

"An Investigation of Personal Power"

by Warren Farrell

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Ralph was a forty-one-year-old man in our men's group. He was married, the father of two children. He had been in the group for three months, and had hardly said a word. One evening he looked up and said, "I think I'd like to speak up tonight..."

"All my life I wanted to play baseball. As a pro. When I was a sophomore in high school I was pretty hot stuff, and my uncle came and scouted me. Later he said, 'Ralph, you're good. Damn good. And you might make it to the pros if you really work at it. But only the best make good money for a long time. If you really want to be good to yourself, make use of your intelligence, get yourself a good job--one you can depend on for life.'"

"I was surprised when my folks agreed with him. Especially Dad. Dad always called me 'Ralph, who pitched the no-hitter.' Dad stopped calling me that after that conversation. Maybe that turned the tide for me." Ralph hesitated, as if he were piecing something together, but he quickly withdrew from his introspection.

"Anyway, I was proud of myself for making the transition like a man. I'd always liked reading and learning, but just hadn't focused much on it. But I figured just for a couple of years I'd 'play the system: borrow friends' old term papers, take a look at old exams, focus my reading on the questions different teachers tended to ask, and so on. I never cheated. I just figured I'd 'play the system' for a couple of years, raise my grades, then when I got into college, I could really learn--I could do what I wanted after that.

"Well, 'playing the system' worked. I got into a top-notch university. But it soon became apparent that a lot of people graduated from good universities--if I wanted to really stand out it would help to 'play the system' for just a few more years, get into a good grad school or law school, and then, once I did that, I could do with my life what I wanted after that.

"I decided on law school--but to become a social-work lawyer, so I could make a real contribution to people who most needed it. But about my second or third year of law school--when my colleagues saw I was taking what they called this 'missionary law' seriously, they explained that if I really wanted to be effective as a social-work lawyer, I'd better get some experience first in the hard-knocks, reality-based field of corporate law rather than ease into the namby-pamby area of social-work law right away--if I didn't I wouldn't get the respect to be effective. Frankly, that made sense. So I joined a top corporate law firm in New York. I knew I could work there for a couple of years, and then really do what I wanted with my life after that.

"After a couple of years with the firm, I was doing well. But the whole atmosphere of the corporate legal community made it clear that if I dropped out after two years it would be seen as a sign that I just couldn't hack the pressure. If I continued for just a couple more years, and

became a junior partner--junior partners were the ones marked with potential--then I could really do what I wanted with my life after that.

"Well, it took me seven years to get the junior partnership offered to me--with politics and everything. But I got it. By that time I had lost some of the desire to be a social-work lawyer--it was considered a clear step backward. In other ways I maintained that ideal--it seemed more meaningful than kowtowing to rich money. But I also knew the switch would mean forfeiting a lot of income. My wife Ginny and I had just bought a new home--which we pretty much had to do with two kids--and I knew they'd be going to college....Ginny's income was only part-time now, and she was aching to travel a bit.

"By that time, I also realized that while junior partners had potential, the people with the real ins in the legal community were not the junior partners, but the senior partners. I figured I had a pretty big investment in the corporate law area now--if I just stuck it out for a couple more years, I could get a senior partnership, get a little money saved for the kids' education and travel, and then I could really do with my life what I wanted...

"It took me eight more years to get the senior partnership. I can remember my boss calling me into the office and saying, 'Ralph, we're offering you a senior partnership.' I acted real calm, but my heart was jumping toward the phone in anticipation of telling Ginny. Which I did. I told Ginny I had a surprise. I'd tell her when I got home. I asked her to get dressed real special. I refused to leak what it was about. I made reservations in her favorite restaurant, bought some roses and her favorite champagne.

"I came home real early so we'd have time to sip it together; I opened the door and said, 'Guess what?' Ginny was looking beautiful. She said, 'What is it, Ralph?' I said 'I got the senior partnership!' She said, 'Oh, fine, that's great,' but there was a look of distance in her eyes. A real superficial enthusiasm, you know what I mean? So I said, 'What do you mean "Oh, fine"--I've been working since the day we met to get this promotion for us, and you say "Oh, fine"?'"

"Every time you get a promotion, Ralph,' Ginny announced, 'you spend less time with me. I guess I just wish you'd have more time for me. More time to love me.'

"Why do you think I've been working my ass off all these years if it isn't to show you how much I love you?' I said.

"Ralph, that's not what I mean by love. Just look at the kids, Ralph.'

"Well, I did look at the kids. Randy is seventeen. And Ralph, Jr., is fifteen. Randy just got admitted to college--a thousand miles from here. Each year I keep promising myself that 'next year' I'll really get to know who they are. 'Next year...next year.' But next year he'll be in college. And I don't even know who he is. And I don't know whether I'm his dad or his piggy bank.

"I don't where to begin with Randy, but a few weeks ago I tried to change things a bit with Ralph, Jr. He was watching TV. I asked him if he wouldn't mind turning it off so we could talk. He was a little reluctant, but he eventually started telling me some of what was happening at school. We talked baseball, and I told him about some of my days pitching. He said I'd already told him. He told me about some of his activities, and I spotted a couple of areas where I thought his values were going to hurt him. So I told him. We got into a big argument. He said I wasn't talking with him, I was lecturing him...'spying' on him.

"We've hardly talked since. I can see what I did wrong--boasting and lecturing--but I'm afraid if I try again, he'll be afraid to say much now, and we'll just sit there awkwardly. And if he mentions those values, what do I say? I want to be honest, but I don't want to lecture. I don't even know where to begin."

Ralph withdrew from the group. He had struck so many chords it took us more than ten minutes to notice that he was fighting back tears. Finally, one of the men picked up on it and asked, "Ralph, is there anything else you're holding back?" Ralph said there wasn't, but his assurance rang false. We prodded.

"I guess maybe I am holding something back," he said hesitantly. "I feel like I spent forty years of my life working as hard as I can to become somebody I don't even like."

When I heard that sentence fifteen years ago, I was twenty-seven. It's been perhaps the most important sentence I've heard in my life: "I FEEL LIKE I'VE SPENT FORTY YEARS OF MY LIFE WORKING AS HARD AS I CAN TO BECOME SOMEBODY I DON'T EVEN LIKE." Even as I heard it, the ways it was threatening to be true in my own life flashed through my mind.

Ralph continued: "I was mentioning some of my doubts to a few of my associates at work. They listened attentively for a couple of minutes, then one made a joke, and another excused himself. Finally I mentioned this men's group--which I never should have done--and they just laughed me out of the office. I've been the butt of jokes ever since...."

"Suddenly I realized. Ginny has a whole network of lady friends she can talk with about all this. Yet the men I've worked with for seventeen years, sixty hours a week, hardly know me. Nor do they want to."

Ralph withdrew again. But this time he seemed to be taking in what he had just said as if he were putting together his life as he was speaking. Then his face grew sad. A few of us who might otherwise have said something held back.

"I guess I could handle all this," Ralph volunteered, fighting back the tears again, "but I think, for all practical purposes, I've lost Ginny in the process. And maybe I could handle that, too. But the only other people I love in this world are Randy and Ralph, Jr. And when I'm really honest with myself...I think for practical purposes I've lost them too."

We started to interrupt, but Ralph stopped us, tears silently escaping his eyes. "What really gets me....what really get me angry is that I did everything I was supposed to do for forty years, did it better than almost any other man I know, and I lost everyone I love in the process, including myself. ...The more I did to stand out, the more I became the same. Just one more carbon copy. Oh, I got to a high level, okay. A high-level mediocre.

"In some ways, I feel I could handle all that, too. But look at me--paid more than two of you guys put together, supposedly one of the top decision-makers in the country, and when it comes to my own home, my own life, I don't even know how to begin."

Ralph cried. For the first time in twenty-two years.

Ralph is with me almost every day of my life. Every time I am appreciated or applauded, the image of Ralph makes me wonder whether the applause is seducing me into saying something that is popular but less honest than I want to be....

After that session, I started looking at my life and Ralph's life differently. I had always assumed power means having status and access to income, influence, and external rewards. Ralph had all of them. Yet up close he didn't seem very powerful. I started asking whether power meant, rather, the ability to control my own life. And that made looking at power much more compatible with looking within myself.

Most men feel much less powerful than Ralph. Ralph is a winner among men--and women. Compared to him, millions of men are losers. If you are a man, powerlessness is hearing a bomb go off and watching your only buddy's head spurt blood before you told him you cared. Powerlessness is returning with agent orange from a war that you were thought of as a

fool or a murderer for fighting, having your government refuse to take responsibility for the agent orange contamination, passing it on to your daughter and looking at her deformed arm every day of her life, paying taxes to support the war, and then being told, "You make the rules." From this perspective, that's blaming the victim. At eighteen he did not make the rule to subject himself to death while his sister stayed at home, received an education, and married a survivor. He didn't feel powerful when women had an equal right to join the armed forces for money, but not an equal responsibility to be drafted.

ON THE NATURE OF POWER

If we define power in traditional terms--the ability to gain access to external rewards--Ralph had it over all the men in the group. And almost all the women in America.

Yet if we redefine power as **THE ABILITY TO CONTROL ONE'S LIFE**, Ralph probably had less power than anyone in the group. Ralph had given up the ability to control his own life by spending his life doing what he was programmed to do. Most of us were questioning at least some of the things we were programmed to do. **RALPH HAD LOST REAL POWER BY TRYING TO GAIN THE APPEARANCE OF POWER. HE WAS THE LEADER. BUT HE WAS FOLLOWING "A PROGRAM FOR LEADERS;"** therefore, he was really a follower. He had reached a high level, but had done so by adapting to his boss and his boss's boss. He was, as he put it, a "high-level mediocre."

THE FIVE COMPONENTS OF POWER

By redefining power as control over our own lives, we can see exactly what Ralph gained and lost, and what women who imitate the male model gain and lose. I define control over one's own life as first, defining our own expectations and then meeting them in five areas. Looking at these five areas, we can see that Ralph had power almost exclusively in the first area, even when he was "succeeding."

1. Access to external rewards and resources (e.g., income, status, possessions) equivalent to the level of a person's expectation or desire.
2. Access to internal rewards and resources (e.g., internal peace, the capacity for emotional release, positive self-concept, alignment of overall values with daily activities, spirituality). Access starts with the awareness of the importance of these rewards, and becomes real with the time and ability to experience them on a level equal to one's expectation or desire.
3. Access to interpersonal contact (attention, affection, and love and respect from others, whether family or friends) equivalent to one's expectation or desire.
4. Access to physical health, attractiveness, and intelligence equivalent to one's expectation or desire.
5. Access to sexual fulfillment in a form that meets one's expectations.

By redefining power as control over our own lives, we can ask questions that illustrate the limitations of our traditional view of power--as status, income, and control over others.

Does a company president who has never known how to be intimate have power? Does a thirteen-year-old Olympic gymnast who has never known whether she is loved for herself or for how she performs have power? Does a boy who must register for the draft at eighteen, or who is shot through the face in Vietnam, have power? Does a beautiful woman who marries a doctor have power, when she never discovers her own talents? Does her doctor husband have power when he is forever the slave of his beeper?

Which of these people has control over his or her own life?

When we call people "heroes" we encourage them to replace real power with an image. When we say "men have the power," we reinforce the assumption that income, status, and control over others are more important than assessing our values internally.

Prostitution

by Warren Farrell

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I am often asked why men don't get as worked up as they might about women--particularly poor women--having to use their bodies as prostitutes. Because most men unconsciously experience themselves as prostitutes every day--the miner, the firefighter, the construction worker, the logger, the soldier, the meatpacker--these men are prostitutes in the direct sense; they sacrifice their bodies for money and for their families.

The middle-class man is a prostitute of a different sort: he recalls that when his children were born, he gave up his dreams of becoming a novelist and began the nightmare of writing ad copy for a product he didn't believe in--something he would have to do every workday for the rest of his life. The poorer the man, the more he feels this. To men, prostitution is not a female-only occupation.

Most men barely allow themselves even to think about the freedom to look within until after their families are as economically secure as they desire. But many a man finds that just as his goal is within reach, his family is wishing for a nicer home, a better car, a private college. If he is one of the rare men able to satisfy his family enough to look within, he fears discovering the prostitute he has become in the process of providing for others. This is men's version of subservience--of "wife and children first, husband last."