

Being a Boy

Boys are not seen as lovable in patriarchal culture. Even though sexism has always decreed that boy children have more status than girls, status and even the rewards of privilege are not the same as being loved. Patriarchal assault on the emotional life of boys begins at the moment of their birth. Contrary to sexist mythology, in the real world of male and female babies, male babies express themselves more. They cry longer and louder. They come into the world wanting to be seen and heard. Sexist thinking at its worst leads many parents to let male infants cry without a comforting touch because they fear that holding baby boys too much, comforting them too much, might cause them to grow up wimpy. Thankfully, there has been enough of a break with rigid sexist roles to allow aware parents to reject this faulty logic and give boy babies the same comfort that they give or would give girls.

In recent years it has become clear to researchers working on promoting the emotional life of boys that patriarchal culture influences parents to devalue the emotional development of boys. Naturally this disregard affects boys' capacity to love and be loving. Dan Kindlon and Michael Thompson, authors of *Raising Cain: Protecting the Emotional*

Life of Boys, stress that their research shows that boys are free to be more emotional in early childhood because they have not yet learned to fear and despise expressing dependence: "Every child, boys included, comes into this world wanting to love and be loved by his parents. Forty years of research on emotional attachment shows that without it children die or suffer severe emotional damage." Despite these powerful insights they do not talk about the impact of patriarchy. They do not tell readers that to truly protect the emotional life of boys, we must tell the truth about the power of patriarchy. We must dare to face the way in which patriarchal thinking blinds everyone so that we cannot see that the emotional lives of boys cannot be fully honored as long as notions of patriarchal masculinity prevail. We cannot teach boys that "real men" either do not feel or do not express feelings, then expect boys to feel comfortable getting in touch with their feelings.

Much of the traditional research on the emotional life of boys draws the connection between notions of male dominance and the shutting down of emotions in boyhood even as the researchers act as though patriarchal values can remain intact. Popular bestselling books such as *Raising Cain* and James Garbarino's *Lost Boys: Why Our Sons Turn Violent and How We can Save Them* outline the way boys are being emotionally damaged, but they fail to offer a courageous alternative vision, one that would fundamentally challenge patriarchal masculinity. Instead these books imply that within the existing patriarchal system, boyhood should be free of patriarchal demands. The value of patriarchy itself is never addressed. In *Raising Cain* the authors conclude by contending: "What boys need, first and fore-

most, is to be seen through a different lens than tradition prescribes. Individually, and as a culture, we must discard the distorted view of boys that ignores or denies their capacity for feelings, the view that colors even boys' perception of themselves as above or outside a life of emotions." Kindlon and Thompson carefully depoliticize their language. Their use of the word "tradition" belies the reality that the patriarchal culture which has socialized almost everyone in our nation to dismiss the emotional life of boys is an entrenched social and political system. Nor is it an accident of nature. Antifeminist women like Christina Hoff Sommers curry patriarchal favor with men by spreading the idea, put forward in Sommers's book *The War against Boys*, that "feminism is harming our young men." Sommers falsely assumes that educating boys to be anti-patriarchal is "resocializing boys in the direction of femininity." Conveniently, she ignores that feminist thinkers are as critical of sexist notions of femininity as we are of patriarchal notions of masculinity. It is patriarchy, in its denial of the full humanity of boys, that threatens the emotional lives of boys, not feminist thinking. To change patriarchal "traditions" we must end patriarchy, in part by envisioning alternative ways of thinking about maleness, not only boyhood.

Without ever using the word "patriarchy" (he uses the phrase "traditional masculinity"), psychologist James Garbarino does suggest in *Lost Boys* that the cultivation of an androgynous selfhood, one that combines the traits deemed masculine and feminine, would affirm for boys their right to be emotional. In his section on "What Boys Need" Garbarino writes:

Where and how do boys learn what it means to be a man? They seem to learn it all too often from the mass media and from the most visible males in their community, particularly their peers. Boys' friends are the arbitrators of what is masculine and what is feminine, so resilience among the boys in a community depends upon changing macho attitudes among male peer groups and broadening their concept of what a real man is and does.

Garbarino's is a powerful work, very much on target in the descriptions and information it offers about all the ways boys are traumatized by the demand that they deny their emotions. But it is also a disturbing one because the author himself seems unwilling to connect his recognition of the damage done to boys with a critique of patriarchal thinking and practice. It is as if he believes that somehow all that is needed is a revamping of patriarchal values so that boys' emotions can be supported, at least until the boys grow up.

Frankly, it is difficult to understand why these men who know so much about the way patriarchal thinking damages boys are unable to call the problem by its true name and by so doing free themselves to envision a world where the feelings of boys can really matter. Perhaps they are silent because any critique of patriarchy necessarily leads to a discussion of whether conversion to feminist thinking and practice is the answer. It has been hard for many male thinkers about the emotional life of boys to see feminism as a helpful theory because to a grave extent antimale senti-

ments among some feminists have led the movement to focus very little attention on the development of boys.

One of the tremendous failings of feminist theory and practice has been the lack of a concentrated study of boyhood, one that offers guidelines and strategies for alternative masculinity and ways of thinking about maleness. Indeed the feminist rhetoric that insisted on identifying males as the enemy often closed down the space where boys could be considered, where they could be deemed as worthy of rescue from patriarchal exploitation and oppression as were their female counterparts. Like the researchers who write about the emotional lives of boys from a nonfeminist perspective, feminist researchers are often unwilling or reluctant to target patriarchal thinking. Family therapist Olga Silverstein in *The Courage to Raise Good Men* says little about patriarchy even as she does offer alternative strategies for raising boys. There are two major barriers preventing researchers from targeting patriarchy. Researchers fear that overtly political analysis will alienate readers on one hand, and on the other hand they may simply have no alternative visions to offer.

Feminist theory has offered us brilliant critiques of patriarchy and very few insightful ideas about alternative masculinity, especially in relation to boys. Many feminist women who birthed boys found themselves reluctant to challenge conventional aspects of patriarchal masculinity when their boys wanted to embrace those values. They found they did not want to deny their sons access to toy guns or to tell them to just be passive when another boy was attacking them on the playground. For many enlightened, single-parent feminist mothers with limited economic

resources, the effort to consistently map for their sons alternatives to patriarchal masculinity simply takes too much time.

One of my very best friends is a single mother with two children, an older daughter and a younger son. When her son was born I suggested we name him Ruby. His biological dad jokingly made the point that "she should have her own son and name him Ruby." Well, his middle name is Ruby. When he was around the age of five he decided he wanted to use the name Ruby. The boys at school let him know through teasing that this was a girl's name. As an intervention he and his mom brought to school pictures of all the men through history named Ruby. Then later on he wanted to paint his nails with fingernail polish and wear it to school. Again the boys let him know that boys do not use nail polish. His mother and sister gathered all the "cool" adult guys knew they to come to school and show that males can use nail polish. These were my friend's graduate student years, however; when she began working full-time, such vigilance became harder to maintain. Just recently her son told her how much he likes the way she smells. She shared with him that he could smell the same. He let her know that there was no way he could go to school smelling sweet. He had gotten the message that "boys don't smell good." Instead of urging him to rise to the latest challenge, she now allows him to choose and does not judge his choice. Yet she feels sad for him, sad that conformity to patriarchal standards interfered with his longings.

Many antipatriarchal parents find that the alternative masculinities they support for their boy children are shattered not by grown-ups but by sexist male peers. Progressive

parents who strive to be vigilant about the mass media their boys have access to must constantly intervene and offer teachings to counter the patriarchal pedagogy that is deemed "normal." *In How Can I Get Through to You?* Terrence Real, father of two sons, states:

Our sons learn the code early and well, don't cry, don't be vulnerable; don't show weakness—ultimately, don't show that you care. As a society, we may have some notion that raising whole boys and girls is a good idea, but that doesn't mean that we actually do. Even though you or I might be committed to raising less straitjacketed kids, the culture at large, while perhaps changing, is still far from changed. Try as we might, in movie theaters, classrooms, playgrounds our sons and daughters are bombarded with traditional messages about masculinity and femininity, hour by hour, day by day.

Again, Real uses the word "traditional" rather than "patriarchal." Yet traditions are rarely hard to change. What has been all but impossible to change is widespread cultural patriarchal propaganda. Yet we begin to protect the emotional well-being of boys and of all males when we call this propaganda by its true name, when we acknowledge that patriarchal culture requires that boys deny, suppress, and if all goes well, shut down their emotional awareness and their capacity to feel.

Little boys are the only males in our culture who are allowed to be fully, wholly in touch with their feelings,

allowed moments when they can express without shame their desire to love and be loved. If they are very, very lucky, they are able to remain connected to their inner selves or some part of their inner selves before they enter a patriarchal school system where rigid sex roles will be enforced by peers as rigorously as they are in any adult male prison. Those rare boys who happen to live in antipatriarchal homes learn early to lead a double life: at home they can feel and express and be; outside the home they must conform to the role of patriarchal boy. Patriarchal boys, like their adult counterparts, know the rules: they know they must not express feelings, with the exception of anger; that they must not do anything considered feminine or womanly. A national survey of adolescent males revealed their passive acceptance of patriarchal masculinity. Researchers found that boys agreed that to be truly manly, they must command respect, be tough, not talk about problems, and dominate females.

Every day across this country boys consume mass media images that send them one message about how to deal with emotions, and that message is "Act out." Usually acting out means aggression directed outward. Kicking, screaming, and hitting get attention. Since patriarchal parenting does not teach boys to express their feelings in words, either boys act out or they implode. Very few boys are taught to express with words what they feel, when they feel it. And even when boys are able to express feelings in early childhood, they learn as they grow up that they are not supposed to feel and they shut down.

The confusion boys experience about their identity is heightened during adolescence. In many ways the fact that today's boy often has a wider range of emotional expression

in early childhood but is forced to suppress emotional awareness later on makes adolescence all the more stressful for boys. Tragically, were it not for the extreme violence that has erupted among teenage boys throughout our nation, the emotional life of boys would still be ignored. Although therapists tell us that mass media images of male violence and dominance teach boys that violence is alluring and satisfying, when individual boys are violent, especially when they murder randomly, pundits tend to behave as though it were a mystery why boys are so violent.

Progressive feminist research on adolescent males has debunked the heretofore accepted notion that it is natural for boys to go through an antisocial stage where they disassociate and disconnect. Recent studies indicate that it is actually emotionally damaging to young males to be isolated and without emotional care or nurturance. In the past it was assumed that aggression was part of the ritual of separation, a means for the growing boy to assert his autonomy. Yet clearly, just as girls learn how to be autonomous and how to create healthy distance from parents without becoming antisocial, boys can do the same. In healthy families boys are able to learn and assert autonomy without engaging in antisocial behavior, without isolating themselves. All over the world terrorist regimes use isolation to break people's spirit. This weapon of psychological terrorism is daily deployed in our nation against teenage boys. In isolation they lose the sense of their value and worth. No wonder then that when they reenter a community, they bring with them killing rage as their primary defense.

Even though masses of American boys will not commit violent crimes resulting in murder, the truth that no one

wants to name is that all boys are being raised to be killers even if they learn to hide the killer within and act as benevolent young patriarchs. (More and more girls who embrace patriarchal thinking also embrace the notion that they must be violent to have power.) Talking to teenage girls of all classes who are being secretly hit or beaten by boyfriends (who say that they are "disciplining" them), one hears the same Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde narratives that grown women tell when talking about their relationships with abusive men. These girls describe seemingly nice guys who have rageful outbursts. Time and time again we hear on our national news about the seemingly kind, quiet young male whose violent underpinnings are suddenly revealed. Boys are encouraged by patriarchal thinking to claim rage as the easiest path to manliness. It should come as no surprise, then, that beneath the surface there is a seething anger in boys, a rage waiting for the moment to be heard.

Much of the anger boys express is itself a response to the demand that they not show any other emotions. Anger feels better than numbness because it often leads to more instrumental action. Anger can be, and usually is, the hiding place for fear and pain. In *The Heart of the Soul* authors Gary Zukav and Linda Francis explore the ways anger barricades the feeling self:

Anger prevents love and isolates the one who is angry. It is an attempt, often successful, to push away what is most longed for—companionship and understanding. It is a denial of the humanness of others, as well as a denial of your

own humanness. Anger is the agony of believing that you are not capable of being understood, and that you are not worthy of being understood. It is a wall that separates you from others as effectively as if it were concrete, thick, and very high. There is no way through it, under it, or over it.

Certainly in almost all the situations where boys have killed, we discover narratives of rage that describe the emotional realities before they happen. Importantly, this anger is expressed cross a broad spectrum of class, race, and family circumstance. Violent boys from affluent homes often are as emotionally alienated as their ghetto counterparts.

At a time in our nation's history when more boys than ever are being raised in single-parent, female-headed homes, mass media send the message that a single mother is unfit to raise a healthy boy child. All over our nation mothers worry that their parenting may be damaging their sons. This is the issue Olga Silverstein tackles head-on in *The Courage to Raise Good Men*. Commenting that many people still believe that mothers compromise their sons' masculinity, she writes: "Most women, like most men, feel that a mother's influence will ultimately be harmful to a male child, that it will weaken him and that only the example of a man can lead a son into manhood. Single mothers in particular are haunted by the dread of producing a sissy." Homophobia underlies the fear that allowing boys to feel will turn them gay; this fear is often most intense in single-parent homes. As a consequence mothers in these families may be overly harsh and profoundly emotionally withhold-

ing with their sons, believing that this treatment will help the boys to be more masculine.

No matter that information abounds that lets the public know that many gay males come from two-parent homes and can be macho and woman-hating, misguided assumptions about what makes a male gay still flourish. Every day boys who express feelings are psychologically terrorized, and in extreme cases brutally beaten, by parents who fear that a man of feeling must be homosexual. Gay men share with straight men the same notions about acceptable masculinity. Luckily there have been and are individual gay men who dare to challenge patriarchal masculinity. However, most gay men in our culture are as embracing of sexist thinking as are heterosexuals. Their patriarchal thinking leads them to construct paradigms of desirable sexual behavior that is similar to that of patriarchal straight men. Hence many gay men are as angry as their straight counterparts.

Just as maternal sadism flourishes in a world where women are made to feel that their emotional cruelty to sons makes them better prepared for manhood, paternal sadism is the natural outcome of patriarchal values. In the book *The Man I Might Become: Gay Men Write about Their Fathers*, edited by Bruce Shenitz, many of the stories of boyhood describe rituals of paternal sadism. As James Saslow writes in "Daddy Was a Hot Number":

All children suffer that aching stab of inadequacy when Papa turns his face away; it's just twice as sharp when he's your object of desire as well as your mentor and role model. Only mother

love is unconditional. . . . But fatherly love is also about licking the child into shape. . . . Fathers challenge and then judge us—their role in socializing the next generation. In this mythic battle of wills, persuasion and example are the preferred weapons, but if they don't work, the drill sergeant will have to unleash the A-bomb of familial warfare: rejection.

Most patriarchal fathers in our nation do not use physical violence to keep their sons in check; they use various techniques of psychological terrorism, the primary one being the practice of shaming. Patriarchal fathers cannot love their sons because the rules of patriarchy dictate that they stand in competition with their sons, ready to prove that they are the real man, the one in charge. In his essay "Finding the Light and Keeping It in Front of Me," Bob Vance describes walking behind his father as a boy longing to connect but knowing intuitively that no connection was possible: "Something inhibits me from asking him for what I need. I know, if a very young boy can intuit such things, that I am left out of his world and am somehow forbidden to ask him what I can do to have him take me into his world, to hold me playfully or tenderly. The rift begins here. This is the earliest memory I have of my father."

To the patriarchal dad, sons can only be regarded as recruits in training, hence they must constantly be subjected to sadomasochistic power struggles designed to toughen them up, to prepare them to maintain the patriarchal legacy. As sons they inhabit a world where fathers strive to keep them in the one-down position; as patriarchs

in training they must learn how to assume a one-up role. Real explains:

Sustaining relationships with others requires a good relationship to ourselves. Healthy self-esteem is an internal sense of worth, that pulls one neither into "better than" grandiosity nor "less than" shame. . . . Contempt is why so many men have such trouble staying connected. Since healthy self-esteem—being neither one up nor down—is not yet a real option, and since riding in the one-down position elicits disdain, in oneself and in others, most men learn to hide the chronic shame that dogs them . . . running from their own humanity and from closeness to anyone else along with it.

This flight from closeness is most intense in the lives of adolescent boys because in that liminal zone between childhood and young adulthood they are experiencing a range of emotions that leave them feeling out of control, fearful that they will not measure up to the standards of patriarchal masculinity. Suppressed rage is the perfect hiding place for all these fears.

Despite major changes in gender roles in public life, in private many boys are traumatized by relationships with distant or absent fathers. Working with groups of men, listening as they talk about boyhood, I hear the stories they tell about their fathers' lack of emotional connection. As they attempt to measure up to patriarchal expectations, many boys fear the wrath of the father. In *Man Enough*:

Fathers, Sons, and the Search for Masculinity, Frank Pittman recalls: "Fearing I didn't have enough of it, I was in awe of masculinity. I thought my father had some magical power he wasn't passing on to me, a secret he hadn't told me." Again and again the same assumption appears, which suggests that there exists a masculine ideal that young males are not sure how to attain and that undermines their self-esteem. And the crisis of this longing seems most deeply felt by boys with absent fathers. Without a positive connection to a real adult man, they are far more likely to invest in a hypermasculine patriarchal ideal. Fear of not being able to attain the right degree of manliness is often translated into rage. Many teenage boys are angry because the fantasy emotional connection between father and son, the love that they imagine will be there, is never realized. In its place there is just a space of empty longing. Even when it becomes evident that the fantasy will not be fulfilled, that the "father wound" will not be healed, boys hold on to the longing. It may give them a sense of quest and purpose to feel they will someday find the father or, through having children, become the father they dream about.

Frustrated in their quest for father bonding, boys often feel tremendous sorrow and depression. They can mask these feelings because they are allowed to isolate themselves, to turn away from the world and escape into music, television, video games, etc. There is no emotional outlet for the grief of the disappointed teenage boy. Being able to mourn the loss of emotional connection with his father would be a healthy way to cope with disappointment. But boys have no space to mourn. This need for a space to grieve is poignantly portrayed in the film *Life as a House*. Learning

that he has cancer and only a short time to live, the father in the film seeks to connect with his sexually confused, angry, drug-using teenage son, who lives with his mother and stepfather. In the short time he lives with his dad, the son is able to develop an emotional connection. When the son finds out that his dad is dying, he rages about being offered love that is not going to last. In Donald Dutton's study of abusive men, *The Batterer*, he observes that there are few male models for grieving, and he emphasizes that "men in particular seem incapable of grieving and mourning on an individual basis. Trapped by a world that tells them boys should not express feelings, teenage males have nowhere to go where grief is accepted." As much as grown-ups complain about adolescent male anger, most adults are more comfortable confronting a raging teenager than one who is overwhelmed by sorrow and cannot stop weeping. Boys learn to cover up grief with anger; the more troubled the boy, the more intense the mask of indifference. Shutting down emotionally is the best defense when the longing for connection must be denied.

Teenagers are the most unloved group in our nation. Teenagers are often feared precisely because they are often exposing the hypocrisy of parents and of the world around them. And no group of teenagers is more feared than a pack of teenage boys. Emotionally abandoned by parents and by society as a whole, many boys are angry, but no one really cares about this anger unless it leads to violent behavior. If boys take their rage and sit in front of a computer all day, never speaking, never relating, no one cares. If boys take their rage to the mall, no one cares, as long as it is contained. In *Lost Boys* therapist James Garbarino tes-

tifies that when it comes to boys, "neglect is more common than abuse: more kids are emotionally abandoned than are directly attacked, physically or emotionally." Emotional neglect lays the groundwork for the emotional numbing that helps boys feel better about being cut off. Eruptions of rage in boys are most often deemed normal, explained by the age-old justification for adolescent patriarchal misbehavior, "Boys will be boys." Patriarchy both creates the rage in boys and then contains it for later use, making it a resource to exploit later on as boys become men. As a national product, this rage can be garnered to further imperialism, hatred, and oppression of women and men globally. This rage is needed if boys are to become men willing to travel around the world to fight wars without ever demanding that other ways of solving conflict be found.

Ever since masses of American boys began, in the wake of the civil rights struggle, sexual liberation, and feminist movement, to demand their right to be psychologically whole and expressed those demands most visibly by refusing to fight in the Vietnam War, mass media as a propaganda tool for imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy have targeted young males and engaged in heavy-handed brainwashing to reinforce psychological patriarchy. Today small boys and young men are daily inundated with a poisonous pedagogy that supports male violence and male domination, that teaches boys that unchecked violence is acceptable, that teaches them to disrespect and hate women. Given this reality and the concomitant emotional abandonment of boys, it should surprise no one that boys are violent, that they are willing

to kill; it should surprise us that the killing is not yet widespread.

Ruthless patriarchal assault on the self-esteem of teenage boys has become an accepted norm. There is a grave silence about adult male tyranny in relation to teenage boys. Much of the adult male terrorism of and competition with little boys and young males is conducted through mass media. Much of the mass media directed at young male consumers is created by self-hating, emotionally shut-down adult men who have only the pornography of violence to share with younger men. To that end they create images that make killing alluring and the sexual exploitation of females the seductive reward. In the wake of feminist, antiracist, and postcolonial critiques of imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy, the backlash that aims to reinscribe patriarchy is fierce. While feminism may ignore boys and young males, capitalist patriarchal men do not. It was adult, white, wealthy males in this country who first read and fell in love with the *Harry Potter* books. Though written by a British female, initially described by the rich white American men who "discovered" her as a working-class single mom, J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* books are clever modern reworkings of the English school-boy novel. Harry as our modern-day hero is the supersmart, gifted, blessed, white boy genius (a mini patriarch) who "rules" over the equally smart kids, including an occasional girl and an occasional male of color. But these books also glorify war, depicted as killing on behalf of the "good."

The *Harry Potter* movies glorify the use of violence to maintain control over others. In *Harry Potter: The Chamber of Secrets* violence when used by the acceptable groups is

deemed positive. Sexism and racist thinking in the *Harry Potter* books are rarely critiqued. Had the author been a ruling-class white male, feminist thinkers might have been more active in challenging the imperialism, racism, and sexism of Rowling's books.

Again and again I hear parents, particularly antipatriarchal parents, express concern about the contents of these books while praising them for drawing more boys to reading. Of course American children were bombarded with an advertising blitz telling them that they should read these books. *Harry Potter* began as national news sanctioned by mass media. Books that do not reinscribe patriarchal masculinity do not get the approval the *Harry Potter* books have received. And children rarely have an opportunity to know that any books exist which offer an alternative to patriarchal masculinist visions. The phenomenal financial success of *Harry Potter* means that boys will henceforth have an array of literary clones to choose from.

Literature for children is just as fixated on furthering patriarchal attitudes as television. There are just few books with male characters focusing on boys that challenge the patriarchal norm in anyway. Since these books do not abound there is no way to know what impact they might have in teaching boys alternative masculinities. Writing a series of children's book for boys, I was initially amazed by how difficult it was for me, a visionary feminist theorist, to imagine new images and texts for boys. Shopping for books for my nephew first alerted me to the absence of progressive literature for boys. In my first children's book with male characters, *Be Boy Buzz*, I wanted to celebrate boyhood without reinscribing patriarchal norms. I wanted to write a

text that would just express love for boys. It is a book aimed at little boys. This book strives to honor the holistic well-being of boys and to express love of them whether they are laughing, acting out, or just sitting still. The books I have written are aimed at offering boys ways to cope with their emotional selves. The point is to stimulate in boys emotional awareness and to affirm that awareness.

To truly protect and honor the emotional lives of boys we must challenge patriarchal culture. And until that culture changes, we must create the subcultures, the sanctuaries where boys can learn to be who they are uniquely, without being forced to conform to patriarchal masculine visions. To love boys rightly we must value their inner lives enough to construct worlds, both private and public, where their right to wholeness can be consistently celebrated and affirmed, where their need to love and be loved can be fulfilled.