

## The Fear of Men

by Paul Kivel

As I looked around at the young men in the classroom I once again noted how much activity there was. Many were pushing each other, by name, by comment, by little shoves, by punches on the arm. These 13 and 14 year-olds were already wary of each other and constantly testing every day in class, in the halls, on the field. When I walked down the halls I heard it too, "wimps!" "fag!" "punk!" The little words, or more like slaps in the face, reminders to act tough, act like a man, don't let your guard down because some other guy will cap on you sure as you're standing there.

I could see it in the classroom when the bell rang as well. Class starts and everyone gets quiet. The subject is a little scary; they aren't sure at first about this adult man; or, more importantly, how it will look to the other guys if anyone speaks up too much? Can't take too many risks, always looking over your shoulder.

It was like that for me too, especially on dates. I'd be in a car with a girl and I would be trying to remember what the guys said I was supposed to do, prompted to try everything because of the threats, the teasing and the put-downs if I didn't come up with something to say or do or prove how good I was with girls. At times I was almost more on a date with them and their ever present eyes of approval or disapproval. By college I didn't need their voices or presence anymore. I had taken it in so well that I knew exactly what I "had" to do on a date.

Much has been written about men's fear of women, once again blaming women for our insecurities, our survival tactics, our problems getting along or getting by. The fear I see in the classroom, the fear I identify within myself is not a fear of women, although I'm sure there is a small element of that present: the fear is the fear of other men. This fear grows out of 37 years of being tested, judged, attacked, competed with, dominated, and challenged by other men and boys. It is not an irrational fear of some unknown, made-up terror. The fear was built on getting beat up after school by some older kid in the neighborhood who didn't like me for some reason I never knew. The fear was built on the names and teasing I got because sometimes I cried after I got beat up. The fear was built on all the times my dad put me down because I wasn't good enough in sports, or at school, or whatever he decided was the standard that day. It was the fear that I wouldn't get a job, get a career, get a safe place in the world. And some of it was fear of what I might do to someone else to take care of myself.

The reality of physical and emotional violence was real and ongoing; it's still with me whenever I am around other men. Some of these men had authority over me, socially backed power to run me over. Coaches, bosses, older guys, teachers, my father--all taught me well the survival skills of acting tough, not crying, keeping it to myself, not making mistakes or admitting to weakness. Of course, they did not teach me the costs.

I know the costs now and I fight to unlearn the skills. I try to pass that understanding on to the younger men that I work with. But I don't necessarily trust other men. I can't always afford to. And any theory of how I am which says it was my mother, or breaking away from my mother, or the absence of my father, or my women teachers or girlfriends does not hear, see and feel my pain and hurt at the hands of men, men I knew, loved and trusted and who violated that trust. And any man who says I should open up with him has to earn that trust. And any man who says that men will redeem me or teach me, or that I should be pushed or bullied or challenged to change by a male leader, therapist or group leader doesn't hear my hurt and pain and fear of exactly that kind of "caring". The kind that always seems to come with anger, bullying, and violence.

There is danger from other men. Women know this to the core of their being. So do men even if we deny it. There is different danger for each of us depending upon our place in society, the amount of power we have to protect ourselves. There is physical danger from men we meet on the street, there is danger from men we work for and men we work with. There is danger from men who are our friends, around our kids, around the women we relate to as family, friends or lovers. There is danger from men who hold administrative power over us, those who hold racial power over us, those who have more money than we do, from any man who has power to affect our lives if we don't "act right."

We do need each other as men. We do need to trust and work together and build a different community. We do need to stop violence among and between ourselves and those around us. But right now that work is coalition work for me because my fear of men is based on the danger of men. I cannot afford to let go of my survival skills, anymore than the teen men in that classroom can afford to, unless and until the strength to replace them can come from inside myself and the safety that nurtures that strength is commonly striven for by more of us.

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