

Refusing to “BE A MAN!”¹

Voice Male Magazine – Winter 1999

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“Be a man!”

The effects of those three words continue to echo through our lives long after we’ve realized the lies behind them. Listen to the inflection, the emotional message we can hear so clearly in this simple phrase, carrying equal parts promise and threat.

Be a man!

If we can achieve this goal we are promised a sense of power, pride, confidence, mastery, control, and invulnerability. If we do not “cut the mustard,” “make the grade,” “step up to the plate,” and “box our corner,” we are threatened with isolation, shame, abuse, and violence.

But what does it mean to “be a man”? For years I have regularly asked groups of people what comes to mind when they hear that expression. The responses, from men and women of all ages, are frighteningly consistent. And everyone knows what happens to boys or men who do not fit inside this “box.”²

We remember schoolyards and street corners, and often homes, with our own or our friends’ families, where proving that we had an “acceptable” degree of masculinity was an ongoing theme of our daily lives. We learned that any nonconformity to the rules of this masculinity risked making one the target of brutality and ridicule. And we learned that we could have prestige and privilege, power and control, to the extent that we were able to “be the man.”

And yet, especially as children, we knew we really did not and could not meet this impossible and inhuman standard. Sometimes we did get sad, scared, and hurt. We did, at times, want to cry and be comforted. If we had enough safety as children we might respond to the command “be a man” with the truth: “but I’m not a man.”

But it wasn’t always safe to tell the truth. So, in subtle and not-so-subtle ways we practiced hiding or minimizing our gender nonconformities, because we were told that’s not how men are. How we dressed, walked, talked, used our hands, expressed our emotions, related with other males, and talked about and behaved toward females was all carefully scrutinized so that we would not betray any deviance from the prescribed rules for being a man. We did not want to be standing alone feeling shame about our difference. So we denied parts of ourselves in order to feel safe and accepted within a dominant culture that demanded of us: “Be a man!”

What would it mean now if we were to create a culture in which men join together to reclaim these parts of ourselves that we once hid and denied? If we discovered that, as we peek out from behind our fear, we find the shy and smiling face of another, reflecting our own

remembered wholeness. What would it mean if together we found the courage to stand and face the dominant culture, saying with determination and pride, We do not want to “be a man”? We refuse the rigid box of gender conformity. What if we created a community where we could feel safe and accepted in the infinite variety of our gender nonconformities?

It would mean the end of the system of patriarchy, wherein the promise of power is leveraged by the threat of violence. Homophobia, violence against women, and war—the ultimate weapons of gender conformity—would disappear, no longer needed to prove and protect our “manhood.” Men would show up in the full rainbow of our expressions. We would inhabit our homes and families, remembering the delights of nurturing relationships. And we would seek out the close, loving companionship of other men and other women. It would mean hope for the world in places where we have long felt only hopelessness.

I believe this is all happening now. Yes, it can often seem agonizingly slow and painful, and there is certainly plenty of overt and covert resistance; however, there is a tremendous wave of liberation moving through our world. Men breaking free from the individual and cultural demand to “be a man” is one key ingredient in this movement.

It’s time for us now to assert that we will not be boxed into masculinity by seductive promises of power or intimidating threats of violence. It’s time for us now to break through our fear and isolation and come out as gender nonconformists who do not fit or accept prescribed rules of manhood. It’s time for us now to call each other out of the shadows of the box with a welcome of acceptance and safety. In this way we are creating a new culture where being a man is an open-ended, ever-expanding expression of possibilities.

For information: www.mensresourcesinternational.org

¹ Refusing To Be A Man is also a thought provoking collection of essays by John Stoltenberg [citation]

² See the “man in the box” activity described in Men’s Work by Paul Kivel, Hazeldon Press [citation]