
Opinion

Treating This Heavy Midlife of Men

Eli H. Newberger, M.D.

"How heavy this life, the life of men. Is it true they cannot raise one eyebrow with the other? So weighted with their work, eagerly curving their shoulders to the contours of the yoke. A world dry to tears and bleached of color. One never hears the wind chimes or the music of jewelry. In the mornings they brush away their dreams like flies. There is no carpet and no grass over the rough brown boards of their existence. Perhaps, never owning more than two pairs of shoes, the richness of life has escaped them."

—Anais Nin, *The Four-Chambered Heart*

When Anais Nin uttered this delicious send-up of the constrictions of male experience in her 1950 book (*cited in Goethals & Klos, 1986, p. 340*), she presaged current discussions on male development. It served me well when I was looking for an introductory epigram to a discussion of male identity at the threshold of adulthood (*Newberger, 1999*). I think it applies even better here.

Nin asserts that the life of men is heavy, and I think she's correct, starting with how we are wired. Male readers of this piece have all had the unsettling experience of walking into a room full of people, eyeing the other guys, and wondering, "Can I take those guys?" or "Am I going to be a victim?"

Where does this come from? All behavior, and the ways we make meaning of experience, derive from both nature and nurture. Beasts that we are, we also have a capacity for conscious reflection, and for making behavioral choices. In my view, character is all about choice, especially in the face of moral challenge, when you have to reconcile your own desires, needs, and impulses against the needs and rights of others.

But many generations of evolutionary adaptation are woven into our bodies' cells, and scripted into how we respond to the hormones that course through our veins. We males have a particular, built-in need to locate ourselves in a dominance hierarchy, or pecking order, in every relational situation. I think therapists too often neglect this biologically determined aspect of our nature. In mid-life, our genetic heritage affects the major challenges men must face: sustaining life-giving

relationships; maintaining a sense of personal potency; finding fulfillment within and outside the workplace; and coming realistically to terms with the limits of one's capacities.

Deriving from my research on male development, I believe that there are five essential elements in earlier life experience that make for strong, admirable male character. I will list them and give some thoughts on how this foundation applies to the treatment of men at mid-life.

- First, and most important, a male in childhood needs at least one adult in his life who is crazy about him, who through love and sustained involvement will assure him of his worth, who will always respect him and give priority to his needs and views, and who will advocate for him when needed. This person (or, even better, persons) need not be a biological kinsman. A committed therapist can play this role for the man for whom mid-life is an experience of work and sensory and relational isolation.
- Second, on this relational core, beginning in earliest childhood, males need to learn words with which to characterize, sense, and express a full range of feelings. In my work on domestic violence, I have been struck by the extraordinary absence of affective sensibility in abusive men, most of whom would not recognize a feeling if they ran into it on the sidewalk. Why should violent men not sense emotion? Because it has been forbidden to them, both by how they were brought up and because of the rage, anxiety, and, most of all, powerlessness associated with witnessing their mothers being emotionally and physically assaulted. In search of mastery and a sense of personal power, they seek dominance in relationships and invulnerability to having their nurturing needs cut off.

Selma Fraiberg (1959) coined the concept of "word magic." Just as we can show babies and toddlers picture books of kids expressing emotions, we can help men "get in touch with their feelings" by, quite literally, insisting that they talk about them and attach words to them. I also believe, from my own experiences as a musician, that performing and listening to music, and engaging in other aesthetic pursuits, can build one's sensory vocabulary, if not create a harmonious balance in one's heavy life (Newberger, 2000).

- Third, boys—and men—need to be protected from exposure to violence. It's a mean, cruel world out there for many, if not most, males. Longitudinal research suggests that aggression is about as stable a developmental quality as is intelligence, and it can start as early as two years old (Cairns & Cairns, 1994). These are the boys who, as you walk with them by a movie marquee, have to be pulled away from the violent posters. They become the men who, in mid-life, continue to see the world as a hostile place, and who often misconstrue every social relationship as carrying a portent of threat.
- Fourth, children and adults can have their lives transformed by the experience of giving back. Not a few of us go into human service because of our solicitude for

our ill loved ones when we were growing up. Robert Coles (1997) cited Dorothy Day, the visionary Catholic advocate for the poor, who spoke of the revelatory moment when college-aged volunteers came to see that the helpless help the helpers more than the helpers help them. For the men who seek our care for life's dissatisfactions, I propose that here are great opportunities to find meaning in life.

- Fifth, and finally, males need to learn self-control, and "inductive discipline" (Grusek & Goodnow, 1994) is the best approach to foster it. There's a widespread misbelief that it is manly to "do what you have to do," even if it hurts someone. Men may feel regret afterwards if this happens, and may be moved to apologies. But they may never come to see that behavior actually involve choices. Nor may they arrive at a point of internalizing a sense of responsibility to others, arguably the most important attribute of admirable character. The task is continually to reflect on one's behavior toward others, and to make amends if one offends. Too many therapists foster a sense of entitlement, if not narcissism, in men, by focusing only on their individual unfulfilled needs and expectations.

Walter Lippmann, in his 1929 book, *A Preface to Morals*, noted: "In all the great moral philosophies from Aristotle to Bernard Shaw, it is taught that one of the conditions of happiness is to renounce some of the satisfactions which men normally crave" (p. 156). Add to this the positive notes suggested by Anais Nin, and I believe you have a prescription for a fuller, if not a lighter, life of men.

References

- Cairns, R.B., & Cairns, B.D. (1994). *Lifelines and risks: Pathways of youth in our time*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Coles, R. (1997). *The moral intelligence of children*. New York: Random House.
- Fraiberg, S.H. (1959). *The magic years: Understanding and handling the problems of early childhood*. New York: Scribner's
- Goethals, G.W., & Klos, D.S. (1986). *Experiencing youth: First-person accounts* (2nd ed). Lanham, MD: University Press of America.
- Grusek, J.E., & Goodnow, J.J. (1994). Impact of parental discipline methods on the child's internalization of values: A reconceptualization of current points of view. *Developmental Psychology*, 30, 4-19.
- Lippmann, W. (1929). *A preface to morals*. New York: Macmillan.
- Newberger, E.H. (1999). *The men they will become: The nature and nurture of male character*. Cambridge, MA: Perseus Publishing.
- Newberger, E.H. (2000). Medicine of the tuba. In M.G.M. Curnen, H. Spiro, & D. St.James (Eds.), *Doctors afield*. (pp. 67-74). New Haven: Yale University Press.