Letting Go

Feminist and Social Justice Insight and Activism

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Letting Go of Normal when "Normal" Is Pathological, or Why Feminism Is a Gift to Men

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I have never been normal. For years I struggled and failed to be normal, until I finally just gave up. Since then, I am doing much better. I feel better, in large part, because of feminism, and more specifically radical feminism, the kind of feminism that is relentlessly harsh in evaluating men's behavior—especially men's violence and sexual exploitation of women—in a patriarchal world. I embrace radical feminism, which sounds crazy to some people but is the sanest place a man can land. I recommend it for all men, not just on principle—because it's the right thing to do morally and politically, though I believe that it is—but because it is in our own self-interest.

Here's why I can say this with confidence to another man: I am not normal, and you shouldn't be either. The quest for normal in patriarchy is a losing game. All this likely will seem counter-intuitive to many men, since most of us were trained to be afraid of feminism. What are feminists? I was taught most of my life that feminists were ugly women who couldn't get dates and as a result had a grudge against men, wanted revenge against men, and would do unpleasant things to men given the chance.

That's what I was socialized to think, and that's what I thought for my first thirty years. But then I started to actually read feminist writing and talk to lots of feminists. Over the next couple of years, I kept reading and talking, and I took seriously the feminist critique of patriarchy. Slowly, I was persuaded by the intellectual and moral power of the arguments they made, but probably more important was the way those arguments resonated with me personally. I realized that radical feminism would allow me to let go of my failed quest to be normal.

Definitions

It is important to be clear about what I mean by terms that are used in different ways by different people. *Patriarchy* is a social system based on the assertion that males and females were created or evolved differently for different purposes,

with men taking their rightful place on top (Lerner 1986). In patriarchy, the differences in male and female biology are assumed to produce significant moral, intellectual, and emotional differences between men and women, which are used to justify men's subordination of women. Whether grounded in God or evolution, patriarchal systems claim that the differences are immutable, an odd idea given that patriarchy is a relatively recent phenomenon in human history.

The development of patriarchy is tied to agriculture and the domestication of animals, when the communal and cooperative ethic of gatherer-hunter societies was replaced with ideas of private ownership and patrimony that led to men controlling women's reproduction and claiming ownership of women. In the 200,000-year history of the modern human, patriarchy is less than 10,000 years old; in this sense, patriarchy is not only not universal and not timeless but a relatively recent shift away from a considerably more just and sustainable gender system.

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Feminism analyzes the ways in which women are oppressed as a class—the ways in which men as a class hold more power, and how those differences in power systematically disadvantage women in the public and private spheres. Gender oppression plays out in different ways depending on social location, as men's oppression of women is affected by other systems of oppression—heterosexism, racism, class privilege, and histories of colonial and postcolonial domination (Hunter College 2014).

Radical feminism is the analysis of the ways that, within this patriarchal system in which we live, one of the key sites of this oppression—one key method of domination—is sexuality. One of the most powerful radical feminists, the late writer Andrea Dworkin (1981, 1983, 1988), was central to the feminist antipornography movement in which I have worked. The radical feminist philosophy that has shaped my thinking is most clearly articulated by Marilyn Frye (1983, 1992), while Catharine MacKinnon (1987, 1989) has been influential in my understanding of the law's role, and Audre Lorde (1984, 2009) challenged many of my naïve assumptions about gender and race.

I also understand radical feminism not just as a way of critiquing men's domination of women but also as a way to understand systems of power and oppression more generally. Hierarchies of any kind are inconsistent with human flourishing unless a compelling argument can be made that the hierarchy is necessary to help those with less power in the system, a test that can rarely be met. Feminism is not the only way into a broader critique of the many types of oppression, of course, but it is one important way, and was for me the first route into such a framework.

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The feminist movement with which I identify is not satisfied with improving the conditions for women within other hierarchical systems. The contempo-

rary United States is still a white-supremacist society—even after the significant achievements of the civil-rights and liberation movements—and so radical feminism must critique the current manifestations of that racial hierarchy and reject the common claim that the country is "post-racial" (Bonilla-Silva 2013). Capitalism is a profoundly inhuman, anti-democratic, and unsustainable system (Jensen 2009, 150–156)—a threat to the health of people and planet—and so radical feminism must articulate a different ecological and economic vision (Mies and Shiva 2014) and reject the current capitalist triumphalism, often referred to as "neoliberalism" or "market fundamentalism" (Schweickart 2002).

Radical feminists can, of course, work pragmatically to improve the conditions for all women within existing systems, but the ultimate objective is the abolition of those hierarchies. The work, in short, is not to lean into hierarchy but to eliminate it.

Because there are different approaches to feminism (just as in any intellectual/political movement), everyone has to make choices and cannot simply endorse all feminist views. Although men should be hesitant to weigh in on disputes within feminism—and there are times when men's voices are not terribly important in intra-feminist debates—we have to be clear about our commitments.

In the past three decades, radical feminism has lost ground to traditional liberal feminism (which I believe offers a weak critique not only of patriarchy but of other hierarchies), a surging libertarian feminism (a weak critique of patriarchy and no critique of other hierarchies), and postmodern feminism (which I have always found either perplexing and/or counter-productive). Twenty-five years after my introduction to feminism, I continue to find radical feminism the most compelling way to understand the contemporary world, and I believe that this radical approach has been marginalized—not only in the culture at large but also within feminism and women's studies—precisely because it is compelling and calls for significant changes in all our lives.

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Normal can be purely descriptive, meaning an idea or practice that is common, the norm for a particular society or group. Normal can also be used normatively, to convey moral or social approval of an idea or practice. Care for children, for example, is normal and normal—it is a common practice, and it is a practice we endorse. Problems arise when normal behaviors (in the sense of being common) that also are considered normal (in the sense of socially approved) are actually deeply pathological and destructive. Therein lies the problem with the dominant patriarchal masculinity in contemporary US culture: Men are assumed to be naturally competitive and aggressive, and being a "real man" is therefore marked by the struggle for control, conquest, and domination. A man looks at the world, sees what he wants, and takes it. That's normal, and in this case what's normal is dangerous.

Patriarchal Masculinity

Men who don't measure up are suspect—they are wimps, sissies, fags, girls. The worst insult one man can hurl at another, whether among boys on the playground or at corporate executive gym, remains the accusation that a man is like a woman (or is gay, which is assumed to be too much like a woman). Although the culture allows men in some situations to exhibit traits traditionally associated with women (such as caring, compassion, and tenderness), in the end it is men's strength-expressed-as-toughness that defines us and must trump any woman-like softness. Those aspects of masculinity must prevail for a man to be a real man, to be normal.

To identify this dominant definition of what it means to be a man is not to suggest that every male lives by the exact same rules. Scholars and activists often talk of "masculinities," plural (Kimmel, Hearn, and Connell 2004)—the idea that different men and groups of men fashion different conceptions of what it means to be a man in different social locations. That's a positive development when it helps us understand how other forms of hierarchy (especially race, class, and sexual orientation) affect men in patriarchy, in what has become known as intersectional analysis. But this trend is diversionary when it undermines the focus on patriarchy, for it always is crucial to remember that all masculinities are a masculinity-in-patriarchy. Our goal should not be to redefine masculinity but to leave it behind.

Men who oppose patriarchy and strive honestly, albeit imperfectly, for equality are not performing/doing/enacting a form of masculinity, but are stating a commitment to the end of masculinity. I need not pretend I am always successful in this venture or that by this declaration of resistance I can magically walk in the world without the unearned privileges that society accords to men. But there is a difference between this commitment to the abolition of masculinity and a reformist project. Even a pro-feminist masculinity is a masculinity, and masculinity, no matter how it is defined, is always about dominance. A kinder-and-gentler masculinity is still patriarchal.

And whatever the variation in how men live masculinities, there remains a dominant conception of masculinity to which virtually all males are exposed and with which a significant percentage (likely a substantial majority) identify in some fashion. Many men who claim to be challenging the dominant conception of masculinity are simply putting a new face on the same system, the key components of which are the struggle for supremacy in interpersonal relationships and social situations; avoidance of any activities too closely connected to women; and repression of emotions connected to women. (Men do not repress all emotion; in certain situations men freely express anger, for example.)

King of the Hill

This conception of masculinity can be explained through the children's game King of the Hill, in which the object is to be the one who remains on top of the hill (or, if not an actual hill, a large pile of anything or the center of any designated area). To do that, one has to repel those who challenge the king's supremacy. That can be done in a friendly spirit with an understanding that a minimal amount of force will be used by all, or it can be violent and vicious, with both the king and the challengers allowed to use any means necessary. Games that start with a friendly understanding can often turn violent and vicious.

In my experience, both male and female children can, and did, play King of the Hill, but it was overwhelmingly a game of male children, one that trains male children to be men. No matter who is playing, it is a game of masculinity. King of the Hill reveals one essential characteristic of the dominant conception of masculinity: No one is ever safe, and everyone loses something.

Most obviously, this King-of-the-Hill masculinity is dangerous for women. It leads men to seek control over "their" women and define their own pleasure in that control, which leads to pandemic levels of rape and battery. But this view of masculinity is toxic for men as well. One thing is immediately obvious about King-of-the-Hill masculinity: Not everyone can win. In fact, there can be only one really real man at any given moment. In a system based on hierarchy, by definition there can be only one person at the top of the hierarchy. There's only one King of the Hill.

In this conception of masculinity, men are in constant struggle with each other for dominance. Every other man must in some way be subordinated to the king, but even the king can't feel too comfortable—he has to be nervous about who is coming up that hill to get him. This isn't just a game, of course. A friend who once worked on Wall Street, one of the preeminent sites of masculine competition in the business world, described coming to work as like "walking into a knife fight when all the good spots along the wall were taken." Every day you faced the possibility of getting killed—figuratively, in business terms—and there was no spot you could stand where your back was covered. This is masculinity lived as endless competition and threat. Normal guys don't have to play this game every moment of their lives, but no guy can be normal if he challenges the basic rules of the game.

Again, to be clear: There is not a single standard for masculinity or a central committee that sets the rules. As in any system there is variation. But it is crucial to remember that the study of men and masculinity will not be meaningful politically—that is, a potentially useful intervention into the way power operates—unless it is grounded in the study of patriarchy. Scholarship, like pop culture, is susceptible to de-politicization and faddishness, both problems of what Michael Schwalbe (2014, 38) calls "the masculinities industry," which can "take men off

the feminist hook by talking about masculinity instead of talking about men's oppressive behavior."

Whatever the short-term, material benefits of masculinity, whatever power it gives one over others, it's also exhausting and, in the end, unfulfilling. No one man created this system. Perhaps no man, if given a real choice, would choose it. But we live our lives in that system, and it deforms men, narrowing our emotional range and depth and limiting our capacity to experience the rich connections with others—not just with women and children, but also with other men—which require vulnerability but make life meaningful. The Man Who Would Be King is the Man Who Is Broken and Alone. A normal guy is typically a miserable guy.

Yet this toxic conception of masculinity continues to dominate. We teach our boys that to be a man is to be tough, to be acquisitive, to be competitive, to be aggressive. We congratulate them when they make a tough hit on the football field that takes out an opponent. We honor them in parades when they return from slaughtering the enemy abroad. We put them on magazine covers when they destroy business competitors and make millions by putting people out of work. We train boys that it is normal to be cruel, to ignore the feelings of others, to be violent. US culture's most-admired male heroes reflect those characteristics: they most often are men who take charge rather than seek consensus, seize power rather than look for ways to share it, and are willing to be violent to achieve their goals. Victory is sweet. Conquest gives a sense of power. We close the deal. The occasional rush crowds out the always-present isolation.

And then there is sex, where victory, conquest, and dealing come together, typically out of public view. Masculinity played out in sexual relationships, straight or gay, brings King of the Hill into our most intimate spaces. This doesn't mean that every man in every sexual situation plays out this dominance, but simply that there exists a pattern, and that it is the rare man who doesn't struggle with these feelings. The cruel and degrading sexualized images of women so routine in pornography, and the routine way men use women through pornography, is painful testimony to this reality (Jensen 2007).

Again, for emphasis: the fact that this toxic masculinity hurts men doesn't mean it's equally dangerous for men and women. As feminists have long pointed out, there's a big difference between women dealing with the constant threat of being raped, beaten, and killed by the men in their lives, and men not being able to cry. But we can see that the short-term material gains that men get in patriarchy are not adequate compensation for what we men give up in the long haul, which is to surrender part of our humanity to the project of dominance.

This doesn't mean, of course, that in this world all men have it easy. Those other systems of dominance and oppression—white supremacy, heterosexism, and predatory corporate capitalism—mean that non-white men, gay men, poor and working class men suffer in various ways. A radical feminist analysis doesn't

preclude us from understanding those problems but in fact helps us see them more clearly.

Beyond Normality

So, embracing radical feminism and critiquing patriarchy's toxic conception of masculinity does not solve all the problems men have. And, again for emphasis, rejecting the pathology of patriarchy does not allow one to transcend magically one's own training or the real-world manifestations of it. I still routinely fight my own patriarchal tendencies and still have to navigate in a patriarchal world. And no matter how successful I am in that struggle, I still am a man in a patriarchal world that gives me unearned privilege and power in many situations. Such privilege and power cannot be given away by an individual; it comes with the identity.

That decision to embrace radical feminism opened up a process that led to similar processes of challenging norms around sexual orientation, race, class, and nationality. Each process, like each system of power, was similar in outline and different in details. My experience with feminism provided a framework for working through the rejection of normal in each of those arenas.

As a result, I no longer try to be normal. For me, that has included some things that are relatively trivial (no longer pretending to care about football and instead openly critiquing its routine brutality), some that can be uncomfortable (challenging other men when they use women in the sexual-exploitation industries of pornography, prostitution, and stripping), and some that are life-changing (finally dealing openly with my shifting sexuality from straight to gay and back to straight). Most crucially, it has meant committing some of my time/energy/money to feminist organizing and doing my best to bring a feminist consciousness into other progressive political activities, efforts that are not a sacrifice but an opportunity for me to enrich my life.

I may inadvertently get pulled into a game of King of the Hill at work or have to contend with unexpected urges to be the King of the Hill. But on a day-to-day basis, I don't have to keep trying to be a normal pathological man. Giving up on the failed project of being normally pathological has made me a healthier person. Apart from whatever contribution this may allow me to make to political movements that fight hierarchies, apart from any positive effect I have on my students by exposing them to these ideas, apart from any moral claim I can make to being on the right side of history—I am a saner person than I was when I was trying to be normal.

But a caveat: sane does not necessarily mean upbeat and happy. Understanding the nature of hierarchy and the injuries it visits upon people, engaging in activities that put those injuries in plain view, committing some part of one's daily life to these issues—that doesn't leave one happy. But it creates the possibility of finding joy.

Letting go of normal means letting go of the cheap and easy pleasures that can numb the pain of facing the world honestly. I have nothing against pleasure, and there are pleasures in my life. But the quick routes to feeling happy are cut off when one chooses to let go of normal. Instead of a superficial happiness, letting go of normal offers new ways to experience a deeper joy. And as that capacity for joy deepens, so does the capacity for grief.

Letting go of normal changes the equation. It makes daily life harder, but it makes life more meaningful. James Baldwin (cited in Bayley 2009), as he so often did, got to the heart of this in a comment that is often quoted:

> I think the inability to love is the central problem, because the inability masks a certain terror, and that terror is the terror of being touched. And, if you can't be touched, you can't be changed. And, if you can't be changed, you can't be alive.

That's why I repeat, over and over, to as many men as I can reach: We are told that feminism is a threat, and in some sense that is accurate. Feminism is a threat to our ability to hang onto normal. But once we let go of the pathology of normal, we can more easily embrace change, touch, and love. When we let go of normal, we can see that feminism is, in fact, a gift to men.

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