CRACKING THE ARMOUR

POWER, PAIN AND THE LIVES OF MEN

MICHAEL KAUFMAN

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Michael Kaufman
Toronto, Canada
October 1992

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INTRODUCTION

✦ *Armoured Illusions, Glimmers of Hope*

When I was a boy living in Cleveland, Ohio, one of my favourite places was a room in the art museum where they kept the armour. I remember a sunroom, skylights high overhead, exotic plants from Africa, and everywhere, those suits of armour, strange remnants of medieval Europe. Each suit was a model of invincibility. I would debate in my mind the merits of various designs, wondering how chain mail would stack up against the bulkier outfits with the ridged helmets. From the fierce gaze of the face masks down to the iron toes, armour seemed like good protection. My body might have been small but in my mind I was powerful – armour seemed all I needed to bridge the gap between imagination and reality.

The armour represented strength, like that of the

grown men around me. They were the ones in control just about everywhere; they were the figures of authority, respect, physical strength and achievement. They were the policemen, doctors and school principals, the scientists, sports heroes and superheroes, the cowboys, priests and rabbis. They included God himself. By seven I already had a vague sense that the world belonged to men and, as a male, someday it would all be mine.

At the time, however, I didn't have much control over my daily affairs. To be a child meant always being told what to do. But my fantasy life was another thing. I dreamed of superheroes in comics and the war stories on TV. I could fly and see through walls; I would suffer silently, horribly wounded, yet be able to hang on until reinforcements came. These heroes were the fantasy counterpart to the man I would someday become. I might have felt weak and powerless as a child but for me there was a great escape: the future promise of manhood. Part of my birthright was a passkey to the world of male power. All I had to do was to dream and to wait. I didn't have any idea why men had power, nor was it something I even thought about, but I did realize that there was something about our bodies that distinguished those who would enter the world of power from those who wouldn't. This early sense of power was the driving force of the masculinity that was growing within me.

I caught on pretty early that men had power, but my ideas about this power were a bit lopsided. I had a sense that it was about strength, but I didn't know that men often felt powerless. I thought that armour was something that could be worn on top like a suit of clothes, so I didn't realize that I would have to reshape my child-hood heart and my innocent soul if masculine armour were really to fit. Most of all, there was no way I could know that by the time I was an adult, there would be a crisis of masculinity in our society, a questioning and a confusion about what it meant to be men.

Thousands, even millions, of men are now rethinking and reassessing their expectations of manhood. We're reading books and listening to speakers that explore the mythical past or emphasize essential differences between men and women. This book is different. For me the problem is not feminism, as some men feel; nor is it the contention of Robert Bly and his followers that we men have been feminized and left out of touch with our wild, masculine essence. The real problem is that the ways we have defined male power over several thousand years has brought not only power and privilege to the lives of men, but tremendous pain and insecurity as well. That pain remained largely buried until the rise of feminism. As women have challenged men's power, we've been left feeling increasingly vulnerable and empty, and full of questions. Bereft of the socially created power on which we had come to depend, we have lost sight of our innate

human capacities and potential.

If this is where our problems lie, then we have to look for solutions in the hearts and behaviour of individual men as well as through a challenge to all those things in our society that have perpetuated a certain brand of manhood. We have to redefine what it means to be men, but to do so we need to reshape our world in a design of equality, diversity and shared strength between women and men.

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At certain moments I celebrate the lives of men and my life as a man. I am playing basketball and am exhilarated with the push and shove of muscle against muscle, with the sense of legs, arms and brains pumping in harmony and rhythm. I am telling stories with my son, each of us trying to delight the other with our outrageousness and audacity; or we're sharing a hug or marvelling at the bugs and wildflowers of a forest. I am working, one moment taking hammer to nail and pounding with precision, the next tapping words into my computer, the next guiding a group of students through a difficult progression of logic. I am making love and feel a power of body and mind. There are many positive aspects to our masculinity: our physical and emotional strength, our sexual desire, our ability to operate under pressure, our courage, our

creativity and intellect, our dedication to a task, our self-sacrifice. The ideals of men have a positive side for they represent many of the capacities of all human beings.

But I am uneasy. Many of the characteristics men celebrate become distorted. Although it is seldom recognized, the ways that we've come to define manhood create a problem for most men. I see one man drinking himself to death and another working himself to an early grave. I see one man who loves women but hates himself; I see another who hates women and yet another who desperately needs women but emotionally abuses them. I see men with desperate and insatiable sexual longings that feel overwhelming. I see men isolated and alienated from other men, who fear other men. I see some men without friends. I see so many men distant from their children or from their fathers, and unsure how to get any closer. I see men who are scared and scarred but who live their lives with an aura of mastery and calm as they function from day to day without a hitch, often moving to the pinnacles of social power, usually oblivious to their own pain.

All these joys and pains of manhood are now joined by a new confusion in the lives of men. The modern wave of feminism that began in the late 1960s has called into question men's assumptions about power and identity, about what it means to be men. Much of what we were taught, much of what we said was good and true, has

been challenged as discriminatory towards women or perpetuating stereotypes of femininity and masculinity that damage us all. The old rules of the game have broken down. A genuine and profound crisis of masculinity is sweeping North America and Europe and is beginning to reach out to the rest of the world. It is a crisis that touches the lives of each and every one of us. This crisis has created a market for dozens of recent books about men's wounds, and for woodland workshops where drumming and discussion are proposed as a viable pathway to change.

The crisis takes on a different quality for different men. I talk to one man who is afraid of his strength, who worries that if he's strong he won't be gentle and caring. He responds to the crisis by losing a sense of his own abilities and power. A second is afraid that he can't sexually deliver to women, that he won't be good enough. A third decides he's fed up with being confused and reverts to the performance-driven model of manhood that he learned from his father. Another finds it frightening to tell his family he is gay. Still another wants to spend more time with his children but feels driven to succeed and perform at work. There are a million and one versions to the crisis – some are slight while some dominate our lives – but the dilemma is being played out among us all.

I was one of those men who wasn't particularly

surprised when women pushed me to rethink my assumptions about men and women, though I am still doing my share of readjusting. From the time I was a kid I never felt entirely happy with the images of manhood I was trying so hard to live up to. It seemed stupid not to cry when you were sad or hurt and it took me years to master that one. I was never good at the cocky arrogance of the playground and had to suffer through the indignity of other kids getting chosen first for kickball and baseball teams. The standard suit just didn't seem to fit me, but there weren't a lot of alternatives and so I had to craft my own armour based on other skills of control and mastery, like intellectual and verbal power, as well as learning how to be attractive to girls and then women.

In recent years, as I thought about my own life and looked around at the world of men, I became convinced that men's experience of power was contradictory: along with the privileges that men enjoy, there is also pain and isolation. Much of this pain has long been hidden within ourselves. This is the secret that dominates the lives of men. Women seem to understand this when they assume the role of emotional caretakers for husbands and sons, friends and workmates. The isolation of each man as he struggles to be a man is like salt in his wounds. We learn to compete with other males, to remain on our guard, to achieve. We learn to fight. In a male-dominated world – a world with elaborate old boy networks, where we work

together and hang out together – men appear to be marching arm in arm. True, we may stand side by side, but we link arms through an armour that mutes our basic needs and emotions, strengths and weaknesses. We don't have to feel these things because we set ourselves apart from each other, the better to remain invulnerable, the Man of Steel in his Fortress of Solitude.

We remain isolated from other men because we feel that our problems and insecurities are unique, and this makes us even more fearful of being discovered weaklings, wimps, pushovers or in other ways not real men. Such fear in turn further increases our isolation. This pattern not only keeps our pain invisible from other men but, eventually, even from ourselves: we stop noticing the pain. In other words, at the centre of men's lives is a paradox: it is the paradox of power. We have social power, but we and those around us pay a devastating price for it. The source of men's pain is none other than the patriarchal societies within which we have defined our power.

The real attraction of Robert Bly and the mytho-poetic men's movement has been that it allows men to start breaking down their emotional and spiritual isolation from one another. This is well and good, for it has encouraged many men to think about their lives and redirect their futures. However, the weakness of this approach is that it tries to break this isolation

using incomplete, even false, premises often based on appealing but simplistic parables that cannot possibly address the complexity of the modern crisis of manhood. For a short time it will feel good and right. But it doesn't get to the source of men's problems, which is this strange combination of power and pain.

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Sometime around 1980 in upstate New York, I was sitting in a support group organized for men. It was chance that brought me to the group, for it was just one small part of a week-long workshop where I was training in peer counselling and trying to exorcise a few ghosts from my own psychological closet. So there I was in my first men's group, if you discount football and basketball teams, boy scouts, and other such things. One man talked about how much he missed his father and wished he had been closer to him. Another spoke angrily about his divorce and his feelings of inadequacy in relationships. A college student confessed that he wasn't really sure what it meant to be a man; he just didn't feel like he was one. One guy who had struck me as someone with more muscle than brains talked eloquently about the way people treated him because he was so big and how they stayed clear of him as if they were scared to be close. We went around and around and I couldn't believe what I was hearing. For the first time I realized that many men shared my discomfort

with the prevailing definitions of masculinity. I felt closer to other men than I had ever felt before.

The discomfort we expressed is usually hard to see because we hide it from ourselves. Even if we allow ourselves to notice it, we try to keep it from others. After that first workshop I started working with men in men's groups and in counselling situations. As I started speaking in public and met men from all walks of life, I discovered that most men have a buried sense that they haven't made the grade, that they aren't like other men. Sometimes they feel different; often they feel isolated, unable to open up and be themselves.

In some ways we all know that masculinity is stifling. Men know this because we were once children who were forced to suppress a range of human possibilities, needs, and emotions in order to fit into our particular style of masculine armour. We know it because we're not always happy with the demands that others, both men and women, place on us or that we place on ourselves. We rarely admit any of this to ourselves, let alone to the world.

I began to feel less isolated when I realized that other men were trapped in the same isolation, the same illusions. This gave me great hope and a new sense of strength. I became aware first of hundreds, then of thousands of men who were making efforts to change themselves and their lives. I became convinced that as

men we can break our isolation and collectively redefine what it means to be a man. And that is the purpose of this book: to help us understand the basis of our isolation and pain, to see what is harmful and oppressive in our current notions of masculinity, and to reclaim the capacities and joys that we buried in our quest for an armour-plated manhood.

This book is a vessel of communication in which I try to capture the aspirations, the courage and the vision of the men who are saying we can do it all differently and better. I am convinced that as fathers, husbands, lovers, sons, brothers, workers and morally concerned citizens we have the capacity to join women in reshaping our lives and our world. We need to do so not just to feel better, but because current gender structures are tearing apart the lives of men and women. *Cracking the Armour* helps chart a new course for our future not only as individuals but as a society of women and men.

✦

Arriving at a new definition of manhood requires an understanding of the complex drama through which we become masculine. The playwright Bertolt Brecht once wrote, "What do you think it costs to become properly hard-boiled, to become even moderately thick-skinned? That state doesn't come naturally, it's got to be attained." From a very young age we soak up the norms, values and

assumptions of our patriarchal culture, but we do so in ways that are more complex than is usually reflected in the books, articles and TV shows of the past two decades. Unlike many others who write on these issues, I do not think we are simply discovering archetypal qualities of manhood that have governed men from the dawn of humanity. I do not feel that we simply adopt a set of stereotyped behaviour patterns or roles that we play out all our lives. Rather, we persist in feeling and expressing a wide and diverse range of human needs and capacities. We never fully become those stereotypes, we never fully play a role; the archetypes only express part of our humanity. We never fully learn to discard "un-masculine" characteristics: at times we might still be silly instead of cool, compassionate instead of hard-nosed, receptive instead of aggressive, conciliatory instead of confrontational. Other qualities remain tucked away, perhaps known only to us and a few people around us, perhaps buried so deeply that even we have lost sight of them. Many emotions or needs simply disappear because we forget they belong to us. Sometimes we forget how to recognize in other men or even in ourselves this well of compassion, love and vulnerability that exists alongside the strength, courage and competence we value so highly.

Admitting and facing up to the limitations of our current definitions of masculinity becomes the first step

in cracking the armour. It also opens up the possibility of moving beyond the compulsion to make the masculine grade in order to discover new sources of pride and hope.

The pathway to cracking the armour is not simply personal. There are those who put all their efforts into personal change and personal growth. They set out to change their self-concept and their relationships. Isolated change, however, is doomed to failure for it assumes, incorrectly, that we can be peaceful islands in a hostile world. Learning to experience and express our feelings is important for men, but it is not enough that we simply try to be a bit more sensitive, to feel a little more, to learn to growl or learn to cry. All of that is in the *Wizard of Oz* school of individual and social change: you close your eyes, click your heels together three times, and say, "I wish I could feel . . . I wish I could feel." And then you open your eyes, and where are you? You're still standing there, perhaps trying to balance the demands of your job with the new demands by women for equal participation in housework and childcare. Trying to respond differently to women who still sometimes act in the same old way to you. Trying valiantly to be a "new man" without ever having been secure about yourself as an old man, and certainly not feeling secure with these new changes. You still aren't sure where you are, but you know for sure that it ain't Kansas.

We need to change both ourselves and the world. The

two must be indivisible if the personal change is to be lasting and if the social change is to produce a new type of human being capable of creating a world of our choosing. Redefining what it means to be men is an ambitious goal, but it is no less ambitious than what women have been working for over the past two decades. Personal redefinitions must be linked to nothing less than a revolution in how we organize our social world--how we participate in politics and make our livelihoods, how we raise children, how we interact with the natural environment, how we think, play, and love.

A redefinition of manhood is not something I can pull out of thin air as I write this book; it is something that more and more men across this continent and around the world are helping to shape. Men are tired of being written off as hopelessly sexist, uncaring brutes. We long for communion with women, children, and other men. We are reading and thinking, talking to friends and joining support groups.

In this book I talk about men, about our lives, about our relationships with women and other men, about things that terrify us and things that take our breath away. I talk about our strengths and what I see as our insecure core which damages men, women and the world around us. I talk about sex and work, friendship and sports, parenthood and politics. I talk about change. I tell stories and include the voices of men I have worked with or interviewed, men whose words I have read or whose lives I have watched with admiration or loathing. Some of my examples are from my own life. I talk about myself because I want to step out from behind the protective mask of objectivity, the mask that helps a writer pretend these are not his problems, but rather are problems that he as an expert sees in others. By drawing on examples from my own life I am saying that we men have nothing to fear by talking about our own lives, our joys and fears, our triumphs and sources of pain. I draw on my own life precisely because it is very much the same as that of other men. I tell stories of our lives because in them we can discover a deep well of hope and possibility for the future of men.

We might feel trapped in the armour of masculinity, a trap both in our minds and in the social structures that surround us. But if we learn to wiggle our arms a bit, our shoulders will come free. Next come our heads and our brains, our chest and our hearts, our groins and our legs, and finally we will walk free. If it ever did serve us well, the armour does so no longer. It is time we consigned the armour of men to a museum.

FROM FLESH TO STEEL

✦ *Masculinity as a Collective Hallucination*

At 8:57 in the morning Maureen was giving birth to our child. It seemed anxious to get out and, just as the top of the head was starting to show, a little hand squeezed out into the open. A moment later there in front of my eyes was a perfect baby. A boy. The nurse grinned. "What a strong little fella," she said. Through the tears in my eyes I looked up at her in surprise. Just moments old and the lines of the script were being read. What would she have said if it had been a girl? "What a pretty little thing"? I felt she was measuring him for a football jersey. I happen to like playing football, but who says he wasn't going to prefer playing house? He didn't even have a name, yet he

was being named strong, masculine.

As each of us arrives in the world somebody speaks The Word. For slightly less than half of us The Word is, "It's a boy." The observation seems a simple one, for there along with the toes, fingers, and ears, is a tiny penis. Of course it's a boy. The observation, however, is more than a matter of anatomy. It is a pronouncement of our destiny. In itself, our biology doesn't create this destiny; rather, it's all the assumptions our society attaches to that biology. All sorts of emotional characteristics and social possibilities are offered to males that are often distinct from those held out to females.

While I knew all this intellectually, seeing it happen before my eyes caught me off guard. It was as if the nurse had taken a big rubber stamp and printed MAN across our baby's pristine forehead. With those words his future was placed before him, as clear as those inky letters. I felt he had been ripped off, that his innocence had lasted but a second before the course of his life was set. He had boarded a ship called Man. Off the ship sails, through life's adventures, its path seems natural and inevitable. But we forget that the ship is man-made. Manhood – masculinity – is just an idea, one that each society constructs in its own way. The boat is a figment of our collective imagination, but it's a phantom ship with tremendous power over our psyches and actions.

✦ Confusing Sex and Gender

The existence of this phantom ship isn't at all obvious. One reason is that we confuse biological sex with gender. The word gender gets bandied about as if it means the same thing as sex, but it doesn't. Gender is our notion of the appropriate behaviour, thought and activities of men and women, our ideas of masculinity and femininity. Masculinity, says a friend of mine, is what you do.

In the best tradition of intellectual research, I conducted an informal poll one weekday afternoon on a downtown street corner. I wanted to find out if people could talk about sex without confusing it with gender. What was natural to manhood and womanhood? I asked.

"Guys are hairy," giggled a teenage girl.

"Women have higher voices and will never be tuba virtuosos," said a man carrying an instrument case that looked like it held a piccolo.

"Men are more logical, women more intuitive," commented several people, men and women alike.

"Women are less aggressive then men, they're more likely to be good parents," said a neatly dressed man and woman almost in unison, as if they'd been in the middle of a conversation on just that topic.

My poll seemed useless. I heard everything from comparisons of muscles and styles of dress, to judgments on who is able to reason his or her way out of a wet paper bag and who is better at looking after babies. Everyone

seemed confused about the difference between natural characteristics of our biology and the creations of gender.

Then again, maybe the poll wasn't so useless for this confusion is one of the key factors that makes "masculinity," or our current ideas of it, look natural. The term "sex" refers to a narrow (even if splendid) set of physical differences between males and females. Gender, though, as our *ideas* about masculinity and femininity, dictates an amazing range of activities, characteristics, forms of behaviour and modes of thinking of men and women. Gender tells us what clothes we should wear, how we should sit, what parts of our body to shave and what parts we can expose, what type of jewellery to hang from where, how to laugh, what sex to be attracted to, whether it's okay to cry and in what circumstances, how to hold a cigarette, what types of jobs are appropriate, and whether we walk through a door first or second.

In addition, when you look closely it turns out that most of the things we assume are fundamentally different about men and women are only average differences. Let's take physical differences, for example. Many so-called secondary sex characteristics, such as height, amount of body hair or percentage of muscle or body fat, admit to no hard and fast line between males and females. Within any one racial group, the average

man is taller than the average woman, but that doesn't mean every man is taller than every woman. Furthermore, women from Northern Europe and much of Africa, for example, tend to be taller than men from Asia. Some Mediterranean women have more body hair than some Scandinavian men.

Surface appearances aside, what about our body chemistry? Not even male and female hormones, to which some people attribute so much of our behaviour, reinforce a firm line between the sexes. Women's adrenal glands produce some of the "male" hormone testosterone while men's adrenals produce some of the "female" hormones estrogen and progesterone. In fact, a lot of a man's testosterone is derived from progesterone. It is the usually higher concentration of particular hormones that triggers the sex-differentiated patterns of sexual maturation, various secondary sex characteristics and reproductive functioning. But levels of hormones vary from person to person. There just aren't absolute limits, as many of us think. Even the so-called primary sex characteristics, those that are supposed to mark a fundamental dividing line between males and females, show similarities between the sexes. All human embryos start off developing as "female." It is not until the third month after conception that the *y* chromosome in males sparks the development of the few physical characteristics that mark the differences between males and females. This once led my father to

comment, at a session of a medical conference he was chairing, "I used to think that all men were brothers. But today I have learned that all men are sisters."

Biologically, chemically, the sexes share much more than is generally presumed. Why then do we *seem* so totally different? I think it's mainly because we've learned to see men and women this way. A friend tells me of the time she was standing at a bus stop with her baby who was dressed in tiny jeans and a lumber jacket. A male acquaintance came up and said, "So it's true you had a baby." With a big grin he grabbed the baby and started tossing it into the air. "What a little bruiser," he exclaimed. "What's his name?" My friend replied, "Her name is Sarah." And with that the man's whole body posture changed. He cuddled the baby and tickled her cheek. "What a little sweetheart," he cooed. In a split second the man saw Sarah differently. He seemed unable to see her as both hardy and cute when in fact she was both.

During one experiment, dozens of baby boys and girls were brought before volunteer observers who recorded their levels of activity and aggressiveness. The observers noted overwhelmingly that the baby boys were more active and aggressive than the girls, who were quieter. The experiment was repeated using different observers and different babies. Each time the results were the same. The hitch was that the "boys"

and "girls" weren't what they appeared. They were randomly chosen from a group of babies and randomly dressed in clothes associated with boys or girls. The observers had consistently made assumptions based on dress and their ideas of what boys and girls were supposed to be like, rather than on actual behaviour.

This tells us that we look at the world through gender-coloured glasses, that we see differences even when there are none. We expect these differences. We expect them in terms of biological attributes and we expect them in terms of behaviour and emotions. Yet think about the people you know. Can't just about anything you say about the personalities and emotional lives of men apply to many women, and vice-versa? I know strong and fast women and small and weak men, men who cry and women who are icebergs, men who are gentle and women who are violent. I believe any stereotype we've imagined –and we've imagined quite a range – is there to be broken.

So gender is a pretty dangerous thing. It obscures similarities between men and women, while masking individual differences; it leaves us thinking that the image of masculinity and the image of femininity that we grew up with represent our biological essence. Gender, not sex, is at the heart of our sex-role stereotypes.

Of course, our stereotypes of masculinity are linked to our stereotypes of femininity. In large part masculinity is defined as what is not feminine. It is gender that allows us

to neatly assume that male and female are two clearly divided halves of the human picture, the yin and yang. So pervasive is this notion of duality that things having absolutely nothing to do with men and women get defined in dualized, gendered terms. In electronics, for example, connectors and plugs are referred to as male or female, depending on whether they have prongs sticking out or holes to receive. For anyone who works with electronics or electricity the expressions are a helpful bit of shorthand, and I use them myself, but there's no way around their sexualized imagery, the sense of one part, the male, doing something active to the passive and waiting female counterpart.*

Even this quick examination of gender lets us in on the big secret: masculinity is not a timeless biological reality. In spite of biological differences between males

* It would be foolish to totally discount the possibility of hormonal and biological sex influences on male and female behaviour. Let me only repeat that such things are likely only average differences. That we tend to notice these things because gender is so important to us and not because of any absolute biological dividing lines between all males and all females. Our knowledge of this question remains clouded by our own gender biases and assumptions. Until we live in a world of equality and freedom from imposed gender differences, we will never really know what forms of behaviour or thought, if any, are innately different between all males and all females.

and females, masculinity is not something that half of us are born with. Masculinity is not in our genes, it is in our imaginations.

Exactly what is manhood, though, is hard to pin down. Although masculinity is an idealized version of what it means to be male, there's no single definition of what it is. Ideas of manhood change from one society to the next, from one year to the next, from one subculture to the next. There are different masculinities, different definitions of manhood particular to different groups of men. A carpet layer, his arms decked with tattoos, tells me, "It's being mature, having a calm temper, not getting angry." A middle-aged father, pausing from a game of catch with his son, tips back his hat, thinks for a moment, and says, "It means you're responsible, that you can provide, you know, look after the family and all that." A corporate lawyer, squeezing in a short interview between meetings, sits erect in a hand-stitched suit. On the broad surface of his desk there's barely a scrap of paper. His hands form a church steeple. "Masculinity?" he says. "It's being tough. No one is going to push me around or make a fool of me." Such an image of toughness is not every-man's cup of tea. Another man, his eyes peering out from behind thick glasses, gestures at the religious books that surround him and says, "Being a man? It means you are entrusted by God to understand His mysteries." A waiter sits down for a cigarette and a glass of wine after a night's

work. "It's just me. I can't say what it is or isn't. It's just me." The bottom line, perhaps, is drawn by a teenage boy standing at a street corner. He shifts from foot to foot and finally says, "It means you're no girl."

Each generation, each social class and ethnic group has a different model of what it means to be a man. You are a man if you're calm and rational, you're a man if you're tough and show it; you're a man if you look after the family, you're a man if you let no woman or kid chain you down; you're a man if you work hard at the steel mill, you're a man if other men open limousine doors for you in recognition of your worldly power; you're a man if you're hairy, you're a man if your face is tough and clean-shaven. The images keep changing. Think, for instance, only of men's fashion. For most of our century few men in the Western world would have been caught dead wearing an earring. Then some gay men started wearing them. Now we have everyone from wrestlers to metal-crunching rock stars sporting pretty little earrings on their lobes. (A teenage boy recently told me, "Sure I wear an earring, but don't get me wrong, I'm not macho or anything.") In South Asia men routinely wear skirts, in Africa and the Middle East they wear full wraparound dresses, and in Scotland the man's garb of old is the kilt. They feel one hundred per cent masculine wearing all this, while you or I need our jeans or suits to feel comfortable heading off to work.

Each ethnic and social group builds its own definition of masculinity, even though there are many men within each group who don't fit the definition. Among North American working class men, a standard for masculinity has stressed physical strength, being good with your hands, and being able to provide for your family. Among middle class men, the definition of masculinity is a bit different. Toughness is still a virtue, as is support for a family, but verbal and mental toughness are celebrated and rewarded more than physical strength.

Different definitions of manhood show how our ideas of masculinity relate to our life situations. For example, a particular forms of masculinity may come to symbolize resistance and struggle by a group who lack power in the dominant society and are subject to particular forms of discrimination. Inner-city black men may affect a "cool pose" to assert control, toughness, and detachment. Through cool a black man can aggressively assert his masculinity and say, as Richard Majors writes, "White man, this is my turf. You can't match me here." Jewish men in the small towns, the *shtetels* and urban ghettos of Eastern Europe, on the other hand, idealized the notion of turning inwards. To them, cast as outsiders and lacking the means of economic power, being masculine meant being a learned man, a teacher of sons. Many gay men since the 1970s have cultivated a hyper-masculine look, a celebration of male physical strength, fitness and a

clean-cut, preppy image that has helped develop a proud self-identity in a community facing harassment and discrimination.

From these brief examples, we can see the wide array of masculine ideals and how they keep changing. One of the most pervasive shifts in the 1980s was a reappraisal of fatherhood. Before our eyes a new version of masculinity arose--the man who might be tough and a success in the world, but who is also an active and nurturing father. Popular advertising images today show athletic guys cuddling babies and middle-aged men hugging their fathers; movies and sitcoms have popped up with fathers, bungling and otherwise, looking after babies and growing children.

✦

Although there is no one set of characteristics that defines masculinity, there are some enduring and pervasive features. In the eyes of many men and women, masculinity means being in control, having mastery over yourself and the world around you. It means taking charge. The ways we do this are sometimes mundane – ordering in a restaurant or guiding a woman through a doorway, monopolizing the driving or keeping control of the TV channel changer. Sometimes they are profound – most of the world's political, corporate and religious leaders are still men. For some

men control is exercised through brute force, through the power of the fist. "When I was a kid," one man tells me, "I learned that if I wasn't the first one into a fight then other guys were going to put the boots to me." For most men, providing their masculinity hasn't had anything to do with fighting, at least not since they were teenagers. Their control might be established through a paycheck, social prestige or one-upmanship. "Feel good about my work?" says a doctor in a candid and relaxed moment. "You bet 'cha. It's important work and makes me know that I'm important."

Our images of manhood are flexible and changing, but they have a presence in our lives as if they were a natural reality. Becoming a man, though, isn't something that happens just because you are born with a penis; rather, it's a state of mind and a story of how we behave. Attaining this state is an important activity of childhood and the principal vocation of adolescence. It is a struggle that is never fully over, this process of squeezing ourselves into the tight pants of masculinity.

So we might be rough and tough or we might be gentle and caring. Most of us are some of each. But whatever our ideas of masculinity, they combine to create a mask, a shell, which protects us against the fear of not being manly. It protects us from harm as we set out on what men before us have defined as the basic quest of manhood, the acquisition of power. This quest is the heart of the project of becoming a man. With this power comes

the capacity to control: perhaps ourselves, perhaps others, perhaps the social and physical environment in which we live.

Whether through interpersonal relations, politics, religion, science or economics, the desire for power and control is at the heart of most of our notions of masculinity. Power can be exercised intelligently and sensitively, or by brute force. We fight in the school yard, compete for marks or prestige jobs, play the power games of business and politics, act like experts on sports, cars, music or academic trivia. In our relationships with other men and with women, most of us try to establish some authority or control, even if we don't always dominate. The urge for power is our mask and our armour. The urge for power is also a window into the psyche we acquire, affording us a glimpse of the burden and the bounty of manhood.

The thirst for control doesn't dwell merely in the individual man. Over the course of the past five or ten thousand years, men the world over have developed patriarchal societies based on a man's control over his children, his wife, and his property. Indeed, the word patriarchy literally means "rule of the father." Most religions came to reflect images of male authority. As the first states took shape, large groups of men began to challenge other groups over control of property and wealth. Today patriarchy the world over has become a dense network of social, cultural, economic, religious

and political institutions, structures, and relationships, which pass on control through men from generation to genera-tion. Men exercise control not only over women and children, but also over other men, based on divisions of class, race, nationality, religion, sexual orientation, age and physical and mental ability. Patriarchy casts its shadow everywhere, whether in Congress or the Parliament, in a trade union or a board room, a baseball team, a church, a family, a professional association or the local bar.

✦ The Fragility of Masculinity

So how can we define masculinity when our own culture's notion of it changes so quickly, when it takes on such widely differing forms that it's hard for any guy to keep up? No wonder so many men feel confused or angry. We've tried to build our lives around an illusion.

Faced with a crisis of manhood in the era of feminism, some men have embarked on a quest to get in touch with their "manly core" and discover the "deep masculine," as popularized by Robert Bly and other writers in an understandable effort quest to make sense of things. However good it all feels, though, looking for a core definition of masculinity is barking up the wrong tree. There is no eternal masculinity, deep or otherwise. We have ideals; we experience these ideals deep in our guts, but ultimately they are just mirages.

Masculinity is a collective hallucination. It is as if millions and millions of people had taken the same drug that helps them imagine a reality that seems to be everywhere but is actually nowhere to be found. Men find ourselves in a hopeless quandary. We strive to be real men, but masculinity as we understand it ends up being out of reach because it doesn't exist as we think it exists, as a biological reality. The very thing most highly prized is impossible to attain because it is ultimately just an illusion. In many societies, part of the disquiet of being an older man is the nagging suspicion that one has spent much of one's lifetime chasing a ghost.

The elusiveness of masculinity means that no man can ever feel totally and permanently confident that he has made the masculine grade. Many men are beginning to sense this – that's one of the reasons for the men's movement and the spate of popular books that propose to help us develop new definitions. But trying to create new definitions still misses the central point, so let me say it again: in the biological sense, being a male is simple – roughly half of humanity does it without effort – but being masculine, living up to society's image of manhood, is virtually impossible. Is it any wonder that so many men harbor doubts about their manhood? Think of some of the impulses that may now be clichés but that still operate in and influence our lives. Why do men, particularly as teenagers, worry about the length of their penises? Why do they fret

about the size of their muscles or who they can out-talk and out-perform? Why do some men fight or go to war to prove they're men? Why do some men slap around women to show who's boss? Why do we refer to someone who is tough and fearless as someone who's got balls? Why are the words "pussy" and "girl" used as the ultimate boot camp insult to army recruits around the world? Why do some men feel emasculated if they can't get an erection or if they're infertile? Why is a man who cries seen as unmanly?

Modern Western culture, in which ideas of masculinity are so fluid and hard to grasp, creates an enormous problem for men. Earlier societies were more homogeneous in their ideas about masculinity. An isolated tribe or an ethnically homogeneous town wasn't bombarded, as we are, by rapid social change. Images of manhood went largely unquestioned. To a greater or lesser extent, men and women had their separate spheres and men had much of the power. When boys were initiated into the world of men they were brought into a world of certainty, a certainty based on unchallenged power and an uncontested vision of manhood. As we approach a new millennium, neither can be taken for granted. Women will continue to challenge men's power, as they should, while a single model of manhood dissolves into a vibrant range of self-definitions and images. The simplicity of past moral and religious belief systems cannot possibly encompass this complex and changing reality.

I'm not suggesting at all, as others sometimes do, that we trade in our complex perspectives for a unified, unitary vision. Such a step would be neither possible nor particularly desirable. If there's anything we can learn from our confusion and fear, it's that we must head away from the notion that gender--masculinity or femininity – exists naturally as a timeless absolute at the core of our being. It simply doesn't. So let's take off those gender-coloured glasses and look beyond our delusions. When I look at the real world of men, I see something infinitely rich and diverse. None of us fully fits neatly into the stereotype; our collective hallucination fails to take into account our individuality.We must struggle against all our illusions, whether of the working class hero, the detached professional or the New Age wildman. Let's admit, joyfully, that we're a bundle of conflicts and contradictions. How liberating to shout out that society's expectations, old or new – our expectations – just don't sit comfortably with most of us.

I think, for example, of the burly ex-cop who quit to become an elementary school teacher, confounding friends and workmates by his rejection of his rough-and-tumble world. Or the successful corporate executive who packed it all in to look after his kids. Or my friend Philip who was a tough kid, famous for setting a record for the number of times he was strapped by the school principal. The values of his hometown never stuck, however, and by high school he had developed

a style that rejected physical force and a certain brand of male bravado. He affirmed his own sense of masculinity through intellectual talent and achievement. It's not simply a local boy makes good story; like all men's stories it shows that no one simply lives according to a predetermined script. In one way or another, all of us remain resistant to the narrowing of our human capacities. The current sex-gender system just doesn't conform to our actual, complex personalities, needs and experiences.

And I think of the story of the King of the Weight Room, a man who seemed to fit a particular stereotype of manhood with a vengeance. I heard the story from Charlie Kreiner, a colleague who does counselling work with men. One day Charlie was on his way from the swimming pool to the locker room at his hometown YMCA and had to walk by the weight room. All the guys were out in the hallway, crowding around the bulletin board, commenting loudly and sarcastically about a poster. It announced an upcoming men's workshop Charlie was leading. They went silent as Charlie passed. He walked quickly into the locker room and to the showers. He was whipping through a shower when in walked the King of the Weight Room. If you've ever hung about a gym you know that every weight room has a King, usually the toughest, the strongest and most assertive man in the bunch. So in walks the King who goes to the other side of the shower room, twists on the taps and starts showering. Charlie continues to shower.

The King works soap over his body. Charlie is starting to turn into a prune when the King swivels in his direction and says, "That you out there on the poster?" Charlie nods his head. The King steps right up to him and points a finger at his face. "You know something?" he says. "My life as a man has always been a tough one."

And so with the water showering down, the King talked about his life, talked about growing up in a poor and tough neighbourhood and how he realized that the only way he was going to survive was by being tougher than the rest. All he needed to feel safe enough to say things he had never said to another man was an opening, an 8 1/2 by 11-inch poster that told him that Charlie was a guy who was going to listen, that Charlie was a man who could understand. With that, the whole complex reality of his life burst open. The King may have appeared to be a cut-out stereotype of machismo, but his self-identity was infinitely more subtle.

There's a bit of the King in all of us, isn't there? I don't mean that our biceps usually measure up to his, or that each of us engages in an all-out pursuit of some type of power. What I mean is that none of us can quite pull it off. None of us can always be the man of our dreams--all it takes is one crisis to burst the bubble. I feel loss and anger at what we force ourselves to be and what we are encouraged and pressured to become.

This sense of inadequacy seems like a nasty inner voice taunting us: "You're not a real man like the other guys." But perhaps that voice is also a blessing. Perhaps it is telling us, "Maybe you don't have to be all those things." I think our inability to be the masculine ideal keeps us human. The battle between our individual needs and capacities and the demands to fit into a mould of manhood is the source of greatest paradox of masculinity: its fragility.

Being a man is a strange world of power and pain.

PAIN FLOWS FROM THE SOURCE OF POWER

✦ *Men's Contradictory Experiences of Power*

Masculinity may not be real in the way we assume it is, but it nonetheless has a powerful presence in our lives. That's because it is based on actual relations of power between men and women, *and* among men. When we talk about masculinity we're talking about gender power.

Over the past two decades, women have challenged men to examine the ways in which we have exercised power in the world. They have challenged our privileges and have demanded equality. More and more men have come to accept the idea that power, at least on some level, should be shared.

At the same time, many men say, "Oh, yeah, we're supposed to have power, but I don't feel like I do."

Do men actually monopolize social power or have we got a bad deal? Do we inflict wounds or are we the wounded ones? Who makes more sense: feminists who argue against patriarchy, or those men who talk only about the pain and wounds of manhood? For some of us, it's a dismal choice. If you pick the former, you feel like you're admitting that men are rotten, so you're bound to feel lousy about being a man. If you choose the latter, you're dismissing the sensible and just charges that women have been making.

I don't think we have to choose. In fact, thinking we have a simple choice leads to a false dichotomy. The truth is not that men live lives of either power *or* pain; rather, our lives involve both power *and* pain. We experience them both. Most importantly, there is a relationship between the two. The ways in which we have set up the world of men's power and the ways we have learned to express our personal power are the source not just of our collective domination over women and much of the pain of women's lives, but of our own pain as well.

✦ Hierarchies of Power

Geoffrey stares out the windows at the skyline. Forty-eight years old and a vice-president of a large clothing manufacturer, he normally feels proud of his hard-won achievements. By any account, he is up there in the world of men's power. But suddenly it doesn't seem

to matter. His fifteen-year-old daughter was killed two months ago in a car accident. He tries to remember something about her – her favourite colour, her favourite rock group – but it all eludes him. For years he has told himself he worked so hard for the sake of his family. Now his only child is gone forever and he barely even knew her. What was the point of all his work? he wonders. He turns back to his papers to drown his sorrow in more work.

Bill watches his wife fix breakfast. It was a long night; both have just woken up. His wife has a black eye and an orange bruise on her arm. His own head hurts, not from blows but from a hangover. He sits waiting, ready to put on his tie and sports jacket before leaving for work. Neither has said anything, but he knows she is trying to fix him a nice breakfast, trying to get him off to a good start today. A dozen nasty thoughts twist back and forth in his head: *I did it again. I know I shouldn't have, but she really asked for it this time ... well, maybe not, but she had in a way. No one appreciates the way I look after her, work to support her. They don't know how it feels to do this crummy job all day.* She gives him bacon and a poached egg. The egg isn't soft enough and he feels himself getting heated up, but he is too tired now to say anything. He knows he loves her but he also hates her. Lost in self-pity and a fleeting remorse, he feels angry and resentful but he isn't sure why.

Geoffrey and Bill are two very different guys. You meet Geoffrey and you don't doubt for a moment that he's a good person. Decent is the word that comes to mind. When you first meet Bill you catch the edge underneath, but you wouldn't guess that he has beaten his wife five times in the past year. Both, though, have learned to exercise power in the world, even if they do so very differently. Now, however, Geoffrey is realizing he has paid a price for the way he exercised worldly power – he didn't even know his own daughter. Bill is a bundle of pain, but he has learned to relieve his own frustrations by striking out at his wife – that is, by exercising power in the form of brute force.

What is this strange world of men's power and pain?

Power can a creative force, used to develop our human capacities in a constructive, positive way, to celebrate life, like the power of love. But when I talk about power here, I am talking about its negative, destructive manifestations – the capacity to control, manipulate and dominate others, our own emotions and the material world around us. In societies controlled by men, this second, negative experience of power has long won out over the positive. This is not because we are inherently bad. We learn to exercise this power because it can give us privileges, advantages and a sense of well-being. Its source is the society around us, but we learn to exercise it as our own. It might derive from a power with

words, from money, from the use of physical force. Each man's power bears his own personal stamp.

Even though we all use it in one way or another, we don't all experience power equally. There are hierarchies of power among men, and this helps explain why some of us feel so powerless. These hierarchies might be based upon age, race or economic class, sexual orientation, education or social status, physical strength, intelligence or physical ability. We all know that society values some groups more highly than others, so it's no surprise that some men dominate others. There's always some guy who wields more power than you. That's one way we can define men's power as the source of our own pain.

Added to the complexity of this blatant hierarchy of power, certain forms of masculinity have greater weight than others. Australian sociologist Bob Connell talks of "hegemonic masculinity" – that is, the dominant cultural ideal of masculinity, the model that enjoys power over others. It is an ideal that prevails even though most of us cannot measure up to its images. We create fantasy figures, gods and mythical heroes, superstars and athletes, and movie characters, such as those played by Humphrey Bogart, John Wayne and Sylvester Stallone. Even though few men are Bogarts or Stallones, says Connell, by an enthusiasm for their fantasy characters many men help sustain these images.

We sustain them not only by our sheer fascination for certain heroes, but by re-creating and reinforcing these images of manly power.

Hegemonic masculinity explains some of the hostility to male homosexuality in many cultures. It's not just that many men don't have a romantic or sexual interest in other men. Rather, there's fear and public contempt attached to homosexuality. Much of this hostility is a response to the fear of being vulnerable to another man, vulnerability automatically lowers you in the hierarchy of male power. Even within the homoerotic societies of ancient Greece and Rome, sexual relations among men tended to follow pre-established lines of social power – between men and boys, or between citizen and slave – in which it was only those with less social power who would be penetrated anally.

✦ Women and the Dynamics of Men's Power

What we all share, though, regardless of our sexuality and regardless of our position within the hierarchy of men, is that which is the major expression of gender power: power over those who are not men – over women and over children.

It's not always expressed physically or aggressively. We exercise control, too, through defining the terms and values of social dialogue. We have often denigrated women's values, the ways women can relate to each

other, their communication and conciliation skills.

Most men are not brutes, and certainly none of us are born brutes, yet all women, directly or indirectly, experience at least the *potential* of domination, violence, coercion and harassment at the hands of men. On a continent where a staggering 30 to 50 percent of women have been beaten, raped or victimized by incest – and where countless more have been pressured into having sex or have been sexually harassed at work or on the street – no woman can feel completely secure. For every one of us who is opposed to these forms of men's behaviour, there is another man who persists in dominating women, and in so doing also shapes the way women will relate to us.

Men's status as first-class citizens and women's as second-class has always been the essence of patriarchal societies, that is, societies where men dominate women, and this control has often been encoded in law. Up to this century only men were able to vote in most countries. Women were under the control of their fathers or husbands – hence in the traditional marriage ceremony the father gives away his daughter to the husband. Until recently in North America and England, men could not be charged with raping their wives (this is still true in a number of states). In many parts of the world women still cannot own property. Male-dominated legal and religious establishments subject woman's

reproductive capacities to outside regulation through restrictions on birth control and abortion, and favour men through double sexual standards for men and women. Even today, as social codes change and old laws are challenged, in many ways a woman is still a second-class citizen. Despite a few high-profile professional women, the average woman still earns only two-thirds of the income of men and still works in a pink-collar job ghetto. While more men participate actively in domestic work and child-rearing, most women are still responsible for making sure this work gets done. Women hold a tiny minority of positions of social power in commerce, religion, science, politics, trade unions, sports, the media and the intellectual and literary world.

On a personal level, men still make decisions on women's behalf as a result of years of conditioning. In many cases these are considerate and well-meaning men who don't realize they are doing such things. Maureen once said about me: "When I'm cooking, or even when we're visiting someone, you don't think twice about making a comment about how to do it better. What spice to add or whether to turn the temperature up or down. You might be right but I just think that men are more likely to give advice. You don't think twice whether your opinion is asked for or not."

There are a thousand and one little things that men do without thinking, things we're often unaware of, things

that aren't necessarily bad or oppressive. They simply have the cumulative effect of reinforcing men's dominance over women.

When women stand up and tell us these things, we start to squirm. We feel like shouting, *I'm not like that, I'm not that type of guy.* Yes, they're often voices of anger. Yes, this anger is often directed at us. But it is at our peril that we ignore this criticism. What are often described as "women's issues" are, in a different way, men's issues. Our own anger and pain is often connected to the ways we have exercised power over women. Some men resent giving women financial support, but that's only necessary because of men's privilege – our access to higher-paid jobs. Geoffrey, for example, was able to devote all his energy to his work because he didn't have to worry about childcare and domestic work, which were the responsibility of his wife. This was a form of privilege he enjoyed, but the cost of that privilege was that he never came to know his own daughter. Then there is Bill. While I feel little but anger towards the abusive Bill, even he wasn't born a bully. His ongoing physical and emotional control of his wife brings horror to her life and allows him to keep burying his own pain as he digs himself into a deeper and deeper pit.

In our hierarchical society we often feel our own power only when we interact with those who have, or

at least appear to have, less power. Men might relish this power, but we also feel alienated from it because of the pain it causes us even if we're not aware of the pain it can cause others.

We know there is no static or single thing that is manhood. Masculinity exists only as a power relationship within a patriarchal society. A man can only be a "real man" if someone is around being a "real woman." Even the most secure man can ultimately only experience himself as a real man, that is, as possessing masculinity, if he's able to experience someone else as possessing femininity, that is, a real woman, a child, or a man whom he sees as less than a real man. What other form of confirmation can there be, particularly when the definitions of manhood are constantly changing? If simple biological malehood isn't sufficient to confirm masculinity, if masculinity is something we have to fight for, if prevailing versions of masculinity are based, at least in part, on a conception of control and domination in addition to its many positive virtues, then it becomes clear that masculinity is ultimately a relationship of social power.

By exploring all this, women have lifted a veil of secrecy, have spoken out in rage and pain. For men, listening to this voice is difficult, yet we should see it as a gift, because it tells us one chapter of the story of men's power and begins to unveil the story of men's pain.

If the way we have defined power causes so much hurt to those we love and so much pain to ourselves, why do we persist? One answer to why men exercise patriarchal power is because we reap the benefits. This, indeed, has been the cogent argument of feminists. It is true, but it isn't the whole truth. Most men are not so utterly callous or self-serving that this can be a full explanation.

✦ The Paradox of Men's Power

There is something more than power and privilege that causes men to do things they are, or should be, ashamed of doing. This is our secret, hidden so well that most men are not aware of its existence: Our lives are a strange combination of power and pain, privilege and isolation. The way we define our power, the way we have set up a world of men's power, the way we assert that power – these are the sources of our pain; this is men's contradictory experience of power.

Nowhere do we see this more clearly than in the ways we have learned to define our masculinity as our ability to control and dominate our own unruly bodies and emotions. We perpetuate our power, perform and stay in control, stay on top of things and call the shots, tough it out and achieve by learning to beat back our feelings, hide our emotions, suppress our needs – and we don't even realize we're doing all this.

The pain of our power begins when we are young. It's there as we learn to perform for teachers and parents, or to survive the rough and tumble of playground life. A third generation Italian-American talks about being singled out by some of the other boys. "I didn't hide my feelings, I wasn't interested in hurting anyone else. When they beat me up I was incredulous. I couldn't understand why they were doing this to me. Finally I decided to get them off of my back. One day on the school bus they were goading me to fight someone and I said to them, 'If I beat up this guy, will you lay off me?' They said yes, and when we got off the bus we fought and I pounded this guy in real good." Only twelve years old, he had already learned to turn off his own feelings and go after someone else.

A man's pain may be deeply buried, barely a whisper in his heart, or it may flood from every pore. The pain might be the lasting trace of things that happened or attitudes and needs acquired 20, 30 or 60 years earlier. Roger has just celebrated his 70th birthday. He sits quietly and looks down at the hands he has been kneading as he talks. "I always felt good at everything – at work, at making things. You wouldn't know it now, but at sports, too. Most of that is over and I realize that I really missed out on something. My wife, you see, was a housewife and that was something I just didn't think about. Things were different back then for us. I didn't realize it at the time,

but now I know that I had a lot of stuff in me – I might as well say it, although it sounds corny – a lot of love in me, that didn't have much of a place to go. My three children were all but grown up before I had time for them, and by then they treated me with a distant sort of respect. Now, they're off, scattered halfway around the world – one's off in India, one's married and living in Germany, and the other's here – and I know I've lost out for the way I chose to do things." He pauses for a moment and lifts his arms in a sad shrug. "That's it. I don't get another chance."

We're busy performing and trying to succeed, trying to keep it up in conversation and keep it up in bed. All the while, feelings like fear, pain and inadequacy must be kept at bay, like wild horses that could lurch out of control at any second. The suppression of emotion is celebrated in our culture in the stoic hero, the self-contained cowboy and the rugged soldier.

Humans have a number of physical responses to stress; we have built-in forms of emotional release to get rid of anxiety and distress. We will cry when physically or emotionally hurt, shout, scream and cry when angry, and shake when afraid. Usually we feel better after crying or shouting or shaking. But most men grow up suspicious of emotions. We learn to suppress feelings, needs and desires that aren't considered manly. We bury them for fear that they limit our masculine control

and our ability to act with so-called rationality. With practice, we lose the vocabulary of human emotions, so that sometimes we're actually surprised to find out we're feeling hurt, or terrified, or scared, or sad. Can you imagine what it takes not to cry when you're a ten-year-old who's just been punched? Or a forty-year-old who's just been fired? Or a sixty-year-old who has lost a dear friend?

These emotional needs don't disappear entirely; they are simply held in check and clog up our emotional pores. If we experience fear, or hurt, or embarrassment, then we keep feeling afraid, or hurt, or embarrassed because the simple expedient of crying or losing control or shaking or screaming is not easily accessible. Those hurtful, or embarrassing, or frightening experiences become magnified and take on a tremendous power. We feel overwhelmed by them. Without release, we become locked in cycles of fear and embarrassment. Seemingly trivial events – missing the ball in the outfield, getting pushed around – will seem to grow in importance, to become scenes that we keep replaying in our heads.

When emotions and avenues of emotional release are blocked, the results can be very destructive for a man and for those around him. For though we may not feel them, those emotions don't go away; they get bottled up inside and are eventually transformed in one of two ways: they

turn into anger and aggression, or they are turned against ourselves to become self-hate, self-deprecation, physical illness, insecurity or addictions.

The first response, anger, is all too common and can catch us by surprise. One couple talked to me with shame about a flare-up of violence in their own relationship. The man was physically strong but extremely gentle. He had never hit a woman or another man. He was uncomfortable with displays of anger and had always avoided sharp arguments. The woman was strong and self-confident, with no patterns of violence or abuse in her own background. They had lived together for two and a half years when their differences began. Little events triggered short quarrels and, as the weeks passed, real arguments began. Late one evening, he arrived home from an exhausting meeting and started to complain. She said she was sick of hearing him complain about his life. He said he was sick of their relationship. Within moments they were yelling at each other, both at the edge of control, when she said, "I can't stand men like you." Without thinking, he screamed and pushed her backwards over a chair. Neither could believe what he had done. She started crying. He tried to soothe her. She said she didn't want him to touch her ever again. He apologized and pleaded, he cried, he was beside himself. And finally,

hours later, they managed to talk. Luckily, the event was the catalyst that led them to begin to work through the problems of their relationship, and led him to make some important changes in his life.

What was it all about? I asked both of them several years later. A strenuous work life and heavy commitments in his small community had left him exhausted, unfulfilled and stressed. During the day he pumped down coffee to keep going and at night needed a drink to calm down. He kept his anxiety under the surface, so the seriousness of his problems was invisible even to him. She sensed his anxieties and tried to look after him, but this enabled him not to confront what was happening in his life and it also made her feel resentful. When he finally exploded, years of repressed emotion arose in a flash. He didn't know what he was doing. The way he had kept his doubts and emotions under check had turned him into a sealed boiler with no pressure valve.

The strange thing about trying to suppress emotions is that it leads not to less but to greater emotional dependency. By losing track of them, blocking our need for care and nurturance, we lose our emotional equilibrium and our ability to look after ourselves. Unmet, unrecognized and unexpected emotions and needs don't disappear but rather spill into our lives in other forms, at work, on the road, in a bar or at home. What we try to suppress gains a strange hold over us. No matter how cool and in control

we think we are, these emotions dominate us. How angry I sometimes feel at a car poking along in front of me on a city street! I think of Bill beating his wife in uncontrolled rage. I walk into a bar and see two men hugging each other in a drunken embrace, the two of them able to express their affection only when plastered.

Some men turn their dependency, frustration and depression against those who have less social or physical power, those they can blame, those who are innocent but who appear dependent, often those whom they love. Sometimes it's a minority that provides an easy target – gays, Jews or Catholics, blacks or Latinos, subordinates at work. Often children are targets. Women especially bear the brunt of this. Most men have a hard time turning to other men for emotional support because this would expose the game we are playing. Since a woman is often the only person in the world whom we can trust with our emotional needs, we tend to unload these on them. Men in need require emotional babysitters, women who are trained to respond to the moods and currents in relationships and who can respond to pain.

Often it's hard to distinguish which way our buried pain is directed – towards others or back on ourselves. In many men it takes the form of self-hate or insecurity, physical illness or addictions. Interviews with rapists

and batterers often reveal not only contempt for women, but self-hatred and self-contempt. It's as if, despising themselves, they lash out at others to inflict similar feelings, and at the same time experience a momentary sense of power and control. Our ideas about masculinity equate power with self-worth, so exercising control can be an effective way of feeling a bit better about oneself, at least for an instant.

All this becomes the background rumble of life: the man working himself to death or the man destroyed because he has no work, the guy who challenges you to a fight because he thinks you looked at him the wrong way, the man who drives his car like it's a fist, the man consumed by petty hatred, jealousy and fear, the successful man with a killer instinct at work. Men who have been deprived of support and attention, men who feel inadequate or powerless in the world, men without emotional outlets, men who are not even aware of their own emotions, men who are drunk with power, men who become junkies of alcohol, drugs, work or sports, men who resemble, as so many of us do, the character in one of Dick Francis's crime novels – a man who is "like one of those snow-storm paperweights, all shaken up, with bits of guilt and fear and relief and meanness all floating around in a turmoil."

Men's pain has a dynamic aspect – it's not just something that hurts and then goes away a second later, like

when you stub your toe. We suppress or displace it, but in doing so it becomes more powerful. We blank out to the real sources of our problems and lose a sense of our pain. We become emotionally mute while at the same time we are bristling around the edges. Some fathers learn to stay in control with a silence their wives and children dare not interrupt. Some teenagers, feeling inadequate, beat up, even kill, other kids.

Blanking out to our pain, we construct a suit of armour. This armour hides our feelings and needs, maintains an emotional barrier between us and those around us and keeps us fighting and winning. But while it protects us, it also keeps us imprisoned. German literary theorist Klaus Theweleit writes, "Men who are determined at all costs to remain men are destined to win and to win, until the battle is lost."

Together, men's power and pain shape our sense of manhood. The combination is the primary source of our alienation as men, our detachment from our own emotions, feelings, needs, and potential for human connection and nurturance. Our alienation is illustrated by our distance and isolation from women and other men. When some men these days write and talk of our distance from our fathers, the father wound, they are merely referring to one aspect of our alienation, one element of our pain. What they say is important, but in stressing only one part of the problem, they miss the

whole.

The relationship between our exercise of power and our alienation is apparent in our response to emotional pain. We become confused because we are feeling things we are not supposed to feel. That's what's behind the story of Geoffrey, who climbed the corporate ladder at the expense of his ties with his family, or Bill, who would get drunk and beat his wife: the alienated try to feel a sense of purpose, the weak try to feel strong. Each of us, in our own way, is alienated and disaffected. Our sense of being alone, our sense of isolation from other people, becomes part of our self-image as men. Knowing this, I react to men like Geoffrey and Bill with a mixture of anger and sorrow, empathy and revulsion. Their stories amount to an unhappy picture of contemporary manhood, one in which I have voluntarily and involuntarily shared.

✦

Whatever our place in this picture, there is something new in the lives of men. It is the realization that power and pain combine in our definitions of manhood; it is the acknowledgment that men's social power is at odds with our own feelings of alienation. As we give voice to the sense of pain, our personal isolation begins to fade and we discover a shared and hidden reality in the lives of men. Even more unexpectedly, as we uncover our isolation and alienation, we find that the roots of our pain

are the very ways we have come to define and exercise power. Our wounds, to paraphrase poet Adrienne Rich, come from the same source as our power.

Power encompassing pain, pain embedded within relations of power. Such things speak with insistence of the ways we have become men.

✦ CHAPTER THREE

DILLINGER'S EQUIPMENT

✦ *A Boy's First Steps to Manhood*

My son often asks me to tell him stories about when I was young. I tell him tales of my early days, childhood adventures, and what now seem like bizarre reports from the late sixties. If he were to ask me to tell him stories about when I first started learning to be a man, here's what would probably first come into my head:

Back when I was twelve and thirteen I put a lot of energy into learning how to be a man. I had a brief smoking career in Grade Six. (At that, he would look at me with astonishment.) A few of us would go to the pine forest with a pack of Kools that Jim had lifted from his mom. My parents didn't smoke and I was unaware of proper procedure. So when I held the cigarette like Bette Davis – between my index and middle fingers, with my

thumb holding down my last two fingers like in a Boy Scout salute – I was told that men didn't hold cigarettes like that. I felt ashamed, kind of like my fly had been down in front of the whole class. I practised the proper technique, pinching it between my thumb and forefinger, and, as the mood hit me, sending it flying into the pine needles with a suave flick of my middle finger. We somehow managed not to burn down the Piedmont of North Carolina, as we cemented a physical sensation of the right way to hold a cigarette. Bette Davis was out, the Marlboro man was in.

If something as trivial as the way we hold a cigarette can become charged with gender meanings, think of what happens as we learn to sit a certain way, walk like a man, look at people with a particular cock of the head, and learn to make the first moves in sexual situations.

There was also the Boy Scouts. Looking back, the main thing was not learning how to start fires and tie knots – it was the paramilitary training that pushed me along the path of manhood. We did parade drill, consisting of fifteen or twenty minutes of being yelled at by older boys and much older men whose uniforms made them look like Boy Scouts with overactive pituitary glands. *Abouuuuut-face! Dreeeeeees-right! Atteeeeeen-hut*! Like basic training in the army, drill had nothing to do with any actual activities (whether fighting a war or helping old ladies across the street); rather, it was a

means to inculcate a willingness to obey orders blindly and to discipline our bodies in a way that stressed rigidity and inflexibility, and above all, the burying of emotions. Drill was like a mime school where we practised wearing armour of the most rigid construction.

Without knowing it, we were learning that masculinity involved learning to "discipline" our bodies and our unruly emotions. It required learning and accepting relations of power and hierarchy. For me, an impressionable boy who desperately wanted to be the man I still couldn't be, the whole thing was terrible. It was like being tortured by someone whose approval and love you wanted more than anything. There were punishments and forced marches, humiliating practical jokes and laughter at those guys who weren't cutting it. The older boys and those grown men who dispensed the merit badges forced me to do miserable things I learned to love and sometimes, luckily, encouraged me to do well at the things I really did love. Each merit badge announced I was one step closer to manhood. It seemed a small thing to suffer their punishments and scowls if I knew that hard work would finally earn me a pat on the back and the masculine seal of approval.

I got a lot of parade drill in those days as I turned from child to adolescent in North Carolina. As an elementary school crossing guard – a position reserved in my state for boys because of the obvious indispensability

of testicles in activities such as blowing whistles and watching traffic lights change – I also spent an inordinate amount of time marching about in preparation for crossing guard competitions that were held every year. By Junior High I became a Scout pack leader and graduated from being the person who got bossed around to the one who got to push around the younger kids. The lesson that relations among men were ones of hierarchy and control was not lost on me. At the time, I was feeling temporarily shoved to the side of my school's social whirl. Humiliated because I was left out of the most prestigious necking parties, I wasn't feeling particularly manly, so what a godsend it was to be able to lord it over boys a year or two my junior! Even if I didn't feel tough at the time, I sure was a lot tougher than those kids who moved like sheep as I put them through drill routines, punctuating my disgust with punches to their shoulders.

I finally got fed up with the whole Boy Scout thing in Grade Eight or Nine, though I agonized about leaving when I was just a handful of merit badges short of attaining the pinnacle of scoutdom, Eagle Scout. Might this harm my future pursuit of patriarchal power? I had heard presidential candidates mention they had been Eagle Scouts, and I wondered if this failure would hurt my chances of becoming the greatest pack leader of them all.

I wouldn't be wrong to think about all this if my son asked me how I learned to be a man, but I would be leaving a lot out. The whole process had started years earlier. I had unconsciously established the rudiments of gender by the time I was a few years old. Like others, my self-definition as a man wasn't just the result of bits of information and misinformation that I stuffed into my head; rather, gender became part of the basic texture of my personality. Masculinity isn't something added on, like hot fudge over a bowl of ice cream. It's integral to our sense of self and our emotional ties with the world around us. We develop gendered personalities.

Looking at the development of masculinity in each individual helps us see how men's power is transmitted from the society to the individual. It allows us to see how that strange mix of power and pain is stitched together by the individual into the hallucination we call masculinity. It gives us insights into why masculinity is fragile and why men buy into forms of behaviour, thinking and living that are harmful not only to those we love but to ourselves as well. This gives us a basis from which to understand why change is possible and how it might happen.

✦ The Biological and Social Setting

Humans have an innate capacity to acquire gender. The malleability of the human personality is what makes

masculinity and femininity possible. It is something that separates us from the rest of the animal kingdom. Animal instincts are a set of programmed instructions that link basic biological drives with certain types of automatic muscle responses and mental activity. Animals sometimes do things outside of their instinctual behaviour, but this is almost always the result of training by humans or environmental stress. Our genetic structure doesn't provide a set, instinctual script that governs our lives. More than any other animal, we glean from it the tools of creativity, individuality and sociability that allow us, through the process of maturation and personality development, to acquire new characteristics, needs, desires, orientations and dispositions. The process of individual development puts the human meat on the animal bones; it establishes preferred ways of meeting basic drives. Throughout our lives we discover new ways to meet those needs. Our needs feel completely natural, as if they were biological mandates, but they are actually the product of the development of a biological creature within a social setting.

It is our ability to form a distinct personality that is the basis for the development of different genders. This possibility is only realized, however, because of a second important particular of human life: the prolonged period of helplessness of the human child and the slow process of maturation, which long keeps us in

a state of vulnerability and dependency.

Our dependency is experienced in a charged setting in which love and longing, support and disappointment become the vehicles for developing a gendered psyche. For most of us, the main social setting is the family, where we receive our first education in the values of our society, including our ideas of gender. The family gives its personalized stamp to the values, ideals and beliefs of a society in which one's sex is a fundamental aspect of self-definition. The family takes abstract ideals and turns them into the stuff of love and hate. As femininity is represented by the mother and masculinity by the father in the standard nuclear family – whether or not the father or mother is actually present – complicated conceptions take on the form of flesh and blood: we are no longer talking of patriarchy and sexism, masculinity and femininity as abstract concepts used in books. We are talking about your mother and father, your sisters and brothers, your home and family.

Keith had avoided fights as a young kid, but one day his family found out he had run away from a fight. "My grandfather said men weren't afraid. He said he never wanted to see me run away again. My mother told me I could fight like a little boy or run home and then she'd be the one to give it to me." Suddenly the stakes were huge: not only was he pressured by his peers, not only was his youthful masculinity being called into question, but the

approval of those he loved was suddenly on the line. Keith now felt that displaying a certain brand of masculinity was the precondition to being loved.

Being raised by adults and older siblings allows the transmission of social values and character traits from one generation to the next. Among these values are those we associate with masculinity and femininity. Half of us build our self-identity around social definitions of masculinity; in the end it's impossible to talk about our personalities without reference to our masculinity. When I tell you about the personality of Michael Kaufman, I'm simultaneously telling you about my masculinity. I can't say, oh, this part is *me* and this part is my masculinity. The *me* is my form of masculinity, my masculinity is me. In the end we do more than construct masculine armour over our basic personality; it's worn within too, close to our hearts. The armour becomes intrinsic to our personalities.

Sociologists, anthropologists, cultural theorists, and psychologists all have different explanations on how gender is acquired. One of the approaches I find most useful is that of psychoanalysis, the theories pioneered by Sigmund Freud and, thankfully, adapted and modified by many thinkers since. Freud was the first to analyze the dynamic relations of the unconscious mind, the first to suggest ways that the personality is created out of the conflicts and the harmonies between the

individual and his or her social setting. By discovering the language of the unconscious, and by showing the extent to which it is shaped by the demands of a society, Freud was able to tell us a lot about the unconscious logic of a male-dominated society. Of course, he was himself very much a product of his own society and his biases were many, including some absurd views about women's sexuality. Many of his writings are blatantly sexist, and this has been perpetuated by some of his disciples. Nevertheless, he was the first to discuss the psychological mechanisms through which we bring the power relations of patriarchy into our own personalities, something many feminists have taken up in recent years.

✦ The Infant

The process of growing up is one of establishing a separate identity, a sense of self and independent relationships with others. For the first year the baby has little sense of boundaries or limitations. I watched my son Liam as he lived his first months in a dreamlike world, with only a slowly unfolding sense of past, present and future. As the weeks turned to months and he discovered he had amazing powers, he must have felt omnipotent: just by covering his eyes, he could make everything disappear.

Soon after its first birthday, the child's developing capacities and desire for independence begin to clash with a perception of its own powerlessness and its dependency

on parental figures. Tension mounts between independence and connection and turned into an ongoing struggle for the next few years and beyond.

This drama of dependency and independence is linked to the acquisition of gender. Power and powerlessness, separation and connection are experienced in relation to adults and older siblings who carry the social definitions of power and powerlessness within their own personalities. Power and independence are embodied in particular people who happen to be differentiated by their sex and gender. By the middle of the second year of life the child is already beginning to incorporate these divisions into its life, even though this process is completely unconscious. I wasn't aware of it until after it happened, but Liam was forming a core gender identity that would be more or less fixed for life.*

* Psychoanalysts have long debated the nature of the gender identity that emerges in the first year or two of life. Freud, lacking a clear analysis of gender, suggested both that humans are all originally bisexual (that is, born with a capacity to relate sexually to males or females) and that girls are "little men" because of their active dispositions. Some later analysts, such as Robert Stoller and Ralph Greenson, propose an initial femininity (or proto-femininity) of all infants due to their primary identification with the mother. Ruth Fast, on the other hand, suggests that boys and girls are psychologically undifferentiated in the first two years. "Self-representations that lay the groundwork for *both*

In all human societies the mother is usually the primary parent. Historically this was a natural outcome of a woman's reproductive capacity and her ability to nurse an infant. In times when people might live only forty or fifty years and most woman were pregnant many times, a woman would have spent much of her adult life pregnant or nursing her children. But social factors have always shaped this biological reality, as is made clear in the accounts by anthropologists studying child-rearing and family forms in earlier cultures. There are societies such as the Semang people of the Malay Peninsula or, to a slightly lesser extent, the pygmy Mbuti in Africa where parenting is shared equally. At the other extreme, there are those, such as the warlike Sambian society in New Guinea, where fathers traditionally avoided all contact with mother and child for the first year. In societies of greater equality between the sexes there is greater equality in parenting. As patriarchal societies developed,

masculinity and femininity are developed during this period. They are not yet organized into gender categories." Like Stoller and Greenson, I believe that early identification with the mother is critical, but I see no reason why this confers a primary femininity as such. Femininity, like masculinity, is the outcome of a longer process of psychic development. Rather, as Fast notes, the child's self-identity is at first undifferentiated, expressing a broad and fluid range of possibilities.

women's role as the primary parent became an essential component of the system. Even today, when most of a woman's life is not spent pregnant or lactating, women are still cast as the essential nurturers and caregivers of children and adolescents. The father is not necessarily absent, but his involvement has tended to be secondary. Although this is beginning to change in many of our lives, men's secondary role in parenting has lasting importance.

When the primary parent is a mother or mother figure, the initial bond for boys and girls alike is with the mother. The mother (or grandmother, older sister, or other substitute) comes to embody love and caring. This is the child's first experience of intimacy and it will create patterns of longing, desire and satisfaction for its whole life. To a certain extent the child's identity merges with that of its mother; there is a sense of unity, something that I can remember from my own early childhood only as a feeling without words – for indeed I had no words at the time. I remember the sound of the radio in the kitchen, the smell of baking, my mother talking to me in her soothing, intelligent voice, sunlight streaming in from the window, a feeling of euphoria, safety and belonging.

Within months after its first birthday, the toddler starts to discover the differences between males and females. He or she learns there are different words to

describe the sexes and there is a significance to these differences. Not surprisingly, around this time gender differences begin to emerge in the child. Here's how it seems to happen:

All children experience a strange combination of power and powerlessness. In their imaginations they know limits, but at the same time they are dependent and needy, vulnerable and insecure. As the toddler begins to explore its own limitations the mother (as the principal parent) also comes to be perceived as a source of frustration to the child. She begins to represent, for the child, its dependency. The child's powerlessness is exaggerated in modern societies where parents impose fairly strict rules about all aspects of children's behaviour. As part of its maturation, the child tries to renounce dependency and rebel against parental power. We see this in the "terrible twos." How well I remember that period when Liam turned everything I asked him into an issue, acting as if one versus two crackers were the end of the world. (I, too, often got into a parallel power struggle, acting equaly as if two crackers versus one were the end of the world.)

At this point, both boys and girls feel powerless. For the boy, though, there is an alternative: a flight to masculinity, to patriarchal power. It is an intuitive flight, something that he is never aware of although he is aware of sex differences. He senses there are power differences between men and women and he will learn to make the

most of it. "Oh, I didn't know this was happening," comments a man in a seminar on gender development, "but, somehow, I picked it up from those around me. It was all those invisible messages, watching my parents talk and seeing how they made decisions, hearing how they deepened their voices to show authority. I don't know, maybe the fact that my father was larger or at least had learned to throw his weight around more made a difference, too."

When the boy figures out that men and women represent different worlds, he realizes there is an alternative to powerlessness. When the mother is the primary nurturer she represents more than just safety and security; she also comes to represent all that the young child feels he must rebel against and overcome, a form of power that he must reject. The father, meanwhile, comes to represent excitement, the outside world, and a form of power that is desirable. This is particularly true in families where the mother stays at home for the first two or three years while the father is out at work. Even when both parents are in the work force, children pick up social messages about who does the *really* important work. One man tells me that although both his parents worked outside the home – his mother was a doctor, his father a businessman – "We never heard about how busy mommy was, or how important her work was, or how successful she was.

Work seemed to make my mother tired and my father respected. That was how it struck us as children." Among some people these attitudes are now changing. But even where there is substantial equality in the home, in a world where men have power there are a million ways that men come to represent and embody this power.

I remember the mystery surrounding my father and my father's work. By age three or four I had the intricacies of home figured out and I was ready for new challenges. Out there, somewhere, were the mysterious things my father did all day long. I would get up with him in the morning and watch as he performed rituals of preparation: showering, carefully shaving, the rich smell of Gillette shaving cream filling the room, putting on clothes he would never wear if he was just hanging around the house. And off he went, not to be seen again until supper time. I felt a sense of awe over all he did and what he was. I experienced my mother's respect for him, perhaps amplified in order to make plain to us why he couldn't be with us as much as any of us would have liked. At his side in the mornings, I felt special to be with him, included in his world.

Men may also come to represent excitement because of the different ways that fathers interact with babies and young children. Maybe men are more likely to think of exciting physical activities while women out of necessity are more likely to incorporate their children into their

normal daily activities as well as planning special things. Michael Yogman, T. Berry Brazelton and their colleagues, among others, have carefully observed patterns of play between parents and infants and young children. In these studies, fathers tended to engage in more high-key, physically active, rough-and-tumble play whereas mothers tended more towards interaction that calmed or soothed the babies, even though both parents usually engaged in some of each type of play and in some families the roles were reversed. In other studies, infants by age two and a half not only preferred to play with fathers but appeared to be more excited by them. Maybe they represented mystery and the unknown, in contrast to the mother's usual preoccupation with cooking, cleaning, shopping and organizing household life. At the same time, when these same babies were under stress, they preferred to turn to their mothers, except in the few cases where the father was the primary parent. This makes sense when mothers are the primary parent, for they have a stake in keeping things under control and relatively calm. And it makes sense that each parent engages in the type of play they have learned: for women, skills of mediation and tenderness; for men the learned skills of motion and activity. The two even come to represent a certain symmetry, for the child needs both stimulation and comfort.

Both boys and girls come to see men as figures of

excitement and independence. Only the boy, however, is presented with the option of entering the man's world of power and independence. This pattern might be changing in those families where fathers have taken on more of the daily chores of child-rearing and domestic work, or in the small but growing number of families with stay-at-home fathers. But so long as these families are a minority and there continues to be many forms of social inequality between men and women, the option to enter the world of power is experienced by boys in vast disproportion to girls.

✦ John Dillinger's Equipment

How does the little boy know he can enter the world of men's power? It's quite simple, and quite small. It's his penis. The boy perceives a power difference between men and women, and, in most cases, he perceives that his dependence has been on a woman. He learns that women can do something he can't do – that is, have babies – and that men have something he has, a penis. The route to power through procreation and caring appears cut off, and this is a great disappointment, but he also discovers that it is tied up with the dependency and powerlessness from which he is trying to escape. As part of finding his independence, he begins to reject maternal power and all the things that go with it, which at least in many societies, includes the capacity to nurture and to extend ourselves

to others. These are big items to reject.

On the other hand he does have a penis, just like those guys with worldly power. And so he feels, at least in his imagination, that although he might be powerless as a child, he actually is a person of power and control because he has that penis. I recall a strong, but almost elusive feeling, that I was a little man. The penis becomes the boy's passkey to the world of power. Without us actually thinking about it consciously or unconsciously, the penis itself becomes a symbol of power in a male-dominated society. The penis becomes more than just a part of our body, it becomes a phallus, *the* symbol of patriarchal power. The importance of this symbol is seen in the widespread preoccupation of many men, particularly during adolescence, with the size of their penises. I remember at thirteen years old rifling through my father's medical books trying to find out how long these things actually were supposed to be. Aprocyphal stories circulated about John Dillinger's serpentine penis, which, as everyone knew, had to be strapped down the inside of his leg and tucked into his sock. Meanwhile in the locker room the guys were all surreptitiously checking out each other's "equipment."

The penis and testicles quickly become more than just parts of our body; they become the dominant metaphor for power; if you don't have one, you don't have power. If you don't have power then you don't

have a penis, you don't have balls. One man tells me of playing football in high school outside Philadelphia. "I made the team and went off to a one-week training camp. It happened that when I got there I was sick as a dog, a high fever, everything, and I was stuck in bed for the first two days. In the evenings and when I got back to practice I got endlessly hassled by the other players for 'pussying out'. That's what they always said, that I was 'pussying out.'" Evidently not tough enough, the boy was charged with not having a penis. Those lacking power are pussies.

For many years this power, the power of manhood, only exists in the little boy's imagination. This is a key reason, I think, that from a very early age little boys grab onto symbols and representations of what our society sees as powerful. This explains their fascination with power objects and projectiles, whether guns, cars or the arc of their own pee, and their fascination with superheroes. I watched as my son and his friends became transfixed by a long series of heroes, from Superman to Ninja Turtles, then from baseball stars to rock heroes. Listening to the kids play, it was clear they didn't just enjoy all these icons; in their imaginations they became them. For a young child, there is often little difference between imagination and reality.

The fantasy can be at complete odds with reality. When Liam was eight, in the same week that he dropped out of his baseball league because it was too competitive

and he was terrified of being bonked by a hardball, he told me that he planned on playing in the Major Leagues when he grew up. In his imagination, he could be the superhero, even if he no longer actually played organized baseball. All those images, those superheroes and sports stars, represented his power. This is the young boy's escape from powerlessness and dependency. It is the fantasy of a particular brand of power that we call masculinity, a fantasy with a real basis, because men do have such forms of power in a patriarchal world.

Perhaps this answers the riddle that confronts so many non-sexist parents: Why, when the father is playing an important nurturing role and parents are trying their best to avoid sexist attitudes, does the boy still adopt many of the negative standards of masculinity, even if slightly modified? Our sensitive sons still get excited playing with guns, terrorizing young girls and going nuts over pictures of the latest muscle-bound heartthrob. It quickly becomes clear that it isn't just the immediate family situation that shapes our sons, but rather the influence of the entire male-dominated society (including men's secondary role in parenting) that creates general social and psychological patterns. Even at a school where Liam is supposed to be receiving a non-sexist education, the very structure of the place imbues a patriarchal notion of power. He is learning

the values of hierarchy and authority, that if you have power you can control many others: one teacher controls the classroom of twenty or thirty kids, just as at home his parents, whether sexist or liberated, control him. Even if the language is non-sexist, even if we promote values of equality, the messages of our society and the way we bring up kids is lodged within the patriarchal structures of our society. A society's overall values affect even those who don't agree with them. It's like what happens when you sit in the non-smoking section of a restaurant and come out smelling of tobacco: smoke doesn't just stick to those who are puffing.

Through a combined process of rejecting what he associates with his mother – whether his vulnerability or her nurturing – and gravitating to and identifying with what he associates with being a man, the little boy takes the first steps towards becoming a man.