

This could be dangerous, I thought. This is Los Angeles, early June 1992. And, besides, it's getting dark.

Stranded and alone, hauling a heavy suitcase along Washington Boulevard east of Lincoln Avenue, unable to find a phone that made sense or a taxi dispatcher interested in my fare, I was running late for my plane at LAX. I decided that this was a chance I needed, no, wanted to take. I approached three young Hispanic men standing outside their car in a fast food parking lot.

But first a little background.

I had just spent four days in the mountains above Palm Springs at a conference of men who wanted to give the nation new hope for old and growing problems. We were a few of the big fish in the small pond that some have called the men's movement. We agreed that what the nation most urgently needs right now is a massive infusion of strong, noble, loving, nurturing, healthy masculine energy to counteract America's malaise, impotence and social pathologies. We talked a lot about the importance of fathers, both as an archetypal metaphor and as a practical reality.

Back in the fast food parking lot I warily approached the three young, black-haired, brown-skinned men. "How ya doing?" I said calmly and evenly. "I'm trying to get to LAX and I'm running late. The cabs and the phones aren't cooperating. How much money would you need to take me?"

They looked at each other. One of them in a white T-shirt said to the one who must have been the driver, "Go for it, man."

The driver hesitated. I said, "Name a price that makes it worth your while."

He looked straight at me. "Ten bucks," he said.

"I'll give you twenty."

"Let's do it, man," said the T-shirted youth. The driver nodded and popped the trunk. "You wanna put your suitcase here?"

"No, thanks," I answered straight back. The image of being forced empty-handed out of the car was clear in my mind. "I'd rather keep it with me."

"That's cool," the T-shirt said.

So there I was, entrusting my life to what I hoped to be "positive male energy." I was thinking we should go west to Lincoln Avenue. We headed east. Now what?

But then we turned south and soon we were on a freeway. I knew it could have been stupid, but I took out my wallet, removed a twenty and said to the driver, "Here, I want to pay you now."

The driver took it with a simple "thanks."

"So here I am, guys," I said. "I sure hope you're going to take care of me."

T-shirt, sitting in the back seat with me, my suitcase between us, smiled knowingly and said, "It's okay, man. We're good guys."

I nodded and shrugged, "I sure hope so, because if you're not, I'm in big trouble, aren't I?"

They all laughed and then T-shirt spoke up. "So where you from?"

"Baltimore," I answered.

"Oh, man, it's nice back east. That's what they say. Green and everything."

I smiled and nodded, "Yeah. And back east, L.A. is our idea of heaven."

"Naah, it's rough here, man. It's hard." T-shirt was clearly going to be the spokesman.

Every issue we men's movement participants had talked about during our conference in the mountains was in this car. It was time for a reality check. "How old are you fellows?" I asked.

They were sixteen and seventeen. They were all in school and had part-time jobs. T-shirt and the driver worked in a restaurant. The quiet young man riding shotgun didn't say.

"Tell me about the gangs. Are there gangs at your school?"

"There's gangs everywhere, man. Everywhere. It's crazy."

"Are you fellows in a gang?" I asked.

"No way, man."

"Why not?" I wondered.

"Because there's no hope in it. You just get a bullet in your head."

"Yeah, but what hope is there for you outside the gang?"

"I don't know. I just want to get a future. Do something."

"What's the difference between you and the young men in the gangs?"

"I don't know, man. We just don't want to do it."

"Yeah, but why not? What's the difference?" I gently pressed.

"I don't know, man. I don't know. We're just lucky I guess."

I let the question sit for a moment, then started up. "What about fathers? Do you have a father at home?" I asked the youth in the back seat with me.

"Yeah. I do."

"How about you?" I asked the driver.

"Yeah, I got a dad."

"Living with you?"

"Yeah."

And the shotgun rider volunteered, "I got a dad, too."

"How about the young men in the gangs? Do they have fathers living with them?"

"No way, man. None of them do."

"So maybe fathers make a difference?" I suggested.

"Absolutely, man. Absolutely."

"Why?" I probed. "What difference does a father make?"

"He's always behind you, man, pushing you. Keeping you in line."

"Yeah. Telling you what's what," driver and shotgun agreed.

And I was taken safely right where I needed to go. The driver even asked what terminal I wanted. On time. Without a hitch.

I met eighteen honorable men at the conference in the mountains. I am eternally grateful for their wisdom and their urge to heal the nation.

But the most admirable men I met on my trip were the three youngest ones, Pablo, Juan and Richard—admirable because in spite of everything they were trying to be good.

And the men to whom I am most grateful are the men I never met. The men to whom I am most grateful are their fathers.

It was their fathers who got me to the airport. It was their fathers who kept me safe.

CHICAGO (UPI) August 18, 1997 — Chicago area researchers say that gang prevention programs are doomed unless fathers lend their weight in trying to keep pre-teen children from joining street gangs.

At the annual meeting of the American Psychological Association in Chicago, researchers say the critical factor in gang recruitment is the lack of a father at home, giving gang membership the role of surrogate parent.

Marie Bracki, associate professor of psychology at National-Louis University of Wheaton, Ill., tells United Press International, "There is no use in trying to intervene in gangs if that intervention doesn't include a father figure."

She and colleagues from Naperville North High School and Aurora Township scrutinized reports on 28 pre-teen gang members from suburban Chicago and found that only nine of the 28 lived with their fathers — and several of those fathers were involved in crime, drugs, alcohol or had jobs that limited contact with the children.

Bracki says, "The gang is fulfilling the father role in the lives of these youths."

She says numerous studies, including those done in the Chicago area, show that "the absence of the father or his abandonment of the pre-adolescent may be an all too common factor that establishes the gang as provider of support, identity, nurturance and acceptance of the child at a vulnerable period in his development."

She says the development and recruitment of pre-teens by gangs is pervasive across America and cuts across racial and ethnic lines.