

Reflections on Masculinity

Posted on 9/27/2013 12:45:00 PM by [Justin Natoli, JD MA](#)

If market price is a function of supply and demand, then my advice is to start investing in masculinity. That stuff is flying off the shelves. For a variety of reasons—innate and learned—masculinity is like catnip to a significant percentage of gay men, and it appears to be in short supply. The appeal of masculinity isn't breaking news. A quick glance on Scruff reveals one masc/musc man after another seeking masc-only sexual connections. What sparks my curiosity is the role masculinity plays in our sex lives and what our longing for and fetishizing of masculinity says about the gay experience.

I sat down with some 'masc-only' gay men recently to understand better what they feel like when connecting with men they judge to be masculine. These conversations suggested three distinct but overlapping roles masculinity plays in sexual relationships with men. One group is drawn to masculine men because they feel protected. Another group says they enjoy feeling dominated by masculine energy. A third group reveals that connecting with masculine men validates their own masculinity and helps them feel more masculine. Time and time again, the themes of feeling protected, dominated and validated emerged as the payoff for bagging a masculine man. What does our longing for these three qualities—a longing so strong that for some it's a fetish—say about our gay experience?

According to Carl Jung, one of the forefathers of modern psychology, we all have aspects of our personality that we deny, hide or have not fully developed. Because it's so difficult for us to accept or tap into these aspects of ourselves, we project them out into the world and encounter them in other people. That's why the repressed gay man sometimes becomes a gay-bashing homophobe. He tries to eradicate his own sexuality by projecting it onto others and eradicating it. Whenever we experience a powerful attraction to or revulsion from someone, chances are good that we're projecting onto them an aspect of ourselves that wants our attention.

So what are we projecting onto masculine men? Why do so many of us share a longing for protection, domination and validation? I propose that we have not yet fully developed our own masculinity. A masculinity that can protect, be dominant and is felt in our core to be valid.

From one perspective, the opposite of masculine is feminine. Gay men tend to be hyper-aware of the masculine-feminine spectrum. We are so focused on masculine versus feminine that we forget another spectrum exists. From another perspective, the opposite of masculine is the pre-masculine boy. Our fetishized longing for masculinity could suggest that, as gay men, there is a part of our masculinity that remains underdeveloped, like that of a boy.

Young boys, not having yet been initiated into their mature masculinity by adult men, have a childlike view of what it means to be a man. They only know what masculinity looks like from the outside—a deep voice, muscles, power, stereotypical mannerisms or victory in competition, for example. Gay men in our culture appear to view masculinity the same way. We only know masculinity by contrasting it with what is feminine because we only know masculinity from the outside, the way a boy does. Perhaps we long for an internal, adult masculinity but have never had the mentoring we need to develop it. On a gut level, we know something is missing, but this missing piece is so far outside our awareness that we project it onto others the way some gay bashers project their same-sex attraction. Instead of bashing our neglected masculinity, though, we want to merge with it through sex.

What does adult masculinity look like, and how do we get it? Using protection, domination and validation as a guide, I've got a hunch. I suspect adult masculinity protects through strength and service. I'm strong for

myself when I man up and take responsibility for my choices instead of blaming others or my external circumstances. I'm strong for others when I keep my commitments and when my word becomes a rock others can stand on. I'm of service to myself when I'm brave enough to ask for what I want, which includes asking others for help when I need it. I'm of service to others when I contribute to communities and principles that matter to me.

With regard to domination, a dominant adult masculinity is not macho or tyrannical. Boys are macho and tyrannical. Adult masculinity dominates through a willingness to show up, play big and be fierce. I show up when I participate with passion, speak my truth and present others with the real me instead of the version I want others to see. I play big when I open myself to feeling the ecstasy of extravagant joy no matter who is watching. I am fierce when I face the demons that prevent me from living the life I want.

Once we tap into our adult masculinity, we know it to be valid. We don't need it confirmed by others, because we trust it. We feel it in our gut, in our heart and in our balls. But manhood doesn't happen by itself. It requires active intervention with the support of a community of men. In tribal cultures today and throughout recorded history, men would come together to initiate boys into their adult masculinity. Initiated boys would learn how to receive emotional nourishment from other men. They would learn how to experience their fierceness and wild energy as something capable of more than destruction. We have no such initiations in mainstream culture today. No masculine mentorship. We put our biological grandfathers in retirement homes, and we render our gay elders invisible because we have no sexual use for them. Even if we were in a relationship with them, they are likely just as separated from their adult masculinity as we are. To compensate, we gravitate towards substitutes. We join gangs and fraternities. We enter tribes united by steroids, meth or circuit DJs. Or perhaps we isolate ourselves, shut ourselves down emotionally or distract ourselves with addictive substances or behaviors.

I'm calling on gay men to awaken. I certainly need to. Once we become aware of what our hearts are yearning for, we can finally start nourishing ourselves. I believe one major area of our malnourishment is a connection to our healthy, whole, adult masculinity. If you feel the same way, I'm here to support you.

Justin Natoli is a psychotherapist at the Foundry Clinical Group in Beverly Hills. He is a registered marriage and family therapy intern (IMF #75892), and his supervisor is Aaron Alan, LMFT, CSAT. To schedule an appointment with Justin, contact him at Justin@foundryclinicalgroup.com