

## American Manhood: Dreams and Distortions\*

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It is the special challenge of men today, and especially male teachers, to develop programs that provide male students with a rich base from which to develop as gentle-men. The result would be men who are prepared to live in structures of family, work, and public life that are equitable and just, and for whom the rewards are enriched social and work relationships, between themselves and other men, and between themselves and women, and nurturing relationships that embody mutual support, affection and care.

There are two critically important aspects of American manhood that provide us with insight.\*\* The first is the observation that men desire to be with other men, in positive emotional and instrumental ways. Let me quote from an idealistic young man about his perceptions of fraternities:

The friends you make and the bonds created can help you later in life. A bond is made with people similar and different from yourself. This bond creates a friendship that lasts forever. You always have someone to turn to in times of need or crisis. If you need some help in a subject and are hesitant to go for help there is always someone that knows what to do. If you need help with anything, then someone will always lend a hand.

In friendships, in fraternities, on teams, boys and men express identification with each other in so many ways. In these men's worlds, men hope to find achievement and success (financial and otherwise), respect, and significant attachments to groups. Men enact many positive manly qualities, such as being courageous, determined, goal oriented, hard working, and being team-oriented. Boys and men hope to join a world where the models of men have been instrumental, as inventors and industrious workers, as happy providers, loyal husbands and fathers. But, in fact, most men in American culture have been followers and not leaders, as Emerson said, "living lives of quiet desperation." This desperation has often resulted in acting out real social and psychological deprivations, and acting out distortions, such as alcoholism and domestic violence.

Unfortunately, success, respect and group attachment are unequally distributed among men, so that, for example, men of color often have less success, respect and belonging than other groups of men. The striving for success is directly linked to stress, and the high rate of cardio-vascular disease among men. The striving for respect has often led to distorted images of other men, through homophobic remarks and homophobic violence, and distorted images of women, in men's prejudicial language and in discrimination, and in men's sexualized violence toward women. Finally, a great source of psychological distress for American men is loneliness. Often men simply fail to successfully attach themselves to groups that exercise satisfying emotional belonging. While

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\*\* These patterns exist in models of masculinity in many countries around the world, and structures of domination persist, despite significant cultural and historical differences. For example, similar distortions exist in countries as diverse as Vietnam, France, England, and Japan.

men's expectations are high, often reality is something else. I quote from a young man who speaks with disappointment about his fraternity experience:

If a male addresses this issue by referring to a "tight-knit brotherhood" I will laugh. Perhaps this is a generalization, but time and time again I see so-called "brothers" being less than brotherly towards each other. I see them pass by each other on the way to class without so much as a glance. I see them cruelly laughing at each other's defeats.

This experience, located in a fraternity, could just as easily be located in a dorm, a sports team, or virtually any other "male domain." It is just that edge: On the one hand men desire male friendships that embody complete trust that other men will not take advantage of vulnerabilities. On the other hand, there are the competing demands of manhood to be the self-reliant loner, to be the winner, to be emotionally strong and hard, to be the rock. This makes it so difficult for men to approach each other with the guard down. James L. Spates, writing about American "street games" argues that boyhood games teach men that the essence of manhood is competition. This becomes a code word for domination, through physical force (wrestling, king of the hill, football), by emotional manipulation (name calling and verbal cut games), or by acquiring more than the next fellow (read the automobile bumper sticker: "He who dies with the most toys, wins!"). This creates a model for men of manhood that can distort men's character and deprive men of significant friendships and more satisfying social relationships. From my view, this model provides too few opportunities to expand the ethical and emotional lives of men.

Thus, the second salient and related point: Men in groups are often a source of conflict, violence, substance abuse, and ugly sexist and sexual behavior. The acting out of deprivation and distortion has found itself principally, I think, in the use of violence against oneself and against others. That violence has many forms, including physical abuse of others, substance abuse, irresponsible sex and risk-taking behavior. It has created a cycle of fear in women, and a cycle of self-destruction in men. Masculinity is a constant test, mainly around the theme of "the flight from the feminine (and the female)." This flight produces for men a very narrow bandwidth of acceptable experiences and relationships, as men defend their so-called turf. One of my male students declared "I will take advantage of women as long as they let me." A group of young male university students derided and dismissed women's sports as uninteresting and amateurish because it did not exhibit the physical force and violence that these men felt had superior value. The exaltation of the female to the role of equal, and the male flight response from anything identified as female, has resulted in many young men feeling deep betrayal, feeling that it is unfair that men should not be permitted to continue to dominate and be privileged as a result of their ascribed sex.

What do men fear? Unable or unwilling to look carefully at masculinity itself, men deny that one of the significant themes of manhood is **fear of other men**. Simply, men fear being exposed as a sissy. Men pose a **constant and relentless threat to each other**, so that throughout the life of men, we fear being unmasked as feminine. The little tests, of how men look at their hands and fingernails, of vocal inflection, of response to threats of violence -- every mannerism, every movement contains a coded gender language. In short, men fear other men, with whom each has

to compete, seeks to dominate, and for whom each performance is but a repeated test of manhood. This is the very foundation of sexism's double-edge: If a man fails the tests he risks being likened to the objects of our derision. Here is an example, from a true story by one of my male students:

[At a strip club where women remove clothing as the men give them money] My two other *friends* (italics mine) went up on stage and placed a dollar in each of their mouths. I remained in my seat, and my friends began trying to pressure me to get up too. They called me a sissy and wimp for not getting up there and they persisted to bother me throughout the night. This began making me feel like I was less of a man than they were, since they had all gotten up on stage and I did not. They were getting angry with me for not participating. Finally, I got up and lay down on the stage. My *friends* were extremely excited and began throwing money on me. I felt like I was now regaining their respect, since I was doing exactly what they wanted me to do. They felt relieved that I had finally given in and began treating me like an equal again. *Before I got on stage I was treated like I was less of a man than they were and after I got on stage they treated me as an equal again...*They were satisfied when I did it and proved to them that I was one of the guys. They made it seem like it was some kind of test that I had to pass.

Sexism has as its target men as well as women, and it sustained by threats by men toward other men! American men are under a lot of pressure to conform: In the United States, suicide rates for women have been quite stable for over the past 20 years, while males, especially white male teenagers, has increased rapidly. Male teenagers are 5 times more likely to commit suicide than females. Overall, men are committing suicide at 4 times the rate of women. Men between the ages of 18 and 29 suffer alcohol dependency at three times the rate of women of the same age group. More than 2/3 of all alcoholics are men, and 50% more men are regular users of illicit drugs than women. Men account for more than 90% of arrests for alcohol and drug abuse violations. There is an increasing rate of unemployment among men, and of course, we know that men's life expectancy is 10% shorter than women's, often from stress-related heart disease and certain cancers.<sup>\*\*\*</sup> In other words, as Don Sabo has indicated in his work in men's studies, enacting American masculine behaviors can be dangerous to men's health!

While women have been redefining themselves, where has been the male revolution? Given the gendered nature of these difficulties, why is it that men do not want to look at themselves deeply and critically *as men*? Why is it that American men have not recognized the need for a sexual revolution for men, instead repeating mantra-like to each other that men are OK, and that women have the problem, or are the problem? **To be a man in America is very problematic, and the demands of manhood, the roles that prove masculinity, are the root of men's insecurity, denial, and bluffing.** In his article "The Male Sex Role -- and What It's Done For Us Lately" (1976), Robert Brannon defines manhood critically as:

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<sup>\*\*\*</sup>Lest I paint too rosy a picture of women's health, remember that the male-dominated medical profession has often neglected American women. Cancer rates are alarmingly high, and we have only recently seen developments that promise to redress the lack of funding for women's health issues. Moreover, men have often dismissed as foolish or infantile diseases that strike women, so that we have, for example, avoided understanding the locus of poor self-esteem its relation to the world men have made, and the myriad of eating disorders that are the result.

1. "NO SISSY STUFF!" -- One may never do anything that even remotely suggests femininity. Masculinity is the RELENTLESS repudiation of the feminine.
2. "BE A BIG WHEEL" -- Masculinity is measured by power, success, wealth and status.
3. "BE A STURDY OAK" -- Masculinity depends on remaining calm and reliable in a crisis, holding emotions in check. In fact, proving you're a man depends upon never showing your emotions at all (except anger).
4. "GIVE'EM HELL" -- Exude an aura of manly daring and aggression. Go for it. Take risks.

When American men follow this formulation, when they enact it, there is no opportunity to think critically about the sexist model of masculinity. So that what appears to be a strong offense turns out to be a shaky defense, what appears to be security is a source of insecurity, and what appears to be confidence is often bluster, actually driven by fear. Joseph Pleck has provided us with a paradox: Men have power, but most men experience powerlessness in much of their lives. Thus men exclude females, and selected other men, from their networks and their intimacies, and escape into male fantasy behavior become the modes by which men keep their fears at bay, and by which men maintain the (in)security of male identity.

The world of men has been so dictatorial, so total, and men's privilege vis a vis women and other men so significant, that men have not recognized the destruction that is self-inflicted, or is inflicted on other men and women. Men cannot really understand how they exploit others until men look at the *nature of how men oppress themselves!* Men have created what Andrew Kimball has named (in parallel to Betty Friedan) the "male mystique," in which the new image of men is one that is autonomous, efficient, intensely self-interested, and disconnected from community and the earth. One of the most tragic aspects of the male mystique is that it makes it so difficult to have loving male friendship and bonding. The male mystique teaches men that the successful man is competitive, uncaring and unloving. It celebrates the ethic of isolation -- it turns men permanently against one another.

Men must confront and enact change and expand beyond the male mystique of bluster, phoniness and pretense, beyond talking the talk of sensitivity, beyond being politically correct (P.C.) in public, and sexist and homophobic in private. And many men are ashamed of this behavior -- but their **SHAME LEADS TO SILENCE** -- so that it appears that they actually approve of sexism, homophobia, and racism. It is no surprise that college women often sadly relate that the male friend who treats them as an equal in private acts as a crude, sexist male in his male groups. This impulse, to revert to the hegemonic and somewhat demonic image of the sexist male is rooted in **male loyalty**, not just to the men around them, but to men as a general group. Men have difficulty changing without perceiving themselves as disloyal, a traitor to their sex. As a result, and in order to preserve this distorted male bond and social compact, men often resort to denial and distortion of themselves in defense of masculinity, and especially the denial of the "other," mainly women, minorities, and homosexuals, discounting these group's experience, and rendering them invisible. But gender and racial oppression and subordination is based on this lie -- and deeply, viscerally, men know it is a lie. Women and minorities often do not have equal pathways to succeed in the world. Women, and minorities have a hard time winning. If they act within their own boundaries,

they are perceived as defective. But if they adopt standard, western, and usually white male behavior, they can be perceived as “bitches” or “toms.” The sub-text of male loyalty, and the hidden texts of coded male behavior (for example, the male gaze, the wink or smirk) keep it so. Thus, on the one hand men together profess loyalty to this distorted ideal of masculinity, and simultaneously, because embedded in it is *fear of other men*, find themselves in opposition to each other!

Men might address sexist and homophobic language and behavior by reversing the standard: it could now be a source of dis-respect and low esteem to act in such a way. Men might understand that gender-based violence is a distortion, an aberration, to be decried rather than celebrated. For example, we know that “real men” don’t rape. Rape is the ultimate expression of domination, in everyday life and in male prisons. The linkage of domination to masculinity provides the corrupting motive that ultimately pits each man against each other, inculcates a lack of respect for others, and ultimately a lack of respect for himself, as a man. Men know that when a man put others down to make himself appear taller, stronger, more masculine, that it is ugly and ignoble. But everyday social forces defend this masculine self-concept, and demand that men defend this model of masculinity or be pushed to the social margin.

Men can stand against these distortions, and men can express new models, generating more positive and committed friendships, and more enriching social relationships. Men can become better communicators and especially better listeners. Men can create groups and friendships that help men to feel secure in themselves so that men might truly be gentle-men, rather than exhibiting behavior that masks insecurity and vulnerability. Freed from a masculinity that put men in the double-bind of both loyalty and opposition to other men, men will be able to unmask the self, and be in an authentic relationship of care with one another. New opportunities will become available, family and work relationships will be enhanced, and men’s lives will be immeasurably enriched, more rounded, less lonely, and less stressful. Through new models of masculinity, men will find themselves becoming more active in their communities, doing good work, helping others, and a source of great healing. In this way, men might reclaim a positive brotherhood, and fatherhood, and can reinvent what it means to be a gentle-man – as a generative source of friendship, community and family making.

In confronting old models of American manhood, through effecting change in private and public institutions, through rewarding behavior that is inclusive, equitable and just, men will re-model, create, and sustain masculinities that celebrate deepening relationships, that celebrate men’s variety.

Men will create and sustain masculinities that are expressions of lasting and humane value, and bonds between men, and between men and women, that rest on the worthy foundations of respect and care rather than the complex distortions of domination and fear.