

Presentation to Institute on Working with the Abuser

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by Kathleen Carlin

Before I begin, I want to acknowledge my debt to three people whose work and ideas have provided me with much of the foundation for what I say. They are Jean Baker Miller, author of Toward a New Psychology of Women, Dorothy Height, formerly director of the Center for Racial Justice, National Board, YMCA of the USA, and Reginald Wilson, for his concept of Third World leadership and Monitoring.

I also want to state that I am very aware that I cannot speak for other than the white experience, because that is what I know, and that this presentation is limited because it lacks dimension from people of color. I look forward eagerly to the analysis by women of color of this issue.

When I say “we” I mean women.

To begin, I would like to try to give an analysis of the position that has already been eloquently expressed by the movement, that position being the one that when the inevitable question is raised “but what are you doing for the men”, the answer with power, the answer that represents our political framework is NOTHING.

To begin that analysis I have an illustration I’d like to share with you. This illustration is from a feature article that appeared in the Atlanta Constitution on January 23, 1982, by Carol Ashkinaze, a member of the paper’s editorial board. I’d like to read part of it to you.

A conservative- leaning state legislator I admire, despite his unflagging admiration for Ronald Reagan, invited me into his office a few days ago for a chat.

“Will you still be my friend,” he inquired a little bit flippantly after dispensing with the amenities, “if I vote against the ERA?” He smiled engagingly with the assurance of a man who takes such things for granted.

I didn’t answer immediately.

“Well if you have to think about it...” he said, defensively. His smile faded.

I did indeed, have to think about it. It wasn’t a question exactly he had voted against the ERA in the past. This was his way of telling me not to take it personally if he did it again, his way of fishing for assurance that I would not take vengeance by, for instance, maligning him in print.

“But would you take it personally? Would you still be my friend?” he persisted.

Indeed, how did he define friendship? What does he mean by asking if she will still be his friend? This is what I understand him to be saying. What he really means is will you still take care of me. That is, will you continue to carry those aspects of the human experience that I assign to you but that I denigrate; those aspects I have to be close to because they are essential to the human experience (weakness, vulnerability, emotionally) but which I have learned not only to hate but to deny knowing I ever have them. Will you continue in the conspiracy that protects me from knowing that I ever feel these things, even though it means knowing I am then fatally dependent on you, which in turn inspires my rage toward you so that your very presence reminds me of that dependency, and I must find ways to express that rage to you.

The lynch pin for maintaining this conspiracy is this: you must continue not to respond to me honestly and openly, but instead continue to respond to me in ways that accommodate and please me. To guarantee that, I must make sure that you gain access to the resources of the world only through me. As long as I control your access to money, power mobility, then I guarantee that you dare respond in no other way. So what we have is a system where women “take care” of men, bodily, emotionally, sexually, so that they are girded to go out into the world and oppress and abuse us. Because this is not explicit but instead is built into the culture as “natural” and is obscured by being explained in other terms, i.e., sexual inferiority, then it is inevitable that men, in trying to explain away what can’t possibly make sense, even to them, find it easy to say on all kinds of levels, “they really like it”.

Now, the key is that when we don’t do this, when we in fact stop taking care of them, stop maintaining the conspiracy, there is nothing in the culture that allows them to understand. It doesn’t fit into prevailing system; there is no space in which to put it, so that men are truly bewildered. Therefore, the moment we do anything with men (in this case, work with abuser) it is defined by the dominant culture in the term that prevail; in this case, we are cast immediately into our “proper” role of taking care of men. The only way not to allow that to happen is not to do it totally. Because to relate to men with a different meaning is nothing less than to redefine the culture, and the nature of it is not to allow that to happen.

At the same time, I propose that it is, in fact, our work to redefine the culture. It is our work because 1) we know how to do that, and 2) because the battered women’s movement owns the means for structuring and modeling the radical redefinition. What it is nothing less than creating a place where women can claim those aspects of the human experience which the culture historically has punished us for claiming – powerfulness, leadership, doing the analysis- and were men can claim those aspects of the human experience which the culture has not allowed them to claim so that they have had to have women close by to experience them for them.

The model I am proposing for this is a model in which men dedicated to anti-sexism work with men to deal with their fundamental issues of power over and rage toward women but with this work being done under the leadership and control of the women in the battered women’s movement who know that rage and that abuse of illegitimate power over them and can point it out. This is a model of having those who oppress taking responsibility for that oppression and for changing it, all the while acknowledging that only those who are victims of it can finally say what and where that oppression is.

The reason this is so crucial is that this kind of task for men is like the proverbial pulling oneself up by the bootstraps: it is impossible because if they try to do it alone, there is nothing against which to get leverage. Because this is a struggle with what is so deeply buried within them and because it is so painful, and so difficult, the natural process is to fall into reinforcement of that behavior under a new guise. That is, they redefine the usual attitudes and behaviors in a different way and keep on doing the same type of things. I have an anecdote that illustrates this.

“...(He) was involved in the civil rights movement years ago, and then along came black power, so he was told that “they” did not need whitey anymore. Later, he supported the women’s movement and shared the struggle with his wife as her feminist involvement changed the dynamics in their marriage: but he soon found himself uninvited to women-only meeting and social occasions. “Finally”, he told me, “I got involved with...(a men’s organization). Here is one group in which no one can question my qualifications to belong.”¹

This is a classic example of a failure to acknowledge, even, much less deal with the automatic assumption of his illegitimate power in relation to black people and women, and his unawareness of his imposition of it in those groups. Therefore, it is essential that those who understand that behavior, because they are the recipients of it, constantly monitor that process toward change, (also known as keeping them honest). The key word there, and the first step in getting at the power issue, is leadership. Leadership in our society is a white male word. That is why we have to say “women governor” or black chairman of the board”. So that when a white man talks to use we are all set up to grant him a lot of authority and power and he is all set up to have that. But when a woman takes that kind of power and authority it is as though people don’t have any place to put it- there is no space within the prevailing culture forth to fit. Then, the first task for men becomes that of building space for integrating that kind of shift.

So that, if we are going to change the dominant assumptions that legitimize woman abuse, work with abuser must be done in a context where the men working with them are acting out a stance that says, “there has not been room in the traditional male-dominated culture for understanding how we maintain a system of oppressing and victimizing women, so we have not learned this. This understanding is not a part of our experience, so we have to learn from it from women who are conscious of it. If we are going to change and help bring about change in men who carry out explicitly the male victimizer role we all own, then we must constantly look to women to teach us, to give us the words, to describe the experience. We will accept their perceptions and work from their authority.” This represents that radical shift of power to a place where the leadership and authority are not male. Until that shift occurs, as long as men have final authority to define the issues residing with them, then everyone is still acting out the same old male dominant/ female subordinate theme. Most importantly, until that radical shift occurs, it will not be possible to acknowledge or make it apparent that there is anything “wrong”.

As I say this, I am acutely aware of the very critical risks inherent in such a process, and I would like to talk about those risks, because they are very important.

The first is the risk of losing our safe space. In all the models that exist so far for walking with the abuser (i.e., RAVEN, Emerge, etc.) a base tenet is first, that the safety of the battered women must be guaranteed. It is, in fact, far more complicated than that. For all the women in this movement, not only those at the moment being battered, the shelters are a safe space: the place we can know ourselves, gain our wholeness, discover ourselves as autonomous; those things which we can do only apart from men. Therefore any work that we do must be structured so that that safe space is not violated. The second risk calls fourth the threat that is so deeply buried in our psyches as to seem almost unconscious, but it is that inchoate fear that to relate to men is to lose, give up a part of ourselves. Only if we hold this up, make this explicit and do so that battered women profit from it. I am talking about money. The third risk is that we will give up our power to men. I have been in gatherings of battered women's organization and watched this happen. (The hopeful part is that I also saw situations where the men did not take the power.)

What, then, do we build in to protect us from these risks becoming realities that injure us. First, we need to know that our power is our feminist analysis. It can then be brought to bear as we act out radically different behaviors. I am going to describe some of those behaviors that we can model. These are only a few. There are many more that we will know as we do our work.

First, is listening. Listening is passive, female. (And parenthetically, I think it is useful to observe how we have "invented" something called active listening", given it a technology, so now men can do it.) If men are able to listen to us when we say, you are taking something that is ours; you are violating our safe space, that models a radical shift. The other part of it is listen to women talk about men. Forever, women have listened to men tell them about themselves, from Paul to Freud to the friendly neighborhood psychiatrist. But for men to listen to women talk about men is a radical shift. This is important because thru our history of observing men, but filtering those observations and withholding the part that we get punished for revealing women have information about men that man don't have about themselves.

The second is the question of what is work. Here we begin to look at women's work and men's work and the basic cultural definition: when men do it is work; when women do it, it is not work. Challenging this and struggling with it becomes a modeling of "equal pay for equitable work".

The third behavior is in not giving up our power. By actively, consciously dealing with this, we force ourselves to confront, in a new way, all the fears around power that we have learned. Because power has been used to hurt and oppress us. It has engendered in us fears that confuse us and get in our way as we go about our task of empowering battered women.

The fourth is the issued trust. To be able to say, with safety, to someone who has more power than I, "I don't trust you" requires a fairly high level of trust. (Parenthetically, this is why marriage counseling is not only disastrous but dangerous with a battering men and a battered woman.) so that if as happened thru this past week for example, women can say to men, we don't trust and the beginning of the shift from power inequity to equality of power.

The fifth behavior is waiting. "Waiting is passive; female. It is an enduring theme of our history. Women have waited for men; to come from the war, to come home from the whaling voyage, to come home for dinner. In terms of what we are talking about here, the most crucial, most central fact is that we must not get into this work until we are ready. And only we will know when we are ready. Probably the greatest challenge to the men here is one: will you wait until we say yes we are ready for you to undertake these tasks?"

There are some thoughts that I hope point you toward the exquisitely complicated and difficult qualities of this issue. Because what we are talking about is addressing the most profound, significant difference in the human species: the difference between men and women. And so we can come back to that primary question, what we do we do with difference? Do we fight it and attempt to dominate and control it, which is our history, or do we engage it, and allow it to nurture our growing toward being whole.

Thank you.

-----Kathleen Carlin

(Kathleen Carlin is director of the women's Resource Center, YWCA of Cobb County, Georgia, and Georgia's representative to the national coalition Against Domestic Violence Steering Committee)

1. The men's experience by Louis W. McLeod, Ph.D. From THE EMORY MAGAZINE -54,1, 1978,18-20