

Why I am a feminist man

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In trying to understand the inhumanity of the sexual abuse he experienced as a young boy, **Richard Jeffrey Newman** found feminism to be the only politics that explicitly commits itself to a world in which that kind of inhumanity is no longer acceptable.

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The first time the old man who lived in the apartment at the top of the staircase said hello to me, he stopped for a moment as we passed in the courtyard and smiled as if he'd known me my whole life. The second time, he did the same thing. By the third or fourth time, a ritual of greeting had grown between us.



Whenever we saw each other, he would smile and say hello first; I would smile, say the same thing back, and then, for a long silent moment, he would fix me with his gaze while I stood there, too happily embarrassed to move, wishing when he walked away that I'd done something, anything, to prolong our conversation.

I think of him as “the old man” because of how young I was when I met him?—?I was 13?—?but he was probably not much older than the 49 years-old I am now, if that old, and so he was the perfect age for me to see in him a possible surrogate father.

My parents had separated when I was three; my stepfather had recently left us; and I was desperate for some kind of paternal attention and approval. So I was thrilled when the old man one day in late summer did not keep walking after our usual exchange, asking me instead, “When am I going to see you?”

I figured he was lonely, like Mrs. Schechtman had been when she lived in the apartment next to his, and the thought of visiting with him like I used to visit with her made me happy. “Soon!” I answered.

Not too long afterwards, I was on my way out of our building to meet my friends. The old man happened to be walking down the staircase leading from his apartment to the front door, which we reached at the same time.

As I went to turn the knob, he held the door shut with his left forearm, maneuvering me with his right till I stood face first in the corner near the mailboxes where the door frame met the wall. Covering my body with his own, he ran his hands beneath my shirt and up the legs of my shorts; he groped my chest and belly, squeezed my butt, cupped my crotch, and he kept whispering hoarsely into my ear, over and over again, “When am I going to see you?”

I had no words for what he was doing, no training such as young children get now in how to scream *no!* to scare off an attacker. All I could do was stand there till he was finished; and when he was finished, I ran. I don't remember how far or how long or in which direction, but I ran as if I could leave my skin behind, as if running would turn me into

another person.

When I stopped running, in the small park across the street from the Lutheran Church, I sat a long time with the knowledge that my running had undone nothing, that my body was still the body he'd touched.

Even if I'd wanted to tell someone?—?and I didn't?—?I was sure no one would believe me, so I pretended nothing had happened. When the old man passed me the next day and said hello, I said hello back the way I always did, forcing myself not to see the ironic twist he added to his smile.

After a couple of more times, our hellos began to feel normal again, and I told myself that maybe it hadn't happened. Maybe he was just a lonely old man who liked to say hello, and as long as he stayed on his side of that hello, I felt?—?or, to be more accurate, I convinced myself that I was?—?safe.

Some weeks later, as I sat with my friends in front of our building, the old man came home from food shopping and asked me to help him upstairs with the bags in his shopping cart. I wanted to say no, but I couldn't. To do so would almost certainly have raised questions for my friends about why I was being so rude, and the last thing I wanted to do was explain myself to them.

So I took the bag he pointed to and followed him up to his apartment, where he opened the door and motioned me in ahead of him. The bag was heavy, so I stepped inside, thinking I'd leave it by the door and get out as quickly as I could, but he was too fast for me.

As soon as the door shut behind him, he pushed the shopping cart to the side, took the bag from my arms and dropped it to the floor. The cans at the bottom landed with a crash that shook the whole apartment. Snaking his arms around my waist, he undid my belt and unzipped my pants, pushing them down so they fell around my ankles.

All I could do was stand there, frozen to the spot where my feet had stopped moving. He took me by the hand and led me to the couch against the wall. He sat down. Looking up at me with a wide smile?—?I have the distinct memory that he'd taken out his two front teeth?—?his eyes, at what I imagine must have been the fear in mine, grew tender. "You've never had a blowjob before, have you?" When I shook my head no, his voice filled with concern. "But don't you want me to love you?"

In the silence with which I responded, he took my penis in his hands?—?I remember thinking his fingers were like a cage?—?and he told me how good it was, how beautiful and big, and then his own pants were down, and I was sitting on the couch, and his penis, large and purple, hung in front of my face.

His voice came from somewhere above me, urging me to play with it, at least to touch it, and I don't remember if I did?—?no, at this point, my memory goes white, like the blank space in a video of which a portion has been erased, though I can still feel his hands on the back of my head. Then I see myself walking to the door, unlocking it, closing it behind me, and somehow I am next in my bed, curled in the fetal position, where I stay until my mother calls me for dinner.

The next day, the old man saw me standing by myself in front of our building. He didn't come close, just stood some distance away and pleaded with me to go upstairs with him again. This time, he promised, would be different. He would move more slowly, be more gentle. I said no, ignoring his further pleas until he left me alone, which he did for the rest of the time he lived in our building.

I still nodded in recognition if I was with someone when he saw me?—?I did not want anyone wondering why I didn't?—?but otherwise I did my best to ignore him, and he seemed content to ignore me as well. Eventually, he moved away, and what he'd done to me receded even further into the silence I'd wrapped it in, and I pulled that silence around me like a protective cloak. No one else ever had to know.

Breaking the silence

The fabric of my silence started to fray when, at 19 years old, I read [Adrienne Rich's *On Lies, Secrets and Silence*](#). At the time, I was interested in Rich as a poet; I knew nothing about her as a feminist. Indeed, feminism itself was barely on my radar as something with a substantive relevance to my life, and so I was surprised to find myself enthralled and energized by the political and explicitly woman-centered content of what I was reading. Then I came to this passage from 'Caryatid: Two Columns':

[T]aught to view our bodies as our totality, our genitals as our chief source of fascination and value, many women have become dissociated from their own bodies...viewing themselves as objects to be possessed by men rather than as the subjects of an existence.

As soon as I read those words, a small voice in my head began to speak. "But what about me?" it wanted to know. "What about what happened to me?" I sought out other feminist texts and read voraciously, discovering in the feminist analysis of men's sexual violence against women a vocabulary for naming what the old man in my building had done to me as the violation it was.

More importantly, though, being able to name what he did made it possible for me to tell others, and when telling them did not bring the roof of the world crashing down around my head, I found the strength I needed to confront my abuse more fully by going to counseling. In a very real sense, then, I owe to feminism whatever healing I have achieved.

If I stopped here, even those of you totally opposed to feminism would probably be nodding your heads. "Of course you're a feminist. It makes perfect sense."

Yet to stop here would be to reduce feminism to a kind of self-help ideology, implicitly denying that feminism is also a politics. More to the point, it would be to gloss over the fact that committing myself to those politics has been part and parcel of my healing.

Not too long after I first read Adrienne Rich's essay, I was working as a summer camp supervisor in New York's Hudson Valley. The leader of a training session we were required to attend told us he would use the word *she* as the generic pronoun when discussing how to deal with campers who might choose to tell us that they'd been sexually abused.

Since most abuse happened to girls, he explained, referring to both boys and girls as victims would give us a skewed picture of reality, making it difficult for us to respond appropriately. I felt like I'd been punched in the stomach. It wasn't just that he so blithely dismissed my experience.

What he said seemed to imply that the sexual abuse of boys and the sexual abuse of girls were so radically different in nature that we could not talk about them in the same context. If that were true, it called into question everything I thought I'd been learning from feminism, suggesting that the strength I'd been drawing from that learning was based on a false premise.

My body rebelled at this idea. Each time I tried to tell myself that the session leader was right?—?because the weight of his expertise made it hard to think he wasn't?—?I wanted to crawl out of my skin no differently than I had after the first time the old man in my building touched me.

Still, there was no denying that the books I was reading said not one word about *my* experience. Girls and women were abused and exploited in those pages, not boys, and certainly not men. I'd found myself in Rich's essay, in other words, as well as in the other feminists texts I was reading, through a process of analogy.

Gendered expectations

To take another instance from 'Caryatid: Two Columns', when Rich wrote about how the values of our culture "equat[e]...manhood...with the objectification of another's person and the domination of another's body," I under-

stood her to be describing, with a chilling accuracy, what the old man in my building had done to me, even though she was talking explicitly about men's sexual objectification of women.

This analogy only grew stronger as I began to see very precise parallels between the old man's method of "seducing" me—?because that's what I think he thought he was doing?—and the methods for getting women into bed that some of my male friends talked about using.

I remember, for example, a dorm room conversation from when I was an undergraduate. The "stud" among us—?call him Liam?—was talking about the kind of women with whom sexual success mattered to him the most. These were, he said, the women who resisted, the ones who made him work for it, forcing him to prove that he could bend them to his will—?I think he actually used those words?—?because getting them to have sex with him made him feel most like a man.

As Liam described how he sized such women up, I suddenly realized that the old man in my building had sized me up as well, that he *had* to have been watching me before the first time he said hello. I was a shy, awkward and needy kid, so he gave me the kind of attention that would make me feel noticed and that I would therefore want more of.

Liam talked about this as the "stage of flattery." Then, once the old man could see in me a growing desire for his attention, he must have assumed that I also desired (perhaps without realizing it) everything else he wanted to "give" me as well.

According to Liam, a woman who resisted at this stage really wanted sex but was afraid of being labeled "easy." She needed to be "taken," he said, so she could give up her self-control without feeling guilty. Following what I am sure was a similar logic, the old man used the force he thought was necessary to push me past the fear he believed was keeping me from expressing my true desire. How else to explain the question he asked me before my memory goes blank, "But don't you want me to love you?"

Ironically, this parallel between the two men was comforting. It affirmed for me that there was no reason to believe my experience of abuse differed in any essential way from the experience of a girl or woman whom a man had similarly violated. The session leader had to have been wrong.

Yet there was also no avoiding the fact that the feminists I was reading placed me as a man in the same category as the two men I have been talking about. Here, again, from 'Caryatid: Two Columns', is Adrienne Rich:

Rape is the ultimate outward physical act of coercion and depersonalization practiced on women by men. Most male readers...would perhaps deny having gone so far: the honest would admit to fantasies, urges of lust and hatred, or lust and fear, or to a "harmless" fascination with pornography and sadistic art.

I was fascinated by pornography; I had fantasies that combined lust and fear; and it was impossible to miss the cynical accusation in Rich's use of the word "perhaps." More tellingly, though, and damningly, I had to admit that when Liam explained what it took for him to feel sexually like a man, I could not help but measure myself against the standard he set. I didn't have a girlfriend at the time, and I wasn't having sex, and I'd be lying if I said that didn't sometimes make me feel inadequate.

However, it was only after I met a woman who rejected me because I was not "man enough" in precisely Liam's terms that I began to understand how fully the sexual values to which he subscribed were also values I had in me, whether I wanted them or not.

I met "Ling" through one of her suitemates, "Denise," who sat next to me in the class I was taking on Shakespeare's comedies. The three of us spent an afternoon talking and joking in the library when we were supposed to be studying, and we hit it off so well that soon I was walking across campus a couple of times a week to hang out with them and "Naomi," the third woman with whom they lived.

Sometimes, if I stayed too late, I'd sleep on the couch in their suite and go back to my own dorm in the morning. One such night, Ling and I stayed up talking on that couch. I don't remember a single thing we said except for the fact that she told me about her experience emigrating as a young girl from China to the United States, but I know I felt good as I walked back to my dorm the next morning. I liked Ling a lot, and I hoped that our talking might lead to a romantic relationship.

The day after that, I saw Ling on campus walking with Naomi past the library. I called out to them and ran over to say hello. Instead of saying hello back, however, they started mocking me, calling me "little boy" and "coward."

I couldn't imagine they were doing anything other than joking with me, so I started to laugh with them. When I tried to ask Ling how she did on the test she'd had that morning, though, the two women backed away, laughing even harder and holding up their hands to tell me I shouldn't come any closer. I was confused.

I called that night, but Denise told me Ling wasn't there and that it would probably be a good idea if I didn't call again. Ling had been very insulted that not once during the time we were talking on the couch did I even try to kiss her. I called a couple of more times after that, hoping I'd be able to tell Ling how much I really did like her, but the one time I got her on the phone she was so clearly not interested in talking to me that I stopped calling. I neither saw nor spoke to her again.

I was heartbroken. More than that, though, I was angry and ashamed. I replayed the whole night over and over in my mind, trying to figure out which raised eyebrow or touch on my arm or significant gaze I should have understood as Ling's cue that it was time for me to kiss her.

I just could not see what she clearly thought should have been obvious. I tried to imagine how the night might have gone differently, creating a scenario in which I leaned over and kissed Ling gently at the edge of her mouth, as if I'd been aiming for her cheek and missed. She sat back, looked at me for a long moment, and then, of course, kissed me in return.

Each time I played this scene in my head, however, my anger and shame only increased. I still didn't understand how I was supposed to have known that Ling wanted me to kiss her. As my sense of inadequacy grew, the sting of Ling's mockery grew as well, and I started to think that maybe I was indeed no better than the weak, cowardly and ineffectual little boy she and her friend had told me that I was.

Once again, though, my body rebelled, and a nausea rose in me. Instead of making me want to crawl out of my own skin, though, this nausea was accompanied by a rage that propelled me past Ling's skin and into her body. Now, in the scenes I played in my head, I saw myself "taking her" the way Liam had described "taking" women who were afraid of seeming too "easy," except I didn't realize I was following Liam's script.

Then, once, as I imagined myself putting my hands on either side of Ling's face to hold her still while I kissed her, I had a sense memory of the old man in my building putting his hands on the back of my head to pull my mouth towards him.

I was mortified. I spent the rest of that day alone, trying everything I could think of to twist what I had imagined into a shape that was not what it was: precisely the kind of rape fantasy that Adrienne Rich had written about. The fact that Ling might truly have wanted me to "take her"?—?whatever "taking" might have meant to her?—?was beside the point.

What mattered was that I'd imagined myself "taking her" out of rage, to prove I was a man, not in response to anything I knew about Ling's actual feelings or desires. In Rich's words, I had "equat[ed my]...manhood...with the objectification of another's person and the domination of another's body."

I swore I would do everything in my power to unlearn that equation.

Why I am a feminist man

At the heart of my feminism, then, is a paradox. On the one hand, as a survivor of male sexual violence, I stand with women against the culture of manhood which produces that violence and which the violence in turn perpetuates.

On the other hand, as a man, I am?—?I have no choice but to be?—?implicated in that violence.

The challenge with which feminism confronts me is to make sure that I never allow myself to stand on the same side as my abuser. Meeting this challenge has not been easy. It is often uncomfortable to call other men out on their sexism; and it can be similarly uncomfortable when someone calls me out on mine.

Perhaps the most difficult thing, however, has been resisting the temptation to wear my sexual abuse as a badge of difference, as if having been forcibly penetrated by another man?—?because I am convinced that what I cannot fully remember did in fact happen?—?had somehow emptied me of the manhood I was trying to prove in my fantasy with Ling, the same manhood that Liam valued so highly and that is at the root of male sexual violence.

Because I have been coerced into the position that this kind of manhood usually reserves for women, in other words, it is easy to feel that my relationship to this manhood is essentially the same as a woman's.

Yet whatever else may be true about the fact that I was sexually abused, the social and cultural context in which that abuse exists does not portray either the boy I was or the man I am as a sexual object in the way that it pervasively portrays women.

Nor am I subjected to the daily depredations of misogyny and discrimination, individual and institutional, that women experience because of their status as sexual objects. Finally, because I am a heterosexual man, there is no escaping the fact that both the pleasure this objectification is designed to deliver and the advantages it is supposed to confer are meant quite explicitly for me.

It is, in other words, as if there are two voices speaking within me: the voice of the man who is trying to own up to and change the culture of male sexual violence and the voice of the man who, as that culture's victim, feels like he has nothing to own up to.

Integrating these two voices has been the defining challenge of my life, personally, professionally and creatively. I called my first book of poetry *The Silence of Men* because I was breaking the silence in my life that had resulted from keeping these two voices separate.

More, I hoped my poems would speak to and for men whose lives were shot through with a similar silence. Writing essays like this one also lets each of the men inside me have his say, allowing me to speak about what the old man in my building did to me, while still doing justice to the complex relationship between who I am because of what he did and the man I have been taught I am supposed to be.

Feminism showed me how to connect the old man's inhumanity to the inhumanity of what I have been taught; and feminism is the only politics I can name that explicitly commits itself to a world in which that kind of inhumanity is no longer acceptable. *That* is why I am a feminist man.

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His include *The Silence Of Men* (CavanKerry Press, 2006), a book of his own poems, as well as *Selections from Saadi's Gulistan* and *Selections from Saadi's Bustan* (Global Scholarly Publications, 2004 & 2006 respectively), translations of two masterpieces of 13th-century Iranian poetry. He also co-translated with Professor John Moyne all of the poetry in *A Bird in the Garden of Angels* (Mazda Publishers, 2008), a selection of work by Rumi, also from 13th-century Iran. *The Teller of Tales*, a translation of part of the *Shah-*

nameh, the Persian national epic, is forthcoming in Spring 2011 from [Junction Press](#). As an editor, Richard was responsible for the special Iranian-literature issue of the online journal [ArteEast Quarterly](#), *It Deserves and Should Command Your Attention*.

Richard served as [Persian Arts Festival's](#) first Literary Arts Director, and he continues to co-curate the monthly Shab-e She'r (Night of Persian Poetry) that Persian Arts Festival holds from September through June at the [Bowery Poetry Club](#). He currently sits on the advisory boards of [The Translation Project](#) and [Jackson Heights Poetry Festival](#), and is listed as a speaker with the [New York Council for the Humanities](#).

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