children of the children, for seven generations to come?* Nobody asks this question today.

What kind of world do we want? We have desecrated a precious planet; the earth is calling. Humanity is wounded; our collective soul is also calling. Can we imagine a world where all people and all species could thrive and be joyful?

If the Caliph of the story asked me the riddle, my answer would be different from the thief’s. I would say that what women really want is beauty in their lives.