

Men must abandon notion they are violent by nature

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In my darker moments I think it was inevitable. A young man, wired with hate and fear, pulled the trigger on 14 women's lives. It was inevitable not because men are naturally violent. There was something else at work.

There are those who think that men are predisposed to aggression and brutality. That's the "2001: A Space Odyssey" view of human nature. Good movie, but with anthropology as flimsy as the Flintstones.

Researchers tell us that half of tribal societies investigated over the past century had no, or very low levels of, violence. Some had no rape. No battering. No fist fights. No war. This is the best proof we have that humans in general, and men in particular, are not genetically programmed for violence against each other.

But that's not much solace for the woman I met two weeks ago in a small farming community who told me her husband beat her every few months.

We're surrounded by violence. Kids take it in with their first mouthful of pabulum. They'll see 18,000 violent deaths on television by the time they graduate from high school.

They'll watch physical brutality in prime_time sports and learn that "bullets and bombs" make gridiron heroes. They'll hear our respected political leaders tell us why we need to start a new war. They'll be spanked by their parents and learn that violence and love go hand_in_hand. If it's not biologically innate, then violence must be something we learn.

But that's not much solace for the friend I spoke to last night who told me about being date raped when she was 17.

Anthropologists gives us a clue how we might begin to change things. They tell us that the societies with little or no violence were more_or_less egalitarian. Men didn't control women and no man ruled another. They tell us that societies with more violence have been societies of male domination. There must be something about the way that men have ruled the world that begets violence.

It's not only that men have used violence to maintain power and control over women, children and other men. Men have learned to think of power as our ability to dominate and control the world, the people around us, and our own unruly emotions.

This power is equated with masculinity. We exercise power in different ways: with money or ideas, charm or chance, brains or brute force. Whatever the method, we learn that to be a man means having some sort of power

and control. Most men are not violent, but most of us feel we have to perform and be on top at least somewhere in our lives.

The problem is that so many men don't feel in control. If you equate being a man with having power, a lack of power can make you feel incomplete, inadequate, impotent.

What do men do about that? Far too many use harassment, abuse, and violence as a way to unconsciously restore their masculine equilibrium, their sense they really are men. Harassers, rapists, batterers, and murderers of women are not simply deranged. They're men in pain who bought the message that they've got to dominate to be men.

But that bit of analysis is no solace for the old woman stabbed to death across town.

It does, however, contain a message for change. Men's violence occurs in societies of inequality between men and women. That's why the struggle against men's violence is part of feminism and why feminism is the critical tool for ridding the world of violence.

Feminism is a vision of equality between women and men. It is a vision of liberation for women. It is, as more and more men are discovering, a vision of liberation for men ourselves. It promises to free men from the power struggles, performance anxieties, competitive pressures, emotional distance from children, men, and women, and violence that characterizes all of our lives to one extent or another.

That's why, every year, hundreds of thousands of men in Canada wear a white ribbon. It's a call on men to lay down their arms in the war against women. It's a commitment to examine sexism in our own lives. It's a statement that men aren't just part of the problem but part of the solution.

That's no solace to the 14 sisters we lost in Montreal. But it is a message of hope for the future.