Comment Suppers

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What Men Are For

BY RICHARD V. REEVES

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WHEN LONE RANGER MASCULINITY BOTTOMS OUT

When I was thirteen, my father lost his job. He was hardly alone: this was in the early 1980s in the UK, and he worked in manufacturing. It took months for him to find work. Each morning he would appear at the breakfast table, freshly showered, in a shirt and tie. Then he would go to his desk to check for new job postings and send out résumés.

One day I asked him, "Why do you still dress so smartly when you don't have a job to go to?" He looked at me and said, "I do still have a job. My job is to get another job so I can take care of all of you." I'll never forget that moment. I saw, for the first time, that Dad's job wasn't just that mysterious thing he went off to do every morning. It was a manifestation of the relationship of care between him and the rest of the family.

Three years later, he had to find a job again. This time he found work halfway across the country. But I was flourishing in my school and had friends I loved. My parents were reluctant to move me. So for two years, Dad left home at dawn every Monday morning, returning sometime on Friday afternoon. When I asked him about it years later, he said, "It's just what you do, isn't it?"

My father's masculinity is relational. It is shaped and affirmed by his roles as a father, a husband, and community member. For his generation, the bedrock responsibility of an adult male was that of an economic provider. (My mother worked too, as a part-time nurse, but there was never any question about the division of labour.) But it was far from the whole story. My father's role did not end with the paycheque: he was also our swimming coach, driving instructor, moving man, chauffeur, academic adviser, and much more besides. He served on the parent-teacher association, was active in the local Rotary Club, and coached junior rugby at our local club. Like my mother, who was equally engaged in our community, my father's sense of self was created not in isolation

and introspection but through relationships and service.

This relational masculinity contrasts with the masculine archetype of the Lone Ranger, especially salient in America, in which manhood is defined by fierce independence, even to the point of isolation. To discover oneself and step into adulthood, a man has to shake himself loose of social ties. It's Thoreau in his cabin, the frontiersman riding alone, the cowboy out on the range, the astronaut alone in the vastness of space. It's almost every role played by Kevin Costner. Lone Ranger masculinity rests on the assumption that in a state of nature, men would be wild and free.

If men were Lone Rangers at heart, feminism should have freed them. As women became independent, men could simply head to the hills and be their true selves, unburdened by paycheques and parent-teacher nights. But, in fact, the Lone Ranger is just lonely. Today 15 percent of young men say they have no close friends, up from just 3 percent in 1990. Single men have worse health, lower employment rates, and weaker social networks than married men. Drug-related deaths among never-married men more than doubled in a single decade, from 2010 to 2020. Divorce, now twice as likely to be initiated by wives as husbands, is psychologically harder on men than women.

Men may like movies about cowboys and astronauts. Back in the day they might have jokingly referred to their wife as "the ball and chain." But most seem smart enough to discern myth from reality. In a 2016 poll, more men than women ranked being married, either now or in the future, as "very important to me" (58 percent vs. 47 percent).

Men without women are not living out a dream of Marlboro Man freedom. They are taking drugs and, too often, taking their own lives. Men are at a three times higher risk for "deaths of despair" from suicide, alcohol, or drugs. Australian researcher Fiona Shand and her colleagues looked at the words that men who have attempted suicide most often use to describe themselves. At the top of the list: "useless" and "worthless."

These men are not free. They are lost.

The ideal of Lone Ranger masculinity is culturally dangerous, especially for young men who might be lured into thinking that a life free of responsibilities and relationships will be better. It is also anthropologically false. Masculinity has always and everywhere been defined socially, in relationships, rather than by retreat. "Every known human society has rested on the learned nurturing behavior of men," writes Margaret Mead. But as she also warns, "This behavior, being learned, is fragile,

and can disappear rather easily under social conditions that no longer teach it effectively."

According to David Gilmore, summarizing a global survey of cultures from the Mediterranean basin to Tahiti to South Asia (published in *Manhood in the Making: Cultural Concepts of Masculinity*), boys become men when they produce more than they consume. The central idea here is that mature men generate a *surplus*. As well as producing and defending offspring, Gilmore notes that to "be a man" you must "provision kith and kin."

I think this is true. But it is a mistake to interpret the ideas of surplus and provisioning solely through the lens of postwar Western economies. Men can provide a surplus not just of material goods but of love, of care, of time, and of energy. What remains constant is the idea of producing more than you need for yourself. It is therefore inescapably relational. A man who lives in glorious isolation providing only for himself is not masculine at all.

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There's a big question mark, today, hanging over the question of what it means to be a man. If masculinity is relational, what do those relationships look like, given the dramatic shift in the economic relations between men and women?

In the 1970s, the principal goal of the feminist movement was to reduce women's reliance on men by increasing their economic power. "Being able to support oneself allows one to choose a marriage out of love and not just economic dependence," said Gloria Steinem. In almost all rich nations, the movement has spectacularly succeeded. In the US today, 40 percent of women earn more than the typical man (up from just 13 percent in 1979), and 40 percent of primary breadwinners are women. The share of marriages in which the husband is the sole or primary breadwinner has fallen from 85 percent in 1972 to 55 percent today. These are glorious achievements, amounting perhaps to the greatest economic liberation in human history. And they have taken place in just half a century.

Steinem popularized Irina Dunn's statement that "a woman needs a man like a fish needs a bicycle." It was a memorable rallying cry of the women's movement, an evocative description of a world where women do not need men. But what, then, does this mean for men? The old male script, mostly centred on breadwinning, has been torn up. In an influential 1980 essay, "Why Men Resist," William Goode observes that "the underlying shift is toward the decreasing marginal utility of males." True, in terms of economics. But also, ouch.

Many men are left feeling dislocated. Their fathers and grandfathers had a pretty clear path to follow: work, wife, kids. What now? What is a bicycle for in a world of fish?

Conservatives warned all along that shorn of their distinct role as breadwinners, men could become dangerously untethered from society. It is a perfectly reasonable fear. As George Gilder wrote in 1973, "A man who is integrated into a community through a role in a family, spanning generations into the past and future, will be more consistently and durably tied to the social order than a man responding chiefly to a charismatic leader, a demagogue, or a grandiose ideology of patriotism."

Gilder was a polarizing and often reactionary figure, delighting in receiving the award for "male chauvinist pig of the year" from *Time* magazine. But given recent political history, it is hard to say that he was wrong.

The economic reliance of women on men held women down, but it also propped men up. Now the props have gone, and many men are falling. There has been a sharp rise in male isolation and dislocation. The solution is not to somehow try and hit the rewind button. It is true that the lopsided economic conditions of women and men contributed to stable families. But nobody wants to re-create that inequality. Is it really a solution, however, to pathologize or dismiss the idea of masculinity altogether?

It takes a village. And some of the villagers have to be men.

The narrow role of breadwinner was one particular and culture-bound expression of relational masculinity—that of provider. But dads are not ATMs. Fatherhood encompasses forms of "provisioning" that go well beyond the material, including direct care, teaching, coaching, and play. As women have taken on more of the breadwinning, dads should be freer to provide for their kids in other ways, including being full partners in the raising of emotionally healthy kids. And fathers' involvement in their kids' lives and character formation has strengthened, as much in sheer hours as in acknowledged meaning: fathers now spend more than seven hours a week with their children, up threefold since the 1960s, and one in four fathers say that their role as a parent is "the most important aspect of who they are as a person." (The share among mothers is higher, at 35 percent.) Almost half (46 percent) of fathers say they spend too little time with their children, and would like to spend more.

We have a big opportunity to strengthen pro-father policies, not least through the

The Fisherman's Return by Henry Ossawa Tanner (1859–1937), date unknown.
Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Dr. Nicholas Zervas

provision of paid leave. And while some aspects of family law have progressed—for instance, fathers now get about a third of the time with children after separation or divorce—our norms and policies have a long way to go in honouring the vitality of their role. Unmarried fathers are often treated poorly by courts, and child-support systems are stuck viewing dads as walking ATMs.

One of the most striking social-science findings of recent years is from Raj Chetty and his team at Harvard, who work on intergenerational mobility. They found that black boys who lived in neighbourhoods with lots of fathers around did better, even if their own father was not in their lives. The idea of the "social father," of a man providing for children who are not his own flesh and blood, is not a new one in human history. It is in fact the norm. It takes a village. And some of the villagers have to be men.

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The notion of relational masculinity is distinct not only from Lone Ranger masculinity but from femininity too. Both femininity and masculinity are defined in relational terms. The difference is that femininity is relational in a much more obvious sense, related to the distinct role of women in reproduction and the care of infants. This distinct feminine role is

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less fragile than masculinity, because it is more directly grounded in biology. When was the last "crisis of femininity"? That's right: never.

To modern ears, these discussions of masculinity and male roles have an antiquated, even regressive ring to them. They presume that there are in fact differences between men and women that are not just physical and that are not solely the result of socialization. It is not a coincidence that every religion has a story to tell about how or why we are created male and female. In Judaism and Christianity, the distinction is an important part of the drama of Adam and Eve. Islamic theology teaches that men and women are "made in pairs," but from a single soul. In the Hindu tradition Brahma asks Rudra to divide into male and female so that creation can continue.

It should not be a surprise, then, that most of us are fairly attached to our

gender identity. Nine out of ten men and women describe themselves as either "completely" or "mostly" masculine or feminine. These identities are held quite strongly too; almost half of men (43 percent) say their sex was "extremely important" to their identity. Of course there are exceptions to the rule, including people who do not identify with their biological sex, or even with either male or female category. But it is not necessary to deny the rule in order to honour the exception. For most people, including most trans men and women, our gender identity is a key element of our personhood, the most visible expression of our dignity as humans.

But there are two opposing dangers here. On the one hand, overweighting differences blurs the personhood of each individual, which should always come before any group membership. As Robert Bly writes, rather beautifully, in his 1990 book *Iron John*, "I say we have to be a little gentle here, and allow the word *masculine* and the word *feminine* to be spoken and not be afraid some moral carpenter will make boxes of those words and imprison us in them. We are all afraid of boxes, and rightly so." Nobody wants to be boxed in.

But nobody wants to be benched either. Dismissing any differences at all denies the experience of most people. It might also cause some people to insist even more fiercely on the importance of their masculinity or femininity if they feel this aspect of their identity is being denied.

The construction of masculinity is a cultural task faced by every human society. It must be taught, and learned, and above all shown: boys believe their eyes more than their ears. When the job is done well, men know they are needed, and for what. They feel seen and heard. If we don't like some of the versions of masculinity currently on offer, it's up to us to fix that, rather than to pathologize the idea of masculinity itself.

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I've been reading, writing, and thinking a lot about this subject over the last few years. Along the way I've encountered a litany of troubling statistics. One that stopped me in my tracks was from a 2018 survey conducted by Pew. The sample size was small, and made use of a word-association methodology, so I haven't cited it in most of my work. But I still wonder about it. Every single respondent thought that "masculine" was a negative term when applied to women. That's not surprising. What was shocking was that most people—four out of five—thought the term "masculine" was negative when applied to *men*. (The term "feminine" was not mentioned often

enough to make it into the analysis.) This finding is consistent with another survey finding that half of men, of all races, think that society "punishes men just for acting like men."

My own father is about to turn eighty. But he's still generating a surplus. Not necessarily economically: He's done that part. But he is still actively contributing to kith and kin. He serves on the board of a technical college, leads a university-based discussion group, and helps raise funds for local charities (which requires him to spend many Saturday mornings in the Cardiff rain helping run an outdoor parking concession).

As you can tell, I love my dad. But the point is, I'm far from alone. He modelled a relational rather than Lone Ranger model of manhood. His masculinity is demonstrated not by "doing his own thing" or "going his own way." He is not "his own man." He is a man for others.

My middle son chose to attend Cardiff University, in part to be close to his grandparents. As I write, my father is helping him to move out of his college housing. My son recently told me that as he walks to his lectures, he sometimes looks north where he can see, about two miles away, the tower of a Victorian-era hospital that is opposite my parents' home. "It just makes me feel better," he said. "You know, to know that they're there. And that Grandpa would come help me if I needed him."

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SUPPER QUESTIONS

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Anchor Question

Are men and boys struggling in your community? How have you seen the way boys and men relate to masculinity change in your lifetime?

Secondary Questions

1. Can women keep the gains they've won over the past half century while productively addressing the ways men are failing? In what ways is this a zero-sum game? In what ways is it not?

2. What do you think are the root causes of the current "masculinity crisis"?

3. What is the role of education in the problems boys and young men are facing? What about the role of education in the solution to those problems?