TO BE A MAN

What is it like to be a man in America in the 21st century? If you are a guy reading this, see which conclusions of mine (at age 67) might resonate with your own life experiences. If you are a woman, perhaps you would like to know one man’s opinion on this topic, as a way of further understanding the often mysterious (to you) opposite sex.

Rudyard Kipling wrote a famous poem in 1895 entitled “If.” In it, he lauds all the aspects of Victorian-era stoic manhood. The poem concludes with these words:

“If you can fill the unforgiving minute

With sixty seconds’ worth of distance run,

Yours is the Earth and everything that’s in it,

And – which is more – you’ll be a Man, my son!”

Most boys of my generation were vaguely familiar with this work. We were commonly told that boys didn’t cry, and that we needed to fight and be tough for what was rightfully ours, and that girls were little but frilly and silly weaklings to be patronized but never taken seriously.

A young man’s first role model is naturally his father. Here is the pivotal turning point for society, for if the father is absent from the home or remains at home but takes no interest in his parental responsibilities, that unlucky boy will already begin to drift and stray from proper development. Such boys often join gangs or engage in anti-social or criminal behaviors as a subconscious way to feel membership in the male hierarchy. Cultural anthropologists have studied this phenomenon at length, and this outcome is the same around the world.

As for myself, sadly, my own father was scarcely involved in my life. He struggled with his own unspoken demons -- probably a combination of alcoholism, crippling memories of being a soldier in World War Two, the stress of driving a fire engine for the Chicago Fire Department for 25 years, low self-esteem, and an unhappy marriage to my mother. As a child, I feared his rages, but as an adult, I felt sorry for him and forgave him his shortcomings. Regretfully, there was no emotional connection between my father and me. None. He never taught me how to play any sports, or even played simple catch with me with a ball. We never had any ‘man-to-man’ talks. He never took me fishing, or to a ballgame (delegating the former task to my Uncle Bill -- bless his heart). My father gave me no support or advice or praise that I can recall. Sadly, I never heard him say that he loved me, nor did my mother. Once, when he attempted to teach me how to ride a bicycle in the alley behind our house, he gave up after the first minute when I crashed helplessly into our garage. He literally walked away without saying a word. I wound up teaching myself, alone. When I turned 16 and we went together for my Illinois driver’s license test, we used his badly maintained car for the actual driving test portion. Our car stalled dead in the middle of the test, and the angry test facilitator exited the Chevy in disgust, saying, “Come back with a working automobile next time!” Needless to say, I flunked the exam, and a tow truck had to be called to drag our car off the exam course. Talk about embarrassment and humiliation! (I returned weeks later with my brother-in-law and his car, and thankfully passed the test without incident.)

Searching for suitable male role models, I first looked to history. At our local library, I poured over biographies of famous world explorers like Roald Amundsen, James Cook, Marco Polo, Columbus, Richard Francis Burton, Alexander von Humboldt, Ferdinand Magellan, and Roy Chapman Andrews.

Next, it was heroes of the American Frontier that I admired: Daniel Boone, Lewis & Clark, Jim Bridger, John Fremont, Kit Carson, and Wyatt Earp.

These men were followed by: scientists (Galileo, Copernicus, Newton, Louis Pasteur, Jonas Salk); astronauts (John Glenn and the other Mercury 7); heroes from classic tales such as Odysseus, King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table, El Cid, Sinbad, Aladdin; world conquerors such as Alexander the Great, Genghis Khan, Tamerlane, Constantine, Charlemagne); inventors (Edison, Tesla, Bell, Marconi, the Wright Brothers); and great men from the Bible (Moses, Solomon, David). I was also deeply impressed with Theodore Roosevelt, who lost both his mother and his first wife on the same day in New York City (Valentine’s Day -- February 14, 1884), yet completely re-made his life out in the wilds of the Dakota Territories, and gradually overcame his grief before becoming a phenomenally popular and successful two-term American President.

As I entered my high school years, the television series "Star Trek" captured my imagination. I began to imagine myself as having a combination of the decisive and imaginative leadership of Captain James T. Kirk, and the cool, mercurial demeanor and unflappable logic of the starship's First Science Officer, Mr. Spock. Believe it or not, these fictional characters were my secret role models as to how to be a man.

By the time I finished college, I had absorbed bits and pieces of the lessons of significant men in the fields of history, literature, education, business, art, music, philosophy, religion, and psychology. By also cultivating deep and lasting friendships with similar-aged men at NIU, I came to understand the searching and trials and fears and doubts that all men must undergo as they mature. Now, I finally had the confidence and determination to begin my adult life and career. Later, the rewards and the challenges of marriage and parenthood would be introduced. Learning from women and children teaches a man many significant aspects of life that he cannot possibly understand on his own.

Now, let’s examine the clichés and stereotypes of modern American manhood.

Does fighting and killing make you a real man? Throughout countless wars over the centuries and continuing up to today, manliness is commonly defined by stark violence. Physical strength and courage in battle has always been highly regarded. True, every human has a ‘part-animal’ nature which includes aggression, and a potentially lethal and vicious temper. Unchecked, this can transition to killing, especially after military training and indoctrination. Yet I believe humans also possess a ‘higher’ nature, one that rejects the killing of one another as a geopolitical solution to complex disagreements. It is ultimately easy to kill, but it takes more courage to reject that familiar, pathetic pattern, and instead to seek out peaceful solutions to international conflicts. I would accept killing only in situations of self-defense, whereby all other options have been exhausted. Killing unto itself does not make you a man.

On the related subject of guns, I am in favor of the Second Amendment, in part because I believe it reduces the chance of a wayward totalitarian government from ever seizing the freedoms of its citizenry. I was a gun owner. For years, I had a .357 Magnum revolver and a .30-30 Marlin lever-action rifle. I practiced with both weapons at local shooting ranges, both indoors and outdoors. Around the time our daughter was born, however, I gradually felt that my guns were unnecessary, so I sold them. (Regarding guns for home protection, I was told by a policeman that the best way to protect your house was with a security system, or with a large barking dog, and that firearms could cause more trouble in an emergency than they were worth.) If you are a gun owner, that's fine. If you are a hunter, I trust that you eat whatever you shoot. (I would think that using a hunting crossbow would be more pure and 'sporting,' but having never hunted myself, I can only assume.) Lastly, I don't believe that semi-automatic assault weapons should be sold to the general public. Restrict those to trained police and military personnel. It's only common sense.

How about sports and athletic competition? While I can appreciate and admire any exceptional athlete in his prime (Michael Jordan, Walter Payton, Muhammad Ali, Bobby Hull, Pele, Jesse Owens, Lou Gehrig, etc.), superb skill in whatever sport cannot always translate into one’s personal life being an inspirational example to others (Michael Phelps, Tiger Woods, Jim Thorpe, Pete Rose, Ted Williams, Mike Tyson, etc.). Athletic ability, or brute strength and muscles, or trying to have the ‘perfect’ body, do not automatically make you a man. By all means, maintain your fitness and regularly exercise, but don't become obsessive. Safeguard your health with good nutrition and proper rest too.

My father’s generation made drinking and smoking appear tough and manly. To them, a real man smoked harsh, unfiltered cigarettes or cigars, and could drink other men ‘under the table’ because he could ‘hold his liquor.’ Well, merely looking at the prevalence of alcoholism and lung cancer deaths caused by these awful addictions should give any sane person pause. What were they thinking, forming habits that were killing them? Advertising and cultural promotion through television and motion pictures did not help either. Smoking and drinking do not make you a man. They lead to early disease and death. If you do consume alcohol, do it in moderation.

How about driving fast cars or having the mechanical ability to fix engines? While I can appreciate anyone with a ‘hands-on’ skill (mechanics, carpenters, plumbers, welders, farmers, construction workers, electricians, etc.), I fail to see how having an expensive ‘status-symbol’ car or truck makes one more manly. Advertising, again, is a prime culprit here, with car manufacturers pushing popularity and driving (no pun!) up demand. Certainly a simpler vehicle can take you where you need to go safely and efficiently. Why have a loud and flashy ‘muscle car,’ or why have a pick-up truck in an urban environment? Does your ego really find it indispensable, in terms of showing off and/or attracting women? No thanks.

Let’s next examine the role of money and power in business and politics. Does being the ‘alpha male’ in the ‘animal pack’ made you more masculine? Being the boss, the manager, the executive, the general, or the person in command can bring prestige, power, and often a large salary. Former U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger famously said, “Power is the ultimate aphrodisiac.” Is this yet another arena for males to compete for the attractions of females? My own life experience with most bosses is that they are more likely to be neurotic bullies, clueless bureaucrats, or bumbling pretenders. Few inspired me, or instilled a desire to work harder or more efficiently for a higher purpose. Being the top person in charge does not necessarily make you a better man. I have witnessed those lower on the company ladder who were more caring and intelligent precisely because they didn’t want to ‘claw their way up to the top, no matter what.’

So how about extreme male risk-taking, serious and dangerous adventurism, or just plain showing off for the crowd for fleeting fame and recognition? To judge the benefits of such actions, just look at those who became cripples for life or who died from attempting crazy stunts. No thanks, Evel Knievel. I don’t want to brag that I have broken every bone in my body -- some more than once, as he claimed! Such dubious activities do not make you a man, nor do attempts at subduing nature or lording over other animal species. The natural world is made for long-lasting coexistence with all life forms, not for domination and exploitation for ego and profit.

Does facial hair make one more manly? In many cultures and religions, it is an ancient practice for a man to display his full beard. Personally, I had a full beard for a year, but then shaved it off when it became too itchy and sweaty. Since my mid-20's, however, I have enjoyed having a trimmed moustache. Without it, I feel somewhat 'baby-faced' (having shaved it off on a few occasions to see what I would look like). Some men also like to shave their skulls, but I never went that far! Asians tend to have less facial hair than Caucasians, but genetics from one's father will generally indicate what kind of beard a boy will someday develop. Beard or not, neither makes one more a man. To me, daily shaving and weekly trimming is not that much of a chore, regardless. Some woman prefer a 'bushy' man, while others like the clean-shaven version of their men. To each their own.

Finally, we come to men and women and sexuality. Here we must mention the various euphemisms for the male phallus -- twig and berries; fire hose; johnson; wiener; willie; schlong; and dozens more. You know the most common terms. Does size matter? Not if you consider that the average erect penis is just under six inches long, not eight or ten inches as lurid pornography videos might suggest. This misconception fuels fear and feelings of inferiority when young men first shower with other young men at summer camp or after a gym class, and take quick, comparative glances at other male bodies. (I still remember as a boy seeing my first uncircumcised adult penis in the locker room of a community pool, and later informing my friends -- we all assumed it had to be some kind of regrettable, horrid deformity!) Another confusion is with the sex act itself. The popular misconception would have most men believe that they are supposed to be ‘super-studs’ in the bedroom, lasting hours before dramatic climax. But the fact of the matter is more likely a mere ten minutes passes during sex before a typical male orgasm. The bottom line here is that natural endowment does not make one more or less manly. Your body is as it should be, with no shame or excuses needed when considering your manhood. Be happy you are healthy.

A few asides here for my female readers, if you don't know or suspected as much: when men are in their late teens and 20's, they are wrestling constantly with the molten heat of surging testosterone. They want to mate with virtually any female, anytime, anywhere. They are directed solely by the attractive female shape and appearance. Men in lust are just not very interested in what kind of personality the woman has, or what she thinks and says, or what she wants in a loving relationship. (Fortunately, all of that caring and concern comes in the decades that follow, or hopefully sooner, after a long relationship or marriage.) As a result, men will lie, pretend to care, and will make promises -- in fact, do almost anything -- to get laid. Once that occurs, he is already wondering about mating with other women. His animal instinct is running the show. This situation causes much female confusion and anguish and hurt. Men truly don't mean to be cruel and unfeeling at this volcanic stage of their young manhood, but it is how it is. Sorry, ladies! But time and age generally mellow the average man who is strong and secure within himself and relaxed with his masculinity. He need not cheat on or betray the woman he loves. His promise of faithfulness to you is true. If not, it is because he never grew up, and you are best to be rid of him anyway.

So...what is actually important for one to fully be a man today?

I will begin this analysis with my training in the Boy Scouts. Perhaps this surprises you? Over several years growing up, I took their fine teaching to heart. As an adult, I now can find no flaw in the ideals they can instill for growing boys to help them become solid, productive, and vital men.

First, here is the Boy Scout Law: a Scout must be trustworthy-loyal-helpful-friendly-courteous-kind-obedient-cheerful-thrifty-brave-clean-reverent. What wonderful goals!

Next, the Boy Scout Slogan: “Do a good turn (deed) daily.” With no need for reward, this is selfless service at its best for others.

Lastly, this is the Boy Scout Oath or Promise:

“On my honor, I will do my best

To do my duty to God and my Country, and to obey the Scout Law,

To help other people at all times,

And to keep myself physically strong, mentally awake, and morally straight.”

From these early inspiring lessons, and from my own later life experiences, I have compiled my own list of what it takes to be a true man in the world today. These are the goals I strive to achieve, and the attributes I try to cultivate:

1. Do the right thing. You know what to do.

2. Be an independent thinker.

3. Show kindness and concern to all.

4. Safeguard nature and the environment.

5. Treat others with equality and respect.

6. Be guided by the spiritual aspects of life.

7. Be generous, patient, and humble.

8. Be honest and open, and be at peace.

9. Listen -- as well as speak -- thoughtfully.

10. Be loving with family, friends & others.

11. Continuously learn new things.

12. Protect children and help those in need.

13. Whatever work you do, do it expertly.

14. Educate yourself to your best potential.

15. Travel the world and see for yourself.

These represent some of the finest paths to true manhood, in my opinion. As men, we must teach our sons and the nation’s boys by our example. We must dispel the toxic myths and stereotypes that have led so many young men down the wrong road into confusion, anxiety, and despair. Over the past two decades, I have seen a growing 'crisis in masculinity' in America -- with less men attending college and graduate schools than women, men generally reading less books, and fewer men accepting their full responsibilities as devoted fathers and husbands. This tragic trend must be reversed.

The future of our country demands no less of America's true men now…

THE END

by Jack Karolewski

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