

Sophistication Today

Caryn Hacker-Buechel explores the complex notion of sophistication in today's society.

A Florida chill is in the seasonal evening air, while soap bubble snowflakes ride happily on the wings of holiday jingles. Colored lights add a gemlike quality to December's evolving canvas, along with the certainty of expectation that Jack Frost is hiding just behind the closest palm tree. The recognition of life in the likes of a Thomas Kincaid painting, spirituality aside, heightens the desire for a wonderful holiday season marked by eloquent sophistication.

The flurry of parties, seasonal hugging and hand-shaking, generosity of gift-giving and platters aplenty—of all types of food—create immediate images of our present and our pasts. We shop for new sparkle in holiday couture, clear the dust off crystal goblets, check our busy social calendars and polish the tarnished silver. Even as the stress level increases as women begin to prepare for the holidays, we also look forward to the complexity of intelligent conversation over a superior glass of Châteauneuf du Pape paired with a fine Stilton cheese amidst the delightful and engaging laughter of friends. Our chic style and urbanistic cleverness rules the season. And yet, identifying and enjoying a sense of sophistication was not always so apparent.

The historical concept of sophistication is difficult to adequately and acceptably identify. According to elegantwomen.com, some of the characteristics of “simply sophisticated women” include self-love and rich self-esteem, a gait with energy and purpose, excellent posture, being well-read and educated, being comfortable with luxury, never allowing intimidation and always feeling at ease in any social experience. This sounds more like a character from the TV hit, “Pan Am,” than a



description of a fabulous Neapolitan woman. More to my liking is the definition from Merriam-Webster's Dictionary, which professes that "sophistication" includes being highly complicated or developed, having refined knowledge, being finely experienced and intellectually appealing.

Intelligent women, with an interest in education and literature, gathered clandestinely in the 18th century in order to discuss topics more complex than needlework and knitting. "It was considered 'unbecoming' for them to know Greek or Latin, almost immodest for them to be authors, and certainly indiscreet to own the fact. (Wikipedia)" These privileged females followed their own erudite sense of authenticity and created The Blue Stockings Society (of England). The group began as a women's literary discussion group (compassionate and appropriate guests were often included) and challenged the standard of non-intellectual but traditional activities for women. Revolutionary as they were, they did, however, formally dress for the occasion and food was typically included. On one occasion, botanist, translator and publisher, Benjamin Stillingfleet, was invited to attend. He did not have the finances for proper black silk stockings and arrived in his everyday blue worsted socks. Thus, the group became known as The Blue Stockings Society and exists in a subtle form of its original purpose to this day. (www.bluestockings.com)

The continual evolution of a woman's acceptable journey to her most evolved self (from the early days to present times) has not been an easy or even climb. In many ways, the journey to sophistication has been akin to a black and white painting, slowly becoming imbued with hue. The recent interest in the book and movie "The Help," certainly highlights this issue as the proper gloved hand of the silver service set's owner was not, in the end, the one who was considered the most "refined." We are learning that "classiness" is more than Leave It to Beaver's mother, so calm in her pearls and waisted, aproned dress and more than Bri Vandekamp's desperate housewives' approach to her

chaotic life through beautiful trays of food and a tight, controlled smile. Sophistication is a fabulous combination of intelligence, experience and grace. It is not easy to develop and will not occur without insight, the recognition of our own authenticity, personal enlightenment and a huge dose of kindness (for ourselves and others).

How does this equate to the present in a simple way? With the holidays approaching and the stress upon women increasing, try to focus on the moments that previously offered the "feeling" of sophistication, elegance and familial love from your childhood. Visualize that plate of Aunt Ethyl's frosted holiday sugar cookies on her gleaming silver tray, or your mother's famous pot roast served in her porcelain dish. You know, the one with the delicate blue flowers on the edge. Remember the aromas of tea with lemon, pine, nutmeg and cinnamon. Re-connect with that early feeling of being special and elegant. Now, add your unique intelligent shortcuts to recreate those images and the feelings attached to them.

Buy the cookies to add to that memorialized tray. Remove the frozen, store-bought pie and place it in the pan that looks like cousin Sherre's and add some sprinkled sugar during the last 15 minutes of baking. Put your store-bought rolls in a great, linen-lined basket and serve with easy herbed butter. Play music CDs that make the heart smile. Offer a project that you can do with your children and/or grandchildren that you did as a child. Know that sophisticated memories are created by moments which touch the soul, not cooking for days or cleaning every corner. I think you get the idea. Decreasing holiday stress will increase seasonal sophistication. So...find a good book (for discussion) and don a fabulous pair of blue stockings. Cheers.

Caryn Hacker-Buechel, ACSW, DCSW, began writing books and articles for growing minds during her 30-year career as a psychotherapist and motivational speaker. She is the author of the children's book: *A Bully Grows Up: Erik Meets the Wizard*. She lives in Naples.