

Growing Up Male: The Little Boy Within

Jeffry Steele, 11/99 (Sermon given at U.U. Churches in Gloucester & Rockport MA)

As I was leaving a picnic at a friend's in Putney, Vermont, I noticed that my car was blocked in. A man named Robert was quickly found who cheerfully cleared my path with a wave, looking professorial in a tweed jacket and beard. A few days later, we all read in the paper how a woman named Judith had been killed by a man she had recently broken up from who pursued her to a Brattleboro gas station, jumped into her car and stabbed her 13 times with a kitchen knife. Adding to the horror of this news was the eerie discovery that the murderer was this same guest of my friends who I had encountered in the driveway. My Putney friends then spoke with Robert, who had turned himself in to the police, as he began his life prison sentence. Why, they asked him, could you not have told us that day how desperate you were? He replied that he was simply too ashamed of how he felt and couldn't bear to have them know.

Another friend of mine once related how his cousin had married a man who was so jealous and possessive as to require her to stay home until he returned from work each day. She was slowly going crazy with this and begged him to let her find a job. He refused. She did manage to get out to see a therapist, who subsequently asked her to bring this young man to a session. Surprisingly, he agreed to meet her in front of the therapist's office. On his way, the man stopped at his mother's for a hunting rifle that was kept there. Just after he left with it, his mother suddenly realized that her son was probably not going game hunting -- as he had professed -- and she raced to warn her daughter-in-law. But within minutes shots were heard from a car in front of the therapist's office. The man had killed his young wife, and then himself.

These two stories have played over many times in my mind since hearing them, partly because I knew people close to those involved, but partly because I felt an empathy with these men. They both responded to their circumstances as if their very survival were at stake; it felt like death for Robert to lose his relationship and it felt like death to her husband when this cousin of my friend's sought her freedom -- which he apparently interpreted at the first step in her leaving him. Both men felt that, without these women in their lives, they had nothing to live for. Both men were consumed by a rage so deep that they could kill. How did it get this bad? Are these extreme, aberrant personalities? Or were these men simply playing out the pain that most *every* man in this culture has inside him to a greater or lesser degree?

As babies, most of us were given the opportunity to cry, were nurtured and held. At some point, though, we boys began to be treated differently from girls. We could no longer cry, whenever we felt the need for the healing effects of tears, without rousing fears from the adults around us that we would grow up to be sissies. The same went for being held by our mothers, or by anyone for that matter. There was a limit to how close we could be to other boys before being labeled "gay". And our fathers, most of them, were simply not equipped to provide for us that which they themselves had also been denied.

Girls were systematically hurt in different ways -- refused many opportunities to develop their full potential -- with sexism affecting their lives in more ways than we men can even imagine. But they were permitted to at least *maintain connection* with each other in ways we boys were not. They also were encouraged as care-givers. I can remember being eight or nine years old on the playground, when a younger child might be crying, how girls my age would hold the child

and say soothing things while we boys stood by helplessly, cut off from our ability to show tenderness.

No wonder, then, it is generally assumed that our capacity to nurture is limited. I am told there are many cases of men denied visitation rights to their children not because they lacked a significant and nurturing relationship with them but because of the influence a spiteful ex-partner can have in the court system. There is also a systematic assumption that we are readily given to violence -- evidenced by the fact that a restraining order filed by a woman can go into effect without any official consideration of the man's side of the story. It may well be that blanket policies like these do save lives -- and may be the only way the legal system can protect itself from litigation given the limits of public resources; but I simply want to bring attention to the *assumptions about men* on which such policies are made.

My first year in boys' prep school, seventh grade, I was waiting with my classmates in the woodshop for the instructor to arrive. But he was long delayed; and some of the boys started running wild, throwing pieces of wood, and chasing each other around the potentially dangerous power tools. Feeling strongly that something must be done, I raced back to my homeroom to report to our teacher what was going on. I'll never forget the look of concern that came over his face -- not over the antics in the woodshop, but over how I would suffer socially for having been the one to "tattle". The message came loud and clear in that look: "Young man, whenever you're in a situation like this, *go numb* -- or suffer the consequences"

Discoveries such as these were both confusing and traumatic for us, and were made more insidious by the fact that everyone -- rather than acknowledge and validate the outrage we would have felt within -- acted as if this were the normal state of affairs. From the first time we were told to "buck up and take it like a man", and we looked around to see all the adults present nodding in agreement, we felt deceived and abandoned. The most we could realize is that no one had attention for -- or wanted to be burdened with -- what *we really felt*, that we needed to somehow conjure up an exterior of toughness and to fake an air of confidence.

I can imagine a lot of you having the thought right now, "Oh, come on, Jeffry, it wasn't nearly as bad as you're making it out." But I ask you to consider the possibility that this is precisely how we've been *conditioned* to think.

The culture did make it safe for us to contact one another through sports; here was also a place to develop camaraderie. But too often this has been tied up in a tribal mentality, with the unifying motivation being the defeat of someone else. And while I'm sure it is true that participation in sports, or the military, have helped many men develop positive traits, particularly when it comes to sticking up for one another, there was the implication that you would not qualify for maleness if you chose a gentler path. You only needed to be called a "wimp" once before you began strategizing how to get your "male act" together. In an effort to protect themselves, some boys hurried to be the first to call *another* boy "wimp".

As we grow up, the little boy within keeps asking: What happened? Who is going to look after me and continue to nurture and think well about me? What I think most of us decide, if it could be called a decision, is that this void will be filled by *one special female*. Not a diversified network of male and female friends, each connecting with different parts of ourselves, new ones ready to be accepted when old ones fall away, no: *one female*. One woman who we *still* may not be willing to open up to -- so conditioned we have been not to open up -- unless perhaps we are having sex. Then maybe, just maybe, will we let ourselves be seen in all our vulnerability. But

when we *do* remove the lid covering the seemingly bottomless pit of needs stored away over many years, we're anxious to secure it again. *One perfect woman*: who soothes and always says the right thing.

The male ego is fragile; and the one thing it fears, more than any perilous physical challenge, is humiliation. It is difficult for us to lose graciously. The two men I described earlier felt very humiliated by the women on whom they were fixated. I think we may safely assume that *they* were significantly abused as children, and thereby routinely experienced humiliation growing up. It is the re-triggering of this unhealed humiliation that brought them to the extremes of violence, much as has often been the case in street gangs.

Girls and women tend to want everyone happy, and will willingly sacrifice their ego wants so that things go well for those around them. Whether it is because they are inherently more secure with themselves or because of what they have suppressed they have less need to dominate or be victorious. Just as we males attribute our value to what we can do, what we know or what we've accomplished, I think females, in many cases, attribute their value to how well they please others, both through their emotional warmth and physical appearance. So starved is the male for these female qualities, which he has been conditioned to suppress in himself, that he frequently misinterprets a girl or woman's conditioned behavior *towards him*. All she has to do is smile and ask him how he is, and he is ready to assume that she wants to date or perhaps become his "one and only."

I think most members of both sexes have difficulty believing they fully deserve to be loved without having to *earn it* in some way; and that men frequently hope to earn it through tangible accomplishments while women hope to earn it in displays of sensitivity. I love how easy it can be to finish tasks and reach decisions with a group of men, but I *also* appreciate the quest for consensus and taking everyone's feelings into account that often accompanies working with a group of women -- a process that some of us men find infuriatingly inefficient.

Groups of men can show a collective poetry. I've attended many jazz concerts where the men performing are totally caught up in their enjoyment of each other's playing, leaving egos behind. One may observe similarly proud and virtuosic collaborations on basketball courts, fishing vessels or construction sites.

Historically we males have often sacrificed ourselves for others in the physical realm. We may be the ones that get trained to kill, but we also will *give our lives* for each other. This *could* be seen as our lack of self-worth playing itself out, but I can't deny the nobility in these lines from "To Dream the Impossible Dream":

"And the world will be better for this
That one man, scorned and covered with scars
Still strove with his last ounce of courage..."

I once read a news story about two thirteen-year-old boys crossing the street; one could see that the other was about to be run over by a speeding car and leaped to push his friend to safety, only to be struck -- though fortunately not killed -- by the car himself.

Another scene that comes to mind is watching my brother scatter our father's ashes last Spring at the ocean's edge near the cemetery. Still trying to shake the last of the ashes from the edge of the container, he stood unflinching as a wave washed over one of his shoes. No gesture spoke more

clearly of his love for his father.

As men, we are expected to have answers and not to ask questions, to be depended upon without having to *depend upon*, to work endlessly without need for rest, to lead without collaborating. We are expected to *win*, and have developed minimal compassion for ourselves when we do not. "The thrill of victory, the agony of defeat." Many of us choose to have nothing to do with topics we cannot display full command of, being uncomfortable with uncertainty or with deferring to the thinking of others. Not having competence at something can cause us to feel worthless, as though lacking intrinsic value to the world.

As with many oppressions, that of males is kept in place by current economic practices. We have a pornography industry that depends on men staying isolated and not finding true connection in their lives. It is in the profit interests of pharmaceutical companies that hyperactive boys are given drugs rather than the emotional support they require. When we should be building community centers, we build prisons. Millions are generated out of addictive substances and pastimes, most of which depend on men staying isolated. We have a sports industry that depends upon. . . well, I leave it to *you* to decide what it depends upon. We have a corporate system that depends on men overworking themselves in a pursuit to impress, to accumulate, to reach "the top" -- while remaining aloof to how they may affect the rest of humanity or the planet.

In business, as in the military, men often focus on where they rank. Those further down the totem are enslaved to executives who are enslaved to themselves. Within this system of ranks, men learn blind obedience, whether it be to a superior officer or the profit margin. I heard ex-GIs interviewed on the 49th anniversary of a massacre they had participated in during the Korean War. Assembled at a church with Korean survivors of the massacre, they were unable to reach past the excuse that they were "just following orders". They were unable to apologize.

I'm not here to make excuses for the violent behavior of any man. In the end we must be held accountable for our actions. But I think that Jesus' message (in the opening words) is that we are *all* accountable for the actions of violent men -- for we all have passed by the destitute and "did not minister unto them". We all have failed to recognize the Christ dwelling within characters distasteful to us. Once I was discussing, with a Catholic nun I used to work for, the movie "Dead Man Walking" -- in which a Catholic nun "ministers unto" a murderer-rapist on death row. My employer said that while she realized Jesus would forgive this man for what he did, she herself never could. We have all seen *many* forms of oppression take place in front of us without having enough courage to interrupt, among these being the systematic isolation of boys.

As a Big Brother volunteer, I spent nearly two years with Chad before his family was broken up by the Department of Social Services and he was put into foster care -- at age eleven -- with a family that did not favor my continued relationship with him. [*Explaining all of this is another story*]. I was permitted three termination visits, though, where he would be delivered to me in the center of Northampton by a social worker who served as a mediary. My last time ever seeing him, she commented to me -- preparing to walk him to her car -- that she had never witnessed a more affectionate relationship between a Little Brother and his "Big". From her experience with these boys and knowing what they'd been through, *she* knew that homophobia was the last thing they needed. I stood watching them walk down the sidewalk, tears streaming down my face. Just as he was about to climb into the car, more than a block away, Chad turned and yelled in a voice brimming with confidence, "See ya later, Jeff!"

I can only pray that the healing connection we had put him on the path to subsequent healing

connections. And I thank him for the love brought out in me by our time together, a love which, bit by bit, I have been able to send back to my own little boy within.

Please join me now in the spirit of prayer:

Dear God,

We ask that your love fill the hearts of *all* our brothers. . .
in this sanctuary,
throughout this city and state, this country and planet;
in homes and schools, in factories and offices, in shelters and prisons.

We ask your healing for those of our sisters who any of these brothers has wronged.

We pray that all who have known neglect, shame, abuse or violence find the strength to act on the love buried within them, rather than repeat these hurts towards others human beings or the planet.

Grant us each the courage to be a force for healing in the world.

Amen