

Matching Troubles

The very different way that women respond to the telling of troubles is dramatized in a short story, "New Haven," by Alice Mattison. Eleanor tells Patsy that she has fallen in love with a married man. Patsy responds by first displaying understanding and then offering a matching revelation about a similar experience:

"Well," says Patsy. "I know how you feel."

"You do?"

"In a way, I do. Well, I should tell you. I've been sleeping with a married man for two years."

Patsy then tells Eleanor about her affair and how she feels about it. After they discuss Patsy's affair, however, Patsy says:

"But you were telling me about this man and I cut you off. I'm sorry. See? I'm getting self-centered."
"It's OK." But she is pleased again.

The conversation then returns to Eleanor's incipient affair. Thus Patsy responds first by confirming Eleanor's feelings and matching her experience, reinforcing their similarity, and then by encouraging Eleanor to tell more. Within the frame of Patsy's similar predicament, the potential asymmetry inherent in revealing personal problems is avoided, and the friendship is brought into balance.

What made Eleanor's conversation with Patsy so pleasing to Eleanor was that they shared a sense of how to talk about troubles, and this reinforced their friendship. Though Eleanor raised the matter of her affair, she did not elaborate on it until Patsy pressed her to do so. In another story by the same author, "The Knitting," a woman named Beth is staying with her sister in order to visit her sister's daughter Stephanie in a psychiatric hospital. While there, Beth receives a disturbing telephone call from her boyfriend, Alec. Having been thus reminded of her troubles, she wants to talk about them, but she refrains, because her sister doesn't ask. She feels required, instead, to focus on her sister's problem, the reason for her visit:

She'd like to talk about her muted half-quarrels with Alec of the last weeks, but her sister does not ask about the phone call. Then Beth thinks they should talk about Stephanie.

The women in these stories are balancing a delicate system by which troubles talk is used to confirm their feelings and create a sense of community.

When women confront men's ways of talking to them, they judge them by the standards of women's conversational styles. Women show concern by following up someone else's statement of trouble by questioning her about it. When men change the subject, women think they are showing a lack of sympathy—a failure of intimacy. But the failure to ask probing questions

could just as well be a way of respecting the other's need for independence. When Eleanor tells Patsy that she is in love with Peter, Patsy asks, "Are you sleeping with him?" This exploration of Eleanor's topic could well strike many men—and some women—as intrusive, though Eleanor takes it as a show of interest that nourishes their friendship.

Women tend to show understanding of another woman's feelings. When men try to reassure women by telling them that their situation is not so bleak, the women hear their feelings being belittled or discounted. Again, they encounter a failure of intimacy just when they were bidding to reinforce it. Trying to trigger a symmetrical communication, they end up in an asymmetrical one.

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REAL MEN DON'T CRY . . . AND OTHER "UNCOOL" MYTHS

PHIL W. PETRIE

Things were not going well. Do they ever for young couples struggling to understand each other, raise a family, pay the mortgage and at least keep the Joneses in sight? I had wanted to comfort my pregnant wife, soothe her with words that would temper the harshness of our reality. The baby was due in two months and my employer had just informed me that I didn't have hospitalization coverage for childbirth. I was frustrated and wanted to scream, lay my head in my wife's lap and cry. I needed to be soothed as well as she. She wanted to talk about our predicament, needed to talk it out. So did I, but I couldn't. I felt that I had failed her: Guilt stood at my side. But how could she know any of that, since all I did was to turn on the stereo system—my electronic security blanket—and listen to Miles Davis. I was cool. Her words shot through the space of "All Blues." "You're a cold SOB," she hissed.

She's being emotional again, I thought, *just like a woman*. I, on the other hand, was controlling the situation because I was cool—which in reality was only a few degrees away from being cold.

Phil W. Petrie, "Real Men Don't Cry . . . and Other 'Uncool' Myths" from *Essence* (November 1982). Reprinted with the permission of the author.

Wasn't that what she really wanted from me, as head of the household — control? Wasn't Freud correct when he proclaimed that our anatomy was our destiny (that is, our genitals determine our behavior)? In spite of her protestations that we had to talk, there was nothing in my upbringing that negated for me the power of coolness. I knew by the example of my elders that men controlled themselves and women did not.

In Mt. Olive, the Baptist church of my youth, it was expected that the "sisters" would "carry on" at church services. And they did. Moved by something that the preacher had said or by the mystery of a song, they would leap from their seats, run, scream, hurtle down the aisles. Transformed. Private feeling was suddenly public spectacle. Ushers came. White-gloved hands brushed away the tears. The men of the church, the elders, sat glued to their seats. I watched, instructed by this example of male control. I watched in silence but wished that I could know the electric transformation that moved those souls to dance.

"The larger culture creates expectations for males," says Dr. Walter Tardy, a psychiatrist in New York City. "In spite of the Women's Liberation Movement, men still live in a very macho culture and role play. Women tend to display their feelings more."

One of the roles men play is that of the rational being devoid of strong emotions. Profound feelings, it is thought, will interfere with the male task, whether that means making it at the nine-to-five or making it at war. Objective decisions must be made without distracting emotions, which women are thought to be prone to — even by some other women. For many persons, "being a man" is synonymous with being emotionless — cool.

One need not be told this. Like air, it seems to be a pervasive part of the male atmosphere. If one missed it at church (as I did not), one might pick it up at the barbershop or the playground — places where the elements of the culture are passed on without the benefit of critical examination.

Didn't Wimpy Sheppard tell me at Tom Simon's Barbershop that only babies, women and sissies cried? A man, he said, ain't supposed to cry. That's why my father, at the death of his mother, slipped out to the backyard away from his family to sit among the chickens and wail. How could I explain to my wife — to myself — that I couldn't rest my head in her lap and weep? I had to protect my masculinity. Asking me to cry, to drop my cool, was asking me to redefine my life.

Says Margo Williams, a widow residing in San Diego, California, with her two children, "If you can't let down to your mate, friend or what have you, then you have to ask yourself what the relationship is all about — is it worth being involved with? For me, it's not about my man being strong and hard. I want him to be a human being — warm, sensitive and willing to share his life with me."

What if he balks? Williams is asked. "If the relationship is a serious one, I would urge him to let us try to work through the problems," she says. "I would want to establish a relationship wherein we could express to each other our needs and wants — even express our dislikes. We have to establish an honest relationship."

Dr. Tardy cautions that "there are degrees of honesty. Do you tell the truth all of the time, or is a white lie something appropriate? One can only be just so honest. The truth may set you free, but some truths should be withheld because they can hurt more than they help. But even if you don't tell it all, you must tell *something*. Communication is the key."

Therein lies the danger of being cool and playing roles. In doing this, one reveals a persona rather than a person, plays a part rather than being part of the relationship. Communication, by its root definition, means "sharing, making something common between people." It is this fear of sharing — giving up something — that drives some men into being noncommunicative except in the area of sex.

Robert Staples, a sociologist, states in his book *Black Masculinity* (Black Scholar Press) that when Black men "have been unable to achieve status in the workplace, they have exercised the privilege of their manliness and attempted to achieve it [power] in the bedroom. Feeling a constant need to affirm their masculinity, tenderness and compassion are eschewed as signs of weakness, which leaves them vulnerable to the ever-feared possibility of female domination."

It could be argued that in today's climate of women's liberation, all men are on the defensive because of the developing assertiveness of women. No doubt some men — if not many — use sex as a controlling force. "But," says Wilbur Suesberry, a pediatrician practicing in Compton, California, "I don't believe that sex is racially restrictive. Black sexuality is a myth started and supported by whites and perpetuated by Blacks. Men find it difficult to express their inner feelings but they must find a way to do it. If you have things pent up inside of you and they do not come out in a healthy way, then they exit in an unhealthy way. Sex as an outlet for your emotions is not good. To communicate you can't sulk or take to the bed, you must talk." Talk? Yes, talk is a more precise method of communicating than sex, intuition or an "understanding."

"The birth is due in two months," she persisted. "What are we going to do?" Annoyed, not at her but at the apparent futility of the situation, I turned up the record player and went deeper into myself. Didn't she *understand* me well enough to know that I would do something? Hadn't I always? Couldn't she look at me and see that I was worried too? Didn't she *trust* me well enough to know that I would do something? All of those questions might have been eliminated with my telling her simply and directly what my feelings really were. How could she really know them unless

she were a mind reader, just as I didn't know what she felt?

Screaming and crying isn't quite the same thing as communicating effectively. I pulled her to me, caressed her.

Hugging and kissing are not substitutes for words, for language. Talking to each other allows us to bring order to the disruption and confusion engendered by silence. *Talk to me*, Little Willie John used to sing, *talk to me in your own sweet gentle way*.

This simple verbal act is made all the more difficult for men (and women, for that matter) if we don't know (or won't admit) what our feelings really are. We can't talk about things if we can't conceptualize them. Communication is more than mouthing words or rapping. I see it as defining an aspect of one's life by framing that aspect into words and then sharing it with someone. It is not only a problem for lovers; it also bedevils fathers and sons, mothers and daughters. It is problematic because it drives you within. The first act of communication is with your self — "the private self," Dr. Tardy calls it. This journey within involves both introspection and openness.

Yet what I face within myself — if indeed I face it — may never be completely shared with anyone. An insistence that I communicate *all* of my feelings is asking too much. We men are now being urged not only to redefine our roles and relationships with our mates and society but also to become vulnerable by revealing our private selves to another public, although it may be a public of only one. The degree to which I can do this — express *some* of my feelings — is determined by the self-awareness I have of myself and the trust I have for my spouse.

I closet my feelings out of self-protection and fear of the unknown. Women in their newfound drive for liberation have the example of men to direct them. It seems that all women are asking for are some of the prerogatives once claimed by men only. But what is to be the model for me? White men? I think not. Granted they are the movers and shakers within this society, but the madness of the world that they have created does not make them legitimate role models. Yet for many Black women the term *man* is synonymous with *white man*. I resent being asked to pattern myself after a man whose reality — full of avarice and destruction — is so antithetical to mine. I hold on to my cool.

For Black men, being cool is not just an attitude; it becomes a political stance, a metaphor for power. To give that up is, in effect, to render oneself powerless — to lose control. For Black men, who control so little, to lose this cool is to lose a weapon in their arsenal for survival. Do Black women know that?

"Maybe you could call somebody [white?] who can help," she suggested, determined to get a word out of me. And if I can't find someone white to help us with my problems, I thought, then I can fold up and cry to you. Ugh. Is this what you ask of me: to imitate

white men or act like women (that is, take control or cry)? What brave new world are you asking me to enter into by dropping my cool, discarding my role as leader, drowning my strength with tears? It is a scenario that no other group of men in history has ever played. Yet you ask me, the most politically weak person within the society, to lead the way to this new world. How can you ask me that, baby? And if I go, will you cast me aside as being weak? You scream about a man who is strong enough to cry, strong enough to admit weaknesses, and at the same time you want a "take-charge" person, a man who won't let anyone run over him. Caught between such confusion, I turn to the ball game, to the television, to the silence within myself. Love is withheld. Restrained. Tentative.

"I think that our generation is too tentative," says Lee Atkins, a publishing-company sales representative living in Chicago. "Those of us born in the 1940's and before were given too many caveats. Black men or boys were told not to do this and not to do that. Avoid the police. Stay out of trouble. All of this was done to protect us in an extremely racist and hostile society. In effect, we were being told: behave or you will be destroyed." That made us cautious and we are now paying the price for all that caution. As men we find that we are too careful, too private, not open and not willing to explore. We find it difficult to open up even to those we care about the most.

"Those kids born in the 1950's and 1960's," Atkins continues, "were born into a world where the expectations for the Black male were more positive. A whole set of new possibilities was suddenly available. Sexually, things were more permissive, and in the do-your-own-thing attitude of the 1960's and 1970's Black men were actually encouraged to be more unconventional, to open up."

This has led to young Black men who are more candid about their feelings, more carefree in their attitudes. "I would be surprised," says Dr. Tardy, "if these young adults weren't more open in their dealings with each other. The drawback may be that they don't want to establish the permanent relations that were expected in the past. I can imagine that many young women will say that the young men today aren't 'serious' or are too much into themselves. That's the legacy of hanging loose."

Whether we are young or old, one thing is certain: we men cannot expect to go through a lifetime in silence, repressing our feelings, denying our emotions, without being run down by frustrations, failed opportunities and unfulfilled promises. And why would we do this? Is it because of the protrusion dangling between our legs? Is it because we hold on to a fixed role in a changing world? Or is it because of our fear of losing an imagined power? Perhaps the answer is all of the above. If so, we must rush to get rid of these contrived ghosts. In the real world our women are calling to us. How long will they keep it up before they give up? Or as writer Amiri Baraka asks, "How long till the logic of our lives runs us down?"

She stood before me pleading, belly swollen with my seed. She wasn't asking for much, just that I talk to her. She was richly human and was demanding that I be nothing less, saying that I couldn't be a man until I showed that I was human — warm, tender, compassionate, feeling, and able to express that feeling. It was difficult, but with a guide so dedicated to my good health I began the journey from within to without that day. We found the money for the hospital. But more important, I found that I could talk to her about me, could share my life in trust with her. I write this as a souvenir of remembrance — a gift for her.

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DANNY

NATHAN MCCALL

Sitting at my desk, working, I noticed a tall, lanky white dude walk into the newsroom and head toward my row. He was casually dressed: a silly-looking stingy-brimmed straw hat on his curly head, a lightweight mustard-colored zip-up jacket, paddy-boy slacks, and a pair of those shoes construction workers wear. No sport coat or tie. He was dressed so casual I assumed he'd come in for a story interview. Then he walked straight over to the aisle where I sat, plopped a notepad down on the empty desk behind me, and took a seat. I thought, *Just what I need. Another cracker near me.*

I stood up to go to the supply cabinet. Before I could leave, the new guy sprang from his seat, extended his hand, and said, "Hi, I'm Danny. Danny Baum." He was three inches from my face, smiling like there was something funny. I shook his hand. "I'm Nathan." And I walked away.

Later, I saw Danny walking across the newsroom. He had a goofy demeanor — long strides, arms swinging wild — like a northern Gomer Pyle or Mr. Green Jeans on *Captain Kangaroo*. A white woman reporter who sat near me leaned over to another white reporter, pointed at Danny, and whispered, "That's the new guy. Do you know what he did? He moved into a black neighborhood. Everybody's talking about it. *Somebody's* got to talk to him." Apparently unaware that I overheard, they burst out laughing, as if this new

Nathan McCall, "Danny" from *Makes Me Wanna Holler: A Young Black Man in America*. Copyright © 1994 by Nathan McCall. Reprinted with the permission of Random House, Inc.

guy — this crazy northerner — had done the stupidest thing in the world. I looked at them a minute and thought to myself, *Uh-huh. These are the same pseudo-liberal crackers who will get up in your face and swear they're not racist and they don't see color. Yet they thought it was hilarious that a white guy was so color-blind that he'd moved into a black neighborhood.* I decided that the next time a white person told me he didn't see color, I was gonna call him a liar to his face. Let him know that he can't insult my intelligence and get away with it.

After I finished going off on white people in my head, I turned my thoughts back to this Danny guy. What kind of a person *was* he to move into a black neighborhood? Was it a mistake on his part or did he do that intentionally?

Newsroom gossip held that he had come to the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* from *The Wall Street Journal*. Normally, that's considered a step down professionally. *The Wall Street Journal* is, after all, one of the top newspapers in the country. When asked why he left the *Journal* to come to Atlanta, Danny had told someone, "The people at *The Wall Street Journal* were too stuffy and pretentious. I decided I'd get a real job with real people who would let me chase fire engines and write about it."

In the following weeks, I watched him closely to see what he was about. It didn't take long to see that there was something different about this cat. Other people in the newsroom, blacks and whites, recognized it, too. I found him to be different in a pleasant way. Whenever he said something to me, there was a straightforwardness, a childlike honesty, that I didn't get from most other white people. With him, I didn't feel the hesitancy I felt from other whites or the racial baggage getting in the way. And he'd ask me the damndest things out of the blue. One day, he slid his swivel chair back near mine and asked, "Why aren't black reporters more aggressive around here, Nate?"

It was the kind of thing I knew a lot of whites around there wondered about but were afraid to ask for fear of sounding racist or for fear of revealing that they were, in fact, racist. But Danny didn't seem to care. I concluded it must have been because he was secure in his mind that he wasn't racist, and he had nothing to hide. He was simply curious. He didn't know, so he did what any intelligent person should have done: He asked rather than assume. I respected that about him and found that, in spite of myself, there was something about this dude I really liked.

Since we sat so close to each other, we began rapping a lot at our desks. I learned Danny had done his own examination of the white mainstream and reached some of the same conclusions as me: that it was totally fucked up, that they needed to scratch all the rules governing the macho corporate game and go back to drawing stickmen on cave walls because that's about how far they'd come in human development. By the time he came to the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, Danny had decided that he was no longer going to play the game by their silly rules. He didn't brownnose the bosses or try to join the white folks' privileged insiders' club in the newsroom. He didn't try to get in with all the *right* people to gain an edge. In fact, he held man-agement in contempt and talked about them as much as I did.