

Gather the Men

My name is Fred and I'm one of the men.

This is a most unusual community of men. One I have never experienced before. There is no explicitly defined leadership, no overt personal agendas: we are not here for ourselves but for others. We talk – a conversation about men, about women, about families and about issues of violence and trauma. A consciousness arising from different perspectives but sharing common themes has begun to take shape among us. I'd like to share some of the highlights of our journey so far.

Be the Peace has called for men to gather; for our support, insight and efforts to find a way to a more peaceful world. We are those men: teachers, social workers, retirees, fishers, therapists, business men, artists and others. We do not speak for all men, only ourselves, and those who may wish to join us. We heard the call in November of last year and have met bi-weekly since then to discuss and explore our roles as men, in bringing about a more peaceful world.

In the beginning we viewed it as a call for help, an acknowledgement by women that although men are the problem there can be no solution without us. In the intervening months we've modified that view to a more inclusive perspective. A view, we hope, will turn us away from seeing victims and perpetrators and allow us to turn to one another with compassion, fairness, openness, honesty, trust and hope. We have much to learn.

We began by exploring our feelings about ourselves and our relationship and experience with violence. It is, at times, a slow and arduous exploration of the heart of men. In our hearts we all want a peaceful world so it seemed that the heart is where we should begin to look for solutions. All the while aware that better minds than ours and much effort has gone into finding solutions - with little positive change and no real reduction in the amount of violence in society. To make real change we must reach the "heart of the matter" or "have a change of heart" or "have a heartfelt response": language and phrases we are all familiar with. Real change will also take courage, an interesting word with its root cor; taken from the Latin, meaning heart – it speaks to the source of courage.

The language we use is important. As we have learned in producing this communication – words can be exploitive and reinjure even when used with the kindest and most sincere intentions.

SO - Is it getting better or is it getting worse?

Violence everywhere imaginable and everywhere - unimaginable violence.

We hear it every day, the background news of our lives: our tears fall for the innocent, the trampled, the beaten and the scarred. Is it hopeless, this struggle for peace, that; in our hearts we all reach for?

Alternatives, located in Bridgewater had 30 open files in 1999.

In 2010 alone they had 372 new referrals. More than an 1100% increase.

So is it getting better or is it getting worse?

Here's the thing!

In 1999, 99% of the cases were court ordered, in 2010 70% of the cases were self-referrals; no court or child welfare order to attend.

That means 260 people voluntarily stepped forward and asked for help.

How has this happened?

Why are people - asking for help, and not - reporting for punishment as ordered?

According to the Society's Director Art Fisher and his colleague Deborah May, their clients say "this is the only place people listen without judging me."

During the last decade, workers at Alternatives have learned that the issues identified by both women and men, include: men and women's participation in violence, experiences of childhood abuse, sexual violence, and many shared experiences of cultural and social oppression.

They respond to the issues, their clients identify, as needing support, learning or intervention. The message that Alternatives listens and helps spread by word of mouth indicating what's possible when barriers to understanding are overcome. This successful community resource has developed because Alternatives takes great care to listen without judgment.

This change did not happen overnight.

There are no overnight solutions.

There is not a panacea.

There are seven billion solutions and you are one of them.

Whether we identify as women or men, we all risk becoming harmful, paternalistic and judgmental, especially when we think we are the good ones, or the ones in the right. It's very important for all of us to work together, and not undermine each other's efforts with judgements and resistance.

This is about listening without judging and understanding without condoning?

Listen without Judging - Understand without Condoning - Consequences squarely faced.

We think there is a lesson here.

Everything we see around us, every organization every technology had to be imagined by somebody or a group of somebodies before it became a reality. We need to envision a future free of violence before we can make it a reality. What that imagined reality looks like and how we plan to get there will be our task.

So here we are a bunch of men swimming in a sea of uncertainty searching for a handle to pry open the mystery of how to make real change to protect the vulnerable and share this world with women in a fair, open, honest and trusting way. And yes I am aware that the "handle and prying" analogy is decidedly masculine in tone. No apology necessary. If men are to affect and effect change we need to come to this process as authentic men.

A host of questions arise from this exploration:

What is an authentic masculine approach to the reality of violence?

Should we take an educative, supportive, interventionist or integrative approach?

How can our small group of men begin to change a masculine culture that is founded in a centuries old process of feminine devaluation and misogyny?

How can we speak freely with women without fear of being accused: of somehow, as being men; we are responsible for all violence?

Do we need to become more like women?

Do we need to see through the eyes of women or feel with feminine sensitivities?

Are men just too insensitive; have we been trained to bury, ignore and belittle our own sensitive natures and as a result unleash unresolved emotional discord with violence directed at the weak and the vulnerable, particularly women?

How can we reduce or eliminate stigmatization of people involved in violence?

We may not want to talk about these things but to effect change; communication among men and the community needs to extend beyond a few grunts, shouts and hugs on the playing field.

Can there be understanding without compassion or love without vulnerability?

We need to shed the belief that toughness and sensitivity cannot coexist in a real man. We need to find the strength to be more compassionate - and the courage to be more vulnerable. It will not make us more or less feminine or masculine but more fully human.

People can be peaceful, hopeful, open, honest, trusting, compassionate and brave. These characteristics are neither masculine nor feminine they are the foundation for our journey together to a more peaceful community?

If we accept that the violent nature of men is the problem, then there is no hope- only counter measures to remediate the pain and injury inflicted by men.

We refuse to believe that.

We need to look at violence not as the driver of the situation but a symptom of the problem. This of course raises the question, what is the problem? As we uncover answers to that question we can follow a path to peace.

We know violence is pervasive and requires a diverse set of tools and approaches. We cannot tackle everything at once. We see three distinct areas for action:

Preventative Action – Acute Reaction – Restorative Response.

Currently, most public and government attention is directed to acute reaction in crisis situations - which is only natural; the old flight or fight reaction to threat or pain. Social and family services from the federal to municipal level are reactive to critical care situations; the same box as the “Sickness Care System.”

Couple that with the fragmentation and victimization of society by the tyranny of government bureaucracy; a system that encourages people to present themselves as the most deserving victim in order to receive meager funding to protect and care for the most critical cases of injustice and abuse in their silo of concern. The silos expect us to choose: “My pain is more important than yours”. This is the voice of domination, not the voice of love.

This is not to blame or fault people working in these systems, most of whom are sincere, hardworking and dedicated to finding solutions - as we all are. It’s just the nature of the system we have all created.

How can the fragments we have created be transformed into a healthy whole?

What are the threads that connect all or at least some of these fragments?

How can we work together to change a system where both government and community groups perpetuate silos and create bullying among us for funding dollars?

This is one of the most critical questions we need to ask, so that we can transform our organizations into places that genuinely help everyone. This is a critical question. The answers will transform our organizations into places that genuinely help everyone.

The most vulnerable are children, both boys and girls. If we only “gather the men” to help the women, we are not genuinely caring for those little boys or the men they grow up to become. We should also be gathering to help the families, youth, and children of our communities.

We see our role as integrative, preventative and restorative not interventionist. There are many others better prepared than us to address that approach.

Although it is almost cliché to view community as the unifying solution to every conceivable social ill; we believe community values of family, however defined; and shared stories of everyday life, including lives of violence: hold a key to understanding the pervasive nature of violence in our society. We believe that to hear and share the stories of men and women and families of violence is an essential step in understanding the problem.

As hard as it may be we need to move beyond the victim perpetrator model that has us locked in an endless battle of blame, shame and fear. We believe one of the reasons little headway has been made in the struggle against violence is because some of the story is missing. Without judgement, we need to reach across that wasteland of blame, of shame and of fear to hear and understand the stories of men and women of violence without condoning or approving of it. Our first tasks will be to collect and disseminate these stories in a way that allows the community to listen with compassion, open hearts and minds and without judgement.

Working from a non-judgemental, compassionate, honest and inclusive perspective with fairness and safety for all, we can strive to build a more peaceful and respectful community.

Gather The Men (GTM)

April 2013