

What about me?



Any man who is worthy of the title should be asking himself the same question these days: What about me?

Harassment in general and sexual harassment in particular are difficult subjects to self-judge. There's the overt and obvious, of course, such as sticking a tongue down someone's throat or asking them to "twirl" for you.

Then there's the more subtle, where the act is perceived on one end but not always recognized on the other. That's where I'm going today as I investigate "What about me?"

First, let's recount a few JMD details that we've discussed before on the blog. There is the upbringing by my family about respect and fairness. Then there's the awesome Mom who raised me and my sister while also running her own flower shop. And there's the amazing Stepmom I've had for almost as many years. [Both are women of strength and success.](#)

So, I went out into the world with no preconceived notions about a woman's lack of capacity to perform any job. If anything, I leaned in the other direction.

During the course of my working career, I've only had one company within which I wielded any "power", that being my last one. This post is about me and not an indictment of them. I'll say they were...culturally challenged with regards to women.

It took me some time to gain enough promotions to be considered someone of authority, but my personality and irreverence to my own position made it unlikely anyone ever

took me seriously.

Combine that with my utter fear of saying the wrong thing with women (earned through some pretty awful and bumbling encounters with women previous to this job) and I often ran headlong in the other direction of risky social interaction.

In fact, the above was so much the case that one female co-worker asked me if I was gay (she was not known for tact). I opted for the contextually neutral reply of “Would it make a difference?”

I’ve also mentioned on this blog that I used to do [a thing on Valentine’s Day](#), And I took over giving presents to the department [during Secret Santa](#) when the gag gifts started getting ugly. I never noticed anyone feeling there was a quid pro quo expected by those gifts. I certainly didn’t expect any.

On the other hand...

There was this one woman whom I bonded with at an intimacy far beyond sexual. I met her during my first days at the company. We both felt alone and somewhat out-of-place because all we wanted to do was come in and work, do a good job and go home. Neither of us felt comfortable with the demands for social interaction.

Over time, she ended up working for me, then working in another department, then another division and finally moving away with her family. During that period we ate lunch together nearly daily. I would invite her along for dual Valentine’s Day lunches with my Grandma. And I would spend every Christmas morning with her family, eating breakfast and opening presents.

She was bright, attractive and she liked me. And I never once thought of her sexually. Or even romantically. Looking back, I don’t even find that as strange. She captured my heart in a

totally different manner and became my best friend in the world.

Nevertheless, as some are wont to do when they see two people as happy in each other's presence as we were, the rumors began that there was something going on between us. (Of course, there was, just not what their tiny imaginations could understand).

I figure I must be doing something right (or wrong?) if I could simultaneously be considered both gay and a wife-stealer.

Which then leads me to the next part of my "What about me?" analysis. The confusing guy.

I've mentioned before, with bemusement, how I have been told by several women that I send mixed signals. Originally, I ascribed this to the fact that I do nice things in general and, as I was taught growing up, act in a gentlemanly manner towards women.

This led to me doing "amazing" things such as holding the door open for women (to buildings and to cars) and sending flowers to them on their birthdays and Valentine's Day. As mentioned before, I see flowers as an intrinsic part of life, thanks to Mom. Apparently, in "real" life, guys don't do things like that unless they're "interested".

Well, of *course* I'm interested. You're my friend!

Perhaps now is a good time to mention how naive I was about man-woman interactions. I assumed (I believe rightfully), that my looks and personality would safely prevent any woman from being attracted to me, but I never considered simple acts of courtesy and thoughtfulness might actually overcome those weaknesses. My brain just wasn't wired that way.

So, in context of the "What about me?" reflection, I have now

begun to wonder if those acts, which I never thought more of than being the natural thing a gentleman does, could have made some of my female friends uneasy. Were those gestures considered inappropriate? Did it imply I expected them to be “friendlier” with me?

Continuing down that path, I am (apparently) a heterosexual man after all, and it’s certainly true I worked or crossed paths with many bright and attractive women. On occasion, I even (surprisingly) found myself more than professionally interested in them. Generally, I was too chicken to express my interest, but that doesn’t mean I didn’t unconsciously send “signals”.

None of them ever worked “for” me, but still, I had *some* authority in my company. It’s possible I could have impacted their success. Did I ever, in my fearful and bumbling way, create the kind of discomfort associated with unwanted advances?

For the most part, as I remember my working life, I can only recall that my level of sarcasm made me an ass of the highest order, but that my treatment of women (and men), was kept to a respectful and professional manner.

The unfortunate conclusion is that I will never know. I have almost no interaction with anyone I used to work with. There are rare few who read this blog. And in the off-chance I have done something worth apologizing for, would there be a benefit to them speaking up to me now? I have no import to anyone or anything anymore; no power to wield or authority to damage someone.

When you look at who is speaking up on the public stage right now, it’s mostly women who have already gained some measure of power and protection, so their fates are less at risk. I am awed by the accounts of those women in Alabama, who have nothing to gain and a whole lot to feel pain about (given some

of the nasty comments being made about them).

One last thing. Even if, after this time of self-reflection, I feel more assured of my comportment in Corporate America, I am still guilty. Of being craven.

During my working time I listened to many a comment of demeaning nature. And even if I graduated from nervous laughter to disapproving frown, the fact remains I was too cowardly to call out the behavior and thus effected no change whatsoever in the treatment or view of women within the company.

It's easy to be brave now, with no career or earnings at risk. I would like to think that, given a second chance, I would stand up more and challenge those attitudes. I would like to think that. But I'm not so arrogant as to believe it.

What do you think? Have you gone through your own "What about me?" review? Are you secure that you're not one of these seedy men being exposed recently? Great. I believe you. Because I believe most men are, if not gentlemen, then at least good men, who respect and support women.