

COLUMNS

Amateur: How Do I Reconcile My Masculinity With The Toxicity of Men?

Thomas Page McBee breaks down how to reconcile one's masculinity with the often-abhorrent nature of men.



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October 5, 2018

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I spent my entire 29th year in what I can only describe as a waking fever dream. This was 2010: the year before I began injecting testosterone, the year I picked my new name, my last year in San Francisco, the end of a life (mine) and an era (all of ours) — in more ways than I ever could have imagined.

As the US and the global economy began its slow recovery from the “Great Recession,” and the markers of what we now call the “masculinity crisis” took hold the world over, I spent most of that year at home, seeing myself as I really was: Bearded and shirtless, an apparition at my kitchen table or in my bed, this inevitable man I would become. It still surprises me how precisely right I was in that hallucinatory imagining, but of course, I have another body within this body — we all do. All of us have the capacity to take hormones that will turn on the genes that lay dormant inside us, unlocking a twin of sorts. But the intimacy I had, unconsciously, with that man within me felt mystical once I blossomed into him. This deep wisdom about my own becoming is a great joy for me, about being trans. I

only note it because there are so few joys expressed about the trans community outside of the tropes people rely on to tell our stories, “born in the wrong body” chief among them. Our stories, however, are beyond containment.

But all that was then. The Tea Party was on the rise, but the roiling, overt racism and sexism that is now centerstage in our national politics was still only flaunted on the most extreme margins. Still, I spent much of that year struggling to come to terms with how I’d leave behind all the markers of difference, of queerness, and of the androgyny that (I imagined) made clear my politics and my frustration with gender generally, and suddenly move through the world in my new life as a legible, white man. I was a man, that I knew. I just really didn’t want to be what I thought a man *meant*.

For me, being a man meant violence. The year before, I’d been involved in a horrific mugging-gone-wrong, a near-death experience where, gun to my head on an Oakland sidewalk, the only thing that seemed to save me was opening my mouth and speaking in my then-higher register. The mugger went on to shoot two other men in similar circumstances, and even the DA seemed to think that this body I’d rebelled against my entire life was what allowed me to live. This wasn’t my first brush with serious violence; I’d spent most of my childhood being sexually abused by my stepfather. My biggest fear about my transition wasn’t that I would lose people (I did), or struggle to find my place in the world (I did), or face hardships (I did, though certainly not as many as people with less privilege than myself), but that I would turn out anything like these men. Some part of me, a part that I later learned I internalized from culture, worried it was an inevitability.

Seven years after that first shot of testosterone, I think I’ve figured out a way to navigate masculinity without succumbing to its more toxic elements, but I had to write an entire book about it to figure out how. I mostly wrote *Amateur* in the year before and after the presidential election, when all the worst shadows of white male supremacy in our nation were, finally and fully, brought to light. I’ve talked to sociologists, psychologists, historians, and neuroscientists to try to figure out how to reimagine the monolithic masculinity we are culturally indoctrinated into from infancy. This masculinity — the “man box,” as sociologists call it — is the root of much of the more terrifying behavior we’re currently seeing from cis men and their apologists in our national politics: Dominance (especially over women and

men and their agents in our national politics. Dominance (especially over women and gay men), reckless risk taking, not asking for help, not showing (or feeling) “weakness” or vulnerability, and guarding against “masculinity threats” by any means necessary. Cis men are more likely to kill themselves and others, to be rapists and mass shooters. They’re less likely to work to save the environment. It makes sense, with that level of abhorrent behavior, for most men to want to put as much distance between themselves and these “bad men” as possible. I certainly do.

But what we have in common is being male in this culture, with its various rewards and restrictions. I was shocked by the visceral realities of privilege early in my transition, just as I was disturbed by the trade those privileges required of this body: The way I found myself limiting the ways I showed emotion, pushing myself to “be strong,” to not ask for help, even when I really needed it.

I’ve thought quite a bit about trans men who are undergoing the early stages of transition in this political moment, and a letter I received last week from a reader confirmed my sympathies. He mentions that he “quietly sought out a low dose of testosterone” over the last six weeks, and is struggling with how to navigate a personally precarious time during a precarious age for all of us. “How can I talk to anyone about this, knowing how many women and men and nonbinary people in my life have been harmed by masculine people?” he writes. “How can I work out the (still barely legible) person I want to be without inappropriately centering myself and masculinity, at a moment when everyone around me is reliving trauma at the hands of, largely, men?”

I think this question alone is the exact right start. We need to talk about masculinity. Trans men have an advantage, I’ve found, in highlighting the toxic aspects of masculine conditioning in two key ways: We tend to understand that we have a gender (privilege hasn’t rendered masculinity invisible to us), and for those of us who transition in adulthood, we are sensitive to socialization, and can therefore use that sensitivity to do the hard work of identifying and refusing the worst aspects of masculinity in our own becoming — if we choose to.

We also have a disadvantage, in that our masculinities are more “fragile” from the jump.

That can make us more vulnerable, through our human need for acceptance and love, to bow to dominant ideas about how men “should” be. Though this question comes from a trans man six weeks on testosterone, I think his unique mix of awareness and (presumably) heightened anxiety about that fragility is actually a perspective many “woke”-ish cis men in the US are feeling right now. The collective, and disappointing, disparity between the performance of that wokeness online and the many male bystanders to bias and violence IRL is all but inevitable for men who can’t quite see how to challenge a system that they’ve been taught since boyhood is monolithic, immovable, and innate.

But all men have an opportunity to open their eyes in the same way trans men, like our letter writer, are made to in these heady, early days of transition. What are some actionable steps he, and other men, can do to engage with gender in a more meaningful way, and challenge toxic masculinity, in this charged moment?

Tristan Bridges, a sociology professor at the University of California–Santa Barbara, suggests that “part of the problem with gender is that it is all about distinction. It's about distinguishing *some* groups from *other* groups.” He cites the notion that men tend to grow facial hair during moments of historical gains for women. “Just as women do something to move toward gender equality, demonstrating themselves to be as (and often more) capable than men, men do things to re-emphasize gender *difference*.” But as he points out, “the symbols associated with masculinity are not intrinsically associated with power and dominance.” Look at gay bears! “Being big, hirsute, and appearing ‘mountain-ready’ does not mean that those same folks are not also able to be cuddly, emotionally intelligent, compassionate, and nurturing, for instance. But it often takes some extra work to remind people to challenge these taken-for-granted associations between symbols of masculinity and the types of people we imagine using them and behaviors we imagine them to signal to others.”

But the truth is, “it’s ultimately not possible to separate masculinity from the culture in which it swims. And this means that privilege follows masculinity no matter who's donning it,” Bridges says. For trans men who pass, like me, the visceral discomfort of that privilege can feel like a crossroads. Would I accept the dominant narrative about what being a man

means, or give up what little “status” I have in this paradigm to challenge it? I don’t posit that question lightly. Patriarchy teaches us all that staying quiet about what we see men do is the key to survival. But what if... it’s not?

In recent days, I’ve seen trans men and nonbinary survivors of sexual violence discussing their experiences online, in response to Christine Blasey Ford’s heartbreaking, disturbing testimony about Supreme Court nominee Brett Kavanaugh at his confirmation hearing. This insisting on ourselves — this trading of power and privilege to align with the women in our lives — is a rejection of toxic masculinity. Regardless of your gender background, this willingness to question the ways you’ve internalized harmful ideas about gender is key to liberation, both yours and mine. Niobe Way, an NYU developmental psychologist who studies adolescent male friendships and the way we socialize boys out of empathy, put it to me this way: Instead of asking yourself if you are a “good man,” which presumes another binary, and which requires that there be “bad men” in that presumption, ask yourself, “What am I doing to maintain the status quo?”

This is a key question for trans men early in transition, one that has the potential to transform your relationship to masculinity. Experience of social privilege is cited often by trans men, Bridges says, as “the recognition that comes with presumptions about authority, a capacity for violence, and sometimes respect and other forms of social advantage.” He points out, powerfully, that trans women experience a much different early awareness of social transition. “Having someone catcall you on the street might qualify,” he says. “Many trans men's early experiences with social recognition are associated with power and privilege, while many trans women's experiences with social recognition are associated with disempowerment.”

Let that sink in for a moment, whatever your gender.

I know what I was doing to maintain the status quo, early in my transition: Staying small, internalizing every comment that seemed to mark me as “not real,” contorting myself to fit into the “man box,” and wondering what the point of transitioning even was, and whether it was yet another prison for my body. I am so grateful to have found within myself a more pressing desire than being loved or accepted, something that powers me beyond that

pressing desire than being loved or accepted, something that powers me beyond that claustrophobic existence: An insistence on my right to be myself, in this life, in this body.

We all have that right. In fact, we're all counting on each other to locate the truth in our collective becoming. We've never needed the quiet, inward looking that comes from sitting in discomfort more. In fact, men of all backgrounds (our letter-writer included) can start by being uncomfortable, and facing the dissonances found there.

And then he can talk about it. He can seek feedback, and fight his own tendency toward being complacent. He can be the man he wish he'd had as a role model. He can tell the truth, and in that truth-telling, he can join the voices of a diverse and growing legion of men who refuse to conform to expectations that harm us, the planet, and everyone on it.

It won't be easy, but it will be better. For all of us.

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