We believe we need to think carefully about the assumption that women necessarily benefit when men work on their own healing. This thorny question was brought to a head for us by Frederick Marx in his Spring 2012 Voice Male article, “Women Supporting Men Supporting Men.” We would certainly agree that it is valuable for us as men to focus on our own healing (rather than relying on women to heal us). However, the assumption that men can only truly heal in male-only space is erroneous at best, and downright dangerous (for both men and women) at worse. To discount the value of women as active supporters of men’s healing is as dismissive and sexist as is men’s continuing to rely exclusively on women for our healing. Furthermore, both women and men have strong and powerful relationships with both women and men. Most men need, deserve, and experience relationships with both women and men that can help men heal from the wounds we have experienced.

Equally worrisome is the view, communicated in various ways by Mr. Marx’s article, that men know better than women do what is best for women. Among some of the most central of sexist beliefs held by men are that woman are filled with irrational fears, that they do not know what is best for them, and that they don’t recognize when men are actually acting in women’s best interests; we’ll take a look below at some of the ways this unfortunate outlook seems to have crept into Mr. Marx’s writing.
ARE THERE GOOD REASONS FOR WOMEN TO HAVE QUESTIONS?

Many women (and some men) look with some suspicion on men’s claims that when we spend time freeing ourselves from the straightjacket of traditional masculinity, women benefit. Could it be, perhaps, because they have good reason to have doubts? We have listened carefully over the years as women have recounted their experiences of their male partners involvement in the “male liberation” movement, that genre of self-exploration that we associate with drumming circles. Some recurring themes include:

- He handles his participation in “men’s weekends” or other human growth activities in a way that leaves her burdened with family responsibilities (especially when children are young). When she complains of this, he gives her an irritated response such as, “You want me to be more the kind of man you are looking for, and then you complain when I try to work on myself!” Thus her feelings and needs get dismissed once again.

- His process of becoming more aware of and “in touch with” his feelings, along with developing a better understanding of a “deeper masculinity” and an increased sense of bonding and connection with other men, doesn’t result in him treating her any better (more patient, respectful, caring, understanding, empathic…) than he did before.

- He’s bonding with other men through their mutual complaints about women, such as that women don’t understand their healing work, are too demanding, or are too suspicious. He’s gaining fuel for his focus on blaming women for his unhappiness.
One of the great (and regrettable) ironies of Frederick Marx’s article is that it contains within it examples of the kinds of statements and attitudes that are exactly why women might not trust men coming from this mindset. For example:

“All the smart women I know (and I know plenty) cherish the men in their lives for doing personal growth work. They realize how it makes women themselves safer, happier, more loved. They realize they need not be threatened... Smart women understand that there are multiple venues and circumstances where men teach other men, and boys, about being men.”

Marx is telling us that he knows who the smart women are, what smart women think, and that all smart women agree with him. He thus is saying, in effect, that women who disagree with what he is saying here are stupid and unwise. He also in effect takes a swipe at some of us men who don’t agree with him, implying that we are not smart and are not in touch with smart women too. We, as men, don’t get to tell women what is in their best interests; this is a key piece of what men have been doing to women for millennia. Women get to decide for themselves what’s in their best interests. And when so many women are expressing mistrust of the men’s retreat process – as Marx himself acknowledges – then it is our responsibility as allies to look closely at where that mistrust is coming from, rather than devoting an entire article to disparaging women, at times openly, for their distrust. The fact that he feels that he has a right to do so ironically serves to give strong evidence of why women have good reason to doubt that men’s liberation work is leading men to face and change their attitudes towards women.

A second section that is of concern:
“A wise woman always recognizes when a man needs to get out and be with other men. He’s getting short with her and the kids, he’s not listening anymore, or worse, he’s starting to act out aggressively. A wise woman will urge her man to take space. Now.”

The message here is that when a man behaves badly, it is the woman’s responsibility to figure out what kind of support and help he needs and she’s supposed to take over all the work so that he can get that. This is one of the pillars of sexism -- that women should put their own needs aside and put men’s needs first. Our response to this scenario would be quite different. If the man is getting short with her and the kids and has stopped listening, first of all he needs to cut that out and start listening. Second, he needs people in his life challenging him to respect women and children and treat them properly. And if he’s beginning to “act out aggressively,” what he could probably best benefit from, according to research, is to be removed from the house in handcuffs. But instead, Mr. Marx proposes that he be rewarded for his aggressive behavior by being sent away to hang out with the men, and his wife should bear the consequences of that. So once again women are doing the labor while men think deep thoughts.

Next most bothersome is Marx’s statement that he suspects that women feel that “if it’s good for men, it must be bad for women.” What possible evidence does he have to support this inflammatory statement? Most of us in our actual lived experiences of working alongside women have found that women do often have hesitations and concerns regarding some of our efforts as men, but that overwhelmingly they support our efforts to be good to ourselves (so long as it doesn’t put women or children at greater risk). It is men, in fact, who have historically considered women’s advances for
themselves as having negative consequences for men. If a white person wrote an article explaining the mistakes that people of color are making in failing to trust white people, or if a straight person wrote about the supposed thinking errors of gay men and lesbians, the piece would be widely considered to be offensive. We don't think a man writing about what women are doing wrong is any different.

There is also nothing in Marx’s article about how these male liberation efforts prepare men to become more involved in their community, more active as mentors and supporters of younger men or women, more engaged in combating violence against women or other forms of oppression; nor does he address how men can be better prepared once we have healed ourselves to more strongly support and ally with women and girls. We would suggest that a significant part of men’s healing is learning how to support and be true partners with women and girls, while also working for a world that is more based on gender justice and respect. Evidence strongly suggests that men who live in environments of relative gender equity have tremendously better health, relationships, and other outcomes than men who live in environments of gender inequality; which suggests that rather than men going off by ourselves to heal in the absence of women, we, as men, may be better served by working and healing alongside women...towards a world that respects and values us all.

We come away with the impression that Marx must think that boys who are being raised by single women are doomed, though he doesn’t come right out and say so. Countless women, particularly African-American women, would question this, as would the many men who have had highly successful lives that they attribute to their mother’s guidance and leadership (again, African-American men in particular). Mr. Marx says, “The fact is men need to be taught by men how to be men.” This is far from a fact. Our own lived experiences as men, supported by a wide range of available evidence, suggests that when men are taught to be men in the absence of women, this does not bode well for us as men, for the women we’re in relationships with, or for our communities as a whole.
When men provide good guidance to other men, that is of course one important contributor to our well-being. But the ability to listen well to women, to learn from them, and to take guidance from them in forming our identities, is every bit as important for us; we would go so far as to argue that the survival of the planet depends on men’s preparedness to do so.

THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN MEN’S LIBERATION AND OVERCOMING SEXISM

We’d like to look at a theoretical point that is critical. when discussing the unhealthy aspects of male socialization and male culture, we are actually talking about two somewhat separate strands that shouldn’t be collapsed together. One of them is the strand where men learn to be unfeeling, afraid to touch other people – especially other men but not just other men --- territorial, prone to violence toward other men, focused on pecking order, and focused on never showing or admitting to any fear. These elements can be thought of as making up “touch guy” or “macho” masculinity.

The second is the strand that focuses on preparing males to participate in the exploitation and domination of females. This part of our training teaches us that women are inferior, that they were put on this earth to serve us, that they have no rights, that they should shut up, that they exist to give us sex, and on and on. And we learn specific tactics for how to manipulate, guilt trip, or intimidate women into performing their required functions and not challenging male domination.

These two strands are separate to a considerable degree. There are men who do not take on the “macho”, violent version of masculinity in how they define themselves and how they interact with other men, who nonetheless are oppressive, physically violent, and sexually violent to women. And there are men who are way into the macho thing, with exaggerated courage, belligerence in conflict with men,
and strict codes of never showing fear or other emotions, who treat women quite decently and respect
women. (This last is part of what bothers us so much about the stereotype of batterers as beer-drinking
working class men wearing their “wife beater” shirts, an image that promotes class prejudice and helps
upscale abusers get away with murder, sometimes literally.)

It's true that there is overlap between these strands, as for example when men take the view
that women can’t be taken seriously because they aren’t as tough as men and are too swayed by their
emotions, but the strands still remain substantially distinct.

This distinction has huge significance for women. So many women recognize that a man who is
out working on getting in touch with his “feminine side” and learning to bond with other men as a “new
warrior” is often doing nothing to really confront the negative attitudes and entitled expectations of
service that he has assimilated towards females. He also is unlikely learning the skills necessary to
challenge and confront other men or male institutions in order to generate greater gender respect and
more gender justice.

BUILDING SUCCESSFUL ALLIANCES

Marx's article begins with an extended derisive description of a woman that he spoke with on
the phone, who in his eyes was ridiculous for accusing him of being sexist and whom he viewed as
determined to find something wrong with the weekend retreat he was offering. Besides our concern
about the tone of that description, we also have many questions about what exactly she may have been
worried about; we find so much to worry about in this article that drips with bitterness and
condescension towards women, so perhaps she too was hearing these attitudes from him and reacting
to them.
We have both been involved in the struggle for gender justice for thirty-plus years, primarily as male allies within the movement to stop violence against women. During the early years of our involvement, there was widespread mistrust of males who presented themselves as allies. Some men chose to disparage women for not welcoming men. But fortunately many others of us chose to respect women’s concerns and listen carefully to their experiences. And what they described to us was multiple experiences of having been burned by men who claimed to be profeminist who were working within the movement. Women told of purported allied who turned out to have patterns of disparaging women’s opinions, or pressured them for dates, or advised battered women that the man was “really serious about changing” and that she should give him another chance. In a few cases we learned of men within the movement who were themselves perpetrating physical or sexual violence against women, and dealt with one case where a the man had inappropriately touched an advocate’s daughter. By taking the women’s sources of mistrust seriously, we were able to work on developing systems of accountability for men within the movement and make it harder for men who were not genuine allies to hide out there. The result? Men are increasingly welcomed as allies into the struggle to end violence against women, and the level of mistrust is far lower... And the reality is also that women still get burned sometimes.

The lesson, then, is that women will trust us when we prove ourselves trustworthy. And so far the “men’s work” movement is not doing so. One choice is to blame women for not trusting the movement, which is what Marx’s article is mostly devoted to doing. The other alternative, which we hope we can choose to follow in the name of solidarity with women in their battle for liberation, is to make the changes that we need to make to deserve women’s trust.