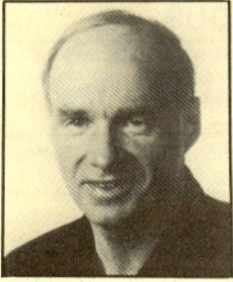


THE LAST WORD



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Do Real Men Hug?

In one of his management newsletters, Harry Levinson says, "People benefit from sharing their pain. They find strength in the ability to ask for help, not because they can't do without it, but because mutual support makes both parties stronger, both lives easier and both lives richer."

Women, it seems, have less trouble with this than men. They don't seem to mind asking for help if they need it. Men, on the other hand, resist asking for help. We have been trained by coaches, drill instructors, Boy Scout leaders and big brothers that it's "macho" to stand alone, to be tough, to make it on our own. Only "weaklings" ask for help. After all, what good does it do to have a college degree, a pilot's license or 30 years experience if we still have to ask someone to help us?

Take the average man who loses his way driving through a strange city. His wife is beside him and his mother-in-law is in the back seat. Both women are adamant he should stop and ask directions.

Does he do it?

Not on your life. Gripping the steering wheel with white knuckles and staring straight ahead, he drives and turns and turns and drives, cursing the way the city is laid out and those idiots who never know how to put up a decent road sign. At best he might pull off the road, look at a map, and try to figure out where he is. At worst his wife forces him to stop by threatening to jump out of the car. In the end he runs short of gas, and while he is filling the tank his mother-in-law says to the attendant, "My stubborn son-in-law is too proud to ask directions. How do we find...?"

Men don't like to ask for help. Especially from their wives, mothers, mothers-in-law, employees, employers, peers, strangers, friends or other men. Because of this strange concept of masculinity, real men, we are taught, not only do not eat quiche, neither do they ask for help.

Nor do they hug.

It's like shedding tears, kneeling at an altar, or saying "I love you" to another man. We men prefer a strong handshake or at best a hearty clap on the back. That's macho!

I remember the instructions my dad gave to each of the four Buckingham boys as we grew up. (I'm not sure how he handled this with our baby sister.) "Shake hands like a man," he said. "Take the initiative. Grasp the other fellow's hand firmly. Squeeze with gentle strength, shake slightly, and look him in the eye. Never look at his forehead, his chin, or his mouth. Always in the eye. This way you're in control."

Much later I learned the handshake is the perfect defense against the pusher who wants to invade my "private space"—that 18-inch perimeter which forms a sacred aura around my body. All men, and

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most women, according to psychological studies, set up this perimeter of defense. Like a magnetic field, it is designed to keep folks from getting into our yards and looking into our windows. It stems from a don't-get-close-to-me spirit and causes us to ward off all male huggers (and especially kissers).

A sociologist from North Carolina State University recently pointed out, "The male twosome is rare and seems designed more for combat than for comfort." For that reason male relationships seldom deepen into intimacy. They stay at the superficial and guarded level, meaning most men treat each other the way two male dogs might as they meet on the sidewalk, politely sniffing, but with the hairs on the back always slightly bristled.

This is sad, for inside every man is a little boy who has never stopped looking for a pal.

Why, then, are we men so reluctant to have close friends, to form relationships, to let our brothers and sisters know where we are hurting and ask for help?

The Bible says the reason is *pride*. It's an awful thing, this pride. It not only prevents us from asking for help and from hugging, but it robs us of deep and lasting relationships.

We men need to learn how to express our need for warmth, security and other deep emotions. We need to learn to lean on our brothers, to put an arm around a hurting friend, to let a friend put his arms around us and help heal our hurts. In short, we need to grow up, stop being afraid some woman is going to ensnare us with a mother's apron string, or some man put us back under a father's tyrannical thumb.

We men need to learn from our female counterparts that it can be comforting and strengthening to admit "weakness" rather than hiding it. Perhaps we might discover others have weaknesses, too, and in the process of our seeking comfort, we can become a comforter.

It's risky, fellows. There is a real danger you might reach out and be misunderstood—or even rejected. I'm not saying this kind of love and honesty is easy, but we have to start somewhere.

Why not with each other? ↪