



Violence and Masculinity

Almost as if we planned it, the topic of masculinity is all anyone can talk about. Wasn't it just last month that we started writing about it here in Profit! And yes, I'm going to talk about the Will Smith moment.

I honestly still cannot believe that happened. Ever since I first learned of it—from Twitter, of course, and not from actually watching the Oscars—there's been this script running through my head: "Wait, wait, wait...did he really just do that? What! Why? Wait, why would he do that? And what would've happened if Chris Rock had tried to protect himself? ... Wow, that could've ended so badly."

For whatever reason, that moment really had an impact on my psyche. I must admit I was so amped just watching it I even had a hard time falling asleep that night.

While part of me wants to dismiss this as just some irrelevant public display of private moral failure, another part of me thinks that there's something profoundly important about what happened that night. It feels like some inevitable

cultural reckoning, an unmissable warning sign calling out to society once again: "Hey, it's time to get serious about this whole masculinity thing!"

Look, whatever that moment was, it certainly was not an expression of idealized masculine conduct. And our culture cannot help but take note. There have been thousands of articles and posts about the incident. Twitter, of course, is on fire with commentary and memes and more serious OpEds have started to appear that are examining the episode in the context of the broader cultural rejection of toxic masculinity.

Interestingly, at some level, there's a nobility to what Smith did. Not every joke is worth making and some things are, indeed, too personal. Look, even comedians should be careful now and then. What's more is that while there are plenty of celebrities whose public conduct makes them very deserving of the attention of comedians like Rock, Jada doesn't seem to be one of them. In fact, she seemed to be genuinely struggling with having to live out a clearly difficult personal situation in the increasingly unforgiving public eye. As the husband to a

strong wife myself, I understand the impulse Smith must've felt. But this doesn't justify the action.

Smith obviously knows this now but he sure didn't that night. His half-hearted, rambling acceptance speech was more of an attempted justification than an apology. Clearly, at that key moment, he hadn't quite processed the gravity of his mistake. To be sure, the protector is an important archetype of the ideal masculine and part of me admires his self-identification with the role as it's something that's clearly missing among men today. But while violence can certainly be a valid expression of the protective impulse, the man as protector uses violence only when absolutely necessary.

Anyway, ultimately, what this little incident is about is our rather complex relationship with the nature of violence. The capacity for violence is a distinctive feature of the human condition. This is something we cannot deny or ignore. In this post-modern world, where many of us are completely insulated from actual violence, there is this feeling out there that we are somehow "over" violence. But I don't believe that for a second. We are just as violent as ever, maybe even more so. Take a step back and think about our culture for a second. Violence is absolutely pervasive—we find it in our movies and shows, our video games and sports and even our music. As much as we'd like to believe we've conquered violence, we're not so different from the Ancient Romans after all. We are still under the psychological hold that so captivated the Romans at the Coliseum.

Violence is something that I've been fascinated by since my youth, as far back as I can remember actually. As I got into my 20's I noticed a tension in me, a sort of contradiction, where while I loved to engage with things like violent stories and movies, I was very uncomfortable with the idea of actually expressing violence myself. For this reason, I was very much afraid of conflict. I used to joke with a roommate of mine who was big into mixed martial arts about how I wanted to get into my first adult fight. Look, I didn't really want to get into a fight but clearly there was something unresolved in me when it came to violence.

This tension stayed with me until my early 30's when I finally decided to do something about it. One day, I walked into a local MMA gym here in Los Angeles and this little decision kicked-off almost a decade long obsession with martial arts and fighting. By the way, I met my wife in that gym—interesting, right?—but that's a story for another day! I got really interested in things like UFC and boxing, even to the point of not only ordering all the pay-per-views but also watching things like the post-fight press conferences and highlight videos online. I trained almost every day, but for the longest time, even though I was training "martial"

arts, I was reluctant to actually spar. I was still struggling psychologically with the idea of the expression of violence.

Part of my struggle was about simply being afraid of pain and the unknown. Outside of a few very minor fights all the way back in middle school, I had never really been hit. Not knowing what that was like naturally produced a kind of fear. It turns out there was more to it than that though but I didn't realize this until later.

Eventually, I found the perfect sparring partner in my now good friend Thanasi. What's so interesting about Thanasi is that he's this absolutely phenomenal fighter—really a very dangerous athlete and competitor—but he has this happy-go-lucky, kindhearted personality. When you meet him you'd think he could never hurt anyone but, trust me, he certainly can and has. But still there's just no malice in him. Not at all. Looking back, Thanasi was the perfect teacher for me, for in working with him I figured out that what had really been bothering me about violence all these years. My mistake in understanding came down really to a bad assumption. I had wrongly assumed that violence just had to come from a dark place psychologically, the place of malice, rage, anger and hate. To be fair, violence often manifests from these dark forces but it doesn't have to and that's the key. A man can embrace and cultivate his capacity for violence. He can engage with it, become comfortable with it and even enjoy it without giving in to dark forces like anger or hate. This is what the Jedi mythology is all about by the way. The central question of the myth is something like "can you engage in necessary violence without destroying your soul?"

Something really interesting and unexpected happened for me when I figured this out. My interest in violence started to just fade away. These days I don't feel the same way about the movies, almost never watch UFC or a boxing match and find myself much more inclined towards ideas like Gandhi's ahimsa—i.e., the radical commitment to non-violence. Peace is what I'm after, especially now that I'm a father.

The other day I was looking through some old writings and found some essays I wrote in my 20's where I'm talking about things like how war somehow produces the best in us and is necessary for the cultivation of virtue in society. Interesting how a young, naïve mind thinks, right? While I've gotten over the glorification of violence, I don't believe it is something we can or should ignore. I really do believe that we should embrace our capacity for violence. It's just so clear from the long, sordid history of humankind that violence is something that we often actually need. Just ask the Ukrainians today. You just never know what life will demand of you.

At the same time though, we must also cultivate things like

judgment and emotional self-control. This what the Will Smith thing is ultimately about. You see, that night, Smith was completely overtaken by the emotions of the moment and acted violently out of anger and rage. You could see it in his quivering face as he was yelling at Rock. And in acting this way, Smith failed in one of the key elements of ideal masculinity: restraint. While we shouldn't shy away or hide from our capacity for violence, we also shouldn't just use it whenever we feel like. Violence is a force of ours that is not to be trifled with. Yes, we should absolutely be prepared to use violence but only when necessary and only as a last resort. We make our biggest mistakes when we lose control and give in to things like anger, rage, malice, fear or hate.

At a broader level, I think this issue of restraint is the fundamental problem of masculinity today. Men just haven't learned how to control themselves. Go figure. But this really isn't a new issue though. Remember Achilles' failure in "The Iliad"? It's about exactly this point. Achilles allowed his rage to so overcome him that he lost the one thing he actually cared about in life. Something very similar played out on the stage that night.

Let me end by nerding out on Star Wars for a minute. In my mind, it's no coincidence or accident that Star Wars has become what it has become. I believe it is the most important cultural product of the American experiment actually. It's a story, very much like "The Iliad," that operates on multiple psychological, cultural and spiritual dimensions all at the same time. In exploring things like right versus wrong, good versus evil, fate, destiny, free will and the possibility for salvation, it challenges us to think seriously about our own lives.

Anyway, when it comes to understanding violence, the Star Wars story makes a pretty profound point. Take yourself back to the very end of the first trilogy, when Luke goes to face Vader and the Emperor all by himself. Think about how he actually wins that fight for a second. As the audience, what we are hoping for is for Luke to somehow kill them both in a dramatic lightsaber battle. But that's not what happens at all

and this is where the story is genius. Luke wins this fight in the most unexpected way.

The story proceeds in the predictable trajectory, with Luke fighting Vader. The fight's kind of even but we aren't left with the feeling that Luke could actually win. But then, at one point during the encounter, his thoughts betray him and Vader realizes he has a twin sister. Luke, overcome by his love for her—i.e. exactly the same protector instinct Smith referenced that night—almost kills Vader in a rage. This is where it gets interesting. Right at his moment of triumph, when he has smashed Vader to the ground and cut off his hand, Luke completely abandons the path of violence. He realizes there in that moment that if it takes giving in to rage and hate to win, it's not worth winning. He tosses his lightsaber to the side resigned to suffer his fate. But as the Emperor proceeds to try to try to kill the defenseless Luke, cold-hearted, evil Vader is inspired by love—the innate, presumably unbreakable, love of father for son—to a profound act of redemptive sacrifice. He picks up the Emperor, absorbing all the hate-filled negative energy into his own body, and then tosses him into the abyss. This is a perfect symbol for what we should do with a feeling like hate.

So in the end, it's not violence that wins the day but rather Luke's courage, his willingness to die rather than give in to anger, that wins the day. Luke's act somehow shows Vader the truth, that anger can indeed be overcome, and the story ends with his redemptive act of sacrifice that saves not only Luke but also himself. This, by the way, is precisely what Jesus was talking about. Fascinating stuff.

I'm convinced that one of the reasons that the Jedi story has so captivated our culture is that it holds the secret to understanding how to think about violence. Like Luke, we should all be very prepared for violence and even use it when necessary. But if in doing so, we risk making a great spiritual mistake, like giving in to anger or hate, then we must have the courage to stop and just walk away, no matter the consequences. No easy task obviously.