

I admit it. I cracked up the first time I saw this on a t-shirt. There might even have been a bit of smirkage in my somewhat self-righteous laughter and there is always something to be said for seeing the lighter side of things. Which, by virtue of the laws of our current Multiverse, immediately invokes its polar opposite. As in sometimes not so funny. Rather dark, actually.

Mockery is one thing when it's done tongue-in-cheek style, it is quite another when it ratchets up to full-on man-bashing status - a popular though not particularly pretty sport in which a lot of women engage. So for that matter, does the media, television and, according to several psychologists, the world of mental health professionals. In keeping with the truth in advertising theme (see above) I have, on occasion, vented some creative anti-male spleen as well.

Men are babies. All men cheat. Women are more intelligent. Men can't show emotion. They're inherently violent. They're uninvolved and inept fathers. The litany goes on and on. Sometimes the comments are justified as reciprocity for what women have long been subjected to and is used as a virtual rallying cry, "They deserve it!" However, from what can I see in the world (not to mention all of human history) "an eye for an eye" sensibility hasn't been working out all that well.

So I decided to talk to some guys about the situation. First though, I must tell you that to a man, when I recited various versions of "the litany", every one of them laughed ruefully and each one replied with their version of, "Well, it's basically true." It has been my experience that is decidedly not what you hear from many women when the litany is on the other foot (as it were). Also, I must note that that there is a difference between being manly and machismo. One is developing the most glorious aspects of being male and the other is overcompensation for staggering insecurities.

So for years I've had a theory that men (in this country) are more oppressed than women insomuch as the oppression continues to be documented by many. To deny it exists is patently ridiculous. But the

hobbling of men by subtle and not so subtle methods is quite hidden. So much so, that most men don't know it's happening.

Women grow up in a world that encourages and even sets expectations for a level of communication and sharing among other women. We've been exploring those relationships since we were two, so most of us think it is instinctive rather than a learned behavior. For instance, I could walk into the Ladies Room in a restaurant, see someone who

looked upset and have a more personal and intimate conversation with a total stranger than most men have with their best friend of 25 years. Society endorsed and nurtured that behavior.

I asked Jim Ross, SVP and General Counsel for The Nielsen Company, what he thought about the exclusion of men in same-sex friendships.

"I raised two boys and I wanted to cover the bases of the real world," Jim said, "but outside of that I didn't encourage them to have multiple confiding relationships the way most women do. I don't even think those were available in the male community. The opportunity for a connected relationship where a man can give voice to insecurity, fear, sadness or disappointment is with a woman. And if you find the right relationship, that's your shot."

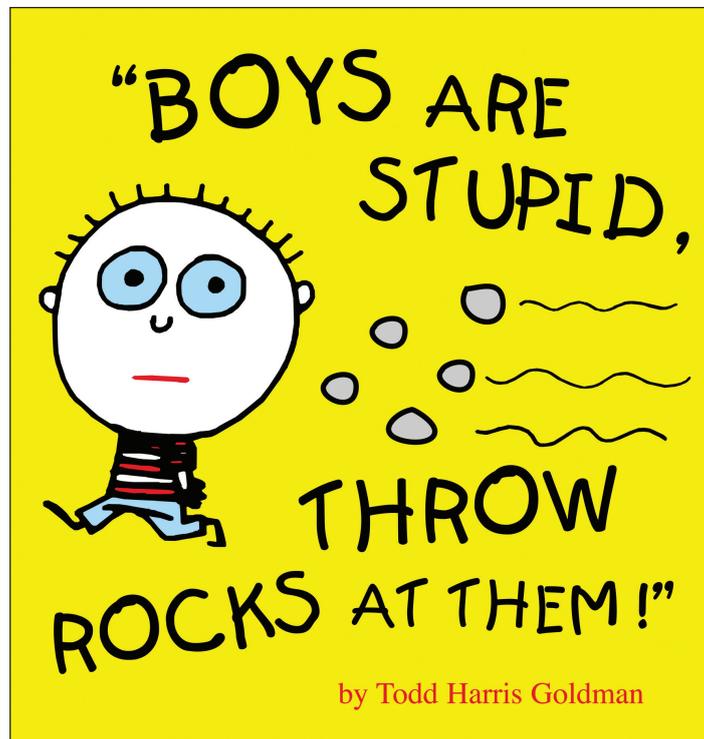
When asked, "If this was available to you, would you want it?" Jim responded, "Logically, who wouldn't want that tool for dealing with life, but I have a visceral reaction which is: 'Are you kidding me?'"

The oppression is so sotto voce and subtly indoctrinated that men don't even know, (never mind believe) that there is a place where it would be safe to conduct a similar conversation with another man.

It isn't about men being homophobic; it is instead about a concretized awareness that no such thing exists.

Enter Donald Cohen, a marriage and family therapist in Weston, CT for 34 years. Dr. Cohen says, "The worst thing you can do in a relationship is minimize somebody else's existence. We really underestimate the potentiality of men's ability to feel and to relate.

Specifically in relation to man-bashing he responded, "What women



## THE ART OF COMMUNICATION BETWEEN THE SEXES

Story by Susan Heller

# Relationships



need to understand is when they do that to men, it emasculates them, they feel rejected and what happens underneath all that is it makes them want to strike back. They're so insecure they will overcompensate by getting really mad or very mean. They will act out by seeking pornography, a mistress or manifesting a work addiction."

To put it in perspective, think about what has happened to you and the people you love for merely the last six months: upset, angst, triumph, loss, whatever. Now imagine not having your girl-posse in your life, no one to empathize, intervene, discuss and problem-solve any issue or incident for the last half year with you. Imagine not being able to talk about any of it, with anybody. I can hear heads exploding all over the county. Expand that list of events to include your very first date, 4th grade traumas, college insanity, career insecurity, the anguish of failure, the giddiness of true love, the pain of not feeling good enough, the fear of not being a good parent. An entire lifetime of experiences good and bad all held in a very human and isolated male container.

Dr. Cohen comments, "In direct and subtle ways, boys are taught to be embarrassed for being in the receptive mode. We have a very difficult time in our society balancing feminine and male energies." Feminine energy (not female sexual identity) is introspective, contemplative, often creative. Masculine energy (not male sexuality) is energy turned outward, manifesting as activity in the world.

Dr. Cohen says it's important to get out of the gender thing, that women and men need to balance the two energies of masculine and feminine within themselves. "This is ancient wisdom," he says. "There

is no validity in one role being more important than another. The true task is developing yourself. If you ever told me I was going to be writing songs and lyrics and poetry, I would have told you to have your head examined." No small irony there.

The fact that his creativity didn't blossom until he was over 40, is something he attributes to maturity and exposure to the possibilities.

Jim Ross says, "If I'd had kids in my twenties, I likely would have defaulted to the behaviors of my father and the Irish community. I wouldn't have had time to distance myself to conclude that the environment could be different and there were ways of resolving disputes or disagreements that didn't involve socking someone in the nose."

What would their journeys have looked like had they had a same-sex posse that cared, cajoled, offered kindness and also tough love when necessary all along the way? It's a rhetorical, but fascinating, question.

Jim's initial description of how men move through the world mirrors many people's thinking:

1. They don't need/want to bond.
2. They're fighting over the spoils.
3. They are fairly Darwinian in every aspect of their lives.

Yet in his practice, Dr. Cohen says he sees quite a few men who feel very unloved and disrespected and that, he explains, is when you see a lot of problems. When women are bashing men they work themselves

up just the way men do. "I see it in my peers and in my patients," remarks Cohen. "Women make the assumption that a man doesn't know how to do anything. This has a long history because many men saw the same behavior in their parents in the control of what went on at home. Where sociologically women knew how to deal with emotions, and men just didn't know how to do any of this stuff. Men who were treated like that by mothers and then by wives feel profoundly disrespected and unloved. Women watched their mothers dominate or compensate for their father's behavior."

I think of it this way: if you were raised speaking Russian, that's your language that's how you communicate. To speak another language you need to learn it. So in an admittedly gross oversimplification, if you were raised with the language of disrespect and condescension of men, that's pretty much your lifetime vernacular. Unless you consciously choose to explore alternatives. And if you were raised with a language that did not include the skill-set of how to deal with emotions, how to ask for help, or how to be kind to yourself and others, then without same-sex friends, men think they are the only ones feeling inadequate, lost or rejected and can project their upset toward women.

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So when we as women ask men to speak Russian -- "Tell me your feelings, I want empathy, are you scared/happy/mad, why won't you listen to me they way my friends do?"-- and they say, "I can't," we hear, "I won't." Then we up the ante: "If you loved me, you would speak Russian." The reality is, he never learned the language, never even knew it existed as a possibility for him.

Jim Ross has a very good answer for that dilemma. "The, 'If you love me you will speak Russian,' request is simply the wrong approach. 'I'm going to show you the benefits of speaking Russian, and when you experience them, you'll never go back to the language of origin,' is the way to go."

How can we help men become better at being men? Dr. Cohen says, "Encourage a man to get in touch with his creative side - the arts, doing something in a caring way, giving back to the community. You'll see the advice is the same for both sides here, because we're not talking about gender. It isn't about male and female. It is the energy of feminine and masculine."

So perhaps we can help men become better men by being better women. It's a theory.

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*Susan Heller has earned a reputation for excellence as a Writer, Ghostwriter, Producer and Director. She also designs and directs; TV spots, advertising, video and multimedia presentations when she's not writing speeches or helping other professionals hone their public speaking skills.*



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