

Review of
***Well Meaning Men Breaking Out of the Man Box* By Tony Porter**

I had the privilege of attending A Call To Men's national conference in New York on May 21 and 22. I am not exactly certain but there were something like 200-250 people there, perhaps a little more than half of them men from around the country, as far away as Idaho and Washington states, as well as from South Africa and the Caribbean. Tony Porter was one of our hosts, of course, and he was ever-present in the audience, on the stage, working with his co-hosts Gwen Wright and Ted Bunch, keeping everyone at the conference busy, on schedule, and completely engaged.

One of the many things Tony Porter does well is tell a story. And while he didn't actually lead us all in the exercise I am about to tell you about, he told us how it worked. It goes something like this. In a group of people, you break up into triads with one man talking, another man listening, and then the third person observing. The one man talking is asked to tell the other man (hopefully, a stranger) his greatest, best, hottest sexual experience in intimate detail. Naturally, any man in his right mind will stop and look at Tony like he's crazy. Not waiting too long, Tony lets everyone know that he was just kidding, and everyone breathes a sigh of relief. But then he asks everyone to consider a woman who has been raped who must tell a complete stranger, often someone in a police uniform with a badge and gun, her worst "sexual" experience ever, in detail. Then she will have to tell a detective or

two the next day, or even repeat it again the same day. And then later on, she'll have to go through all the details of her worst experience in detail with a prosecutor. And finally, she may eventually have to do it all over again in public at a trial. Tony's point, of course, is for us all, especially men, to consider what strength and courage it takes for a women to report rape, what they must go through, and why there are many rapes that go unreported.

It's the stories about men, the "brotherhood" of men, and his personal life that make Tony Porter's little book *Well Meaning Men....Breaking Out of the "Man Box" – Ending Violence Against Women* come alive. Ted Bunch is credited also as contributing writer.

The book is one part Tony Porter speaking, one part women speaking, and one part the voices of other men. It is all eloquent speech that names problems, calls on men to stand up and speak out, while listening to women's voices, and lays out the serious work that men must do.

This short, concise book is also a workbook of sorts, describing a practical framework for men to utilize in examining the behaviors associated with the Man Box, looking at entitlements and privileges, at our behaviors toward children, at men's attitudes toward women in the workplace, and other sexist beliefs and behaviors that challenge us every day.

Porter then urges the reader to explore "things that you can do to challenge your own sexist beliefs and behaviors." He starts this section with this statement: "I believe in men and have hope for us. I know that we can accomplish this

breakthrough. Millions of men have already begun the journey. We can and will because our sons and daughters are counting on us.”

Here are some of the ways he challenges us: “What are some of the negative comments men make at your workplace about women? What can you do at your job to confront negative behaviors and comments toward women? Can you be more open and vulnerable with boys and men in your life? If no, why not? If so, how? What can you do (or stop doing) with boys in your family or community to teach them to value girls and women? How can you encourage and challenge men to stop making excuses for other men who perpetuate violence against women?” You get the idea. He wants the reader to write down his answers. It’s hard work with hard questions.

One of the things common to all A Call to Men events is that every meeting begins with women’s voices and ends with women’s voices. This recognition and acknowledgement of the experience, wisdom and pioneering work women have done to end men’s violence against women is foundational to the work Tony Porter and Ted Bunch do. It will surprise no one, therefore, that the book contains many women’s voices. And they are all worth reading and taking to heart. A few examples will give you an idea of the strength of their words.

Katie Gentile, Director of John Jay College’s Women’s Center, warns that “well-meaning men joining this movement must remember and understand that this is not just another way to feel powerful.” The Reverend Shawna Marie Aarons-Cooke states: “The work of ending violence against women must continue and increasingly be informed by women. On an individual level, well-meaning men must

make a commitment – to literally strive on a daily basis to impact change within themselves about their behaviors and perceptions regarding women.” Tonya Lovelace (Women of Color Network) sums up one of our basic challenges: “We are just as concerned with what you do on the anti-violence against women stage as we are once you leave the stage.”

The book wastes no time getting to the point: “It’s time for those of us who are well-meaning men to begin acknowledging the role male privilege and socialization play in domestic and sexual abuse as well as violence against women in general. It’s time for us to claim the collective responsibility we have in ending men’s violence against women. It’s time for us to be part of the solution.”

Porter’s honesty is evident, his views and perspectives borne of personal experience which he has no qualms about sharing with us. His personal challenges within the Man Box are obvious in just two stories he tells when he was a boy and when as a father. He shares with us his silence in the face of a gang rape he witnessed of a mentally challenged young woman, and a tells us how worried he became when his son cried after being hurt at a football practice game and how relieved he was that the other fathers and players didn’t see him.

There’s nothing in this book that hints at self-congratulation., nothing here that says “I am a well-meaning man, always have been, look at me.” Although we can admire Tony Porter for the work he is doing, we must remember the hard work he has done and continues to do as a man. There isn’t a man doing this work that can honestly say he never struggles with the effects of the Man Box, whether he grew up

in the 50s and 60s like me, or in the 80s and 90s like so many of the younger men who are taking on this work.

This is not a major work of research, it's not a tome about masculinities. It is, rather, a useful little book with stories, powerful words and experiences, and a call to action, with some helpful and useful ways (many brought together from other sources) that men can begin to challenge themselves and other men. Besides the women in his life, it's clear that the early work of men like Paul Kivel lives in this book.

Perhaps an abiding sense of this book is that change for men is good, it is healthy, and that men suffer from violence against women almost as much as women. In working to end violence against women, men will bring peace and health to their hearts. Eve Ensler, at the Call to Men conference in May, said something very powerful about how all too many men live their lives: "What greater tyranny is there to be separated from your heart." This book can help bring some men closer to their hearts.

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