Being a White Man After Newtown

by Bill Proudman

I've been noticing for some time the media's reluctance to identify most of the mass shooters in the U.S. as men, specifically white men. Almost all the shooters have been middle class, white men (from Newtown, Tucson, Oak Creek, and Aurora going all the way back to Columbine). One way to bring this more clearly into focus is to wonder what the public discourse would be if the shooters were overwhelmingly black men, Muslims or women. These demographic details would be front and center. Yet, because the shooters are mostly white men, it has largely gone unreported in the media analysis since Newtown.

Two writers who have had the courage to write about the role masculinity and race play in these tragedies are Michael Kimmel and Jackson Katz. Michael wrote a brilliant piece for CNN that appeared December 19 titled *Masculinity, mental illness and guns: A lethal equation?* Katz's article, *Memo to Media: Manhood, Not Guns or Mental Illness, Should be Central in Newtown Shooting,* appeared in the Huffington Post on December 18.

Both Katz and Kimmel speak to what the rest of the media seems to ignore, that masculinity has a connection to these mass shootings. Kimmel wrote: "If the shooter were black and the school urban, we'd hear about the culture of poverty; about how inner-city life breeds crime and violence; perhaps even some theories about a purported tendency among blacks towards violence."

Katz added: "Typical news accounts and commentaries about school shootings and rampage killings rarely mention gender. If a woman were the shooter, you can bet there would be all sorts of commentary about shifting cultural notions of femininity and how they might have contributed to her act, such as discussions in recent years about girl gang violence."

It is not only maleness that is often invisible but white maleness. The reality is that if the shooters had overwhelming been a part of any other group—other than white men—it would be prominently mentioned as a factor for consideration.

Gender and race are almost never mentioned as a factor when the perpetrator is a white male. As members of the dominant group in the U.S., white men are still routinely described as individuals, not members of the white male group. The actions of individual white men are just that, individual actions. The actions of white male mass shooters have largely been treated as one offs, with little to no public mention or discussion about the rise of lone white men gunning down innocent men, women and children.

HOW DOES THIS RELATE TO ME?

One might legitimately ask, "What does this have to do with me and other white guys in the business world? I don't see the connection." Lets explore the connection.

BILL PROUDMAN
CEO, Founder

Bill started WMFDP in the 90s after noticing white men leaders repeatedly disengaging from diversity efforts.

For more than 30 years, he has served as a consultant, coach and facilitator to countless companies and organizations on issues of team effectiveness, diversity and leadership development.

Bill is a writer, blogger, and sought after speaker and co-author of a three-volume field guide on white men, leadership, and diversity partnerships.

BILL BLOGS

WHITE MEN AS
FULL DIVERSITY PARTNERS
INSPIRING COURAGEOUS LEADERS

> More and more white men in business lament that they feel a victim of reverse discrimination.

Young white boys and men are bombarded by images of violence and toughness as the norm to aspire to within manhood. "Suck it up," "show no chinks in the armor," and "don't back down" are aspirational battle cries giv-en to many young men. And they have easy access to violent video gaming.

As the football coach character in the film "Varsity Blues" chortled, "the only pain that matters is the pain you inflict." Unfortunately, some white men and boys are inflicting a high level of pain on others as well as themselves. We as a society seem lax to name it as a crisis for men, let alone white men.

This infliction of pain has been con-structed as the norm for many men. If not physical pain on the athletic field, then it shows up as one-upmanship and male banter in business, pushing men to succeed at any cost and without regard to self or others.

Real men are expected to sort every-thing out for themselves, to make their own way in life. This "I can handle it without help" mentality spills over almost everywhere: from avoiding seeking medical care and psychologi-cal counseling to asking for directions when we get lost. The over reliance on rugged individualism is causing many white men to live more isolated and estranged lives. Men are reluctant to reach out and share their feelings with others, especially other men. They hold it in, assuming they must figure it out themselves.

This false self-sufficiency forces many boys and men to struggle with intimacy and vulnerability. They expect (and are expected) to go it alone and not ask for help. To do otherwise is viewed as unmanly. "I don't need no stinking help" is the mantra many boys and young men have been taught to aspire to, thinking this is what defines real manhood.

These mainstream expectations for American white men create a fiction that is impossible to live up to. Recent books like "The End of Men" and "The Demise of Guys" point to men as a group being increasingly disenfran-chised, socially misadjusted or feeling lost or alone.

More and more white men in business lament that they feel a victim of reverse discrimination. Many report feeling oppressed, limited by their skin color and gender for promotions and new jobs. Efforts to create more equity and representation in leadership roles have created a level of resentment among white men.

Many straight white men at work strug-gle with how to partner more effectively with those who have been previously excluded from key leadership roles (white women, people of color and out gays and lesbians).

WE ARE AT A CROSSROADS THAT FEW SEEM TO NOTICE

We are witnessing a crisis in Ameri-can masculinity, especially for straight, white men about how to feel proud of who we are as heterosexual, white men without degrading, invalidating or dismissing others who also seek a place for themselves and their talents. We have an opportunity to reframe the dialogue to create more sustainable and inclusive communities and work cultures where everyone can realize their full potential.

WHITE MEN AS
FULL DIVERSITY PARTNERS
INSPIRING COURAGEOUS LEADERS

There is nothing wrong with being your own person: self-contained, confident, self-sufficient, tenacious. The challenge comes when I and other white men go overboard and dismiss the need for any help and support, especially from other men, and equate needing help and support as a sign of weakness or surrender. We have to get beyond that.

We as men need to more fully embrace and better understand our groupness as white men without feeling we are being asked to lose or abandon our individuality.

We can be both tough and compassionate, strong and vulnerable.

We can curiously probe the edges of our own identity as men while being more reflective. It is refreshing to see NFL athletes like Brendon Ayanbadejo and Chris Kluwe speak out about homophobia. We need more of this to help men expand beyond the tough guy image.

We need to lean into building vulnera-ble relationships especially with other men. If we do so and it becomes the norm for masculinity it might just relieve some of the pressure to act tough.

We need to change the cultural norms that contribute to troubled men taking semi-automatic weapons into their own hands. We need to intervene for men who seek to reclaim a sense of their own personal power—a power they feel robbed of by the current testoster-one ridden, jock-glorified male culture that personifies violence and toughness.

We as white men have an obligation to push the societal norms that currently limit a full range of expression about what it means to be a man. We as white need to show that being vulnerable, asking for help, using our intuition, being reflective and asking questions are also forms of real masculinity. We must reject the Ram-bo-style, take-no-prisoners mindset that perpetuates the stereotypical tough guy.

We are more than that. In doing so with other men, maybe we can create a little more latitude to stretch and expand the societal expression of manhood.

Will our efforts stop future tragedies? In the short term: most likely not. There is no one remedy for complex societal issues. But I do believe there is a link between white male culture today and the tragedies we see played out more and more. Much more is needed in societal and political dialogue around complex, interrelated issues like gun control, mental health support, bullying and gender-role conditioning for lasting change to happen. My work with other men to expand what is considered nor-mal male behavior is a place to start. I am fully committed to that.

I am also fully committed to continuing my work with other men, especially white men, to redefine who we are and give us permission to claim member-ship in a white male group. To give this group a human face. Doing so will give each of us greater

bandwidth for fuller self-expression rather than feel-ing caught in a limited and ultimately flawed public performance of manhood. It is my life's remaining work. I do it for my grand kids and other children so they may each fully realize their unique potential and not fall victim to being straight-jacketed into gen-der-prescribed, limiting norms about masculinity and femininity. I also do it for myself, to more fully be the person I am: a sensitive, tenacious, passionate, independent yet interdependent, tough yet loving, white heterosexual Ameri-can-born man.

For those ready to heed the call, let's get to work. Figure out your self-interest in examining more parts of your mascu-linity that have been hidden from sight. What would it take to be more of the man you really are?

The journey to answer these questions is never ending, yet it starts so simply with each of us choosing how we engage in our daily lives in the company of others.