

Introduction

Every girl sometimes needs a big sister to talk with. Big sisters can be a wonderful resource. They've been around the block a few times. They're willing to admit their own mistakes, to listen, to laugh and cry together, to give guidance, to talk about the (sometimes hard) lessons they've learned in life. They're a little like a mom and a little like a friend, but somehow they fill a role that is all their own. Most important, they know and love their younger sisters in a way no one else can.

The very special relationship that exists between older and younger sisters is the reason we've created the book you are holding in your hands. For *Sister to Sister: Black Women Speak to Young Black Women*, we invited ten remarkable women to open their hearts to the young "sisters" they imagine might be reading their words. Each woman was asked to speak freely on whatever topic she thought might be of interest and value to an African American girl growing up in America today.

Some of the contributors reflected on the whole of their life's journey. Others focused on a specific incident or period in their lives. Still others addressed a particular topic or idea. The essays are as diverse as the women who contributed them. In *Sister to Sister*, you will hear the voices of high school dropouts and the voices of women

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with doctor's degrees. There are women who became mothers at a very young age and mature women who have not yet chosen to have children. There are women who have lived in poverty and women who have grown up middle-class. There are women who have lived in the criminal underworld and women who have been community leaders. There are women who are known across the nation and women who are known only in their own communities. But all these women, no matter how different their life's journeys, have arrived at a place where they can look back and offer deep, thoughtful reflection upon what they have learned.

Why does *Sister to Sister* focus on the experiences of Black women? Certainly, women of all colors and cultures learn and benefit from the love and guidance of their older "sisters." But in looking at the media messages that bombard each of us every waking moment of our day, it seems clear that young Black girls are especially targeted by potentially destructive, soul-sucking images of what it means to be a Black women. Rather than providing a realistic view of Black women as being complex and multifaceted like everyone else, the media all too often present only a few "flavors" of African American females. We're all familiar with depictions of the gold-digging bitch, the crack whore, the welfare queen, the superhuman matriarch, and the

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booty-shaking rap-video dancer. A vulnerable young Black girl growing up on a steady diet of those images can too easily believe that those images represent the only choices available to her.

We hope that *Sister to Sister* will offer young Black readers an antidote to the poison of those lying—and limiting—images. You are warmly invited to spend time with ten remarkable women who have offered their sisterhood to you. As you read the words of Jean Sutton, Rasheedah Phillips, Yolanda Easley, Stephanie Wroten, Marcia Lyles, Julia Burney-Witherspoon, Kimberly Roberts, Mary Griffin, Hamidah Sharif-Harris, and Lina Buffington, you will be enriched by the broad spectrum of experience and diversity represented by today's Black women. Sit back, relax, and enjoy your time with these, your loving and caring big sisters.



Jean Sutton

About Jean Sutton

Jean Sutton was raised by her widowed mother in West Oak Lane, a mostly African American community in northwest Philadelphia. She attended Franklin & Marshall College, a primarily white college in rural Lancaster, Pennsylvania. It was at Franklin & Marshall that she met Rod Sutton, the man she would later marry. Rod's own story is told in *Brother to Brother: Black Men Speak to Young Black Men*, another book in the Townsend Library. Today Jean is an assistant vice president with Unitrin Direct, an insurance company, and Rod is an assistant principal at Philadelphia's University City High School. Jean and Rod are the parents of three children. In her essay, Jean writes about preparing for adult life, choosing a mate, and building a strong marriage.

Jean Sutton Speaks

"If I died, you'd have nothing. I have nothing to leave you."

Those are harsh words to hear when you're only 11, but I knew my mother was only telling me the truth.

"Don't make the same mistake I did," she said. "Educate yourself. Don't grow up expecting that a man will always provide for you. Anything can happen."

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She knew what she was talking about. She had learned that lesson the hard way. With only an eighth-grade education, she had few job opportunities available to her. She provided childcare out of our home, a row house in a working-class neighborhood of Philadelphia. My father was a high school graduate who had joined the military, and had then gone to work in a steel plant.

Then my father died suddenly. My mother and I were forced onto the emotional roller coaster that follows the death of a loved one. Our sorrow was compounded by the financial impact of my father's loss. My mother struggled to make ends meet. We had to give up our car, and we very nearly lost our house. At a very early age, I realized how vulnerable an uneducated woman is.

I think that was my first lesson in selecting a mate and in preparing myself for adulthood. I learned that I wanted to be a financial equal in a marriage. I didn't want to have to marry in order to survive. I didn't want to be unable to support myself if my man was no longer around. I set about the task of becoming self-sufficient. I completed my formal education and am now an assistant vice president at an insurance company. I am happily married, but I have also prepared myself for life's unexpected events.

From my elementary years on, I was a good student. I enjoyed school, but beyond that, I never forgot that

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education would provide me with the opportunities my mother hadn't had. When it was time for college, Franklin & Marshall College in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, offered me a scholarship. F&M is a very good school with a small minority enrollment. When I attended, there were 1,500 students, of whom about 50 were African American. I had gone to a Catholic high school with white students, so being with white people was not that big a deal. For me, the adjustment was more about class than about race. In high school, we'd all worn uniforms, so it wasn't so obvious who had money and who didn't.

But at F&M I really saw the disparity. Now that I was living around people who had always had money, I felt poor in a way I never had before. My classmates were surprised that I took my work-study job in the cafeteria so seriously. If they had jobs, it was just to earn pocket money. But I needed my job so that I could buy a winter coat. In the summers I worked full-time in order to buy textbooks for the next year. Although I tried hard to find affordable used books, one year I ran out of money before the second semester began. That term I developed a new schedule. I would sleep in the evening while my dorm mates studied. Then I would borrow the books I needed and study through the night. I took special satisfaction in making the dean's list that term!

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Because F&M didn't have a large enrollment of Black students, the Black Student Union made special efforts to help us get to know each other. The BSU assigned each of us incoming students a mentor, and early in my freshman year they hosted a dance. My mentor noticed me sitting on the sidelines and asked one of the older students to invite me to dance. That student was Rod Sutton, the man I would later marry. I told Rod that I didn't feel like dancing. He said, "Okay, but then I'm going to sit and talk with you."

What I first noticed about Rod was the same thing most people notice—that he's *big*: a big, tall man with a big voice. And being from inner-city Newark, New Jersey, he's very street savvy. As we sat and talked, however, I sensed that this big, loud guy was also kind and gentle. I felt a bond with him, as we had both grown up in the city without much money.

For a full year after that first meeting, Rod and I were just friends. Yes, for real, *friends*. And since I was just his friend, he wasn't trying to impress me. He was just being himself. During that year, we had long talks about how we wanted our lives to turn out. He talked about his plan to teach and to attend graduate school. He told me that he wanted to complete his education before he got married. He talked about the girls he'd known in his old neighborhood who had become

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teenage mothers, and how sad he was that those smart, talented girls would be unlikely to ever realize their full potential. He said he didn't want to bring a child into this world before he was ready to be a devoted, responsible parent.

Wow, I thought. Even as he was criticizing teenage pregnancy, he did it in a way that didn't trash the girls involved. He acknowledged that they were smart and talented. He respected them. That impressed me.

Other things impressed me as well. During our friendship, I had the chance to hang out with Rod and his friends. Many of those friends were good-looking guys, attractive and smart. But some were disrespectful of their own girlfriends or were involved in relationships built on guilt or control. Once I heard one of these guys call his girlfriend the "b" word right to her face. She shrugged it off as if it were nothing. Can you believe that the next day she was walking across the quad with him, arm in arm? When Rod heard such things, he always spoke up to the guy. He would criticize the disrespectful attitude toward "the young lady," as he always carefully referred to the girl.

As Rod and I exchanged our life stories, I came to respect him even more. I learned that this gentle, kind man had been an angry, troubled kid who had been repeatedly kicked out of school for fighting. He'd finally

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been sent to a kind of last-chance school, one run by monks. There, gradually, he had turned around. As I heard him talk about how his attitude had changed and as I watched him in his daily life, I could see he was for real. He was consistent in his actions as well as his words. He wasn't saying things because he thought they were what I wanted to hear. He didn't just talk the talk—he walked the walk.

We began to date, and my good opinion of Rod kept growing. After we graduated from F&M, he got a job teaching elementary school. He lived in Philly but commuted to Camden, New Jersey, every day. That first winter, the temperature fell to zero after a storm that dropped seven inches of snow. The schools in Philly and Camden were closed, but Rod left for work so early in the morning that he missed the announcement and drove all the way to Camden anyway. Here was a single guy, no wife or children to support, and yet he had such a strong work ethic he always showed up at work, often earlier than anyone else.

Watching him, I thought, He's hard-working, considerate, respectful, and a communicator. What more could a girl ask for?

Then I saw him interact with an elderly woman. When we were in a department store, Rod noticed her carrying a heavy shopping bag and struggling to open

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the door. “Let me help you with that, ma’am,” he said. He took her bag and opened the door for her. “Thank you!” she said with a smile. He stood and watched her go until he was sure she was okay.

That sealed the deal for me. On top of everything else, he cared about our elderly! To this day, he dotes on the senior women in our church. He visits the sick and shut-ins. He goes beyond simply opening the door or helping with a bag. He engages them in a way that makes each one feel like the most important person in the world. I tease him about how he flatters the seniors, but I admire the care and respect that he shows. Given all the wonderful things I’d observed in Rod over the years, there was no question in my mind about what to say when he asked me to marry him.

My appreciation for his good qualities has only continued to grow since our wedding many years ago. Before my mother passed away, she was seriously ill for many months, and I was her sole caregiver. When I came down with the flu, Rod stepped in without hesitation. He visited her every single day, making sure she had a good meal and fresh water by her bedside. Some days he sat with her for hours, just to keep her company.

In parenthood, as well as elsewhere in our lives, Rod and I are true partners. We agreed that we wanted

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to wait to start our family until we felt really ready. I know that during the years before we had a child, Rod took some static from men he knew. They'd pressure him, saying things like "Don't you know how to make a baby?" They'd say it in a joking way, but you know a lot of guys would have been bothered by that. They were implying he wasn't a "real man" until he had fathered a child. But Rod never let such things get to him. He made it clear that *we* were going to make that decision; that we were a team, and that no outside pressure was going to influence us. I am so grateful that Rod felt the same way I did—that bringing a new human being into the world is a very serious decision, and not something to be done lightly.

We did make that decision in our own time, and our family now includes Paige, who is 13; Justin, 11; and Abu, an 8-year-old we're in the process of adopting. Abu has gone through a lot in his short life, and we are all excited about his move from the foster-care system to his forever home. In Rod's career as a teacher and now as an assistant principal, he has seen so many angry, scared, neglected children. He's worked very hard to help them, but as a teacher you can do only so much. We feel we've been very blessed in our own lives, and we've always wanted to share our good fortune with another child.

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So by now you know that I'm a big fan of my husband and an advocate of marriage. But rest assured that marriage is not easy. It takes a lot of negotiating and hard work. That's why it is so important to have patience in selecting and getting to know your mate. You cannot get to know someone in a day, a week, or even a month. It takes time. A good rule of thumb is to know your mate through at least four seasons before you get married. Don't rush!

And don't just listen to what a guy *says*. Words are easy. Observe his *actions*. Observe how he treats his family and close friends. That will be a good indication of how he'll treat you.

I see so many of the girls I grew up with settle for, in my opinion, far less than they deserve. We African American women face some special challenges. To begin with, we simply outnumber our marriageable men. So many of our men are in prison. And there is a widespread perception that high-achieving Black men don't marry Black women, that they go outside the race. I don't know how true that is, but many women believe it.

So I think a lot of women end up saying, "Well, this guy is halfway decent and not in prison," and they settle. And the result is so much divorce and so many children growing up without fathers. I understand why it happens. When your friends are getting married and

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having babies, it's easy to get swept up in the excitement of that. You don't want to be left behind. But marriage and parenthood are too important to go into for less than the right reasons.

I am convinced that good men, loving men, dependable men who hold themselves to high standards, are out there. Hold out! Give it time. Look in the right places—places like school, church, and work. I'll tell you where *not* to look—in bars and clubs. Sure, a good guy could be at a club. But in general, guys hanging out in clubs are looking for someone for a while, not for a lifetime.

Ladies, love yourself enough to, first, be the best person that you can be. Then love yourself enough to demand of your partner all that is rightfully yours. Take the time to be certain that the love you have is a love that will always be there. I'm not talking about the sexy love of your youth. I'm talking about a love that will be there at the end of your life, holding your hand when you take your last breath—a love that endures not only through joy and fun, but also through sickness and despair and whatever life may bring. Do not settle for less. Love yourself enough to hold out for all that you deserve.