

## Chapter 12

# Modeling Sustainable Manhood

*“We cannot solve our problems with the same thinking  
we used when we created them.”*

—Albert Einstein<sup>74</sup>

**M**asculine-feminine intelligence bestows upon gay men an innate flexibility to access the masculine and feminine. Most gay men do not need instruction to access their emotions, to demonstrate empathy, and to act cooperatively. Sensitivity and intuitiveness often come naturally. At the same time, because we are men, and because we are socialized with all the expectations of manhood, we have broad access to the masculine.

Male gender norms restrict men’s repertoire of expression. The emergence of an emboldened gay male community around the globe counteracts that rigidity. By our very nature, gay men challenge patriarchal structure. When we become aware of our impact and our potential, we can use this gift to advance change where it is needed most: expanding male consciousness.

### **Prisons of Their Own Making**

By coming out, gay men and lesbians have made enormous contributions to global consciousness. As Chapter 16 explores, we serve as models of authenticity and courage, and we cleanse shame for humanity. Additionally, and very consequentially, coming out created a new rite of passage. It says, “I now choose to live according to who I am instead of what society wants me to be.” This public declaration emboldens us to

choose authenticity in all areas of our lives, well beyond our sexuality. We have bequeathed this rite to future generations, creating a lasting ripple effect.

Coming out, of course, represents just the first step in our journey to authenticity. Gay men spend considerable energy questioning and re-writing society's rules about what it means to be a man—and recovering from the emotional violence these rules and their messengers inflicted. But gay men are not the only ones whose spirit becomes crushed by society's wholesale prohibition on the feminine for men. All boys and men suffer from it.

To explore this prohibition further, let's revisit the Three-Dimensional Masculine-Feminine Model from Chapter 4. On two of the measures most amenable to fluidity—personality traits and external traits—society's expectations enforce considerable rigidity to qualify as a “real man.” Nearly every feminine trait on both scales is off limits. To scientifically test my theory, I asked a group of men in one of my weekend programs to complete a masculine/feminine trait assessment based on what society *expects of men*. The men in the group looked at me with puzzled expressions, then one man blurted out, “Duh! It's the list of masculine traits.” We all agreed.

Of course, differences exist between society's expectations of men and their actual behaviors. Many men choose to express feminine traits and consider it a sign of strength. For instance, the last few decades in the United States have witnessed an expansion of men's permitted behaviors and traits, a rise in stay-at-home dads, and increasing gender parity. The women's movement largely influenced these expansions in gender norms. Among the Millennial generation, men embrace a much wider set of permissible expressions than do their parents. For this generation, which came of age at a time when gay men had already been living openly for years, gay men's model of manhood has no doubt had an influence.

Even the most macho men give themselves permission to express at least some feminine traits under certain circumstances, such as with female partners or their children. It is also important to note that different societies define masculinity and femininity differently than in the

United States. But the generalization about gender-norm restrictions carries weight—and not just in this country. Patriarchy exerts tremendous pressure on men to conform to a given society's definitions of manhood. In most parts of the world, the worst thing a man can be is like a woman.

This restriction places half of the human experience off limits for men. In terms of personality traits, society pressures men not to express: affection, caring, compassion, communicativeness, collaboration, cooperation, eagerness to soothe feelings, emotions, empathy, a family or inward orientation, flexibility, gentleness, helpfulness, intuitiveness, kindness, nurturing, passivity, patience, reasonableness, responsiveness, sensitivity, sexual submission, shyness, soft-spokenness, sympathy, tenderness, understanding, yielding, and warmth—among others. In terms of external traits, societal expectations keep men confined to rigid body posture and movements, narrow permissions for dress, and vocal inflections in the lower octaves. One misplaced hand gesture or the wrong crossing of legs leaves a man open to receiving the worst insult: being labeled a fag or a sissy.

When considered in this light, the restrictions on men ring with insanity. And yet this insanity rules and drives much of men's behavior. Because men control the levers of power, denial and repression of the feminine within themselves translates into denial and repression of the feminine and feminine principles globally. Considered slightly differently, men devaluing swaths of themselves translates into men devaluing swaths of humanity. We see this imbalance in stratification, hierarchy, and racism. It shows up in the way governments repress; armies slaughter; corporations subjugate, exploit, and pollute; and politicians steal power. Religions perpetuate this imbalance in teachings that assign women lower status. It manifests as emotional and physical violence toward women; cut-throat business practices; and the perpetuation of income inequality. It results in the careless destruction of Earth's environment, which could in the not-too-distant future extinguish us all. When the dominant force in the world denies half of the human experience, it becomes all too easy for this group to deny the humanity in others.

The sad irony of men's entrapment within a rigid, narrow range of expression is that this prison is entirely of men's making. Men maintain control of and perpetuate these restrictions on male norms. Women have little say in it; they may exert pressure on their men to integrate their masculine and feminine, as we explored in Chapter 10, but this goes only so far. (Of course, some women actually support and reinforce gender rigidity.) In some ways, heterosexual men become more permanently wounded than gay men, because they have no rite of passage that can help them "come out" and throw off these limiting conventions. Herein lies the paradox for straight men: If you belong to the dominant culture, who do you rebel against? What do you reject? What is your foe? Women could throw off men's values and reclaim their personal power. Gay men and lesbians could reject society's messages that tell them being gay is inherently wrong. But if you live amid and benefit from the power of the dominant group—like the proverbial fish that can't recognize water, how would you even grasp the prison you live in?

For those of us outside of this prison, the view inside seems awfully bleak. Consider a life where pressure to conform to the narrowest range of human expression keeps one constantly on guard. A colleague of mine shared insight into the straight male experience as he and I talked about the unfortunate prevalence of gay men's preference for "straight acting" sexual partners. "Straight acting," he said, "is an act. Straight men are scared shitless to be seen as anything other than manly, so they adopt an act."

Sociologist Michael S. Kimmel supports this assertion. In his article, *Masculinity as Homophobia*, he describes the interior state of the typical U.S. male:

The great secret of American manhood is: *we are afraid of other men*.... Our efforts to maintain a manly front cover everything we do. What we wear. How we talk. How we walk. What we eat. Every mannerism, every movement contains a coded gender language. As adolescents, we learn that our peers are a kind of gender police, constantly threatening to unmask us as

feminine, as sissies.... As young men we are constantly riding those gender boundaries, checking the fences we have constructed on the perimeter, making sure that nothing even remotely feminine might show through. The possibilities of being unmasked are everywhere.... Even the most seemingly insignificant thing can pose a threat or activate that haunting terror.<sup>75</sup>

Nathan Palmer, a sociologist at Georgia Southern University, engages his students in class discussions around Kimmel's work, where they discover the inevitable implications of a narrow definition of manhood. He describes this process in his blog *Sociology Source.org*:

After we have clearly discussed how gender is socially constructed and defined what masculinity as homophobia means, I ask my students to brainstorm the consequences men and women experience because of this narrowly defined masculinity. My students are quick to point out that many men do "stupid" risk taking behaviors to show they are tough. Students draw the obvious connection to the shamefully high levels of male violence toward women. Many men, they typically say, are hostile or even violent to gays and lesbians because a narrowly defined masculinity sees any non-compliance as an affront to their own masculinity. After this students usually go quiet.<sup>76</sup>

Palmer's students make the obvious connection between toxic male shame and violence. According to a 2013 World Health Organization report, 35 percent of women worldwide have experienced either physical and/or sexual intimate-partner violence or non-partner sexual violence.<sup>77</sup> This violence turns inward as well. The American Foundation for Suicide Prevention reports that suicide rates among men are nearly four times higher than among women, and have been for many years.<sup>78</sup>

On a more subtle yet pervasive level, fear of other men keeps men disconnected from each other. Homophobia creates intense fear of even platonic displays of affection among men, unless they fall under strict

contexts—such as celebratory hugs and pats on the butt during sporting events. The male hug—with hands clasped and arms crossing the chest to prevent full-on body contact—delineates the line that cannot be crossed. Whereas friendships among men were once celebrated even in the United States, homophobia created a distance among men, keeping them starved of authentic male friendship and platonic affection.

A life lived in fear, shame, and inner violence creates external manifestations of these conditions. Fear, shame, and violence become projected onto others—and sometimes onto oneself. The metaphor is inescapable: the interior of the average American man—and men around the globe—is as toxic an environment as the one into which we are rapidly transforming the Earth. Men's rejection of the feminine has created a human and ecological disaster.

### **Claiming Our Gay Manhood as a Model for All Men**

It seems no accident that at precisely the moment in history when our technology has turned men's disavowal of the feminine into a human and ecological disaster, large numbers of gay men have come out of the closet and demonstrated a balanced form of manhood. Gay men represent the future of manhood. We show how to live as men who integrate the masculine and feminine. We live as free men—because we have chosen to open ourselves to the entire range of human expression and, therefore, to humanity. We are teachers of men. Gay men model sustainable manhood for all men. It's time we claim this leadership and consciously use it to benefit all men—and all people.

One man in a Gay Men of Wisdom discussion group raised a compelling objection to this concept when I proposed it. "I struggle with the question of what it means to be a man because I see it as negative," he said. "I don't fit the stereotype of what it means to be a man, and as a result my experience with manhood has been on the receiving end of anger and violence from the hands of men. Men use power, violence, aggression, and domination. These are things I don't want to be associated with."

His comments reflect a common gay male reality: we experience violence—emotional, physical, or both—at the hands of men and learn

to associate that with manhood. The gravity of this wound cannot be overstated. It is important to distinguish between the masculine and manhood, however. While our culture considers them synonymous, they are in fact two different things. Masculinity includes those traits and energies a society determines to be masculine, while manhood encompasses the ideal set of traits that men should possess. When manhood consists of only the masculine and little to no feminine, aggression and violence—masculinity’s shadow side—take over. This describes the state of manhood in most parts of the globe. The authentic masculine, however, provides a positive energy that makes a contribution to society equivalent to that of the authentic feminine.

Another man in the same group explained this as follows: “The masculine has tremendously beneficial contributions to make: holding a place of service to others; strength; being a light for people we know; taking action; giving back; sacrificing to benefit others; leading; being leaders; honoring our world; being protectors; taking responsibility for oneself and one’s own actions. Men have a different strength from women, and heterosexual men have a different strength than gay men.”

When I began leading gay men through explorations of the masculine and feminine, I fully expected that I would run into the greatest resistance around the feminine, and that men would sail through the assessments and discussions about the masculine. Much to my surprise, the opposite took place. This prompted me to rethink my assumptions and observations of gay men. It became clear to me that the real challenge lay not in the struggle with the masculine or feminine per se, but on a deeper level, in our struggle with manhood.

The notion of gay manhood does not exist. To some, the words “gay manhood” even sound funny. In them, I hear the echoes of the kind of masculinity presented in Robert Bly’s *Iron John*—straight men trying their hardest to be sensitive, strong warriors. We don’t have a notion of gay manhood, because we don’t feel like men. We don’t feel entitled to claim manhood for ourselves—as if heterosexual orientation provided the key to this kingdom. We still believe, on some level, that we are less than other men. All the evidence, of course, points in the other direction. We are the strongest men on the planet, because we have done the

unthinkable: we have challenged all men to look inside and recognize the feminine within them. Only an army of loving men could ever have the nerve, guts, and masculinity to accomplish this. We are men who are giving all men the key to unlock the prison gate.

We have begun redefining manhood whether we intend to or not. When we claim our manhood as gay men—and honor the balance it contains, in all its variations, from the nelliest queens to the butchest daddies—we will begin our deep healing work. When we proudly proclaim ourselves as men who embrace and honor the feminine, and who embody and express the masculine—and know that deep within ourselves—we will become whole. We will become the strong teachers that all men look to for guidance, because we will possess a strength that speaks to them.

Some of us may simply choose to live with this awareness. That alone will change how we interact with others, and it will change how men see us. Others of us will choose to consciously apply this awareness in what we do in our workplaces, in our families, and our communities. For some, it will mean literally entering into some form of service to men, such as a therapy practice focused on helping men heal, or a spiritual or religious ministry. Some may choose to become involved in men's groups and take active leadership roles. And some gay men may create new services, such as “coming-out-from-the-masculine-shadow” rites of passage, or other experiences specifically for straight and bisexual men. The possibilities will expand beyond our current conceptions, for as gay men will have stepped fully into our leadership role, modeling and teaching sustainable manhood for all men. When we heal other men, we will complete our own healing journey.

### **Gay Men of Wisdom on Gay Men and the Masculine**

Gay Men of Wisdom groups have produced rich discussions about gay men, the masculine, and the feminine:

- We are not afraid to be confrontational; we have used the masculine to create political power: ACT UP, gay rights. We have channeled the masculine to useful ends.

- Gay men are tough as nails.
- Gay men have a strong work ethic. That feels very masculine to me.
- Gay men care about their physical appearance and enjoy their masculinity.
- We have demonstrated strength and perseverance. We have survived and overcome the odds of lonely, difficult childhoods.
- Acceptance of gay culture allows people to be bisexual, which will create an American culture that is less warlike. There will be less pressure on men to be so hyper-masculine.
- As a gay man you're forced to make peace with your feminine side.
- We break barriers. We have helped redefine sex roles, especially for men. We help break the hardening of sex roles.
- We are not afraid to physically express our feminine side, such as through gestures, flairs, fashion, and trend setting.
- Our culture has crushed the feminine out of straight men; gay men can help restore it.
- We have created permission to be intimate without being sexual, affectionate without being sexual. We have given men a broader set of permissions. Heterosexual men have little of this available to them. We have created models for authentic male-male friendships.
- Some gay men form close and authentic relationships with heterosexual men. More of this will happen in the future. This is where we are headed.

- It's easier for us because we don't have to worry about not being manly enough. This puts tremendous pressure on straight men. We have much less pressure on us. This allows us to be ourselves.
- We're automatically models of manhood. The appearance of gay people in the world causes people to feel differently. This gives heterosexual men the permission to see themselves differently and more expansively.
- We give men permission to be affectionate without being sexual. We model this.
- We expand definitions of masculinity.
- The shadow damages straight men just as much as it damages gay men.
- We have led men in this area, and are suited to lead them further.
- We can teach straight men that women are human beings. If you are strong in yourself, you won't have an issue with a woman being in charge.

*What is different about how gay men embody manhood?*

- On the surface, we appear the same, but inside we are different.
- We don't have the same pressures as straight men. We don't relate to women sexually.
- We are feminine and masculine, depending on who we are with. We don't have to play a role.
- For gay men, masculinity means being sexually attractive, not being dominant over others. It means wanting to be loved.
- We define masculinity by sex, but we can get lost in it.

*What can we teach heterosexual men about being men?*

- Allow yourself to feel. Be okay with it.
- It's okay to cry.
- Being physical/sensual is not the same as being sexual. This is a distinction most heterosexual men are too afraid to make.
- We expand notions of what it means to be a man.
- We can teach straight men how to understand women.
- It's okay for straight men to see each other.
- Be who you are.
- Find that strength in yourself to be who you are.
- Find the courage to speak up and create change. That's the power men hold.
- It's okay to have feelings. Strength is not in not having feelings, but in facing and harnessing them.
- We can teach men to love themselves, because, while we still have a ways to go individually and collectively, we have done this for ourselves.
- We can teach straight men how to feel.
- Gay and straight men can learn from each other about what it means to be a man. We can create a new definition of what it means to be man together.