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A

**A Guide
to True
Masculine
Power**

MAN

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sounds true
BOULDER, COLORADO

Contents

INTRODUCTION	True Masculine Power . . .	xiii
	Softening Does Not Necessarily Mean Emasculation	
	Shame Left Unattended Is Shame That Runs Us	
	Shame, Aggression, and Sex	
	Toward True Masculine Power	
PART I Orientation and Groundwork		
CHAPTER 1	Tarzan Must Also Weep: Manhood ReEnvisioned . . .	3
	Longing to Belong	
	When Power Gets Derailed	
	Sex as an Initiation into Manhood	
	Neither Rejecting nor Succumbing to the Dark Side of Male Power	
CHAPTER 2	Navigational Pointers: Things to Consider for the Journey . . .	15
	Shame	
	Vulnerability	
	Empathy	
	Emotional Literacy	
	Turning <i>toward</i> Your Pain	
	Distinguishing between Anger and Aggression	
	Distinguishing Thought from Feeling	
	There's More to Sex than Meets the Eye	
	Connecting the Dots between Your Past and Present	
	De-Numbing	
CHAPTER 3	Working with Shame: From Humiliation to Humility . . .	29

Signs That Shame Is Present
Healthy and Unhealthy Expressions of Shame
Getting Better Acquainted with Your Shame
Shame and Performance
Shame and Aggression
Disempowering Your Inner Critic
How to Work with Your Shame

CHAPTER 4 **Bringing Your Shadow Out of the Dark:
Facing What You've Disowned in Yourself . . . 45**
Facing Your Shadow
Practice: Getting More Familiar with Your Shadow
Cultivating Intimacy with Your Shadow

CHAPTER 5 **The Gift of Challenge:
An Edge That Can Bring Out Your Best . . . 55**
Being at Your Edge
Cutting through Your Illusions
Challenge as a Relational Practice

PART II Power and the Modern Man: Anger, Aggression, and the Hero

CHAPTER 6 **Fighting for Power:
From Overpowering to Empowering . . . 69**
Fight Club: Meeting Masculinity in the Bare-Knuckled Raw
A Deeper Empowerment

CHAPTER 7 **Anger: Tending the Fire . . . 79**
Anger and Aggression Are Not the Same Thing!
Shifting from Aggression to Healthy Anger
Reactive Anger
Being Vulnerable in Your Anger
Four Approaches to Working with Anger
Practice: Anger-In, Anger-Out, Mindfully Held Anger,
and Heart-Anger

CHAPTER 8 **Aggression Unveiled:
When You Shift into Attack Mode . . . 95**

- Aggression as Instinct
- Aggression as Social Construction
- The Many Faces of Aggression
- Antidotes to Aggression
- An Integrative View of Aggression

- CHAPTER 9 Violence: The Brass Knuckles of Aggression . . . 109
 - A History of Violence
 - How We Relate to Our Violence
 - The Many Faces of War
 - Working with Violence

- CHAPTER 10 The Hero: Courage, Pride,

and Embodying Your Natural Heroism . . . 125
 - Heroism in *Avatar*: A Full-Blooded Awakening
 - Courage: Having the Heart to Persist Regardless
 - of Your Fear
 - Keeping a Compassionate Eye on Your Pride
 - The Presence and Evolution of the Hero
 - The Anti-Hero
 - The Hero as Human

- PART III Relational Intimacy**

- CHAPTER 11 Clearing the Relationship Hurdle:

Some Preparatory Considerations . . . 147
 - The Vulnerability and Challenges of Relating

- CHAPTER 12 Relational Intimacy for Men: Relationship

as a Sanctuary for Transforming Your Life . . . 153
 - Essential Steps to Authentic Intimacy

- CHAPTER 13 Deep Communication: When Dynamic

Receptivity and Expression Work Together . . . 165
 - The Way Back to Connection
 - Deep Listening

- CHAPTER 14 Fighting *for* the Relationship:

Transitioning to Shared Power . . . 173

- CHAPTER 15 What Women Need from Men:
An Invitation to Be a Full Partner . . . 177
- CHAPTER 16 Gay Men: Outsiders No Longer . . . 185
- CHAPTER 17 Deep Connection: Foundational
Practices for Intimate Relationship . . . 193

PART IV Sex

- CHAPTER 18 Eros Illuminated:
An Introductory Look at Sexuality . . . 201
- CHAPTER 19 Sex Uncovered: Freeing Your Sexuality from
the Obligation to Make You Feel Better . . . 205
The Selling of Sex
The Language of Sex
Bringing Sex Out of the Closet
- CHAPTER 20 Eroticitis: Obsessive or Compulsive Interest
in Sexual Activity and Possibility . . . 213
Eroticitis and Sexual Excitation
Sex without Eroticitis
- CHAPTER 21 Eroticizing Our Wounds: Acting Out
Old Hurt through Sexual Channels . . . 217
Why the Eroticizing of Our Wounds Gets Little Recognition
How the Eroticizing of Our Unresolved Hurt Happens
What Our Sexual Fantasies Dramatize
- CHAPTER 22 Pornography Unplugged:
Understanding and Outgrowing Porn . . . 225
Pornography Illuminated
The Price of Being Possessed by a Pornographic Mindset
Facing the Pain That Drives Us toward Pornography
Outgrowing Pornography

- CHAPTER 23 Taking Charge of Your Charge:
Responsibility and Sexual Arousal . . . 235
- CHAPTER 24 The Penis: A Sensitive Topic . . . 241
- CHAPTER 25 Breasts: Mammary Mania . . . 247
How the Original Appeal of Breasts Gets Eroticized
When Breast Fantasies Are Stripped of Their Eroticism
Moving beyond Breast Fixation
- CHAPTER 26 Fully Facing Rape . . . 257
Do All Men Have an Inner Rapist?
The Issue of Consent
Cutting the Ties to Rape
- CHAPTER 27 Ecstatic Intimacy in the Raw: Awakened Sex . . . 269

PART V Wrapping Up

- CHAPTER 28 Full-Spectrum Healing:
Bringing Together All That You Are . . . 275
When Your Past Occupies Your Present
Integrating Body, Mind, Emotion, Psyche, and Spirituality
Embodying Wholeness
- CHAPTER 29 The Passage to Authentic Manhood:
Your Flaws No Longer in the Way . . . 285
- APPENDIX Having a Conscious Rant . . . 287

Acknowledgments . . . 289

About the Author . . . 291

PART I

Orientation and Groundwork

Staying present with your shame takes far more courage than converting it into aggression. Neither indulging in your shame nor avoiding it furthers the authentic warrior in you, the one who can step into the fire of deep challenge and remain present, without numbing himself or emotionally disconnecting. Being present with your shame takes guts. It also deepens your capacity for vulnerability and compassion, and therefore also your capacity for being in truly intimate relationship.

Tarzan Must Also Weep

Manhood ReEnvisioned

I GREW UP assuming that being a man meant looking strong and being in control, fortified against the display of any feelings that might suggest weakness or softness, as so well modeled by my father. Television gunfighters were big heroes to me, especially the ones who didn't kill unless they were drawn on first; they met every challenge with clean-cut determination, their eyes and mouths unwavering slits. How I longed to possess their expressionless resolution in the face of adversity!

My heroics got no further than gunning down Marshal Matt Dillon at the start of each episode of the television Western *GunsSmoke*. I'd stand before the black-and-white television, my prepubescent legs spread wide, my eyes narrowed, my hand menacingly hovering over my holstered toy revolver, waiting for the towering, grim-faced marshal to draw his revolver. When he did—in the prelude to each show—I'd whip out my revolver, making a sharp *kkkhh* sound to indicate the firing of my gun. Matt never fell, but I knew I'd gotten him. My mother sometimes remarked that my father resembled Matt Dillon.

But my main hero was Tarzan. He was invincible. Again and again, he'd be captured after a mighty struggle—all alone against a brutish horde—and then taken before a haughty, alien queen, who would immediately be attracted to him. And how could she not? Was he not manhood at its impeccable and brawny best? Eventually, in a packed amphitheater, before the queen and her uncouth subjects, Tarzan

would face a hulking monster of a warrior in a fight to the death. Effortlessly, he'd hoist his massive opponent overhead—the queen's breath quickening as he did so—and fling the flailing brute into the stands. Tarzan could outwrestle the mightiest gorilla. He could always, always rise to the occasion, with endlessly photogenic grace. No shame for Tarzan—he was, unlike me, established in a position where he could not be shamed.

In my adulation of Tarzan, I practiced tree jumping—leaping with outstretched hands from branch to branch of oaks and Douglas firs—and pounded my bony little chest, screaming out “Tarzan Tar-mangani!” (just as Tarzan did in the books). In his noble perfection I basked, finding a thrilling escape. Tarzan was a flawless performer, unerringly heroic. Matt Dillon and Paladin (the suave gunslinger of *Have Gun—Will Travel*) were almost as good, for they rarely failed to gun down the villains they faced each week. And something else arose in me at the same time: I began secretly cheering for the bad guys, for many of them were just as stoic and invulnerable, just as tough and manly as the good guys. I was concerned not with the morality of what was going on but with the raw power being demonstrated—and my desire to overcome or overpower my father was starting to surface more and more insistently.

By my early teens, I began to wonder why Tarzan was never shot to death, for in many episodes he had to face unscrupulous white hunters who carried guns. How could they continue to miss the ape-man? I gradually began longing for his death; his Teflon impeccability was becoming more burden to me than inspiration. Still, I clung to what he epitomized, setting excessively high standards for myself, losing myself in the excesses of performance, both academically and athletically. Tarzan's life was a myth that both enriched and impoverished me. Through him, I not only contacted my dormant courage but also made a virtue out of invulnerability.

As I navigated my gypsyish twenties, riding the testosterone express and adventuring worldwide, I didn't fully leave Tarzan behind. For a long time, I was occupied with trying to conquer my environment, both outer and inner, infusing myself with more sophisticated

versions of my Tarzanesque ethic, until an overwhelmingly painful relationship breakup in my late twenties (closely followed by my first experience in therapeutic group work) brought me to my knees with such pronounced impact—cracking my emotional armor—that I had to change course. So I started to reenter the very tenderness and softness that I had so desperately fled as a boy, rediscovering my heartland, finding and gradually embodying a power that served something deeper than my egocentric ambitions. Being vulnerable was scary, but at the same time made me feel more alive and connected, opening doors that had been closed tightly since I was a boy. And though my armoring didn't disappear, it loosened up and thinned, ceasing to be my go-to strategy whenever pain arose.

LONGING TO BELONG

When I was eighteen, my father found me a government job as a surveyor's assistant. The job was to last two weeks in Victoria, British Columbia, and then two months in the far north of Canada. It was my first paying job, other than strawberry picking. I puffed up a bit—having a job meant that I was more of a man, or so it seemed. My three coworkers were older than I, and much more worldly. They claimed they drank huge quantities of beer—frequently bragging about their prodigious barfing—and apparently had had countless girlfriends. Neither was true for me (I hadn't had a girlfriend yet nor been drunk even once), and I was unable to pretend otherwise. When we'd lounge around between work stints, sometimes for hours, I felt horrible, not knowing how to include myself in their exploit-recounting conversations. I was too fearful of their judgment to remove myself from these talks—or to even consider challenging what they were saying. I mercilessly judged myself as a weirdo, a misfit, a social failure, letting my inner critic shame-slam me.

Their bragging and snickered asides about how they'd like to “get into her pants” or about how they wouldn't “throw her out of bed for eating crackers” left me numb. The ubiquitous “her” was out of my reach. I couldn't participate in my coworkers' world any more than

I could in that of my high school friends when they would talk for hours about carburetors, mag wheels, and huge engines. I blazed with self-consciousness, my strained efforts to fit in only fanning the flames. Even so, I was determined to stick it out—was I a man, or wasn't I?

Two days before we were scheduled to fly north, a foreman, at least twice my age, approached me and, without looking at me directly, muttered, "You're canned." Before I could say anything, he turned away and left. I asked one of my coworkers what *canned* meant, and was told "fired." Fired! In shock and shame, I walked to a nearby park and sat on a bench for an hour, trying to choke back my sobs; it was the first time I'd cried since I'd entered my teens. The words "I've failed! I've failed!" pounded accusingly through me, a jackhammer refrain that hogged my attention. A short time later, I sought out the government official in charge of my job and was informed that some of my coworkers had said they could not get along with me.

My shame was immense.

What would my father say? Predictably, he was enraged, not so much at me as at the government; he, against my wishes, would have gone to see the official to try to get my job back, if I hadn't that very day found another job. His concern was not for me but for his pride—someone associated with him had conspicuously failed. I felt very unmanly, hating my vulnerability.

It was not until years later, when I'd done a substantial amount of deep emotional work, that I recognized that my vulnerability could be a source of power. Tarzan had not taught me this; nor had any of the men in my life. I saw that the strength it takes to lose face, to soften, to make room for our weaknesses is a strength truly worth cultivating—because its presence empowers us to stand our ground when we're emotionally shaken, without locking ourselves into our armor or fleeing our hearts, remaining relationally available.

WHEN POWER GETS DERAILED

Rarely are men taught that stepping into their power actually *includes* stepping into their softness and vulnerability, but such inclusion is

a central component of what constitutes real power (*power* meaning the capacity to take action). The seeking of power, especially *power-over* (whether of oneself or others), is a common trait of conventional manhood—and, at the same time, a confession of already existing powerlessness. Quite often, men pursue a sense of power, of reliable potency, through membership in a male-dominated group—be it a work crew, an army, a team, a political organization, or a bunch of friends with a common ethic. (The group need not even be a physical reality; it might be no more than a particular ideology, whether radical or conservative, materialist or spiritual, sophisticated or crude.) Such membership provides a sense of security and commonly held power. The price is steep—personal integrity usually being peripheral to fitting in—but for most, this matters little, at least at the time.

Men who thus involve themselves become “one of the boys,” which offers them a secondhand sense of power. In so doing, they get to shift much of the responsibility for themselves and their choices onto the group, just as they did in childhood when they submitted to parental expectations and regulations. So in becoming “one of the boys,” they remain firmly entrenched in the boyhood they never really grew up from, a boyhood big on doing and acting grown-up, a boyhood lacking heart and empathy, turned away from the unmanliness of softness and vulnerability.

During my midtwenties I worked on a railway labor gang in the northern steppes of British Columbia. I’d taught high school for a year (in a small coal-mining town where my teaching meditation had been banned because some parents opposed it), and wanted to try something completely different. The gang lived in train cars and worked an average of twelve hours every day. All were male. My job, which I quickly ceased to romanticize, was swinging a sledgehammer and shoveling gravel.

Most mornings I awoke with my hands cramped into rigid claws, as though gripping the shaft of an invisible sledgehammer. The gang was gripped with equal rigidity by its code of manliness: complain upon awakening (usually a chill hour before dawn), swear whenever possible, talk in an unrelentingly loud voice, slow down when the foremen were

looking the other way, show absolutely no sign of vulnerability, refer to women as sexually and brutally as possible, be tough, look tough, and talk tough. The main insult was: “Suck my cock!” In other words, “Submit!” Aggressively demanding one another’s submission masked their submission to the gang’s ethics. Alcohol was the sacrament.

One day some of the men started stoning a bear cub while others cheered them on. I watched from a distance, disgusted at them—and at myself for not stepping in to stop them. Suddenly the mother bear appeared, immediately charging the men, her teeth bared. They frantically fled, barely escaping her wrath, as I secretly cheered for her to catch a couple of them.

I remember childhood times with three or four of my friends, all boys, when I also obeyed a group ethic not to interfere with displays of cruelty. One boy would torture a cat, or mash in a snake’s head, and the rest of us would watch, transfixed, desperately trying to appear as indifferent, as manly, as possible—learning to be *bystanders* in the presence of appalling male displays of power. We expected ourselves and each other to bear these sights without showing emotion—we could laugh or joke, but only to demonstrate mastery over the situation. We watched each other for signs of shakiness or fear. Only once did I actually participate, when I helped kill a snake. I felt disgust, fear, guilt, and a brief thrill.

When I was alone, I sometimes killed tent caterpillars, ritualistically mashing their heads. I did this on my own because I feared that my friends would laugh at me—for them, caterpillar killing was unmanly, something anyone could do. In my teen years, I watched, on two or three occasions, a friend throw live mice into a running tractor engine, laughing his loud hard laugh as the engine spewed out blood and fragments of flesh. In such situations I learned to numb myself, disguising any feelings that weren’t supportive of the displayed cruelty.

When groups of males look down upon or injure that which is small and vulnerable—“boys just being boys” some would say—they’re just revealing their repression of and dissociation from that which is small and vulnerable in them. *But not to thus armor and harden oneself doesn’t necessarily propel one into authentic manhood.* The New Age male (the

postmodern or spiritualized version of the nice guy), the sensitive, readily empathetic male, often makes such a virtue out of softness and tenderness and noncompetitiveness that he becomes just as rigid as those whose hardness he deplores; he institutionalizes sensitivity and vulnerability. He can cry, he is not enemy to his helplessness, he is in touch with his softer dimensions, but he *dissociates* from his raw power, his forcefulness, his more powerful passions. He is a stranger to his guts.

Such a male tends to live from the heart up, dividing his feelings into positive and negative; much of the time he'd rather rise above his "negative" emotions, be they anger, jealousy, shame, or fear, and simply focus on his "positive" emotions. However, this only renders his love and joy and humor lukewarm, stagnating in the flatlands of overdone niceness, impoverished by the lack of force that he's enforcing from the heart down, unable to make and take a real stand.

At worst he is a pushover, a must-be-positive man presenting himself as a paragon of spiritual values, self-consciously impaled upon his high-minded standards. His model of manhood is basically a reaction to the conventional model. Both suffer from a righteously upheld repression of feeling (anger for the "sensitive" male, sadness/grief for the "insensitive" male). Both are armored, one with hardness, one with softness. Both avoid shame. Both are at war with themselves; one projects his inner conflict onto his environment, thereby disowning any responsibility for it, and the other tries to transform his inner conflict from the safety of distant sidelines, treating it as a kind of unfortunate implant, thereby disowning any responsibility for it.

But manhood is not a matter of repression, of subjugation of what we fear or don't like about ourselves, nor is it a matter of transcending such qualities. A healthy man neither hides in nor abandons his maleness. The power that comes with maleness is not his to decry or apologize for, but rather to harness, to ride, to enjoy, and to use responsibly. Claiming his full power does not make a man less of a man, but permits him to embody his real nature, in all its depth and wildness. Power asks only for a discerning hand, a taking of the reins that is both loose and firm, both fierce and gentle, both daring and tender, both muscular and sensitive.

SEX AS AN INITIATION INTO MANHOOD

What does it mean to be a man? To answer this more than superficially, a good place to begin is to explore what we were taught about it, and to what degree we absorbed—and perhaps are still absorbing—this.

One such teaching that's very pervasive equates having sex with being a man—an adult male who is still a virgin tends to be seen by other men as being less than a man (lacking as he apparently is when it comes to potency). Think of the protagonist in the film *The 40-Year-Old Virgin*, a nice but dorky guy whose buddies conspire to get him laid—as if they're doing him a huge favor, helping him make the transition from dorkdom (or the geeky fringes of emasculated living) to real manhood. As if once having had sex, he'll suddenly have the qualities of a real man.

In 1972 I was on the road (the colorful, nonconventional adventuring of which fit my notion of manhood back then) proudly carrying nothing but my backpack, spending some time in the Goreme Valley of central Turkey. From the rolling plains of the valley rose hundreds of towering stone phalluses, many thirty to forty feet high, each topped by an oval head much larger in circumference than its supporting column, all shaped by nature's hand. This thrusting landscape—a congregation of hard-ons erected by a ten-million-year infusion of cosmic Viagra—seemed to my twenty-four-year-old imagination to be on the verge of exploding, of impregnating the sky.

Within a local home a prewedding celebration, to which I'd been invited, had begun. Only men were there. With arms over each other's shoulders, we danced long and hard and noisily, eating hashish and drinking copious amounts of wine and *raki*, an industrial-strength liqueur. The groom was no more than eighteen or nineteen. Unlike the rest of us, he was wearing a suit. The bride was elsewhere, not to be seen until our celebration was over, and then only by the drunken, advice-saturated groom. When dawn came, he was expected to go to his bride and copulate with her. I imagined her fear and discomfort; I was told that she was a virgin. The groom looked ill at ease despite his alcoholic intake, his writhing hands speaking a language none seemed to hear. There was no tenderness

around him, no softness, only leers and winks and intoxicated backslapping (akin to the encouragement of the “experienced” men in *The 40-Year-Old Virgin*).

Across the groom’s face, peeking through his drunken bravado, flitted the shy smile of a little boy. He appeared eager to please his older fellows, to do whatever he had to in order to fit into their world. Finally, loudly propelled by them, he stumbled out the door to where his bride was waiting.

I was also drunk for my first sexual encounter—with a minimal depth of connection to the woman. You’re now a full-fledged member of the human race, I told myself shortly afterward, as I parachuted into sleep—now you belong, now you are a man! I felt tremendously relieved; I’d reached a goal I had long yearned for, and now that I had attained it, I felt a sense of lofty victory, as if astride the highest plateau of some great peak, not seeing that I stood only at the foot of the mountain. Through the unknowing crowds and past the oblivious buildings I walked the next morning, flushed and euphoric, a walking erection. My heady inflation didn’t last long, but it did signal an initiation that was every bit as significant for me as was the wedding celebration and its aftermath for the young Turkish groom. Not that our actions were admirable—what mattered was that we were now men, or so it seemed.

Being truly a man is not such a simple matter. It is not so much a successful meeting of cultural standards and expectations as it is an integrity-generating, compassion-deepening *outgrowing of them*, an open-eyed, fully embodied passage through the very patterns and expectations that underlie and generate each culture’s—and subculture’s—notions of manliness. Far too often, manhood gets reduced to obedience to a group ethic, in order to be “one of the boys” (an unwittingly telling phrase). Such initiations, whatever their defining rituals, can dumb men so far down that it looks like up to them, especially when their behavior snares the rest of the group’s approval. When sex is reduced to a display of power or a sign that one is indeed a man, all involved are impoverished, and whatever underlies such “prowess” is left unexamined.