



What is healthy masculinity?

by Rick Belden

Over the last few years, I've seen more attempts than I can remember to define what constitutes appropriate and proper (often characterized as "healthy") manhood and masculinity. Some of these efforts are clear, grounded, and helpful. Some are well-intentioned but misguided and/or misinformed. Others appear to be driven primarily by sociopolitical motivations, and in far too many cases, by an ongoing effort to demonize men, masculinity, and male power as inherently flawed, bad, evil, wrong, "toxic", etc. Masculinity is seen as a source of problems and therefore must be restricted, restrained, and if possible, eliminated, with corresponding retraining of men to rid them of their innately troublesome nature (e.g., the widespread "Teach men not to rape" meme).

One of the most prevalent and pervasive themes I've seen on this subject typically goes something like this:

Healthy masculinity is defined by how a man treats women.

This could not be more wrong.

Healthy masculinity is defined, first and foremost, by the nature of a man's relationship with himself. He must know, understand, and be in conscious, ongoing relationship and dialog with:

- his wounds
- his history
- his needs

- his anger
- his sadness
- his grief
- his joy
- his strengths
- his weaknesses
- his purpose in life
- his shadow
- his power

A man's relationship to his own power is a critical element of a mature, healthy masculinity, and that relationship can be a tricky and difficult one for some men. The primal aspect of male power can be very intimidating, especially for men who spent their boyhoods with men who abused or avoided their own power. But true manhood is not possible without acceptance, application, and mastery of one's own power, in whatever forms are unique and appropriate for the individual.

Owning and applying one's power in a mature, healthy way carries with it the responsibility of owning the outcomes of doing so, both positive and negative. It also requires setting boundaries for what is and what is not within the scope of one's responsibility. A man must be willing to take responsibility for his own actions and inactions, his own successes and failures, without assuming responsibility for the actions, inactions, successes, and failures of others, however much he might feel pressured to do so.

Any man who defines himself primarily in terms of something external to himself (other people, objects, job, etc.) is in for a world of trouble. A man who regularly gives women's needs higher priority than his own is going to wind up very lost and very angry at some point in his life. He will then direct the effects of his suffering at himself, at those around him, or both.

A man will generally treat others, over the long term, only as well as he treats himself. A man who is in healthy relationship with himself will treat others (women, children, and animals as well as other men) with the same respect, consideration, and understanding he allows himself, and all of it will be coming from a place of authentic inner abundance rather than from a need to impress or meet external expectations.

It's hard for me to imagine the same folks who espouse the "Healthy manhood is defined by how a man treats women" approach flipping the genders and saying "Healthy womanhood is defined by how a woman treats men." Healthy relationship between men and women will not come by requiring one gender (male) to elevate the other (female) above itself. What we should be aiming for is parity and partnership. Telling boys and men that the number one priority in their lives should be the needs of girls and women takes all of us in the opposite direction.

The “Healthy masculinity is defined by how a man treats women” approach essentially says that healthy, appropriate, mature masculine identity is to be determined on a performance basis by women, according to standards that would no doubt vary from time to time and woman to woman. This is a blueprint for confusion and frustration on the part of both men and women. Women cannot define masculinity for men, nor should they be expected to, any more than men can, or should be expected to, define the feminine for women.

The true source of healthy masculinity is within each man. It is waiting for him in his mind, his heart, and his body. It speaks to him in his dreams, his daydreams, and his fantasies. The pathways that can lead him to it are ancient and well-traveled by his ancestors. It is a journey that has been taken countless times over countless centuries, but it begins anew with the life of every newborn boy who enters this world. Let’s give each boy and each man the tools, the knowledge, the encouragement, and the freedom to take that journey in his own way, at his own pace. That is the one and only way that healthy masculinity will truly manifest and express itself in our world.

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Rick Belden is a respected explorer and chronicler of the psychology and inner lives of men. His book, [Iron Man Family Outing: Poems about Transition into a More Conscious Manhood](#), is widely used in the United States and internationally by therapists, counselors, and men’s groups as an aid in the exploration of masculine psychology and men’s issues, and as a resource for men who grew up in dysfunctional, abusive, or neglectful family systems. His second book, [Scapegoat’s Cross: Poems about Finding and Reclaiming the Lost Man Within](#), is currently awaiting publication. He lives in Austin, Texas.

More information, including excerpts from Rick’s books, is available on his [website](#) and [blog](#). You can also find him on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), and [YouTube](#).