



## **Road Trip for Men**

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I was fairly young when I was shown how to identify negative bias against minorities. In the 60's and 70's I discovered that the media was loaded with images of African Americans that, in many ways supported negative bias and I learned how this bias can transform into racism. Not long after that I learned about the various forms of negative bias against women and the way it was supported through the media, our culture, society and, of course, my own careless thoughts. I had to learn to recognize the problems with what our biased culture would otherwise program into me as normal thoughts and behaviors. I was no expert, but really needed no expert skills to spot plenty of bias.

The process of learning about negative biases against women was not necessarily intuitive and I had to do it from a man's perspective, but I had help in developing my understanding. After some thought and consideration, I realized that helping women to overcome bias would also help men in general and of course me, in a variety of ways. To me, the process of learning to identify the bias was a little like getting to know a new car. We look at the car a lot before we decide to buy it and think about how it fits our life and how we look in it. We must of course, learn to find it in the parking lot. We learn to recognize it well, and get to the place where we can spot it passing us at 65 MPH. I learned to recognize and understand the 'negative bias against women cars' and eventually became comfortable in blowing my horn when I saw one to show my disapproval. Others did too, and with so many horns blowing, we have driven a lot of negative Female bias right off the road. As a result, our social consciousness has changed.

About 9 years ago, I began working shoulder to shoulder with men and women from the unskilled temporary work agencies. Because I am a little nosy, the workers had a lot of information I did not, and because they were often open about their lives, I began to learn more about the effects of living at unskilled income levels and gender bias on our society. It was clear to me that while we have done a lot to identify and curtail gender bias for women, we have neglected doing the same for men. Since I am rarely the first person to figure

anything out, I started searching the net on topics related to gender bias and, of course found resources galore to satisfy my curiosity.

After reading a number of books and articles on gender issues, I wrote a class curriculum based on some of the work of Warren Farrell and guided a class discussion with the Sr. High on the subject of intimacy between the sexes. We made a list of the criteria generally used by men in our culture to develop intimacy with a woman:

1. Physically Attractive

No, it's not a very long list.

Other criteria is probably used, but would take a distant second.

We then listed the criteria generally used by women: (P7)

1. Financially sound
2. Has Skills / Potential
3. Intellect
4. Straight
5. Single
6. Must be the aggressor (take risk of pursuing intimacy)

The lack of requirements men have to be intimate with women means that women don't feel special in any significant way when a man chooses to be intimate with them, many women feel that it's not healthy or wise for men to pick a partner based on something women have little control over. They feel men are shallow when they use a superficial trait like looks to determine who they are willing to be intimate with.

Many people feel that long term relationships are not well served based on a physical attraction that wears off over time. For me, people become attractive (or not) because of their personality and character after we get to know them well and they even begin to look like their personality and the person they are emotionally and intellectually, not the person they present as physically.

In class we talked about how:

Some women feel cheapened because it does not respect what they have accomplished or how they behave.

Women feel that it's hard to be sure that a man cares for them for what they are, separate of their appearance.

It's a significant burden to compete in a world where there appearance is the criteria for your worth.

Young women can develop what is called a “Cinderella complex” where they become motivated to look good enough to attract a wealthy mate and not have to develop themselves in any other meaningful way.

This lack of criteria promotes the treatment of women as sex objects and in the worst versions of this objectification causes exploitation of woman's bodies, sacrifice of their health and even death.

You have heard people ask: “Why is it that I always find what I am looking for in the last place I look?” We stop looking when we find what we expect to find. This applies here, when it comes to our societal discussions of intimacy bias. We have our bad guy, and its men. Women are victims of being sex objects and this supports what we are fed by the media and our culture so we move on to righting the wrong based on this information, and it turns out, to be half of the information.

For me, the process of identifying and understanding gender biases takes the completion of 4 steps:

1. Identify a gender related problem or bias and understand it's effects.
2. Determine the effects on the opposite gender and understand them.
3. Find improvements that accommodate both genders in a healthy way.
4. Change you personal behaviors and / or the manner of communication with others.

I spent a long time jumping from step 1 to 4 and have, in recent years been working on going back completing steps 2 and 3 in an effort to process a better step 4.

Let's go back to the RE class and work on step 2 for men in the above example:

This long list of criteria women have for intimacy does not represent a healthy measure of a man's worth. Its focus is on his success as defined by his financial worth and career potential.

A focus on success puts undue pressure on men causing men to live shorter lives, work dangerous jobs in order to earn more money, have health problems from stress, miss out on many of life's joys (time with family, self actualization, etc. due to long hours at work)

Men go to war, are expected to take risks with their life and health to show the world they are successful and are willing to sacrifice themselves for the protection of women and children.

The worth of a man should not be completely dependent on the physical attributes that allow for success (brains, good looks, wealthy parents, strength etc.)

It's a significant burden to compete in a world where there success is the criteria for your worth.

Men can develop into thinking that success is all they need to have a happy life and attract the right (good looking) mate. I call this the “Prince Charming” complex.

This long list of criteria promotes the treatment of men as success objects and in many versions of this objectification causes exploitation of men's bodies, sacrifice of their health and very commonly early death.

After understanding that men and women are both adversely affected in many ways by our common cultural gender behaviors around intimacy, we pulled some nice words from our principals that were hanging on the wall, mixed them in, and re-sorted them all. The nice words easily trumped all the criteria we previously listed. An intellectual look at this social behavior creates the possibility of very positive change in our lives. Our UU principles encourage us to see the whole picture and when we do, we can transcend the gender divide by being open to understanding both sides. It could very well be that deep down, what men and women want from intimacy on a personal level is more the same than our social behaviors would indicate.

What I had discovered in paying attention to the plight of men at my workplace and then in my subsequent investigation, was the Men's Movement. Like the Women's movement, It is wildly varied and fairly fractured with lots of different approaches to dealing with the many struggles of men. It includes many different things from beating drums in the woods to significant academic research. From my readings, the conservative writers seem much more likely to accept the many problems of men today. The conservative solutions to the struggles of men often require men to be better men, buck up, make promises and keep them. If men struggle because they are marginalized for the achievement of success, pushing them for more success seems counter intuitive to me. The liberal writers often work to deny that we should address problems for men at all, since they often see women as victims and men are (of course) “in charge” and therefore could not have any problems. “Men in Charge” is a great topic of discussion, but when it's used to thwart the discussion or remove the possibility that men could be victims of any of society's biases, it becomes a tool of prejudice. Frequently it seems both the conservative and liberal points of view reflect that Men's problems are of their own making and their own fault. Here, like in most cases, fixing of blame just impedes the process of fixing the problems.

I prefer the more academic parts of this men's movement that are largely about going back to work on Step 1, 2 and sometimes step 3 for men. Warren Farrell does this. A well know feminist that was elected to the board of the National Organization of Women 3 times. After listening closely to men in therapy, he discovered the need to evaluate the other side of the gender divide and has written “The Myth of Male Power” and several other books on the subject.

Other writers have been through a similar process of first understanding the plight of women and then working to consider men.

Betty Friedan, author of “The Feminine Mystique” a book that is considered the seminal work on feminism wrote a “step 2” book called: “The Second Stage”, where she clearly

stated that consideration of men is a critical part of the process and she seemed very frustrated that men were not being included in the process.

Susan Faludi, wrote "Backlash, the undeclared war against American Women" and criticized Fredan and Ferrell for wanting to include men. But later wrote a "Step 2" book of her own called "Stiffed - The Betrayal of the American Man" providing her sympathetic view of the male side of the divide.

What we see from these significant figures in the gender debate is that you can sell a lot more books if you arm both sides of the gender war. All kidding aside. . . It shows both sides of divide are significant and those that study the relationship eventually want to make that clear.

Norah Vincent, a writer, lesbian and feminist recently wrote "Self Made Man". She dressed up and lived as a man for a year and a half apparently intending to write an expose' on the power of manhood. From start to end, Norah (Ned in the book) found that the grass was not green, let alone greener on the other side of the gender fence. She used the need for a men's movement to justify her sympathetic conclusions. I will turn that around and say that her conclusions work to help justify the need for a men's movement.

Today, wave 3 of feminism is a lot about including those who were otherwise disenfranchised from the wave 1 and 2. Reading feminist blogs online, I can see that men are starting to become a part of Wave 3 with many feminists adopting parts of the men's movement as their own.

It turns out that there are way too many types of negative male bias to cover today, but I will mention a few significant and glaring points that show just part of one aspect of negative male bias in the called: "Disposable Men." This information relates to the US.

Men are about 92 percent of the jail and prison population in the US, and we have the largest percent of our population incarcerated on any country in the world. If we ask why there are so many men in Jail and Prison, the answer will be of course "They commit more crime". But a different question is appropriate today, and that is: "Why do we incarcerate such a high proportion of men?" There are only three possible reasons for this, they all lead to bias and the way we socialize men. For me, none of the possible reasons come near excusing our inaction on this inequity. Progress here, would obviously be reducing the number of incarcerated people, not increasing the number of women we incarcerate.

Men are 98 percent or more of military action casualties in recent wars. It probably about a 1% increase since WWI. This is purely related to bias, again the best progress would be to take more people out of harm's way.

Men are 93 percent of workers killed on the job.

Men complete suicide 4 times more than women. Women attempt suicide at a much higher rate and we can't really tell who suffers more necessarily, but our world is clearly harsher for men when it comes to having a way out of our troubles.

Homeless men outnumber all homeless women and children combined and it's estimated that homeless men individuals outnumber homeless women individuals estimates vary from 3 or 4 to 1.

Roy Baumeister, noted social psychologist and author of 20 academic books (co-author of many others) in his field recently wrote the book "Is there anything good about men". (The fact that we even have to ask this question says volumes) In it he fills in some of the blanks in our understanding of why men are treated (he uses the word "exploited") the way they are. He explains that very few men are at the top (with lavish rewards) through the competition for success, but that many, many more men are pushed to the very bottom of society. It's not just about rewarding those at the top, it also involves punishing those that do not perform. This he explains is part of the natural "Male extremity pattern". There is very good evidence that this "pattern" has been in effect since before we were considered humans and is based on and results from roles that worked well for and reflected the need for survival. Few men are needed to maximize reproduction and maximizing reproduction has long been critical for our survival. It's become clear to me that the free market, capitalism, improved health care, Et cetera have changed the situation so that today, our survival may more likely be dependent on controlling and reducing our rate of reproduction. Depending on your view of how many people the earth can hold, our historic justification for treating men in the biased ways we do is either long gone or it soon will be. It would seem we owe a great deal to the feminists that got the ball of social change rolling in this regard. We may even owe our survival to their early detection of these changes.

I am convinced that our gender roles, their advantages and disadvantages have a lot to do with our socialization (variation between cultures show this), but there is a component that seems innate. Since we can't change what is innate, we can take comfort in knowing that we can choose to change the way we are socialized to accommodate the innate.

Throughout my entire journey of learning about gender issues, I have been reminded many times that because I am a man, the wind is at my back because, as a man, I have many privileges. We can find many lists of male privilege online and that is, of course, where I discovered that people have (and here's another Step 2) generated a number of long lists of "female privilege" as well. There is plenty of banter online about who has what privilege and what affects your privilege, but as a Unitarian, I can see that we all have a lot to gain and could transcend all the banter by putting all the privileges on an a la carte menu and then allow equal access for everyone. We might very well find that men and women want a lot of the same privileges. Because we have failed in some ways to understand and communicate both sides of the divide in our society and culture, our public discourse remains flawed.

As a UU, I believe in the web of life and know that what hurts or helps one of us affects us all. Helping men can help women because we are interconnected in so many different ways.

As a UU, I believe we must allow ourselves to see men as victims when they are victims and there are, of course ways that they are.

As a UU, I must learn to identify the negative male bias cars along with all the other negative bias cars on the road and get comfortable in blowing my horn, to get them off the road. We all stand to benefit from healthy, happy and respected people in the world, no matter what gender, ethnicity, orientation or religion, etc. they are.

As a UU, I have and will try to take the road that lets me experience both sides of the Great Gender Divide, explore and understand Bias Mountain and work for that Equity Peak experience.