

Eedan Shwartz

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Ljiljana Coklin

Story of Self

I was never really any good at sports. That didn't particularly bother me, but it seemed to bother the people around me. "You're a boy! You should be out there playing baseball!" Or soccer. Or basketball. Or karate. Or anything else that was suitable for a little boy. Listening to their peers, my parents signed me up for tennis, soccer, boxing -- every sport imaginable. I hated every minute of it, but I kept at it because I thought that it would make me a man. That's how the men around me were, and I wanted to be just like them. I wanted to be like my brother who would go to the park with his friends and play basketball and soccer for hours on end. I wanted to be like my dad who woke up at 6am every morning to train for two hours. My image of what boys should be like was entrenched in my mind. Boys should want to run around all the time. Boys should be angry and shouldn't talk about their feelings. And when my brother and I would physically fight, that was just boys being boys. Right?

Toxic masculinity is a phrase that has relatively recently entered the English language. It refers to how traditional notions of masculinity have had negative effects on men themselves and on society as a whole. The problems of toxic masculinity arise because of how men are socialized from a young age. Boys are expected to act a certain way and enjoy certain things just because they are boys. I've heard many people talk about how excited they are to have a son so that they can throw the ball around with them or cheer them on as they hit a homerun or score a touchdown. This isn't only perpetuated by parents either; society as a whole has an expectation for what a "real man" should look like and how a "real man" should behave.

The figure of the tough, scarred, emotionless man of few words is one that has surfaced in lots of media. When little boys watch these movies and TV shows that only depict men like this, they start to get contorted images of what a man should be like. I struggled a lot to reconcile these images and notions with my own desires and feelings. I was not physically strong. I hated sports. But I loved theater and I loved dressing up. And while I let myself indulge in theater, I shunned many parts of myself because I didn't deem them manly enough. It was only near the end of high school and the beginning of college that I started letting myself enjoy my more "feminine" side. I grew a new passion for fashion and started painting my nails. I started letting go of the anger that I had kept inside myself for so long. I was angry at the world and at myself for not being able to express myself the way I wanted to. It took me so many years to discover that a real man is just someone who is comfortable with himself. It has nothing to do with physical strength and everything to do with being confident in yourself. I can't claim to be fully confident in who I am right now, but I can definitely say that I am progressing towards that goal.

But even as I continued to become more confident in my manhood, I had another barrier to cross. I didn't come out as bisexual until freshman year in college, which continued to make me question myself. When I came out, people would tell me "Oh, you like theater because you're bi! It makes sense now." There was the implication that it was okay for queer men to like feminine things because they weren't "real men." But as I have become more comfortable with my own sexuality I have also realized that this is not true. Queer men are not any less men than their straight counter-parts.

When I think back to what shifted my perceptions of manhood, I think back to many of my teachers in high school. Mr. Jacobs, my 9th grade teacher, played a big role in my life. While I had met other gay men before, I never actually got to speak to someone about their sexuality.

Mr. Jacobs spoke very freely about being gay and what that entailed and what his life was like as a gay man. Although I didn't come out as bisexual for another four years, I started to see that you can be different and still love yourself. Still be a man. I also think back to Mr. Saavedra, who shared with us the story about how he never felt good enough for his dad and struggled with the machismo in his culture while being very shy and meek. I resonated with his worries that he would never be a good enough man. And as he cried in front of us, I cried as well as I spoke to him after class and thanked him for sharing all of this with us. A man doesn't need to be an emotionless monolith. A man who processes his emotions and accepts them is what a real man is. But the man who perhaps had the biggest impact on me was Mr. Berkowitz, my theater teacher who I had for all four years of high school. Who embraced his differences and taught us how to as well. Who applauded us when we spoke freely about ourselves. Who showed us what being a man really entailed. Mr. Berkowitz was one of the first people I really opened up to, and he gave me the support to be the man I am today.

One of the most important aspects of manhood and developing masculinity is our teachers and other role models. What our teachers teach us and how they share that information becomes ingrained in us. School as a whole is incredibly important in our development as young children. We spend upwards of seven hours at school every day and more if we are involved in extracurriculars. Besides our parents, we spend a lot of our days looking up to our teachers. Physically. The way that our desks are set up means that most of us physically turn our heads upwards in order to look at our teachers. Because of this, little boys' perceptions of manhood are oftentimes derived from their male teachers. The most important thing that our male teachers can teach us is how to expand our toolbox of how to deal with problems. Men are conditioned to only have a hammer. As the saying goes, if the only tool in your toolbox is a hammer, why are

we surprised when men treat all their problems like nails? We need to be shown that men are more than just hammers. That we have emotions and that we can cry. That we can like stereotypically feminine things or stereotypically masculine things or a mix of those. We can want to be a boxing star and still paint our nails, or we can love to dance and sing in the theater while still wanting to fix up our own cars.

The future that I envision for myself is one where I can help other kids learn the lessons that took me too long to discover myself. I want to be that positive male role model that can show other boys that they don't have to feel insecure about not feeling like a man, and that they don't have to feel bad about being different or not living up to their fathers' expectations. I hope that by being that positive male role model and talking openly about what being a real man is, that I can inspire other men around me to also want to take up the job of being a role model. One doesn't need to be a teacher in order to teach. Young children are incredibly perceptive and take in a lot of information non-verbally. By being open in our manhoods and showing all the different shades of masculinity and throwing off the veil of toxic masculinity, we can help to perpetuate better definitions of manhood.