Nice Guys Needn't Finish Last

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A large number of men believe that treating women as equals is the best way to attain not only a satisfying primary relationship but also personal fulfillment. They listen to women, learn from their demands and the way they live their lives, and work with them to end sexism at home as well as in society. Of course, the process is not always discussed in these terms. Many men would not link their respect for women at work or their equal participation in childrearing to the battle against sexism. But whether or not they think about it in terms of ending sexism, a generation of men learned in the 'sixties and 'seventies to do what had once been considered women's work: cooking, housecleaning, and childrearing, and they learned to work alongside women, and treat them with respect.

If the venture was at all successful, they also learned that there are payoffs to the redivision of labor, including the joys of close contact with children from infancy, the experience of sharing feelings, the opportunity to admit weaknesses and ask for help in relationships that permit mutual dependency, and relief from the pressure to always be the strong shoulder to lean on, the one capable of fixing a woman's every problem. At the same time these men learned what it means to really respect a woman's right to realize her full power in the world at large, and that there are benefits for men in a more equal arrangement.

Men who came of age after the 'sixties movements waned never had the opportunity to be involved in the struggles of those days, but their lives have been deeply affected by women's social gains. Women have been admitted to previously all-male colleges and universities and men are attending academies that were established for women only. Women are entering jobs and professions previously reserved for men and working their way up the hierarchy. Dianne Ehrensaft (1987) chronicles the attempts of a large number of dual-career couples to share equally the burdens and joys of childrearing. Meanwhile men are taking on more of the jobs that were once considered women's work, from toilet-cleaning and childrearing to secretarial work and nursing.

Judith Stacey (1990) examines the ramifications of feminism among working class families in California's Silicon Valley, pointing out that though these men and women do not acknowledge the effects of feminism and are not social activists, their lives have been deeply affected by the women's movement. Stacey comments about the young adult women she interviewed:

> Ignorant or disdainful of the political efforts feminists expended to secure such gains, they are preoccupied instead coping with the expanded opportunities and burdens women now encounter, (p. 264)

Stacey also comments about the men:

> Almost all of the men I observed or heard about routinely performed tasks that my own blue-collar father and his friends never deigned to

> contemplate . . . . Although the division of household labor remains profoundly inequitable, I am convinced that a major gender norm has shifted here. (p. 268)

This phenomenon is not limited to Silicon Valley. Gender relations are in flux. More women are assuming positions of power in the public sphere and more men support women's efforts while assuming more of the burdens of domestic life.

For a while it did seem to many that the idealism of the 'sixties could live on in the personal attempts to attain equality between the sexes. But then mishaps began to occur. Relationships floundered. Illness, the deaths of loved ones, or the failure to achieve the aims of one's life threw many men into emotional turmoil. Men who were unable to find satisfying work or lost opportunities for promotion saw women getting more jobs and more promotions, including the women they were personally supporting.

Men tired of hearing the many ways they were guilty of sexism, they could not stand to hear once again what is wrong with men, and they began to suspect that the women in their lives were utilizing the charge of sexism to enhance their power in heterosexual relationships.

Some began to feel that, while women had support groups and an audience as they talked incessantly about the need to empower women, there were few if any opportunities for men to talk about their problems and

insecurities. In addition there was the accusation that men who attend too closely to women's needs and desires are "Momma's boys," "soft males," and "wimps." Many men began to realize that being supportive of women's struggles was not enough.

The men I am describing are ambivalent about power. On the one hand, they do not want to act the brute, compete ruthlessly at work and dominate at home in order to demonstrate their adequacy as men; on the other hand, when they pull back from the cutthroat competition in the public arena and support women's power at the expense of their own at work and at home, they end up feeling powerless, manipulated, and inadequate. These men would like to discover ways to be powerful without being sexist, and ways to stop obsessing about the theme of power and men's place in an oppressive hierarchy.

Jim

Jim entered my office nervously and walked around, looking at the art on the walls and the books on the shelves. He smiled, as if pleased, and sat down, sinking slowly into a semifetal position on the chair as he began to speak:

"My wife is having an affair. I don't know what to do. I'm so jittery I can't sleep nights. Do I tell her I know and start a big fight—maybe break us up—or

do I just shut up about it, treat her well, and hope she'll stop seeing the guy?"

After a few minutes he began to cry, apologizing and saying he has not cried like this in years.

"I've done everything right. We always negotiated every decision we made together, and I always made sure we were divvying things up equally. Now she's cheating on me, treating me like dirt. And this guy she's seeing—a real sleaze—he doesn't even know what feminism is all about! It just isn't fair!"

By now he was speaking angrily, sitting up in his chair and urgently leaning toward me.

Jim had always supported his wife's efforts to succeed and feel powerful. They met in the 'seventies. She was in a women's consciousness-raising group. He was very interested in what she was learning about herself. They married and he supported her while she returned to university to earn a graduate degree in a professional school. After she graduated and established herself in her profession, they had two children. Following each birth he cut back at work and did much of the housework while she returned to part-time work within a few months.

Jim always thought they had an ideal relationship. What went wrong?

We talked quite a bit about this. His wife had grown up with a strict and critical father who would not permit her much freedom as a girl. She chose for a mate someone who listened to her, made her feel self-assured, and helped her to be very much her own person. Jim had learned from an early age to put his needs aside and take care of his depressed mother—this was the only way he could feel close to her—and was therefore ready and able to "take care of" his wife in many very admirable ways. They were both psychologically prepared for the message of the women's movement and sincerely attempted to put it into practice in their everyday lives. They spent fifteen years together.

Being treated well, she enjoyed her newfound freedom for awhile. She developed confidence. Then she began to feel there was something wrong. Perhaps she could not put it into words, and needed to emote or act out in seemingly irrational ways—by screaming at him without reason or by having an affair. He, meanwhile, was not very good at setting limits with the person he most wanted to please. So she felt unmet, out of control, or just plain irritable. He felt for some time that she was not very interested in satisfying his needs, but he said nothing about this.

Jim's marriage needed a serious overhaul, and each of the partners needed to look at his or her own personal issues. We discussed the situation, examined Jim's inability to confront his wife, and related his limitations to

some still unprocessed conflicts he had about his early relationship with his mother. He defended his mother—as if talking about her faults constituted disloyalty—but then became aware of a certain amount of resentment he had always harbored toward her. He began to see he had been suppressing similar resentment toward his wife, resentment that had been mounting long before she began the affair. Soon after commencing therapy, Jim decided to stop crying silently and fading into the furniture. He confronted his wife, told her he knew about the affair, and for once expressed more outrage than she during a heated battle that resulted in their sleeping in separate rooms for several nights.

He considered leaving her at this point and, by his account, she considered leaving him. In the end, neither wanted to end the relationship. She promised to stop seeing her lover, and they decided to see a therapist together and renew their efforts to make the marriage work. Meanwhile, he began his own psychotherapy in earnest, the primary goal being to feel more self-confident, more "manly"—without giving up his commitment to equality between the sexes.

A Certain Lack of Vitality

Psychoanalysis has taught us to look for personal constrictions in three general areas: love, work, and play. In all three areas the men I am describing

regularly report feeling a lack of power and vitality. Many are unable to stand up to a woman just when they both need him to. If he continually attends to his partner's needs and remains quiet about the fact she is not as interested in attending to his, he either builds up resentment that has no outlet until he develops an ulcer or has an affair, or he becomes timid and depressed, fearing that any other response would threaten the stability of the relationship—perhaps he fears the repercussions of the rage that is building inside. Or the man's lack of vitality might be reflected in his inability to come forth with his feelings and desires.

Alternatively, the single man's difficulties finding a partner might be related to the idea that, once he commits himself to a relationship, the partner will gain control of him and he will lose his personal freedom as well as his sense of identity. There is a kernel of truth, as usual: If he does not learn to be clear about his feelings and desires, she will always seem to him to be in control of their relationship and he will wind up feeling he is passively reacting to her moods.

Quite a few single men seek therapy mainly because they believe there is something wrong with them, causing their relationships to go awry. They, like men who are in long-term relationships and encourage their partners to be powerful, must get past this dilemma if their relationships are to be sound and lasting. For instance, a single man recently consulted me following the

break-up of a year long romantic relationship with a woman that had been "a disaster" for him. He quickly identified the problem: from the start he had let the woman make all the decisions; she began to despise him for his weakness and treat him cruelly, for instance telling friends about his problem with premature ejaculation; and when he complained about her cruelty there were loud and vicious arguments.

"I was left with the choice of screaming at her or getting out, so I got out."

He told me he has resolved to prevent a repetition of that traumatic episode by avoiding women altogether. We began to explore the reasons he did not believe he might, in future relationships, insist from the beginning on establishing trust and making half the decisions, and in the process find a partner who would be willing to share power more equally.

Ted's wife was first attracted to him because of his "softness." He had grown up in a home that was organized around his father's tyrannical style. Ted's father would yell at Ted's mother whenever she missed a step—burned dinner or failed to respond to a child's frantic call from school, making him interrupt an important meeting in order to ferry a sick child home. He wonders if his father's constant complaints about his mother might have been his father's reaction to her disinterest in sex. He will never know. But his

father was a tyrant, and he swore from an early age never to be anything like him. He always respected his wife's right to carry on a life of her own, with professional activities and numerous intimacies.

"The only problem," he adds with sadness in his eyes, "is that now she's saying I don't stand up for myself enough."

Because of continuing squabbles Ted and his wife go to see a marriage therapist. After a few sessions she tells them that she thinks the problem is insufficient emotional contact between the two of them, and that his wife seems to miss it more than Ted does—so, his wife quite often starts fights with Ted in order to create emotional contact. Fighting is better than no contact at all. This has been true of their relationship from the beginning, what has changed is that she can no longer tolerate his lack of strength in the ensuing fights. She needs him to stand up to her so that she can figure out where her boundaries end and his begin. Without that, she feels very out-of-control, sometimes crazy.

Ted cannot figure out whether he should get tougher—that is, be more like his father—or keep giving in to his wife in their arguments, for instance doing what she says now and fighting harder. Isn't giving in to his wife in this argument—by getting tougher with her, thereby giving her precisely what she wants—just another sign of weakness? I raise the possibility he might

insist she begin to appreciate the ways in which he already demonstrates his toughness—for instance, how avidly he supports her professional life and her right to maintain close intimacies with women friends, even though he often feels left out when she is out doing exciting things with others. My job is to help Ted begin to believe that a man might assert himself within a heterosexual relationship without becoming a brute, and, alternatively, that he can occasionally bow to his wife's wishes without seeing himself as a weakling.

Often a couple's problems surface in the emotional turmoil of one 'or more of their children. For instance, the father—whether living with the mother or divorced—might make a habit of bowing to the mother's will, leaving the child to experience his father as passive or absent and his mother as controlling. There are many reasons why a father might bow in this way; his passivity might be characterological, it might be grounded in early interactions with a controlling mother, he might be afraid of his wife's wrath or abandonment if he asserts himself, or, in the case of a divorce where the father left the mother, his passivity might be an expression of the guilt he feels for breaking up the family. The man's inability to express his power with women is passed on as a problem to another generation. Sons find their fathers' weakness and passivity disappointing, and report feeling they lack a role model. One of the positive ramifications of the emergence of a men's movement (and renewed interest in male psychology) is that fathers are

figuring out new ways to be strong. The model of parents resolving their differences as equals without resorting to distancing or abusiveness makes it possible for the children to envision a relationship based on mutual respect, and there is no reason a healthy relationship of this kind cannot develop between divorced parents as well.

The lack of vitality in the work arena is often less visible, the man being competent enough, and complaining little about his dissatisfactions. Only when problems get entirely out of hand—for instance with a business failure, bankruptcy, layoff, or stress-induced ulcer—only then do these men consult a therapist about their conflicts about work. They tend to be quite bright and talented, and, on the surface at least, seem to have achieved quite a bit in their lives. But on closer examination it becomes apparent they have not achieved all that they might, or all they might wish. It turns out they have been holding themselves back. They have always used their talents to succeed just enough to support a family or attain a modicum of recognition from their peers, but they have not applied themselves fully to any ambitious project. Again, the most notable symptom of their malaise is a certain lack of vigor, or competitive edge.

Harold, an attorney, had spent his first few years out of law school as an associate in a "high-power, prestigious firm." He did not mind working sixty hours per week as much as he minded what he terms the "ass-licking/ass-

kicking mentality" that was required of those who wished to become partners in the firm. But at the same time he felt that attorneys who worked on their own and did less important cases were not serious about the law. Eventually he left the firm and did some criminal defense work. But there he felt he could never do a satisfactory job preparing a defense, the work load being so overwhelming and the public defender's budget so limited. He reports:

"I burned out on that and went into solo practice."

There he ended up doing "the kind of unimportant cases I used to criticize others for taking."

By the time he began psychotherapy he was very depressed, bored at work, unable to figure out any changes he might make, and kicking himself about the trajectory of his career.

For many men it is the third area, play, that is the most problematic. It is also the lowest priority. Some men, especially those with a busy career and young children at home, state categorically that they have no time to play. Others, single or with careers firmly established, who have no children or whose children are older and more independent, complain they have forgotten how to play. Even when they are athletic, their demanding workouts and athletic contests seem more like work than play, and they lack friends. At least they express some nostalgia about their teens and college

years when, as one client recently told me:

"It was easier back then, there were guys I hung out with and we just did things together—now I wouldn't know what to do, and the men I know are all too busy with work and families to just hang out."

These men link their inability to play with their lack of friends:

"There is no one to play with."

Alex tells me his father was essentially absent—he suspects he had many affairs—and his mother was very dependent on him, the oldest child. She would drink Scotch, go to bed, turn off the lights, and cry for hours. He always needed to reassure his younger siblings. Then, when they quieted down, he would go see if there was anything he could do to make his mother feel better. Or, if his father returned, he would take his brother and two sisters out of the house and give his parents some privacy and time to work things out. Meanwhile, he had to help his siblings with their homework, do his chores, and do his own homework—all of which he did so well that he won a full scholarship to a prestigious college.

Alex is successful in his profession and has a family of his own now. But he is still unable to let go, to really enjoy himself. He tells me he never relaxes at social events, he is always worried lest someone not have a good time. And

he is unable to take time for himself, so worried is he that there's someone he should be checking on. Of course, the pattern has been there from childhood. He took care of the whole family as a child. That is a very big job for a small boy, a job that would hasten maturity if he were to accomplish it, and would make him ever vigilant lest he fall down on the job. When the boy is unable to play, the man has no childhood play experience to fall back on. Worse, the man carries on the child's sense of the current task as overwhelming, in spite of an adult life full of evidence that this man is more than a match for almost any task, and that the most important tasks—for instance the attainment of success at work and a happy family life—have already been accomplished. The man's inner sense of an ominously large burden resists revision. And one cannot figure out how to play by utilizing serious, rational exercises. In fact, Alex is unable to play precisely because he is too serious about the project of figuring out how to play. As D.W. Winnicott (1971) advises, Alex and I need to "play" in the consulting room so that he can learn to duplicate the experience in his life outside of therapy.

Men Who Abhor Domination

Why do some men support gender equality while others do not? Many experts on male psychology blame an overly involved mother for the adult male's inability to stand up to a woman, his underachievement at work, and his general lack of vitality (Olsen, 1981). Others blame passive or absent

fathers (Biller, 1970; Carvalho, 1982). In his popular book, *Passive Men, Wild Women,* Pierre Mornell (1979) blames both. According to Mornell, the man's mother was immensely disappointed in his absent, abusive, or weak father:

> The disappointed mother—and this was the crucial point—then transferred her expectations from the husband to the son. Not only did she transfer her expectations, but also her sexual energy—once directed toward the husband and marriage—was now poured into her son . . . . Her boy became the primary focus of her adoration and expectations, (p. 47)

Of course there are cases where the man was overly involved with his mother, perhaps the one in the family who was most attuned to her needs and most interested in taking care of her. Sometimes he was the one who was "special" in her eyes, the one she could adore while she continually devalued her husband. Tom, played by Nick Nolte in *The Prince of Tides,* reports to his sister's psychiatrist that his mother told him he was so special that she loved him the most, and that he only found out years later that she had told both his brother and sister the same thing. There are many histories of physically or emotionally absent fathers, or abusive ones, or overly critical ones. But quite a few of the men I am describing report that they were not particularly close with their mothers and that they had a fairly close relationship with a father who was capable of nurturing others and treating women as equals. Or they report that they were not close with either parent. In other words, there is no single pattern in the background of all these men. It is amazing how some men who were abused or neglected by both parents evolved the capacity to

be intimate and attain sexual equality. It is as if, while they were being abused, they were imagining how things might be different and vowing never to make anyone else suffer the way they suffered. I have heard from several men in therapy that this was indeed the case, and that they remember how much better they felt as children when they concentrated very hard on that vow while enduring repeated abuse.

My own impression in working with these men is that they do not all spring from one Oedipal constellation or share a particular type of personality or psychopathology. After all, psychoanalysts have been notably unsuccessful in their efforts to uncover a generalizable theory on the etiology of homosexuality (Friedman, 1986). Aside from the fact that their approach has been riddled with unexplored homophobic biases, there just does not seem to be one story that fits all gay men. Rather, there are many idiosyncratic personal stories. Similarly, there is no single early precursor of support for gender equality in men.

These men do share one important attribute: an early acquired abhorrence for relationships based on domination, particularly with regard to gender relations. There seems to be a lifelong wish for a relationship of mutuality (Benjamin, 1988).

If there is no single childhood scenario that explains why it is very

important to certain men to treat women with respect, perhaps we can begin to understand the psychology of these men by assuming there is a range of tolerance for domination in human relationships. The range is obvious in a family where the father is abusive. One child will stand up to the father, perhaps to protect the mother, another will cower, while a third might identify with the abusive father. Perhaps the difference is related to birth order, perhaps to temperament, perhaps to the mother's choice of a champion from among the children. There are many relevant variables, each worthy of exploration in individual cases. But it is difficult to identify a single explanation of the reactions of all children in this or any other kind of family scenario. Similarly, the early family dramas of these men can involve a nurturing father and a loving parental dyad, and one son can grow up to be quite traditional while another becomes a champion of gender equality. There is no simple formula.

If a child grows up believing something that is contrary to the explicit belief system of his family or culture, if he is not sufficiently articulate to put his beliefs into words nor sure enough of himself to espouse his belief system in any forceful way, and if, when he lives out his beliefs, he receives admonitions or worried glances from those around him, then he develops doubts about himself. Many of the men I am describing have had this kind of experience. Perhaps as a child in a family that fostered competitiveness and ambition in boys, he was less interested in competing and rising to the top

than he was in being close to others and attending to their feelings. Stories vary here. Sometimes the boy's mother supported his interest in interpersonal relationships while his father railed on about his lack of manliness and ambition. Sometimes the parents were both ambivalent about ambition, giving the child mixed messages about the importance of striving for excellence. A client recently told me that his leftist parents were both ambivalent about success, feeling that most successful people had "sold out" somewhere along the way. The parents passed their ambivalence on to their child, who at age 24 complains he has been unable to get started in any particular career track.

If the boy's beliefs did not clash with his family's, he might have come to grief when faced with the schoolyard drama where he was forced to fight or be called chicken. Perhaps he had no interest in fighting but was unable to find a third alternative. Or perhaps as a teenager he was repulsed by the prospect of bragging to other boys about his sexual conquests and divulging names and details of acts committed—Jim remembers being deeply troubled when his male friends in high school began devaluing women in this way. Sensitive men regularly report doubts about themselves that they trace to early experiences where they felt very much the oddball for refusing to posture "like a man."

The initiation of boys into teen peer culture often includes humiliation,

where the humiliated newcomer is permitted and expected to regain his sense of composure and belonging by turning around and joining the other boys in humiliating the next newcomer who happens along. Thus Steve, now in his early forties, tells me that he was picked to play on a regional select baseball team at age 14. Most of the boys on the team were older, and he was the only one who joined the team in the middle of the season. After the first practice, when he went into the locker room to shower, his teammates jumped him, stripped him naked, and while three held him down the others pinched his torso until he was black and blue, meanwhile making nasty cracks about his "baby fat" and the small size of his genitals. Then they let him go and nothing more was ever said about the incident. When, at the beginning of the following season, it became clear his teammates were planning to initiate two new team members in similar fashion, and would mock him if he did not participate, Steve quit the team. He confesses I am the only person he has ever told about the incident.

Peggy Reeves Sanday (1990) describes in graphic detail the kind of humiliation that occurs when certain college fraternities initiate their "pledges"—including stripping the pledges and mocking their genitals, putting them in diapers, and calling them girls. Then, these young men become members and join their "brothers" in doing the same things to the next group of pledges. Because her source of data is interviews she conducted with fraternity members, Sanday does not mention the young men who never

pledged fraternities and would never take part in such cruel rituals, nor does she mention the many men who did take part but later regretted the cruel acts they committed as youngsters. Men who refused to participate in the teen rituals often report that they felt very isolated at that stage of development.

Max, a building tradesman who grew up in a working class family, complains he lacks confidence in social situations, particularly with women, and this is why, at age 29, he has never had a satisfactory sexual relationship, not to mention a long-term intimacy. As a teenager he felt isolated. He wanted to be more social, but believed others did not like him. I ask why and he explains he was not interested in the things other kids were interested in.

"All the guys wanted to talk about was sports and girls—and I didn't like the way they talked about girls—I had two sisters and I didn't want any guys talking about them in a disgusting way."

Listening to Max, I found myself reminiscing silently about my own teen years. In high school girls I liked told me they really valued our friendship, I was "so sensitive" and easy to talk to, and I would be "just the kind of guy" they would like to marry someday, but for the time being they were more interested in dating a different kind of guy, in other words a more exciting one such as the high school quarterback, the biker, or the college fratman.

I had to force myself to snap out of my reminiscing and figure out what to say to Max. I decided to say approximately what I would have liked an older man to say to me when I was struggling with some of the same issues:

"Sensitive men often have trouble as teenagers. High school culture values tough-guy-ness. Guys regularly say disrespectful things about girls, I think it might be an attempt for them to bolster their sense of manliness. So a sensitive guy who doesn't want to talk that way has a hard time. But later, as an adult, the same sensitivity can turn out to be a very valuable asset. It can make men better at whatever they do, and women value it in a way they were not able to admit in high school. Their part of the high school game is to admire the tough guy who puts women down. Maybe they have unresolved conflicts about a brutish father. When they get a little older they might figure out it's much better to hook up with a man who can be sensitive to their needs and treat them with respect. The challenge for a sensitive man like you is to weather the high school rejections and not give up the sensitivity. Then, a bunch of years later, that sensitivity is one of the things others will find most lovable about you."

Max cried a little at the end of that session. In the weeks that followed he broke off a relationship with a woman who consumed large quantities of alcohol and refused to listen to him when he demanded she stop. He decided not to date for awhile, at least until he figured out why he always chose

women who were self-destructive and refused to listen to him. Of course we linked this question to his relationship with his mother. But a part of the psychodynamics here had to do with revenge for insults suffered in high school. He chose women with tough exteriors, the kind who might have dated the football captain in high school, then he uncovered their fatal flaws—for instance alcoholism— and was able to feel superior while taking care of them. Several months passed before he met a woman who was very different, the woman he eventually married. She was very strong, yet interested in what he had to say.

Another male client in his early forties seeks therapy because he feels he is not "getting very far" in his career and lacks ambition. He tells me his father was very ambitious and describes the older man's talents and status in the business world. I point out how proud he seems of his father and ask why it is so hard to emulate him. He answers that his father was an alcoholic and very abusive toward his mother. He always took his mother's side. He remembers his father raging and pushing his mother out the bedroom door. With tears he begins to explore a fantasy he had as a child but had forgotten: that all powerful men are abusive at home.

The Male Theme

In my clinical work with men, spanning twenty years, I have been

impressed by the omnipresence of a single theme: Men view themselves, consciously or unconsciously, as at the top or the bottom of some hierarchy—and, if at the top, needing always to remain vigilant lest they fall or be thrown to the bottom. The man on top is successful, powerful, virile, admirable, heroic, lovable, and so on. At the bottom he is weak, humiliated, impotent, shunned, cowardly, and despised—a failure. There is a rigid either/or quality to the theme, the man feeling at times there is no third alternative.

This theme occurs in men's fantasies; it also reflects an aspect of our social reality. Christopher Lasch (1979), among others, points out that our "culture of narcissism" fosters this theme in men. Robert Bellah and his collaborators (1985) link the problem to the American male's obsession with individualism and self-sufficiency. This is not to say all men view their plight in just these terms, nor that all men are obsessed with power and domination. Rather, the theme is present to some extent in the male psyche, and each man must work out his own way of relating to the theme as it surfaces periodically in his life. The sensitive, nontraditional man is no exception.

Women are not immune to the male theme, of course. Naomi Wolf (1991) explains that acceptance of "the beauty myth," including the notion that there is a universal standard for judging a woman's beauty, leads women to collude with men in maintaining the male theme. By worrying about their relative beauty, women "keep male dominance intact." According to Wolf:

> In assigning value to women in a vertical hierarchy according to a culturally imposed physical standard, it is an expression of power relations in which women must unnaturally compete for resources that men have appropriated for themselves, (p. 12)

It is no accident that women who are challenging men's obsession with hierarchies are also challenging women's obsession with mediadictated standards of female beauty.

Michael Maccoby (1976), having interviewed a large number of successful male corporate managers, has this to say about them:

> He wants to be known as a winner, and his deepest fear is to be labelled a loser .... He tries to use the company for his own ends, fearing that otherwise he will be totally emasculated by the corporation, (p. 100)

Aren't most men terrified of being dominated? Perhaps it takes the form of a business failure, loss of a competitive battle at work or in sports, loss of a woman to another man, or merely the possibility someone might stab one in the back. The tendency for men to cannibalize each other is socially constructed and deeply internalized in the male psyche.

The theme is omnipresent in American literature. Consider Theodore Dreiser's (1900) classic novel, *Sister Carrie.* Carrie's second lover, Hurstwood, is the successful manager of a fashionable club when they meet. He proceeds to steal from the club, deceive his wife about his infidelity, and lie to Carrie. By the end of the novel, he and Carrie have moved from Chicago to New York,

broken up, she has become a star on Broadway, and he has sunk to ever new lows of poverty and unemployment. Eventually they meet on the street outside her theater, where he is begging for a handout. Here is the underside of the American dream, the ideal being the "self-made man." If everyone has the opportunity to become rich and famous, then those who fail in their quest have only themselves to blame. The man on the bottom thinks of himself as deeply flawed, and others become workaholics for fear they will fall to the bottom.

Of course the parts for the adult drama are learned at home and at school. At home the boy learns about the pecking order, about the father's authority, the mother's submission and the child's smallness and inability to change the family hierarchy. Freud conceptualized the theme of hierarchy in terms of the penis. The boy has one, the girl does not. The boy discovers this fact during his second year and draws two conclusions: he is somehow privileged in relation to the girl, and her lack means castration is possible (Freud, 1925). In addition, the boy's penis is small, the father's large. Thus the boy finds his place in the hierarchy: possession of a penis gives him higher status than females, but the size of his penis means lower status in relation to another male, his father. This is Freud's formulation. Karen Homey (1924, 1926, 1935), Clara Thompson (1942, 1943) and other pioneer psychoanalysts moved away from Freud's phallocentrism, pointing out that possession of a penis is a way for men to rationalize their domination and not a biological

given, and male domination is something that can be changed. Since the late 'sixties feminist psychoanalysts, including Nancy Chodorow (1978) and Dorothy Dinnerstein (1976), have attempted to free Freud's Oedipal formulation from its sexist biases. Freud's is not the only explanation of the way hierarchy is learned at home. Still, home is where the lessons begin.

At school the lessons are refined and reinforced (Connell, 1989). According to Jules Henry (1963), the grade-schooler learns that for someone to succeed, someone else must fail. Henry relates the story of an observer he sent to an elementary school classroom as part of his research in urban anthropology. The observer watched as Boris stood at the blackboard and looked at a math problem. Boris could not figure out the answer. The teacher suggested he "think!" Boris' mind was still a blank. By this time there were several hands waving in the classroom. Several classmates were having trouble staying in their seats, so excited were they about the prospect of Boris failing to figure out the answer and the teacher calling on them. Henry comments:

> This is the standard condition of the American elementary school, and is why so many of us feel a contraction of the heart even if someone we never knew succeeds merely at garnering plankton in the Thames: because so often somebody's success has been bought at the cost of our failure, (p. 296).

The male theme stands out boldly in psychosis. Consider the manic

episode that follows a man's fall from a position of power into bankruptcy. Rather than feeling depressed about his plight, he manufactures the delusional belief that the bankruptcy was for the best and he need not seek employment because he is soon to be selected CEO of a large corporation. Thus, he explains in a cheerful tone, there is no cause for sadness. Another man, paranoid, compensates for his severe sense of inadequacy by imagining that dozens of undercover FBI agents have been assigned to follow him and tap his phone—as if he were that important. In both cases, the man believes he has fallen to the bottom of the heap and compensates with a delusional sense of power and importance.

In the more typical case it is only after a certain amount of self-exploration that a relatively healthy and functional man discovers the theme in his unconscious. For instance, a man came to my office for a consultation complaining of deep depression. He told me he was a "workaholic" and no longer wished to be—but when he stopped working, even for a short vacation, he became very anxious. Meanwhile his wife was threatening to leave him because he was never around. We eventually discovered that the anxiety was related to an unconscious fantasy: "If I don't keep working every waking hour I will be beaten by envious competitors and fail miserably at my job." Of course the fantasy also contained the idea that, once beaten, his wife would definitely abandon him.

The either/or-ness of the theme is reflected in a series of polarities: big/small; strong/weak; success/failure; lovable/despicable. The last is very familiar to anyone who has ever fallen from the heights of love to the depths of self-doubt after being left by the loved one. The first is just as well known, the big/small pair being central to this society's male culture. There is the lore of penis size: the jokes, the boys with bigger ones making fun of those with smaller ones, the fear of being unable to satisfy a woman because one's penis is too small—a fear that is aggravated by porno magazines where male protagonists are always "well hung." We cannot befriend each other for fear of being betrayed in a dog-eat-dog world, we use women to prop up our sense of potency, we hate illness and cannot stand the aging process because of our dread of vulnerability and failure. Helen Caldicott (1984) links the threat of nuclear annihilation with the male theme, pointing to the "missile envy" that keeps the world on the verge of war. The either/or quality is so intense that a man who feels like a loser in any one regard feels like a loser in all regards—small, weak, a failure, and unlovable.

Nice Guys Must Cope with the Male Theme, Too

I have noticed a pattern in the way a large number of men handle this theme. Realizing at a very early age that they did not want to play either role, these men remember always trying to pull back just a little from engagement in male games and male posturing, biding their time and trying to find a path

that would not require them to be either victor or vanquished. They always had sufficient abilities—athletic, intellectual, creative, or social—to get by, and as long as they did not push themselves as much as they might to excel or to reach the very top, they were able to walk a line somewhere between the insensitive posturing man and the weak, submissive loser. But having pulled back from the male drama of the schoolyard, the mating game, the beer hall, the fraternity, or the board room just enough to avoid having to play one of the two polar roles, they found there was no strong role left for them. They eventually experienced low self-esteem or a worrisome lack of vitality; the former because they, like all males, have internalized the male theme to a significant extent and feel like losers; the latter because, in pulling back from the male drama, they have had to suppress a certain amount of the passion that is typically called forth by competitive male pursuits, and that kind of suppression has become something of a habit.

I do not mean to imply that disdain for domination was always conscious. Jim did not view his submissiveness in these terms; Harold never verbalized his conflicts about ambition until after he graduated from law school; and Steve always wondered if he was “less of a man” for refusing to participate in his baseball team’s cruel initiation ritual. In their early years most of these men were not sufficiently formed as autonomous individuals to design alternative roles for themselves. And boys who were having the same difficulty were unable to support each other at that time because they, too,

believed “real men” just did not discuss with each other their doubts about being a man.

In many cases, these men found some respite in the arms of a woman during young adulthood. There are many versions of the story. In Rilke’s (1912, 1989) version, the prodigal son leaves home because he cannot “stay and conform to this lying life of approximations which they have assigned to him, and come to resemble them all in every feature of his face.” Instead, he would “love again and again in his solitude, each time squandering his whole nature and in unspeakable fear for the freedom of the other person.” Each time he fell in love, “he was now once again overcome by the growing urgency of his heart. And this time he hoped to be answered. His whole being, which during his long solitude had become prescient and imperturbable, promised him that the one he was now turning to would be capable of loving with a penetrating, radiant love.” Eventually, the prodigal son returns home, “For he had lost hope of ever mating the woman whose love could pierce him.” Like Rilke and his prodigal son, some men never find a woman whose love will pierce them and set them free. Others are more successful in their quest. But flight into a woman’s arms does not provide lasting resolution of a man’s conflicts, especially his conflicts about the male theme.

Reframing Childhood Memories

When, as adults, these men encountered women who were demanding equality, respect and an end to sexual exploitation, a resonant chord was struck deep within them. It was not only the obvious fairness of gender equality; finally there was external validation for what had been an all too private struggle to find a tenable stance as a man that did not require one to oppress others or be seen as a weakling or a loser. These men could understand their lifelong ambivalence about power, male posturing, and ambition in relation to an explicit theory of domination. Like an interpretation given in therapy, this adult understanding permitted a man to reconstruct childhood memories— of schoolyard fights or failure to be accepted by male peers because of a refusal to tell sex stories about girls— and this time see himself as a small, unsung hero. And now he would gain women's support for being among those rare men who were sensitive and not sexist—the very qualities that had led to derision from other boys in earlier years.

Family therapists speak of "reframing" events, putting them in a better light that permits the participants to maintain their dignity or feel loved by others with whom they interact in irrational ways. In the introduction I discussed my reframing of George's dilemma. He felt inadequate because his wife's salary exceeded his, and I pointed out that without his willingness to share childrearing responsibilities his wife would not be able to succeed as she has at work, and it was only because of his commitment to equal

responsibilities at home that he was unable to work longer hours at the office and earn a promotion. George's depression occurred because he was trapped in the either/or theme. I offered him a third alternative, a way to view his principled commitment to equal co-parenting as a powerful stance instead of a loser's excuse. As a therapist I find myself continually reframing men's stories, redefining power, and giving them an opportunity to see how powerful they are in spite of their failure to climb all the way to the top of traditional hierarchies.

But life goes on, and the hero of one day is not necessarily a hero the next. Women were very happy to find men who respected them as equals and were willing to change their ways. That happiness, however, eventually wore thin. The women continued to build their movement, and feminism evolved in new directions, women meeting with each other in various contexts to improve their lot and struggle collectively. What about the men? There is still very little support available for men who relate best to women and eschew traditional male competition and posturing. Friendships among men remain problematic. And men have less capability than women to get together with each other and strategize about the next step, let alone satisfy their needs for intimacy.

The man who goes against the tide is doubly isolated. He is isolated from traditional male circles where he is viewed as less than manly. But there

are a large number of men who feel uncomfortable in traditional male circles. The problem is their difficulty getting together and supporting each other. Many say that they find it easier to be alone or to relate on an emotional level exclusively with women. Thus these men, enough like traditional heterosexual men to be hesitant about forming close, same-sex intimacies, are left out of traditional male circles while being relatively inept at forming alternative networks. The emerging men's movement is a real cause for hope here, as is the new resolve on the part of a large number of men to improve their intimacies with other men and to achieve a new level of equality and connectedness with women.

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