



Why aren't more older men showing up for younger men?

by Rick Belden

The other day, I read a very timely post written by Jayson Gaddis called [“What I Got From The Inter-Generational Dialogue Between Men”](#). Jayson began his post as follows:

After eight months of gathering together, the leadership team of the Boulder Men's Experience (BME) decided to pick a theme for the BME-8: Elders. While the BME has been a deep and rich experience that has been able to serve a wide spectrum of men at various levels of development, we felt that one obvious thing had been missing—older men.

Jayson went on to explore this subject, and reflect on his personal experience with it, in greater detail in the context of a recent men's group focused on the topic of what I've previously called [“an absence of elders”](#).

I left the following comment in response to Jayson's post:

Jayson, I think you hit on something important here regarding the absence of older men at these gatherings: they don't see themselves as elders. Furthermore, they don't see themselves as having anything of value to give younger men, nor do they see younger men as wanting anything they might have to offer.

All of that has certainly been true for me, and the problem is not new. It goes back several generations. In the program A Gathering of Men in 1989, Robert Bly

said, "I never realized that young men needed anything I had to give them." When I first heard him say this, I was 32. I'm 54 now and struggling with the very same issue.

I think it's also true that many men my age simply have very little personal contact with younger men, outside their carefully prescribed roles in work and family, and therefore have very little opportunity to connect with them in meaningful ways. Without that experience, an older man simply has no context for understanding what is needed and what he can offer in response.

Another factor for men my age, I believe, is that we came of age during a time when distrust of men in authority was deep and pervasive, and for good reason. It was hard to see any man in a position of authority as an ally or a helper who cared and could be trusted, much less as a friend.

I still carry that distrust of authority within me. To see myself, or for other people to see me, as some sort of authority in any context generates a great deal of cognitive dissonance in me. I'm still resisting because part of me still sees a man who embodies and projects authority as the enemy. I worry that, if I fully accept my power and responsibility as an older man, I might turn into one of those old bastards who sold me out and are still selling out our men, young and old, even now.

Finally, as you said, a lot of men my age simply haven't done the developmental work that's needed to prepare them to sit and listen to another without trying to offer advice, fix what they see as a problem, or defend themselves. If you can't sit with your own discomfort (or even feel it), you're probably going to have a hard time doing it for someone else.

It hurts me to think that younger men might have anger and distrust for me as an individual because of my age, but I can certainly understand it. I remember, when I was in my early 30s, telling a man fifteen years my senior (a man I liked and respected) how angry and disappointed I was with his generation for dropping the ball, being so selfish, and leaving such a mess for my generation. I could hardly disagree with a younger man who might want to say the same thing now to me, or to any man of my generation.

I recommend reading [Jayson's blog post](#) to get the full context of the discussion. This is a deep area, largely unacknowledged and unexplored, and there's a lot more than can be said.

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Rick Belden is a respected explorer and chronicler of the psychology and inner lives of men. His book, [*Iron Man Family Outing: Poems about Transition into a More Conscious Manhood*](#), is widely used in the United States and internationally by therapists, counselors, and men's groups as an aid in the exploration of masculine psychology and men's issues, and as a resource for men who grew up in dysfunctional, abusive, or neglectful family systems. His second book, [*Scapegoat's Cross: Poems about Finding and Reclaiming the Lost Man Within*](#), is currently awaiting publication. He lives in Austin, Texas.

More information, including excerpts from Rick's books, is available on his [website](#) and [blog](#). You can also find him on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), and [YouTube](#).