

Can men ever be free of society?

Changing men: The anti-sexist male

A few years ago, I was playing jacks with a woman friend. I started imitating a sportscaster doing a play-by-play of the game, which she didn't enjoy. I figured she had no sense of humour, but the truth was, that was the only way I was comfortable with the game...turning it into a competition. Jacks, for Pete's sake!

It's hard for men to stop competing. We've spent our lives building a person of consequence, who's able to accomplish things, who's respected by those who know him. In school, status was gained by doing well in sports or getting good grades or fighting well or getting lots of girls. Outside school we compete over even more things: our careers, the quality of our dope, our strength, our knowledge of mechanics, electric circuits, or the workings of capitalism. Conversations in all-male groups often consists of trading insults, seldom compliments. Even when we're trading information, there's a strong element of competition, with nobody wanting to look too dumb.

What I've been noticing lately, and what I'd like to talk about in this article, is that this eternal competition shows up in the way we use our bodies.

Society has given us a whole catalogue of gestures, postures, expressions, tones-of-voice, and movements that are 'manly'. Those ways of holding our bodies are tools in the competition for respect, and they express a lot of the ways men are supposed to be: that we don't need anyone else; that we are never lost or bewildered; that we won't be pushed around; that we are proud of the 'man' we built. I've bought nearly this whole catalogue of manly postures without thinking about it much. I use them in situations where I want to be respected. I'm only vaguely aware of them, so my descriptions will not be very accurate, but I hope they'll spark some recognition in you.

Not too close, man

I hold myself rather upright and rigid. I keep my face relaxed and not very mobile, better not to make a fool of myself. I grin, but I don't smile. It's too vulnerable. If I use my hands at all when speaking, they act strong, rather than soft and sensitive. I don't stand too close to a man I'm talking to. Generally, I don't face him directly but rather half turn away, so we're not so intimate, unless we're actually fighting. I put a little crackly edge on my voice to stand for authority,

rather than letting it be soft and loving. I listen in a friendly way, but don't tilt my head in empathy. I don't talk about things unless they're exciting things.

If someone gives me a firm handshake, I make sure I squeeze right back. Even when I'm just killing time, I slouch without relaxing. I feel instinctively that certain postures are effeminate: my knees crossed, or held close together, my hands between my legs. The postures that feel OK are postures of defense or action. There's even a 'manly' way to dance...very 'in command' rather than letting myself softly sway with the music.

These gestures all add up to a charade fight between me and other me. I'm always ready to fend off a physical attack. That may sound exaggerated, but I think it's true, and not too surprising since I grew up in this culture that idolizes Clint Eastwood, Sean Connery, Larry Csonka, and so on. Even among anti-sexist men, I often see indications of how deeply we've retained a reverence for violence. Several months ago, I was in a discussion about experiences in school. One man finished a story about how horrible school had been by saying "...and I went to high school in New York City." A ripple "yeah" went around the circle, meaning we knew he had been through it.

In the same discussion I talked about fights I'd had, with an undeniable twinge of pride that I'd had them. None of us would say that violence is a way to solve anything, but there was still a romance in testifying that we knew what violence was about.

So I'm saying that we gain and give respect through competition with other men, and our bodies are an important part of that competition. Fantasies of violence are important to all of us, and we constantly flash body language messages telling others we're ready to protect our bodies. I want to change the way I use my body, and change the way I respond to messages from others. Let me spell out some reasons why.

Backbone

First, I think that using the gestures I described earlier puts other men on their guard. I hurt our chances for creating a real relationship and insure that we'll stay superficial.

'Backbone' is a good word. I've been proud of how much I had. I was a calcified fort. I didn't need



"Welcome aboard. This is your captain, Margaret Williamson speaking."

anyone, had huge reserves of armour so life's storms would never reach me. I was the opposite of "sissy" ...a loser in the status struggle. He doesn't respect himself enough to keep fighting.

I'm starting to see the positive side of sissy. He loves himself enough to cry for himself when someone hurts him. I've had the opportunity to be around a few men who seemed pretty incapable of competing. At first I was put off by them as being just too weak. But I noticed that sometimes it was very easy to be relaxed and real around them. They had allowed me to drop my defences. At the first sign of someone putting me down, however, I'd put together a show of backbone. I want to stop that. Let my backbone-fort dissolve. Let other people in.

Another reason for ending these status wars between men is that they make it impossible for us to relate to women as people. We need women to serve as non-threatening refugees, need them to be soft, caring, non-critical. Need them to say "I'll love you no matter what the world thinks of you and bandage your psychic bruises."

But we spend lots of time sizing up other people critically, and we can't just shut those judgements off when dealing with women. Then the very qualities we need in women become defects in our eyes. We see the fact that they cry easily as a weakness. A sign they can't cope with life's

problems as well as we can. Or we'll say "women use tears to manipulate men".

As in my game of jacks, we can't help setting up silly competitions with women. I vaguely remember a series of magazine ads in which a woman had to follow a man into 'his' outdoor world, rock climbing or whatever, to earn her drink. She always looked very distressed and wanted to know if there wasn't an easier way. The point is that he needs her not to judge him the way other men do, but he's addicted to competition, and so goes ahead and sets up a test for her.

We're very bad at giving emotional support back to women. Once again the example of crying fits. We do so little of it that we don't know what it's about and can only interpret it as a sign of defeat. We know very little about the positive aspects of crying and generally wouldn't think of helping someone to cry.

Female Chauvinist

As more women turn to other women to find that sensitive support, it unfortunately becomes more common to hear men say "wait a minute. You're being female chauvinist. Come back and struggle with me."

If we want to change male and female stereotypes, we'll have to start finding those 'female' caring parts in ourselves and other men, and find the joy in

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