

Violent acts reflect broader issues

Sunday, August 05, 2007

By Randy Flood

Special To The Grand Rapids Press

In July, the Grand Rapids community was witness to four lives lost to domestic violence. Three slayings and one suicide asked families, schools, churches, neighborhoods and the community at large to make sense of the violence around them.

Historically, we have tried to convince ourselves that domestic violence is a family problem, a private matter. But, in just one month, we were reminded how it affects the whole community. This was made particularly clear when the streets of Grand Rapids were lined with citizens and filled with droves of police officers mourning a fallen officer who was killed while responding to a domestic violence call.

Domestic violence creates significant collateral damage. It affects families and communities. That being said, we can stop domestic violence by working as a community on the very issues that perpetuate it. There are many means of prevention and intervention such as an improved criminal justice system, changing attitudes toward women, and raising boys differently. The primary intervention, however, is getting help for the men and women who themselves are abusers.

Men are typically responsible for the more serious acts of domestic violence. Male socialization trains men to hide or act out their pain, not ask for help. So, when men are in crisis, they are less likely than women to seek professional help. Men often will enter a therapist's office for "rock bottom" therapy. They come at a time when it seems like it can't get any worse, when they may have lost an intimate partner, a job or their freedom to choose counseling. When a man is ordered by the courts to seek counseling, this gets him through the door, but not necessarily into his heart and head.

We've all been told that the first step to getting help is to recognize that you need help; then, you must ask for it. Unfortunately, the problem for

many men is that asking for help is antithetical to the masculine identity. Instead, men in pain are more prone to work, drink, aggress, play, isolate and generally "suck it up" or "act it out" than share their feelings. This is a lethal formula in some men. The thought process is, "If you humiliate me, I'm angry and therefore entitled to punish or stop you from causing me hurt and shame."

People get humiliated and angry all the time. The key here is the sense of entitlement. This entitlement shows up in men who abuse women.

These men believe that their intimate partner fundamentally doesn't have the right to humiliate or shame them, and so they have the power to stop or punish that partner. Some men will go as far as killing to punish individuals deemed responsible for their pain. To kill an intimate partner is just a lethal version of a common male formula: "I will do anything except introspect and feel."

A desire to blame others

This male formula subtracts a man's accountability, while adding the desire to blame others for his problems. When a man lives this out, the pain, shame and anger he experiences is understood and addressed through critiquing, fixing and punishing others. The missing links are his culpability and empathy. Consequently, when certain men experience rejection from their intimate partner, they begin drowning in shame, pain and powerlessness. They desperately seek relief via self-talk: "How could you do this to me, you can't do this to me, this is not going to happen, I will put a stop to this."

This talk often leads to hurting others, destroying families, and, as we've recently experienced, affecting whole communities. The way out of this downward spiral is to face the man in the mirror.

Asking for help

Whatever the situation is that ails a man, whether it is getting lost in Chicago, his career, his relationships or his life, he needs to not be afraid to ask for help. It can be easy for the male chorus to bellow out the line, "he needs help" when discussing murderers, abusers and molesters. The remaining men, who need help, are left to sing quietly alone in the shower, "Help, I need somebody, not just anybody."

I have a profession that affords me the opportunity to journey with men into their hearts and souls. In a sense, I help hold the mirror. So many men fear being a wimp or a loser, hence equate the need for counseling to an inferior status.

However, the men with whom I've worked are the business owners, attorneys, engineers, doctors, Marines and plumbers of our everyday life. These men explore the interior landscape of their souls in order to navigate the evolving requirements of what it means to be a fit male in the 21st century.

They are my heroes because they have the courage to evolve into compassionate and strong men -- men for the new millennium -- soulnavts.

Soulnavts seek understanding

These soulnavts seek to understand better what is going on inside themselves in order to connect emotionally to their partners. They are learning more effective and respectful ways of parenting. They are learning to become emotionally literate and to manage their emotions in stressful situations. They have the guts to discover the craters in their character, the wounds in their hearts, the fire in their belly and the gifts of their humanity.

I have seen soulnavts become better fathers, intimate partners, business owners, attorneys, electricians and teachers. There is not a loser among them. They are entering into the next frontier for men, their own heart and soul.

As society evolves and changes, so must men. The fittest men in the new millennium will need to be in touch with and know how to manage their interior world as much as they have been masters at their exterior world of gadgets, organisms, territories and equations. Each person that enters a new frontier has to face the fear of the unknown and unfamiliar. The fittest male overcomes the fear and takes the next step just as the pioneers, innovators and visionaries of the past did.

Charting new territory

Imagine what the world would be like if men could experience pain and shame without feeling entitled to stop or punish those whom they deem responsible. A world where boys are raised to unclench their fists and open their hearts. A world full of heroic men, courageous and strong enough to not only be astronauts, firefighters and linebackers, but soulhunts able to go into the fire in the building and in their belly, into a board room discussion and into an intimate bedroom discussion. This world would solve complex problems differently and less violently.

Perhaps Grand Rapids wouldn't have lost four lives to domestic violence if the alleged killers had sought help upon feeling rejected. On a grander scale, when we were all dealing with the fear and powerlessness after 9/11, perhaps the leaders of our great nation would not have led us to the war in Iraq.

The more we are able to identify, soothe and resolve the shame and pain in our interior world, the less it is destructively expelled onto others in the exterior world. The more we have the courage to ask for and receive help, the more fit we can become. As this process increases for men, I believe the world will be a better place.