



THE POWER OF “We”

A VETERAN REPORTER EXPLORES “HOOK UP CULTURE” IN HER FORTHCOMING BOOK

by *Laura Sessions Stepp '73*

One of the most poignant things I’ve ever heard a student say occurred as I was researching *Unbooked*, my forthcoming book about the hookup culture in college.

I was attending a 21st birthday party for a young woman about to graduate from George Washington University in Washington, D.C. A handful of students were dancing to the music of rapper Jay-Z, and I was asking a senior named Julie about her intimate relationships over the past four years.

Like many young women I met while researching the book, Julie had had no problem finding guys to hook up with at college. These casual sexual encounters, she said, were neither serious nor particu-

larly romantic. She didn’t seem bothered by that.

“I don’t have time or energy to worry about a ‘we,’ she said, and I thought to myself, how times have changed.

For me, college was about many things: learning to read Goethe in German and ride horses, marching to protest the Vietnam War and enduring yet another tough steak on Saturday night in the cafeteria. But most of all, I see now, Earlham was about learning how to build relationships to others: how to be a “we” with a roommate who went to bed right after sundown, a classmate who argued in favor of the war, a Medieval lit professor I couldn’t stand and, significantly, with a boyfriend or two.

When I arrived at Earlham in 1969, I was excited by the possibility of enjoying my first major romantic relationship away from the scrutiny of my parents. Unlike past generations, my girlfriends and I did not necessarily expect to find our husbands on campus, although some did. But we shared this grand idea called marriage, and in the deepest recesses of our minds thought of dating as a series of lessons leading up to the final exam. As we pored over maps for geology, or put in work-study hours shelving books in the library, it never occurred to us that we couldn't do all the things we had set out to do in college — including pursue romantic relationships.

Julie and her contemporaries today, I discovered, see things differently. With all that they want to accomplish in schoolwork, athletics and professionally — and all that their parents have encouraged them to accomplish — they have come to believe they can't afford a relationship. Hooking up, which ostensibly carries no expectations, appears to them to be a practical alternative.

What is hooking up? It can be anything from a kiss to sexual intercourse, occurring one night, over a couple of weekends or even occasionally over a period of months. It comes with two expectations: neither partner should become emotionally close, and both understand that it carries no commitment. Hooking up's defining characteristic is the ability to unhook from a partner at any time, just as one might delete an old song on an iPod or an out-of-date "away" message on a computer. Some people call this a hookup culture, but a more accurate description would be an unhooked culture. It is a way of thinking about relationships, period. And many young people carry it with them as they move through their 20s, when the "hookup buddy" becomes the "some-time boyfriend." One recent national study found that among 18- to 29-year-olds, only slightly more than a third were in committed relationships. The majority of the rest, like Julie at GW, said they were not looking.

This is unfortunate, because I have come to believe that intimate relationships teach us how to be a "we" outside, as well as inside, the bedroom. Skin to skin, we are at our most vulnerable, and so is our partner. We learn what it means to respect another person's signals, and what can happen when we don't. We learn the joy of caring for another person and of being cared for, and the pain that comes from an absence of caring. Perhaps most significantly, we learn what commitment means and how difficult, yet ultimately rewarding, it can be. Hookups are about anything but these qualities.

Jamie in my book provided an example. Late on Friday and Saturday nights, for most of her first semester, she would sit on a concrete bench on Duke's freshman campus waiting for a bus to take her on a 20-minute ride to the upperclass campus and a senior she had met named Jake. She would watch Jake and his fraternity brothers playing video games, then go to bed with him. Early the following morning, she would catch another bus back to her dorm. Although Jake owned a car parked behind his fraternity, he never volunteered to pick her up or take her home — and she never demanded that he do so.

At the time, she wrote this off as normal behavior. "No other girls were getting rides," she told me.

As she told this story, I thought back to my first semester at Olvey-Andis Hall, and how excited I was waiting for my date to arrive. He would have put some effort into making sure I had a good time at a movie downtown or a crazy party at Bundy Hall. In return, I would try to have a good time, all the while making sure that he didn't try to have too good a time.

At first, it could seem like a game. But the more we expressed appreciation for each other, as we learned about each other's family, favorite books, political preferences and the like, the more we came to believe that both of us were pretty special. Respect for each other, and for ourselves, accrued slowly. Intimacy came in stages and involved conversation and negotiations.

Dating in the late 1960s was far from perfect, but it did require that

we pay attention to each other, talk honestly with each other and take the time required to learn how to do both. Jumping into bed not only forces decisions young people may not be ready to make but frequently kills the chance that they will work at putting their best selves forward. A lot can get lost. When hooking up becomes a pattern, a stunning cynicism toward the opposite sex sets in. One young man at GW always kept a condom in his wallet and a little piece of paper that read, "Toss the bitches."

Two young women at Duke said they enjoyed occasionally getting out of bed after having sex and leaving the guy dumbfounded.

"To see the look on their faces when you get out of bed before they do makes men feel feeble. It gives me such pleasure," said one.

The other nodded, noting, "Sometimes you just want to screw them before they screw you."

The experience of Nicole, a sophomore at GW, suggested how uncaring hooking up can be — on both sides. She hooked up several times early her freshman year with another freshman named Chris. In January of that year, Chris stopped calling her or responding to her phone calls.

According to the rules of the hookup culture, she wasn't supposed to feel anything for him. But her pride was hurt. So first semester sophomore year, when he expressed interest in her again, she took revenge. She slept with him twice, and early in the morning the second time, after they woke up, he asked her, "So what do we do about this?"

"We do nothing," she said. "I got what I wanted."

She told me later, "I wanted to prove I still had the upper hand."

None of this is meant to say that young people today don't want to be respected, cared for, even loved. But many think that love, or anything resembling love, should wait. The result, as Nicole's behavior suggests, is that when, by what seems like accident or error, attachment occurs, they are torn up inside. Hooking up leaves them wholly unprepared for the steadfastness a loving relationship requires.

When I met Cleo, a GW senior, she said she thought she was falling in love with another senior, Steven. That worried her because she had plans after graduation that didn't include a boyfriend. "It will

“Dating in the late 1960s was far from perfect, but it did require that we pay attention to each other, talk honestly with each other and take the time required to learn how to do both.”

“What is hooking up?”

It can be anything from a kiss to sexual intercourse, occurring one night, over a couple of weekends or even occasionally over a period of months. It comes with two expectations: neither partner should become emotionally close, and both understand that it carries no commitment.”

suck if it's bad,” she told me, “but it will suck even more if it's good. I don't want to lose the love of my life, but I also don't want to compromise my experiences for anybody.” She ended up hanging on to Steven until graduation, and hooking up on the side with other guys — in part, I think, to remind herself not to become too committed.

Certainly, students at Earlham did their share of cheating when I was there. But it was seen as just that, cheating. Most young women in relationships whom I knew didn't cheat and those who did risked censure from their gal pals. Young men who cheated got off more lightly but didn't escape criticism entirely. Today, since commitment is verboten, cheating doesn't exist. You are committed only to yourself.

This makes life difficult for those who, like Cleo and Steven, try to make a relationship work.

“People don't take our relationship seriously,” Steven told me.

Cleo agreed. “If a guy hits on me and I say I have a boyfriend, he'll say, ‘So?’ And if he's hot, my girlfriends say, ‘Go for it!’”

Good relationships are about commitment perhaps more than anything else. Love is wonderful, but it's also fickle, and one can fall in and out of love. Respect and caring are crucial, but on occasion even the most loving partner will have a bad day and take it out on the person closest to him or her. Commitment forgives, or at least outlives.

As students at Earlham, we knew married faculty who were deeply committed to their marriages. We also heard about marriages breaking up — and then saw our wounded teachers recover. Earlham's small size — and the faculty's willingness to open their homes to us — helped us understand the problems with and value of commitment, right at the time that many of us were trying out our first committed relationships.

From them we learned that commitment is saying you're dedicated not just to the person(s) involved but to the relationship itself, and that you're willing to sacrifice some of your preferences for the relationship. The relationship is not so much a contract you can't escape but a team you won't quit, except under unusual circumstances. You come to appreciate each other's differences and learn from them, expanding who you are in a way you could not have done alone.

Of course these fundamental life skills can be learned in other con-

texts, but I would argue they may best be learned within a romantic relationship because the partners are motivated by the romance to learn them. Students who avoid relationships are missing that opportunity.

At Earlham and other colleges around the country, my generation succeeded in getting rid of single-sex dorms, curfews and visiting hours. I realize now that those restraints on our social lives both inhibited and protected us. I do not necessarily think they should be restored. But I do know that one result of our activism was that young people now have to make rules on their own in what is the most confusing sexual landscape of any generation. Should they have to do so without some guidance? Not in college, I would say, and especially not in a college like Earlham that values community.

I wonder, when Earlham faculty, staff and students now talk about community, do they talk only about communities of 10 or 20 or 200, or do they also discuss what it's like to be a community of two? Can we hope to sustain communities of size if we don't know how to sustain our own personal communities?

Earlham students possess amazing analytical skills. Do professors challenge them to use those skills in thinking about their personal lives? Do teachers of literature choose reading material that forces students to think about their intimate partners? Are science teachers exposing students to the fascinating new research on brain functioning and the endocrine system that would help students understand the biological reasons they react in certain ways in intimate situations? Are sociologists discussing with students what kind of partnerships they look for in marriage and whether the mating habits they're acquiring will help them get to where they want to go? Are psychologists encouraging classes to examine theories of love and sexuality in light of the students' own experiences and choices?

I suspect the answer to all of these questions is yes, sometimes. I also suspect more could be done, for Earlham is, above all else, a place where students can learn how to be a “we.”

Pulitzer prize-winning journalist Laura Sessions Stepp writes for The Washington Post. Her latest book, Unhooked, is due out from Riverhead Books in February 2007.