

Jeff Garson
 Reflection #57
 November 13, 2011

Men – We Make Complete Sense!

Into my 40s, I did what a lot of men do. I kept my feelings mostly to myself – except with my girl friends and, then, my wife. That said, my way of sharing with my romantic partners was, all too often, not sensitive and skillful to say the least. I was able to express anger and annoyance, but sadly – for her and me – my deeper fears and longings were too often expressed in these reactive ways as well. “Why can’t you get off the freakin’ phone,” instead of “I’m missing you and hope you’ll be fully available to me soon.” I pretty much had it figured that I was an asshole. A victim of testosterone poisoning, I was not very good at that emotional stuff, hopelessly aggressive, and far too interested in sex.

At lot of good things have happened in the ensuing years. One very healing part of my journey has been time spent with other men – not at ball games or in the cushioning presence of our spouses – but in settings that allowed for frank and open conversations about life’s challenges and what it means to deal with them as a man. I have learned a lot. And one of central lessons is this: We men are fully capable adults in every sense of the word – emotional as well as practical, empathic as well as assertive.

In this Reflection I focus on an issue that has become one of my abiding passions: Why we men make complete sense and why, understanding this, we are fully capable of pushing back against the gender based myths and stereotypes that consign so many of us to sad, isolated, and reduced existences.

The key to mounting an effective response to our assigned gender roles is to remember – always – that biology is not the issue. In [Pink Brain, Blue Brain: How Small Differences Grow into Troublesome Gaps and What We Can Do About It](#), Lise Eliot reviews in detail the evidence of gender based biological differences. Her conclusion? The differences in our physiology are minor and, standing alone, inconsequential.

So what is going on? As James Carville might put it, “it’s the culture, stupid.” We live in a world that accentuates these small genetic differences; pushes each sex toward certain capabilities and vulnerabilities and away from others; and shrinks, in the process, the essential humanity of both. When it comes to gender, the culture’s message – relentlessly reinforced – is that for girls, intimacy and nurturance are fine but assertiveness isn’t and, for boys, the opposite is true.

To illustrate this point, Terence Real and Carol Gilligan tell the following stories. Ask an 8-year-old girl what kind of pizza she wants and she will tell you. Ask an 11-year old girl and she’ll say, I’m not sure. Ask a 13-year-old girl – now fully socialized to her assigned gender role – and is likely to ask, “what do you want?” On the other side of the equation is the 3- year old boy who falls down in the supermarket, his eyes filling with

tears. What happens? An adult rushes to tell him everything is fine, to brush it off, to be a little man; a response far different from hugging, cuddling and gentle stroking a 3-year old girl would typically receive.

The message that is communicated to our boys through a myriad of cultural cues, incentives and sanctions – and with increasing intensity as the years go by – is this: Suck it up, be strong and tough, don't be needy, hide your fear and vulnerability. And never forget that intimate sharing, and physical and emotional comfort are unmanly, the province of girls and sissies. Needless to say, the emotional price we pay as boys and men – like the price our sister's pay as they absorb their assigned story – is enormous.

This intense cultural conditioning makes sense of so many of the male behaviors that women find so perplexing and troubling. And, understanding that they are learned behaviors is a powerful reminder to us men – and to the women who love us – that they can be changed. As the women's movement has so persuasively demonstrated, our culturally-defined gender roles are not a life sentence.

Working through the implications of our assigned gender role, here is a brief summary of why the things we do as men, in three key areas of living, make complete sense.

1. Our sexual behaviors.

By the time we reach puberty, we boys are already emotionally isolated, having learned not to cry, or to seek physical comfort, or to share our fears and vulnerabilities. But we can be sexual. Indeed, our emerging sexuality – at least insofar as it means scoring with girls – is seen as a badge of honor. So what we learn as boys, and we carry into our lives as men, is that hugging, stroking, and nurturance are not ok – except in the context of sex.

Viewed in this context our obsession with sex is entirely understandable. It's not because we are pigs, ready to “screw anything that moves.” It's because this is the only socially sanctioned arena in which we can get the physical nurturance we long for.

It also explains the male tendency to leave after having sex or to abruptly disappear from a relationship. While the sex is going on things are simple. We are fully focused on the sex act and so, we (often naively) tell ourselves, is she. In our minds, there is nothing to complicate the equation, nothing to be said, no complicated intimate choices to be made.

But then orgasm occurs and everything changes. Now suddenly we are naked, and nose-to-nose, with another human being. Moreover, this is a person whose experience with intimate interactions is far greater than ours. From that post coital moment of transition forward, we are prone to feelings of confusion, unease, and vulnerability. So we flee, not because we are insensitive louts, but rather to avoid the uncomfortable feelings that flood us, now that we are forced to inhabit this far more complicated world of intimacy.

2. Our ways of being intimate.

Because of the ways in which women are raised, intimate conversations are, for them, a place of comfort. But for men – with their very different socialization – it is an invitation into unfamiliar and, therefore, emotionally unsafe territory. So when our spouse says, “we need to talk,” it signals, for us, the risk of being judged and shamed. Small wonder, then, that our instinct – so often – is to resist the invitation or to react with defensiveness.

Our socialization also explains our typical ways of interacting. Talking sports, cracking jokes, exchanging insults, hanging out – doing these things, we are creating companionship at a distance that feels comfortable. In addition, we are creating shame-free zones where the danger of being judged has been banished. In this environment, no one is shamed, even when he gets falling down drunk and vomits all over the bathroom floor.

3. Our aggressiveness.

Given our cultural conditioning, we men are far more conversant with aggressive emotions – assertiveness, anger, annoyance, and frustration – than we are with more vulnerable emotions such as hurt, sadness, fear, and confusion. But what is less obvious is how we use our aggressiveness to shield our selves from these less familiar, less comfortable emotions.

As Steven Stosny points out, anger is like a little hit of crack cocaine. Its negative consequences are severe, but in the moment it actually makes us feel better. Why? Because it shifts our body into action mode. Adrenaline and cortisol are pumped into our bodies and blood rushes to our large muscles groups, giving us a sudden jolt of energy. In addition, the reasoning parts of the brain – the parts that could breed indecision at a moment of crisis – shrink, leaving us with a heightened sense of clarity.

So a typical man, trained to be assertive but not open and vulnerable, predictably falls into this emotional pattern: When, as is inevitable, more vulnerable emotions come up, he “fast forwards” through this unfamiliar and uncomfortable territory, seeking instead the short-term relief that anger, annoyance, and frustration offer. And, over time, this pattern becomes so engrained and automatic that many men are not even aware of the underlying hurt, fear or confusion that triggers it. In this area as well we are not perverse, inexplicable beings. What we are doing is an understandable – if flawed – adaptation to our culturally assigned gender role.

In each of these areas, knowing that the ways in which we act are cultural rather than biological in origin, and make complete sense, we are empowered to grow into the whole human beings we are meant to be – comfortably conversant with the full range of emotions and capable partners in intimacy.