

What Was I Thinking?

I once attended a writing workshop on how to write realistic male/female dialog, and the speaker suggested reading *You Just Don't Understand* by Deborah Tannen, Ph.D. (Ballentine Books, 1990) to really understand the root causes of male and female conversation styles. I quickly checked the book out of my local library and settled in for what I hoped would be an intriguing insight into the male mind.

I haven't yet finished reading, but my understanding so far is that men, by nature (and in general), seek to be the top dog in every relationship (at home, work, play), and their communication style naturally supports that goal. Women, on the other hand, seek consensus and symmetry in their lives, and they likewise interact with others in a way to bring about that goal. It's not that women don't want what they want just as clearly and deeply as men, but women go about communicating their goals in an entirely different manner. (And my apologies to Dr. Tannen if I have completely misunderstood!)

Now, I grew up in an all-female household with no men in my life to speak of, aside from an elderly aunt's "gentleman" friend who did his best to scare me to death on the eve of horseback riding one summer day when I was ten by telling me I'd fall off the horse and he—the horse—would step on me and...well, you get the picture. (I'm sorry to say I never did much like horses after that.) Boys were a mystery to me during my growing years, and I think it's safe to say I pretty much subscribed to the girls-rule-boys-drool theory through high school. Then I met the man who would become my husband, and that was the end of my all-female world. After we married, our life together progressed as many middle American lives do, and we were blessed with two boys to raise. Ironically, I now find myself in the position of being the only woman in a household of men.

So yesterday after dinner, while we still sat around the dinner table, my beloved men sated with yummy Thanksgiving leftovers in their tummies, I thought it would be interesting to raise the topic of the book and the differing conversation styles. (What better research pool, I thought, than my own men, whom I already knew so well!) I launched into my opening spiel about the premise of the book, and gave a couple examples of differing styles.

Example: Two sets of teenagers are talking about their problems: one group of two boys, another group of two girls. Each girl listens to the other's woes and offer sympathetic and empathetic reactions (e.g., "I know just how you feel. Something like that happened to me too."). They are seeking comfort by relating to the other's problems. The boys react to each other by changing the subject (to themselves) and by poo-pooing (my word, not the author's) the other's problems (e.g., "Don't worry about it."). The way I viewed it, each boy was trying, in his own very male way, to make his friend feel better. (Such a female reaction it turns out!) Son number one, über-educated city boy, said, "Don't tell me, some chick wrote that, right?" I said, "Well, yes."

Then all three of them laughed, giving each other knowing eye rolls.

Son number one continued, “Mom, the guys weren’t trying to make each other feel better. They were trying to make the other look like a loser!”

Shocked at this bald admission (I couldn’t possibly have raised this person, could I?), I looked to my husband and younger son for what would certainly be a denial. Wrong! They both nodded in agreement and even laughed at my female naiveté. And there I was, trying to be so magnanimous to the male species, giving them the benefit of the doubt.

What was I thinking?!?!

Now, it could be that they were pulling my chain, or were simply too “manly” to admit that men/boys do try to comfort each other, in their own way. Or it could be that , in fact, boys do drool and girls do rule. :-)

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