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A Plea to the Better Angels of Our Nature

By Matt A. Mayer

Much has been written and said over the last few months about sexual harassment and assault in America. Fewer words and commentary have been spent on the other aspect of this growing problem: inappropriate, but consensual activities between people. An unintended consequence of those activities is that it creates a permissive environment in which lecherous men feel less restrained. Whether in the halls of Congress, Hollywood, the media, Fortune 500 companies or just about any place people meet in our communities, it is clear too many people are doing things they should not be doing.

By inappropriate, I mean the full range of actions from harassment to assault, as well as sexual banter to emotional affairs to sex with a married person. It is all wrong, undermines our civic fabric and pushes us farther down the road of moral relativism.

Most of the broad brushstroke of this growing sexual epidemic rightly has focused on men given their continued role at the top of most societal pyramids, but some space on that brush should be reserved for women, too. After all, women are [equally capable of abusing subordinates](#) and choosing to engage in inappropriate behavior with or as a married person. Without excusing abusive men, each of us likely knows a woman who has done wrong.

The easy cases are the ones now coming out in droves – men in positions of power taking advantage of subordinates or those who perceive failure to comply will harm their careers. What about married co-workers engaging in sexual banter about breast and penis sizes, Michael Scott-like "that's what she said" quips or one outright coming onto the other? The fact remains far too many offices, political or corporate, are riddled with inappropriate conduct by married men and women.

Our economy and productivity are weighed down, as [hundreds of millions of dollars are spent](#) annually on education, lawsuits and investigations involving workplace sexual incidents. Reams of paper and days of compliance courses are consumed every year trying to sketch out what is and is not *legally* appropriate in the workplace among co-workers, without any commentary on the *morality* of those activities and the impact they have on colleagues, children and families. The emphasis on "can" needs to be replaced with one on "should."

We cowardly accept such things will occur because that is just life among sexual creatures. Proponents of a sexualized workplace dismiss the rest of us as pent-up prudes or out-of-

touch Ward Cleavers. Their retort is the intellectually lazy charge that "we just don't get it."

With daily revelations of another person being accused of doing things he or she shouldn't have been doing, one must ask: Are we truly no better than our primal urges? Despite our belief that we are superior among all of the animals on Earth, we appear no better than bonobos, rabbits or dogs when it comes to resisting our urges.

The claim that we can't live like Puritans – that our workplaces somehow must contain sexual tension to be "tolerable" – is a false one. Are there not thousands of other topics to discuss, joke about and relate with co-workers and friends except sexual ones? Is our creativity limited to sexual banter and innuendo? If so, humanity is little more than Thomas Hobbes' observation that life is "nasty, brutish, and short."

Knowing our humanity inherently means we are flawed, we nonetheless should aspire to be better than living life merely seeking to satisfy our selfish wants. We are endowed with free will, which means we can choose to listen to the angel on our right shoulder not the devil on our left shoulder. We teach and tell our children to heed the angel and resist the devil. Shouldn't we as adults with stronger wills to oppose bad acts do as we say?

More pointedly, shouldn't we ask ourselves in those moments before sexually harassing, assaulting, engaging in sexual banter or having an extramarital affair with another person: What would our children say or do if they witnessed those actions? Do we want our sons to be cads, creeps or criminals and our daughters to be suggestive, seductive or slutty? Would we tell our daughters to use their sexuality anyway they want or our sons to take it if they want it? In all cases, the answer is unequivocally no.

So, why is it so hard for us to live life as if our children are watching or reading our texts?

The gap between the [teacher](#) who is arrested for having sex with a student whom we deem incapable of giving consent and the Harvey Weinsteins of the world isn't as far as we'd like to think. Similarly, the gap between the Matt Lauers and the co-workers engaging in an extramarital affair is narrower, as well. All of these incidents fall under societal and cultural mores that have swung too far to the relativistic, base urges of our selfishness and too far away from the moralistic, "better angels of our nature."

Let's hope this reawakening not only stops bad men from doing bad things, but also pushes each of us to behave better in all aspects of our lives. I, for one, want a world in which my daughters can rise based solely upon merit without having to tolerate bar behavior at work, my son treats all women with respect and all of them do what they should do, not what they can get away with.

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