

THE NATURAL ORDER OF THINGS

A sermon preached by Galen Guengerich
All Souls Unitarian Church, New York City
April 10, 2016

A couple of months ago, the website Quartz, which describes itself as a digital news outlet for business people in the global economy, published an essay by Thomas Page McBee titled “Why Men Fight: An Empirical Investigation of the Extremes of Masculinity.” McBee is a transgender male: he was born and raised as a girl, and he came to identify himself as gender queer in his late teens and 20’s. He transitioned at age 30.

As testosterone began to change his body, other people’s expectations of him, and his own expectations of himself, began to change as a result. He decided to take up boxing. He writes, “As I settle into this new life, I realize I need to understand the tie, whether biological or cultural or some potent brew of both, between violence and masculinity. I want to know for sure that I can be a different kind of man, an intentional man, a man who can both understand the expectations of him, and transcend them.”

As McBee began spending more and more time at the gym with other boxers in training, he began to feel at home. And he began to feel ever closer to the other boxers with whom he trained and fought. He wondered why.

McBee contacted R. Tyson Smith, a professor of sociology at Haverford College and author of *Fighting for Recognition*, a book about professional wrestlers. He asked about why he felt so close to his fellow boxers. Smith responded that the shadow of violence is precisely what allows for a kind of fraternal love.

Smith says, “An unquestionable masculine space allows you to emote or express or hold hands. There’s more room for this broader definition of masculinity because you have the framework of violence. Here’s a way with which to get some of that intimacy — by not ever calling it intimacy.”

Today’s edition of *Education Life* in the *New York Times* features an article by Andrew Reiner, who teaches a masculinity course at Towson University. Reiner describes a video clip one of his students found online of a toddler getting what appeared to be his first vaccinations. Off-camera, the father offers to hold his son’s hand and instructs him not to cry. As the boy becomes increasingly agitated, the father says, “Aw, big boy! High-five, high-five! Say you’re a man: ‘I’m a man!’” Reiner reports that the video ends with the whimpering toddler screwing up his face in anger and pounding his chest, barking through tears and gritted teeth, “I’m a man!”

Reiner adds, “The home video was right on point, illustrating the take away for the course: how boys are taught, sometimes with the best of intentions, to mutate their

emotional suffering into anger. More immediately, it captured, in profound concision, the earliest stirrings of a male identity at war with itself.”

I’ve mentioned before the philosopher Martha Nussbaum’s book titled *Take My Advice: Letters to the Next Generation from People Who Know a Thing or Two*. She observes that we all begin our lives as helpless babies, dependent on others for comfort, food, and survival. And even though we develop some degree of independence as we mature, we always remain alarmingly incomplete, dependent on other people and an uncertain world for whatever we achieve.

As we mature, Nussbaum says, we develop a range of emotions in response to this predicament: fear that bad things will happen, love for those who help us, grief when loved ones are lost, hope that good things will happen, and anger when someone harms something we care about. In other words, she says, “our emotional lives map our incompleteness: A creature without any needs would never have reasons for fear, or grief, or hope, or anger. But for that very reason we are often ashamed of our emotions, and of the relations of need and dependency bound up with them.”

And then Nussbaum draws the conclusion that gets to the heart of the relationship between male identity and violence. She writes:

Perhaps males, in our society, are especially likely to be ashamed of being incomplete and dependent, because a dominant image of masculinity tells them that they should be self-sufficient and dominant. So they flee from their inner world of feeling, and from articulate mastery of their own emotional experiences. The current psychological literature on the life of boys in America indicates that a large proportion of boys are quite unable to talk about how they feel and how others feel — because they have learned to be ashamed of feelings and needs, and to push them underground. But that means that they don’t know how to deal with their own emotions, or to communicate them to others. When they are frightened, they don’t know how to say it, or even to become fully aware of it. Often they turn their own fear into aggression. Often, too, this lack of a rich inner life catapults them into depression in later life.

Ironically, boys don’t start out life emotionally inarticulate and physically violent. In Andrew Reiner’s article about his masculinity course — the article is titled “The Masculine Mystique” in the print version and “Teaching Men to Be Emotionally Honest” in the online version — he cites recent studies confirming that from infancy through age 4 or 5, boys are more emotive than girls.

Researchers at Harvard Medical School and Boston Children’s Hospital found that six-month-old boys were more likely than girls to express anger, to fuss, to gesture to be picked up, and they tended to cry more than girls. At NYU, Dr. Niobe Way, a professor of applied psychology, has concluded after more than 20 years of research that

“many boys, especially early and middle adolescents, develop deep, meaningful friendships, easily rivaling girls in their emotional honesty and intimacy.”

But then the male identity war begins, which is when, Reiner says, “We socialize this vulnerability out of them.” Boys start using phrases like “No Homo.” They start focusing on girls and on pornography — though not necessarily in that order.

The cover story in the current issue of *TIME* magazine, written by Belinda Luscombe, is titled “Porn: Why young men who grew up with Internet porn are becoming advocates for turning it off.” Luscombe writes, “A growing number of young men are convinced that their sexual responses have been sabotaged because their brains were virtually marinated in porn when they were adolescents...These young men feel like unwitting guinea pigs in a largely unmonitored decades-long experiment in sexual conditioning.” Luscombe also lists broader concerns about porn’s effect on society, including the fact that it often celebrates the degradation of women and normalizes sexual aggression.

One way or another, it seems, emotions that don’t get expressed eventually get hard-cased in violence. It’s certainly true that most of the brutality around the world today, whether sexual, economic, political, or religious in nature, comes at the hands of men. There are exceptions, of course, but they merely serve to prove the rule. The cult of masculinity has been built of aggression and violence.

And culture has mostly convinced men to keep propping up the cult of masculinity. As one of Andrew Reiner’s students put it, “It’s like we’re scared that the natural order of things will completely collapse.”

I would add that if the natural order of things requires men to deny what they feel and take out their aggression on everyone and everything else, maybe it should collapse.

In various ways and places, men lash out when they are afraid — afraid of being weak, afraid of being irrelevant, afraid of being left behind, afraid of not having enough. In a word, they are afraid of being in all ways impotent, and they lash out to remind others and to reassure themselves that they still have power. The cult of masculinity insists that to be a man is to be tough, aggressive, dominant — and even misogynist.

More than anyone else, Donald Trump has brought to this image of masculinity into the mainstream. In a poll released last week by the Public Religion Research Institute, nearly 70% of Trump supporters say that society as a whole has become too soft and feminine. Trump’s bellicose misogyny, among other qualities, has led three-quarters of women in the US to view him negatively. The good news is that men aren’t far behind in recognizing a bad role model when they see one: two-thirds of men in the US also have a negative view of Trump.

I am one of those men. Even though it’s easy for me to talk about how I feel about Donald Trump, it’s often difficult for me to talk about how I feel about other things — especially about my own emotions. I come by my emotional reticence the old-fashioned way: I inherited it.

As many of you know, I grew up Conservative Mennonite, a tradition that bequeathed to my family of origin the conviction that emotions could easily run you afoul of God's will. If you felt too happy, you might begin to take credit for your happiness, which rightly belongs to God. On the other hand, if you felt too sad, you would deny God's perfect will, which supposedly ensures that everything works out for good.

As role models go, I don't recall my father ever talking about his feelings. In fact, he often reacted negatively when other people expressed their feelings. It was almost a sin to have emotions, because they indicated your narcissism. In this sense, I am my father's son, though I'm working hard to grow beyond the limitations of my past.

But I am also my father's son in a different and better way: I didn't learn to express my sublimated emotions through violence. We were a radically pacifist household, and we were taught to abhor violence in all its forms — including verbal violence. I wasn't even allowed to play football, which for a teenage boy in south Arkansas was bitter medicine indeed. Given that most boys and men develop their closest male friendships in various arenas of conquest — sports conquest, sexual conquest of girls and women, financial conquest, and so on — I have made my way through life mostly without close and enduring male friendships. This now feels to me like a loss.

Make no mistake: I don't miss the violence, actual and implied, associated with most experiences of male bonding. I don't miss the denigration of women, the belittling of weakness, and the scorn of anything that could be described as soft or feminine. Indeed, the values we cherish as a religious community and those I espouse as a spiritual leader have often been described as feminine values — connection, compassion, nurture, and love. But I do miss not having long-standing and close male friendships.

Given everything I know and everything I've experienced, I believe we need to expand the definition of masculinity, but without requiring the framework of violence. We need men to emote, and express, and even hold hands. We need men to find emotional intimacy with other men — and maybe even call it intimacy.

One of the great gifts of the LGBTQ movement is how it has changed the way people today view gender identity and orientation. Increasingly, in both theory and in practice, there is no such thing as a gender binary composed of two opposite sexes, each locked into a predetermined role. Facebook alone has more than 50 different options for expressing one's gender identity and orientation. As more people express more openly their gender identities and orientations in distinctive and authentic ways, we can move beyond the stereotypes. All of us — no matter our gender identity and orientation — need to express our strength when we feel strong and express our vulnerability when we feel vulnerable. And all of us sometimes feel strong, and all of us sometimes feel vulnerable — and all of us sometimes feel the wide range of emotions that lie between.

The natural order of things, in my view, is for each of us somehow to find sufficient courage within us and sufficient compassion around us to free ourselves to be emotionally open and honest. We need somehow to break the link between masculinity and violence. Our own emotional wellbeing depends on it – and the fate of human civilization may depend on it as well.