ities, utilizing some of the growing body of pro-feminist men’s research and literature. Just like women, men go through a process of consciousness-raising as the first step toward politicization.

This isn’t going to be easy. The question of motivation is especially problematic. People wonder: what do men have to gain by making these changes? What’s in it for them?

It’s really pretty simple. If we want to be able to look the women we care about in the eye and say that we respect them and support their struggle for dignity and equality, then we really have no other choice.

Next Steps and Action

"Take a look," he said.

My fingers stopped on my combination lock as I looked to my right to see a man, naked from the waist down, standing a foot away from my locker.

For years I’d heard about girls getting flashed near my suburban California high school. When it had happened to my sister a few years earlier, it had been broad daylight and she and her girlfriends laughed until the man ran away. It was not like that tonight. It was dark and we were alone.

All I could do for a moment was follow his orders and look at him. He carried his pants over his left arm, and his right hand was shoved into the pocket of his grey-and-blue running jacket. Was he holding a weapon beneath his jacket? Was he going to rape me? Did he move closer? Did I hear someone else?

“What do you want?” I finally managed.

“Just take a long look.”

I stood frozen in front of him for a long time. I thought about running or yelling for help, but told myself it wouldn’t work: He would be too fast, no one would hear. I was feeling desperate. My car keys were cutting into my hand. Were they a weapon?

“I could stab you,” I warned him, gripping my keys.

“I’d like to see you try.”

I recoiled, shaking with both fear and anger. He was right, I wasn’t going to try. "All right, I saw you, just leave."

“Close your locker.”

I did, and was relieved when the next order was to walk away slowly and not look back.
When I began to run, he disappeared into a dark hallway and did not follow me. I went home and told my mother what had happened, and we called the police. To my knowledge, he was never caught.

It would be several years before I'd take my first self-defense class and stop seeing myself as a failure that night. I wanted to stab him, stop him, scare him the way he scared me. I wanted to be unafraid of him. But he overpowered me, ordered my obedience and received it. "I'd like to see you try." His words followed me long after I stopped hearing his voice. It was typical teenage insecurity that made me freeze up during tests, get tongue-tied during arguments, fumble the winning shot during soccer games. But I'm sure those words contributed. They taunted me, pushed me down, reminded me: He won.

As a kid with an equal-rights, athletic mom and a dad who wanted daughters rather than sons, I was raised on feminist children's books like Free to Be . . . You and Me, and I knew boys weren't better than girls. I also refused to believe they were stronger. When bullies picked on me or my friends, I hit them in the knees with my Holly Hobby lunch pail and that was that. But as with most girls, my self-confidence decreased as I grew. I continued to believe in equal rights, but—since I didn't excel on the playground and wasn't allowed to hit boys—I gave up on being athletic or tough. . . .

That all changed my junior year, when I took my first self-defense class with Karla Grant. A fifth-degree black belt in karate who has taught self-defense for fifteen years, Karla explained to me how tradition and the media warned me not to fight back against men. She told me how I could fight back, where and when to strike and with what. She told me why I must fight back, both to save myself and to help stop the growing number of attacks on women every day. Then she taught me how to punch and kick; how to block a blow from a fist, a club, a knife or a gun; how to fight two attackers, or three, or five, or a gang. At the end of eight weeks, I broke a two-inch-thick wooden board with my fist, and Karla told me, "If you can break a board, you can break his nose."

I've carried that message with me ever since, through three years of martial arts and self-defense training. When I hear the words of my attacker attempting to push me down, the voices of my three feminist teachers—Karla, Kathy and Roberta—tell me to push back. I see that night in high school differently now: I was not a failure, I was brave. I did not risk my life. I got away. . . .

I feel more independent because of my self-defense training, not less so, and I am grateful for the female sensibilities who encourage questions and focus on women's strengths. Women's bodies are perfect for karate: We have more lower-body strength and tend to be more agile than men. Most important, our attackers do not expect us to fight back, so women have the element of surprise.

I've been a pacifist all my life, and yet I relish the knowledge that my front kick can reach someone's head, my punch can knock someone to the floor. These are not completely incompatible notions. Passivity does not mean submission—it means de-escalation. Fighting back does not mean warfare—it means handing over the money if I'm mugged, but going for the testicles if he grabs me. Equal rights means women should be equal to (not the same as, but equal to) men in all ways—including equal fighters. . . .

Women who study martial arts say they are calm in the world and that they wear their training like an extra layer of protection. A warning: I can take care of myself. Women have long been striving to say that with confidence on an economic level. Self-defense provides the strength to reinforce it on a physical level. Living with the fundamental knowledge that I can protect myself against a man has changed my life completely, inside the dojo and out. I no longer question my instincts. I know them to be good when my arms block a punch before my eyes see it. I don't apologize for being in the way; I have seen the usefulness of my body. Knowing that I am strong, I refuse to be weak.

It's self-confidence that doesn't come from a gun or a can of Mace, and it won't leave
you fumbling through your purse in a dark alley. It's not surprising that women have responded to the marketing tactics of gun manufacturers and deterrent-spray dealers. Cultural “wisdom” has always held that women's bodies were not made to fight, and that we are constantly vulnerable to sexual violence. With that kind of setup, movies supply the ending: She beats his chest and hysterically pleads for mercy; he doesn't grant it. She runs away but trips; he walks slowly and still catches up. Even if she's a strong female character and lands a swift knee to the groin, he's the Terminator; he stumbles for a millisecond, smiles, and then keeps coming.

These are ridiculous scenarios, but they've made their way into the consciousness of every woman and still succeed in scaring us and preventing us from fighting back. So does this warning: Don't fight back, you'll only get him angry. Everyone's heard it from the most well-meaning of sources, like the high school sex education teacher or the cops who speak to first-year female students in the dorms. The idea is that if you submit to brutal rape and torture, you may get away with your life. May. But as Karla explained to my first self-defense class, an attacker is already angry and not very trustworthy as a bargainer. He may say, “Don't scream and you won't get hurt,” but he's already breaking the law: why should he keep his promise? The best time to fight back is when he's least expecting it—when he puts down the gun or the knife to assault you, when he gets the rope to tie you up. After that point, you don't know what he's going to do. And then there's the double standard that comes from the same sources that advise against self-defense. If you get raped, the first question is, “Did you fight back?” “No.” The response then is usually, “You must have wanted it.”

When I began seeing the hypocrisy of these messages from male authority figures, I also began to see the hypocrisy in all of patriarchal society. My self-defense training became connected to my awakening as a feminist. The questions began to sound the same and have similar answers. Why is a woman's right to control her body constantly threatened? Whether referring to reproductive rights or sexual violence, the answer is to take control back. With self-defense, I am in control.

Karla also told my class that the one-in-four statistic left something out—the possibility that women can successfully take down their attackers and get away. It should read: One in four women between eighteen and twenty-four will be targeted for rape in her lifetime. And every time a woman isn't attacked because she defends herself this statistic is whittled down even further. The National Women's Martial Arts Federation estimates that women make up 30 percent of all martial artists in the United States. To me, that's not enough, but it's up from 10 percent ten years ago and one percent twenty years ago. When rapists are thwarted because women fight back, attackers will stop assuming their victims will be intimidated into obedience.

I was flashed again recently, on the subway in Manhattan. An older man stood next to me, his coat draped over his arm to hide his fly, which was open to expose his penis. He was trying to show only me, but I didn't notice for a while. When I finally saw what he was doing, I immediately thought about all I could do to take him out. His knee was in a perfect position for me to break it with a kick. I could smash his elbow with a punch, or karate chop his neck. And I could certainly kneel him in the groin. We were in a crowded, well-lit car, and he was no threat to me. Instead I looked to his face and showed him that he had not succeeded in frightening or arousing me, whichever his purpose might have been. At the next stop, he covered himself up with his coat and exited the car. I laughed to myself.