

## Modern Fatherhood

A quick disclaimer before I begin, I am a cis white man married to a cis white woman, and much of my talk today will be in binary terms. That is not an endorsement of the gender binary, but rather a framework for discussion.

“Men are from Mars and women are from Venus.” And that concludes my platform today...

I remember that from when I was a kid; I’m sure many of you do as well. A sort of childish rhyme that, as I recall, had some... colorful flourishes about the nature of men and women. Completely lost on me at the time was what seems now like a pretty obvious reference to Mars and Venus, the Roman gods of war, and love and beauty, respectively. I don’t think it takes too much high-brow reasoning to discern what this refrain is trying to say about the nature of men and women. Men are violent, and brutish, while women are soft, and beautiful. Maybe you can see where I’m intending to go here, since that stereotype is so obviously out-dated.

This rhyme, though, is an example of cultural grooming, preparing young children for their future gender roles... which we will then spend a lifetime trying to break. Even in progressive communities like ours, where we reject the gender binary and embrace non-traditionalism, these stereotypes are difficult to break, if we even notice them at all. We see it in behavioral outcomes like child-rearing, jobs and hobbies, the clothes we wear. We see it in the gender pay gap. We see it in elected office.... all of which are reinforced by societal norms. And as much as we’d like to pretend it isn’t, it’s here at WES too. It’s in *our* behaviors, *our* words, *our* paraverbals... even as we work toward a more egalitarian community. We know from published research on

childhood development that children as young as 3-5 already know these norms. Dr. Niobe Way, a social researcher and author of the book *Deep Secrets*, tells a story from her research about a 4 year old boy who happened to be friends with the girls in his preschool class. The boy was adamant with Dr. Way that she not let the other boys know of his friendships with the girls because the boys wouldn't want to play with him anymore. From that early of an age, 4 years old, she goes on to say, young boys begin to restrict themselves from deep relationships—with children of all genders—until by around their teenage years, they are effectively isolated. It's no wonder we see higher rates of depression, interpersonal violence, and suicide.

What I want to talk about today is a journey I've been on for the last year and a half or so. I have been involved in a men's group—all fathers—who want to be more connected and engaged with their families and communities. The problem is, many men, many fathers in our society, don't know how to engage in a way that truly makes them feel connected. Our group was 8 men who knew they were missing something, but didn't know how to get there, or even where 'there' is. During our weekly zoom calls, we followed a guided journey, modeled on the classical 'hero's journey' to identify our unhelpful habits, where they may have come from, and tools to improve ourselves through mindfulness and holding each other accountable. You quickly... and I mean *very* quickly... you find that at the root of many of the challenges we were facing is INTEGRITY. By that, I don't mean what we commonly understand as 'doing the right thing when nobody is looking'—though that is certainly a part of it when working on ourselves—but rather the more Socratic definition of integrity, where all parts of a system work the way they are intended. That means honesty with ourselves and others, it means holding confidence within the group, it means being our authentic selves. It means building a culture around us that supports all those elements.

One of our commitments we organically came to during our sessions was that we would not only work to better ourselves, but to call out toxicity in our own lives and communities, particularly at times that we would normally have just let it go.

The founder of the group, a now good friend of mine, Dr. Jason Frishman, has worked as a clinical psychologist and counselor for men and men's issues for over 25 years. One of the things he says frequently when talking about men's work and fatherhood in particular, is that it is a revolutionary act in an age of hypermasculinity and toxic masculinity to embrace all aspects of our humanity, including those "soft" aspects that are often assigned as feminine. He says, "boys who are hurt, turn into fathers who hurt." Without embracing our full humanity, boys and men fail to develop as full humans. Men who are—say—sad, often don't have the skills or tools to effectively cope in a prosocial way, and may lash out in anger... an inappropriate and sometimes dangerous response. More like a trapped animal than a sentient being. Perhaps they self-medicate to suppress those feelings, which actually further exacerbates their internal distress.

I think many of us know people like that. Perhaps were raised by people like that. In my experience within the military, toxic masculinity and hypermasculinity are everyday things. Shocking, I know. But through my journey with men's work, I have begun to allow myself to not only recognize those behaviors in myself and others, but begin to challenge them, head on. And here's the part that surprised me... when you cut through the facade, most of those 'hypermasculine' men are softies. And they **respect** you for cutting through. Fundamentally, men *want* those 'softer' sides of humanity in their lives because we innately feel that emotional need. The challenge is cutting through the masks we wear—without judgment—to present opportunities for growth... to make men feel whole.

So what does it mean to be a father today? How about 20 years ago? 50 years? 70? I think most people would agree that fatherhood—the nature of being a father—probably hasn't changed much over the last several generations, what I'll call living memory, but our cultural context has changed significantly. Societal expectations for fathers have changed, and that drives behavior. It's probably for the better during our living memory... for the most part, anyway. But I feel that we are at a sort of crossroads right now where we are collectively **aware** of toxic masculinity, but societally unsure of what to **do** about it, and that makes our future uncertain. As a veteran, I'm particularly sensitive to some displays of toxic masculinity, which are often conflated with hyper-patriotism, what I would call borderline or out-right nationalist. Surely, we saw it on January 6th. Honestly we see it every day... and don't call me Shirley.

For veterans, it is reinforced by over 20 years of constant war in the Middle East, these men... and women too... see a man's role in the family and community as a stoic warrior, immune from emotion, ready to fight at a moment's notice [in defense of his loved ones and principles]. Me being me, I call bullshit. I see someone deeply hurting, looking for an outlet. Honestly, I pity those guys because they lack the ability to be introspective enough to see that they aren't angry, they're hurt. Veterans returning from war, I would submit, are almost all suffering from some degree of PTSD, whether it's diagnosed or not. But how does that explain non-veterans behaving in the same manner? My view: it's an over-reaction to the shame of the Vietnam-era, when drafted service members were booed and spit on when they returned home to the US. It's underscored every time a professional sports team plays that damn Lee Greenwood song and makes everyone stand up to applaud some service member; or even every time you tell someone "thank you for your service", not knowing

what in the hell that means. We, as a society, reward those behaviors, and are thereby saying it's ok, and even good, to be that brutish man in the mold of Mars.

But remember, patriarchy doesn't care about men either. Reinforcing those 'hard' attributes of humanity in men forces us—collectively—to balance by forcing the 'soft' feminine attributes in women. I think, here at WES, we recognize this and largely take a very progressive approach to things like gender roles. But consider this... as we take affirmative steps toward egalitarianism and fathers are spending more time with their kids (a good thing), they don't necessarily know what to do, and may be causing more harm unintentionally than they otherwise would have. This is what I mean when I say we're at a crossroads... a sort of generational turnover.

So what do we do? Smash the patriarchy, right? In more tangible terms, I offer that this means that men, particularly fathers, need to put in the work to learn about patriarchy, to learn about systemic oppression, and learn about emotional labor. Then they—we—need to work on forming those relationship bonds we've been conditioned to avoid... and it's hard, it takes time; it takes vulnerability that we are conditioned not to show. It takes accountability from each other and the community, and an open mind to avoid defensiveness that leads to the pendulum swinging the other way. It takes patience from our partners who are 'used' to dealing with us the way we have been, and an allowance that we may (read: we will) make mistakes and sometimes fail. It takes community involvement, because we aren't just raising our own children, we are all raising our community's children.

So let me ask, speaking to those who identify as fathers: where can you become a father at WES? Where can you be engaged in SEEK,

or Teen Group. When can you communicate with staff as a father, rather than as a disgruntled congregant? Where can you serve the best interests of the community, rather than simply serving your own? As a father of two adolescent children, the way I look at it, in 20 or 30 years from now, what is going to be the most impactful to as many people as possible here at WES?

I'm going to go off script here a minute...

Look y'all, I get that the gas stove in the kitchen has pilot lights that are continuously on, but we—as a community—don't have investment in that. We do, however, have investment in the little free library out front. Our teen group was thriving; they had monthly waffle bars to raise money to buy it. They painted it, sourced books, took care of it because it was their own. That library was destroyed in December 2020 by a white nationalist mob, and in over 2 and a half years, nobody has said or done anything about fixing it. If I'm a teenager, why would I want to give up my only real day off every week to come to a place that doesn't value me? It is our job to be fathers to our community first. What does it say to prospective members or parents about WES's lived values that we can't have a full SEEK program because we don't have enough volunteers? I'd say, "come to stone soup". Jeff Mehall owns that rodeo. He gets community involvement; teens come help cook and serve; everybody brings something and we all sit down together as a community that values each other. Thanks, Jeff, for being a father to WES.

Dr. Frishman likes to say that "men's work is revolutionary work", and I believe him, because any time we buck the status quo, not by force or bullheadedness, but through our own vulnerability, it is a radical act. Dr. Frishman's website and contact information was published in News and Notes this week, and I'll plug it again before I end here. The website is [JourneymenFoundation.com](http://JourneymenFoundation.com), and many of his talks

and interviews are available on Youtube, just search for Jason Frishman and you'll find them. Likewise, if you identify as a mother and this topic resonates with you, I suggest a google search for 'Revolution from Home', headed by Beth Berry. She has a similar approach to topics surrounding motherhood which, while notably different from fatherhood for some obvious reasons, has significant overlap.

Does this remind you of your own experience, or your partner, or someone you know? Luckily, I know a guy. During community sharing here in a bit, I would really love to hear from those who don't identify as a father to share your thoughts and areas where you would like to see the dads of WES show up.

Ok, I sense that some of you were expecting a dad joke today. When I was writing this, my wife said the same thing, and said it was a mistake to not include one. I told her that in the spirit of vulnerability we need to lean into and embrace our mistakes, so she gave me a hug. But not to disappoint, here's one I heard recently... How does a non-binary ninja attack its enemies? They slash them.