Peggy Orenstein, "The Miseducation of the American Boy"

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(excerpt)

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I KNEW NOTHING about Cole before meeting him; he was just a name on a list of boys at a private school outside Boston who had volunteered to talk with me (or perhaps had had their arm twisted a bit by a counselor). The afternoon of our first interview, I was running late. As I rushed down a hallway at the school, I noticed a boy sitting outside the library, waiting—it had to be him. He was staring impassively ahead, both feet planted on the floor, hands resting loosely on his thighs.

My first reaction was *Oh no.*

It was totally unfair, a scarlet letter of personal bias. Cole would later describe himself to me as a "typical tall white athlete" guy, and that is exactly what I saw. At 18, he stood more than 6 feet tall, with broad shoulders and short-clipped hair. His neck was so thick that it seemed to merge into his jawline, and he was planning to enter a military academy for college the following fall. His friends were "the jock group," he'd tell me. "They're what you'd expect, I guess. Let's leave it at that." If I had closed my eyes and described the boy I imagined would never open up to me, it would have been him.

But Cole surprised me. He pulled up a picture on his phone of his girlfriend, whom he'd been dating for the past 18 months, describing her proudly as "way smarter than I am," a feminist, and a bedrock of emotional support. He also confided how he'd worried four years earlier, during his first weeks as a freshman on a scholarship at a new school, that he wouldn't know how to act with other guys, wouldn't be able to make friends. "I could talk to *girls* platonically," he said. "That was easy. But being around guys was different. I needed to be a 'bro,' and I didn't know how to do that."

Whenever Cole uttered the word *bro*, he shifted his weight to take up more space, rocking back in his chair, and spoke from low in his throat, like he'd inhaled a lungful of weed. He grinned when I pointed that out. "Yeah," he said, "that's part of it: seeming relaxed and never intrusive, yet somehow bringing out that aggression on the sports field. Because a 'bro' "—he rocked back again—"is always, always an athlete."

The definition of masculinity seems to be contracting. When asked what traits society values most in boys, only 2 percent of male survey respondents said honesty and morality.
Cole eventually found his people on the crew team, but it wasn't a smooth fit at first. He recalled an incident two years prior when a senior was bragging in the locker room about how he'd convinced one of Cole's female classmates—a *young* sophomore, Cole emphasized—that they were an item, then started hooking up with other girls behind her back. And the guy wasn't shy about sharing the details. Cole and a friend of his, another sophomore, told him to knock it off. "I started to explain why it wasn't appropriate," Cole said, "but he just laughed."

The next day, a second senior started talking about "getting back at" a "bitch" who'd dumped him. Cole's friend spoke up again, but this time Cole stayed silent. "And as I continued to step back" and the other sophomore "continued to step up, you could tell that the guys on the team stopped liking him as much. They stopped listening to him, too. It's almost as if he spent all his social currency" trying to get them to stop making sexist jokes. "Meanwhile, I was sitting there"—Cole thumped his chest—"too afraid to spend any of mine, and I just had buckets left.

"I don't know what to do," he continued earnestly. "Once I'm in the military, and I'm a part of that culture, I don't want to have to choose between my own dignity and my relationship with others I'm serving with. But …" He looked me in the eye. "How do I make it so I don't have to choose?"

I'VE SPENT TWO YEARS talking with boys across America—more than 100 of them between the ages of 16 and 21—about masculinity, sex, and love: about the forces, seen and unseen, that shape them as men. Though I spoke with boys of all races and ethnicities, I stuck to those who were in college or college-bound, because like it or not, they're the ones most likely to set cultural norms. Nearly every guy I interviewed held relatively egalitarian views about girls, at least their role in the public sphere. They considered their female classmates to be smart and competent, entitled to their place on the athletic field and in school leadership, deserving of their admission to college and of

professional opportunities. They all had female friends; most had gay male friends as well. That was a huge shift from what you might have seen 50, 40, maybe even 20 years ago. They could also easily reel off the excesses of masculinity. They'd seen the headlines about mass shootings, domestic violence, sexual harassment, campus rape, presidential Twitter tantrums, and Supreme Court confirmation hearings. A Big Ten football player I interviewed bandied about the term *toxic masculinity*. "Everyone knows what that is," he said, when I seemed surprised.

Yet when asked to describe the attributes of "the ideal guy," those same boys appeared to be harking back to 1955. Dominance. Aggression. Rugged good looks (with an emphasis on height). Sexual prowess. Stoicism. Athleticism. Wealth (at least some day). It's not that all of these qualities, properly channeled, are bad. But while a 2018 national survey of more than 1,000 10-to-19-year-olds commissioned by Plan International USA and conducted by the polling firm PerryUndem found that young women believed there were many ways to be a girl—they could shine in math, sports, music, leadership (the big caveat being that they still felt valued *primarily* for their appearance)—young men described just one narrow route to successful masculinity.* One-third said they felt compelled to suppress their feelings, to "suck it up" or "be a man" when they were sad or scared, and more than 40 percent said that when they were angry, society expected them to be combative. In another survey, which compared young men from the U.S., the U.K., and Mexico, Americans reported more social pressure to be ever-ready for sex and to get with as many women as possible; they also acknowledged more stigma against homosexuality, and they received more messages that they should control their female partners, as in: Men "deserve to know" the whereabouts of their girlfriends or wives at all times.

Feminism may have provided girls with a powerful alternative to conventional femininity, and a language with which to express the myriad problems-that-have-no-name, but there have been no credible equivalents for boys. Quite the contrary: The definition of *masculinity* seems to be in some respects contracting. When asked what traits society values most in boys, only 2 percent of male respondents in the PerryUndem survey said honesty and morality, and only 8 percent said leadership skills—traits that are, of course, admirable in anyone but have traditionally been considered masculine. When I asked my subjects, as I always did, what they liked about being a boy, most of them drew a blank. "Huh," mused Josh, a college sophomore at Washington State. (All the teenagers I spoke with are identified by pseudonyms.) "That's interesting. I never really thought about that. You hear a lot more about what is *wrong* with guys."

While following the conventional script may still bring social and professional rewards to boys and men, research shows that those who rigidly adhere to certain masculine norms are not only more likely to harass and bully others but to *themselves* be victims of verbal or physical violence. They're more prone to binge-drinking, risky sexual behavior, and getting in car accidents. They are also less happy than other guys, with higher depression rates and fewer friends in whom they can confide.

It wasn't always thus. According to Andrew Smiler, a psychologist who has studied the history of Western masculinity, the ideal late-19th-century man was compassionate, a caretaker, but such qualities lost favor as paid labor moved from homes to factories during industrialization. In fact, the Boy Scouts, whose creed urges its members to be loyal, friendly, courteous, and kind, was founded in 1910 in part to counter that dehumanizing trend. Smiler attributes further distortions in masculinity to a century-long backlash against women's rights. During World War I, women proved that they could keep the economy humming on their own, and soon afterward they secured the vote. Instead of embracing gender equality, he says, the country's leaders "doubled down" on the inalienable male right to power, emphasizing men's supposedly more logical and less emotional nature as a prerequisite for leadership.

Then, during the second half of the 20th century, traditional paths to manhood—early marriage, breadwinning—began to close, along with the positive traits associated with them. Today many parents are unsure of how to raise a boy, what sort of masculinity to encourage in their sons. But as I learned from talking with boys themselves, the culture of adolescence, which fuses hyperrationality with domination, sexual conquest, and a glorification of male violence, fills the void.

For Cole, as for many boys, this stunted masculinity is a yardstick against which all choices, even those seemingly irrelevant to male identity, are measured. When he had a choice, he would team up with girls on school projects, to avoid the possibility of appearing subordinate to another guy. "With a girl, it feels safer to talk and ask questions, to work together or to admit that I did something wrong and want help," Cole said. During his junior year, he briefly suggested to his crew teammates that they go vegan for a while, just to show that athletes could. "And everybody was like, 'Cole, that is the dumbest idea ever. We'd be the slowest in any race.' That's somewhat true—we do need protein. We do need fats and salts and carbs that we get from meat. But another reason they all thought it was stupid is because being vegans would make us *pussies*."

THERE IS NO DIFFERENCE between the sexes' need for connection in infancy, nor between their capacity for empathy—there's actually some evidence that male infants are more expressive than females. Yet, from the get-go, boys are relegated to an impoverished emotional landscape. In a classic study, adults shown a video of an infant startled by a jack-in-the-box were more likely to presume the baby was "angry" if they were first told the child was male. Mothers of young children have repeatedly been found to talk more to their girls and to employ a broader, richer emotional vocabulary with them; with their sons, again, they tend to linger on anger. As for fathers, they speak with less emotional nuance than mothers regardless of their child's sex. Despite that, according to Judy Y. Chu, a human-biology lecturer at Stanford who conducted a study of boys from pre-K through first grade, little boys have a keen understanding of emotions and a desire for close relationships. But by age 5 or 6, they've learned to knock that stuff off, at least in public: to disconnect from feelings of weakness, reject friendships with girls (or take them underground, outside of school), and become more hierarchical in their behavior.

By adolescence, says the Harvard psychologist William Pollack, boys become "shame-phobic," convinced that peers will lose respect for them if they discuss their personal problems. My conversations bore this out. Boys routinely confided that they felt denied—by male peers, girlfriends, the media, teachers, coaches, and especially their fathers—the full spectrum of human expression. Cole, for instance, spent most of his childhood with his mother, grandmother, and sister—his parents split up when he was 10 and his dad, who was in the military, was often away. Cole spoke of his mom with unbridled love and respect. His father was another matter. "He's a nice guy," Cole said—caring and involved, even after the divorce—"but I can't be myself around him. I feel like I need to keep everything that's in here"—Cole tapped his chest again—"behind a wall, where he can't see it. It's a taboo—like, not as bad as incest, but …"

A college sophomore told me that he hadn't been able to cry when his parents divorced. "I really wanted to," he said. "I needed to." His solution: He streamed three movies about the Holocaust over the weekend.

Rob, an 18-year-old from New Jersey in his freshman year at a North Carolina college, said his father would tell him to "man up" when he was struggling in school or with baseball. "That's why I never talk to anybody about my problems." He'd always think, *If you can't handle this on your own, then you aren't a man; you aren't trying hard enough.* Other boys also pointed to their fathers as the chief of the

gender police, though in a less obvious way. "It's not like my dad is some alcoholic, emotionally unavailable asshole with a pulse," said a college sophomore in Southern California. "He's a normal, loving, charismatic guy who's not at all intimidating." But "there's a block there. There's a hesitation, even though I don't like to admit that. A hesitation to talk about … anything, really. We learn to confide in *nobody*. You sort of train yourself not to feel."

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