



Modern Masculinity

When my wife was pregnant with my oldest son Benjamin, something really interesting and unexpected happened to me as a man. While I have always been inclined towards feelings of self-responsibility, maybe even too much so, the feeling that came over me then was so strong and so qualitatively different that almost immediately it started to work changes on my way of being. And these were necessary changes. I had a lot to do to ensure that I would be properly prepared for the many challenges of fatherhood.

For some reason, I got really interested in the question:

Just what does it mean to be a good man?

Of course, at the time I assumed I sort of knew the answer. I got really motivated to write about the subject. What started off as a letter to my then-unborn son quickly morphed into a much more ambitious book project. And as I was writing I kept imagining this mythical moment in the future, where I would hand this book to my then-grown to manhood son and say something like “Here’s what you need to know son.”

As if I could somehow bestow upon him all the secrets of manhood and life.

Look, naïve as it was, it was all very motivating and I managed to rather quickly write over 100 pages. But after a while I got stuck and as I started to read and re-read through all my writings, a stark realization came over me. I didn’t actually know the answer!

Man, was that a painful realization. Now, I don’t want you all to think I was living some overtly bad, evil or corrupt life. It wasn’t like that really. My errors, transgressions and failures as a man were more a function of poor awareness, lack of understanding and immaturity than anything else. While I was mostly a “good” man, I wasn’t completely so. Looking back, my big issue was that in many cases, even where I was good, there was a lack of awareness there. There was just too much about my personality that was operating automatically and unconsciously. Much of the book I’ve been working on is about this realization, my search to understand what ideal

masculinity is actually about and my attempts to conduct my life accordingly.

And let me tell you, it's been quite a journey! It took me 3 or 4 years just to peel back the layers and layers of toxic cultural and behavioral conditioning standing in my way of right understanding. Then there were another few years trying to transform my personality—one of the hardest things in life to do. Only now, with my oldest son approaching 7 already, do I feel comfortable writing about what I've learned. And lest you think I'm crazy, under no circumstances do I profess to know the full truth of the answer to the question I originally posed—what does it mean to be a good man?—nor do I believe that I'm somehow living the life of the perfect man (just ask my wife!), I just feel like I've actually been making some progress and have learned some things worthy of sharing.

You see, masculinity is an idea that is under attack in our culture and rightly so. For too long now, masculinity has been expressed in toxic form. What we have seen in these high-profile cases like the #MeToo movement or the Epstein child sex ring are sadly just the extreme manifestations of much broader problem. Corrupt lines of masculine energy have been running wild in our culture and until recently, doing so with impunity. While this is a very complex issue, the most obvious dimension of toxic masculinity in our culture has to do with how we think about and behave towards women. This is a pervasive problem. We find men behaving badly all over the place and there's this undeniable out of balance patriarchal bias in all of our institutions.

Part of the problem is that here in the West, at least, representations of ideal masculinity come few and far between. You cannot just open a book or turn on the TV and find examples of good men leading good lives. In fact, the contra examples are basically all you can find. Look, in my lifetime, we've had Presidents, on both sides of the aisle, who were as guilty as any of the #MeToo villains. It's not that there are no good examples though. We do celebrate individuals like Lincoln, Gandhi and Jesus from time to time. And most people do have a decent understanding and working knowledge of the profound example of these lives. But even with someone like Jesus, we don't necessarily celebrate his way of life as a particularly masculine expression. Even though we should!

The problem goes all the way back to the very beginning of Western culture actually. Think about Greek mythology and literature for a second. How many of the male heroes behaved rightly towards women? Look, you basically cannot find a story that doesn't involve rape or adultery. And even the Gods are getting in on the act. Odysseus, who we love to celebrate for his dedication to his dutiful wife Penelope, wasn't exactly faithful himself. The only time we find him

exercising restraint is when he comes across the young princess Nausicaa but that was probably more a function of self-preservation than anything else. Even Pericles' funeral oration, which we celebrate as one of the great moments in the history of freedom, is decidedly unenlightened when it comes to women.

So, we have this legacy, this built-in cultural tendency for the expression of masculinity to lean too far in the direction of strength, dominance and the will to power. Our heroes are, in a sense, too one dimensional—strong and courageous, yes but also self-aggrandizing and out of control. They are missing key characteristics like self-control, empathy and compassion and are failing in critical dimensions like responsibility.

The outright rejection of all things masculine is an understandable cultural reaction, especially in light of everything we've seen in the past several years. But I think things may have gone too far. It's not masculinity itself that is wrong or bad. In fact, it's quite a necessary and important cultural energy. The problem is more an issue of balance. This is a big oversimplification of an incredibly complex issue but if you think of masculinity and femininity as a continuum, the idealized expression of both the masculine and the feminine lands right in the middle, the perfect blend of all the possibilities and powers of both. Our problem today is that for too long now masculinity has been expressed in our culture in this improperly extreme and out of balance form.

This, by the way, is why thinkers like Jordan Peterson have become so popular in recent times. In response to the deserved backlash against men and masculinity, Peterson articulated an inspiring alternative for men around the world, one that emphasizes important characteristics like self-responsibility, strength, courage, duty and discipline. While he offers a compelling answer both to the problem of out of control masculinity and to the emasculating effects of the backlash, there's something not altogether right about Peterson's vision. It's somehow out of balance itself, too much of a reaction in the other direction. Peterson's ideal male is a little too harsh, a little too individualistic.

Anyway, as I mentioned earlier, it took me a very long time and a lot of reading just to begin to understand the problem of masculinity today. I kept searching and searching. I read a ton—philosophy, religious and mystical texts and especially biographies. What I learned from the lives of Socrates, Jesus, Gandhi and Lincoln pointed me in the right direction. But it wasn't until I turned my attention fully to the East—to works like the Ramayana or the Mahabharata—that I felt like I really found an answer. In these amazing works—I cannot believe these aren't required reading in schools across the globe—we find a totally different vision

of idealized masculine conduct. The heroic characters in these stories are completely different and offer a much more balanced vision for what it means to be a good man.

When it comes to women, for instance, they don't engage like the Greeks and Romans at all. No, they are much more respectful, careful and disciplined. You find them exercising restraint rather than reckless acts of self-aggrandizement. Instead of trying to sleep with every beautiful female they come across, you find them even turning down offers for sex from beautiful Goddesses. In fact, in these stories the principal "bad guys" are the characters who make transgressions against women. There's an arc in the Ramayana story that is exactly the same as in the Iliad. The evil demon Ravanna abducts Sita, the wife of the hero Rama, and there is a war to get her back. Sounds familiar, right? But in the Ramayana you don't find the heroes treating women as prizes and fighting with each other over them. It's a much more enlightened matter in this story.

The Mahabharata has a more complicated story line but you find the same dynamics there. The heroic males figures all share this profound respect for women and the feminine power. The principal heroes, the 5 Pandava brothers, even agree to share a wife, rather than succumb to jealous rivalry like the Greeks in the Iliad. One of the brothers, Arjuna, who's the Hindu version of Achilles, even becomes a woman himself for a year before he's allowed to fulfill his destiny as the era's greatest warrior. I absolutely love this part of the story. It's making such a profoundly genius point: it's only when a man truly understands the feminine that he is worthy of heroism.

What I learned from these stories has me convinced that the question of what it means to be a good man starts with getting things right when it comes to women. There's more to it obviously but this is the place to begin. Clearly, in our day and age, this is the area of masculinity most in need of attention.

You might be thinking by now: "Wait, Nick, but what's the answer to the question? Did you ever figure out what it means to be a good man?"

Well, I'm working on it...still! You see, I've been writing this book, which is turning out to be an extended exploration of this whole topic, and while I am excited by it, I'm also, quite frankly, a bit scared. This is a tough topic to write about. I feel like I'm trying to walk this thin line where I'm genuinely trying to answer the question without, at the same time, giving off the impression that I think I'm some perfect or ideal masculine figure. No, I'm not that at all.

For now, I will just leave with you this. Something really interesting has been happening to me since I got serious about answering this question. It's making me believe that I'm on the right track here. All kinds of powerful and dynamic women have been coming into my life. And it's not like I set out with some deliberate intention to work more closely with women. This just sort of happened organically. It started about 3 or 4 years ago when Gloria, the amazing woman who runs my boys' preschool, asked me to be the school PTA President. I wasn't expecting this at all. It never once occurred to me that this was something I might want to do but I've loved working with Gloria and all the families at the school. There's something really special about building and leading a community of young families. In my youth, I always had this one very limited picture of what leadership looked like—basically what you find in epic stories of war and survival—but it turns out there's much more to it than that.

Anyway, this was just the beginning. This same thing started happening in every area of my life—my business, my civic activist work and even my writing. Fast forward to today and my Saturday morning workout partner is a woman. My writing coach is a woman. My closest allies on the HHH Citizens Oversight Committee are women. Many of my most engaged readers here are women. You get the idea! I'm convinced that this is all somehow related to the seriousness with which I've approached the question. It's like a slight nod from the Divine Feminine. "Here's someone who is on the right path." This is my hope, at least!

When I look back on the arc of my own life, it makes absolute perfect sense that I would marry my wife Alicia. She's an amazing woman with an unusually balanced personality. She naturally moves across wide swaths of the masculine-feminine continuum and is very comfortable with male friendships. What's so interesting about Alicia is that her personality doesn't fit neatly with any of the bs cultural stereotypes around what it means to be a woman today. She presents as this divinely confident and fiercely independent woman—which sometimes throws people off—but underneath she's all love, loyalty and kindness, the ultimate caretaker. I'm convinced that living closely with her all these years has helped to undo all the toxic cultural conditioning in me. Her particular personification of the feminine power was exactly what I needed to make progress as a man. When I met her my understanding of all this, if it existed at all, only did so in a pre-conscious way, but clearly something was pulling me towards this awakening. She likes to joke that without her I'd be a shadow of a man. Well, she's more right than she knows. □