

The Lie of Entitlement*

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"Lying is done with words, and also with silence." - Adrienne Rich, *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence*

Because I will be using my personal experience as the vehicle for this essay, I want to start by saying a bit about who I am. I am a divorced white male in my early fifties. Reared in the southeast United States by working-class, Catholic parents, I earn my living as a self-employed furniture maker. I am university educated, middle-class, and straight. As such, I inherited all the privilege the rape culture provides.

The connection between my life and that culture was largely invisible to me until I began working with Men Stopping Violence, an organization dedicated to ending violence against women - specifically battering, rape, and incest. What I have learned through my associations with other men and in particular through my work with Men Stopping Violence is that, although my experience may differ from that of other men in some of its specifics, it is frighteningly similar at its core. In our childhood homes, on playgrounds, in locker rooms, in dormitories, and in fraternities of all kinds, men learned to define our masculinity in terms of our differentiation from what we felt was feminine as well as our ability to control women. The dichotomy was absolute: I was either in control or I was a pussy.

This said, what does my personal process have to do with transforming a rape culture? In particular, how do I support patriarchal values, making them seem almost "natural" when I choose not to reckon with them in my own movement through the world?

For me, a hint of an explanation came while experiencing that paradigm shift that took place when I began training with Men Stopping Violence. I was certainly not a stereotypical villain when I came to the organization asking how I could help. In fact, I had a long history of politically correct and socially responsible behaviors. I spent ten years in a seminary where I learned empathy for the downtrodden and how to help them while pursuing my theological studies. I was outspoken against the Vietnam War even while in the military. In the late 1960s, I participated in civil rights marches and demonstrations in my native Mississippi. I was the co-founder of a group working for environmental sanity in the panhandle of northern Florida. I studied and maintained a voluminous library of feminist writings. I was always careful to keep copies of *Z* magazine and the *Utne Reader* nearby. I worked for the passage of the ERA. I made it a point over the last fifteen years to choose strong, independent women as companions. For years, I participated in men's groups where I shared feeling and supported others in doing the same. Thirty years after the movement, I continued to ascribe to the hippie value that all men are brothers and conducted my business accordingly. A problem for me was finding other men who respected and shared such a liberal belief system; as a result, most of my friends were women. I worked and read to overcome my racist, classist, and sexist beliefs. In all honesty, I felt quite good about the job I'd done. I considered myself a politically concerned, sensitive, and principled person.

It was this man, immobilized by what I now recognize as my homophobia, who resistantly followed the wise and careful shepherding of a dear friend to the Men and Masculinity Conference held in Atlanta in 1990. There I became acquainted with Men Stopping Violence through the keynote address of its executive director, Kathleen Carlin. Through her I learned of the Principle of Intentions versus Effects: what gives my actions their moral value is not necessarily my intentions, but rather their effects on others - specifically, those people who are disenfranchised by my privilege, those marginalized by my sense of entitlement. But Kathleen did not stop there. She went on to say that they, rather than I, were the ones to name those effects. What's more, they got to say what I needed to do to redress the damage.

Despite my liberal bent, these ideas caught me completely unawares. In that moment, my privilege was rendered visible to me in a way that was undeniable. With that epiphany came my first inkling of why my privilege remains largely invisible to me. So extreme and so complete was my privilege that to question it literally never entered my mind. My sense of entitlement insulated and isolated me from threats of any kind. I had no reason to be aware of my privilege.

The challenge to relinquish my privilege both chilled and excited me. However, the threat of that challenge made it very elusive to me. Trying to examine it made it invisible. Nonetheless, with a strange mixture of apprehension, confusion and altruism, I called Men Stopping Violence the following week. I was ready to step into a position as an instructor in their batterers intervention program after an orientation to the organization. Hold up! There's a one-year training to be done? Well, after a review of my background, I will certainly be exempted from most of the internship.

I was hurt and angry to find that before I could work with the organization, I was to complete the entire year-long internship, a clear waste of my time and money. I thought these people were looking for help! I was incensed that my M.A. in psychology wasn't enough. I was confused that my work with prisoners while in the seminary wasn't enough. I was surprised that my former employment with vocational rehabilitation wasn't enough. I was indignant that my sagacity and righteousness weren't enough. What more did these people want?

My first class brought the answer. My internship began as a participant in a twenty-four-week class for batterers. The initial exercise was to check in with one's worst incident of abuse to women. After several days of struggle about whether to lie or not, it dawned on me that the training was not about helping "those guys"; it was about confronting my own abusive and controlling behaviors. My world quickly shifted 180 degrees: I was going to be held accountable in a very new way, accountable to women. I felt the Principle of Intentions versus Effects beginning to slowly recondense in my brain. I wanted out!

I wanted to be one of the good guys. I wanted to say what battering is about and who does it. I wanted to say what working on sexism looks like. I wanted to say what racism is and what to do about it. I wanted to be the one to say when homeless people, gays, people of color, and most especially women "go too far" in their self-expression. I wanted to define fair and just. I wanted to say what is appropriate and when. I wanted to say what is sensual and sexy. I wanted to say what "no" means. I wanted to say what is provocative or erotic for women. I wanted to say whether this sense of entitlement propagates and condones a rape culture. Last, if questioned, I wanted to deny this need for control.

It looked rough! I had twenty-three weeks of class and fifty-one weeks of training to go. Each week I struggled with the Principle of Intentions versus Effects while I identified my abusiveness and listed its effects on those I had silenced. Each week I sat with those intense feelings of vulnerability, fear, and confusion as the reality of women was brought into the room. Through this process, my acceptance of the Principle of Intentions versus Effects grew. Yet, each week, I used my theological, psychological, social, and political training to concoct new ruses to allow me to jump outside that system of accountability.

The challenges for me surfaced in subtle attempts to control: Why do I shield my expectations from my partner, keeping her walking on eggshells, focused on my life rather than hers? How do I store disappointment for its ambush potential at a later date? Why, to feel safe, do I present myself as an emotional enigma that she must figure out? Why does being direct with women make me feel so vulnerable and out of control? Why is being sexual with a woman so important to me? What does it mean for me to be sexual with a woman? What am I trying to do when I pout and withdraw following a refusal of sex? What does it mean when a woman agrees to be sexual with me in the face of my sulking and moping around? What constitutes consent between someone of the subordinate and someone of the dominant caste? If I was unable to get control via psychological and verbal manipulation, would I take the next step - physical force? The "good guy/bad guy" model no longer made sense to me. I was simply another man moving across the continuum of controlling behaviors to get my way with women.

In retrospect, my training with Men Stopping Violence was needed to uproot my arrogance. To try to exempt myself was to lie about my involvement in a rape culture. I wanted to remain silent around my role in the perpetuation of a culture that condones violence against women.

I had not been exempted from the internship because my background and preparation had been carried out in an environment of disdain for the Principles of Intentions versus Effects. My previous training endowed me with the authority to take control, define solutions, and co-opt the "problem" people into carrying out my ideas. The two types of training are not the same, and it was critical that I have a clear understanding of that. For me to have received an exemption would have been to lie about women's reality - to say that I could in fact name it.

Most of what I brought to Men Stopping Violence was of enormous help to me as I assimilated the Principle of Intention versus Effects, but it was and sometimes continues to be an enormous burden to me while trying to negotiate the labyrinth of my sense of entitlement; my privilege always gives me permission to frame my perceptions as the Truth.

This lie of entitlement - my privilege to describe the reality of women - gives a rape culture its life. Patriarchy is predicated on this lie and our protective silence. It is the lie I wanted so badly to tell the class. It is the lie that allows me to describe myself as one of the "good guys." It is the lie not permitted in the classroom. When this lie is disallowed, our rape culture is challenged at its foundation. If I go on to name that lie, if I break ranks with the patriarchy by acknowledging that I cannot know the reality of those subordinated by the system of values that entitles me, that system is no longer seamless; its existence is endangered.

As a man, someone the rape culture has endowed with credibility, my schism has the potential to be all the more destructive. Of course I will be cast with the lot of women for this betrayal. Nonetheless, just as I was moved by the honesty of other men not to lie about my worst incident of abuse to a woman, so perhaps other men will be inspired by this truth telling to break ranks. My vision is that this personal process moves logarithmically, reaching critical mass, and ultimately destroying the institutions that support and encourage rape.

I must confess I have difficulty holding this vision in focus, but I also know that I cannot work for something I cannot imagine. If I let my mind run wild, I can see men naming the lie of privilege in such numbers that this system of values begins to unravel. As it unravels, the rape culture begins to transform into one of respect and dignity for women.

What can keep this vision from being realized? Why is this vision so difficult for me to hold in focus? Because to stop lying means nothing less than changing what it means to be a man. Because my proclivity is to remain silent and to consolidate my power as a man - not to write this essay, not to blow the whistle on myself. Silence feels easy. I don't feel like a man when I'm not in control. I feel confused and vulnerable. It frightens me to say out loud: As long as men control women's bodies, a rape culture will continue. As long as men get to define the sexuality and eroticism of women, a rape culture will continue. As long as men link sexual excitement with control, domination, and violence, a rape culture will continue. Until the effects of men's behavior on women define the moral value of that behavior, a rape culture will thrive. Violence of all kinds can be seen as the refusal to accept the Principle of Intentions versus Effect. Privilege is always paid for by those it subjugates.

As a man, I accrue privilege simply by remaining silent, accepting this legacy, and saying nothing about its cost in terms of women's lives. Men can stop the lie of our inherent superiority in its tracks by simply not acting as if it were true. I do not mean to imply that what is simple will be easy. It is extremely difficult for me. But the process begins with the acknowledgment of privilege; the terms of my privilege are that I do not have to acknowledge it. The process begins with me saying aloud that the standards of gender identity are contrived to accommodate my privilege. The male/female dichotomy is based on relatively minor biological differences that are eroticized, fetishized, mythologized, and exploited to declare men and women "opposites." This social-political dichotomy is used to promote the idea of men as intelligent,

rational, sagacious, and moral, while women are promoted as our opposites, as dense, emotive, obtuse, and evil. As I aggrandize myself, I demean my opposite. As I deify the masculine, I necessarily vilify women. The degradation not only makes attack permissible, it makes it a moral imperative.

When my privilege is laid out in all its ugliness, how can I remain silent? My hope is that what Gloria Steinem said of the women's consciousness-raising groups in the 1970s is true for men today: "Personal truth telling as a path to social change is the most important and enduring legacy." I am breaking my silence and try to tell my truth, trusting social change will follow. If men break the silence in concert with one another, we can transform this rape culture. As the perpetrators, we can bring about the transformation today, if we so choose. If we maintain our silence, we undoubtedly will rape another six hundred thousand women in this country in the coming year and in each of the years to come.

My personal process has carried me to the place where I know that I am lying when I fail to acknowledge openly my privilege as a man, and that my failure to make that acknowledgment holds the rape culture in place. To transform the culture, I must transform what it means for me to be a man; I must relinquish my claim on women.

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