

The Boys Are Not All Right

By **MICHAEL IAN BLACK** FEB. 21, 2018

I used to have this one-liner: “If you want to emasculate a guy friend, when you’re at a restaurant, ask him everything that he’s going to order, and then when the waitress comes ... order for him.” It’s funny because it shouldn’t be that easy to rob a man of his masculinity — but it is.



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Last week, 17 people, most of them teenagers, were shot dead at a Florida school. Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School now joins the ranks of Sandy Hook, Virginia Tech, Columbine and too many other sites of American carnage. What do these shootings have in common? Guns, yes. But also, boys. Girls aren’t pulling the triggers. It’s boys. It’s almost always boys.

America’s boys are broken. And it’s killing us.

The brokenness of the country’s boys stands in contrast to its girls, who still face an abundance of obstacles but go into the world increasingly well equipped to take them on.

The past 50 years have redefined what it means to be female in America. Girls today are told that they can do anything, be anyone. They’ve absorbed the message: They’re outperforming boys in school at every level. But it isn’t just about performance. To be a girl today is to be the beneficiary of decades of conversation about the complexities of womanhood, its many forms and expressions.

Boys, though, have been left behind. No commensurate movement has emerged to help them navigate toward a full expression of their gender. It’s no longer enough to “be a man” — we no longer even know what that means.

Too many boys are trapped in the same suffocating, outdated model of masculinity, where manhood is measured in strength, where there is no way to be vulnerable without being emasculated, where manliness is about having power over others. They are trapped, and they don’t even have the language to talk about how they feel about being trapped, because the language that exists to discuss the full range of human emotion is still viewed as sensitive and feminine.

Men feel isolated, confused and conflicted about their natures. Many feel that the very qualities that used to define them — their strength, aggression and competitiveness —

are no longer wanted or needed; many others never felt strong or aggressive or competitive to begin with. We don't know how to be, and we're terrified.

But to even admit our terror is to be reduced, because we don't have a model of masculinity that allows for fear or grief or tenderness or the day-to-day sadness that sometimes overtakes us all.

Case in point: A few days ago, I posted a brief thread about these thoughts on Twitter, knowing I would receive hateful replies in response. I got dozens of messages impugning my manhood; the mildest of them called me a "soy boy" (a common insult among the alt-right that links soy intake to estrogen).

And so the man who feels lost but wishes to preserve his fully masculine self has only two choices: withdrawal or rage. We've seen what withdrawal and rage have the potential to do. School shootings are only the most public of tragedies. Others, on a smaller scale, take place across the country daily; another commonality among shooters is a history of abuse toward women.

To be clear, most men will never turn violent. Most men will turn out fine. Most will learn to navigate the deep waters of their feelings without ever engaging in any form of destruction. Most will grow up to be kind. But many will not.

We will probably never understand why any one young man decides to end the lives of others. But we can see at least one pattern and that pattern is glaringly obvious. It's boys.

I believe in boys. I believe in my son. Sometimes, though, I see him, 16 years old, swallowing his frustration, burying his worry, stomping up the stairs without telling us what's wrong, and I want to show him what it looks like to be vulnerable and open but I can't. Because I was a boy once, too.

There has to be a way to expand what it means to be a man without losing our masculinity. I don't know how we open ourselves to the rich complexity of our manhood. I think we would benefit from the same conversations girls and women have been having for these past 50 years.

I would like men to use feminism as an inspiration, in the same way that feminists used the civil rights movement as theirs. I'm not advocating a quick fix. There isn't one. But we have to start the conversation. Boys are broken, and I want to help.

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