

Man to Man

by Paul Kivel

THE LETTER BELOW IS SOMETHING I wrote to address individual men in communities that I live, work and play in because we still, all too often, assume that “our” men have it together and are safe and non-abusive in their personal interactions.

A LETTER TO MEN (ALL MALE-SOCIALIZED AND MALE-IDENTIFIED PEOPLE) WHO ARE ENTERING OUR COMMUNITY.

Dear friend,

Welcome to our community. Whether you are entering our neighborhood, our workplace, our school community, our congregation, or other collective spaces, I hope you will be welcomed, safe, respected, and fully able to participate in our activities and life together.

There are many ways that people’s safety and well-being is undermined in our society. One of the primary interpersonal ways that people are attacked is rarely talked about directly therefore I need to talk with you about safety and healing from male violence. No matter how special or different or evolved, or progressive we think our community is, male violence is happening among and around us.

Many of my friends, family, neighbors, colleagues, joint travelers, and acquaintances have experienced violence from men. Male violence has had a devastating impact of their lives and on the lives of all of us. The cumulative result is that we cannot come together to rebuild our communities, establish a just society, or create intimate partner and family relationships without dealing with the shadow cast by this violence.

I don’t know you. I don’t know your past history of relationships, I don’t know your intentions, and I don’t know, or know that you know, what you will do in various interpersonal situations you may find yourself in. So we need to talk, man to man, as you enter our community.

You need to know that many of the women, men, people who are transsexual and transgendered, and youth in your life have experienced, survived, and are still healing from child sexual and physical abuse, teen dating violence, and many kinds of domestic violence and sexual assault, as well as from various forms of racial and homophobic violence (you may be one of them). The pain of this abuse was compounded by the fact that men like you and I did not respond, did not believe, did not support the survivors, and often even colluded with the perpetrators. You need to know that people seldom lie about the abuse they have experienced and that they seldom talk about it either, for fear of further pain, among other reasons. Therefore you may not even know about the kinds of interpersonal violence that those around you have experienced.

For me, there is only one healthy, safe, and healing way to be in relationship with the people around me and that is to create relationships built on respect, consent, and mutuality, and even that may not always be enough. In this context I am referring to every level of interaction from casual encounters at the bus stop or in a store, to the most intimate moments of a sexual relationship.

For me, respect means coming from the place of deepest recognition of and valuing of the body, spirit, culture and individuality of the person I am relating to.

Consent means only engaging in conversation, interaction, acts of physical intimacy, or other forms of contact with the expressed affirmation of the other person. No one can give consent if they are underage, asleep, on drugs, don't speak the language, physically, emotionally, or financially dependent, intimidated, threatened, harassed, cajoled, or manipulated into saying "yes" when they do not really want to. If you have any indication that your behavior is causing someone else pain or that they are engaging in behavior that they do not really want to, then your responsibility is to stop and check it out with them.

Mutuality means to me that both people in the relationship get to establish the boundaries of the relationship and those boundaries will be honored until mutually changed.

I invite you to consider what these three words mean to you.

Respect, consent, and mutuality are principles, not rules. If you are looking for rules then this is not, perhaps, the community for you. I encourage you to operate from your deepest place of caring about others, not from a fear of breaking “the rules” or of being incorrect. We live in interdependent communities, accountable to each other. Given the violence in our lives and communities, building relationships is a never-ending process of trying to be loving to ourselves and to act in loving ways towards others. With that in mind, if you have any doubt, at any time, that what you are doing may not be completely respectful, consensual, and mutual—check it out with the person you are with, or with others.

I also encourage you to find other male identified people to talk with about these issues and other aspects of male socialization and male supremacy. Most of us learned early on to hide our feelings and cover our pain, to take abuse and pass it on, to expect male privilege and entitlement, including emotional, physical, sexual, and other care-taking services from women. You may be hardworking, well-intended, creative, committed, charismatic, well-read, and/or working for justice. Yet, you may still act abusively towards those around you unless you are doing the personal antisexist work necessary to unlearn abusive patterns.

I also think that each of us has a responsibility to support and lovingly but firmly challenge the men around us when we see or hear that they are being abusive, acting in disrespectful ways, taking advantage of male privilege, or acting out of male entitlement. There are many institutional systems that perpetuate male violence. But sexism also continues because men collude with other men in perpetuating it. We not only collude; we often actively bond with other men around the objectification, sexualization, marginalization, and exclusion of others. It is certainly not always easy, but it is absolutely essential that we step up as men to challenge other men. Our intervention can not only stop the abuse, it can also break the collusion that allows male violence to continue.

Women, children, and men will only be safe, healthy, and collectively liberated when all systems of oppression are eliminated. In the meantime, we each have a role to play as allies in the struggle to end male violence in all the many forms it takes. I invite you to join, or redouble your efforts in that struggle.

Again, welcome to our community!

In love and solidarity,

paul kivel