

## Men Also Share Fruits of Women's Equality Day

*Women's Equality Day on Aug. 26 is not just a celebration for women. Rob Okun says the day gives men a chance to follow the leadership of women on many fronts and further their own independence.*

(WOMENSENEWS)--Besides celebrating women's advances, Women's Equality Day--celebrated Aug. 26--offers men a chance to think about we can advance our own lives.



If we're willing to honestly examine our long held fear of powerful women--and the false notion that we lose some of our power as women gain more of theirs--there's much for men to learn from the day. Not the least of which is a direction for leading rewarding lives, including understanding our inner world more profoundly.

In this arena, women have long led the way. If that's a problem for some of us guys, well, it's time for us to get over it. Healthy leadership knows no gender.

Four decades ago, when women began renewing their demand for self-determination and freedom across the board--including the ongoing process of examining all female roles in society--they uncovered a silver lining of independence from which men can benefit too.

But first we have to unflinchingly examine our fears. Many of us have felt confused, unsure, angry and threatened by the gains women have made. In some households, being supplanted as top wage earner has triggered men's insecurity; in others, it's been women returning to school to finish a long-delayed degree. Some men feel they're paying a steep price for sharing power: not just losing control but also self-respect.

What a set up. For healthy men, sharing power can have such a healing, eye-opening upside: offering us an opportunity to lighten the load of responsibility so many of us still feel we have to carry.



Rob Okun

Credit: Hiroko Matsubara.

### Danger Lurks

Danger lurks, though. Many unhealthy men, too shut down to examine their own lives, may cross the line, exhibiting controlling, even abusive behaviors. These behaviors must be confronted.

Some believe the advances women have made--increased job and career opportunities, improved wages, better child care--have come at men's expense, as if freedom and independence were finite: "If she has it, then I've lost it," the thinking goes. Truth is, liberation is like love: there's an infinite supply.

Instead of men feeling resentful about the gains women have made, we might study women's accomplishments and apply what we learn to our own lives.

For instance, many women have been public about their struggle to balance the world of work and career with that of relationship and child rearing. The public conversation about the "mommy track" may be a difficult one for women, but it reminds women they are not alone.

Sadly, men wrestling with those same issues usually do so in private, too often silent and isolated. In groups I've facilitated and with individual men I've counseled, I've heard the same refrain: "I was always too ashamed to talk about it."

Unsympathetic supervisors have frowned upon, or have been outright hostile to, men who tried to organize their work schedule in order to make the game, the recital, the doctor's appointment. As a result, many spoke about the despair they felt, the lack of support. Some described developing physical conditions that seemed to develop out of their inner condition: high blood pressure, depression, even suicidal thinking.

## **Sharing Stresses**

For many men, the idea that sharing with others the stresses they were carrying could actually play a crucial role in shifting their experience had never occurred to them.

The world inhabited by my three daughters--29, 26, and 22--and son, 19, has been informed by the struggle for equality women have been waging since before they were born. They've all benefited greatly from their mothers' many acts fierce acts of independence. That one daughter is in Tibet right now working on a film about Buddhist nuns, that another just completed an emergency medical technician certification training in Montana, and that the third is in North Carolina beginning a nurse practitioner graduate program speaks volumes about what women can achieve.

Does their younger brother, a college sophomore, feel undermined by their stepping into the big, wide world, arms flung open, reaching for the sky? Hardly. He's inspired. Just as I am. He knows there is room for him to think big, too. He freely acknowledges how their many trips, when he was in elementary, middle school and high school to Asia, the Middle East, and Central and Latin America, emboldened him to begin his own international travels.

Like many men, I've backed away from admitting the fear and vulnerability I've sometimes felt navigating my life. Long before I began finding strength and hope, wisdom and love, friendship and healing, in the company of men, I found it with women: women in the anti-war movement in Washington, D.C., in the late '60s; strong leaders in the anti-nuke movement in the '70s, proponents of feminist political art in the '80s. Their uncompromising honesty all contributed significantly to my learning how to open up to myself.

I didn't have the language for it at the time but women were modeling a kind of courage I was hungry for, going for a full life without limits.

## **Men Join the Celebration**

It's fitting that men join a celebration of the 19th Amendment that the suffragist movement left to the world 87 years ago.

While we're celebrating, let's include a generous dollop of hope for what's possible for our sons, too.

So thank you, sisters, for being unwilling to accept the restricted lives society imposed on you for so long. Thank you for setting no limits for who you could become. Thank you for articulating the link between the civil rights and the women's rights movements. Thank you for expanding that link to include so many other vital causes, from gay and transgender rights to environmental justice and immigrant solidarity; to name just a few. Thank you for your leadership in the anti-war movement, then and now. You are an inspiration.

As important as Women's Equality Day is in marking what women have accomplished, there is still a long way to go.

Yet as a powerful symbol for men to consider, it raises a question: Can men commit to appreciating women's lives and women's leadership on more than just this one day? Absent our fears, jealousies and unfulfilled longings for connection, can we unabashedly commemorate this holiday and, in the process, open to our own possibility, our own questions?

I hope so. For those of us who can, we will be well on our way to celebrating our own Independence Day.

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<http://www.nwhp.org/>

Millions of Women Still Fail to Cast Ballots:

<http://womensenews.org/article.cfm/dyn/aid/3269/>

National Women's Hall of Fame:

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