

“In the past, a woman was snatched from her childhood universe and thrown into her life as a wife by a real or simulated rape; this was an act of violence that changed the girl into a woman: it is also referred to as ‘ravishing’ a girl’s virginity, or ‘taking’ her flower. This deflowering is not the harmonious outcome of a continuous development; it is an abrupt rupture with the past, the beginning of a new cycle.”

(Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex*)

## **“Either you eat yourself up inside or you cry out from deep within...”**

**Mother:** I’m not asking you questions to get you to expose private, intimate things about yourself, but because I think the question of whether you can accept your body or not has a lot to do with the backdrop of our society. I mean that you’re being given the chance to be born into your final form, physically, psychologically and intellectually, and you’re no longer alienated from your body. We’re talking about growing up, about the transition from girlhood to womanhood. This process in life is the topic of the images I’ve made, the ones behind us now, and you played a major role in shaping them.

**Daughter:** I can definitely tell you a lot about puberty. I think that the images show pretty clearly what it means to go through it, like in the picture with the eyes in my body – during puberty you want to be seen, to be taken special notice of, but at the same time you’re afraid and tearing yourself apart – inside you’re torn, but on the outside you want to be strong. To seem strong.

**Mother:** Yes, you can see that here in the position of the arm – on one side the arm is pointed downwards, almost falling off, twisted to one side, and the other arm is pushing upwards in a powerful gesture, each hand clenched in a fist. Almost as if you were saying: Look here, this is me! And on the other side you see the division, the divided self.

**Daughter:** But somehow all the parts still make up a whole – even though you’re torn, everything is still there and you still have a self.

**Mutter:** When we took the photos you were in the middle of puberty. You were 13 or 14. I still have bad memories of the time when “generative” was exhibited and then immediately removed from the exhibition. It turned into a scandal. A boy from your school happened to see it on TV and recognized you. You were very upset, and so was I.

**Daughter:** Yes, because the whole thing was misinterpreted – he talked about it to everyone as if I had just taken my clothes off and let my mother take nude photos of me, and then they were even on TV. Everyone started talking as if it were pornography, and some of my friends made fun of me because of it.

**Mutter:** I felt so bad for you, because at that age you were so torn, as you just said, and felt divided inside – on the outside you wanted to appear strong and these attacks were aimed at just that part of you. It must have really affected you. At that point I almost wanted to shred the pictures so no one could ever see them again. But the images were still there in people’s minds. So there was only one thing to do – instead of retreating, we took one more step forward. We said they could talk to us about it. The boys came to our studio, and after a long and heated discussion we were able to settle this misunderstanding.

**Daughter:** They've never said anything negative about the pictures since then – they really didn't know anything about them.

**Mutter:** Did you experience puberty as a dividing point in your life – I mean, did you experience it as an abrupt change, or did one thing just flow into the other?

**Daughter:** I think it's just a part of life. You're not always conscious of what's happening while it's happening. You just go through it.

**Mother:** But there may be girls who reject their own bodies because they're suddenly being viewed in a completely different way. A lot of girls become anorexic when their bodies begin to “bloom” and take on a new shape. In our society it's no longer the case, as it is in other cultures, that women are excluded during menstruation because they're considered dirty. Did you ever feel as if you had been excluded or rejected?

**Daughter:** Yes, I always wanted to be like everyone else. Now it's just the opposite, I'd rather be different than the others. But at that time in my life I wanted to be just like the people around me.

**Mother:** To belong at any price?

**Daughter:** You want this feeling of being part of a group.

**Mother:** To be able to identify with the others?

**Daughter:** You didn't want to be alone, you wanted to be accepted. You wanted to be able to say: I belong, I'm not an outsider.

**Mother:** During puberty you lose something too – you're losing your childhood. And you don't know where you're headed yet.

**Daughter:** As you can see in this picture with the mouths in my body: either you eat yourself up inside or you cry out from deep within...

This woman – I mean, that's me – looks young on the outside but I already contain the old self – I'm destined to become old. I already have it inside me. Even now, that's really who I am. It keeps growing outwards towards the surface, this old self, and at some point it reaches the skin and then you can see that you're getting old.

When I was little I always wanted to be older, and that lasted until I was 14. After that, I thought before every birthday: I don't really want to be 15, 16, 17 or 18. Even though legally you're allowed to do more, but the whole idea of getting old – I don't want that.

**Mother:** Even though at that age you're not even getting old yet.....

**Daughter:** But I don't want to have to deal with it. I'd almost rather die young than later, when my body gets sick and weak – I'd rather die while life is still good. For some reason I'm afraid of all these big steps like getting married and things like that... Now I have my whole life ahead of me, now I can do what I want. When you're a child you never really have to make decisions that will affect your whole life. So maybe you could say I'm still half a child inside.

**Mother:** But now you know a lot more about life, more about yourself – you can take on responsibility and you’ve had your own sexual experiences. How has that changed you?

**Daughter:** You do change, because you’re sharing a part of yourself with another person that no one else knows – you’re sharing yourself.

**Mutter:** You’re sharing yourself? Yourself as a body?

**Daughter:** Yes, as a body – you give something of yourself and at the same time you get something from the other person. It does change you, because you learn something about another person that no one else knows. It really is something special. I think this experience had made me more respectful of my body. Before, I respected it less and was always complaining about the way I looked.

**Mother:** Really, physical intimacy is something that every human being needs. You can’t just exist on your own. You’d waste away.

**Daughter:** In *The Art of Loving*, Fromm wrote that humans want to overcome the feeling of separation, so they’re always looking for someone else. Because each of us was carried in our mother’s body once and always had the feeling of being together then, never separate, we all want to overcome this feeling of separation.

**Mother:** But even so, you’re always a separate person. This desire for symbiosis remains, but I can only be an independent human being if I separate.

**Daughter:** In this picture with the dark background it looks as if it’s inside the uterus, and these four women from different generations are also inside the uterus while a new human being is being born. There they are – you can see the genetic connection. The light encloses them, almost like a placenta.

Annegret Soltau’s conversation with her daughter Julia on February 6, 1997