

WHEN TWO GENERATIONS OF MEN'S GROUPS MEET

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BY TOM WEINER

For three decades, Tom Weiner has been part of a western Massachusetts men's group (that's been meeting for even longer). He is currently writing a book about men's and women's support groups, emphasizing the purposes they serve for their members and their role in society. When his son Stefan told a friend about his father's book idea, Ben Blackshear shared that he, too, is in a men's group that has been together for two years. Intrigued, Tom began a relationship with the Brooklyn, N.Y.-based group, interviewing two members and attending one of their groups. The older man and younger men peppered each other with so many questions that Tom suggested the younger men come north to meet with his group, formed in 1978. Its nine members spend one Sunday a month together, from brunch through supper. They also hold a five-day annual retreat on an island in the St. Lawrence River's Thousand Island region. The younger men's group, ranging in age from 26 to 40, has six members, and includes Ben Blackshear, Kevin Quirolo, Joshua Latour, and Ben Fuller-Googins. (Two new members have joined their group since the weekend.) Members participating from the older men's group, who are 58 to 67, include the author, Steve Trudel, Paul Richmond, Alan Surprenant, Steve Bannasch, Robbie Leppzer, and Dick McLeester. (Two of its members were unable to attend the weekend.) What follows is an edited conversation among members of the younger and older men's groups.

WHAT PURPOSES DOES YOUR MEN'S GROUP SERVE IN YOUR LIFE?

Josh (Younger Men's Group): I see the group helping me with my own needs as a man and with being a better ally as well as with managing my relationships with women by being emotionally more aware. The group encourages me to be more emotionally available, to be a better listener, and to be more informed about how to be with other men.

Ben B. (YMG): Our group offers the opportunity for structured reflection. We also come for the camaraderie. There are times when we offer one another advice. I have also received—and offered—emotional support.

Kevin (YMG): I see our group as a space to develop emotional intimacy with other men based on a shared commitment to anti-oppression politics. It also offers me opportunities to practice patience with myself and others.

Ben F-G (YMG): The practice of sharing has been critical. One of the features of patriarchy and toxic masculinity is the feeling that a lot of the traits and habits are my own—thoughts about sex or about women or the inability to be in relationship. Then I pathologize my own issues, so coming together and sharing in group lets me know there are others who have similar feelings and tensions, which is very healing.

Steve T. (Older Men's Group): The group reduces my individuality. It has created a collective identity as a result of the maturation of our men, which is a joy, because it is so different from what I usually experience in relationships with men. I see the group as having expanded our sense of being human. The area where it has been the most important has been to be able to feel trust in other men—the trust to be challenged and to challenge each other's limitations within a context of the ocean of trust we've co-created.



Robbie Leppzer, left, and Josh Latour talk about men's groups then and now while hiking along the banks of the Quabbin Reservoir in western Massachusetts.

Paul (OMG): Making a commitment and being able to have much deeper relationships—the group has fostered that in my life. I learn that a lot of similar things go on for all of us. Whatever ways in which I might have thought I was unique I find out I'm not so unique.

Dick (OMG): Being in the group means I'm thinking on an ongoing basis, "This is something I could bring to group—something to put out to the group as a whole." Or, it's something I want to ask. A lot of other times it's just about hearing what other people are wrestling with that will be an occasion for me to think about that aspect in my own life. I've learned ways to share, to listen and to challenge other people and particularly other men.

Robbie (OMG): Having this support group going through life has been priceless. I feel very grateful. I was 20 when I joined; the youngest member of the group. As a teenager, I had long considered myself not macho, having grown up and witnessed the ravages of patriarchy, domestic abuse and violence in my own family. This group gave me validation and support to continue on my path as a pro-feminist man. As the men's group became my chosen family over time, it has provided a continual grounding and support for me on my evolving journey as a man.

HOW DO YOU SEE MEN'S GROUPS BEING BENEFICIAL TO MEN?

Ben B. (YMG): Our group has encouraged me to feel more vulnerable. We have been getting better at helping each other look at our lives and our pasts through different and more critical lenses, such as reflecting on the balance of emotional labor in our relationships.

Ben F-G (YMG): I see in white men, in the older generations of my family, that patriarchy is still the prevailing frame of masculinity and it is individualized. So the concept of being in connection with other men is in direct contradiction to how we're conditioned to be in this world—alone. Having a group structure invites the possibility that there are other ways of being that are rooted in sharing and being visible.

Josh (YMG): I need to issue a disclaimer. I wrestle with the idea that our men's group isn't challenging enough or isn't inclusive enough or whether it's really needed since women's voices are not heard enough already. People can criticize us for being together with only men and not being open to women, but I feel our group is just getting its toes wet in terms of what to do to be more effective.

Steve T. (OMG): All the female partners I've talked to like the idea that their men are having other ways to explore their needs—not just in their marriage/partnership—because men tend to not do that. They traditionally do that kind of exploration with their wives and then think that's the only place they have to do it. In my work with men who are abusive and controlling, it's pretty characteristic that men are isolated without networks of support. Men's groups like ours work to undo the isolation.

Tom Weiner (OMG): Men's groups can greatly help men to experience a much wider range of emotions and cultivate nurturing and intimacy understandings and skills that serve in other arenas, including romantic relationships, friendships and child rearing, a topic our men's group has discussed regularly as some of us have become fathers.

DESCRIBE HOW YOUR MEN'S GROUP FILLS YOUR NEED FOR CONNECTION WITH OTHER MEN.

Ben B. (YMG): I think it demonstrates to us the truth that we need each other. It clearly shows that peer support and realizing our interconnectedness are important in a culture that is so built on individualism.

Ben F-G (YMG): It fills the need for connection because it's explicitly rooted in wanting to both outwardly confront and challenge patriarchal violence and inwardly deal with how patriarchy shapes our relationship to ourselves. Since it was the intention of our group from the start it changes

how I show up for it compared to how I am with other men. Right from the start we were talking about pornography or violence or how we objectify women or how we can't cultivate a relationship with our fathers. It's been a consistent invitation for me to reveal more, and there's nowhere else in my life where that happens.

Josh (YMG): It's about being more intentional and talking about different things—like what it was like growing up as a boy and all the pressures society sets to be tough or being talked down to if you showed emotion; talking about sexuality and how to be a better lover. Many of us have been affected by the phallogocentric view and it was all about penetration and not how to pleasure a woman. We grew up hearing phrases like, “Did you get your dick wet?” No, we don't want to be that way. Also being in group allows us to talk about our sexual identity preferences. We don't have to identify as male or female. Seeing the group through a queer lens—we want the group to be more inclusive for people of all sexual identities and orientations—the group is very open to that and it helps us inform our language.

Alan (OMG): I would add the size of the group—not one-on-one or a threesome. There's a certain energy that comes from seven, eight, or nine of us being together. It's unique. I don't experience that any other place in my life.

Paul (OMG): It's about being in a safe place to explore and be challenged to help me grow. It's people who know you for a long period of time that can reflect along with you about what's happening, what you've gone through. Are you still telling us the same story that you were when we met you? Now we're all tied up in it, too, so what do you want to change? Plus there's the commitment we share to really show up and to go deeper, to ask those questions.

WHAT ARE SOME SPECIFIC THINGS YOU'VE LEARNED ABOUT YOURSELF FROM BEING IN A MEN'S GROUP?

Ben B. (YMG): It's helped me learn how to be more vulnerable with people in my life who are not my romantic partner. I've learned that sharing ways I am working on improving myself or things that I am struggling with helps me do the work I need to do to make the changes I want and need to make. Being in the group makes me more accountable to myself—and the group.

Kevin (YMG): I tend to avoid connecting with men outside our group because having to confront the sexism I encounter is stressful. By facing and dealing with our own sexism in a controlled environment it's made me more confident I can deal with it outside the group.

Ben F-G (YMG): I want to touch on sex. I think I have a lot of shame around sex and my body—particularly about male violence in sexual dynamics. It's hard for me to bring my full self in sexual romantic partnerships because I censor and police myself so I don't express violence. One hundred percent of my female partners have experienced this and it impacts our relationship, because if I'm putting a lot of energy into policing and censoring my behavior, partners can't experience my whole self. So I'm seeking a balance between feeling my full self, but not replicating patterns of violence and dominance that is still the norm. Even as I hear myself talk about this it's such a release to have a space to talk about with other guys saying it's hard for them, too.

Steve T. (OMG): In our group, I'm more interested in finding out where everyone is at with a bigger discussion, not one where one person talks and the rest of us listen. The group gives me a place to explore things I know about myself and get feedback. I like being able to feel safe and trusting, to challenge the other men in the group, but I feel a certain amount of judgment and a sense of an accompanying irritability when we don't change.

Alan (OMG): Any time I take time out from the hubbub of my life to do something and I'm conscious of what's going on, I'm learning something. The act of taking that space is what's central. I'm still learning...

Tom (OMG): I've learned to be more trusting of men having had numerous experiences of being bullied or rejected. I learned I could trust an entire group of men and I found out how satisfying—rather than scary and disappointing—that could be.

IF YOU HAVE ENCOURAGED OTHER MEN TO TRY A MEN'S GROUP, WHAT HAPPENED?

Ben B. (YMG): I encouraged a student at the college I attended to start one. He had told me he wanted to be more aware of his position in social justice organizing spaces on campus and he seemed interested in starting a group that would give him support and feedback about that work.

Kevin (YMG): A friend of mine, who I thought would be interested because he is a feminist, isn't interested. I think there are two points here. First there's a suspicion of a group of men focused on themselves, and second there's a sense of urgency to organize outwardly. The first point, the suspicion, is crucial to this work because sexism is so insidious it can (and often does) corrupt seemingly earnest efforts by men to support feminism. Any men's group of this kind has to directly address how patriarchy shapes who we are and how we relate to other men. The second point, the urgency, is understandable, but could be counterproductive. Getting out in the world and working against oppression can be transformative. But urgency could be an excuse to ignore your own sexism.

Ben F-G (YMG): I invited someone I knew and he's now an awesome part of our group. There are a lot of men in my world that are politicized and have a lot of awareness. But I notice hesitancy—"Do I deserve, as a man, to spend time in a group setting like this rather than an outward organizing project?"

Josh (YMG): It's been hard to follow through with people. Our group is still in its infancy so it's hard to know what we're inviting people to. I'll say, "Come to our men's group," and someone will ask, "What are you doing?" I'll say: "We're talking," but they want concrete examples. This kind of organizing takes time. Two new people have joined since our weekend together. New York is a rough city to be doing this kind of work, because everyone is so busy earning a living and negotiating their lives.



“It’s possible to have deep friendships.” From the left, Steve Trudel, Keith Quirolo, Ben Fuller-Googins, Ben Blackshear.

Alan (OMG): I had the experience of helping a men’s group form. They’re 68 or older and there are seven in the group. I met with two of them—the conveners—over breakfast to describe what we did and they’ve started with how we did, meeting weekly.

Paul (OMG): Any time the idea of men’s group comes up, the person I’m talking to thinks I’m talking about drumming and walking on coals. Sometimes I get a reaction just because of the years we’ve been a group. You have a group of people you’ve known for 38 years? Do you still actually meet with them? That is actually a source of amazement—that we even get together.

HOW HAS BEING IN A MEN’S GROUP RESULTED IN YOU BEING MORE VULNERABLE AND TALKING HONESTLY WITH OTHER MEN ABOUT YOUR LIFE.

Ben F-G (YMG): With my dad there’s been a major shift in our relationship. I’ve noticed in the past couple of years being able to talk more than we have historically, particularly around family issues and relationship stuff. I don’t think that would have been possible without the practice and support around being vulnerable that I’ve taken from our men’s group. I’ve just seen the joy of that. It’s totally deepened our relationship.

Josh (YMG): I’ve been finding more ways to be vulnerable and communicating that vulnerability. A specific example would be with my sexual partner where I’ve been communicating my needs and wants and intentions. We talk about it together and it helps me be more aware of what’s going on. I have a better understanding of consent culture—not just having an idea about it but practicing it.

Steve T. (OMG): Our group has enabled us to develop a sense of confidence in intimately exploring one another’s paths. It allows and encourages me to see through men’s defensiveness in the world at large and seek out and invite men to experience their own exploration of vulnerability. It also enables me to be in the moment with another person as they are rather than trying to change

them or make something different happen, which is probably the best way to experience mutual vulnerability.

Steve B. (OMG): Many years ago I was walking with one of my daughters. She was about three years old so I was holding her hand. We were about to cross the road at a crosswalk when somebody drove past really fast. I yelled loudly. The car, which had passed us by then, slammed on its brakes, screeched to a stop, and backed up really fast. A much younger, muscular guy said, “What the fuck is your problem?” I said, “I made that loud sound, because I was afraid. I’m walking with my daughter.” That completely disrupted his narrative, because he wasn’t expecting that. It was so out of the narrative that he gruffly responded, “I’m sorry...” and then drove off more slowly. I think that is something that came from my life experience, and my life and men’s group are totally linked up.

Steve T. (OMG): The only feeling that can commonly be shared between men is anger. We can share being pissed off. That guy in Steve’s story expected to be met at the level of anger and so anger is up here (gestures with his hand) and beneath it is often some other kind of feeling, like confusion or another feeling that’s related to anger. Then, beneath that level of being confused is sadness and grief. You could notice that’s also in there when you initially feel anger—if you have the opportunity to be able to pay attention and if you’re listened to. We’re a group that is committed to nonviolence, so anger isn’t going to be the currency that we use, but still it is possible it could show up. We’ve added more complexity to the story.

Paul (OMG): I appreciate our willingness to let each of us experience the pain that we might be having in our lives and to realize that there’s nothing else anybody can do besides letting us have a safe space to experience that pain and witness it. If you need to be held that’s available. Nobody is putting you down, telling you to suck it up. That vulnerability makes it possible to get through some really difficult stuff.

Tom (OMG): I think of my vulnerability numerous times when something really difficult has happened in my life and my first thought is I can’t wait until I can talk about that in group. I’m thinking of my friend’s tragic death, of my son’s innumerable brain operations—of lying on the bed at Steve’s house and having the whole group give me a loving back rub so I could just cry out my fear and my sadness.

WHAT DO YOU SEE AS A TAKEAWAY FROM BEING WITH AN OLDER AND YOUNGER MEN’S GROUP?

Ben F-G (YMG): I went into the weekend having some skepticism based on not having very positive relationships with older white men. It was such a joy to see your group’s friendships with each other. On one level, “Wow, it’s possible to have these friendships that are expanding, challenging and deepening over decades.” The level of curiosity I experienced you showing about us—that was fantastic. I so appreciated that because it is not what I experience a lot in relationships with older men. I left very joyful and hopeful having seen that if you commit to such a group it can be rich in lasting joy and transformation.

Ben B. (YMG): The biggest takeaway for me was an affirmation that this work is valuable and the “project” of men’s groups is worthwhile. Seeing the deep bonds the older men have, their happiness, their political astuteness, their willingness to challenge each other, and the shared

memories they've built over the years was powerful. It made me feel that the benefits of this work are ongoing and get even richer with continued time and emotional investment.

Steve T. (OMG): I felt like I got to experience my wisdom and our collective wisdom from having been part of our group for so many years. I also felt a great sense of relief knowing that there are young men who are finding value in being with each other, supporting each other in the same way that we've had the opportunity to experience—that sense that, “Oh, good, our men's group wasn't just a blip on the radar screen that went away.”

Paul (OMG): It felt like they are a younger version of ourselves. In this time and place they are political guys who are questioning and working on issues that they think are important— whether it be about issues of race or climate change or the environment. They are being confronted with how they are being men in the various organizations to which they belong. They are being supportive of each other and trying to be different from traditional masculinity in what they're doing.

Robbie (OMG): I was so delighted and amazed that men's groups like ours are still forming in the 2010s because it's a very different era than when we started our group. To know that there's a lifeline of consciousness about men's groups and that young men are aware and feel the need and see the importance of forming a men's group is heartening because I'm generally somewhat disheartened that the consciousness we helped to develop has experienced a backlash against it.

Tom (OMG): I found the younger men to be incredibly open and honest with men they don't know. They sought that in their group and you could tell that we welcomed and invited intimate interactions. I was gratified that it happened so quickly.