



Men in Couples

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Men in Couples

In *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, Milan Kundera (1980) describes a marriage:

In those first weeks it was decided between Karel and Marketa that Karel would be unfaithful and Marketa would submit, but that Marketa would have the privilege of being the better one in the couple and Karel would always feel guilty, (p. 36)

I do not agree with Kundera that “every love relationship is based on unwritten conventions rashly agreed upon by the lovers during the first weeks of their love” (p. 36). Rather, I believe that the terms of a relationship are always changing, and that only by resolving the tensions that continually creep into the relationship can a couple keep their love alive. But Kundera makes an important point about the unstated ways partners hold their own in the inevitable and ongoing power struggles.

As middle class women enter the world of work in record numbers (less affluent women have always had to work because their families needed two incomes to survive) and men assume shared responsibilities at home there are new sources of relational tensions, including new forms of competition. Who earns more on the job? Who is the better parent? When his turf was the world of work and hers the home, there was less need to compete. Each partner reigned supreme in a different realm. Now, where there is a

discrepancy in earning power as well as a discrepancy in domestic competence, and where one or both partners have a need to compete, there are new kinds of envy and rivalry. This is especially true if the discrepancy reflects a reversal of gender roles, the woman earning more and the man doing more than half of the childrearing.

Cary and Sarah married a year after they met in graduate school and have two young children. They are both professionals in their late twenties. He enters individual psychotherapy for depression. He does not know why he is depressed, but the depression drains his energy and he is unable to work. Then, when he comes home he finds he has insufficient energy “to spend quality time with the kids.” His wife, he feels, pulls off “that hat trick” better than he does. She works as many hours and yet when she gets home she is able to get excited as the children tell her what happened to them during the day. Cary marvels at the way she musters the energy to interact with the children. “But then,” he laments, “she’s never interested in making love. I guess working and being with the kids is enough for her.”

Marital tensions play a big part in Cary’s mood. He and his wife may need to see a couple therapist. My hypothesis is that Cary is depressed because he is stuck in an untenable position and does not know what he can do to alter the situation. I ask him what he thinks might be stuck in his marriage. He guesses that he and Sarah might be engaged in a power struggle.

I ask him what powers they each wield. He says he knows that she feels very inadequate on account of her inability to be sexually available and responsive, so he uses her sexual unavailability as an excuse for not listening to her when she wants to talk about how hard it is to have a career and a family. He guesses she uses the issue of shared domestic responsibilities to make him feel guilty:

“I never seem to be able to do enough. No matter how much housework I do, she stays up later finishing up. And yesterday she got angry at me and screamed that she doesn’t even tell me all the times she has to wash the dishes or arrange childcare for the kids in order to cover for me when I forget to take care of things.”

Reacting to what he considers a guilt trip, he turns a deaf ear when she wants to talk about her feelings. She uses guilt, he is passive-aggressive; an even match.

The Capacity to Confront a Partner and Work Through Relational Tensions

Tom avoids marriage like the plague. If asked, he would say it is because his mother was so intrusive and abusive that he does not want to find himself in another intimacy where there is no exit. This is not to say he is insensitive to women, nor unwilling to please. Quite the opposite, he is “the kind of man every woman would give her eye tooth for,” or so he imagines. He is quite

attractive to women. It is not only his looks and sparkling intelligence, he is also very sensitive and capable of talking about feelings. He is a therapist and employs his listening skills productively in his work. He was married in his mid-twenties and divorced after two years. And there have been two other primary relationships that have lasted as long. In one he and his lover lived together for one year, in the other he never lived with his partner. Besides these three relatively “long-term” relationships, Tom has dated hundreds of women. He is very proud of the fact that most women he dates say that he is the most emotionally available man they have ever met, that they admit sex is better with him than it has been with anyone else, and that they very soon want to make a commitment and eventually marry him.

“Then why have none of these relationships worked out?,” I ask.

“I don’t know. I always seem to get bored just when the woman begins to tell me she loves me. I get attracted to somebody else. I’ve just never been able to be monogamous, and none of the women I’ve been with could stand for that.”

It frightens Tom that women keep telling him they feel a deep connection with him. He feels like he is deceiving them. He knows how to talk about feelings, and he is a good listener. But he admits he developed these skills as a teenager because he knew women were more likely to have sex

with a sensitive man. He does not respect women who fall for him, but their willingness to be vulnerable and their praise for his sexual virtuosity make him feel powerful. He thinks he is “addicted” to admiration from women. He is seeking therapy because he is depressed. He has been thinking about having children but he does not believe he has ever been in love and wonders if he is capable of sustaining a committed relationship.

Psychoanalysts tell us that our adult romantic relationships are shaped by the kinds of relationships each partner once had with his or her parents, and that men and women regularly project their internalized images of parents onto their partners, causing the other to join him or her in acting out precisely the kinds of scenes that might have occurred in the childhood homes of one partner or the other (Meissner, 1978). I ask Tom why he has never considered the possibility that, by trying to resolve differences between himself and his partner, he might create a relationship that is more rewarding than the earlier one with his mother. Tom is able to admit he is afraid that if he marries he will be locking himself into a relationship with someone who, like his mother, might ignore his feelings and needs and bombard him with hers, just as his ex-wife did. And he is able to see that, by being so willing to listen to the women he dates while refusing to expose his vulnerabilities and needs, he repeatedly sets up a scenario wherein his partner seems to be overly needy and demanding, as if to fulfill his prophecy.

Why is it so hard for this man, and so many others, to trust that by actively processing conflicts with a woman, or a male partner, he will be able to attain a quality of intimacy he has not known in the past? There is a personal answer to that question, a different answer in every man's life; in Tom's case it is because he was never able to accomplish much improvement in a toxic relationship with his mother. There are also sociocultural factors. With sexual freedom, media portrayals of readily available sexy men and women (who seem forever young on account of working out at the right gym or drinking the right beer), the ease of "no-fault" divorce, the social stresses on marriages today (including the economic downturn that makes so many men subject to feelings of inadequacy), it should be no surprise that so many men and women choose to toss aside their marital vows instead of working very hard with a long-term partner to fix what ails the relationship.

There are male foibles that predispose to impasses in a primary intimacy (there are female foibles as well, but that is not the topic here). Consider, for instance, the man's unwillingness to admit the ways he depends on the woman, leaving her to wonder if she is the only one with dependency needs. Perhaps, if he could admit his dependency—for instance his need for constant reassurance from her that he is the one she loves and depends on—she might feel less the needy one. Then she might be able to come out of her depression and pay more attention to his emotional needs.

Sometimes the personal idiosyncrasies are so deep-seated and complicated that they are not very amenable to change. Some men refuse to permit much intimacy to develop with a woman because they are afraid of the rejection or betrayal they believe is inevitable. Other men avoid intimacy because they are afraid that when they get close to a woman the ugly side of their personality will emerge and they will abuse their partner or themselves and begin to drink heavily, for example. Women have idiosyncrasies too. Sometimes both partners are so wounded that it is hard for them to even begin the process of communication to work out their differences.

Sandy and Rochelle are unable to argue with each other without getting into a screaming match. They are in their late thirties and have been together for three years. She very much wants to have a child but he is ambivalent about it. He comes to see me seeking individual psychotherapy. He says he loves her very much but is unable to stand up to her. As a child, he was abused severely by alcoholic parents. His father beat his mother frequently, and both parents turned on him at the slightest provocation. There was always a pretense. Perhaps he spilled a glass of milk or slammed a door too hard. And the beatings began as “a spanking.” His parents used a strap, but inevitably they moved on from spanking to whipping him on the shoulders and back as he crouched in a corner or tried to flee from the room.

Sandy remembers asking himself as a child what he had done to deserve

this kind of punishment. And he always arrived at an answer: he was too noisy, too clumsy or “in the way.” The last was a recurrent theme. He was an only child and his parents often talked about the freedom they might have had were it not for his unplanned birth. He remembers feeling that he was the sole cause of his parents’ misery, and therefore the violence that erupted between them as well as the beatings he received really were his fault.

Children quite regularly accept this kind of blame. The reason is simple. If a very young child is treated badly, there are two ways for him or her to understand the situation. If the child concludes that the fault lies in the parents’ badness, and the child has no way to change the parents, then the situation is quite bleak and the helpless child is at the mercy of those bad parents. If, on the other hand, the child concludes that there is something he or she is doing wrong and this is the cause of the abuse, then there is always the possibility that the child can change what he or she is doing and then the parents will change their behavior, take better care of the child, and the hellish situation will be abated. The child begins blaming himself or herself at a very young age and develops the habit of blaming him or herself in each ensuing situation. Even when, as an adult, the individual who has this kind of habit recalls childhood abuses, there is the lingering belief he or she really was at fault. Then, when blamed by a contemporary partner, whether the blame is warranted or not, the individual who has this habit will accept more than his or her share of the blame.

Rochelle's father deserted the family when she was quite young. She was the older of two sisters. She remembers angry battles with her mother, though there was no physical abuse. First her mother would be nice to her, for instance buying her a pretty dress, and then the older woman would turn against her and attack her for getting the dress dirty. The pattern continued as Rochelle began dating in her mid-teens. First her mother would encourage her to go out and meet boys, then when she managed to go on a date her mother would criticize her upon her return home, accusing her of being promiscuous or saying that it was insensitive for her to keep her mother awake worrying about her while she stayed out late.

Sandy and Rochelle had an intense and troubled relationship. They alternated between highs of passionate love and lows of bitter animosity. She would tell him that he was "the love of her life" and the only man who had ever truly understood her, and then she would proceed to insult and humiliate him in front of others. Once she acted quite seductive with a friend of his at a party. When he complained and began to leave the party by himself, she stopped him and insisted he take her home. During the drive home she teased him and said his jealousy was unmanly. On another occasion she told him he was not aggressive enough sexually, and then when he became more aggressive she stopped him and called him a brute and a rapist.

Both partners tend to alternate between two different states of mind. At

one moment he is the admirable, caring man who deserves to be called the “love of her life,” at another moment he is a despicable cad who deserves abuse and humiliation. At one moment she is the loving and lovable enchantress, and at another she is the angry, evil “slut.” Both of the partners have trouble keeping in mind, when they are in one or the other split-off state of mind, that there is another side to them. He cannot keep in mind, when she is abusing him, that he is a lovable man who deserves respect and appreciation. At that moment, a captive of his childhood habit, he accepts her abuse and assumes he is a despicable character who deserves to be treated that way. At another moment he feels that things are grand, that he is deservedly the love of her life, and he barely remembers the bad moments.

Sandy needs to reclaim the aggression he buried as a child out of fear he would be killed by his parents if he fought back when they were attacking him. In addition, he swore from a very tender age never to be as abusive as his parents were, and since he has never been able to figure out how to stand up for himself without being a brute, this resolution has motivated him to bury his aggressive strivings even deeper. Unconsciously, he fell for Rochelle in part because he identified with her aggressiveness. In other words, while he could not permit himself to be aggressive he could vicariously enjoy his partner’s forcefulness. She, meanwhile, acts out with him what her mother did to her. Thus, when he does begin to stand up to her she humiliates him, just as her mother humiliated her every time she began to make progress.

Sandy must reclaim the aggressive strivings he has been suppressing since childhood and learn to stand up to Rochelle and say with some conviction:

“Hey, wait a minute, I don’t deserve to be treated that way, and if you don’t begin to treat me better I’m not going to remain in this relationship very long.”

She, on the other hand, must learn that he will not attack her as her mother did just when she makes herself most vulnerable, so she does not have to keep destroying the love that is growing between the two. In other words, if this couple is to learn to build a more consistently loving relationship, both must stand up to the other as whole individuals demanding to be treated decently.

Is It Different for Gay Couples?

While heterosexual couples enjoy the blessings of society, gay men, lesbians, and gay couples suffer the consequences of widespread homophobia and institutional discrimination. Gay couples are denied official marriage, shared health insurance, and joint tax returns. They are faced with huge legal obstacles when they try to adopt children, when the partner of the natural father seeks official recognition as a stepparent, when they seek paternity leave, and when it comes time to establish each partner’s legitimate heirs.

Society withholds approval and makes it very difficult for gay men to sustain committed primary relationships. Then there is the omnipresence of AIDS, the risk for both partners as well as the likelihood that the couple will lose many friends from the disease.

There are personal obstacles as well. Most gay men were raised by heterosexual couples and received little training in same-sex intimacies. Then, when both partners are men, there is a double dose of male foibles. So gay couples must be trailblazers. They must make room for compromise, otherwise how would they be able to avoid the kinds of battles that regularly erupt between men living in close quarters? And the partners cannot rely on a difference in gender to determine their respective roles and privileges. Who will take care of the house? Who will be the major provider? In sexual matters, Who is to be on top and who on the bottom? Who is to be active and who passive?

Straight couples may not follow tradition in every respect, but at least they have the tradition to bounce off of as they create their own path. Gay couples, from the beginning, must negotiate on a large number of issues that straight couples take for granted. As Laura Markowitz (1991) points out:

The fact that same-sex couples have to balance stress in so many systems at once—their own families of origin, their relationship, the gay/lesbian community, their ethnic or religious communities, and mainstream society—makes their efforts at forming a family an impressive juggling act. And

the complexity of a relationship between people with the same gender socialization can create further confusion and conflict, yet the problem may not be evident to the straight therapist, (p. 33)

Then, in addition to the difficulties that confront gay couples in this society, there are also the kinds of tensions that creep into heterosexual relationships: the inevitable power struggles, jealousies, misunderstandings, and conflicts about autonomy vs. dependence. It is not easy to make a relationship work.

Adversity can intensify a couple's commitment and deepen the intimacy. Many long-term gay couples are realizing this and creating new forms of family life (Marcus, 1988). And we see evidence of the fruits of adversity in the way the gay community has responded to the AIDS epidemic with new ways to love and nurture terminally ill men.

Sex, Potency and Ambition

In David Lodge's (1975) *Trading Places*, Philip and Desiree have this conversation while lying naked in bed. He begins:

"You don't think it's on the small side?"

"It looks fine to me."

"I've been thinking lately it was rather small."

"A recent survey showed that ninety per cent of American men think their

penises are less than average size.”

“I suppose it’s only natural to want to be in the top ten per cent.

...” (p. 167)

While working with a man who complains of sexual dysfunction—impotence and premature ejaculation are the most frequent complaints—I assume that the sexual problem is a continuation in the bedroom of a more general and pervasive conflict, but the problem only seems obvious and upsetting when it surfaces and causes dysfunction in relation to sex. Of course, I only make this assumption once I have ruled out medical causes of sexual dysfunction, for instance chronic illnesses such as diabetes, vascular, and neurological conditions, and the side effects of antihypertensive and antidepressant medications.

Consider the problem of premature ejaculation. The first thing to note is the man’s definition of premature. What standard is he employing to assess prematurity? Is the standard the time he imagines a potent man is capable of continuous intercourse? Is the standard his partner’s satisfaction? Is he more intent on performing than he is on enjoying sexual encounters? Are inadequacy and shame part of the picture? How much performance anxiety is there? Does the man take full responsibility for the problem or does he see it as a relational difficulty?

Jed is a factory worker in his early thirties who has been married for three years to Martha. He enters psychotherapy complaining of premature ejaculation. As we explore his sexual difficulty it becomes clear there is more to the problem than the mechanics of ejaculation. He is aware that it takes a long time for his wife to reach orgasm, and complains that she is very demanding during their love-making, insisting he do a long list of things to her “because that’s the only way I can come.” In love-making, it seems, he caters to her needs and whims with very little reciprocity, and she complains that he has not done enough.

I ask if it would be fair to say their relationship is like that in other regards. He thinks about my question for awhile and responds in the affirmative.

“She does kinda call the shots most of the time. She has strong opinions, and if I insist on anything too much we get into a fight. Besides, it’s not important to me anyway, and I’m glad to be able to make her happy.”

In other words, sex is not the only arena in which Jed ignores his needs while taking care of Martha’s. Of course, there is a power struggle as well. She is controlling. While he seems to be granting her total control, his refusal to wait for her to have an orgasm before he has one gives him another kind of control. And the symptom serves to express some of his anger and wish to

frustrate her.

I point out to Jed that the sexual problem is not due to any deficiency in him, it is a relational issue. I suggest that, for a while, he and Martha reorganize their sexual encounters so that they are less serious about the goal of orgasm, there is more playfulness, intercourse is not the main activity, and they try to tell each other in words what they want the other to do to them. In addition I suggest that the timing of his orgasm become her responsibility. If she would like for him to wait longer, then she must notice when he is about to ejaculate and halt whatever they are doing. I suggest he set up this altered routine by first telling her that he really needs her help if he is to solve his sexual problem, and that he tell her she will probably need some practice figuring out when he is about to ejaculate.

Jed talks to Martha and they agree to try the plan. He reports a few weeks later that there is some improvement in his ability to delay ejaculation, but the main thing that has changed is that the couple is talking more about both partners' sexual desires, they are spending more time making love, and Martha says she actually prefers paying attention to his sexual needs—she had always felt uncomfortable about the fact he never let her know what he wanted her to do. Meanwhile, he has been taking more initiative in making other kinds of decisions and reports he feels less depressed.

When I ask Jed why he had never told Martha what he wanted her to do while they were making love, he responds that he believed she should just figure that out without his having to say anything.

“Do you feel that way about other things?” I ask.

“Well, yes, I guess I do. Martha comes home and starts talking about what’s going on with her, and she just goes on and on. She never asks how my day has been.”

“So why don’t you just tell her?”

“If she were interested, she’d ask. And I don’t want to be telling her about all that happened and spilling my guts and then find out she isn’t even interested. That would just kill me!”

“Has that happened?”

“Yeah, a lot of times.”

It turns out Jed’s mother was very inattentive. She would ask him how his day had gone at school and then, before he had a chance to complete a sentence, she would leave the room and begin doing something else. I began to wonder if Martha was as inattentive and self-absorbed as Jed would have me believe, so I suggested he talk with her about this problem. He did, and

returned the next week to inform me that she was surprised by his question, admitted that when he did not volunteer anything she tended to talk about herself, but claimed that she would be very interested in hearing from him about how his day had gone or what was on his mind. I pointed out the similarity between this exchange and the one about sexual cravings. In both cases he was surprised by the fact that, when he finally did state his needs, he found Martha very willing to hear them and respond.

Sexual impotence, when it is functional and not caused by an organic condition, is usually a symptom of a more pervasive male malaise. Since a man's sense of potency is rooted in his accomplishments and status, failure can lead to impotence. Sy, a married man in his early forties and the father of three young children, entered therapy because of severe depression, insomnia, and impotence of a few months' duration. He had been employed as a community organizer in a grass roots organization for fifteen years. Before that he and his wife of seventeen years had been active in the civil rights and antiwar movements.

Sy's oldest child had been attacked recently by a bully at the local public school. In discussing their child's dilemma, he and his wife arrived at the possibility that they might have to pull him out of the public school and enroll him in a private one. They quickly dismissed that idea because of the expense. But, in the weeks that followed, his wife continued to worry about the son's

safety and the quality of his education, and this led to her depression, her self-castigation focusing on the couple's limited earning power. In reaction to his wife's depression, and her criticism of him for being unable to provide real financial security, this man fell into a deep depression and a troubling impotence.

The couple had a particularly painful argument one evening after putting the children to bed. She was alternately tearful and enraged as she exclaimed:

"If it weren't for your goddamn fear of success you'd have finished graduate school and gotten a decent job and I wouldn't have to work so hard—then I could spend more time with the kids and even do some of the writing I've always wanted to do!"

At first he argued that the community organizing he was doing was important. Then he broke down and cried too. He told me it was at that moment that he suddenly realized he'd been wasting his life. He had watched all the others he worked with in the community move on to graduate school and higher paying jobs. But by now it was too late for him. He was too old to go back to school, too old to be hired for an entry level job in a big company. By the time he entered therapy he was getting only one or two hours of sleep per night, spending the rest of the night thrashing about in bed obsessing

about job opportunities he had turned down years before, and worrying about the family's financial straits. He had also become impotent. He saw no way out of his predicament, and said he would seriously consider suicide if it were not for the kids.

Interestingly, in the course of five or six weekly sessions where he obsessed about the impossibility of radically altering his situation at this late date and berated himself for all his inadequacies, he never once mentioned that there was another reason he had chosen to be a community organizer for a small organization that could not pay him a high salary or offer him much opportunity for advancement. That reason was his commitment to the aims of the community organization. The paid job had been a way to make a career of the kind of political work he had done as a young adult with no remuneration.

Conflicts about ambition play a central role in the male midlife crisis. For those who are satisfied with their accomplishments, midlife is a time to slow down and attend to undeveloped sides of the personality. But men who are dissatisfied tend to feel a failure, envy others, and sink into depression. When a man has always tried to put his ideals and his principles into practice in his everyday life and, on account of his principles, has missed opportunities for personal advancement, he might experience some regrets at midlife (Kupers, 1990).

In this case it was true that some of Sy's inner conflicts about performance and success had held him back. But that was only part of the picture. He had also firmly ascribed to certain principles. For instance, as a young adult he believed that he should not be paid a higher salary than others just because his family was affluent enough to send him to college. And part of his community organizing work involved helping disadvantaged youth go to college. In his depressive crisis Sy was focusing exclusively on his failings and his wife's unhappiness. He was ignoring the other side of the coin: his rather impressive success as a husband and father, the respect he had in the community as a committed organizer for important causes, and the integrity of a life created out of lived principles. Once he was able to shift his focus to include what was admirable about his life his depression lifted, he was able to make love with his wife, and the two of them were able to begin talking about what realistic moves they might make as a family to eventually allow her to do her writing and him to be more successful in his work.

Not all men's sexual difficulties are as amenable to therapeutic intervention as these two proved to be, and not all couples are as motivated to change. But these vignettes illustrate the way sexual problems can offer a window into the overall dynamics of relationships.

Beneath the Cloak of Gender Equality

Quite a few couples are attempting to live according to the principle of gender equality. This does not mean the two partners in a heterosexual couple have to be and do exactly the same things. In fact, the couples who are most successful at sustaining a mutually satisfying intimacy are the ones who can differentiate themselves while still maintaining the sense that neither is losing out on account of the arrangements. The notion of dividing every item of housework exactly in half is no longer the ideal, if it ever was a particularly useful aim. Most couples I know who once tried to share housecleaning, cooking, laundry, home repairs, car maintenance, and decisions about interior design have moved on to a give-and-take arrangement whereby each partner specializes in the things that he or she does best or prefers the most. Kitty Moore talks about partners being “captains of different ships” (1992, personal communication). For some couples gender reversals work, the father likes staying home with the young children while the mother prefers to work long hours in order to further her career. The question is not how absolutely perfect the split in relation to each area of responsibility, but rather whether either partner feels oppressed by the way labors and benefits are divided.

It is not easy for a couple to establish equitable gender roles. There is the social reality that men, on the average, have more earning capacity than women. There is “the feminization of poverty,” the fact that there are more poor, single women who head households than there were prior to the Women’s Movement (Pearce, 1978). Then there is “the second shift,” the

reality that in the average intact marriage where both partners work the woman tends to do more of the housework (Hochschild, 1989). Diane Ehrensaft (1987) points out that even in families in which the parents agree to strive toward equal co-parenting, women tend to initiate more than their share of the childrearing responsibilities and end up being the one who checks that things are done. Anne Bernstein (1989) studies stepfamilies and discovers that even if the mother is the stepparent she ends up initiating more than her share of parental interventions, while men, when they are the stepparent, feel more justified in stepping back and letting the natural mother do more. In other words, unnoticed or unspoken gender inequities continue, even in conscientious couples striving to attain equality. On the average, the man is more likely not to notice, the woman more likely not to mention it.

An additional problem is that a man might consciously ascribe to certain principles while his unconscious conflicts lead him to violate those principles. I mentioned the marriage of Cary and Sarah. Several months after the beginning of individual psychotherapy, Cary appeared for a session quite distraught and announced that he hit Sarah over the weekend. They argued, she pushed him, and he hit her with a closed fist on the back of her head. He was shocked that he had done it, and so was she. He tells me he wants to quit therapy because we are not getting at the deeper issues, the ones that led to his violence. He is ashamed of what he did, and was thinking of not coming to see me because it would be too embarrassing to talk about it.

Cary and I agree the situation is serious, and he says he will stop procrastinating and go with his wife to see a couple therapist. Meanwhile, there are some issues he and I can discuss. Having agreed that it is not O.K. for him to hit his wife no matter how much she provokes him, he resolves not to do it again and we begin to explore the sources of his anger. The thing that bothered him the most was her refusal to acknowledge how much time he had been spending with the kids while she was working night and day on a project at her office. She yelled that she shouldn't have to acknowledge his pitching in with the kids since he never acknowledges all the extra things she regularly does for the kids and for him. The shoving began and he hit her.

Cary feels he gives away too much power:

"It's been that way from the beginning. She wanted to get married so I went along. She wanted to have kids. I would have eventually initiated it, but she was ready to have kids long before I would have been, and I went along. And I have always been willing to cut back my hours at work to take on more things at home so she could work. Now I'm glad we've done all these things, don't get me wrong, but there have been sacrifices. All I want is a little acknowledgment. Is that too much to ask?"

I ask Cary what he gets for being so good. He tells me it just makes him feel good. When Sarah smiles and tells him how great it is of him to do so

much at home, he feels like he “walks very tall.” I ask him if there is any reason for him to be needing more of that kind of feedback from her right now. He thinks it might be because he is feeling inadequate at work, an important project is turning out to be a failure, he is losing a client, and his confidence is suffering. I question him about his definition of manliness and he begins to describe a man who overcomes immense obstacles in order to accomplish something great. We compare his assessment of himself and discover that he does not qualify.

“I know, if I would only value the things I do well—dividing my energies between work and home, raising kids who have their heads on straight, and supporting my wife to be all she can be—then I’d think of myself as a successful man. But it’s hard to think like that when I’m all alone with my thoughts and I’m realizing how mediocre my work is.”

As Cary recites his list of manly virtues, notice he disqualifies the man who puts ambition on the back burner while he stays home with the kids and supports his wife’s career aspirations. He thinks about his father, who gave up a high-level managerial job because it would have required that the family move to another city. Then his father was laid off from the company he had worked for for eighteen years and went into a severe depression. His mother took charge at home and told the kids to go easy on their father. He remembers how angry he was at his father for needing “to hide behind a

woman's skirt." Somehow the topic shifts to Cary's recent fight with Sarah, and he is able to examine his rage from a different perspective.

Cary was afraid that by giving up some of his own career aspirations he was becoming less of a man. Sarah's failure to acknowledge his sacrifices made him doubly angry. In addition, he felt that in the act of shoving him she was mocking his commitment to principle. For instance, she thought he would not hit her back because of the principle a man is never supposed to hit a woman no matter what the provocation. She was taking advantage of his commitment to that principle when she shoved him, and he felt mocked for his principled stance.

"Suddenly I felt like I was my father, the one everyone mocked in our family. So I lost it and let her have it!"

Cary and Sarah went to see a couple therapist. He vowed never to hit her again and they were able to discuss the importance of *mutual* acknowledgment in their relationship.

The Shoulds That Constrict, The Shame That Isolates

Whether it is the wish for a larger penis or the mandate to be at the top of the hierarchy, men feel burdened by the "shoulds" that they learned while undergoing training for manhood. Men "should" stand tall, take care of others

without displaying too much softness, keep emotions contained, and avoid tears where possible. When a man is unable to carry out all the shoulds, he feels inadequate, there is shame, and then he isolates himself, making it more difficult to resolve the tensions in interpersonal relationships.

A young unmarried couple who had been living together for several years went on a vacation and rented a cabin by a lake. A man followed the woman as she was returning from the lake, forced his way into the cabin, pulled a gun, tied the male partner up, and proceeded to rape the woman. The intruder escaped. The couple, quite traumatized, returned home. In the weeks that followed he insisted that she not tell people about what had happened because it was too humiliating for him. The woman eventually went to see a therapist complaining of depression. It quickly became clear that the isolation her partner was imposing on her in order to avoid his shame was preventing her from getting the support she needed from others to work through the trauma she had undergone. She resolved to confront her partner and insist on her right to tell their friends about the rape. Her partner was then forced to confront his shame and look at the way he was isolating himself instead of seeking the support he needed. He eventually figured out that some of the “shoulds” he was laboring under were totally unrealistic. And she figured out that by putting aside her needs in order to protect him she was condemning herself to irresolution and depression. In fact, when the couple told their friends what had happened there was an immediate outpouring of sympathy

and support, and both partners began to feel better.

Notice the male theme as it surfaces in this story. The man on top is strong, virile, and able to protect his female partner. If he fails to protect a partner, he is not only a weakling and a loser, but also feels shame on account of his failure and consequently feels he must isolate himself rather than sharing his pain with others. Shame and isolation form a vicious cycle; the more shame a man feels, the stronger the urge to be isolated. This vicious cycle is quite counterproductive in the context of a primary intimacy, especially when the partner wants to know what the man is feeling and to help him cope with his pain.

Lillian Rubin (1983) interviewed 150 couples from around the country and found that most couples are confused by recent changes in gender roles and gender relations. According to Rubin, some changes are easier than others: "The redistribution of household chores and other domestic arrangements, for example, requires only that there are two people of good will, good intention, and a willingness to engage the issue." Other issues go deeper and are more difficult to change, for instance, "how we handle our dependency needs, or how we express our needs for both intimacy and distance" (p. 206).

Gordon and Meth (1990) comment:

Men today are caught between the old and the new, between holding onto the breadwinner role and trying to share more. The “old” values husbands learned from their fathers and the “new” ones introduced by their wives and the socioeconomic changes in family life are frequently not in concert, (p. 67)

Men are caught between the lessons they learned from their fathers—including the unverbilized one that raising children is woman’s work—and the current reality of mothers who work and fathers who co-parent. How is a man to know what is the manly thing to do? No wonder so many men attend men’s events designed to explore what it means to be a man.

Rubin shares a personal anecdote. She and her husband very consciously decided to create a role-reversal. He had been supporting her while she went to graduate school, but he wanted to quit his job and devote all his time to writing, a switch that would greatly decrease his income. After she graduated they agreed that he would quit his job and she would assume the major responsibility for supporting the family while he devoted more time to writing. She reports that a month or two after the switch he fell into a deep depression and she found herself getting furious at him. Rubin writes:

He struggled with his sense of failure, with the fear that somehow his very manhood had been damaged. I—the liberated, professional woman—was outraged and enraged that he wasn’t taking care of me any longer. I felt as if he had violated some basic contract with which we had lived, as if he had failed in his most fundamental task in life—to keep me safe and cared for, to protect and support me. (p. 23)

In other words, the man's depression and the woman's fury were signs that some very old "shoulds" were still in effect.

In my own case, the shoulds took over during a construction project. My wife and I, in partnership with two women friends, purchased some land in the country several years ago. We decided to build a cabin on the land and decided we would be partial owner-builders. We purchased plans and some prefabricated sections of the cabin; then we hired carpenters, plumbers, and electricians and planned to work alongside them. In addition, we asked some friends to come and help with the building.

One of our women partners took the lead and began to enquire of the men who lived in the vicinity how to accomplish the various tasks that were required if we were to get moving on the construction. Our male neighbors were eager to assist the women builders. They must have thought my partners' complete lack of expertise was cute, and must have enjoyed the opportunity to help. But where did that leave me? I found myself in the position of needing to ask these neighbors how to do things—from buying materials to replacing frozen pipes—that I secretly felt I should already know how to do. All along I wondered if the men would think I was a total wimp, but on each occasion, when I took a deep breath and proceeded to ask for help, they turned out to be friendly and nonjudgmental.

Then the time arrived for intensive on-site construction. Half of the friends we invited were men, one was a carpenter-contractor, and one of the women was a carpenter. As we began to build I found myself, the single male owner-builder, among people who knew much more than I did about every aspect of the project. Inwardly I felt some shame. As a man I “should” take charge and know what to do (my women partners, including my wife, were not saddled with this particular should). But as we moved from task to task—framing, sheet rocking, the installation of plumbing fixtures and so forth—I repeatedly found I did not know what to do and someone else took over. Between the partners’ families there were seven teenage boys involved in the building process, and they were quite willing to take instruction from anyone who knew what to do. Again, I felt I “should” be able to instruct them, but repeatedly I had to tell them to ask someone else how to proceed. It turned out that I worked most on the roof, by myself, as if in nailing roofing tiles I was constructing a safety barrier between myself and the people and problems that remained down below.

After we finished building the cabin and returned home, Arlene and I had a vicious argument, punctuated by screaming matches that went on for several days. Eventually we spent several hours talking to another couple about our fight and were able to find grounds for a tentative resolution of our differences. (We feel very fortunate to have a couple we trust and with whom we can trade unofficial “therapy sessions” whenever serious tensions develop

in either marriage.) One of the things we figured out was that I had felt ashamed of not being able to lead the construction team. I felt I was failing to be the “hero” whom the “damsel” could depend on in her moment of distress, so I withdrew from her in shame. She did feel some anger toward me for not taking charge, and she agreed that piece of the puzzle might involve her conflicts about rapidly changing gender roles and relations, but she was even angrier that I had failed to stay in better contact with her so we could help each other through what had been a strange and difficult experience for both of us. Instead of working together, we had become alienated. I accepted much of the blame for that; isolation was my way of coping with the shame I felt when I could not fulfill an unrealistic set of “shoulds.”

Forward Motion

When Martha first agreed to take responsibility for the timing of Jed’s orgasms, she was merely complying with his wishes. But soon she realized there were benefits for her in the plan to have her pay more attention to his sexual and emotional needs, for instance, there would be less cause for guilt about her being self-indulgent and controlling. Similarly, the man whose partner was raped was at first merely bowing to her wishes when he agreed to talk to their friends about the traumatic incident. But when he discovered that talking, far from aggravating his shame, helped him cope with his feelings, he admitted he had learned something valuable as a result of his

partner's demand. And I was eventually able to see that Arlene's complaint about my isolating myself during the construction project was not only valid, it was also a valuable lesson on how to cope with my shame in stressful situations.

There is a two-step process that occurs in couples who are willing to learn from each other during and after the upheavals that punctuate their relationship. First one partner bows to the other's demand; second the resulting change in the way the partners relate turns out to be an improvement, even in the eyes of the partner who originally only complied in order to keep the peace. If the second step does not follow the first, the partner who gave in is likely to resent how much he or she repeatedly has to back down in order to make the relationship work, and the unspoken resentment that lingers after the resolution of one squabble will already contain the seeds of the next major squabble. Of course, there must be open discussion between the partners if there is to be forward motion in the relationship, and it is especially helpful if the partners are able to openly acknowledge how much they have learned from each other.

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