

He Ain't Heavy . . .

by Jeannie Zandi



A man is a male human.
— Wikipedia

It's 1975 and I am standing on the playground with my first love, a lithe, long-haired blonde 13-year-old who loves to ride his Sting-Ray bike and can beat most of the men in town in tennis. We look up from our conversation to see a pack of seven eighth-grade boys heading toward us with a look of intent on their faces. It has the distinct feel of a lynch mob. I am stunned, mystified and frozen. What do they want with us? When I glance over to my sweetie, I see that within a matter of seconds of taking in the situation, he has fled. The group marches past me, then breaks into a run, in hot pursuit of my friend.

Later I learned it was his turn for the wedgie ritual that was delivered to every seventh-grade boy. Never having experienced such a threat myself, I realized bodily for the first time as I watched those boys approach that the differences in growing up male versus female were probably more than the games we played and the body parts we had.

Since those early years, I have been on an adventure of deepening my understanding of myself as a human being and a woman, leading me through many twists and turns of how I have regarded and related to the men in my life. Much has changed since I stood on that playground, many things have been learned and unlearned, and new questions arise as I see things anew. And so, I offer a little of my story to you as a way to explore what I've gleaned along the way.

For the most part until high school, the realm of boys was only visible to me now and then, and I didn't ponder it too deeply, busy in my girl world — the world of boys seemed foreign and more their business than mine. Boys were suddenly interesting around puberty — I sailed through my teens and 20s having various perplexing relationships with young men that

provided me little insight into the inner life of male humans. The perplexing parts were how moody some of them got, how unresponsive they could be sometimes verbally or emotionally, and how they didn't seem to want to talk at length about much except their passionate interests in music, cars, guns and various other conceptual topics. I hooked up and broke up with them usually because of some change in life circumstances like going off to college or because they started to become insecure, jealous and weird with me and I had no skill to offer understanding or to help us move through it.

Perhaps I picked the moody ones, despite the fact that my grandmother once cautioned me, "Don't marry a moody man." Apparently my grandfather was quite the grumpy, hard-to-please guy. In fact, the clearest memory I have of him is his gravelly Italian-accented voice yelling her name from the other room: "Marie!" Once, when I lay in bed with her during a visit and asked her in my 13-year-old curiosity and brazenness, "What was the biggest mistake of your life, Grama?" she quickly shut me down with a tight-lipped "Never mind." I assumed, since she had already advised me about the moody-man thing, that it had been marrying my grandfather. My own father carried on the tradition, often withdrawing to his room with the door shut when he returned from work — certainly having his share of dark moods.

For whatever reason, the men that I chose invariably turned into people with moods about which they either could not or did not want to talk. Again, I had little insight and generally took these moods to be evidence that either they were less than wonderful humans or they thought *I* was. I felt wounded by their surly voices or shortness with me. I felt unloved, unappreciated and unseen. My basic approach to my guys during this period of time was to try to minimize the surliness by figuring out what they wanted from me and being/doing it, occasionally have a big tearful outburst about it, long to be somewhere else, and eventually act on it.

In the middle of a moody-man relationship, I realized that rather than focus on him or how I needed to change him or myself, I needed to deepen the inner work I was doing. I started focusing on the internalized oppression I carried as a woman. I was part of and eventually led groups of women who were working intensively on reclaiming what it means to be whole: shedding limitations of who I thought I could be, how I could express myself in the world, how I could deepen the intimacy in friendships with women, and dissolve where my well-being felt to be a function of a man's moods. While this opened up new horizons, flexibility and expressiveness for me on my own and in relationship, it also seemed that my reaching for and expressing this wholeness through new activities, open conversations or explorations only served to increase the surliness in my relationship. What was a girl to do?

In the midst of this confusion I began to connect with men involved in the men's movement. This enabled me to start understanding the other side of the story, the side I couldn't experience and my boyfriend wasn't talking about. I learned — through reading, talking with and counseling men, and listening in at men's conferences — about the mistreatment of men. I met and became close to a man who was very active in the men's movement and discovered

that my “moody men” were simply men who were hurting! What a revelation: to see that the men I had been with weren't deliberately depriving me of relationship, acting irritated when they could choose to be kind, and that I wasn't an insufficient woman incapable of reaching them. They simply carried hurts and confusions that expressed themselves in these ways that looked oppressive from within my woman lens.

I absorbed as much as I could learn about the challenges of men, while simultaneously seeing how what the men were carrying dovetailed with my own internalized oppression as a woman. I realized I was trained to think they were supposed to save me and make my life blissful, or else I should conclude that either I wasn't enough or they weren't. I realized I was trained to look to them for security, safety, love and connection. Meanwhile, they were trained to hide any signs of insecurity or fear and somehow produce this security and safety and bliss for me. If they didn't, they should conclude that either they weren't enough or I wasn't. And I was supposed to squeeze enough love, connection and safety from these same guys who had been urged to divorce themselves from their sensitive, feeling natures and were often hurt for showing and acting on love and connection as boys.

I learned that what a man experiences as a struggle — what he carries as a difficulty that is a result of the regular mistreatment boys and men receive, a difficulty that he can't talk about — I would often see as simply more evidence of, at best, the incomprehensibility of men and, at worst, the man's “badness.” *What's wrong with my guy that he can't be thoughtful and tender and communicative and fun loving, and make our lives blissful?* Formerly I had believed that he could help it *if he cared*, that he could be nice and kind and warm and emotionally sharing *if he cared*. I assumed that it was his male privilege that kept him from it: he could, but he won't because he doesn't have to. I didn't realize just how monumental a step it is for some men to admit they aren't on top of something, ask for and accept help, or explore feelings long locked away in the context of relationship.

When I started to see boys and men as good people who simply had struggles just like I did, it changed everything. Where once my paradigm was that a boy who hit a girl over the head with a toy was a bad boy who needed discipline, it turned into seeing the child as a good boy who, through some frustration or pain with which he could use help, was harming another. In both cases, the hitting must stop and a boundary set, but within the first paradigm the boy is shamed and left alone with his struggle, and in the other, the boy is given love, listening and a chance to explore and move through what drives his actions.

I also learned that an obstacle to a man sharing intimate details about his struggles in his life, or especially struggles with me, was the tendency that I had as a woman to look to men to be my source of validation and good feeling about myself. In fact, I could be downright voracious in this department. My sensitivity to how I was viewed by men I was close to could and did translate into an inability to hear where they struggled in relation to me — their attempts to point at a struggle just sounded like criticism of me. Having invited a man out to talk about how

he felt, I sometimes would get reactive, criticize *him* for criticizing me, and end up demanding that he pay attention now to how I felt in response to the feeling he was beginning to explore. I learned that to a man, this can feel like anything from annoyance to downright betrayal and attack. And I learned not to ask a man how he was doing or what he felt about something (including how I looked) unless I was ready to really listen and create unreactive space for that.

Eventually a men's-movement man and I became partners, and we worked and worked and worked together on our internalized mistreatment, listening to each other, healing, moving through all kinds of hurtful experiences. I now saw surliness or shortness as a sign of my friend hurting, and I learned to make space for that hurt to be expressed. He yelled and screamed and cried about painful experiences as a boy and his frustration at being seen as a bad man by women while I listened. I cried and raged at feeling powerless or insufficient as a woman and celebrated my wonderful self while he listened.

The more we made room inside of our reactivity for each other by moving through our pain, the farther the reaches of freedom of expression we would enjoy together. We would give each other "sessions" at the drop of a hat whenever something emotional had grabbed one of us. We talked and talked about how women and men are set up to hurt each other by misunderstanding each other's attempts to reach for each other, and about our dovetailed conditioning and how it worked. We presented what we discovered to others through writing, speaking and leading groups. The growth I experienced in this relationship, the shifting of paradigms, the understanding of the male experience and the understanding of my own conditioning were deep, impactful and life changing. Suddenly my relationships with my brothers, my father, my male friends and any man with whom I came in contact transformed. I began to perceive an angry man as a hurting man instead of an asshole to be frightened of or condemning toward. I began to see men as my brothers rather than as adversaries or my oppressors.

After so much good work my friend and I separated, when I wanted a child and he did not. A year later I became involved with another man, who wanted a child and who also had been involved in men's work. I had visions of us taking our master's degrees in counseling and our work concerning gender and conquering the world together. This was the first man who did not have the surly quality of the other men I had been with, and we seemed to be able at first to talk through anything.

However, in the midst of this relationship I went into a dark night of the soul that rendered everything I had been, done and lived for irrelevant. The community within which I had explored, processed and moved through so much had dissolved. Who I was as a helpful person, as a knowing person, as an on-top-of-it person, as a loving woman was eclipsed by something big that was moving in and taking me down into the underworld.

As I struggled to solve the riddle that plagued me every day in the form of a deep sense of meaninglessness and angst, everything else faded into the background as unimportant. Where once I had felt clever and great at exploring and surfing the waves that came my way, I felt completely knocked down and beaten by this one. No matter what I tried or where I turned, I came up with nothing. And while the person I had considered myself to be was being taken apart piece by piece, this man had no problem having feelings in relation to me: he was sad, he was pissed, and he communicated that to me.

In the meantime, I was becoming extremely sensitive to and disinterested in processing emotion. What had been the ground of my relationships suddenly became moot. I didn't care about anyone else's story or my own. Raw emotion was fine, but mixing it with conversational analyses felt like poison to my sensitized being.

When I emerged four years later from the ass-kicking for which I had no explanation, the relationship was over and I looked around as a genderless being. My mind could no longer hold any theories of gender conditioning, nor did I care. I saw all people simply as beings, with eyes like mine that looked out from a depth where we were one united being. For a while, I didn't care if I was ever with another man — there was a joy and sweetness that rose up from the core of my being that met and made moot all of the needs that had heretofore driven my relating with men. Though I was abundantly capable of being present in the moment with an emotion if it arose in me or was presented from the outside, I was no longer interested in its past or cause, or in analyzing it at all. It simply was part of what was present and therefore holy and worthy of attending to.

Then I began to see a man who had had a similar humbling, and we met each other in this fresh beingness. Our bodies as masculine and feminine, though thrilling to have in this context, were subservient to this greater wholeness, presence and love. If I habitually dipped into my theories of gender conditioning, he was largely uninterested and so was I. Nothing theoretical or old lasted in the space of immediacy that was there. And though the learning continues to be useful, it is now integrated into my body and my interactions with men in a way that I no longer think about. Pieces of my conditioning as a woman or his as a man can play out between us, but they are now seen as tight spots in need of tending, without the sense that "this is my conditioning as a woman" or "this is your conditioning as a man." Gender is an interesting spice that has been added to our relating as beings, but not something that defines who we are.

The process has been incredibly rich, and I am grateful for it. It was valuable to see and understand the differences before I organically moved to "gender doesn't matter" — it *did* matter and informed my ability to treat the men I loved with compassion and to understand the places I formerly could not. I can now feel the places where I am free and not being dragged around as I once was; I no longer feel as if I am a function of what a man is like in my presence or how he perceives or acts toward me. Within the paradigm of "one of us is bad here" that often is operating when difficulty arises in relationship, no matter how passionately we reach

for each other or try to point to our pain, we alienate and further mistreat each other in our simultaneous attempts to get free of it. However, when we begin to see that all beings are exactly as they should be in any given moment, with an integrity all their own, then any behavior can be understood if one cares to delve into the experience of another with an open mind and a loving heart.

When I see a man with understanding, I no longer can see him as an intentionally mean person who wants to hurt or withhold. When he sees me with understanding, he no longer sees me as a voracious need-monster to whom he can never be enough. When we sweep out the chambers of our hearts by meeting the demons within us, we make room for the pain of others and compassion flows easily. Reactivity lessens, love flows and we see each other as the well-intended, sweet humans that we all are, doing the best we can.

© Copyright 2007, Jeannie Zandi, all rights reserved.
Originally published in The Eldorado Sun, June, 2007.