

LETTERS FROM 'KAREN CRAWFORD' V 1.0, 25 JAN 2001 ++

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'Karen Crawford'

I have been on the net since long before it was the web. I started in December of 1983, and except for a two year hiatus when Syracuse took relay down, have been on it throughout my adult life. A great deal of my social life and friendships take place over the net, and most of the time I don't really need the face to face contact. Yes, the net is for me a pretty good replacement for face to face social interaction. I have been on many groups; I was on ND to discuss net life when I first joined Cybermind. Cybermind sometimes discussed net life as well. Sometimes it was frivolous but it felt open, flexible, and lively. ND, at that time felt neither important nor lively to me. If you talk of life out there on ND, you get ignored or told to play in the traffic. It got so bad I finally walked, but came back later.

I now think of my journey through the Sondheim empire as one of heading in the wrong door because I did not know myself as well as I should. I guess we all have to learn. I used to fancy myself a sophisticated intellectual. Well no more. My issues with Alan were simmering on the back burner for a long time. I saw Alan as listowner do a stealth unsubscribe to a friend of mine on Cyberculture and on the same List he told me and Lady Sparkles, who ran The Rumbles at that time, to go play in the traffic when we were having what was a fairly general philosophical debate about what was important on the web as far as social interactions went. I began to call Alan "the listowner with feet of clay".

I also got told to play in the traffic when I asked others on Cyberculture to vote for a fighter at Site Fights (<<http://www.thesitefights.com>>). Her name was Jennifer. I had supported her (traded votes with her and gave her votes) for a long time and she was up against a site being secretly run by a team manager who used all his staff to generate

support for it. That site was for a nine year old girl laid up with a kidney infection. The team manager of the Angelic Champions said “he loved children,” but he had no problem using his staff to help defeat a fifteen year old.

I explained the situation on the list and asked others to “bring a little fairness to the Site Fights”. A vote only takes a minute or two. An extra five to six votes per day can make a big difference. It does not correct anything fundamental but it is the same as buying cookies from a neighbor kid to help support the local high school football team. What kind of a community are we building on the net I asked myself when a plea to give a fifteen year old two minutes per day falls on deaf ears and meets with hostility? What kind of people are these?

Cybermind List members also used to get upset about an occasional ZOID CITY Voter Guide, which I posted once every two weeks while every morning Alan would stick six or seven political forwards on the list.

I returned to Site Fights because I preferred the company of vote exchanging Site Fighters whose values were better than snobbish intellectuals. I also at Alan’s urging switched from the high class Cyberculture to the chattier Cybermind. I should have known that I really belonged nowhere in the Sondheim empire but I just was too stupid. I may have joked about the slobs against the snobs but deep in my heart I was still a snob.

There is a third element. I write creatively and I make web graphics. I do not know how good at it I am. I do it though. I from time to time contribute to Interactive Story for example. Being a writer makes me a critic , and most of what Alan Sondheim produced was garble. I couldn’t understand it. It was supposed to be art, but what good is art if it is beyond comprehension? Oddly enough, I had no personal grudge against Alan. I even remember exchanging a few friendly private emails with him. In some ways, I had lost my respect for Alan, but thinking someone a wretched list owner is very different from thinking that they have done something personal to you that cries for revenge. What Alan was doing was NOT aimed personally at me, and it wasn’t because I was female and he was male.

Where anything having to do with gender started was with Nikuko. Alan started the Nikuko and Leopold pieces and the English was actually readable. I avidly followed the story of the ballet beautiful dancer in the gorgeous lavender tunic. She danced endlessly. He wrote a lot about her genitals and her state of sexual arousal. Leopold (Dr. Leopold Konninger) sat on the stage and watched her. Sometimes he wore a suit and top hat. Sometimes he wore nothing but his monocle. Sometimes he forgot his duties and lusted after Nikuko backstage.

I really liked these stories. In my mind's eye I could see the beautiful young Nikuko the ballerina. Then I realized something was amiss. Nikuko was a young girl. Nikuko was a beautiful girl. Nikuko was a good girl. Alan was dragging this poor character through the mud. Couldn't he understand beauty? Also the stories lacked a bit of verisimilitude. Nikuko was in those toe shoes for hours on her feet and tired. There was no way she was going to be aroused. That was a high school boy's locker room fantasy. He also never mentioned Nikuko's pretty face, sweet eyes, or lovely hair. He had no eye for her beauty or romance. All he was interested in was her sweaty crotch.

I do think Alan objectifies his female characters and treats them like dirt. He would say that they are not real people and that the pieces explore the interface between skin and outside world, or machine and reality, or virtual reality and its closeness to sex, and a lot of other stuff like that. I guess I care about characters in stories. I always think of Nikuko as a good girl gone bad and looking for redemption, so I decided to rescue Nikuko from the gutter Alan had built for her. First she got off stage. Next she took a shower. Then she and Leopold went out on a proper date. They ate a good meal and then finally clean and fed and satiated, she and Leopold made love. I even married her to Leopold. Of course at the end of the story as a slightly nasty touch I cast Alan as a neutered male cat. The cat gets frustrated one day and rips open the couple's waterbed while they are making love – The end.

The story got good reviews even though I was actually a bit worried about casting Alan as a castrated male kitty. I mean would you want someone to cast you in a story as a cat with no testes?

Then, a while later another list member, and a prominent member at that, Kerry, died. The public mourning was attenuated so that relative newbies like me were locked out. I wanted to do something badly so I hit upon humor and distraction. It was time to give Nikuko her own web page. It was going to be a take off on all those conservative ladies' web pages, the kind of pages that those women in ladies group such as LOTH (Ladies of the Heart), NetBuddies, Divine Angels, Women of Strength and Inner Beauty, Sisters of the Silver Moon, Garden House, and Garden of Friendship Make.

As a snobbish intellectual, I had looked at these groups and laughed. This wasn't me. Up went the page. I got Nikuko a RTH membership.

RTH stands for Random Tender Hugs. I got a group graphic and link and later made my own. I always make my own graphics. I don't know if I am a good artist, but I love my graphics because they are mine. I also went over to Angela's Angels and adopted an unborn baby angel and named it Alan Julu. It's up in the Angel gallery at Nikuko's page I have a one year sticker for him and may stick it up there too.

The page met a firestorm due to the unborn angel adoption. This took me by surprise. I had after all made Alan a castrated male kitty and he hadn't objected. What was wrong with a baby angel as compared to a castrated kitty? Well I had violated one of the snobby intellectual's pieces of dogma. We must all be pro-abortion. Now an unborn baby angel is a powerful thing especially to a traditionally religious and also spiritualist person. I always knew the fetus had a soul and I was a biology major in college and had studied fetal development. I had always been queasily prochoice. It is amazing how all of us accept a certain amount of orthodoxy just to get along in the world.

Well handling that angel graphic, modifying it, and mounting it had made me rethink my views on the abortion issue. I still don't think that the government's outlawing abortion would be a good thing, but I'm prolife and it was that little angel that pushed me over the edge. The page that had started out as a parody was now a serious endeavour. I joined RTH in my own name. I was switching sides though I did not know it at the time. This is that old going native problem. Maybe it is projection, the things that irritate and that you dislike are a part of you. Is that the shadow? All I knew was

that as I wrote the MA page, I believed what I wrote. Those were my words. Sincerity is important.

We had a long argument on prolife versus prochoice on Cybermind. I remember mentioning that with the way we are heading, genetic engineering as such, valuing unborn babies in the womb only made sense. I don't want to live in a world where children are turned into commodities. I also explored other sites that had unborn baby angels. Unborn Angels had thirty pages worth of fellow angel adopters. I learned who my fellow proliferers were. I learned that they were often women who had brought an unplanned pregnancy to term, were raising a handicapped child, or who had lost a child through miscarriage or stillbirth. This was a money where the mouth was issue. Of course on Cybermind I was told that if I was going to be prolife I should volunteer to work with teenage mothers or pregnant teens. This seemed reasonable enough, though very few of us back up all our moral views with volunteer work. I did go to one very sleazy prolife counseling center in my town, the kind of place with an adoption center next door run by the same agency. The whole business felt sleazy.

Well, I kept working on Nikuko's page and I spent time hanging out at RTH just to gawk more than anything else. I even made a page that Nikuko had supposedly made for her niece, Zivia. I always wanted to make a kids page and the page was a model. I proudly advertised the page on Cybermind. I guess this was rubbing sand in the wound or maybe salt. It's disputable whether what I am doing with the Nikuko page is fair use, parody, or a separate story inspired by another author's work. There's a whole pile of wrongs not making any rights and not enough left to fight for.

Then to make matters worse, Alan advertised among his forwards a Nikuko videotape. I asked if I could advertise it on the RTH board where people believe that Nikuko is a real person. I was going to use the public announcement as an example of her old life. I would enjoy the joke in both camps. After all those ladies were such a bunch of air heads. They weren't sophisticated intellectuals like we were...no...we could all enjoy the joke. I guess Alan did not share my sense of humor.

February 3, 2000 I found myself ejected from Cybermind with a “fuck you” from Alan. At least there was none of the formal ding letter crap that sometimes accompanies list expulsions. It was time to take stock. What was I left with???

Well Cybermind is a rough and tumble environment. It has sort of an unwritten rule that nothing was sacred. Also there is more to my story than meets the eye. I am a punk born and bred. I also don't always get thrown out or into scrapes at every opportunity. This is the first time in two years that I have been thrown out of anywhere. Had Alan instead said, either take the pages down or leave the list, I might have made a choice to go voluntarily.

Within less than twenty-four hours, I had somewhere else to go. I wanted to keep writing about Nikuko. That afternoon, I found my way to the freeform fiction mailing list GhostScripts. Nikuko now had a new home. What I remember upon joining GhostScripts was my very pleasant shock at reading prose where one sentence followed another and all of what I read made sense. Of course I had to become Nikuko and about a dozen other characters. Most active scribes as those who write to the list are called, have multiple personae. On GhostScripts one writes in character 99.9% of the time. The only time you are allowed not to write in character is a “going nomail” note or a note about a real life emergency and it has to be an emergency. I like writing in character. I am not sure why. I think the mask frees me. Since it is all fiction we shake hands and make up when the fighting is over. You can't get thrown off for what you say. You can only get thrown off for stealing another scribe's character or voice.

However, using Nikuko's persona at RTH was no longer a good idea since someone might connect (my real RTH membership) with my spoof one. I did not want to alienate the folks at RTH, not any more.

I did a lot of thinking about my time in the Sondheim empire and I did a lot of thinking about how RTH would have handled Kerry's death. I realized, much as I had realized when ten months earlier I rejoined Site Fights because I loved and respected my fellow fighters, that RTH was where I belonged. Their creed was no longer laughable. It made sense. It was time for me to do some real learning.

It was both a good feeling and a humbling one. I signed up (using my RTH name) for the Care Committee (later renamed the Tender Angels) and for the Hugs Committee. The Care Committee signs guestbooks and sends digital e-cards to those “in need of kindness”. Recipients ask for this stuff. I write hopeful poetry. I don’t know how good it is but it is serviceable, and better than a lot of that canned inspirational crap. It is possible to use my way with words to voice hopeful sentiments with a light touch and creativity. I believe the sentiments I write, and those sentiments are too important for clichés and doggerel.

RTH by the way is co-ed but it is overwhelmingly female in membership. I also do graphics. My aesthetic is different from most of the group’s members but they accept me. I use brighter colors much like the forceful intellectual language I still sometimes use and easy to read lettering (no machine script for me) and interesting illustrations that are not babyish or childish. Comfort and caring deserve importance and dignity.

It took a long time reading the RTH board and newsletter before I fully understood and appreciated it. The forceful opinionated prose I had been taught is not the only way to speak. Affect, feelings, relationships, and rites of passage are important. Here is how they describe how they want to write at RTH:

We do not attack members in guestbooks or on message boards. We have love and show love on the Members board, anyone can see it when they visit there. That is the type of environment we all want to be in. Somewhere where we can feel safe and not have to worry about being judged or feel bad.

I call it ‘soft talk’. Soft talkers also believe anything unpaid is rare and precious while in America, “money talks”. Soft talkers tend to be female (at least in my experience) and less educated than hard talkers. They have had children young enough to be excluded from the kind of prestigious work world experience that would give them an entrée into the public sphere. They do not do the kind of volunteer work that gives them an entrée either. Soft talkers are thrilled with the idea of a guestbook full of pressies. There are guestbooks for birthdays, sick folks etc... Anyone can make “someone else smile”. What soft talkers are in fact good at is supporting the common wheel. “Hard talkers” are the folks who are very comfortable with expressing themselves in writing and who feel that they have a place in public life. Hard talker language is blunt and brutal and precise. “You are off topic”, “Please read the rules”, “No spitting in the subway”, are all

hard talker-ease. Hard talkers tend to inflict less accidental injury due to the fact that they have good control over language but hard talker arguments can get hot and fierce. In a hard talker community if you enter the pit, get ready to have people at the least “discuss your post”. On some lists those posting entered the gladiator pit where others freely sliced and diced and a good poster learns to stand her ground. The image that comes to mind from all of this is of me pulling arrows out of my rear while thanking the jerk who flamed my post for reading and commenting on what I write. The wounding is superficial and no one is really injured.

I am not sure that this is a “neither community is complete without the other”, argument. I think more that each culture on the net has something to teach the other. I also think that there are more soft talkers than hard talkers. I think the training for a life of hard talking starts somewhere in the early teens and continues through high school. Since many people enter the net as adults, they are already set and there is little chance of converting them. If you don’t try to understand soft talkers you don’t understand a large portion of the people out there.

Anyhow, the desire to do good and doing good in small ways is ennobling. If I wanted to discuss the news of the day, there was the web board at the Atlantic. If I wanted to be among people whose ideals and values matched my own RTH was the place to be. I admire the way RTH brings what can be inhuman technology down to a human scale.

And yes, there is a nasty political side to RTH, but though I notice it, it is not the kind of politics that impedes my being active. I can enter contests, work on the Tender Angels and Hugs committees and be left alone. If I don’t like the way something is run, I steer clear of it. One thing I have stayed away from is Secret Sister. This comes around several times a year in both groups. For one month you “spoil” a willing volunteer and are in turn “spoiled” with adopted critters, postcards, guestbook signings etc... You can even make a page for your spoilee. I am a bit worried about being able to keep up with the hectic daily schedule. I am also worried that I won’t like the stuff I am sent and will have to pretend that I do. Still I’d like to give it a try. The woman I spoil will have to live with my taste in graphics that I intend to impose upon her. I’d like to see how she does it. I am thinking of doing Life’s Endurance Secret Sister rather than

RTH Love Notes because Life's Endurance set up first and now because the RTH version FORBIDS the building of web pages for the secret pal.

RTH is political enough to have an inner circle but plenty of opportunity for newcomers to be active. It is fairly tolerant, though the board will have what feels like more noise to signal. The mailing list is a bi-weekly newsletter/digest. It is heavily moderated. Most of the action occurs through committees. You do a lot of surfing and signing.

The real charm of RTH was the way it handled communal events both happy and otherwise. Any member who was willing could participate. Despite the politics, it is still that way. Cybermind wasn't. I found I shared far more in common with the ladies' group members than I did with most of the folks in the Sondheim empire. Having two X chromosomes was just the beginning. We worked jobs that didn't pay that much. We were more conservative socially. Religion was an important part of our lives. We also were glyphic.

Lists like ND, Cybermind, Cyberculture, and IPCT-L take a certain kind of cool (almost cold) analytical view of the world. They value word sparring highly over warmth and affect, and they have do not prize traditional values of any kind highly. Spirituality is at best an awkward topic. At one point I fancied myself the punk who could spar with the big boys. Now I realize I don't want to be one of the big boys any more.

I am glad I behaved as I did on Cybermind and glad I was kicked off. I would never have taken stock as I did or become a serious RTHster had I been allowed to stay feeling a vague sense of discontent but still thinking I was one of the group. I would never have taken RTH or any ladies' group seriously, which would have been sad indeed.

I remember making my first guestbook pressies and Care Committee graphics. During the first few months that I was on the Care Committee I told myself that I would bring comfort to those who asked for it in place of the comfort I could not bring to Kerry's widow. RTH helped give my Cybermind experience needed closure.

This fall, I also became a member of Life's Endurance I was invited by a member of RTH who is also a Life's Endurance member as I am. Life's Endurance, which is all female, has a chat list and is more amenable to those in web site competitions and to those who run them. I fall into the latter group. As a thirty-eight year old single female with no children, I have never had much opportunity to participate in traditional female activities or express sentiment. It is wonderful to enter a world where those things are valued. I am grateful for Alan Sondheim for ejecting me. I never want to go back and probably can't any more.

By the way, I am on FutureCulture and I do sometimes stop by the Atlantic's Post and Riposte Board. A membership at ND has survived my conversion but only barely. I know however, there is more to the online world, than these intellectual venues. I wonder why it took such drastic measures as a list expulsion for me to recognize who my own people are and to join them with a whole heart. I guess that I was asleep and needed to be awakened. My expulsion from Cybermind did that.

It is common among my fellow RTHsters to apologize for writing long letters. This is not something I do. I would, however, like to thank you for both your time and patience. I hope you can find something useful and that you are closer to understanding my experience and view of the world. By the way, I am not a "difference feminist." I am simply a woman with traditional social, cultural, and religious values. Adapting to a new environment involved remaking me. It involved cultivating my sentimental side and learning to adapt to sweet expression in others. It meant acquiring new tastes, but becoming a happy ladies' group member was my choice.

I should say it is possible to remake yourself, and I mean the you that you know is truthfully you, your core identity. It's not 100% malleable but I'd say 25-50% of it is. I welcome the chance to remake mine though truthfully I am not sure who the real me is any more. My invented persona, who is active on three mailing lists, knows. She is the me I would have been had I developed "normally". She has a husband and two children and a more conventional attitude toward her Judaism. She does not understand that she should welcome Christian witnessing because it frees her to express her faith in a wonderfully tolerant environment. She is luckier than I am. She has been too busy with a real life to have had to reinvent herself twice. My invented persona is in two top site

competitions and signed up for a vote and visit competition. She has been approved but is not yet rostered. She is also on the two most godawful mailing lists.

If you have any more questions feel free to ask. Thank you once again for giving me the opportunity to tell my story.

You have my permission to quote as little or as much of my story as you would like as long as you give attribution.

I wonder, has any one done any research on internet “ladies groups?” I’d be curious to read it even if it was quite dismissive. They would be easy to research, just join and take notes, but they exist well below the elite’s horizon. The researcher would have to learn to live by the mores of the ladies’ groups they joined. I’m not sure they can.

Karen

Much Later:

Unfortunately, I’ve hit a “female” style of leadership that eschews confrontation while retaining a real sense of control. This is good old Secret Garden of Rainbows. I got yelled at by J for telling a member up front on the support group list that she had sent a card (through no fault of her own) that includes a spam trap in the pick up letter. Sending such cards to someone who is sick or grieving would be a bad idea for obvious reasons, and the group needed to know. I clearly said that the group member was not at fault. I eventually got booted in a coup and left this group in disgust.

I have also seen some real manipulative crap in female groups. The latest move was by L on Loving Hearts when she threatened to leave the list because she could not stand a political post I wrote. People immediately rallied to her side and begged her to stay. The list owner, whom I still somewhat respect, then put down a universal cease and desist which was selectively enforced etc...

I wrote to L front channel and explained that what she had done by threatening to resign was to draw the list owner into what had been a fairly civil argument. I was not sure she

intended that result but that is the result such a move has on many female lists. I said that if she wanted to speak her mind to do it forthrightly rather than spook the list owner. I also asked her to withdraw her threat to resign.

List owners on academic style lists would ignore such a move. In that case, the “I am going to resign because such and so is saying something unacceptable” becomes a “this list is in the toilet bowl because...” letter. Manipulation only works where it is accepted. Other female groups have a “don’t post resignations or problem letters rule” to prevent this manipulative strategy. Letting manipulation run unchecked is the sign of a bad group.