

Being a man doesn't have to be a struggle

Michael Kaufman

I was down at the Y the other day with my son, swimming a few lengths and fooling around on the Nautilus.

Afterwards in the dressing room I started talking with two guys. Two big guys.

I'm no shrimp, but one of them at least matched my 6'2" and that was just across the shoulders. Both had tattoos over muscles that even my doctor probably didn't know about.

They were nice enough guys and pretty articulate. I figured them for two weight room types, but soon found out their most recent training was in a maximum-security penitentiary.

We talked about this and that, I asked them about prison and, in the end, one of them – the little guy, the one under 200 pounds – said he learned one thing in there. "You can't let yourself be pushed around. Right from the start you got to show them you can't be pushed."

He was an ex_con. But what he told me could have been the creed of just about any man: banker, lawyer, lineworker at GM, soldier, teacher, cop. From an early age we learn that to be a man means to have control, to have power, to stay on top, and to dominate.

Most of us don't need muscles to control things in at least some little corner of the world. If you're lucky, have the opportunity and some native ability, you can do it with money or brain power. In spite of my own awe_inspiring bulk, that's where I checked into manhood: I learned to manipulate my environment through the power of words.

This definition of manhood is the source of real tragedy. After all, no man can be fully in control. Even the political leaders, the sports heroes, the stars must feel a bit out of control at times. In a large, alienating world, no one can sit comfortably on top.

The problem, though, is that being on top is part of our self_definition of manhood. The more things get out of control, the more you feel you aren't making the masculine grade. You may not always know it, but those doubts are buried deep inside.

So what do you do about it? Well, some men work harder and burn through their life trying to get ahead and prove themselves to the world. Some men beat up on women or kids: when this whole world is getting you down, why not prop up a bruised ego by showing someone who's boss?

Some men take on other men in sports, business competition, or physical confrontation. Whatever it is, benign or brutal, men scramble to show themselves and the world that they're real men.

It's not only other people who we must control. It's also ourselves. You can't feel too much, you can't wear your heart on your sleeve, you've got to play without fear and tough it out. It's Survival 101 at Masculine U.

Maybe it's a way to survive, but it's no way to flourish. Men's lives get filled with unmet needs and desires. Our links with children are often gutted by having more important things to do. Our ties with other men are often shallow and devoid of intimacy and trust. Our ties with women often hinge on trying to satisfy a lifetime of hidden and unmet emotional needs.

Men work and hustle to look and feel like real men. The funny thing, though, is that it's all an illusion. There's no one set thing that is manhood. What's masculine in Teheran is different than what's masculine in Toronto.

Even within one city, each economic class, each age group, each social group defines it's own standards of manhood. Our ideas about manhood are constantly changing. Just imagine 10 or 20 years ago hearing, as a friend recently did, a male teenager say, "I like wearing an earring, but it's not like I'm the macho type."

Our ideas about masculinity are what has been called gender, and that's something created by society. The problem is that we confuse these social definitions of gender with biological reality. There are only a few, if delightful, biological differences between men and women. Most of the differences we notice – voice, body hair, size, and many personality traits – are only average differences.

Except for a few essential differences in our reproductive functions, there is no hard and fast line separating all women from all men. Every society in which gender is important, though, takes those average differences and accentuates them until we have firm and fixed pictures about what it means to be real men and real women.

Because we confuse sex and gender, we think we must a rat's nest full of characteristics to be real men. Even though my subgroup's definition of a real man might be different from that of the next guy, each definition feels like a fixed, biological truth.

Of course, none of us fit effortlessly into that definition; we have a range of needs, desires, attributes and fears that just don't fit in. And so you've got to struggle to be a man.

The truth, though, is that there's no struggle to be a man. Roughly half of us are born men and will die men. Regardless of what any man might feel, there's no point to struggle. If you've got a penis you've made it. Congrats.

Don't worry about working yourself to death. Don't run out and beat up a gay man or some other guy at the bar. Don't slug your wife. Don't try to rule the world. Don't be an expert on everything.

Just sit back and bask in the good fortune that you are alive.

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