

DAILY LIFE

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What does it mean to be a 'good man'?

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I'm just going to throw this out there because, as far as provocative truth bombs go, it's been ticking away for too long.

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The universal male decency we keep hearing about is largely a myth.

Sure, most men might not be bad. But it takes more than 'not being bad' to be 'actually good'.

Let me backtrack a minute.

Whenever conversation is raised about patriarchy, violence and the lack of equality that still permeates our society, I find myself inundated with messages or comments from men offended by the discussion of male perpetrated violence. Most men, they take ostentatious pains to remind me, are 'decent' - so why do I insist on tarring all of them with the same brush? It's not fair and it's not true. If I want their ongoing support, I had jolly well better start being nicer to them.

Leaving aside for a moment the arrogance it requires to listen to a conversation about the gendered violence suffered by women and make it about their hurt feelings, let's define what they mean by 'decency'.

Is it in the number of men who stand by while sexist jokes are made because 'it's meant to be funny'? Is it drawn from those folks who want women to know that even though they're not saying it's their fault, they shouldn't have been drinking so much? Is it found in the proportions of dudes who talk about how it's women's own incompetency that's holding them back from sitting in positions of power or being paid equal wages for equal work? Is it in the number of men who wax lyrical about how 'ugly' women are when they express a robust opinion, or dare not to pluck and preen their bodies in a way that 'all' men find pleasing?

No, apparently all it takes to be considered a 'decent bloke' is to take an each way bet at doing nothing - nothing to perpetuate oppression, and nothing to stop it. Worse, such 'decent blokes' want to be rewarded for this lack of action, an expectation that not-so-subtly reveals the very same entitlement that serves to perpetuate gender inequality. Translated, what they're really saying is, "Praise me, because I have refrained from behaving in a way both you and I know I could get away with if I wanted to. Please may I have my cookie now? Actually, just give it to me."

Too many of us labour under the assumption that behaving decently is simply a matter of not actively discriminating. Aggrieved justifications of personal goodness are mounted by those on the top of the pile so that we might congratulate ourselves for not abusing our privilege, rather than ponder how unfairly it was bestowed in the first place. Meanwhile, tiny microaggressions are committed and reasoned away by the overarching tolerance that we conveniently confuse for equality.

So it is argued that we cannot be racist because even though we make sweeping generalisations about the mysterious ways of non-white folk, we don't burn crosses on their front lawn; that we cannot be homophobic, because even though we don't think gay people ought to be allowed to marry and 'no one wants to see that in public', we don't want them imprisoned; and that we cannot possibly be misogynists, because even though we think women should take more care with what they're wearing and we laugh when someone tells a sexist joke because humour makes the world go round and think feminists have gone too far, we don't personally beat up women or sexually assault them. (Note: I use 'we' to refer generically to people who lucked out in the social privileges lottery. For race and economic status, I include myself in this category.)

This is apparently what 'being decent' looks like. It's a conditional expression of privilege that pays lip service to

equality but doesn't actually go out of its way to defend it, and whose benevolent support ends the moment it asks us to actually do something. Worse, it balks at this request for demonstration, as if it is enough for our decency to remain an impotent figurehead, and an insult worse than all the discriminations put together to challenge its legitimacy. If I had a dollar for every time I heard a man tell me that if I want his support to continue, I had better start being nicer to him...well, then I wouldn't have to worry quite so much about the wage gap.

Edmund Burke once wrote, "In order for evil to flourish, all that is required is for good men to do nothing." It seems particularly appropriate when discussing the inaction of otherwise inoffensive men when it comes to misogyny and violence (and indeed, there are lessons in this for all of us who experience privilege, whether its that of race, (dis)ability, gender identity or economic class). Doing nothing, be it bad or good, is not enough to actually respect the concept of equality. Real action is required, even when it feels makes you feel awkward, even when it ruins the mood - even when it might shift the target of ridicule onto you.

Because, Good Men, every time do nothing in response to tired sexist jokes or victim blaming or discussions of 'provocation' in regards to gendered assault, you're actually supporting the system that continues to oppress women. Sure, you may not be telling the joke (although plenty of 'decent blokes' have an arsenal of those). You may not have actually committed the sexual assault. You may not be beating your partner. But your silence and inaction condones these things in the minds of those other ordinary people who mistake the lack of condemnation for a green light. Do you know one of the reasons it's not okay to laugh at jokes about rape victims? It's not just because it's extremely insensitive not to mention despicable - it's because treating rape and its victims like they are fodder for humour tells perpetrators that what they did wasn't really that bad.

Unless you are vigilant every day about standing against gender discrimination and misogyny - and that means stepping up, being a proactive bystander and speaking out against ideas and behaviours that perpetuate misogyny - then I'm sorry to tell you that you are not a decent, good bloke. And when you threaten to withdraw your support because you've been made to feel bad, all you're doing is reasserting your own socially gifted dominance.

And frankly, that doesn't sound very decent to me. You might not be a bad man - but unless you're doing something to challenge and change the world we live in for the better, you're not a good one either. All you are is an ordinary person, doing nothing and holding your hand out for a cookie that you do not deserve.

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