

On Al Franken, et al.  
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At the time of this thought, Senator Al Franken from Minnesota has just announced that he intends to resign for the Senate because of his alleged sexual improprieties. He is the latest of a string of prominent men, beginning with movie mogul Harvey Weinstein, brought down by their purported sexual misconduct.

I wrote the following email message to a friend. It gets across my take on what has been front page news for weeks. It can be presumed that this story hasn't run its course.

[name of the person I was writing to]--

This today [December 9th, 2017] in *The New York Times* ["The Great Al Franken Moment" by *Times* op-ed columnist Gail Collins]: [https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/08/opinion/al-franken-sexual-](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/08/opinion/al-franken-sexual-harassment.html?action=click&pgtype=Homepage&clickSource=story-heading&module=opinion-c-col-left-region&region=opinion-c-col-left-region&WT.nav=opinion-c-col-left-region&_r=0)

[harassment.html?action=click&pgtype=Homepage&clickSource=story-heading&module=opinion-c-col-left-region&region=opinion-c-col-left-region&WT.nav=opinion-c-col-left-region&\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/08/opinion/al-franken-sexual-harassment.html?action=click&pgtype=Homepage&clickSource=story-heading&module=opinion-c-col-left-region&region=opinion-c-col-left-region&WT.nav=opinion-c-col-left-region&_r=0). It follows a pattern that's been established in these cases: women, and men too, making pronouncements about what's going on that follow the feminist narrative, that it's about male power, the oppression and exploitation of women, taking sexual license with weakened, subordinated women; stone these men, banish them, and straighten out all men and put them in their place, this is what they are all like. It's lectured insistently, self-assuredly, from on high, as if it is *the* perspective, all there is to know with reference this concern. I'm not buying it.

What is notably absent in all of this is what it was like to be Al Franken, any of these men, with reference to what they did. Was it, for them, about power and privilege, partly, entirely, what? When they were doing those things—let's assume they did

what has been alleged--did they in fact feel powerful, and were they in fact powerful?

I don't think they felt powerful, not really. More, they felt driven: they were, many of them anyway, out of control, simply trying to feel good in a moment and relieve a pressure from inside them they lived with constantly.

Were they powerful when this was going on? Not really. They were actually *less* powerful when they did these things than before. They came down to these women's level. These women could have, and reportedly many of them did, reject them, mock them, show contempt for them. These men put themselves in a vulnerable place and they knew it. At every moment from there forward, they could be brought down: a text message from a higher up, a *Times* exposé, a Gloria Allred news conference, and they were destroyed.

The feminist line is that these men were getting off on what they were doing, riding high. In fact, so I'm speculating, if not during the act itself immediately following it, they experienced self-disdain, even self-loathing. They went on with their day accompanied by the realization that their mother would have been disappointed with them, ashamed of them. The reality is that they were compromised by what they did, not uplifted by it.

I note that in an apology email to one of his victims soon after it happened, Louis C.K. referred to his "problem." When his conduct went public recently, he stayed within the feminist frame—I was abusing my power—but I believe his email reflected what was really going on for him in his own eyes: he had a problem.

Do you follow sports enough to remember Lance Renzel? He was a superb wide receiver for the Cowboys back around 1970. He got caught several times exposing himself to young girls. Tragic—smeared for life, broke up his marriage, you can imagine. He wrote a book, *When All the Laughter Died in Sorrow* [https://www.amazon.com/When-All-Laughter-Died-Sorrow/dp/0553122975/ref=sr\\_1\\_3?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=151](https://www.amazon.com/When-All-Laughter-Died-Sorrow/dp/0553122975/ref=sr_1_3?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=151)

[2813887&sr=1-3&keywords=lance+rentzel](#), about what was going on with him during all this, including the incidents with the young girls. I'm not equating Rentzel's case with those of the men caught up with these recent revelations of sexual misbehavior, but at least it was what was going on from his perspective, not someone else's. It was an account of what it's like to live with a compulsion. Kevin Spacey could tell you about that.

What comes through in the Rentzel book is that what he did with these girls, so awful, was not all that he was. In the main, he was a good person. And I think what is true of Charlie Rose, Dustin Hoffman, all of them, even Weinstein. I'll bet if we really knew Harvey Weinstein, we'd see a lot of good in him as a person. Last night on Vudu, I watched a superb film his company distributed--take this as a recommendation--*Museum Hours*

[https://www.amazon.com/Museum-Hours-Mary-Margaret-OHara/dp/B00EPFMS8S/ref=sr\\_1\\_2?s=movies-tv&ie=UTF8&qid=1512816482&sr=1-2&keywords=museum+hours](https://www.amazon.com/Museum-Hours-Mary-Margaret-OHara/dp/B00EPFMS8S/ref=sr_1_2?s=movies-tv&ie=UTF8&qid=1512816482&sr=1-2&keywords=museum+hours).

Thank you, Harvey. That's part of who you are too. Saying this is not to trivialize what you did, or to discount it, but it is to put it in context, and to try to understand it and you as a human being.

Al Franken was my nephew's roommate at Harvard. I knew his mother Phoebe, and his father Joe, and I know the Frankens to be good people. Al—or as we knew him, Alan—is a good person. He wanted to follow in the footsteps of his hero, Paul Wellstone, and to a good extent, for eight years as a senator, he did. French kissing someone in a USO show rehearsal and jokingly copping feels a decade ago don't define Al Franken to me. And it wouldn't define him to me if it turns out he did those kinds of things last week. We are all more than our least admirable behaviors. We all deserve understanding and the opportunity to contribute to society, and, yes, forgiveness.

In any case, it's a complicated matter, not simple, and it would be helpful as a start to hear about the moment-to-moment

experience of these men, their existence as they lived it. More than quick apologies and disappearances. More than scarlet letters.

Hope all is well,

Robert