

Outside In: A Man in the Movement

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In 1978 I became Public Education Director of the Austin Rape Crisis Center. I was unaware of just how unusual it was to hire a man at a rape crisis center at the time, but the woman who hired me knew that it would be controversial. She believed that the elimination of sexual violence involved women taking the initiative to reorient and reeducate receptive men on the source of this violence and, in the process, creating a new partnership for social change.

In the years I have done this work, the term "odd man out" has acquired a special meaning for me, not just because I have often been the only male in a room full of women, but also because most of the men I have met who do anti- sexual violence work do so *outside* of rape crisis centers and shelters. In the earlier days, I sometimes felt that being hired to work in a center was somehow less honorable than creating my own organization, such as R.A.V.E.N. in St. Louis or E.M.E.R.G.E. in Boston.

Another source of confusion over the years has been the contrast between my relationships with female colleagues in Austin and the rhetoric on "men in the movement" expressed at conferences of the National Coalition Against Sexual Assault. For the most part, I have worked with self-confident women who could separate their personal anger at men from their valuing of us as allies. Contradictory to the rhetoric, they were willing to invest time and energy in individual men whom they considered educable. I understand that many women do not believe it is their role or responsibility to do this, and I respect that attitude. I am not saying that I feel *entitled* to this attention from women, only that I am grateful that it has been offered.

I have always understood women's willingness to invest time in men as coming from a particular vision of social change, which I came to share. That vision defines rape crisis centers and shelters as, in part, places where women and men relearn how to interact with each other, replacing relationships based on power with relationships based on balance and respect. Such an objective is clearly secondary to the need to provide safe space for healing, but it complements the community education component most centers and shelters have. In addition to being healing places, centers and shelters can be places where women and men do some of the practical work of redefining male-female relationships...not the *only* place, but a good place if both parties are willing. Most men have no experience of woman-centered and women-led organizations. Such environments can require men to confront their power and entitlement issues and give them the opportunity to view reality from a radically different perspective.

I want to approach the "men in the movement" question from within the much larger and more important issue of social change. For me, social change is a process of un-learning

gender- and power-based behavior, which has no reference to gender (or race or sexual preference, etc.). This process, as usual, takes time and practice to fully realize. It is as if we - women and men - are waking up from a long, dulling sleep. (For some, it is a nightmare.) Some of us are already awake others in various stages of waking. The landscape we see as we begin to open our eyes looks unfamiliar and, perhaps, a bit threatening at first. But, after looking around for a while, we find something strangely attractive about it.

Since 1978 I have been in a "waking up process" induced by working in a rape crisis center, and I have observed other men engaged in the same process, at least partially as a result of their training and work at the center. This is not an end in itself. Ultimately, it is the job of men to wake other men up. But if social change is a goal of rape crisis centers and shelters, is it not in the best interest of these groups to challenge, support and educate men to do this work -- men who, in turn, challenge, support and educate other men to do the work?

I want to propose that recruiting men into rape crisis centers and shelters as staff and volunteers can facilitate the social change goals of the anti-sexual violence movement. One way to evaluate this proposal is to examine the life changes men working within rape crisis centers or shelters undergo in those environments over a period of time; then ask to what degree, if any, that transformation motivates them to work for social change? In other words, can the practice of bringing men into woman-centered programs create the new agents for social change who happen to be men? This is an important question if you believe, as I do, that ending men's violence requires the provocative involvement of profeminist men with other men, in concert with the work feminist women have done and continue to do.

If there is a constant to what I have experienced over the years, it is that the full meaning of key experiences was not readily apparent to me. In the early years, especially, I had experiences, which, in a most profound way, were unprecedented in my insulated male experience. It was only after much time had passed that I was able to understand what these experiences meant. Two events stand out for me.

My first lesson in male humility occurred less than a year after being hired at the Austin Rape Crisis Center (ARCC). Sylvia Callaway, then the Executive Director at ARCC, and I went to the first conference of the National Coalition Against Sexual Assault (NCASA) held in Lake Geneva, Wisconsin, in August of 1979. The conference took place at a rustic camp on the lake, complete with bunk beds and dining hall. Out of 200-plus conferees, I was one of six men. Although accustomed to being in a minority, I was more self-conscious than usual. Though pleased with my involvement as a man on the "right side" of the issue, I was not at all sure how I would be regarded here. After all, this was hardly Austin, where Sylvia who had hired me and the other women with whom I worked supported me. There, I represented a philosophical issue made concrete -- a man working to stop rape from *inside* the movement. On this issue, the Austin Rape Crisis Center was a pioneer. So my attendance at the founding conference of NCASA was a venture into unknown territory.

Everyone seemed to take my presence right in stride. No overt hostility, no angry glares, no rude remarks. Just business as usual. But, for the most part, the conferees weren't particularly warm, either. The "I'm so glad a man is here" remarks were less common than the feeling of not being noticed at all -- a feeling to which I was unaccustomed.

The first workshop I attended stands out most for me. I was the only man in a group of 35 or 40 women.

I remember nothing about the substance of the workshop, only the feeling I had after being there for an hour and a half -- a new feeling. I was vaguely confused, as if I was there yet not there. I felt *invisible*. The women went about their business, without reference to me.

It took me years to figure out what had happened that afternoon. As a white male, I was accustomed to having women defer to me. Not in a pronounced way, but more out of politeness than anything else. Though I was never conscious of expecting such deference, I missed it when it wasn't there. My sense of self, my identity, was conditioned by having women regard me as something special.

Many years after that first NCASA conference I was at a conference for profeminist men. One of the keynote speakers, Harry Brod, was talking about his experiences with men who viewed feminism and feminists as "anti-male." In commenting on where he thought this attitude comes from, he made a statement which took me back to Lake Geneva and sat me down again in that workshop. He said that what many men most misunderstand about feminism -- a misunderstanding that leads them to view feminism as anti-male -- is that it is not about men at all. And this, he said, is what is so frightening about feminism to so many men.

What those women were doing in that workshop at Lake Geneva *was not about me*. While I did not experience it as being *against* me, I did experience their way of being together without including me as something completely new...and I did not know what to make of it.

That experience, though I did not comprehend it at the time, was a great gift to me. It was the first time I was forced to confront my own belief in masculine entitlement, something, which had been invisible to me before. Masculine privilege is often so subtle and unremarkable in practice that it is easily missed. The process of discovering cultural truths rendered invisible by centuries of denial and political suppression may threaten men's comfortable view of themselves and their place in the world. For many men, "not about me" translates to "against me" because it challenges the idea that women exist to take care of men.

I regard my experience at Lake Geneva as a necessary balance to the support I was receiving at ARCC. Indeed, it made me aware for the first time just how much I took the traditional male-female roles for granted, and just how subtle and invisible they can be.

Since then, I have often felt as if I were doing a balancing act between two parts of myself -- the old, patriarchal, traditional male part (relatively benign, but still very much alive) and the newer, less defined part that I always seemed to be in search of. Men who take this work seriously and find themselves getting deeper and deeper into it may feel as if they are aiming themselves into a void. Role models are hard to find. For all the discussion and general verbiage generated by the so-called "Men's Movement," only the profeminist wing challenges us to confront the part of ourselves which has caused pain in the world, while also affirming our innate worth as human beings.

Perhaps this is the tightrope that we must learn to walk. But tightrope walking is difficult. (Sometimes we fall.) Success involves learning how to balance opposing forces. It involves, in this case, transforming old, dysfunctional gender habits into new, workable, mutually affirming ways for women and men to be together in the world.

The second experience occurred within a year of the first. Almost all of my work at ARCC had involved coordinating the educational outreach of ARCC to the community, including doing educational presentations and training and supervising a volunteer Speakers Bureau. One or two years before, as a newly hired staff person, I had gone through our training program for volunteers. I had some experience on the hotline, but had never done crisis intervention face-to-face. That was not part of my job and not something I particularly wanted to do -- though, as a staff person, I knew that I had to be prepared for it.

One Saturday night around midnight, the hotline volunteer called and I had to go to the hospital emergency room. I was the only person available. As I drove down there, like anyone in that situation for the first time, I was nervous and trying to remember all the points made in training about crisis intervention. Plus, there was the fact that I was male. I had no idea how the woman I was to meet would respond to that. Our policy was to provide a female volunteer if a male was unacceptable, but no one else was available that night.

I knew, of course, that a "normal" response for a person in Sandy's situation could be almost anything. I was greatly relieved that she seemed glad I was there and that we were able to communicate comfortably. Sandy had recently graduated from a midwestern university and was newly in Austin. She told me that as she was leaving a shopping mall that afternoon a young man had approached her, saying that his car wouldn't start. He asked her to give him a ride to a friend's house nearby. He was about her age, polite -- and she was accustomed to helping people out, having grown up on a farm.

She ended up in a ditch outside of town where he raped her, then beat her with a pistol. She found help at a farmhouse.

Sandy had to have x-rays and a rape exam before we could leave. In the several hours it took for her release, she said many of the things a woman in that situation says, and I responded as best I could. Other than the relief I felt at Sandy's acceptance of me, I don't

remember much about how I felt while I was there. I was trying hard to do everything "right" and must have put my own feelings on hold.

Around 4:00 or 4:30 a.m. she was ready to be released. The only friends she had in Austin were her boss and his wife, since she had been in town such a short time. Sandy asked me to call her boss' wife, tell her what had happened, and ask if she could stay with her. That done, we got in my car and headed for a new subdivision on the outskirts of town. Upon our arrival, we went in, sat and talked for a while with her friend; then Sandy went to bed.

The sun was coming up as I left. I felt strange...fatigue, I thought. I was numb from the previous six or seven hours. But about half way home the numbness ended and I broke down. One moment I was fine, the next I was sobbing uncontrollably. I didn't see this coming and I was unable to control it when it did. I was shocked and frightened at what was happening to me. I had never experienced anything like this before and now here I was...driving down the highway at daybreak falling apart.

As before, it took me several years to put this experience in perspective. Nothing that I had to do that night surprised me. I had an idea of what to expect in the emergency room from the training I had received, and I had heard rape survivors tell their stories. But that information was all *in my head*. I had read Brownmiller's *Against Our Will* and other writers of the time. I *knew* the dynamics of rape and the cultural context of such acts. I *talked* about it in educational presentations. But I did not *feel* it in my gut until that night.

Much more than my experience in Lake Geneva, that night with Sandy in the emergency room confronted me with the blank spaces in my life, which I associate with growing up male. Thirty-odd years of life had not prepared me to assimilate emotionally what happened to her. Women have an understanding of sexual assault born of their "at risk" status which comes from being a woman. For me -- for most men -- there is no such understanding, only a blank space.

It is easy to avoid the emotions associated with rape as long as we do not feel vulnerable to rape.

Until that night, my work at the rape crisis center had been a job -- an interesting job, a job that I enjoyed and found stimulating and challenging -- but a job nonetheless. As I look on it now, I think my time with Sandy began the process of turning a job into a lifetime commitment. Something in me changed forever.

Working in a rape crisis center has given me access to the world as women experience it; it has given me a chance to feel their vulnerability...their fear...and their sense of injustice. These feelings have created in me a personal imperative: the need to work for change.

But this opportunity is not available to many men. Trust and power issues keep many women in centers and shelters from being comfortable with men in their programs. Their

concerns are easy to understand. Men created the problem of sexual violence and most still do not grasp the connections between everyday sexism and violence. This creates mistrust.

But if women and men are to overcome their history and be able to redefine power in relationships, they, at some point, must come together, face-to-face, and learn to do this in real life -- over the dinner table, in the workplace, and, in my view, in settings where women's experience is validated and women's leadership is guaranteed. Rape crisis centers and shelters are such places.

Document found online at: <http://www.rapecrisiscenter.com/Outside%20In%20-%20A%20Man%20in%20the%20Movement.htm>