Director's Voice By Steven Botkin

The Journey to Healthy Manhood [757 words]

Once upon a time there was a baby boy. When he was born, his whole being was intent upon one goal: the expression of his need for connection. His most powerful instincts were driving him toward intimate contact with another human being. There was no fear… and there was no shame. There was only the power of life reaching to be embraced.

This baby (if he was lucky) knew many moments of safe, loving connection with others. And in these moments his sense of himself in the world took root. Through this root sense of connection with the bigness of life flowed his power—to express his needs and desires, to reach out into the world, to be open with his true self.

The violation comes in many ways, but always as a profound shock. Sometimes it is physical: Smacking. Spanking. Whipping. Beating. Sexual invasion. Sometimes it is verbal: Belittling. Name calling. Yelling. Screaming. Threats. And sometimes it comes in other forms: Neglect. Unrealistic demands. Witnessing violence or abuse. Hunger. Oppression.

And then, when his natural instinct is to express his pain and fear and reach for contact that will confirm the violation, it is made infinitely worse by the words "Stop whining," "It's for your own good," "It wasn't so bad," "It was your fault," "Don't tell anyone"—or even "It didn't happen." This is profoundly confusing. His need for connection is doubly violated: first, in the acts of abuse, and then, in the minimizing and ridiculing of his response to them. Now there is fear, and there is shame. In these moments the boy is left powerless to protect himself and unable to return to the comfort of connection.

Everywhere he turns, however, there is someone selling him a product they claim will make him powerful and protect him from being a victim ever again. As he looks around he sees many examples of other males using this product who seem to be in control of their lives, getting what they want, invulnerable to being hurt or mistreated. They appear to be revered by many and to have a mysterious connection of brotherhood with others who are using the same product. He also sees that other boys and men who do not use this product continue to be targeted for ridicule and abuse.

The product label says "Masculinity." It teaches him to find power in domination and control. He learns how to be stoical about pain, to hide any fear, and to show no shame. Anything or anyone that threatens this pretense of invulnerability must be controlled, suppressed, dominated into submission in order to maintain his sense of safety and power.

And the price for this product (yes, it's in the very small print) is that he must forfeit his birthright. In order to get the "benefits" of masculinity he must be silent about having ever been hurt or scared, and pretend that he does not really need connection. His sense

of himself now becomes rooted in a disconnection from much of his own internal experience and from authentic intimate contact with others.

But the natural drive toward connection—perhaps the most powerful force in life—is never completely lost or forgotten. Even as the boy grows to be a man who is hiding himself behind the mask of masculinity, he is also searching for ways to express his deepest desire for connection. In each gesture of domination or control can also be found the agonized and distorted reaching for contact that is struggling to break through the legacy of hidden pain and fear.

And this is where the Men's Resource Center comes into the story. We are the men with the legacy—telling this story about ourselves, remembering our birthright, reaching for connection, reclaiming our *true* selves. We are the men and women creating safety and support for ourselves and others to speak out about how violence and abuse have affected our lives. We are a community unmasking mass-marketed masculinity, exposing the lies of power as domination, and creating a culture of compassion and connection.

This is the journey to healthy masculinity. It is a journey that is both painful and joyous. No one of us can (or really wants to) travel this path by ourselves. We can only find our way as men and women embracing together the full range of our genders, rooting our lives again in the true power of our connection to ourselves, each other, and life itself. Join us.

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