



**Tell him to be  
kind to women.**

## I know people, she said.

TELL HIM TO BE KIND TO WOMEN  
BY NANCY DAFOE

**T**he woman stopped us on the William Howard Taft Bridge over Rock Creek Gorge in Washington, DC, and said, “Tell him to be kind to women.”

Wait. What? Back up, please. The subject boy in the cautionary from this stranger was 14 months old. How was I, my daughter, and son-in-law supposed to take such unsolicited advice from this tall woman in a camel-hair coat with a red silk scarf at her throat?

Enzo, dear grandson, my advice to you— No, that is not right.

Barely more than a year old, you were not just walking, but hopping, jumping, dancing, because getting around on two feet was still an exciting enterprise, your little fingers extended, caught by your mother’s and grandmother’s hands on either side.

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Think back to the moment of the surprising meeting. It was warm for a fall day, the leaves turning but still restlessly attached to trees, the wind changing direction, once or twice causing you to catch your breath in startled reflex. I pointed out the heraldic sculptures guarding the bridge, created by Roland Hinton Perry and later re-cast by Reinaldo Lopez-Carrizo, simply as “the big lions”, and you looked up and pointed, turning to your daddy to see if he, too, saw them. We could have carried you, but you wanted to be down, touching your feet to the ground, so we held your hands a little tighter, cars moving past.

But this description is simply positioning, locating, at the point and moment when a contemporary Sybil, our own version of Madame Sostrois, stopped, looked over her shoulder, studied you intently, then turned to confront us, me and your parents, stopping to avoid collision. You, in turn, considered her with a smile.

“Flirting?” she asked, and we looked to see you leaning your whole body slightly toward her, shaking your curly head. Your mother laughed uncomfortably, drawing you closer. Your father took a step toward you. “I know people,” she said.

Then I asked if she was a psychologist, her brazenness spurring my own.

“Psychiatrist,” she offered. “I study human beings for a living. I’ve gotten rather good at reading adults but not children, and this child is absolutely interacting with me at a high, personal level. How old is—?”

Hesitation, the type when you’re not sure if honesty is required in this situation, before his proud grandmother replied, “He’s a little over a year.” My daughter shot me a scolding glance.

“Oh, my, I wasn’t sure,” the woman said. “He’s absolutely beautiful.” She took a long, slow breath, followed abruptly with, “Tell him to be kind to women,” and walked away.

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## Take care of your wife and children, don't get a big head.

Your mother and I laughed uncomfortably. Your father was holding his tongue with a visible degree of irritation. You, however, remained open, receptive to the fullness of life and all the people in it. Whatever was next, you wanted to go there, meet these beings, just like your mother did at your age. Even now, she would have been out in front except for her protective instincts.

As suddenly as this stranger's intrusion began, it ended. I thought that perhaps this psychiatrist had been hurt in the past, a man once betrayed her, had not returned her love or passion, but that was merely my own imagining. She meant precisely what she said by the way she said it, and I considered her words again. What were we to do with that statement? Was it an instruction or a warning to us, to you, to the other women who would one day love you?

Then again, by what right did the woman provide such an admonitory?

As we continued our walk, I thought about the words of wisdom your mother and father might choose, their gentle guidance to help you navigate the myriad passages from toddler to man, the responsibility of being a parent both weighty and fleeting.

What could I, as one of your grandmothers, tell you about being a man in this culture that is obsessed with charismatic, beautiful people, sometimes dangerously so, for the object of adoration, as well as for those who long to be in their presence? Should I remind you to be kind to men? To other children and animals, while cautioning you, first, to watch out for strangers? How could you be kind and open and cautious, even suspicious, simultaneously? I should not forget to tell you to look out for trouble and all those who would want to challenge, even hurt you, simply because you are you, because you are so perfectly charming.

This stranger's counsel caused me to consider what instruction I should give you. What does it mean to be a man in a culture in which definitions are no longer clearly delineated? Your great grandfather on your mother's side, although a man of few words, would have known exactly what to say here. He would have given lessons on just how a man should act, but that consultation would only work in another era: "Take care of your wife and children, don't get a big head," might have been wisdom at the end of WWII. The world you are growing into would likely be almost unrecognizable to your great-grandfather.

## Let me start again. Here is a man. Here is a woman.

Ridiculous to approach this imagined conversation with my grandson without bumping into statements about gender and identity: what does it mean to be a man? A man is a man, and a woman is a woman unless the man becomes a woman and the woman becomes a man or, well, other variations, and there are. Remember Raymond Davies of the Kinks (you won't) who wrote the lyrics to Lola: "Girls will be boys, and boys will be girls. It's a mixed up, muddled up, shook up world." That catchy song was banned in many areas even though few adults at the time ever listened to the words. Kids did, though. Gender as it relates to identity is far more fluid today than it was in 1970 and far more so than when your great-grandfather was growing up just 30 years earlier.

I could counsel you to be strong, but I suspect strength—either physical, mental, or of character—cannot be counselled. I could advise you to be sensitive to others and their feelings, just as I must have to my daughters.

Let me cut myself off here. How do I have the nerve to try to impart wisdom, some knowledge about the world when the knowable world is continually changing and resistant to such framed restrictions?

Reminding myself I am your grandmother not your parents, I try to remember if I ever took instruction from my grandparents. Neither one of my grandfathers talked much to me. My mother's mother died when I was only 10. My father's mother felt compelled to give me bad and bigoted opinions that I knew to discard even as a child.

Let me start again. Here is a man. Here is a woman. Here is good. Here is evil. Here is a lie. Here is the truth. Let me mix that all up and blend it into a cold soup, a smooth gazpacho sprinkled with edible but bitter flowers for you to taste. This is your world.

There is a lovely poem, *Danse Russe*, that you should read some day, by the American poet William Carlos Williams, a poem in which the naked, dancing poet's persona waves a shirt around his head while all in his household sleep. In those 19 lines, Williams annihilates gender roles with such lovely, whirling abandon. Still, I must admit to finding some comfort in boundaries of some guise. Absolute freedom can be exhausting, even annihilating.

While your culture and country will be more complicated than your great-grandfather's, it will also likely be more liberating than the one inhabited by those who came before you. Not just for women who have been up and out of the house for quite a while now but for men, too, released from definitive roles, from that burden which was also heavy equipment to carry.

## The two of you roar away.

If we examine cultural symbols, cars are the first thing that comes to mind because they are racing past us. I need to be conscious of them for your sake, make sure you do not get loose and dart into traffic. Are cars a masculine symbol? Boys like cars and driving around in cars, but then, again, so do girls. Your Papa had a purple—yes, almost pink—Thunderbird with black leather seats and a console straight out of an airplane cockpit. He loved that car, and I know he has never loved a car like that since. Your grandfather on your father's side had a motorcycle, and your Nana rode on the back, holding tightly to the man who had not yet become your Pop-pop.

Here is a pretty girl pulling up on her motorcycle, in a few years, and saying to you, "Let's go, Enzo," and you hopping on as the two of you roar away. Jump on or keep roaming, drive or ride, as it suits you. Not all of your destinations will be good ones—not the crossings your mother and I, your Papa and father, would like. Your Papa had three speeding tickets in one month when he was young, and your other relatives have racked up more than their share. You will want to speed, undoubtedly, and I'll try not to say, "Don't," because that would only make you drive faster.

What should I point out about privilege and responsibility? Your loving parents will—and already have—opened doors for you. You will benefit from entitlements you have not earned, but that does not mean you don't deserve them. It is just that others do, too, and they may not have your advantages. All of humanity deserves love and safety, equal protections and opportunities, happiness and possessions, including a solid, well-built roof over their heads and clean clothes to wear. But, that is not the reality in our world. Many will suffer for no fault of their own.

Economic success, even mere stability, in this country is not simply about hard work even if that is what you are later told, Enzo. This is not a world where fairness and justice exist in practice, even if it appears so in our laws. There are approximately 22 per cent of the nation's children living in poverty. What does that mean? Children and their parents can't afford to eat nutritious foods, can't afford decent clothing, or a home in which to live, so they live in cars, on the streets, in temporary shelters. These children don't own books or computers or any of the

handheld technologies that make us so demanding so very young. School is not a priority when someone is starving or scared of walking down his street, or fearful of what will happen when he gets home.

Enzo, you cannot change these facts, but you can be aware of inequality, the consequences of poverty, the results of policies set by politicians born in privilege and disconnected from the very citizens who voted for them to represent their interests. You can speak out and stand up for others, even if it is just about asking a friend not to bully another child.

Should I walk you carefully through our violent, freedom-for-some nation's history that shows the scars of four million other human beings in bondage before the Civil War, a nation still packing the gut-punch of racial inequities and discrimination around every corner? As I write to you, Enzo, I am mindful of the opening of Ta-Nehisi Coates's book in which he wrote warnings to his son in *Between the World and Me*. The world Coates sees for his son is not the same world you will see because Coates is "black" and you are "white", and there are ramifications to the hurt we all cause and have inherited.

## You are an innocent yet.

You are an innocent yet. You are not guilty except in the way that all Americans are guilty at birth unless we accept responsibility for the horrific acts of our collective past. Some day, you will need to understand this and be aware. There will be some who will hate you because you are not black and some who will hate you because you love black Americans. Some members of your family are black, whatever “black” means. I cannot even tell you what “white” means except it has a long and ugly association with privilege, slave ownership, and abuse in this land.

Your babysitter was born in Senegal and teaches you French. Who knew that when you started speaking you would talk in both French and English? Your first response to your Papa who asked, “How are you,” was, “bien,” and it took us a moment to realize that you were answering in French not talking baby talk. This favor of Michelle broadened your knowledge at such a young age, but far more, the gift of loving another woman who cares for you well and fiercely, is extraordinary.

These awful distinctions of race are forced upon us—this arbitrary division between human beings based upon pigments in the skin is drawn into something far more sinister due to psychological and economic inducements. There is no easy answer to navigating this culture, the one you inherited, but listening before judging is a start.

After consideration, I have decided it is fine that the stranger on the bridge encouraged you “to be kind to women”. I would add, however, be compassionate to others, to animals, dolphins, spiders, the planet, yourself, always be good to yourself. But don’t be too kind. Don’t let yourself off the hook when you have made a decision that feels wrong, and we are all going to make those mistakes at some point in our lives. Whatever you do, don’t get hurt, but you will. Don’t let that dazzling girl break your heart. Be kind to women but not one who would demean you or one who is manipulative.

Humanist, priest, scholar, and social critic Erasmus famously wrote, “Don’t give your advice before you are called upon.” Erasmus was a smart man. Yet, here I am, not in defiance but humility, wanting to give you encouragement because an interloper offered hers. This is not a competition, but the unknown lies in the balance. I do not know if the woman had the intentions of a good fairy or a malicious one. However ridiculously, I need to try to make sure the good fairy wins out.

Somehow, we were drawn into thought-provoking confrontation on a bridge spanning a national park, past generations linked to the future on the other side of this substantial expanse—you walking into that uncertain, terrible, resplendent world, and I beside you for as far as I am able to go.



## NANCY DAFOE

This essay prefigures #MeToo. I wrote it four years ago when my grandson Enzo Cusano was a toddler. It suggests #MeToo with a caveat: the boys we love must learn to navigate this shift in power that comes with greater responsibility for their actions. It is well past time for those changes, however. As a woman and mother of two daughters, I have long fought for more equal rights for the sexes. As a mother of a son and grandmother to four grandsons, however, I also have concerns for boys. They have been privileged and must give back and relearn or learn differently. At five years old, Enzo is even more beautiful than he was as a toddler, and the cautionary in the essay more apt and important today and will be even more important ten years from now. Love is not always about protecting. Sometimes, giving love means taking a step back, reassessing, and reminding our boys that they must give of themselves and be gentle when possible.

A retired English educator, I am now a full-time writer. I have written eight published books and dozens of articles and poems. My published work includes a hybrid memoir and poetry book *An Iceberg in Paradise: A Passage through Alzheimer's* (SUNY Press, 2015); three books on education and writing, *Writing Creatively*, *Breaking Open the Box*, and *The Misdirection of Education Policy* (Rowman & Littlefield Education, 2013, 2014, and 2017, respectively). In addition, I have two published books of poetry, *Poets Diving in the Night* and *The Innermost Sea* (Finishing Line Press, 2017, 2018). My published novels include two literary murder mysteries, *You Enter a Room* and *Both End in Speculation* (Rogue Phoenix Press, 2017, 2018). I also have excerpts of my work in anthologies, including *Lost Orchard* (SUNY Press, 2014).

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