

To Be a Man: Toward True Masculine Power

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the following is an excerpt from Robert Masters' book "[To Be a Man](#)"

"Be a man!"

Whatever its intentions, this demand does a lot more harm than good. It's a powerful shame-amplifier, packed with "shoulds" – and the last thing males need is more shaming, more degradation for not making the grade.

Men – and boys – on the receiving end of "Be a man!" get the message that they are lacking in certain factors that supposedly constitute manliness.

And what are some of these factors? Showing no weakness; emotional stoicism; aggressiveness; holding it together and not losing face, no matter what's going on. Sucking it up. (Think of what pride boys may feel when they're successful at this, especially when they're "strong" enough to not cry or show any signs of vulnerability.)

A manly handshake is a firm one, even a steely one; a manly approach means, among other things, keeping it together emotionally, not losing one's cool. To be unmanned is to "lose it" emotionally (except when it comes to anger), such a loss of face often being taken to mean a loss of strength (when Abraham Lincoln couldn't help publicly crying over the killing of a friend, he described his very visible upset as having "unmanned" him). To be unmanned means being visibly

vulnerable, being ball-less (“chickening out”), being brought low by shame, being subservient to dominant others.

To “man up” is an expression originally used in football and military contexts, meaning not much more than toughen up, move into battle, “grow a pair,” with the apparent failure to do so often resulting in one getting referred to as a girl or lady (who in this context epitomize softness, equated in many a male mind with weakness). Imagine a masculine icon, a famous leader or athlete, not just misting up, not just shedding a few silent tears or fighting back his tears, but crying hard and with abandon – this would be very, very uncomfortable for all too many men watching, no matter how “legitimate” the sadness or grief was.

Men may respond to the exhortation to “be a man!” by getting harder or tougher, more ruthlessly driven, more competitive, more uncaring about their unresolved wounds, making “getting over it” more important than “feeling it” or “going through it.” Conversely, men might also respond to the exhortation to “be a man!” by rebelling against its certainties of what constitutes a man, driving their hardness and competitiveness into the shadows and making too much of a virtue out of their softness and more “feminine” qualities. But in either case they are reacting to whatever notion of manhood has been or is being authoritatively held aloft before them, defining themselves through – and impaling themselves upon – such reactivity.

So let’s consider other factors or qualities that ought to – but generally *don’t* – count for much in making a male a “real” man, factors that many men keep in the shadows: vulnerability, empathy, emotional transparency and literacy, the capacity for relational intimacy – all qualities far more commonly associated with being female than male.

The visible presence of these “soft” qualities induces far more discomfort in most men than the “hard” ones. But once

they are brought out into the open and respected/honored – which takes courage – they can coexist with the capacity to express anger skillfully and take strongly directed action, empowering men in ways that serve the highest good of all of us. True masculine power is rooted in this dynamic blend of “softer” and “harder” attributes – showing up as a potent alignment of head, heart, and guts. When head (thinking, rationality, analysis), heart (caring, compassion, love) and guts (resolve, resilience, bravery) all inform each other and work together, a truly healthy manhood cannot help but arise.

Getting to such power requires facing and outgrowing less-than-healthy forms of power. There is great beauty and much to celebrate in men stepping more fully into their authentic manhood, a beauty at once rough and tender, caring and fierce, raw and subtle, anchored in standing one’s true ground, whatever the weather.

Shame Left Unattended Is Shame that Runs Us

“Be a man!” may seem a straightforward statement, but is packed to varying degrees with pressures and expectations – and often an in-your-face shaming – the *delivery* of which often alienates men from much of their basic humanity. Such alienation has enormous consequences. When we are thus cut off – emotionally and relationally disconnected or numbed – we are far more capable of dehumanizing activity, far more able to rationalize harmful behavior, far more likely to be caught up in abuses of power and sex. But nothing can truly compensate for what’s been lost through such disconnection and numbing. Dissociation from one’s soul – one’s individuated essence or core of being – is hell, regardless of one’s comforts and distractions, and all too many men are suffering this, doing little more than just getting by or dutifully “manning up.”

There is such pain in the pressure, the demand, “to be a man,” such deep and often debilitating hurt, however much it might be camouflaged by stoicism, excessive pride, apparent sexual

prowess, aggression, and conventional success. Men in general are hurting far more than they are showing, and *everyone* is paying the price for this, regardless of gender, age, nationality, or occupation. Attempts to address this have barely made a dent in conventional manhood's armoring, one key reason for this being that such efforts can, however unintentionally, shame men for not meeting the standards of yet another way of saying what a man needs to be.

Until such shame (and shame in general) is recognized and understood, it will dominate – often from behind the scenes – men's emotional and relational lives, obstructing their capacity to face and work through their unresolved wounding. Shame left unattended, shame left in the shadows, is shame that will run us from behind the scenes, disempowering us and determining far more of our behavior than we might imagine.

To in so many words tell a man (or boy) to "be a man!" carries the implication that he is not enough of a man (or enough of a person), that he is not measuring up – he's not only failing to meet a certain standard, a preset expectation or "should," but also is being shamed for this, however subtly or indirectly.

The shaming effect of telling a man (or boy) to "be a man" is rarely seen for what it is, being commonly viewed as a kind of tough-love support (psychologically akin to "spare the rod and spoil the child"), especially in authoritarian or militaristic contexts. And such shaming usually becomes internalized as yet another aspect of the inner critic (a heartlessly negative self-appraisal originating in childhood), the shaming finger of which gets waved in our face so often that it gets normalized. This internal drill sergeant, this love-barren relentless inner overseer, simply wears us down even as it pushes us to be better, to be more successful, to be more of a man, etcetera after self-castigating etcetera. And if the delivery of this is sufficiently harsh, we may lose much or all of our drive to better ourselves, sinking into depression,

apathy, and self-loathing – so long as we leave our inner critic unquestioned and in charge.

The pressure to “be a man!” is generally little more than oppression in good intentions’ clothing. Such pressure, such insensitive or out-of-tune motivational intensity, is but unhealthy or toxic challenge. From an early age, boys thrive in the presence of healthy challenge – non-shaming, age-appropriate, loving encouragement infused with a significant but safe degree of risk – learning firsthand how to both extend their edge and respect their limits. But boys who are steered by overly zealous (and commonly well-meaning) parents and teachers into overachieving and being “little men” (often taking on a premature responsibility) quickly learn to make a problem out of whatever in them counters such parental ambitions and pressures – like their tenderness and empathy and vulnerability.

Shame, Aggression, and Sex

When a man feels crushed or disempowered by shame (and/or by being shamed), he’s likely going to try to get as far away from it as possible, escaping, for example, into the compensatory power he feels through aggression. And why thus escape? Because shame is such a squirmingly uncomfortable and contracted emotion – especially when it is directed not just at our behavior but at our very being. Quite understandably, we generally want to get away from it as quickly as we can, ordinarily doing so by shifting into other states, like numbness, exaggerated detachment, or aggression

In females, such aggression is more commonly directed at oneself, but in males, it is more commonly directed at others. Men tend to counteract the self-deflation that is felt through shame – falling short of what’s expected of them – with the self-inflation they feel by being aggressive (getting righteously “pumped up”). In such aggressiveness toward others – passive, dominating, and otherwise – we usually feel more

powerful, more in control. What more potent antidote might a man find to feeling crushed than feeling his readily-activated, adrenaline-fueled capacity to crush others (as through verbal abuse or physical violence)?

Statements like “be a man” or “be man enough” not only catalyze shame, but also often drive a man to *prove* himself, a drive put into high gear when our shame shifts into aggression. The “proving” behavior that possess so many males – which start at an early age – needs to be deglamorized and not so unquestioningly equated with masculinity, but this can’t be effectively done without addressing and working with the shame at its root.

Aggression can make us feel better, beefing up our everyday sense of self; we’re not down, but are on top or closer to the top, whatever the scale. Even if we’re low on the ladder, under some unpleasant others, we usually can keep ourselves above some others who are lower in the pecking order than us – and we also can fantasize, perhaps very aggressively, about overpowering those who are above us in the hierarchy.

And what else can make us feel better in a hurry, especially when we haven’t been feeling so good .

Sex.

All the pressure and shame of trying to be a certain kind of man, all the anxiety and tension that can go with that, often can be briefly but potently eased very quickly through sex. And so too can the sense of not having much power, or of not being very important. So whatever feeds men’s sexual appetite, whatever amplifies it, whatever keeps it front and central, can easily take on an exaggerated emphasis, as is so lavishly illustrated by our culture’s sexual obsession. How easy it is to burden sex with the obligation to make us feel better or more secure or more manly!

Pornography has become one hell of an epidemic, gluing vast

numbers of men to its screens and ejaculatory dreams, hooking up mind and genitals in dramas that turn relational connection into a no-man's-land wherein sexual arousal and discharge reign supreme. The power that so many men give to pornography – and to what it promises – not only cripples their capacity for real intimacy, but also keeps their underlying wounding cut off from the healing it needs. Pornography flattens and emasculates men, obstructing their evolving into a deeper manhood. Merely condemning pornography is not the solution, however, anymore than is being overly tolerant of it (as if any restriction on things sexual is somehow an infringement on our freedom). What is needed is to *outgrow* our “need” for pornography (including as a “solution” to our pain and unresolved wounds).

Shame, power, sex – these three in their unhealthy forms are at the core of male dysfunction, simultaneously possessing and crippling many men. Shame that crushes and shrinks, power (especially in the form of aggression) that inflates and dominates, sex that compensates and distracts – this unholy triumvirate usurps the throne of self in a great number of men, obstructing them from taking the journey that can restore their integrity, dignity, and capacity for real intimacy.

Toward True Masculine Power

Many men tend to be at war – at war with life, with each other, with themselves, consumed by the fight to win at work and elsewhere. Bloodless war is still war, still an arena of battling with whatever weapons are at hand. A victorious athletic moment may not just feature some full-out exultation, but also sometimes a sense of standing over the defeated team as if on some bloody battlefield. Our entire culture is permeated with the language of war: the war on drugs, the war on cancer, the war on poverty, and so on. We don't just die from cancer, but lose our *battle* with it. Warfare is all about oppositional extremes, and so is much of conventional manhood, with an endless list of things to conquer. What a burden! And

what a diversion from embodying our full humanity.

What could be more packed with excitement (both positive and negative) than war? After all, it includes huge drama, high stakes, tremendous challenges and risk, primal encounters, great danger, unusual camaraderie, and extremes of playing-of-the-edge. I once worked with a highly decorated Vietnam veteran, an officer of the highest caliber who'd done plenty of time in the trenches of direct battle; after doing a few sessions with me that took him to the core of his emotional wounding and required a deep vulnerability of him, he said that such work was more difficult than anything he'd had to do while in the military – and that he didn't want to stop doing it. It asked more of him, it gave him more, it further deepened him, bringing out a different kind of warrior in him, in whom vulnerability was an obvious source of strength and relational intimacy a crucible for breakthrough healing.

True masculine power happens when courage, integrity, vulnerability, compassion, awareness, and the capacity to take strong action are all functioning together. Such power is potent but not aggressive, challenging but not shaming, grounded but not rigid, forceful but not pushy. Again, it requires head, heart, and guts in full-blooded alignment.

I sometimes tell men who are venturing into the work of accessing their true power that the journey they're beginning is one asking for a courage no less than that of real battle, calling forth from them a warriorhood as rooted in tenderness and relational openness as it is in facing and integrating one's monsters and shadow-places. This is a true hero's journey of healing and awakening, connecting the dots of past and present emotionally as well as intellectually, encountering on the way all that we've been and are. Along the way we cultivate an intimacy with *everything* that we are – high and low, dark and light, masculine and feminine, dying and undying – for the benefit of one and all. This is the primal odyssey pulsing in every man's marrow, whether we

embark on it or not.

And there is a huge need for us to take this journey, not as one more should, but out of service to everyone. My aim in this book is to illuminate and support this journey as much as possible, providing navigational guidance for us to step more fully into our own authenticity, helping deepen our capacity for taking wise care of ourselves and our environment.

I have seen many men suffering from shutting themselves off to their own depths, cutting themselves off from what would enable them to have truly fulfilling relationships – not just their empathy, vulnerability, and capacity for emotional literacy, but also their true power and strength, their authenticity, their capacity to anchor themselves in real integrity. There is a deeper life for men, a life in which responsibility and freedom go hand in hand and level upon level, a life in which happiness is rooted not in what we have but in what we fundamentally are. It is to such a life that this book is dedicated.

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