



A Man's Way through
Relationships

**Learning to Love
and Be Loved**

DAN GRIFFIN, MA

Special Praise for

A Man's Way Through Relationships

"For every man who has wandered through the entanglements of love, unwilling to ask for directions, and secretly hoping for a guide, Dan Griffin offers a clear and comprehensive road map. For any man serious about love and any woman who loves him, this book is a must."

Terrence Real, MSW

Author of *I Don't Want to Talk About It: Overcoming the Secret Legacy of Male Depression*.

"Dan Griffin has written a guide—from the heart—about the most challenging and ultimately rewarding task for men in our age: navigating the complex maze of intimate relationships. Written especially for men in recovery, his words and guidelines will be valuable for men of all backgrounds at any life stage."

David B. Wexler, PhD

Author of *When Good Men Behave Badly*

"Dan Griffin is a new sort of man, and he has written a new sort of book about men: honest and courageous, yet vulnerable and accessible. His perspective has been so thoroughly imbued with what he has learned about men from his experiences with men in recovery that his work fairly crackles with the immediacy of the men's lives. Relationships are a central part of these lives, no less—and no more—than they are for women. Dan's style is alternately authoritative and self-effacing, reflecting what he knows to be the case about male vulnerability: that it is only through this vulnerability, not around it, that men become 'all that they may be.'"

Roger D. Falot, PhD

Director of Research and Evaluation
Community Connections

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Dan Griffin

Central Recovery Press

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I dedicate this book to my beautiful daughter, Grace, and all of the boys and girls growing up today in a world so full of possibilities. May this be one more light to help show you the way as you experience the incredible joy and pain of learning how to love and be loved.

And to all of the men, like me, the legacies of the Man Rules, who are struggling to connect and live fully in their relationships.

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Introduction

Where the Hell Am I Going and How the Hell Do I Get There?

I was recently in London and had the opportunity to visit the underground bunkers used by Winston Churchill and his staff during World War II. While London was under siege, they strategized the defeat of Adolf Hitler and the Nazi regime from these secure and incredibly well-fortified dwellings, known as the War Rooms. Throughout these bunkers were maps. Many of the maps showed the locations of the different battleship groups around the world, those of both the enemy and the Allies, tracking their movement. What would they have done without these maps? They would not have been able to see the more complete picture. Not only did the maps show the layout of the current situation, they also helped the British think about and plan their next moves and develop a vision of where they wanted to end up. The strategy for winning the war was contingent on having the context and information these maps provided.

So, where are the maps for men in recovery in our quest to love and be loved? They are few and far between. Maps for women? Yes, some wonderful ones. Maps for couples? Yes, many. But maps written just for men and written by men, especially for those in recovery from addiction? Not really. Why? There is a long-standing belief that men don't care about relationships as much as women do. The good thing is that we are not at war in our relationships. It is not a battle and should not feel like one, even though for many men I know it does. As men we attempt this journey, often with little idea of where we are going. We try to steer our ships on the treacherous seas of intimacy, vulnerability, trust, and love, often crashing on the rocks of our belief systems about men. These rocks are everywhere, and if we are not paying attention, they will sink every meaningful relationship we set foot in.

We all know that men don't often ask for directions, even when they are lost, but they might just use a map. This book is meant to provide such a map—one that can help chart some of the territory that has yet to be crossed successfully. Just for men. Just for you. Of course, a map is of little value unless it is used.

In my first book, *A Man's Way Through the Twelve Steps*, I wrote about important areas that have been poorly addressed in men's treatment and recovery. Men and women thank me for having the courage to take on the toughest aspects of men's recovery. As in that first book, some of the information contained here has been gathered through interviews with men I respect and admire, many of whom have been on the journey of recovery much longer than I. I interviewed over thirty men: gay and straight; older and younger; men of diverse ethnic, racial, socioeconomic, and spiritual/religious (including the nonreligious) backgrounds. Each of these men had at least ten years in recovery, and many of them had twenty-plus years. A few men even had over thirty-five years in recovery. All of them trusted me enough to be willing to be open and vulnerable in their responses. And the similarities across so many of their responses were striking.

Do Men Care About Relationships?

Bobby, one of the men I interviewed for this book, said it well: "Life is meaningful only within the context of the connections we have with the friends and family around us." I have always cared about the relationships in my life. My guess is that you have, too. I did not always know how to show it, or have the courage to show it, and I would often act in ways that sent the message that I didn't care. I had no map. I did not know how to navigate the terrain.

Relationships are complicated and challenging territory for everyone, but particularly for men. Even today, relationships can sometimes leave me wishing I lived on a deserted island, just as

they did when I was stuck in my active addiction. I still don't always know, or have the courage to show, how much I care about the relationships in my life. I certainly do not do it perfectly.

The assumption that underlies this book is that all men care about relationships. We want to be good sons, partners/spouses, fathers, and friends, but we need help. We are shaped by these "Rules" about being males that tell us asking for help is not okay. We may follow these Rules, but they belie what is in our hearts. I have worked with, sat with, cried with, and even physically held far too many men to ever believe that deep inside of most men's hearts is not a real desire to connect, to love, and to be loved. Yet, an incredible force inside of them pushes them to separate, disconnect, push away, and pretend otherwise. This seeming contradiction is at the heart of this book and the conversation in which I want to engage you.

The process of recovery and the Twelve Steps embodies some of the greatest tools to help us find our way in relationships. This book is for all men, but focuses specifically on men in recovery. It is another tool you can put in your toolbox to help you become more successful in all of your relationships. As Mark, one of the men I interviewed for this book, said, "Without recovery, I have no relationships." And I would argue that without relationships, there is no quality life for any of us. This book can help you find your way when you feel lost, and you will get lost. To effectively use it, though, a real man will first have to find the courage to admit that he is lost. Then, he will have to be open to experimenting with new ideas and new behaviors that offer the possibility of finding his way back to the path toward healthy relationships.

A lot of us feel as though we were absent the day they passed out the manual on relationships in school. There is beauty in learning that we need to depend on others if we want to make real progress and that we must dig deep and take risks to go outside of our comfort zone. It requires us to humble ourselves again and again, admitting to ourselves and others that we are

confused. We are lost. We are scared. We are angry. We are hurt. We are insecure. Previously, we hid all this underneath our armor of beliefs about how men are supposed to be. In this journey through life, we succeed by taking off the armor.

Any man who seeks to participate fully in his relationships will experience failure. That failure may look different for different men, but we cannot succeed without risking failure. Out of that failure comes our liberation and the transformation of our relationships as we become fully known to others. As counterintuitive as it seems, invite that failure into your life. Embrace it. Failing means you are trying and pushing yourself. It means you are being courageous in the face of fear.

To what extent do you feel encouraged to engage in your relationships? I do not mean guilt-tripped or manipulated, or any of the actions you may have taken due to a feeling of obligation. I mean *encouraged*. If women want men to step up in relationships, they need to encourage us and see us as partners rather than as large children. And men have to stop being passive about their participation in relationships and stop acting like children, especially when their partners need them to be serious adults. As my wife, Nancy, says, “I need my grown-up husband right now.” Time to put on those big-boy pants.

Those men who truly care about and want to improve how men are viewed in the context of relationships need to speak up because there are too many men acting out the most damaging parts of the masculine script, giving women and others every reason to believe the worst about them. They take the more stereotypical macho path and typically hurt a lot of people along the way, including themselves. Yet, even most of the guys we consider “jerks,” “cretins,” “playas,” and “douche bags” want more out of their relationships and want to be more within them—they simply do not know how to get there. They are confused, unsure, and scared. They are acting like

boys. They are following the “Man Rules” to a tee. They want love and connection, but they don’t have a map. They are simply adrift.

The Journey

Learning to love and be loved is the greatest journey you will take. If you are reading this book, you have already begun or are ready to begin this journey. But this journey is different from most of the others we have taken as men, where the armor of self-protection may have had a useful purpose. As I stated earlier, we need to take off the armor in order to make progress. We think the armor protects us, but instead it separates us from others. In the process, it kills love—sometimes quickly, sometimes slowly, but almost inevitably.

This journey takes place mostly inside us. As men are expected to be more engaged, more emotionally present, more everything in our relationships, most of us are (or were) floundering in trying to do it on our own. In the world of twelve-step recovery, we have been given permission to seek help when we need it. Recovery teaches us Emotions 101—how to feel our emotions and express them in healthy ways, a prerequisite for success in any relationship. Recovery also teaches us how to think of someone other than ourselves and how to be a part of the community, two other prerequisites. Recovery is the perfect training ground for men to learn new ways to act and be in relationships with others.

We spend every moment of our day in and out of relationships. You say all you do is work? Guess what? With few exceptions, work is all about relationships—with every person you pass, every person you email or text, every person you call, every person you convince yourself is the reason you are having a bad day, and every person you stand with in silence on the elevator. And when you are sitting in your office with the door closed, staring at the computer

screen like a zombie, you are still immersed in a relationship. With whom? Well, with the most important person in your life—you.

Based on my interviews with men for this book, there appear to be no significant differences between what gay and heterosexual men value and struggle with in their relationships. In fact, while a lot of the language in this book may seem, and even be at times, focused on heterosexual relationships, I have worked hard to make it applicable to all men. There seems to be a common thread, regardless of sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, age, and other variables—that is, the challenges we share in a world full of expectations and Rules that make it hard to feel “like a man,” to feel good about ourselves, and to be our best in our relationships. Though we may experience these challenges somewhat differently as individuals, some groups of men experience them differently from others, and some groups (such as gay men or men of color) may have unique challenges; my focus is on the common struggle of men to connect with others in ways that are authentic and emotionally intimate.

That said, I know the importance for me to recognize the lens through which I see the world: I am a white, middle-class, heterosexual male of primarily Irish (and Polish and German) descent in recovery from alcohol and other drugs since May of 1994. I am a trauma survivor who has done and continues to do extensive work to heal from the pain of my experience, healing work that includes having had a father who was addicted to alcohol and who behaved violently. But it has clearly affected my relationships with other men and women and my perception of myself as a man. Another significant part of my trauma that I discuss in more detail throughout the book is having had to receive medical intervention to grow and achieve puberty over the course of six months at the end of my sophomore year of high school and through that following summer. This gave me a fairly unique view of the process of becoming a man. I also have a

master's degree and trained to be an addiction counselor at one of the most prestigious addiction treatment facilities in the country and have worked in the addiction field for almost two decades. I have been married for over a decade to my beautiful wife named Nancy, and we have an amazing daughter named Grace.

I believe, and the men I interviewed have convinced me, that a lot of these relationship issues transcend race, class, generations, and sexual orientation. That does not mean we are all the same. Some of these issues will apply directly to you and others will not. You are going to hear from men who have had incredible journeys in their relationships, some of whom have been married for decades. Others have experienced the pain of divorce or the death of a spouse. You may be surprised at the depth of the sharing and the honesty of those interviewed. The men in this book talk candidly about being fathers, lovers, friends, and men. They have learned hard-fought lessons about relationships, many through the high cost of pain.

We have all made plenty of mistakes in conducting our relationships. The point is that relationships take work. It may well be some of the toughest work you have ever done in your recovery, possibly your life. I have seen many men who have conquered incredible challenges brought to their knees by the struggles they faced in their relationships.

I also want to make one thing very clear: This is not a book that tells men how much they have screwed up relationships, or what assholes men are. Far from it. I was meeting with a group of men in recovery, and one with several decades of recovery said to me, "I sure hope you are going to talk about all of the things we do well. There are a lot of things we do that work and that should be celebrated." I could not agree more, and I hope that also comes through clearly in this book.

The Space Where We Meet

Men and women are not from different planets; we are, at most, from different countries, and we can teach each other our native language. I like to say that men are from Minnesota and women are from Wisconsin. We have a river that separates us, but we can always cross that river.

As a generalization, men and women have different relationship needs and skills. Women are not the only ones with the answers, contrary to what some think or espouse. As my wife Nancy says, each of us has to weed our own garden. That is, when relationships go well, both partners, irrespective of gender, are paying attention to their own side of the street, to their own “stuff.” Both partners need to do the actual weeding, and get help from others when the weeds prove too numerous and/or deep-rooted. Relationships simply don’t work when only one partner works to till and care for his or her garden. One of the last things that my mentor, Earnie Larsen, a phenomenal man and human being who gave so much to our experience as people in recovery, told me shortly before he died was “Dan, I have become convinced that the only way any relationship can survive is if both partners are willing to do their work. Period.”

There is a beautiful place where men and their partners meet in a relationship. It is at this place where both individuals are truly in a new space. Both have entered foreign territory; both have the opportunity to create and explore together a vast landscape of intimacy. Nancy and I hit this point several years ago, and it seems we keep hitting it at a deeper level after a decade of being married. It was here initially that we acknowledged we *both* did not know what we were doing. We both had to acknowledge that true intimacy and vulnerability are scary as hell. And that was okay. We have built our intimacy over the years and continue to do so. I cannot emphasize enough the importance of working through pain, grief, rejection, anger, and toxic shame as part of that process.

Consider men in recovery. Whether we are dressed in suits, biker gang attire, shorts and a T-shirt, or any other of the numerous skins we wear, you will most likely be amazed at what you hear us talking about—if you pay attention. You will hear men engaged in their relationships, working to understand their emotional lives, willing to see their role in problems, learning to be aware of their own needs and how to set boundaries. This is a sacred journey, and I want to encourage and celebrate the reality that it is possible for men to learn how to “do” relationships well without forfeiting their masculinity. I want to help those of you who, for fear of being vulnerable, have been unable to take off the armor that prevents you from being yourself and speaking your truth within your relationships. I want you to be one of those people who dares celebrate how wonderful men are. With all of our contradictions, imperfections, immaturity, and goofiness, we are still awesome. You are awesome. You may feel hopeless at times about your relationships. You may feel lost. But you can find your way with the help of others and a good map, such as this book.

Men Learn by Doing

In my many years of experience working with men, training others how to work more effectively with men, and in my own personal growth, it has become clear that many men learn by doing. We can read the ideas and even agree with them. But in order for many of us to truly learn it (whatever “it” is), we have to practice it. For that reason there are sections throughout the book with suggested assignments to help apply some of the concepts discussed in the chapter. I recommend that you buy a notebook specifically for completing some of the assignments. These are called “Into Action” and offer ways to practice applying the concepts and lessons in each chapter and sharing what you find with those closest to you. You can also go to www.amansway.com for further information.

It took many years to get this book published, because there is a prevailing myth out there that men will not read a book about relationships. The fact that you're reading these words proves that "they" are wrong. Men are not as predictable, stubborn, or one-dimensional as many would believe. I have known that for years now. So have many other men—and women. Now it's time to make sure that every man, both in and outside recovery, gets the same chance at having loving, quality, and healthy relationships. You deserve them. And everyone who loves you deserves to have them, too.

Chapter One

The Man Rules

“Recovery has allowed me to question the measures of manhood I had set for myself.”

—Jim

Has it ever felt to you like you were following some set of unwritten rules on how to be a man? Men can do *this* but can't do *that*. These are the Man Rules I referred to in the Introduction. They are unwritten yet very real, and they guide our lives from an early age, telling us how to be boys and men. We follow these Rules to let the world know that we are real boys and real men. When we don't follow them we run the risk of being viewed by others and viewing ourselves as being less than *real* boys or men. Where did the Rules come from? The answer is that they come from many different sources, some personal and some societal. The Rules come from both of our parents and other caregivers, from other family members, from coaches and teachers, from the kids on the playground, and from the media based on the images of “real” men presented on television, in movies, and in print and broadcast advertising. Adolescence can be a particularly brutal period of indoctrination to the Man Rules.

Think about your day-to-day experiences and look at how many Man Rules you follow. Think about how you may judge yourself as less than manly if you don't follow them. There is the Rule that real men do not ask for help. This rule contributes to many men remaining lost for much longer than necessary, among other problems. You may be pretty good at asking for help, but how do you feel when you do it? It's still hard for me to ask for help, and when I do it is frequently accompanied by some sort of self-criticism. If you are anything like me, every time

you ask for help it is a struggle just to get to that point, and once there you probably have at least a twinge of shame around feeling or appearing weak or incompetent or stupid. But with time and practice, it gets better. Luke spoke for a lot of the men in recovery whom I know: *“I had a huge amount of self-hatred before recovery, due to the nature of my acting out and hiding my true self from others. I had issues and doubts of myself about even being a man. Since recovery, the self-hatred has been greatly reduced, and I’m more confident in my masculinity and how I express it out in the world.”*

Some of the most common Man Rules I hear about from men *and* women are:

- Don’t be weak.
- Don’t show emotion.
- Don’t ask for help.
- Don’t cry.
- Don’t care about relationships.

Do these sound familiar?

Into Action

- Take some time right now to write down as many Rules about being a man as you can think of. Think about the Rules you learned from your parents/caregivers, school, neighborhood/community, the media, and workplace. If you are having trouble, think of them in the following areas: Self, Relationships, Activities, Power, Sexuality, and Spirituality.

- Think of Rules that reinforce a healthier idea of masculinity. While the majority of the Rules are neither inherently bad nor good, how they tend to be enforced can be rigid and restricting. However, there are Man Rules like integrity and self-discipline that seem to be inherently healthy traits.

What does your list of Man Rules look like? My guess, if your experience is anything like the majority of the men and women I work with, is that you have not previously spent a lot of time consciously thinking about and attempting to identify these Rules.

Think about what you learned in elementary school of how Europeans imagined the New World (the Americas) looked before they actually had traversed the territory and were able to map it out. In some ways, those are just like the maps men have been using to navigate their way in relationships—out-of-date and inaccurate. The available maps for men are guided by the Man Rules. Like those who sought to explore the New World in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, we may imagine monsters lurking in the oceans and dangerous creatures dominating the land, along with the possibility of falling off the edge of the Earth. We have no real idea of what the landscape actually looks like. And, as the first explorers discovered in traveling previously uncharted territory, the risks were great, but so were the rewards. Yet the only way to learn this was to take the journey and face the many challenges and struggles along the way. Welcome to the new world of healthy relationships.

There is a story of two fish swimming in the ocean when a third fish swims up to them and says, “Hello, gents. How’s the water?” and he swims away. The two fish look at each other and say, “What the hell is water?” In this way, the Water becomes a metaphor for those built-in aspects of our experience we take for granted to such an extent that we don’t even notice them.

That is how the Rules show up in so many of our lives. We have no awareness of them; we do not see them because we are so used to them being there as a natural part of our experience. We react to them as if they are the only version of reality—the one truth. However, they are social constructions that have been created by other men (and women) and passed on. Most of us were never given a choice. Nobody sat us down, reviewed the Rules with us, and asked us which ones we wanted to follow and which ones didn't fit for us. In all likelihood we became immersed in them early in our lives when we were incapable of thinking about them critically. We never had the opportunity to consider whether the Rules made sense for who we were and who we wanted to become.

When I walked into my first recovery meeting a man tried to hug me as a welcoming gesture. Another man, named Bud, wearing a sweat-covered T-shirt and a “Honk if you Love Tits” baseball cap, was one of the first men I noticed standing around. Twenty minutes later this same man—one I arrogantly thought embodied so much of what I detested about traditional masculinity—was crying as he talked about his marriage falling apart at seven years of recovery and how he had been kicked out of the house again.

“Whoa. What is going on here?” I asked myself. And that was the first time I began to see the Water. I realized right away that in the rooms of the twelve-step community men expressed themselves differently than they did virtually everywhere else in our society (though that has changed somewhat during the past two decades).

Of course, that was one of many examples from my first year of recovery that I could point to demonstrating how men in twelve-step recovery tend to express masculinity differently than in American society at large. The more I travel the country talking about these issues, the

clearer it is that the biggest problem with the Man Rules is how oblivious to them so many of us are.

This is what Jim is talking about in the quote that heads this chapter; he has a choice now in how he gets to be a man and what that means to him. He is becoming aware of the Water. The freedom inherent in this idea is immeasurable, yet so many men have no idea of the opportunities and choices that are available to them. A lot of men have not thought about their ideas of being a man. If you do not consciously reflect on this, you can't see or feel the Water in which you are swimming. When asked about the process of how his ideas of being a man have evolved, Jose said it this way: *"I've let go of old ideas that I thought served me well but were actually based on false information or poor perspective on my part."*

How aware of your own internal conversations are you? What do the voices from your past tell you about being a man? I encourage you to listen closely without preconceptions. Only in this way can you come to truly see the Water in which you swim every day.

My guess is that a lot of the Rules have been invisible to you. If we do not consciously call them out, they tend to operate in the shadows, driving a lot of our behavior, with little awareness on our part. We treat them as reality, and as inevitable. How often have you heard the dismissive phrase, "Well, that's just how men are"? I have heard it all of my life, and a lot of the time it did not apply to me. So I thought the only thing that made sense to me at the time was, *I must not be much of a man*. That sentiment haunted me for a long time, and I didn't think I could tell anyone about it. Once I had the courage to begin talking about the insecurity of feeling like I wasn't a real man and share about the negative judgments I hurled at myself, I heard from man after man that I was not alone; many men have these feelings in common.

Let me be very clear that the Rules are not necessarily bad. How the Rules are taught to us (sometimes literally beaten into us) and how we respond to them can be problematic. Rigidly following the Rules is unhealthy because there is no freedom; there is no choice. The Rules at their extremes are toxic. They lead to disconnection, violence, homophobia, objectification of women, and extreme competition, as well as isolation, loneliness, self-hatred, and misery. Discover who you are despite the Rules, and you cannot help but become the man you were meant to be. With self-aware practice, the Rules become more relaxed and flexible. They feel less like tight, constricting clothes and more like loose-fitting, comfortable garments. Mike said this about how recovery and the Twelve Steps had changed his ideas of who he was as a man: *“I like what I see when I look in the mirror. I have come to a level of self-acceptance I’m comfortable with.”*

Many of the men (and women) I know who defend their behavior by saying, “It’s just who I am,” are often lost in the Rules because they are not aware of the Water. These are the people who keep using old, out-of-date maps. It is easier to simply say men don’t know how to communicate feelings and continue to be disconnected in their relationships than to take the risk of communicating feelings. That involves immense vulnerability for those of us who have been told all of our lives that sharing feelings, outside of anger, is not manly. As Mike says, “When I share my feelings, honest connection is possible.” The converse also seems to be true: When we do not share our feelings or our inner lives, it is hard to truly connect with others. This is just one of the many “ways that men are” that I still hear all the time, even in the rooms of recovery.

Of course, the Rules are not always specific and concrete; they can be a set of ideas that we react to or resist. For instance, all of my life I have felt more emotional and sensitive than most men (and women). I have found this to be a common trait I share with a lot of men in

recovery. The Rules, however, dictate that men are not to show emotions other than anger, and that certain emotions, such as fear, sadness, and hurt, are signs of weakness. These emotions are associated with being feminine, which in the context of the Man Rules has negative connotations. Maybe we feel “less than.” We may even spend a fair amount of time trying not to engage in certain Rules that we consider unhealthy and even destructive, but doing so may affect how we feel about ourselves as men. However, if we’re self-aware and allow ourselves to experience how becoming emotionally vulnerable can enhance the quality of our connections with others, through practice we begin to have a better understanding of the man we want to be rather than one whose relationships are being suffocated by the Rules.

Implicit in many of the Rules are a lot of “don’ts.” For example, if the Rule is “Men have to be strong,” an underlying message is “Don’t be weak.” Which is the greater Rule—that men have to be strong or that men cannot be weak or show weakness of any kind? In other words, the negatives associated with many of the Rules tend to be the stronger part of the message. These “don’ts” are important because, at the heart of it, they are telling us as men what and who *not to be*. How much of your identity is built around what and who you *are not*? How much time do you spend *not being* somebody as opposed to *being someone*, or more importantly, being *who you are* and *who you want to become*?

Interestingly, if you look at the “don’ts” and get rid of the word “don’t,” you get a list of Rules that tend to be associated with a particular group of people. Let’s look at some of them.

- ~~Don’t~~ be weak.
- ~~Don’t~~ show emotion.
- ~~Don’t~~ ask for help.
- ~~Don’t~~ cry.

- ~~Don't~~ care about relationships.

What group do we tend to identify these statements with? Women. Practically from the moment we are born, men are raised with messages that conflict with those given to girls and women. We receive messages—explicitly and implicitly—that not only are certain behaviors against the Rules, they are to be avoided because they are associated with the “weaker” sex. Now, consider that some of the same behaviors are exactly what we are expected to practice in our most intimate relationships. This is one of the phenomena that creates serious internal tension for men and conflict between men and women in relationships.

You may be saying, “But, Dan, I don’t live by a lot of these Rules.” Fair enough. But as a man you are still frequently judged consistent with them. Chances are there is still a voice inside you, a model of a “manly” man that you have internalized, with a tendency to judge you more harshly than you realize when you don’t follow the Rules. I know that is the case for me, and I have been living an examined life with respect to my masculinity for a very long time.

The Man Rules have also changed a lot in the past two decades. They have loosened up, allowing for what I referred to in my master’s research as a “relaxed masculinity.” The armor I talked about earlier is less rigid. We have more flexibility and more room in which to move. I am convinced we are on the right path as we evolve as individual human beings and as a society. Unfortunately, I have also found that this relaxed masculinity can cause a great deal of confusion. In the 1940s, 1950s, and early 1960s the Rules were pretty clear. Men and women knew exactly how to act and how to be in relationship with each other. Half a century later there is much less clarity and certainty. Under what circumstances is it okay to show weakness? When is it acceptable and preferable to be vulnerable with our authentic emotions? Some men have learned the hard way that when they do not follow the Rules they are made fun of or rejected for

not being manly enough, not only by men in their lives, but by women as well. Understandably, women can buy into the Man Rules as much as men do. They don't see the Water either.

The Rules provide one very important experience for all men: safety. When I ask audiences what following the Man Rules offers men, they often say "acceptance" or "sense of belonging." I will push them to look further underneath that. What does acceptance, a sense of belonging, or being liked give us? Safety. At the heart of the Rules is an attempt to be safe in the world, to not only be validated as men but to truly feel safe and fit in. Every young boy learns that when he follows the Man Rules he is safer in that he is less likely to be made fun of, criticized, beaten up, and so on. The majority of us did not learn the Rules in peaceful conditions. Maybe your home had a more enlightened approach to gender, but no boy escapes the brutality of the schoolyard. In fact, I would say that given how much the process of socialization cuts us off from core parts of our humanity, there is a degree of trauma experienced by every man. For some of us the trauma is severe. To make matters worse, at the heart of any attempts we make to be intimate and truly known to others is a level of vulnerability that we may not be prepared for or have the ability to navigate. This experience can touch our trauma, triggering it constantly in our most intimate relationships, and when it happens we have no idea what to do and end up sabotaging our relationships as a result.

Finally, there is another nuance of the Rules that affects some men differently than others that must not be ignored. The people I have had the honor to train and share this conversation with have helped me to see more of the Water. When we think of criminals or drug dealers, whose face do we tend to see? When we think of illegal immigrants or people doing menial work, if they are even men, whose faces do we see? The point is that the Man Rules are not color-blind or classless. I will never know what it is like to walk down the street and have people

fearing me simply because of the color of my skin. Or make judgments about me and my intelligence, moral character, or basic humanity simply because of the color of my skin or who I am drawn to love. The intensity and expression of the Man Rules also seem to be different in the suburbs where I grew up than they are in the inner city, the child protection system, or the juvenile and criminal justice systems. All men are not socialized equally.

Through the process of recovery, something happens to us that changes how we express ourselves at the foundation of our identity: our gender. Many people can get confused about the difference between sex and gender, not to mention sexuality (covered later in this book). Our sex is a biological and physiological attribute based upon having specific genitalia and other key distinguishing factors (breasts, etc.), even though there is much variation among human beings, even physiologically. Gender, however, is a social construct. It varies according to so many things and is a fluid concept. What masculinity means in one country versus another can be very different. How we express our gender is malleable and often changes over time and even through the course of relationships.

Many of us are unaware of what happens to our gender in recovery and personal growth because it occurs in the context of our recovery, as part of a bigger process of learning and growth. That was certainly what I found when I interviewed men over fifteen years ago for my master's research, as well as among the men I interviewed for *A Man's Way Through the Twelve Steps*. When I asked, "How have your ideas of being a man changed since getting into recovery?" the number-one answer was "They haven't." I followed up with "You mean before recovery you walked around hugging other men? Asking for help? Talking about your feelings?" It was only when these changes were pointed out and they began to reflect on the question that

they saw they were very different from the men they were before recovery. The same thing happened with a number of the men I interviewed for this book.

Men and women are essentially raised to be half human beings: Women are given one part and men the other. The breakdown could look like this:

<u>Socialization Process</u>		
<u>Feminine</u>		<u>Masculine</u>
Emotional Intelligence (EQ)	Intellect	Logical Intelligence (IQ)
Retreat/Isolation/Internalization	Response to Trauma	Aggression/Externalization
Collaboration/Decentralized	Power	Control/Hierarchy
Process/Intuition	Information	Analytical/Rational
Relational	Self-Development	Individuation
Surrender/Intimacy	Sex/Love	Conquest/Performance
Codependence	Relationships	Independence

We hear from an early age that “boys don’t do *that*” and “girls don’t do *that*.” Case in point: I was visiting my sister a few years ago. I was wearing a necklace made of different-colored, small, rounded stones. When my two-year-old nephew saw it he said, as intelligibly as he could, “Why are you wearing that?” “What?” I said. “That necklace. Boys don’t wear necklaces,” he said with great seriousness. I laughed, and yet I thought to myself, *holy sh%\$!* *Seriously? That young?* My daughter also does this all the time. She doesn’t hear it from me, but she still “knows” that boys don’t paint their fingernails or wear long hair. It is not at all uncommon for her to make comments like “Boys don’t do . . .” and “Girls don’t do . . .” These are observations she is making about the world in which she lives, and if I do not challenge those

comments they become fact for her, stored in the processor of her brain. It becomes part of her Water, with no awareness on her part that it is happening. It happened to me, and it happened to you.

There Is No Gender Neutral

Without breaking into a treatise on oppression and marginalization, we cannot ignore the reality that some people receive benefits and advantages in this society simply because they belong to a certain category. And others get just the opposite—deficits and disadvantages—because they belong to another category or, said another way, do not belong to the dominant group. In terms of gender, men are the dominant group in our society (as in many others). Our society is patriarchal and “maleness” is the norm, the expectation, and even the subconscious default for many men and women. Unless both men and women are aware of this, it infiltrates all of our relationships in insidious ways. Once we are aware of it, we can choose to transcend it.

The issue of gender becomes even more complicated when you consider gay men or men of color who are part of a dominant group (men) and also members of a minority or marginalized group. As Gary put it in *A Man's Way Through the Twelve Steps*, “Even though I am a man, I am a gay man, and being a gay man is the worst of both worlds. I am seen as a predator, weak, dangerous, sick, and as the ‘other’ all at once by the same people.” Psychologically, this can have seriously damaging effects on how these men express their masculinity and how they are able to engage in their relationships.

As we adhere to the old adage “To thine own self be true,” we begin to move toward wholeness as individuals. We round out the rough edges of our character and discover our true selves. The more we engage in our recovery and the process of personal growth, the more likely we are to move toward authentically expressing who we are. One aspect of this process is

learning to love parts of ourselves that we were taught or told were not okay. Another aspect is coming to embrace parts of ourselves that we rejected. A third aspect is expanding what we see as possible, including ways of being that we never considered or had rejected without ever exploring, often because “boys (or girls) don’t act that way.” As I stated earlier, as a young boy I was always sensitive. I learned very early growing up in a violent alcoholic home that being sensitive was not okay (or emotionally safe). I learned to fear and hate that part of myself because I thought it was not manly. I have come to realize that it is a central part of who I am and I do not care if others think it is manly or not. In fact, it is a wonderful quality when I choose to express it in a healthy way.

Chances are you have your own examples of similar experiences. What is important is to be able to verbalize those experiences in a safe environment. This requires doing the work of self-examination and self-discovery. Equally important, however, is that you look at your experiences through the lens of gender to help the unseen become seen.

On a spiritual and moral plane, we don’t ever prosper by treating others as inferior or second class, or by engaging in any of the other ways human beings disparage one another. Nor do we ever prosper by accepting such statements. Such actions affect our spirit deeply. This is particularly true for those of us in recovery, because we are not dulling our consciousness or conscience. We are aware, are living an examined life, and are challenged to see that other people are not responsible for our behavior. And we become aware that the differences between individuals do not automatically confer a status of one person as “better than” another. In fact, the differences enrich our lives. Ultimately, the two primary questions for men that I pose are: How are your behaviors consistent with the man the people in your life truly want you to be?

More importantly, how are your behaviors and the beliefs you maintain reflective of the man you want to be?

If you want to have loving and fulfilling relationships, I cannot stress this enough: Screw the Rules! Be who you are, and you cannot help but show up, authentically and as the best man you could ever be. As Jim said in the quote at the beginning of this chapter, recovery gives you the opportunity to redefine what a man is and what that looks like for you. Bob said it this way: “My history of male models has lots of bravado, independence, and low emotional expressiveness. Since recovery I have been more willing to allow interdependence and emotional expressivity as essential aspects of me. As a result, I am more comfortable in my own skin.”

Into Action

- **Take your own list of Rules and share them with your spouse, partner, and/or sponsor. Have a conversation with them about your Rules.**
- **Consciously look at the Rules you have listed. Which ones do you want to keep? Which ones would you like to get rid of? Which ones would you like to change?**
- **Choose three Rules you want to keep and write about how they have helped you and your relationships. Share what you have written with your partner or a trusted friend.**
- **Choose three Rules that you want to let go of or change and write about how they have hurt you and your relationships. Share what you have written with your partner or a trusted friend.**

- **What are five behaviors or interests you have that would be considered less masculine? What is it like for you admitting that? How long have you had those behaviors or interests? How were you treated when you exhibited them?**