

Multi-tasking Man

By Rachel Lehmann-Haupt

FEMINISM'S FIRST SUPERMODEL was an ancient goddess. As the story goes, Mahisa, a rebellious and greedy god, seized the celestial kingdom when his creator, Brahman, denied him immortality. The gods became so incensed by this tyrant that in order to win back their kingdom they combined their powers to produce a divine force in the form of a beautiful woman. Durga was a shapely siren with eight wild arms wielding deadly weapons.

Whirling her mighty arms, Durga sought Mahisa and seduced him. When he fell in love with her, she smiled, batted her wide eyes, and whispered that she could only marry a man who could defeat her in battle. Mahisa was charmed by her challenge, and so sure that he could beat a woman that he took her on.

Their battle was fierce. Mahisa, slick and focused, maneuvered in between and around the swipes of Durga's weapons. The goddess struggled, but didn't give up. When Mahisa was convinced that he had won, she suddenly overwhelmed him with the whisk of her arms and won the battle with a deadly blow to his heart.

In 1972 this multi-armed goddess appeared on the premiere issue of *Ms.* magazine. This time she juggled new weapons: a telephone, a steering wheel, an iron, a clock, a feather duster, a frying pan, a mirror, and a typewriter. There she was in high gloss, with her head tilted in a luring glance, dainty smirk, and demure eyes. She was no longer delivering blows to the ancients, but a modern media message to thousands of housewives and husbands of post-World War II America. A woman's ancient power to juggle multiple tasks, she declared, was the key to the economic power that would free her from cloistered suburbia, housebound ennui, and Freudian shackles that held that anatomy is destiny.

Helen Fisher, the feminist anthropologist, in her book *The First Sex*, says that a woman's skill to juggle multiple tasks evolved out of men and women's naturally separate worlds—and naturally different brain structures—that date back millions of years to the sunburnt plains of East Africa. The women of the tribal village were responsible for gathering more than half of the meal, taking care of the children, watching out for wild animals, and managing the social and marketing networks of the village. The village men were responsible for focusing on the hunt.

"As our male forebears tracked warthogs and wildebeests," Fisher writes, "they gradually evolved the brain architecture to screen out peripheral thought, focus their attention, and make step-by-step decisions." Women's brains, she argues, evolved to handle many tasks at the same time; what she calls "web thinking." There is even scientific

evidence from studies that the corpus callosum, the bundle of millions of nerve fibers that connects the two hemispheres of the brain, is larger in women, and therefore allows for greater communication between each side.

By harnessing these ancient juggling powers, the second wave of feminism was supposed to wash away the wife's troubles and empower her from the bedroom to the boardroom. Rather than husbands and wives operating in separate fiefdoms, pulling their weight at the office and the home, respectively, women could liberate themselves by dominating both environments. Ms. Durga's many arms meant that the modern woman could have it all. She could be the working woman, the housemaid, and the sexy goddess, and her gallant god in gray flannel stability, unchanged, would still love her.

Thirty years later women have indeed come a long way. Woman managers still make 76 cents for every dollar earned by their counterparts, but women now account for almost half of the labor force. And that number is rising. The majority of men and women no longer live in separate and isolated worlds. Technology and the global economy have connected us together both at work and in our homes and there are now ways for each sex to play more equal roles in each realm. Home offices and telecommuting options, on-line grocery shopping and home delivery services, high-speed breast milk pumps and web cams in day care centers allow us all to toggle more efficiently between the duties of work and home.

These profound cultural changes have created an opportunity for traditional gender roles to break down and evolve. Now that Ms. Durga has tipped the scales, for better or for worse, isn't it time for her to put down her weapons and take the focus off trying to hold it all?

Isn't the next step a new and altogether different feminist supermodel? What about a multi-tasking man? Despite feminist progress, the majority of modern men are still focused solely on the hunt. "My career, not my home life," as one young technology entrepreneur in his twenties, who works at home, put it. "The hunt is not the nest. It is the hunt."

TODAY AMERICAN MEN are still only doing a fraction more of the work in the home than they were thirty years ago. A 2002 report by the Institute for Social Research at the University of Michigan found that American men are doing a mere four more hours of housework a week than they were in 1965. Women aren't doing as much house-work, but they are still doing 27 hours more a week than men are. The nanny/housekeeper may act as a bejeweled arm for many upper-income goddesses, but then we must ask, how many of these appendages of privilege are men?

While the traditional corporate wife of the '50s has become all but obsolete, the corporate husband has yet to really define himself. There are now the few corporate superheroes such as Hewlett-Packard CEO Carlton Fiorino, who boasted in a 2002 *Fortune* magazine story that the stay-at-home husband is "The New Trophy Husband." The reality, however, is that most American women feel more overworked than

men because the brunt of multi-tasking is not equally distributed.

It may simply be a communication problem. Women, in their quest to figure out how to have it all, may have lost track of the conversation with men. In the 1970s the ideal feminist woman became the tomboyish Charlie perfume girl. She didn't ask her man to change. She merely untied her apron strings and took long strides of bold suited confidence that told us that she bought her own seduction potion rather than waiting for that special gift from her man. In the 1980s she wore broad shoulder-padded suits, took the train to Wall Street, and competed with high-octane men, all without asking her man to make a similar conversion. He was still the head of the household, still the stoic Marlboro man at the center of every scene. He might have moved over a bit to share his office with the broad in the pants, but it was still his world. Despite a few sensitive moments, he was still focused mainly on the hunt. "We saw women as equals," said a lawyer in his forties. "But it was still about the boys' network and a female secretary who supported you."

As it turned out, women did not really resemble the cool and confident Charlie girl. They were exhausted, anxiety-ridden and over-burdened. By the end of the 1980s women were suffering from what Arlie Hochschild, a sociology professor at the University of California-Berkeley, called "the stalled revolution." In her book *The Second Shift: Working Parents and the Revolution at Home*, she argued that men and the organizations that they worked for weren't helping take on the weight of domestic labor. "Workplaces have remained inflexible in the face of family demands of their workers," she wrote. "At home most men have yet to really adapt to the changes in women."

In the 1990s the "stalled revolution" in some ways got worse. Men and women became even more alienated from each other. Women gained more economic power and more confidence about their innate feminine powers. Many even argued that a woman's natural abilities to multi-task gave her an advantage over men in a new technology age where everyone was bombarded from all directions with the web, instant messages, and cell phone conference calls from offices around the globe in an ever-growing—and feminized—service economy.

Ms. Durga transformed from the shoulder-padded career woman to the post-feminist power girl who could gracefully toggle between work and home; talk of politics and nail polish; Madeleine Albright's weapons strategy and Monica's thongs. Men were suddenly "stiffed," as Susan Faludi observed. They may have learned that it was cool to tap into their more gentle side, carry the Baby Bjorn, and push the stroller with both hands. They may have traded the bachelor party entertainment of silicon-enhanced strippers for silicon-enhanced facials, manicures and massages at day spas. They also lost track of what it meant to be men.

Many men reacted by running away to pound their chests in the woods. They became cigar aficionados. They joined Promise Keepers meetings in baseball stadiums. They did everything to grasp the last hold on traditional manliness. "That means Russell Crowe. Someone who has steely clear, focused confidence. Someone linear and ballsy. A brute. A

guy who can fix things," said a writer in his thirties.

AT THE TURN of the twenty-first century American women are still sent happy-ending messages through the media—and all the fairy tales that we read as kids—that we need a prince who will let us let down our hair and save us—both financially and emotionally. Many women still want this image, or at least are sexually attracted to it. They want a man.

But rather than a half-liberated prince in a gray Armani suit, what women really need is Durgas twin brother. A multi-tasking mensch. A man who can take some of the weight off women's many arms by bringing home the bacon, frying it up in a pan, without ever letting us forget that he's "a man!" The problem with this vision is that anatomy may be destiny. Men might not have the neurological wherewithal to deliver. "I can see how it would make my relationship with a woman easier, but it's just not natural for me to multi-task," says a New York editor in his thirties. "I know women think I'm just being stubborn, but when I try I feel like the slow kid in the fast class."

In 2001, Alladi Vankatesh, a sociologist at the University of California at Irvine's Center for Research on Information Technology began studying this very issue by looking at how traditional gender roles are shifting in the information age. Vankatesh, a soft-spoken Indian man in his mid-forties, spent a year in the sprawling suburban homes of Los Angeles observing the different ways men and women respond to computer technology. After interviewing close to seventy families, he discovered that not much has changed in a million years. When men use computers, they tend to focus on a single task or an immediate goal. Play game! Win game! Find information!

Women on the other hand, he says, think about how the computer integrates into the rest of their lives. How it can help them toggle between working at home and maintaining a connection with their children's school and other parents in their community, for example. "The good news is that because computer technology does seem to be saving women time, they are feeling less pressure about the work of home," he says. The fact remains, however, that men are overwhelmingly still focusing on the hunt.

THE HUMAN BRAIN has not changed significantly in twenty thousand years. As Helen Fisher explains, even if women in the nations with the highest birth rates, such as Africa and India, begin to select partners who are inclined toward more feminine behavior—including multi-tasking—it's going to take a long time before an actual hard-wiring evolution occurs. A new breed of super multi-tasking man is not arriving any time soon.

Maybe the optimal partnership will be have to be more like the Wonder Twins, the characters in the '80s television cartoon *The Super Friends*. Zan and Jayna were from the planet Exxor. Zan, the boy, had the power to change spontaneously into any water-based form. Jayna, the girl, could become any animal. In order to activate their shape-shifting powers, the twins needed to touch hands. "Wonder Twin Powers, activate!" they would shout. When fighting a villian, Jayna would

shout "Shape of the Sphinx!" and Zan would yell "Form of an Ice Shovel!" The Sphinx would then hit the villain over the head with the ice shovel. Their super powers worked only when they combined their different strengths.

Clinging to evolutionary determinism, however, could also thwart social progress. As women's salaries become necessities for survival of the modern family, men, despite ill-wiring, can no longer afford to focus solely on the hunt. Many modern men, especially those of the generation who were nurtured in Ms. Durga's multiple arms and grew up in the multi-tasking world of computer technology, have therefore begun to adapt.

Even in the most neo-traditional households, where the husband still takes the train to the organization and the wife has set up her office at home in order to manage the house and child care, a new multi-tasking masculinity is beginning to emerge. "Fathering is all about multi-tasking," said a writer in his thirties. "Just last night, in fact, I was swinging my daughter in the car seat to try to coax her to sleep, while at the same time I was downloading music into our computer, reading e-mail, reading a Philip Roth novel, and tinkering with an upcoming article. I only have two hands but sometimes I feel like an octopus. I have literally begun to undertake certain tasks with my feet. "I also do almost all the cooking," he continued. "That said, my father was fairly shocked when he came to visit, because he saw me doing a lot of things that he never had to worry about—and I think he found that somewhat inappropriate."

For men of generations X and Y, the social effects of feminism are slowly taking hold, but the pressures for more change are mounting. As women become more economically independent, they are staying single longer, choosing to rely on their social networks of friends for support rather than settling for a male partner who may not necessarily meet their standards of companionship. A higher divorce rate is forcing more men to live alone, care for themselves and develop the skills of the home front that traditionally have fallen to women. As liberated gay couples become more prominent, gay men, who either through biological or social wiring fall into more traditionally feminine roles, are becoming new social role models.

Most major corporations still lack in-house day care. Most men are still not granted paternity leave. There are still strong cultural pressures on men that make them feel that if they scant their jobs in favor of the work of home and child care, they might appear wimpy or uncommitted. Despite these obstacles, men are progressing in the direction of Durga's twin. If the conversation continues, the balance of roles will improve even more.

There may even be the possibility for change in men's brain circuits. Eric Kandel, a neuroscientist at Columbia University, won the first Nobel Prize in medicine of the twenty-first century for his seminal work with the sea slug *Aplysia*. By studying the way the slug's nerve cells respond to chemical signals that produce changes in its behavior. Kandel and his colleagues discovered that learning can produce physical changes in the brain by strengthening connections between

nerve cells. Men aren't sea slugs, but it could be that the more they multi-task between the work of the home and their work, the more their brains will learn and change. It could be that once upon a time in the future Durga's multi-tasking twin in shining armor could come to her rescue, overthrow the tyranny of the pressure for her to do it all, and prove that anatomy isn't destiny, experience is.