

CHAPTER I



THE INCOMPLETE MAN

When our older son was five, he took a series of developmental assessments to determine his readiness for elementary school, including a Gesell “Incomplete Man” Test.

Afterwards, his kindergarten evaluator informed us that our son had meticulously filled out the left side of the figure in great detail, but running out of time, he had left the right side blank. This “error,” along with the fact that he had given his Incomplete Man a penis, was interpreted as evidence that our wonderful boy was developmentally delayed. It was unclear that he would ever catch up and thrive at the school’s kindergarten that she was interviewing him for. She advised us to seek admission elsewhere. (He graduated from Harvard seventeen years later.)

At the time I didn’t understand how much my son’s assessment mirrored my own lifelong journey (and that of generations of men) as we

attempt to frame new forms of masculinity that more authentically respond to today's requirements. Much as we have tried, most of us are still struggling to develop a complete picture of what it means to be a good man in a world where the concept of masculinity and the dynamics between men and women are rapidly changing. Although we know we need to make a shift, we are unable to frame and step into our new role.

We remain frozen in part because the old models of masculinity are strictly enforced, and the potential social and financial consequences of exhibiting our full humanity as men, in defiance of their edicts, holds us back from moving forward. Our inertia is also due to the fact that the way in which we are raised to fulfill the expectations of these traditional models often forces us to hide or erase the very capacities we need in order to make a shift. As a result, we remain "Incomplete Men," stick figures missing critical pieces of our male identities. *Getting Naked: A Field Guide for Men* offers a framework, a set of key insights inherent in our evolving understandings of masculinity that might help you move forward.

This is not the first time that men have tried to reframe the way we roll. In the early 1980s and 1990s, the mythopoetic men's movement aspired to deepen our understanding of the male psyche and clarify how it might differ from the new identities women had assumed as a result of the feminist movement. The ideas expressed by Robert Bly (*Iron John*, 1990), Sam Keen (*Fire in the Belly*, 1991), Joseph Campbell (*The Power of Myth*, 1988), Robert Moore and Douglas Gillette (*King, Warrior, Magician, Lover*, 1990), John Eldredge (*Wild at Heart*, 2001), and Richard Rohr (*From Wild Man to Wise Man*, 2005) continue to be touchstones for today's men who are committed to preserving and protecting "the best parts" of traditional models of masculinity. Although much effort has been poured into a "new masculinity" movement which builds on these models, men's retreats can often become trauma centers where guys can safely reveal their pain, without forfeiting their standing as a "real man," but are still not given the tools to effectively shift

behavior. We grieve, we attempt to improve our interactions and relationships with loved ones, but much of our behavior remains unchanged. A further problem is that these gatherings can often become ways in which we reify and reintegrate some of the negative norms of the male code and can even reinforce social structures that contemporary society is evolving away from. Today's men's retreats are an important step in the journey, but they don't offer a complete roadmap of possibilities for moving forward.

The great risks and destructive impacts that are inherent in maintaining the status quo have become vividly clear over the past few years. Richard Reeves's excellent analysis *Of Boys and Men: Why the Modern Male Is Struggling, Why It Matters, and What to Do About It* sounds an alarm that we must take seriously.¹ His findings confirm that millions of boys and young men are struggling in school, at work, and in the family at a level that exceeds our prior estimations. In his view, in addition to the work that needs to be done at the individual level, men's struggle is a structural problem that requires meaningful policy solutions. This book will focus on the former—the work that we can do now as individuals while other experts address structural issues. It's clear that something must be done to reduce the current pain points experienced by men and women.

MAN BOX CULTURE

We are going to organize our search for solutions at the individual level using a framework that shines a light on the set of behaviors that have trapped men for years. The consequences of men performing these traditionally masculine behaviors were first codified by Paul Kivel and Tony Porter as the "Man Box." They have been dramatically articulated by Mark Greene, former senior editor of The Good Men Project, and a good friend, in his excellent précis, *The Little #MeToo Book for Men*.²

His brief, incisive prose distills Kivel and Porter's construct into an actionable set of understandings of how men are caught in a web of expectations of what it means to be male from which it is difficult to escape. It's a must read for every man eager to throw off the yoke of its oppression.

Here's a quick summary of Mark's brief. The Man Box is a narrowly defined set of traditional rules for being a man that are enforced through shaming and bullying, in order to enforce conformity to our current culture of masculinity, and to perpetuate the domination, even exploitation of people who are perceived to be "other" or of lesser stature when compared to straight men—most often, women and the LGBTQIA2S+ community. In this model of masculinity, a man is expected to be:

- Strong and stoic
- Unemotional, expressing no feelings except anger and lust
- Providers (never caregivers)
- Heterosexual, hyper-masculine, sexually dominant
- Able-bodied, a person who never asks for help
- Someone who plays or watches sports
- Domineering in every exchange

Each deviation, no matter how small, is policed. It is important to note that many aspects of this culture of masculinity cut across race and the socio-economic spectrum, providing a point of common experience and set of expectations for all men around the globe. It is a universally shared understanding among men, for better or worse.

The objective of this dominance-based culture of masculinity is to eradicate and target difference in male norms, granting permission for aggression—large or small—so that power can accrue to the guys on top. It is a narrow and repressive form of manhood that is defined by violence, sex, status, and assault, a cultural construct where strength, power, and status are everything, and showing emotions, being open, or

engaging in relational empathy are signs of weakness. A social system where sex and aggression are the yardsticks by which men are measured. One of its main strengths is that it insists on acquiescence and silent acceptance. That means that most guys don't challenge the paradigm or the misdeeds of other men for fear of retaliation.

The culture of masculinity is very hierarchical. One of the key tenets of the "Man Box" is that in order to sit at the top of the hierarchy of men, we must reject the personal qualities that our Western society identifies as "feminine." The world of emotions and social cognition—being empathetic, networked, connected, open, and transparent—is devalued as unmanly. Instead, this macho code of behavior reveres a male that is silent, tough, independent, hyper-competitive, and it bears repeating, hyper-sexual. Greene and others contend that this hierarchical system for establishing a man's relative status and power is responsible for the current epidemic of loneliness, depression, substance abuse, and suicide among men, because of the way that the Man Box forces boys to detach from their emotions and adhere to a rigid set of expectations that inflict significant damage. We will talk more about that in Chapter 4.

A veritable platoon of sociologists and psychologists—William Pollack (*Real Boys*, 1998), Michael Gurian (*The Wonder of Boys*, 1996), Dan Kindlon and Michael Thompson (*Raising Cain*, 1999), and later Michael Reichert (*How to Raise a Boy*, 2019)—have documented the destructive emotional training that our society imposes upon boys. The irony here is that the way we men are raised prevents us from having the very tools we now most need in order to initiate a paradigm shift. We have neither the emotional conditioning nor the communication skills to navigate a "highly polarized system between women and men."³

Two decades have passed since some of these popular bestsellers armed a generation of parents, myself included, with an understanding of the importance of nurturing the emotional intelligence of young boys. You might have thought that by now a new generation of men would exhibit less of the derogatory, dismissive behavior that prior generations

have shown towards women. Instead, as we have recently learned from Peggy Orenstein in her book, *Boys and Sex: Young Men on Hookups, Love, Porn, Consent, and the New Masculinity*,⁴ if anything “the definition of masculinity seems to be contracting,”⁵ and the exploitation of women continues. Much as we would like to believe that the new generation of men is behaving better than their fathers, the evidence is not encouraging.

Indeed, men and women seem to be locked in a battle to determine what the prevailing model of masculinity and its corresponding attitudes towards women going forward will be. Many pundits observed that the 2020 presidential election asked voters “to consider what masculinity means,” forcing us to choose between a version of masculinity that stresses macho, plain-spoken toughness, and another model that emphasizes family empathy, caring for and protecting others. As feminist author Susan Faludi, and journalists Claire Cain Miller and Alisha Haridasani Gupta brilliantly observed in their pieces for the *New York Times* just before the election, the stakes just keep getting higher and higher.⁶ The challenge is that this debate is all too often framed as males having to make a choice between being either traditional or progressive, when the invitation that is being offered men in this moment is the choice to be both.

Further complicating men’s ability to make a shift is the dark underbelly of our tough, self-confident male egos. We struggle with deep-seated shame about our bodies and sexual impulses. In diametric opposition to its adoration of the breast and vulva, our culture treats the penis as an object of ridicule and scorn. At a very early age our initial delight in our unusual piece of anatomy is replaced by a sense of embarrassment instilled by our elders, which is later amplified by the non-stop messaging by men, women, and the media that the penis is a sexual assault weapon. Making matters worse is the fact that the penis seems to have a mind of its own. Increasingly research confirms that we all occupy a spot on the spectrum of desire that is a mix of

hetero- and homosexual impulses, as Kinsey first reported in 1948. It further suggests that men’s sexual impulses are likely not singular and fixed. Indeed, the research indicates that our “orientation” may be a pattern of preference (sometimes the result of a committed partnership) that at any time could change. That is, our sexual orientation is not a neurochemical phenomenon that is static and stable (though our preferences may be for a host of reasons). Uncomfortable with our bodies, and unable to process the underlying fluidity inherent in our sexuality, men do not permit themselves to acknowledge and express the full range of their impulses, except within the narrow band of behaviors that society validates. This is, of course, extremely challenging due to the insistent biological imperatives that will not be denied and every man experiences throughout his adult life. We are, both men and women, by nature, extremely physical, sensual, sexual beings.

A final force holding men back is the fact that our secular society does not encourage men to be spiritual. Although the Pew Research Center reports that significant demographic segments are moving away from religion while continuing to believe in a higher power, most men are groomed to devalue their spiritual leanings in favor of exhibiting an orientation towards material achievement that is required to be considered a successful adult male. Our inexperience cultivating the life of the Spirit removes a key instrument for change in a guy’s toolbox, one that it is my contention is absolutely essential. Why? Every wisdom text from around the world has recorded that all fundamental, long-lasting, transformational change comes from within.

All these challenges have been brought to a tipping point recently by the onset of COVID-19. The fundamental assumption underlying traditional constructs of masculinity—a man’s personal agency to achieve a desired outcome in a system where he has some control—was removed, at least for that moment. The question is: In which direction will men make a shift after this disruptive period? Will we return back to the old models that are well-rehearsed, understood, and safe, but do not serve

us well, or will we leap into a new, emerging paradigm? Do we even have a choice? Is this powerful disease forcing men to learn lessons that we have long resisted, demanding that we adopt new behaviors? Is the virus virulent enough to create permanent and lasting change in the way that we live? What will the new norms for being perceived as a 21st Century Male look like in this modern era? Will these norms be adopted by a broad spectrum of men, not just the current pioneers? And what is the critical path for getting there?

I believe that men are ready for a fresh look at how we might construct our own authentic form of masculinities, with new norms of what it means to be a man. I also believe that this effort must literally strip men down (as all male initiation rites since the beginning of time have done)—physically, emotionally, mentally—so that we can build our new identities from the ground up, inside out. We will never experience the change we seek unless men recover and re-energize the innate capacities within us. We must learn how to be bold and at the same time fiercely loving and kind. Everything else will follow.

A ROADMAP FOR MAKING A SHIFT

Recognizing that broad platitudes will get us nowhere, I have identified seven areas of exploration that men can focus on in order to move forward, based on studies by sociologists and other academics observing male behavior, conversations with several psychotherapists whose client lists skew towards men, and my own personal experience. I will describe each of these seven areas in the succeeding chapters, offering research findings, illustrative stories from my own life and from the lives of others, along with some practical suggestions and exercises that you might find useful.

I am proposing these seven areas for personal exploration in order to create a significant transformation in your life, from the inside out.

Each territory for investigation enables men to disable a key tenet of the Man Box's influence over our behavior, so that we might create our own new, more authentic way of being male.

A Seven-Part Journey Towards Becoming a 21st Century Male

1—Get naked

Men are trained to reject any behavior that seems weak in order to become competitive, aggressive warriors as adults. To counteract and balance this training, men also need to learn the power of being open, vulnerable, and transparent. *Getting Naked* proposes that every man who is ready to make a shift literally and metaphorically should strip down physically and mentally at home—as a rite of passage indicating that he is open to the change that he seeks. With this new mindset, men will also begin to develop a much healthier relationship with their own bodies and stop buying into the shame that we are taught. We can learn to see grace and beauty in every male form, at every age.

2—Get in touch with your “feminine” side

Because the Man Box rejects the “feminine” as “other,” men need to reclaim the feminine wisdom within them in order to become whole. We need to learn the value of being networked, creative, intuitive, body-conscious (in a healthy way), grounded in ordinary life, and nurturers/caretakers that are emotionally connected. We know that teamwork and collaboration produce better results than a strictly competitive approach, and that diversity, emotional/relational intelligence, and social cognition are the doors to success.

3—Learn how to engage and express the heart

From a very early age, boys are touched less, and they are conditioned to detach from their emotions in order to become tough, successful adults. Man Box culture trains men to be “calm, cool, collected,” instead

of showing their feelings. “It isn’t manly.” Men are therefore complicated creatures emotionally, and because we are not taught how to handle or communicate our feelings, we tend to explode in anger or lust. We need a system upgrade that enables us to open our hearts, one that provides us with a broad range of tools—verbal and nonverbal—to respond in more appropriate ways to people and events around us.

4—Acknowledge the full range of your own male sexuality

The Man Box asserts that “real men” are both hyper-sexual and heterosexual, despite the latest research on male sexuality indicating that men experience a broader spectrum of sexual and romantic impulses than we are willing to admit. We therefore need to reframe what it means to be a “Real Man.” Men need to get in touch with their actual sexual identities and the range of appropriate ways in which they can express and enjoy them.

5—Develop a daily contemplative practice

Since the early eighteenth century, the ideal man has been perceived to be rational and detached, an individual who is in control of his thoughts and impulses so that he can seize every advantage while retaining his “killer” instinct. We need to develop the skills that empty and still the mind, so that the authentic man within, not some social construct heavily shaped by the expectations of culture of masculinity, can emerge. We need to create an inner space where fundamental change can occur, as grace appears only when we pause in life, surrender, take off our armor, still the body, open the heart, and quiet the mind, so that the transcendent which is our birthright can expand our being.

6—Make time to withdraw completely from the world for a period of rest and retreat

A core proposition of the Man Box is that the primary role of men is as providers in a winner-take-all world. Western society’s extreme

emphasis on “doing” or “accomplishing” things is a heavy burden for men, who are taught from an early age that they must aggressively compete for money, power, recognition, and status in order to be successful and happy. We men need to give ourselves permission to take a break from the 24/7 pace so that we might regroup and redesign our lives both individually and collectively.

7—Reframe definitions of success

New definitions of success are essential in order to weaken the Man Box’s grip on our souls—both the drive to be successful and the fear of failure if we do not abide by our culture of masculinity’s expectations are significantly limiting to men’s fulfillment. A framework for Designing Your Life developed at Stanford offers a good starting place for this final step.

WHY AM I YOUR GUIDE?

You may now be asking why I’m the person to guide you on this journey. Here’s my answer.

Forty years ago, in an act of self-preservation, I rejected the tribal narratives of what it meant to be male that I had learned growing up in the remote corners of rural Ohio and Central Texas. I knew that I had to choose either to adhere to the macho male code or leave it all behind.

I never really did fit the traditional masculine mold. Yeah, I was athletic, and as a youth participated in all kinds of neighborhood sports, but in high school instead of football, I played soccer and ran track. Instead of summer jobs involving heavy manual labor, I taught summer school and worked as a lifeguard at the pool. Instead of driving a pickup truck, I drove an MGB convertible. Instead of hunting and chasing cattle or deer for fun on the weekends, I went hiking. Instead of drinking beer

with the guys, I enjoyed partying with women and men. After finishing college, I finally realized that the “Texas Plan”—leaving the state for college and then returning home—also expected me to settle down, put on a pair of boots, get married and start a family, so I left. I wanted all that, but on my own terms, and I was tired of being labeled as “gay” for not trying harder to be one of the guys.

It all came to a head when the only job I could find in Austin after graduating from Harvard was calling on bad debt for the largest John Deere dealership west of the Mississippi. (Although that propelled me out of Austin, in search of work and an identity that was more aligned to my soul, the job actually turned out to be a terrific experience.)

My trek into a new masculinity frontier wasn’t what I expected. Instead of being rejected, I was embraced first by the last generation of Mad Men in advertising, then by a bunch of Hollywood bosses, and finally by the pioneers of impact investing, including Charles R. Schwab.

If there was a theme across all these male friendships and professional working relationships, it was “Breaking Free.” As we were creating new products and services, and new forms of organization, we were also recreating ourselves as men who aspired to more meaning and purpose than earning a paycheck. We introduced fashion watches at a reasonable price point, wine coolers, Captain Morgan Spiced Rum, Bill Nye the Science Guy, Rabbit Ears Radio (Hollywood celebs and world-class musicians telling classic children’s stories), Schools Attuned (for teachers, parents, and students struggling with differences in learning)—each in its own way dedicated to making the world a better, more exciting place for ourselves and our families. (And yes, despite all the temptation to behave otherwise in New York, Hollywood, Paris, London, Rome, San Francisco, and DC, we were all family men, just like I would have been back in Texas. I did not succumb to the behavior that the #MeToo Movement has so vividly condemned.)

Because I traveled a lot for business, I missed being present daily during our sons’ elementary school years, ironically, as I led an education

start-up to national prominence. But, despite being on the road, I did figure out how to attend all their poetry recitations, most of their important games, and concerts. I made it a priority even when many of the other dads who were only commuting to NYC did not. Then my career hit a brick wall for a completely unexpected reason, leading to an unplanned transition and loss of income. This sudden shift shook the very foundation of my masculinity: *being the provider*.

Seizing the opportunity to make a fundamental change in the way I rolled, I launched a small business and reorganized my life so that I could be more present at home. Fifteen years ago I learned to juggle the demands of being an entrepreneur, father, and spouse, while working remotely, much as today’s men are learning now.

When forces that I eventually understood were beyond my control took charge of my life, I decided to go with the flow and demonstrate my willingness to be open, transparent, and vulnerable in direct defiance of the traditional male code. That took a level of courage that I still don’t quite comprehend, and the full support of my loving wife as I struggled to find my footing.

After this act of surrender, a series of extraordinary experiences began to unfold. Self-help books flew off the shelves to get me started—the ones I needed at the moment, but didn’t even know existed, would actually drop into my hands in the store. Then a series of spiritual advisors showed up. A pre-cognitive psychotherapist, who taught Transcendental Meditation trainers. A demanding but loving female guide (who is also a world-class triathlete). A former Ogilvy exec who is expert in research on the mind-body-heart connection. An inter-spiritual mystic traveling the world, who was a close friend of Ram Dass. An Episcopal monk. All welcomed me into a deepening exploration.

It became clear that I was now on a spiritual adventure, taking me to new territory—both internal and external—consolidating what I had been learning all these years about the essence of my male psyche. Three major projects came out of nowhere and took off seemingly of

their own accord, gathering a momentum that has propelled them into the national limelight.

Conventional notions of manhood are shifting now for many reasons. Scrutiny of male entitlement and hypersexuality exposed by the #MeToo Movement, changing roles (long in the making) now amplified by COVID-19 requirements to shelter in place, male push-back against those advocating for making a shift in male roles and attitudes, and other social forces have brought men to a place where we need to decide how we are going to move forward.

How should we respond? Should we return to our old routines? Or should we reorder our priorities and reorganize our daily lives? I think the latter.

My life and writing have provided me with insights that men might find useful on this journey of collective redefinition of masculinity that we have begun. It has also provided me with access to researchers and thought leaders in the new masculinity/male spirituality space, and legions of men who are willing to share the stories of their struggles to make a shift.

I fervently believe that together we can create the change we all seek, preserving the best parts of our old male code, and inventing the new. So, let's begin our journey.