

Chapel Talk  
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### A Celebration of Boyhood

As a teacher and now as a mother of a boy, I am acutely interested in understanding my opposite sex, especially because I have the responsibility of raising a boy who one day I want him to be a good and conscientious friend, boyfriend, husband and father.

It is without denial that gender differences exist and are obvious even to a three year old. As appropriate to his developmental stage, self-awareness and awareness of others, Gabriel has started to ask and point at those differences. At first a common question and now a triumphant discovery, he often affirms, "Gabriel, Papi and Clive tienen pipi, y mami no." "Gabriel, Papi and Clive have a pipi and mami does not." As he continues to grow older, he will find many other differences. And it is in that process that I find great danger because I would like him to grow up with a strong sense of true manhood and humanness.

Although physical differences are evident, there are other distinctions that are made believed as ultimate truths by culture and media. From their perspective, men and women's characters and values shed such different light, as if the possibility of intersection is an anomaly. One does not have to look far and hard to find adjectives that define manhood such as athletic, strong, unfaithful, independent, aggressive, and money provider. Many politicians, mega rich athletes and actors, as well as common citizens come to mind. They fill the pages of newspapers, magazines and capture the images in popular movies. Philip Roth in his novel *Portnoy's Complaint* summarizes it with two sharp words when Alexander in conversation with his psychologist says: "Doctor, I can't take it anymore being frightened like this over nothing. Bless me with manhood! Make me brave and strong!" Roth points to the ultimate "meaning of manhood"- the disdain of emotions.

Psychologist Robert Brannon has identified four components of the dominant traditional male role in the rules that define how a man is supposed to behave. The first rule, "no sissy stuff," refers to the shame attached to the behavior that appears feminine or "emotional." The second rule - "be a big wheel" - speaks to the historical model of fatherhood of economic provider, success and status. The third rule is that a man also has to "be a sturdy oak"

suggesting “toughness, confidence and self-reliance.” The last and fourth rule is “give ‘em hell” to create an impression of aggression, violence and daring. (Kimmel, Michael *The History of Men*)

We know that historically, these markers of manhood have developed in direct correlation to family structure, economic and social expectations throughout centuries. Koran Tanfer and Frank Mott indicate that the western socialization of boys and the societal expectation of men are cemented in the model of fatherhood throughout time. They argue that in the agrarian model, fathers assumed the domestic control over their children, “defining and supervising the children's development and moral upbringing.” With the shift away from an agrarian to an industrial mode of production, the paternal control over children began to erode. As men's economic roles increasingly drew them outside the home and into the market place, women extended their sphere of domestic influence (Filene, 1986; Lasch, 1977).” The shift in the paradigm was from fathers as moral overseers into fathers as role models. This meant that although fathers still had the disciplinarian role, the close emotional bond with their children was disappearing. “The father now derived his status from the outside world, from his place in the market place. His occupational standing, his economic power established not only his authority in the home, but his worthiness as a husband and father as well. With this movement from ascribed value to achieved value throughout the nineteenth century, an erosion in the role of the father began and thus the birth of the rough, confident, strong, unattached and aggressive image of manhood. (Kimmel, Michael *The History of Men*).

Although some of these descriptors of manhood are positive and wonderful - who wouldn't want to be confident, strong and successful? – my worry is the perception that it is by nature that boys and men are rough, unattached and aggressive. As mentioned above, we know that historical circumstances have shaped that image, but many psychologists, such as Michael Thompson and Dan Kindlon, argue that such behavior comes from the fact that many boys at home and at schools are denied expressing and exploring their inner selves, their emotions and values attached to those emotions. What the historical and cultural construction of “manhood” tries to cover is the “internal life” of boys and men. Emotions such as kindness, respect, communication, empathy, and affection are descriptors more commonly associated to women. But, as we all know, whether we try to hide it or not, we all as humans have emotions, and a long range of them.

Two role models who publicly and gracefully display the traditional expectations of men and the emotional courage are two of many favorite athletes. It is not a surprise to many that I am

obsessed with the best tennis players of today: Nadal and Federer. Of course they are great looking and widely athletic and have achieved a huge economic success, but what I am most obsessed about is how they live their lives. On and off court, these two athletes are the epitome of grace, kindness and respect. Tennis can be the perfect stage for self-centered, ego-hungry, angry and frustrated athletes. However, the rivalry of Nadal-Federer exemplifies the emotional courage that our western culture fears so much from men. Perhaps the best moment that captures their relationship was at the Championship match in Wimbledon 2008. Federer was number one and Nadal number two. Nadal had never won Wimbledon but had just won the French Open for the fourth time in a row and was trying to achieve the rare French Open-Wimbledon double, extremely difficult because the player has to make the switch from a slow clay surface to a fast grass surface and be the best on both courts within the space of a month. Federer had won it for the last 5 consecutive years and was hoping to continue a record of 40 victories in a row at the All England Club, and a record 65 in a row on grass.

An obviously important match for both, Nadal won it in the 5<sup>th</sup> set 9-7 in the longest final of Wimbledon history at that time. After receiving his second place trophy, Federer could not contain his emotions and tears ran down his face, and he had a very hard time speaking. Yet, with the outmost respect for his opponent, he said, "I have tried everything. Rafa's a deserving champion. He just played fantastically." These were tears of defeat, exhaustion and disappointment, but he never apologized for his emotional display in perhaps one of the most viewed matches in tennis. In his kind words and emotions, Federer redefined for many confidence, bravery and strength. And there stood Nadal, who could have been celebrating in front of his vanquished opponent, could have been smiling and oblivious, and had almost earned the right to be that way. Instead Nadal ducked his head, waited for Federer to finish his words and then said "It's impossible to explain how I feel. It's a dream. I never imagined I would win this tournament. It's very tough to play Roger - especially here - he is excellent when he wins and when he loses. He is the best player in history" and went on to add, "Roger won here for five years...he's still the No. 1. He's still the best. He's still five-time champion here. Right now I have one." Understanding his opponent and friend's frustration, Nadal's humbleness and grace allowed him to refrain from celebrating his incredible victory.

I do not have to go too far to find very similar displays of affection, kindness and grace. As part of this community, I see and experience the emotional courage by many of you boys. I have seen success, bravery, strength, love, kindness and graciousness redefined in classes, on dorm, in the fields, in the dining hall and in my own home. The examples are many, but two

come vividly to me. Before the start of the school year, senior leaders discussed positive and meaningful student leaders in their previous years. I have never seen so many bright eyes and eloquent descriptions when these senior leader boys talked about a particular senior on dorm when they were freshmen. What was so incredibly powerful and successful about this senior was that he was emotionally involved in the lives of most of the boys in his dorm. He did not play favorites; he left his door opened for all to come and chat with him, and they kept coming back to him because he was kind and a great listener. He cared about the trivial and important events, the ups-and-downs and created a safe space where no one needed to hide their emotions. All mattered to him because he understood at his young age the sense of responsibility and nurture necessary for his dorm to live with courage. In paraphrased words of Sam Lee, the leadership displayed was that of “inconsequential and repetitive acts of kindness.”

The best testament to the powerful emotional teaching that this particular student did is how many of your senior boys display acts of kindness, nurturing and responsibility to our children and one another. From playing with the children in the dining hall, the front lawn and at homes, to telling them stories, bathing them and tucking them into bed, you exercise and teach empathy, kindness and respect. These “inconsequential and repetitive acts of kindness” might go unnoticed to you, but believe we as parents and adults watch and appreciate your true selves.

As friends, teammates, roommates, classmates, you also display similar acts of kindness when someone had a bad practice, game, is sick, has a problem, has made a mistake or has achieve great victory. Whether you realize it or not, you are the generation that is shifting the paradigm of manhood and fatherhood to an even stronger, better-rounded and healthier definition. And I am ever so lucky that my son has great role models in you.