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What About the Boys?

Abigail Rine

In Quaker-speak, we have something called a “concern,” which is basically a deep-felt divine prompting to attend to a particular need. Although I’ve long felt a general sense of “concern” about injustices related to gender and sexuality, when I wrote that article about Don Draper being raped, I thought it would be a small foray for me into the issue of sexual violence against males. My main goal was to raise awareness and perhaps motivate others to speak out on their behalf.

But I can’t seem to look away. This issue of boys being sexually assaulted and shamed into silence is increasingly feeling like a “concern.” Writing that article opened a Pandora’s box for me, a box full of horrifying statistics and heartbreaking accounts of abuse. Most of the people who responded to me personally after the article came out were male survivors. Many of expressed variations of the same thing: no one is really talking about this. No one sees this. No one cares.

One survivor sent me a link to this Oprah episode from 2010, available online, which focuses on the stories of men who were abused as children. The entire audience in this episode consists of male survivors, one of whom was the man who sent me the link — 200 men in all, each holding a picture of their childhood selves, the faces of beautiful little boys whose lives were horrifically changed. Or, as one survivor puts it, whose souls were stolen as children.

I dare you to watch the episode and not weep. I was crying within the first few minutes, just seeing all those men gathered, holding the pictures, publically telling the world what they’ve lived through.

The episode tells several of these men’s stories in graphic detail – of course there isn’t time to tell every story, but just seeing their faces is incredibly moving. Even a glimpse, the camera passing by, reveals a shadow of the pain they have endured and are enduring. I’d been immersing myself in stats and data, but now I was able to see those numbers come alive in the faces and bodies and stories of actual people.

Oprah mentions her own shock at encountering the disturbing statistic that 1 in 6 men were sexually abused as children. I’m well familiar with the oft-quoted statistic that 1 in 4 women have experienced rape or attempted rape, but until I started looking in this topic, I had never come across the 1 in 6 figure about boys who are sexually abused. If you’re having trouble believing the number, you can read more about the supporting studies here – there’s a good chance it’s an underestimate, actually, because research indicates that men are less likely to disclose experiences of sexual abuse than women.

And that’s what is haunting me right now. The silence. Some of these men were abused for years, throughout their entire childhood, and their parents had no idea. Some, even, were abused by one parent right under the nose of the other parent, which is even more sickening.

It's hard not to be consumed by fear once you have a child; the menu of nightmarish things that could happen is a long one – but right near the top of that list of horrors is having my son be sexually abused and then shamed into silence. I know that I can't be physically with my son at every moment during his entire childhood and adolescence, but what can I do to teach him to speak out if he is harmed, and to never ever ever blame himself if someone assaults him?

My mom recently told me a story about my brother – this doesn't involve any sort of sexual abuse, just to be clear, but it does connect to this discussion in a way. My brother, who was maybe ten or so, was walking home alone from an oboe lesson past a house just down the block with a psychedelic van parked in front. The funky, colorful van intrigued my brother, so he paused to look at it for a moment before continuing down the street toward home – when a guy pulled up and started yelling at him for messing with his van. This guy was scary. He shouted a slew of expletives and explicit death threats at my brother, who, remember, was just a little kid.

After my brother got home and told my mom what happened, she decided to take him to the police station to file a report (my brother specifically remembers the thrill of being able to say the ACTUAL f-bomb five times for the police officer, with mom's approval). The cops talked to the guy, who never bothered my brother again and actually apologized to him. This is the part of the story I find interesting: my mom said that she chose to take my brother to the cops mainly because she thought it was an opportunity to teach him the importance of speaking out in the face of any abuse, whether verbal or otherwise.

I realize this event is not in the same realm as sexual abuse, not even close, and I'm not intending to lump them together. But, for me, the story does shed a little light on this question about empowering children to talk about any violence they experience, preferably with a trusted authority figure. And it also highlights the importance of listening to children when they do speak up. That part is crucial, as research shows that children are often viewed as unreliable witnesses and disbelieved when they report abuse. I'm proud of my mom for taking my brother seriously and intentionally using that moment to empower him (and letting him justifiably say the f-word repeatedly).

Many feminists have written, particularly in the wake of Steubenville, of the need to teach boys the importance of consent. I agree – but I think we must begin by teaching them the importance of their own consent, and the sacredness of their own bodies, and to empower them to speak out if anyone, anyone, ever violates that.

There are many powerful voices out there advocating for women and girls who have experienced sexual violence – and I applaud them. I am so grateful for them. But who is speaking out for the boys? Not as many, it seems, but perhaps the tide is turning.

The eerie hush surrounding this societal wound is gradually being broken, I think. I hope. In my own research, I've seen a sudden spike in studies on sexual violence against men and boys since about 2006 onward. Several of those studies were conducted by this team of psychologists, who repeatedly remark on the dearth of research on this issue. And, of course, the Oprah episode is another indication that more men are coming forward, and more people are listening.

But we have a long way to go. The gender myths that contribute specifically to the silence of male victims remain largely intact: namely, that men are the strong, invulnerable, stoic ones, the ones who can't be hurt – or, if they are hurt, they must somehow be complicit in their own abuse.

We contribute to the shaming and silencing of male victims by perpetuating harmful attitudes about the invincibility of boys and men. Boys don't cry. Boys will be boys. Man up. The lie that men can never appear weak without compromising their masculinity is insidious, dehumanizing, and needs to be challenged.

And it is being challenged, in an important way, by men telling their stories. I am moved by these survivors who directly confront myths about what it means to be a "Real Man," simply by being real men, human beings with inborn capacities for both strength and vulnerability. They show the courage it takes to speak out, especially in such a public way. There was no weakness in that crowd of faces; there was strength and honesty, and daring openness – bravery of the highest kind.

But their voices shouldn't be the only ones calling for more awareness, more research, and more resources for male victims. I am not an abuse survivor, or a man, but my life happens to be overrun with tiny males. I have a son and four nephews – their bodies and souls are beyond precious to me. Now that know these stories, these statistics, I can't ignore this problem.

Maybe if I write, others will, too. Maybe we can expand our societal conversation about sexual violence to have a dual focus on both sexes. Men and women, boys and girls – none of us live in complete isolation from one another. Our lives are entangled. Our fates are intertwined. Our pain pools together.

Let's empower our children, especially our boys, to speak out. And let's listen when they do.