

# Being a man doesn't have to be a struggle

Michael Kaufman

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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# Men must abandon notion they are violent by nature

Michael Kaufman

In my darker moments I think it was inevitable. A young man, wired with hate and fear, pulled the trigger on 14 women's lives. It was inevitable not because men are naturally violent. There was something else at work.

There are those who think that men are predisposed to aggression and brutality. That's the "2001: A Space Odyssey" view of human nature. Good movie, but with anthropology as flimsy as the Flintstones.

Researchers tell us that half of tribal societies investigated over the past century had no, or very low levels of, violence. Some had no rape. No battering. No fist fights. No war. This is the best proof we have that humans in general, and men in particular, are not genetically programmed for violence against each other.

But that's not much solace for the woman I met two weeks ago in a small farming community who told me her husband beat her every few months.

We're surrounded by violence. Kids take it in with their first mouthful of pabulum. They'll see 18,000 violent deaths on television by the time they graduate from high school.

They'll watch physical brutality in prime\_time sports and learn that "bullets and bombs" make gridiron heroes. They'll hear our respected political leaders tell us why we need to start a new war. They'll be spanked by their parents and learn that violence and love go hand\_in\_hand. If it's not biologically innate, then violence must be something we learn.

But that's not much solace for the friend I spoke to last night who told me about being date raped when she was 17.

Anthropologists gives us a clue how we might begin to change things. They tell us that the societies with little or no violence were more\_or\_less egalitarian. Men didn't control women and no man ruled another. They tell us that societies with more violence have been societies of male domination. There must be something about the way that men have ruled the world that begets violence.

It's not only that men have used violence to maintain power and control over women, children and other men. Men have learned to think of power as our ability to dominate and control the world, the people around us, and our own unruly emotions.

This power is equated with masculinity. We exercise power in different ways: with money or ideas, charm or chance, brains or brute force. Whatever the method, we learn that to be a man means having some sort of power

and control. Most men are not violent, but most of us feel we have to perform and be on top at least somewhere in our lives.

The problem is that so many men don't feel in control. If you equate being a man with having power, a lack of power can make you feel incomplete, inadequate, impotent.

What do men do about that? Far too many use harassment, abuse, and violence as a way to unconsciously restore their masculine equilibrium, their sense they really are men. Harassers, rapists, batterers, and murderers of women are not simply deranged. They're men in pain who bought the message that they've got to dominate to be men.

But that bit of analysis is no solace for the old woman stabbed to death across town.

It does, however, contain a message for change. Men's violence occurs in societies of inequality between men and women. That's why the struggle against men's violence is part of feminism and why feminism is the critical tool for ridding the world of violence.

Feminism is a vision of equality between women and men. It is a vision of liberation for women. It is, as more and more men are discovering, a vision of liberation for men ourselves. It promises to free men from the power struggles, performance anxieties, competitive pressures, emotional distance from children, men, and women, and violence that characterizes all of our lives to one extent or another.

That's why, every year, hundreds of thousands of men in Canada wear a white ribbon. It's a call on men to lay down their arms in the war against women. It's a commitment to examine sexism in our own lives. It's a statement that men aren't just part of the problem but part of the solution.

That's no solace to the 14 sisters we lost in Montreal. But it is a message of hope for the future.

## BETTER FATHERING WILL HELP END VIOLENCE

Michael Kaufman

Many countries in the western world seemed to have rediscovered fatherhood. We see fathers in movies and on television, in advertisements and newspaper articles: men are cooing to babies, playing with their kids, spreading advice to the next generation, and getting in touch with their own dads.

It might get a bit corny at times, but the rediscovery of fatherhood is important for men, it's important to our children, and it can be important for women.

It's also part of a long term solution to ending violence. There is some good evidence that, as more men focus on caregiving and nurturing as the most important things in life (as women have traditionally done), we will see a lot less violence. Less violence against children, less violence against women, and less violence against other men.

Not all men have a child, although the majority of us do sometime in our lives. But the biological part, fathering a child, is pretty simple. The real work, and the real joys, of fatherhood start the moment a baby is born.

Seeing those little hands and fingers for the first time brings with it new demands and responsibilities. Unfortunately, this is where too many of us haven't lived up to our potential. Although an increasing number of men are taking an active part in childcare and domestic responsibilities, studies in some countries show that most fathers still spend less time with their children than did our great grandfathers. In most parts of the world, few employers or governments offer good paternity leave. Even in the Scandinavian countries — the only ones with comprehensive programs — few men take full advantage of such programs, because of work pressures, because they don't see it as worthwhile, or because of insecurities about being manly enough.

Not seeing parenting as real man's work is a problem, but things sometimes get much worse. Some children are physically or sexually abused by their fathers. Some children grow up seeing their father physically and emotionally abuse their mother. Men in many countries ignore child support payments after their marriages have ended. And, meanwhile, huge numbers of sexually active men don't take responsibility for birth control.

What is the root of all these problems?

Many studies have shown that much of the problem of men's violence stems from men's absence from nurturing and caregiving. It's not only that many men don't develop the proper skills of fathering. Rather, a life-long absence from nurturing means that many men don't develop a sense of empathy — an ability to feel what others feel — so necessary for nurturing activities. Without empathy you can inflict violence on someone else without feeling remorse and without feeling you are doing something terribly wrong.

Some men learned violence at the hands of their own father or mother. Many of the men who are abusers of women or children were physically or sexually abused themselves as children or witnessed their father abusing their mother. Others were spanked repeatedly as children and learned that physical force is supposedly consistent with loving someone. (This of course does not mean that most people who are spanked grow up to be abusive, nor that all those who experienced or witnessed abuse become abusive themselves.)

All that is the bad news.

The good news comes to us from studies over the past century that compared two types of tribal

societies: those with violence (against women, against children, against other men) and those with little or no violence. It seems those societies with little or no violence were based on relative equality between the sexes. Men didn't have power over women. Men didn't grow up feeling that to be manly meant dominating and controlling those around them.

The other thing that distinguished the two was that in the societies with little or no violence, men were more involved in childcare. Being a man meant being loving and nurturing. Being a man meant communicating feelings and warmth to those people you were responsible to.

This points to a pathway of change.

If we are concerned about high levels of violence against children, against women, and among men, then one way we can begin to make things better is to find ways to encourage men to take equal responsibility for childcare and to see childrearing just as important as any job we might ever have. This doesn't mean that all men must be fathers, nor that all families must have a man present. It only means that men must take responsibility for changing our lives today.

Let's encourage the fathers we know to make their kids their number one priority and let's celebrate the capacity of men to care and to nurture.

Here are some practical measures that might help that happen:

- In the wealthier countries, encourage government program, like those in Scandinavia, that gives both parents up to one year of paid leave to care for any child under six or with a chronic illness. As well, employees should be allowed up to six years of unpaid parental leave, as well as days off for family illnesses, without losing seniority. We need ongoing education to encourage men to take advantage of such programs.
- Programs in schools starting with young children that focus on parenting and domestic skills.
- Strict enforcement of child support payments for separated parents.
- In those countries who still lack such programs, a comprehensive, non\_profit, quality national childcare program.
- Greater vacation time and a shorter work week to allow parents to spend more time with children. (Most European countries have five vacation weeks per year.)
- Equal pay for women workers and the end to job ghettos to ensure that men's work outside the home isn't seen as more important than women's work.
- Legal reforms and government\_supported counseling to encourage non\_adversarial separation and custody arrangements where possible.
- Laws to prohibit the corporal punishment of children. Such punishment teaches children that violence is an acceptable way to express love and to show you care.
- Encourage educational and awareness programs to end violence, such as the White Ribbon Campaign, which is a growing international effort by men and boys to speak out against violence against women

Changes such as these are ambitious and far reaching. They require us to rethink our individual values as well as our social and economic priorities. They would be part of a revolution in what it means to be a father.

Many countries of the world celebrate a Father's Day sometime during the year. In the past, Father's Day has often seemed hollow, a pretend sort of holiday. But as more and more men rethink our values, as we devote ourselves to be caregivers with all the energy and love we can muster, we really will have something to celebrate this coming Father's Day.