

**What Men Would Tell You...**  
**If We Weren't Too Busy Watching TV**

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# Chapter 1: Introduction

Have you felt frustrated trying to communicate with your man, like you were actually speaking to a brick wall? Of course you have!

Have you experienced your man as being passive aggressive, indirect and critical in his interaction with you or your friends? Our guess is that you have experienced this too.

Have you secretly wished he would grow up and act more like an adult? Has he embarrassed you socially with some of his antics? Probably.

Do you wish that for once he would take you more seriously and tell you how he really feels? We are almost certain that you do.

Intimate relationships between men and women are difficult and fraught with many challenges, frustrations, disappointments, betrayals, and pain. Loving hurts, and good loving hurts a lot. However, if we learn how to extract the lessons inherent in the trouble that occurs in each and every relationship, then intimate relationships can also be inspiring, beautiful, intriguing, exciting, mysterious, and have a unique way of helping us grow into our best possible self.

The title of our book is meant to be humorous, but it speaks to a real frustration that many women experience in their relationships. We've heard many women declare:

- I tried to give him more space, but that didn't work.
- I tried to show more interest in the sport or TV show he loves, but that didn't work either.
- I encouraged him to hang out with his friends more, and so he did – a lot.

- I shared with him that I was unhappy, and he thought I wanted a divorce.
- I asked him if there was a good time we could talk and he wanted to know what was wrong.
- I bought some new lingerie to see if we could get closer if we had more sex - that worked for a while but then we drifted right back to our old patterns.

This list could go on and on and on. We know that you have tried very hard to find a way to be closer to the man you love. We understand your frustration. We've both frustrated our own wives many times and have seen this struggle first hand in the men and women that we have worked with. It's a serious problem.

If, like most of the women reading this book, you have had at least some of these thoughts and tried some of these tactics, there are some big questions underneath it all: "How can I connect better with the man I love?" "How can I break through? How can I achieve real intimacy with the man I love?" These are important questions and we want to help you find answers. Our hope is that by the time you finish reading this book you will have a much better idea of how to forge a better relationship with the man you love.

- You will understand the powerful psychological and social forces that have shaped your man and his behavior. We refer to these as the "Man Rules."
- You will explore the "Woman Rules" that have shaped your personality and that also influence your relationship with your man.

The more you understand your man and yourself the more likely it is that you will discover new ways to reach and touch the heart of the man you love. We want to help you enjoy and know him more fully and experience a deep and satisfying intimacy.

As the title of our book suggests, there is a lot we men would say to you if we had the words and ability to let you know our deep inner truth and experience. The problem is that most of us men have difficulty finding the words that accurately reflect what is in our hearts—let alone, the difficulty we find being able to act in harmony with our true feelings. When it comes to speaking about our personal desires most of us don't because we have difficulty being vulnerable. If we had the tools to communicate differently, we would. We would finally show up and be more present, more open, more vulnerable, more honest and more emotionally accessible. But most of us never learned a personal language that would help us intimately connect with the women we love. We never saw our fathers connect in this intimate way with our mothers, and we certainly don't have many good role models in society or from our network of friends. In fact, we were told from a very young age that emotional expression and intimacy were not for boys – and certainly not for *real* men. Not only did we not learn the language – but we were told to stay away from it and not practice it. And when we did share our feelings and express any kind of vulnerability, we learned very quickly that was not okay.

What's more, many men don't even *know* that they don't know these things. Gurdjief, a very famous Russian philosopher, was noted as saying that we are asleep thinking we are awake. Now get ready for this because this is very important for you to know, *most men are asleep and don't realize it*. They have no idea of what is driving them. These forces are unconscious. They believe they are awake but they are not. They don't understand that the reality they have created is not the only one available. It's the one they have constructed but there are other possibilities. But most men are lost in the reality defined by The Man Rules

So we come to these difficulties legitimately. This is true for many of us. And furthermore it is not the case that we will relate better if we simply have the desire to do better. Change is much more complicated than that.

Contrary to what you may believe, *desire* does not equal *ability*. In our culture these concepts have been fused. “You can do whatever your heart desires,” is what we have heard all of our lives. But this isn’t true. Desire can only be realized if we have the courage and willingness to get honest with ourselves and look at how we sabotage our relationships with toxic rules. Unfortunately, this is the road less traveled for many men and women.

The good news is that more and more men and women are taking this less-traveled path. We will discuss this more later. Right now we want you to know that there is a deep desire in every man to be more intimate with his partner, but as you will see the “man rules” interfere with this process. These rules make it nearly impossible for us to be vulnerable, to be our authentic selves, and to develop the capacity to describe our inner lives.

However, we usually don’t tell you that we want a better connection or that you are important to us because being open and vulnerable isn’t considered a manly thing to do. We hide our truth from you. We behave in ways that communicate an entirely different message and paint a very different picture.

We sit watching TV while out of the corner of our eyes we watch you walk away from us in disgust one more time as you see us open another beer. Sometimes we get anxious when we realize that we have disappointed you and run after you to make things better, telling you we’re sorry and we won’t do “it” again (whatever “it” may represent – drinking, watching TV, getting angry, ignoring family, gambling less...). Or we may take the complete opposite position and

totally turn things around—berating you for not giving us a break, because, after all, we worked hard all week. Or sometimes we just sit in silence not knowing what to do or say, which is often misinterpreted, as meaning we don't care.

Welcome to the world of Men! It's maddening —we know. We drive you crazy! The “man rules” make it impossible for us to relate to you personally and intimately. The result is that we are not authentic in our communication.

How did this happen to us? How did we become so skewed in our development? *We believe that men have lost sight of what's really important in their lives because they try to live up to an idealized image of who they think they should be.* And perhaps more relevant to you – they try to live up to an image of who they think you need them to be. Note: this is all in their heads! We haven't checked out any of this with you – we just live miserably by this self-imposed mandate. Just sit with that awareness for a second, and reflect on what it means to you and your relationships with men.

Men who are trapped and lost in the “man rules” can behave badly. This is the source of most of our own personal struggles, and also the source of most of your problems with us. And, amazingly, these “rules” are invisible to us. The rules are so ingrained that we often think “that's just how we are.”

So what can you do to ameliorate the problems the “man rules” create? *The most important thing you can do is to not take what your partner is doing personally.* This book will help you learn more about your man so you can stop taking what he is doing so personally. *This is not to excuse any of the times when even the best of men behave badly. That's never okay in our books.*

In the following chapters we are going to explore some of the most prevalent and destructive “man rules” that exist in our society today. We want you to be able to use what you learn to have a better understanding of your man and his struggles so you can stop taking what he is doing personally and have a greater chance to have the relationship with him your heart desires.

Here is a list of the “man rules” we are going to discuss:

1. No Cry Rule: A Real Man never cries
2. Control Rule: A Real Man is in control and masters all.
3. Vulnerability Rule: A Real Man isn't *too* vulnerable.
4. Success Rule: A Real Man succeeds
5. Protector Rule: A Real Man protects his own
6. Fight Rule: A Real Man fights
7. Cool Rule: A Real Man is self-sufficient
8. Sex Rule: A Real Man craves sex
9. Winning Rule: A Real Man must win.
10. All Knowing Rule: A Real man has the answers

How did you react when you read this list? We hope that your stomach turned at least a little, that you felt some pain, maybe even some disgust, and hopefully some compassion that men are so trapped in these rigid and nonsensical rules. These rules suck, especially if they are adhered to blindly, thoughtlessly, and uncritically. They really do! We know it and we want to help you and your partner liberate yourself from their toxic effects.

Now, you may be wondering, “Who are these guys? What makes them think they can be the spokesmen for other men?” We are glad you asked. Our credibility is grounded in our professional careers and our personal journeys. We have come together from two different generations to speak as one voice and write a book focused on helping men and women create and sustain healthier relationships. This has never been done and there is no time when this could be more important – as our society is in the midst of a major discussion on what it means to be a man in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

We are both professionals who have worked with boys, young men, and adult men for most of our careers, but even more importantly we are men who have been on our own personal journeys. We have both been on a quest to better understand what it really means to be a man. We have both spent years in psychotherapy working through personal traumas and grief. We have both participated in numerous men’s retreats to help us become aware of a healthier manhood. We are both married, love our wives wholeheartedly, and have children whom we love and enjoy. We also both care very deeply for men and their suffering. As you can tell we share many similarities. But we are also very different.

Our ages differ by two decades. This means that we were born into very different social realities. We were also born into very different family dynamics. Allen struggled with losing his father at a very early age while Dan struggled with his father’s abusiveness and alcoholism that eventually led to his untimely death at the age of 54. Our experiences in adolescence and young adulthood were also quite different. Allen joined the USMC at 17 years old and never finished high school. Dan graduated high school and went straight into college. Allen grew up in Chicago and Dan grew up in Maryland. These are but a few of our differences; more will be revealed later in our stories. We believe these differences will also be of value to you. In the next chapter we

will share in more detail our personal journey on the road of becoming the men we truly want to be.

## **Getting the most from this book**

Chapter two tells our personal stories so you can get to know each of us a little better and trust us a bit more as we take you on this journey. Chapter three describes the Man Rules, in general, and each of the following 10 chapters focuses on one of the rules. We each offer our personal reflections for each Rule to give you a greater understanding of how men are impacted by these Rules – and perhaps offer some additional insight into how your man is being affected.

Because alcohol and other drug use is such an important part of the conversation regarding masculinity and our lives, personally, we have a separate chapter on how addiction and recovery relates to the Man Rules. In our personal and therapeutic experiences, use of alcohol and other drugs often starts as a way to cope with the self-imposed shackles of the Man Rules. If addiction or recovery are a part of your life or have impacted you or your partner's history, this chapter contains useful tips for reframing your experiences.

To help you assimilate what we share, each chapter also includes tips that you can easily put into action. We invite you, and your man if he is willing, to do a series of exercises at the end of each chapter. Even if he is uninterested in joining you in these exercises, please do them yourself. Eventually he might become curious about what you are doing and join you, especially if he sees things improving between the two of you. We will provide you with detailed instructions later.

Here are a few suggestions we would like to offer you to ensure you get the most out of this book. You will need to find the courage within yourself to be honest. Only the best in you can see the worst in you. The more vulnerable you allow yourself to be, the more honest you will be, and the more benefit you will receive from reading this book. If you take these risks, you will discover new possibilities within yourself and within your relations with men.

A very special and important caveat for women who are caught in abusive relationships. We must caution you:

***If your man is consistently abusive, controlling, and exerting destructive power, we highly recommend that you seek professional help. Now. Do not proceed with this book. You owe it to yourself to make sure that you are safe and you have clarity in your relationship with your man. If your partner is regularly abusive or violent you owe it to your children to keep them safe as well. Do not invest heavily in an idea that if he just changes everything will be okay without there being really clear ideas of what that change looks like and what behaviors are or are not acceptable. Take care of yourself, first and foremost.***

[EXTRA WHITE SPACE]

As we noted, before we begin the task of unpacking the Man Rules for you we want you to get to know us better, which will help you have a better understanding of why we have written this book. In the next chapter we will share our stories with you.

## Chapter 2: Our Stories

### Allen's story

I was born in 1952. Roles for men and women were clearly spelled out and quite rigid during this period of time in our history. There wasn't a lot of room for men or women to deviate from the norm. Historians have described this as a time of "highly traditional gender roles." Men were the providers. They had to be strong, dominant, independent, leaders, all-knowing, decisive, aggressive, tough minded, and hard working. The iconic John Wayne was celebrated and revered as the ideal man.

Most women in the 50's were homemakers. They were expected to be subservient, submissive, unassertive, passive, sensitive, emotional, and dependent. Harriett from *Father Knows Best*, a very popular daytime family show of the time, was the epitome of the ideal woman.

This was the spirit of the times that I was born into and my family fit right into this mold. My father was a mechanical engineer. He went to work every day, never complained, was strong, never talked about his feelings, was very committed to his children, and worked hard to provide for the family. My mother maintained the house, cooked great Italian food, tended to our daily needs, and held court in the kitchen with her cup of coffee and Parliament cigarettes.

I grew up in Chicago, the Windy City. I loved (and still love) this city with its wonderful ethnic food and incredible skyline. I consider myself fortunate to have had a close and loving relationship with my father, Alvin Jerome Berger. But, as you will read, the "Man Rules" I

learned from him would eventually contribute to my downfall later in life. They left me unprepared to deal with life on life's terms. But this wasn't a black and white situation. Some of the "Man Rules" I learned from him also helped me become the man I am today. The problem was that I tried to live up to all the Rules and never sifted through them to see what would or wouldn't work for me.

I am the oldest of four. I have a younger sister and two younger brothers. Most every weekend dad would take us on a family outing; sometimes mom would join us but the majority of the time we spent with dad. We had a great time with him. He was a very intelligent man and whenever the opportunity arose he talked to us about science. But he was far from a stick in the mud. More than anything, we laughed when we were with him. He loved to play jokes on us. He loved life and loved us and we knew it. I knew it. I loved this man. I felt blessed to have him as my father.

In the summer we'd venture out to Foster Avenue Beach and spend the entire day swimming in Lake Michigan, building sandcastles or burying dad in the sand with only his head left sticking up. Mom liked the beach too, so a lot of the time she would join us. She would make us peanut butter and jelly sandwiches to snack on or if we were really lucky she'd make these wonderful tuna salad sandwiches on Wonder Bread. We'd take a bunch of other goodies too, like Hostess Twinkies or potato chips or pretzels or M&M's, and, to quench our thirst, Hawaiian punch.

The winters were terribly cold and bitter in Chicago. But it didn't stop our family outings on the weekends. We'd head to Forest Glenn to go tobogganing or we'd visit one of Chicago's great Museums like the Museum of Natural History or the Museum of Science and Industry. I can remember the feeling I'd get when we'd pass through the grand entrance of the Museum of

Natural History like it was yesterday. There, standing in the center of this grand hall, was a T-Rex poised for battle. He was facing off with a Triceratops. To my dad these two prehistoric beasts represented the struggle for survival that we all faced in different ways. Dad would have us pause at the entrance of the museum so he could tell us a tale about the battle that was about to begin. Sometimes the T-Rex would prevail and have the Triceratops for dinner. Other times he'd have the Triceratops win the battle sending the T-Rex off hungry and wounded. The imagery he created for us was fantastic! It was another wonderful thing to love about this man. He was fun and creative. I thought he was the coolest dad in the entire world.

My mother had a difficult childhood. Her family was poor and during the Great Depression her father, who was a Vaudeville comedian, fell ill with tuberculosis and was unable to work. They lived on welfare, which wasn't enough to provide for all of the needs of the family. They were desperate to find a way to care for their children during these challenging times. So her mother and father decided to turn to the Catholic Church for help, thinking this would be best for everyone. Her parents sent her, along with one of her sisters and two of her brothers, to an orphanage run by nuns. It was horrible for my mother and her siblings. She felt abandoned and neglected. She hardened her heart to survive. She lost an important part of herself in that place.

Her father would visit her and her siblings once a week but she never spent any time with her mother or other siblings.

Take a moment and imagine how this must have been for this four-year-old little girl, never seeing her mother or the rest of the family. It was terrible for her and she cried herself to sleep many a night. She spent the next ten years of her life being physically and mentally abused by the nuns. She loved Jesus but grew to hate the Catholic Church. She never worked through any

of these feelings, which is a real shame because these deep spiritual wounds limited her ability to love and live life to its fullest.

I learned about my mother's experience from her sister, my Aunt Helen, when I was an adult. My mother could never bring herself to talk about this experience or any of the other traumas she suffered as a child and young teenage girl.

As it turns out this was a major theme in my family. For example, besides another element of those days at the beach was that my mother rarely went near the water. She was afraid of it because she was traumatized by some teenage boys who threw her off Navy Pier into Lake Michigan despite her pleading with them that she didn't know how to swim. She almost drowned that day, but someone finally jumped in and saved her once they realized she wasn't kidding. But she never shared this experience with us until we were adults. Traumas or pain were never talked about in our family.

This was the story of my childhood until the early 60's. Family life seemed good and for the most part I was very happy, but unaware that my family also avoided talking about traumas of the past or present. And there was another reality unfolding: A reality that was never discussed until it could no longer be avoided.

My father was diagnosed with multiple myeloma and leukemia in 1961 or 1962. I am not certain of the actual date he was diagnosed because he swore our family doctor to secrecy. He didn't want to worry us. He suffered in complete silence with the ominous reality that a disease was proliferating inside of him that would eventually destroy him physically and end his life.

I hope you can recognize in his secrecy one of the Man Rules that ran his life. He was trapped in the rule that he needed to be strong for the family and suffer in silence. He was unable

to talk with me, my siblings, or his wife about the incredible emotional and physical pain he was experiencing on a daily basis. This is one of my deepest regrets that I have. My dad and I never got to talk more personally to one another. I had a lot to say to him and I am certain he would have had a lot to say to me too if he could have found a way to approach this painful subject.

We finally found out in 1963 that he was diagnosed with cancer. He could no longer hide the truth from us because of the effects of the cancer on his body. He became frail and lost a lot of weight. I can recall that, urged on by his father, he went to great lengths to find a cure. He traveled to Mexico to get Laetrile injections and I am certain he tried other alternatives to treat his cancer as well, to no avail.

The cancer ravaged him and he eventually became a shell of the man he used to be. But when I looked at him I still saw the man I loved and cherished. Though the cancer was killing him, he was very much alive to me. I couldn't imagine life without him. The last day I saw him was about two weeks before Christmas in 1963. He was approximately 100 pounds and was taking pain medication on a regular basis. Here's what happened.

I took turns sleeping with him in the living room so my mother could get some rest. I often watched his chest when I was lying next to him to see signs that would tell me that he was still breathing. I was so afraid he'd die at night; for some reason the night was more ominous than the day. He had to take pain medication every three hours throughout the night. We'd set the alarm and I'd dispense his medication. One night he suddenly awoke in terrible pain. He grabbed my right arm so tight that I thought he was going to shatter the bones in my forearm. He screamed like I had never heard a person scream before. It was like all the pain he had been suppressing broke free that night and found a voice. The scream penetrated deep into my soul. It still echoes deep within in me today. Tears come to my eyes as I am sharing this with you. I was terrified,

scared, and felt helpless, more helpless than I had ever felt before in my life. His scream woke up the entire family and my mother called for help.

Eventually the ambulance came and rushed him off to the hospital. That was the last time I saw him. Back in the 60's children weren't permitted to visit on the oncology ward, only adults. I missed him terribly and dreaded what was coming next. When I awoke on December 26<sup>th</sup> I knew something was wrong. My mother was overcome with grief and announced to us that Daddy had died at two a.m. the night before. He had died alone in the hospital. I still hate the idea that he died alone that night. I wish someone who loved him had been at his side. I went into shock. I instantly felt numb; I didn't want to feel the incredible pain of losing my daddy. I still needed him.

I walked over to a window in the living room and stood there staring out of it at the street. I was looking at the snow that was piled up on the corner of Argyle and Laverne where we lived. The snow was dirty—grey and black. In the background I heard my mother and sister crying. As I looked at that mucky snow I felt myself freezing over. Tears didn't flow; they were stuffed and locked deep down inside of me. I shut down. I never wanted to feel again. I never wanted to need anyone ever again or want anything ever again. I didn't want to be alive. I never wanted to feel disappointed or devastated ever again. I felt betrayed by life, ripped off, like he was torn from my life. This is not what was supposed to happen! He shouldn't die this young. I kept lamenting what a good man he was as if this should have prevented him from getting cancer. He was 39 years old when he passed on.

How could I process this experience? I was only eleven years old. It was more than I could wrap my mind and heart around.

My mother fell into a deep, dark depression. Her grief was inconsolable. She cried night and day. I kept to myself and withdrew. So did my siblings. There didn't seem to be any room for our experience. My mother's grief sucked all the oxygen out of our family. As I write this I can still feel my anger towards her for abandoning me. But she wasn't the only person I lost to grief and then resented. My grandfather, Ned Berger, also fell into a deep dark depression. My father, his son, was his only child. He couldn't reconcile that he was burying his son rather than the other way around. He too got lost in his grief and abandoned our family and me. All he could focus on was his loss. I wanted him and my mother to recognize my pain, to reach out to me and help me deal with the tremendous loss I was experiencing. But he couldn't. Neither could my mother. Nor could I express what I needed. I abandoned myself too. Instead I found myself trying to comfort my mother and my grandfather while secretly hoping that someone would ask me how I was feeling and comfort me.

I didn't dare tell either of them that I needed them. I wasn't going to set myself up and need someone again. I secretly and unconsciously decided that those days of being vulnerable were over. I was now going to deal with this like a "real man," which meant to suffer in silence, to be independent, and to deal with my problems on my own. Before my father died he had told me, "You are now the man of the family."

*The man of the family.* You've got to be kidding me! I was eleven. It was too much to bear, but of course I didn't let anyone know that about me either.

As I share this with you I find it terribly upsetting that no one, not my mother, not my grandfather, not my Aunt Helen, not one of my father's closest friends, no teacher, not one adult in my life ever asked me how I felt, how was I doing. It's crazy. Where the fuck were they? What made me invisible? I was so angry then, and am still angry today. At age eleven, I said to

myself, “Fuck everyone, I will figure this out alone.” And that is what the “Man Rules” told me to expect anyway. What a terrible shame this happened. And what a huge price I’d eventually pay for this attitude

A large part of me died when my father died. I became an automaton, just going through the motions. My passion and zest for life went up in smoke. It left me when I shut down. I didn’t want to care anymore, about anything. And this is how I lived the next several years of my life. In fact during my father’s wake I sat out in the lobby reading a Spiderman comic. It’s hard to for me to believe how disconnected I was from my pain. I have often wondered, “Didn’t anyone find my reaction a bit strange?”

I am certain these childhood experiences contributed to my choosing a career as a psychologist. Somewhere deep inside me I made a commitment to do my best to be there for someone who was suffering: To ask them the questions that were never asked of me.

The next seven years of my life reflected the decision I made when my father died. Basically, I decided *not to be!* I just didn’t care about my future. I gave up on myself and I gave up on actualizing whatever potential I possessed. Instead, I settled for becoming a teenage alcoholic, dropping out of high school, and selling woman’s shoes. All that mattered was to drink and hang out with my friends. I had no ambition and no goals for my life other than to stay out of touch with myself by drinking and getting wasted.

During this phase of my life I became someone I could barely recognize. I violated most of my personal values and compromised my ethics. I changed for the worse. I lied, stole money from my mother (who was struggling to make ends meet), got into fights, and became totally self-absorbed, self-centered, and selfish. I didn’t care about anyone. I was an angry young man. I

felt betrayed by life. At an even deeper level I stopped caring for myself. Selfishness was a poor substitute for self-love and self-esteem. I was going nowhere fast and no one seemed to care – I didn't even care or at least I didn't care at a conscious level. I now know that there was a part of me that did care and wanted a better life. This part of me was buried deep inside, a part of me that I couldn't recover without help. Thankfully what happened next in my life would eventually help me to recover the parts of me I lost and disowned.

In 1969 I volunteered for the Marines. Secretly I was hoping that this would make me a man, because I had no idea how to become a man and make that transition from being an adolescent boy to a young man. There were no guidelines (that I was aware of), and furthermore it seemed that I lost the only person who would have been my role model and coach.

The Marine Corps boot camp was the toughest thing I had ever done in my life. Somehow, some way, I persevered and became one of the few, one of the proud, a United States Marine. As the new slogan says, "The Marine Corps doesn't accept applications, only commitments." After boot camp I was trained in artillery and the first chance I had I volunteered for Vietnam. In 1970 I landed in Da Nang and was assigned to an artillery unit on Hill 55. While my drinking stopped temporarily during boot camp, I still drank alcoholically whenever I could. In Vietnam I began experimenting more seriously with other drugs and found them to be as seductive as alcohol was to me. Over the next year my alcoholism became an addiction to alcohol and other drugs. I was getting drunk or loaded every chance I could.

I am not proud of the things I did in Vietnam. Something deep inside me felt it was wrong to kill another human being. I wonder if I would have felt different if our purpose in Vietnam was more justifiable – like it was during World War II. Vietnam wasn't that type of a war - as you well know.

After completing my tour of duty in Vietnam in 1971 I returned to the United States feeling a lot of shame. And yes of course, I didn't talk to anyone about my feelings. Once again I was honoring a set of ridiculous rules of what it meant to be a man. Men should suffer silently and deal with their own issues (I learned this rule well). Men should be cold and heartless warriors. Men should handle their own problems. Deep down inside these rules were killing me and fueling my drug use.

Thankfully something happened on my way to my next duty station that would alter the course of my life: It would literally save my life.

After Vietnam I was given 30 days of liberty. I flew to Chicago and partied night and day, drinking, smoking marijuana, dropping acid, and shooting barbiturates. I was a mess after 30 days of nonstop drugging and drinking. So when I boarded the plane in Chicago's O'Hare Airport I wasn't thinking clearly. In my pockets were a bunch of illegal drugs that were given to me as by my friends as a going away present. My friends wanted me to continue the party when I reached my next duty station at the Kaneohe Marine Corps Air Station on the island of Oahu, Hawaii, so they ensured that I was well supplied when they saw me off at the airport.

To show you how out of it I was, I didn't realize that I had to switch planes in LAX to fly to Hawaii. So when I got to LAX I found myself deplaning to board another flight to Hawaii.

This was the summer of 1971 and there had been several international flights that were hijacked by terrorists. So before boarding this flight we had to pass a security screening. I thought for certain they were going to find the drugs in my pocket and off to jail I'd go. I panicked. I left the line in a hurry and must have looked like I was up to something wrong. Instead of going to the restroom and flushing the contraband down the toilet, I started searching

for a place to dispose of the drugs that were in my pocket. I decided that the best place to rid myself of this contraband was in the sand in the ashtrays that were spaced all over the terminal (back then you were able to smoke in the airport). So here is what I did: I would casually maneuver close to an ashtray, brush some sand aside, deposit a handful of drugs, cover them up with some sand, and head to the next ashtray. I repeated this act until I thought I had emptied my pockets of all the contraband. What I wasn't aware of was that the LAX Police were following me and uncovering all the drugs I was burying.

The moment I cleared the metal detectors I knew I was in trouble. There were two LAX Police Officers waiting for me. They immediately took me into their custody and escorted me to their office where they showed me all the drugs they confiscated from the ashtrays I buried them in while at the same time informing me that I was under arrest. I can't remember exactly what happened next but after they found out I was a Vietnam Vet on liberty they decided not to arrest me. Yet they made it quite clear that they were going to report this incident to my new Commanding Officer.

In some ways I thought this was worse than going to jail in LA. The Marine Corps had a zero tolerance policy for drug abuse. What that meant was that I'd be sent to the brig and discharged from active duty less than honorably. On the entire flight to Hawaii all I could think about was how to minimize the consequences of the trouble I was going to find myself in after my shenanigans were reported to the Commanding Officer. I finally decided that my best bet would be to turn myself in and ask for help. I hoped that they'd be lenient on me because I turned myself in and asked for help and possibly just discharge me with a Medical Discharge.

The day after I checked in to my new command I asked to see the First Sergeant. He granted my request. I entered his office and told him that I had a drug problem and needed help. I held

my breath and waited for his reply, half expecting to be berated and shamed. What happened next saved my life. The First Sergeant turned to me and said, “Berger, you are one lucky Marine. The Marine Corps just instituted a program that will grant you immunity from prosecution under the Code of Military Justice and put your sorry ass in rehabilitation. Best of luck Berger.”

I was flabbergasted and a bit curious. I ended up being the third Marine admitted into the Drug Exemption Program on the third day of the program’s inception. Three is definitely one of my favorite numbers.

Only one word could sum up what has happened to me over the 42 years of my life since the beginning of that Drug Exemption Program. that word is *miraculous*. I’ll share more about my journey and what I have discovered throughout the remainder of this book.

## **Dan’s story**

It sometimes amazes me that I am sitting here a forty-seven year old man, married sixteen years, with a beautiful daughter and a life I absolutely love that just keeps getting better. There was a time when that seemed impossible. The suffering of the first half of my life was deeply grounded in my own personal crisis of masculinity. I could even call it an existential crisis. Or angst. Or trauma. And all of those would apply, but there is no way I could separate them from my experience of becoming and being a man.

Every man has his own relationship to the Man Rules, whether he is aware of them or not. For Allen and me the difference in the generational impact of the Rules is quite amazing. If there were one word that would best describe the way my generation and the generations younger than I respond to The Man Rules it would be *confusion*. For many of us the Rules are still as invisible

as they are to the men of Allen's generation. It is just that we have been given a broader and less stringent set of rules. This shift is both freeing and challenging. It is freeing because we have more room to move around in the proverbial "man cage." It is challenging, however, because we don't know when a certain rule is going to be enforced and when it is not. For instance, while there is more permission for men to share our sadness and hurt, we don't know when it is okay. When is it going to result in support and when will it result in criticism, mockery, or rejection? And we wonder about this from *women* as well as from *men*.

When I was younger I was a rough and tumble kid. Very athletic. I loved to play football with the neighborhood kids – and I was good. Fast and elusive with great hands. But Mom wouldn't let me play football for fear I would get hurt. I played soccer and excelled at that. Street hockey. BMX. Tennis. Golf. I loved playing with soldiers, matchbox cars, and doing anything outside. There was no question that I was a boys' boy.

However, I was also very sensitive and emotional. From the get-go. One strike against me in a little man's world. Against the Rules, for sure. I was the kid who would tackle another boy, feel bad if I hurt him, and make sure he was okay. I hated violence. I didn't like to fight. Strike two. While others would stone frogs and toads in the creek, I couldn't. Another strike. I was a *momma's boy*. I cried a lot. I would not have considered myself tough. I also liked to read, write poetry, and even play with my sister and her friends. But underneath all of that I was riddled with anxiety and fear. More strikes. Nonetheless I thrived as quite a popular kid who was able to successfully navigate the different groups of elementary school and find a place within all of them – the nerds and the athletes.

I grew up in the suburbs of Maryland. We appeared to be were the quintessential American family: two parents, two kids – a boy and a girl, and our little dog. My father, Owen Griffin, a

Ph.D. research scientist in fluid mechanics from the University of Notre Dame, was the first and most influential inculcator of the Rules in my life. His brilliance was overshadowed by his violent temper, at least at home. He grew up in the working class town of Wharton, New Jersey, second generation Irish. I have come to realize with a depth of compassion that the man I feared and desperately wanted to love me and accept me—and that I later came to dismiss as nothing more than an alcoholic asshole—was a complicated and wounded man. The depth of his suffering will forever be unknown because of how tightly he wore the armor of “being a man”. Sadly, he died of chronic alcoholism at the age of fifty-four when I was twenty-three years old.

My mother, Sherry, came from a Toledo, Ohio family of Polish and German descent. Like many women from her generation, she limited her identity to being mostly a wife and mother. She did not grow up with a sense that her happiness and life satisfaction were as important as others. This made her very vulnerable to not taking good care of herself in her relationship with her husband and, us, her children.

The incredible stress of the environment contributed to serious health concerns, leading her to ultimately be diagnosed with Addison’s Disease and auto-immune endocrine failure syndrome when I was in high school. However, her knight in shining armor came afterward and she has had the gift of a wonderful man in her life for almost two decades. While George, a veteran of the Korean War and successful engineer, typifies the Man Rules he is also the consummate gentleman and he has given my mother the gift of a love and devotion she always deserved and that, unfortunately, my father was simply unable to provide.

When I was an adolescent my world fell apart. My body did not grow. I was a late bloomer, to say the least. I started to notice in seventh grade. I became acutely aware of it in eighth grade because I was now one of the shortest, but there were still a few other boys who also seemed to

be in my camp. Up until that time I had been one of the smartest, funniest, and most athletic kids in the school. I was the “all around” kid. I was able to maintain some of that in eighth grade because of my natural abilities, but my confidence was quickly eroding and my insecurity and anxiety was quickly escalating. I became a much worse behavioral problem. I stopped trying in school.

I began to wear a blanket of shame covering my body. It only worsened in athletics or, even worse, at the pool where boys were expected to take off their shirts. I let the shame define my experience. I stopped swimming. I made excuses why I wasn’t going in the pool. Or I would get in and be hyperconscious of my body. At the core of this was a clear reality – not just a message: There was something wrong with me and it centered on my masculinity. Other boys were becoming men and I was stuck being a boy. I began to live in a world that would define much of my life: the world of *not-a-man*.

I stood *outside* of masculinity and the Man Rules – and I rejected a lot of it. I chose to separate myself from the Man Rules and my peers who seemed to be very much adherents to those rules. This was my desperate attempt to hold onto myself in any way I could not because I had consciously or thoughtfully reflected on the Man Rules but simply because I *was not* a real man. Burned within my psyche was this constant and resounding voice telling me that I was not a real man. I believed it. That voice haunted me. I would have loved to have been the stud, the star football player or wrestler, the guy who could fight, or one of the coolest kids – but it was not to be. And even had I gotten that – the rewards would have been fleeting at the very most.

Eventually my body grew into the man I thought would be the key to unlock me from the prison of my despair and isolation. I grew to almost six feet tall and matured into what many people consider to be a handsome man. But that is part of the illusion! My desperation created

the illusion that if I was just the perfect image of a *real* man everything would be okay. That illusion has haunted me through my whole life. It haunts every man. I know that now. In the depth of his heart, no man escapes the suffering caused by the Man Rules.

Unfortunately, this most critical awareness came to me long after I had already bought hook, line, and sinker into the lie. Like anorexics wasting away on death's door who still see themselves as fat, it has taken twenty-plus years for me to not see the gaunt prepubescent five foot man-boy looking back at me from the mirror. My brain became trained to see any and all traces of "it" – not being muscular, not needing to shave, less body hair, anything that my hypercritical brain saw. That response I now know to be a traumatic response, stuck in my brain, a horrible soundtrack in the background of every day, every relationship, and every improvement in my self-concept long into my adulthood. There was still the line that would no doubt be written on my epitaph: *Not a real man*.

From my sophomore year of high school until my senior year of college one thing helped to quiet the voices and help me to feel less insane and a little more comfortable around people: alcohol and other drugs. At one time, they saved my life. I needed numbness. Of course, that boomeranged quickly. You can't turn to something that is known to destroy sanity to prop up sanity. I spiraled out of control, still tortured by the voice telling me I was not a man—that I was a freak.

My life changed irrevocably my senior year of college in two very important ways. I discovered the concept of gender and I got into recovery after being confronted by multiple people about my use of alcohol and other drugs. Those two forces coming together offered me more hope than I had ever felt my entire life.

First, I learned that “gender” was a painful experience for a lot of people and that, as a result of the social upheaval of the late 60s and early 70s, there were people thinking very actively and critically about the expectations around how men “perform” our masculinity. Because of my experience in adolescence I was more than eager to listen to those who were deconstructing all of those expectations.

Second, within that context, my process of recovery gave me permission to begin to give voice to the incredibly painful emotions and thoughts that were literally killing me. I also learned something even more powerful from both of these experiences: *I was not alone*.

For two decades now I have walked a path of recovery that has shown me how to be a healthy and mature man. I was an aimless twenty-one year old boy with no clue how to relate to others and no will to live when I graduated college in 1994. I had given up and resigned myself to a fate of suicide or insanity. I have grown up in the culture of Twelve-Step recovery and have encountered incredible men and women who are deeply aware of the depths of despair possible in the human experience, of their imperfections, and of the limitless possibilities of life.

In my recovery I have been blessed with many incredible male role models. I have walked a path of what I call *conscious masculinity* for some time now and it has made all of the difference in my life – particularly in ending the cycle of alcoholism in my family, being a healthy and loving husband, and being present as a father in my daughter’s life to do my best to give her all I was not given.

I also have discovered something very important since getting the courage to bring my inquiry about masculinity out into the rest of the world. *Every man* has some kind of conversation happening inside of him challenging how much of a man he is. Very few men feel

grounded in their masculinity and, when they are being truly honest, can say they feel deeply confident in their masculinity and their sense of being a man. *A real man*. Of course that is the problem with so much of this: *What is a real man?* Ultimately, it is different for each man but it is essential that we reflect on our ideas about being a man and the degree to which we have blindly followed the Rules without ever really thinking about who we are.

Today, you would never look at me and have any idea about what I have been through and the road I have traveled to become the man I am today. What is most important about that statement is that you can say the exact same thing about every man – you have no idea what his journey has been to become the man he has become. Today, I am grateful for all of these experiences – every last one, despite how painful they were at times—because they have helped me become the man I am.

\* \* \*

We hope our stories have given you a sense of who we are and an opportunity to peer into our inner lives. We know that finding the courage to be vulnerable is an essential step for our personal growth and for true intimacy. In fact, we want you to have a very intimate experience as you read this book. We hope to create a mood that invites vulnerability, your vulnerability. Our clinical and professional experience has taught us that the best way to accomplish this is by being authentic and vulnerable ourselves. So throughout this book we intend to share some of our greatest triumphs and some of our most painful failures.

Now that we have given you a sense of the purpose of our book and who we are we want to turn our attention to understanding the role that these invisible Man Rules play in our lives.

## Chapter 3: Understanding the Man Rules

Let's be honest, following rules is not one of the distinguishing characteristics of masculinity. But there is an exception to this reality. You are going to find that men are incredibly loyal when it comes to following the Man Rules. The Man Rules are not your normal set of rules. These rules are unwritten and invisible, yet very real and very powerful. They guide our lives and have shaped our development from an early age, telling us how to be boys and defining what it means to be a man. We follow these Rules because we are supposed to. We follow these Rules because we were told to. When we don't follow the Rules, we run the risk of being viewed as less than *real* boys or men (*whatever that means!*) And we run the risk of internalizing that feeling of being "unmanly." We have found is that most men, deep down, feel that their membership in the "man club" can be revoked at any moment. In fact, there are very few men who ever really feel as though they have made it – that they are man enough! That is what being a man is: never quite being enough. Let's spend some time understanding the nature of these invisible rules.

Certain rules help us function in society. Take for example driving rules. If it weren't for a set of rules that we agreed upon, we'd have nothing but chaos on the roads. Driving would be even more dangerous than it is today. Can you imagine for a moment what would happen if several cars pulled up to a red light simultaneously and each driver needed to invent what to do? Some might stop, others yield, and still others assume the right of way. What a mess. These kinds of social rules are necessary to promote cooperation and social order. So, we don't want to create an impression that all rules are bad things, because they are not. *What we object to are personal rules that are uncritically and mindlessly internalized and acted upon.* The ones we see

as damaging to you and your man are the invisible, personal gender rules that govern his behavior – and yours. We will refer to these rules as the “Man and Woman Rules.”

You may be asking yourself the question, “Where did these Rules come from?” The answer is that they originated from many different sources, some personal and some societal. The Rules come from *both* our parents and other caregivers, from other family members, from coaches and teachers, from the kids on the playground, and from the way that media portrays the images of men in television, movies, in print and in broadcast advertising. In fact, the schoolyard is one of the harshest places where we learn the rules.

The challenge with seeing the Man Rules is that they are not easily identified—perhaps because they are so obvious. The Rules are hidden right in front of our eyes. Few men wake up in the morning thinking about the rules they follow practically as soon as they open their eyes. But they do.

Have you ever pondered the notion that some of the most powerful forces in our lives are invisible? Think about it for a moment. Our existence is dependent upon oxygen, without it we would die. Oxygen is an invisible gas that we take for granted. Yet its absence will be felt immediately and produce a cascading effect of physical reactions that will eventually lead to our death.

Like the oxygen we breathe, invisible psychological forces influence our lives, and these are every bit as powerful as oxygen. Sigmund Freud talked about these at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. He observed that his patients were being influenced by powerful psychological forces that were operating outside of their consciousness. This was quite a revelation. No one likes to think that he or she is not the master of their own fate, that they are not in control of their lives.

The Man Rules that are governing your man's life are operating outside of his awareness. He's not aware of the power that these invisible rules have over him and his behavior and you are probably not either. But like oxygen, he may very well feel as though he needs them to survive – and not even know it.

When we examine ourselves and bring that which is hidden from us into our awareness we can develop a healthier relationship to these issues. In essence, we are given a choice. What this means for men is that once we become aware of the Man Rules that are governing our lives, we can then begin the process of seeing if these are truly how we feel and reflective of the men we want to be. We can then ask ourselves one of the most important questions a man can ask himself: "How does this idea/behavior fit with the man that I want to be?" When we realize that a Rule isn't working or needs to be modified to fit our liking, we can then start the process of replacing it with a healthier alternative. So, the good news here is that your man can recover the ability to be the determining factor in his own life, but not until he faces how often the Man Rules...rule him!

These rules started defining who your man thought he was supposed to be before he even had the ability to think about them. The process continued long after and shaped his personality. The rules were based on his mistaken belief that he wasn't good enough as he was. He needed to be someone else to be OK. When he decided to follow the unwritten Man Rules, your man lost something absolutely essential: the power of choice.

The Man Rules encouraged him to develop certain parts of himself at the expense of others. The parts of his personality that fit the Man Rules were embraced and became essential to his identity. Parts of his personality that were non-essential were tolerated, whereas other parts that didn't fit with who he thought he should be were unwelcome and psychologically disowned or

alienated. He couldn't see that all of him could be of value to himself and to others; that he was much more than the Man Rules defined him as being.

Please note that we are not saying that these rules are inherently bad. They are not. They all have some potential benefit – but they become toxic when they are fixed or absolutes. When we uncritically or blindly obey the Rules as a way of life they become rigid or inflexible. When a man lives by these undigested Rules he ends up being trapped by them and compulsively playing the role of what he thinks a man should be. But when a man becomes aware of the Rules, thinks about them, and truly chooses and integrates the principles, he will take what fits and discard the rest. He will own the Rules instead of being owned by them; the Rules will work for him rather than against him. When the Man Rules are actively chosen and a man gives himself permission to determine how (or whether) each of the rules fits into his life, he is freer to be himself than ever before. In fact, there are no rules! Dan refers to this idea as *conscious masculinity*, where the man chooses what kind of man he wants to be with open eyes, open mind, and open heart. What a great vision of what is possible!

Often it takes a crisis created by the limitations imposed on him by the Man Rules to wake a man up. In that moment, he has the opportunity to discover and challenge the invisible psychological forces that govern his life. However, we believe that a man doesn't need a crisis to wake up, to begin this process. We see men creating their own crucible to do this work all of the time. This is what we hope this book will help you and your man do—avoid a crisis, bring the Rules out in the open, and make choices about whether and how they apply.

Of course, this book is not so you can change your man. Or to believe that if *he* changes then everything will be better. This book is about increased awareness for both of you. We want to help you gain some new information about the way you think about your man so that you can

stop taking what he does so personally. You see, our goal is to help you become aware of these rules and their powerful influence over men's lives. We want to help you see your man differently, to have a better sense of what is happening on the inside. Most of the time, men do what they do because of who they are and who they think they have to be, not because of their feelings toward you. In fact, most men are doing the best they can with what they have been taught and come to believe about who they are. The truth is, even with some of the ugliest behaviors, we men come by it honestly.

To facilitate this journey we are inviting you to begin, we've selected ten primary Man Rules to focus on. We don't intend to imply that these are the *only* Man Rules that need to be examined, but rather those that stood out to us to be the most important to address. This is only a start. Every man has his own set of Rules; his own take on them. We hope this book helps you begin a conversation with your man that will help your relationship become everything it could be. This book is our challenge to every man and woman to stop complaining about their relationships and their partners and truly step into the possibilities of what your lives could be. Together.

As we noted in the introduction to this book, we are going to help you challenge these Rules. At the end of each chapter we will suggest some writing exercises that you, and hopefully your partner, can do and discuss. We want to teach you how to ask the type of questions that will help you begin to see these invisible rules and become aware of their influence on both of your lives.

## **The Man Rules®**

Here is a brief introduction to the ten Man Rules in this book. Each subsequent chapter elaborates on a single Rule and its effects.

1. **No Cry Rule.** Everybody knows this one. It is one of the commandments of being a man and seems to be quite common in many different cultures. Of course, this rule is about a lot more than just not crying. It is about not sharing or acknowledging certain feelings, too. We learn this rule very early and it becomes deeply ingrained inside of who we are through years, even decades, of desensitizing ourselves to certain feelings, especially those feelings we think make us look weak. Even the most self-actualized of us finds it difficult to truly feel again, with all of our being, when to do so means we might break this Rule.
  
2. **Control Rule.** Over and over again you will hear the subtle exhortation underneath many of these rules: Don't be weak! Men are probably more concerned with being out of control than being *in* control. We don't want to struggle, or look stupid, or let someone have power over us. The more we try to control and be in control the more we delude ourselves into thinking that we are the masters of the universe, all because the last thing we want is to be nameless, faceless cog in the great Machine. We may even find temporary success. But boy do we fall hard when the myth of control falls apart.
  
3. **Vulnerability Rule.** The clearest sign of this Rule is your man's refusal to ask for help. Do you know what likely happened to your man when he asked for help when he was a kid? He was probably teased or even bullied for it. He learned that asking for help would only open him up to being hurt or denigrated. When men are traumatized by violence—verbal or physical—it becomes very hard for them to take off their armor because they don't have a better way to take care of themselves. But men who were not traumatized by violence still struggle with this issue because being vulnerable leaves them feeling weak

or unmanly. Rare is the boy who is truly encouraged to be open about his needs and fears—who is made safe enough to be vulnerable. Remember, one of the things that drives men to adhere to these rules is an internalized voice inside telling us we are not men. Not man enough. Not *real* men.

4. **Success Rule.** This rule operates everywhere in our society. If you say a man is very successful, what comes to mind? His family? His service to the community? His recovery from a horrible addiction? Probably not. We typically think that he is successful because of what he has achieved in his job, or because of the size of his bank account, his zip code, or the type of car he drives. That is, we define a man by his status in society, and status is a combination of the things we own, the social power we accumulate, and the social approval or respect we gain for the things we do. (And those things we do could be beneficial or destructive; what matters is the respect of the social circle we run in.) What a man does gives him the opportunity to have all of the toys. These symbols of worth that make him feel like he has value. That he is a man. This is how success seems to be defined for men – by men *and* by women! If a man has high status he is a success and if he doesn't...well, he is a failure and not much of a man. Despite lip service to the opposite men *and* women still perpetuate this rule all of the time.
5. **Protector Rule.** This one runs deep in the male experience, reinforced by millennia of training. It is a part of our value as men. It is one of the more positive of the Rules. It has us watching out for the safety of our loved ones. For some of us it extends into our community and we protect that which we feel strongly about. But there can be a dark side to this one. We can use this to hurt others and to attempt to *rule or control* instead of

protect, justifying cruel behavior by saying things like, “It’s for your own good.” We go from the protector to the overseer. Or even worse, the perpetrator.

- 6. Fight Rule.** We greatly value the protective instinct and even a man’s willingness to stand up for what he believes in – both wonderful masculine attributes. Men are often putting each other into two classes – *the ones whose ass I can kick and the ones who can kick my ass*. This is an automatic response for most men. We don’t even think about it. It is deep in our subconscious, but the looming threat is often there, lurking and affecting our interactions with men and even with women! This one has been a part of our experience as men for millennia. There is definitely something primal to it all. BUT, we aren’t living in caves anymore, hunting to survive, or constantly in fear of being attacked by another clan. This rule becomes toxic very quickly. Listen to the messages. “Man up! Never back down.” Think about how that affects a man’s ability to be in a relationship!
- 7. Cool Rule.** One of the major rules for men is “Don’t be gay.” But that is not actually the rule. The real rule is don’t get too close to other men. Don’t show affection for other men; don’t show weakness in front of other men. Don’t open up too much to other men and don’t be too vulnerable with other men. Keep the conversation focused on sports, politics, weather, and uh...you know, sex. But by all means don’t be too personal. In other words, be cool. Always.
- 8. Sex Rule.** That is all that is on our mind, right? Sex, sex, sex. Get laid, get fucked! That is what we are told, what we hear when we are little boys. What is the age that a young boy first sees pornography – especially now with how pervasive and available it is? The sex jokes that we learn at a very young age. Sexist. Homophobic. Is that all we get? So men don’t get a chance to have more? What about saying no to sex? What about other

ways to achieve intimacy and connection? Other ways to express affection? We can talk about sex with bravado and immaturity. But a healthy, open, and honest conversation about sex doesn't happen. We have much to learn in this area of our development. And we deserve much more.

**9. Winning Rule.** Sure, we give lip service to the idea that it doesn't matter whether you win or lose — that what matters is the effort or how you play the game. Really? Why would I compete if I couldn't win? Even worse, what does it mean about me as a man when I lose? We may hear, "There is no such thing as failure if you keep trying." Sure, that sounds good but the truth behind that is more like, "You better win at some point or you'll just be a loser. Lose the battle but you better win the war!"

**10. All Knowing Rule.** Men put a lot of pressure on themselves to always have the answers. A man who doesn't know is considered stupid. You may not see him as stupid but deep inside of him is this idea that says he always should have the right answer. While it is jokingly referenced in the "Men don't ask directions" adage it pervades men's lives leaving so many of us scared to death to admit we don't know something, to ask for help, or to accept help from someone else.

## **The water in which we swim**

Here is another way to think about the Man Rules. This comes from a brief story that the famed author, David Foster Wallace shared at a commencement speech at Kenyon College and became a viral hit: Two fish are hanging out at the bottom of the ocean. Another fish swims up to them and says, "Hey guys, how's the water?," and then swims off. The two fish look at each other and say, "What the hell is water?"

That little story talks about one of the greatest – and perhaps elusive — experiences of our lives: seeing reality. When our eyes open to how the Man Rules shape us, we have the opportunity to see the world we actually live in rather than the one we have been told we live in or the one that we wish we lived in. We call this tool *awareness*, and it is our greatest tool. Awareness can hurt. Awareness can shake you, and the foundation you thought you had. Yet, until we have true awareness, as Sigmund Freud said, we are being lived by forces inside us. That’s a limiting kind of life.

The Rules are our water. We don’t see them. When someone points them out, we say, “What the hell is water?” just like the fish. But that is how the Man Rules show up in our lives. The same is true with the Woman Rules. *We are constantly in them and have been for so long that we are often not even aware of them.*

How do the Rules become our water? This is how it starts:

What is one of the first questions we ask a woman when she is pregnant? Is it a boy or a girl? And what do so many couples do once they have that information? They begin to construct a narrative about that child. They start planning out that child’s life! They start painting the room, buying clothes and toys, imagining the sports the child will play, think about passing on the wedding dress, or any other number of fantasies. Many of these are significantly based upon the baby’s gender.

Now, let’s imagine that couple knows they are having a baby girl and have already painted the room, had the gender reveal party, the baby shower, and gotten all of the nice little girly gifts. They go in to see the doctor. The doctor says, “I have good news and well, not bad news but some new information.” The couple look at each other with some fear, wondering what the doctor is going to say. The doctor continues, “First, let me assure you your baby is very

healthy. However, there is one small thing that we missed.” He smiles. “You’re actually having a baby boy!” There is a mixture of emotions that runs through the couple as they process this new information. Much of their reactions are due to how attached they had already become to having a baby girl and the fantasy they had created and lived in for the past five months.

What happens? The narrative collapses. At the very least it is a shock. At the most the young couple changes the paint in the room, returns the clothes, and comes up with new names for the child. For some there is disappointment. For others there may be even some relief because they won’t have to raise a girl. Regardless, the narrative changes. The fantasy the couple was playing out in their minds changes.

*That* is the water. That narrative, made up of ideas about what a boy is and what a girl is.

But it doesn’t stop there. That is just the very beginning.

When that baby is born we place them in a metaphorical Dixie cup and begin pouring the water around them. We put them in blue blankets or pink blankets and often treat them very differently based upon what is, in all reality, some silly little symbolism. Research shows that baby boys are held less, given less opportunity to cry, talked to in different tones, and handled differently, often rougher. Research even shows that if you put a baby boy into a pink blanket or onesie, we treat the baby according to the color – comfort him more, speak softer, allow more opportunity for the “softer” emotions, and hold him longer and more gently. Are we aware that we are doing this? Rarely. We just do it with the best of intentions. It is The Water. We just do it with little to no idea that we are doing it.

All you have to do is listen to parents and grandparents talk about their boys. “Oh, look at those hands. They are so strong. He is going to be a big strong boy.” “Oh, look at her hands and

how cute they are. How soft. She is just precious.” Chances are they are essentially the same damned hand!

And it continues.

By the time kids are three years old they have already made many assumptions about their world and how gender fits into it based upon what they have seen. This is true even if they are only just beginning to learn how to speak. You would be amazed what three and four-year olds will tell you about boys and girls and what they can and cannot do based upon the worlds they have been observing. You cannot ever underestimate the power of all of the information that children are passively taking in as they move throughout the day. They observe a world deeply organized by gender and start making up their own reality. So, by the age of three, we boys and girls are already unaware of the water in which they swim.

By the time we become adults we are in the ocean and most of us have no idea. We are swimming around, just like the two fish.

## **Breaking down the rules**

These Man Rules are quite nuanced in how they show up in men’s lives—some obvious, some subtle. Some men wear the Rules on their sleeves, while others hide them under layers of clothing. But if you look closely enough you will be able to see the Rules lurking in the background. They are always there and always exerting their gravitational pull.

Do the Rules we just discussed sound familiar? How have these issues shown up in your relationship? How much compassion have you really had for your man when he has gotten stuck in them? How often do you *really* see them?

Men often have little to no awareness of these Rules. Remember, we do not see them because we are so used to them being a natural part of our experience. We react to them as if they are the norm, as if they are the only version of reality that exists — as if there is only one truth. They are the water in which we swim, even when they threaten to drown us!

Most of us were never given a choice about these Rules. It's not like someone 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. As already discussed, we became immersed in them early in our lives when we were incapable of thinking about them critically. (In fact, the parts of the brain that would help us evaluate the relevance or utility of the Rules don't come online until early adulthood, long after the Man Rules have already been ingrained.) We never had the opportunity to consider whether the Rules made sense for who we were or who we wanted to become.

The bottom line is that we want your man to have choices – or at least to realize that he has the possibility of looking at the Rules and taking from them what works for him. The freedom inherent in this possibility is immeasurable, yet so many men have no idea of the possibilities and choices available to them. A lot of men have not reflected on their ideas of being a man. A lot of the men of Dan's generation – and the younger generations – have a much better sense of the men they don't want to be or are not, but they still lack a strong sense of who they truly are or want to be. We are not prescribing any particular expression of masculinity other than what feels right and true for your man. That is the beautiful piece to all of this: only your man can truly determine what is the kind of man he wants to be. Nobody else. Not even you!

So, what about you? Good question. This is an important place for you to start on this journey. How aware are you of the hidden rules that shape you? What is the nature of the conversations that you have with yourself about being a woman? What does it mean to you to be

a woman? What do the voices from your past tell you about being a woman? What about your ideas about being a man? How much do you think these ideas affect your relationships with men? The more you become aware of how hidden rules operate in your life, the more you will be able to see how the Man Rules operate in your man's life – and even your own.

As we discussed earlier, a lot of the Rules have been invisible to your man, operating outside of his awareness. If he does not consciously call them out they tend to operate in the shadows, driving a lot of his behavior, with little awareness on his part. He treats the Rules as reality, and as an imperative. How often have you heard the dismissive phrase, “Well, that’s just how men are?” We have heard it all of our lives and a lot of the time we did not want it to be true or it simply wasn’t true, which left us not feeling like much of a *real* man.

Let us also be very clear about a point we made earlier: 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 Man 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. The good news is that if your man discovers who he is and he gives himself permission to be that man, he cannot help but become the man he was always meant to be. That may just be the man you have always wanted him to be. With a practice of self-awareness and mindfulness, the Rules become more relaxed and flexible. They feel less like tight, constricting armor and more like a loose-fitting garment. And we can breathe a lot easier.

Many of the men (and women) we know who defend their behavior by saying “It’s just who I am” are often lost in the Rules. It is easier to simply say men don’t know how to communicate feelings and continue to be disconnected in our relationships. It is harder to take the risk of

communicating our feelings, because that means bucking the Rules—changing. Change involves immense vulnerability for those of us who have been told all of our lives that sharing feelings, outside of anger, is unmanly. When we do not share our feelings or our inner lives, it is hard to truly connect with others and impossible to understand the value of authenticity and intimacy.

Think about the Rules we have been talking about and all of the “Dont’s” that show up. For example, if the Rule is “Men have to be strong,” an underlying message is “Don’t be weak.” Which is the more powerful Rule: that men have to be strong or that men cannot be weak or show weakness of any kind? 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 men, what and who *not to be*. Much of your man’s identity is built around what and who he is *not*. How much time do you think your man spends *not being* somebody as opposed to *being someone*, or more importantly, being *who he is and who he wants to become*?

These are important questions that are worth reflecting on. When your identity is built around who you are *not*, it is really difficult to ever figure out who you *are*. And it is equally difficult to ever feel like you made it, like you are a man! We cannot stress this enough – we have yet to meet a man who can honestly say that he feels like he is enough of a man.

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

- ~~Don’t~~ cry
- ~~Don’t~~ be weak
- ~~Don’t~~ ask for help

- ~~Don't~~ be a sissy
- ~~Don't~~ back down

What group do we tend to identify these statements with? You! 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 certain behaviors against are not just against the Rules, they must be avoided because they are associated with the “weaker” sex – the same people that we are supposed to be in these loving and intimate relationships with. Now, consider that some of those 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, my man doesn’t live by a lot of these Rules.” Fair enough. Some men don’t, but don’t conclude that this means that he isn’t being controlled by the Rules. It is very likely that your man is still frequently judged – if only by himself — by these criteria and therefore he must respond to them. Maybe **you** have even judged him at times when he seems to be not following the Rules. But chances are there is still a voice inside of him that represents a model of a “manly” man that he has internalized. This will create a part of him that pressures him to stay in line with the Rules. He will tend to judge himself harshly when he doesn’t follow the Rules. This ensures his obedience to the Rules. This is something the two of us still struggle with and we have been examining our masculinity for a very long time.

## What's behind the rules

We also fully acknowledge that the Man Rules have changed in the past two decades. They have loosened up, allowing for what Dan referred to in his masters research as a “relaxed masculinity.” Men have more flexibility and more room in which to move. As men who have dedicated our lives to working with and supporting men and their families we are convinced men are on the right path as we evolve as individual human beings and as a society.

Unfortunately, we have also found that this relaxed masculinity can cause a great deal of confusion. In the 1940s, '50s, and early '60s the Rules were clear for the men of Allen's generation. 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 or to be authentic? 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 some women as well. Men are understandably confused, because —and we cannot emphasize this point enough because women can be desensitized to these issues too — some women have bought into the Man Rules as much as men have.

The following may be something that does not occur to a lot of us but it is extremely important as you begin to think about your man, why he follows the Rules, and what it might take for him to move closer to the man he truly wants to be. The Rules provide two very important experiences for all men: safety and certainty. Audiences Dan talks to around the country, when asked about the benefits of following the Man Rules, say that when men follow the Man Rules, they have the opportunity to feel acceptance and a sense of belonging. What does

acceptance, a sense of belonging, or being liked give us? Safety and certainty. At the heart of the Rules is the attempt to ensure our existence, to feel safe and secure in the world. We want our manhood to be validated; this is essential to our self-esteem. 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, beat up, etc.

Many of us did not learn the Rules in ideal conditions. Maybe your man's home had a more enlightened approach to gender, but no boy escapes the brutality of the schoolyard. In fact, we would say that given how much the process of socialization cuts us off from our emotions and our sense of connection - core parts of our humanity - *there is a degree of psychological trauma experienced by every man*. For some of us the trauma was severe. As a result of these various traumas, we don't know how to navigate the challenging waters of intimacy. We don't know how to be vulnerable without losing our sense of self. An intimate experience can touch our trauma and trigger it. When this happens, we usually have no idea of what to do, and we end up sabotaging our relationship, often by acting out with anger or even violence or pushing away something we really want. Sound familiar at all? If you have ever been with a man that suffered from abuse you understand how painful this reaction can be.

Dan has had more experience with this than he wishes. It has taken years for him to realize how much the pain of past abuse interfered with his ability to navigate the vulnerability of intimacy and even the inevitable pain that comes with closeness. His love for his wife Nancy often ran right into hidden wounds from his past. The anguish that emerged was a shock to both Dan and Nancy, especially since they were unaware that the wounds even existed.

We both believe very strongly that one of the most powerful, and even beautiful, experiences that you get from a committed relationship is the depth of emotional/spiritual work

that we are referring to here. However, if a man is not aware of what is happening and a woman is not aware of what is happening and, even worse, if they do not have the tools to do anything different, then what could have been another beautiful partnership drowns in the water of the Man Rules.

Finally, there is another nuance of the Rules that affects some men differently than others that must not be ignored. This might be your man we are talking about and it is a very important factor to keep in mind, especially when we want to think about how men experience the Rules. We are two white, heterosexual, upper middle class, well-educated males. When we think of criminals or drug dealers, whose faces do we tend to see? When we think of illegal immigrants or people doing menial work, whose faces do we see? The point is that the Man Rules are not colorblind or classless. We authors will never know what it is like to walk down the street and have people fearing us simply because of the color of our skin. Nor will we truly know the judgments people make about us and our intelligence, moral character, or basic humanity simply because of the color of our skin or who we are drawn to love. All men are not socialized equally and these experiences greatly impact how a man feels about himself *as a man*. And that absolutely affects how he shows up in his relationship with you – for better or for worse. If the additional burden of class and racial issues apply to your man our heart goes out to him and to you – because there is no question that this affects your man in a profound way.

## Put on Your Life Vest!

So, this is the journey you get to take with your man. There are no easy answers or overnight quick fixes. Go back and reread Allen's and Dan's stories. In them you will see that neither one of us were able to change until we first owned what we were doing – that paradox of change we

referenced earlier. Until we finally faced our greatest challenges we continued to be controlled by them. We didn't know what we didn't know, and neither one of us cared to know until we could no longer bear the pain of what we were doing. When we faced ourselves as we were, rather than continued to try to be someone different, change became a possibility. We were able to shift our thinking and our behavior. We began to uncover the invisible rules that were running and ruining our lives. We had no idea how to be men or the kind of men we wanted to be. Like a lot of men we had not spent a lot of time thinking about it. Or, more importantly, talking about it with other men. We knew however that there was a conversation inside of us that was telling us we were falling short. That we were not quite real men. But there was absolutely no way we were going to mention that to other men because it was against the Rules – you have to keep the façade going at all costs, lest you look weak and inadequate.

Throughout the remainder of this book we will incorporate our personal experiences with the Man Rule being discussed so that you have some sense of what it is like to live with each Rule from a more personal and intimate perspective. Hopefully this will give you more insight into the inner workings of men – maybe even *your* man.

So here is the final point that we want you to keep in mind as you read the remainder of this book: *we men identify with the man rules that we have internalized. We relate to others and ourselves as though we consist solely of these rules and nothing more.* And, as noted, this means that we have rejected our true selves, the selves free of the uncritically accepted Man Rules. Because we have rejected our true selves, we are needy (a dangerous thing for a man) and we are often lost. We need you. Our self-esteem is dependent on your validation. Our emotional wellbeing lies in your uncritical acceptance and approval of our facade. You must validate us or we will feel anxious. You must approve of us or we will begin to panic. You must love us or we

will have to face how we don't love ourselves. You must accept us or we will have to face how we have rejected ourselves. You must do for us what we are not doing for ourselves. What an order! It is not fair to us and it is most definitely not fair to you.

## Exercise

Thinking back to our discussion earlier in this chapter, what is the nature of the conversations that you have with yourself about being a woman—that is, what does *your* water look like? What are your own rules, the Woman Rules? Take some time to reflect on the following questions and write your responses in the space provided. The more you become aware of how the Woman Rules operate in your life the more you will be able to see how the Man Rules operate in your man's life. (Note, you may write in the book, or download a free worksheet from our website [www.whatmenwouldtellyou.com](http://www.whatmenwouldtellyou.com).)

1. What are the Woman Rules you have had to deal with in your life?
2. What does it mean to you to be a woman?
3. What do the voices from your past tell you about being a woman?
4. What are your ideas about what it means to be a man?
5. What are some of the ways that your ideas about what it means to be a man affect your relationships with your man/men?