

Boxed in: the fragility of men

Unearthing the roots of misogyny and violence against women in this post-#MeToo era, a writer examines the damage caused by the loss of men's feminine sides – and the role fathers can play.

By David Leser

Eve Ensler, the American author of the era-defining stage play *The Vagina Monologues*, had every reason to fear and despise men, and to be reluctant to hear what ails them; from a young age, she was beaten, bruised, choked and nearly murdered by her father. Yet her efforts to survey the ruined landscape of female suffering – visiting rape camps, establishing safe houses for women across the world, creating a global movement to stop violence against women (first V-Day, then One Billion Rising) – ultimately took her into the heart of male darkness.

In her 2006 book *Insecure at Last*, she described meeting a soldier in Kosovo in the late 1990s who seemed both physically and mentally paralysed. His name was Agrim.

“He looked at me, threw his arms around my neck, and started weeping,” she wrote. “No, it was more like wailing. I have never heard a sound like that. He would not let go. Then his weeping wailing began to build and release. It could not be controlled or stopped. It resounded through the neighbourhood. People from the village began to gather around. I held on to Agrim, but, honestly, I wanted him to stop. All these years I had told myself I wanted men to be vulnerable, to have their feelings, to cry. All of a sudden it felt like a lie. I did not want this man to be so destroyed, so out of control. I wanted him to have answers and be tough and know the way and make everything work out.”

Ensler understood how part of her was terrified of men being lost, how she needed them to be tough and assured. She also understood how many years she'd been carrying men's “invisible pain” in order not to see their weakness or shame. Holding Agrim in her arms, “this weeping liquid man” – as she described him – was her undoing, pulling her “out to sea in the wild waves of his crying”.

“It was as if I were holding the secret story of men in my lap,” she wrote. “Centuries of male sorrow and loss, centuries of unexpressed worry and doubt, centuries of pain. I suddenly understood violence and war. I understood retaliation and revenge. I understood how deep the agony is and how its suppression has made men into other things. I understood that these tears falling down Agrim's face would have become bullets in any other case, hardened drops of grief and rage directed toward a needed enemy. I saw how in fighting to live up to the tyranny of masculinity, men become driven to do anything to prove they are neither tender, nor weak, nor insecure. They are forced to cage and kill the feminine within their own beings and consequently the world.”

I first read this passage more than a decade ago, and the words have remained with me. That's partly because they were delivered by a strong feminist, but also because they spoke to what it is in men that causes them to inflict such monumental hurt on women, other men, children and themselves. *They are forced to cage and kill the feminine within their own beings and consequently the world.*

Carl Jung, the Swiss psychoanalyst renowned for his theory of the collective unconscious, called this feminine within a man the anima – the “unconscious woman” that contains all the feminine personality qualities inside a man that can either be expressed, if allowed, or repressed and removed. These are the qualities of tenderness, compassion, vulnerability, friendship, relatedness, creativity, imagination and intuition.

Conversely, he called the masculine within a woman the animus – the “unconscious man” that holds the archetypal masculine traits of courage, assertiveness, analytical thought, decisiveness and a drive for achievement. (The Chinese describe this polarity as yin and yang, the complementary female and male principles operating in nature.) In Jung's world view, all of us carry these archetypal qualities inside us – feminine and masculine – but from childhood we create gender identities and roles, consciously or unconsciously, to conform with the often-crippling sexual stereotypes society imposes.

Girls wear pink, and isn't that a pretty dress? Boys wear blue and play with Lego and trucks, and aren't you strong? Women are nurturers. Men are providers. Women are sensitive. Men are tough. We all know the drill; and we all know that identity politics today is, in part, a furious backlash to these oversimplified and limiting concepts. For men, these stereotypes are particularly destructive, as Tony Porter, an internationally recognised American author and educator, pointed out in his inspirational 2010 TED talk in Washington DC. “I grew up in New York City, between Harlem and the Bronx. Growing up as a boy, we were taught that men had to be tough, had to be strong, had to be courageous, dominating, no pain, no emotions, with the exception of anger, and definitely no fear,” he said. “[We were taught] that men are in charge, which means women are not; that men lead, and you [women] should just follow and just do what we say. That men are superior and women are inferior; that men are strong, that women are weak. That women are of less value, property of men, and objects, particularly sexual objects.”

Porter later came to describe this collective socialisation as the “man box”, a term first coined by Paul Kivel in his 1992 book, *Men's Work: How to Stop the Violence That Tears Our Lives Apart*. This “man box” contained all the ingredients for how men came to define their masculinity. Some of those ingredients, Porter said, were “absolutely wonderful”, others were so “twisted” that it required deconstructing and redefining the very concept of manhood. Porter used his own parenting to illustrate the point. When his daughter Jay was little, she could come crying to him anytime she liked and Porter would comfort her.

“Daddy’s got you,” he’d say. With his son Kendall, the opposite was true. Whenever he heard him cry, a clock would start ticking in his head. His son had about 30 seconds to stop before he’d start saying to him, “Why are you crying? Hold your head up. Look at me. Explain to me what’s wrong. I can’t understand you.” And then through sheer frustration, together with a sense of responsibility for building his son into a “man”, Porter would say, “Just go to your room. Go on, go to your room. Sit down, get yourself together and come back and talk to me when you can talk to me like ... a man.” His son was five years old.

Porter was mortified. “My god, what’s wrong with me?” he’d ask himself. “What am I doing? Why would I do this?” And the answer took him back to his own father.

He then related a story from his teenage years. His brother Henry had just died and the burial was being held in Long Island. Porter’s family was about to be driven home from the cemetery to the Bronx – a two-hour drive that first required a toilet stop.

“The limousine empties out,” Porter recalled. “My mother, my sister, my auntie, they all get out, but my father and I stayed in the limousine, and no sooner had the women got out, than he burst out crying. He didn’t want to cry in front of me, but he knew he wasn’t going to make it back to the city, and it was better [to have me there] than to allow himself to express these feelings and emotions in front of the women.

“And this is a man who, 10 minutes ago, had just put his teenage son in the ground, something I just can’t even imagine. The thing that sticks with me the most is that he was apologising for crying in front of me, and at the same time, he was also giving me props, lifting me up, for not crying.”

This fear of expressing emotion, of being seen as weak or feminine, Porter said, kept boys and men paralysed – just as Eve Ensler noted with her Balkan soldier, Agrim. They are held hostage inside the “man box”, from which there is often no escape.

“I can remember speaking to a 12-year-old boy, a football player,” Porter finished, “and I asked him, ‘How would you feel if, in front of all the players, your coach told you you were playing like a girl?’ I expected him to say something like, ‘I’d be sad, I’d be mad, I’d be angry,’ or something like that. No, the boy said to me, ‘It would destroy me.’ And I said to myself, ‘God, if it would destroy him to be called a girl, what are we then teaching him about girls?’”

Few men I know can speak with any abiding affection about the men who helped bring them into the world.

Perhaps as men we take our cues from our fathers. From the way they expressed – or failed to express – their emotions, weaknesses, vulnerabilities. Or the way they showed us – or failed to show us – their devotion. In that sense, I think I was lucky.

My father called me “darling” my whole life, and he always greeted and farewelled me with a kiss or a declaration of love. In our quieter moments, up until the time he died four years ago, we were always able to discuss the usual male topics of work, sport and politics, but also relationships, matters of the heart, the things that often felt unsayable. There was even a time, as an adult, when I allowed myself to cry in his arms.

That has often made me feel different from most of my male friends, because even today there are few I know who can speak with any abiding affection about the men who helped bring them into the world.

One old school friend left Australia 30 years ago, largely because of the hurt his father inflicted on him from the time he was a little boy. When he was 16, his father called the police to escort him from his home because he’d found him experimenting with cannabis. His father didn’t speak to him again for almost a decade. Five years after my friend had been banished and come to live with my family, he saw his father walking towards him down George Street in Sydney. “Hello, Dad,” he said tentatively. His father stared at him briefly, then kept walking.

Another friend was repeatedly bashed and thrown against walls as a boy when his father returned home from the pub. His mother often copped a hiding too. Yet another man I know, a carpenter with dashing good looks, warm and funny to strangers, once tied his six-year-old son to a pole and left him out in the midday sun. That was his way of teaching his little boy a lesson after the boy had said he was bored being on the building site with his dad. “I’ll show you what bored is,” he replied.

I know men (and women too, of course) whose fathers died early, or walked out on the family when they were young, never to return. I know men whose fathers were rarely, if ever, at home, so consumed were they with their work or whatever went on after work. I know men who, rather than face up to their own corporate follies or misdeeds, publicly humiliated the sons who were working for them. I know a man who still laments the fact that his father never once told him he loved him. His father is dead, but he’s still waiting.

I remember another close friend telling me how, when he turned 10, he was informed by his father that they could no longer kiss each other goodnight. “You’re a man now,” his father said. “We’ll shake hands.” My friend felt both chuffed and crestfallen by this sudden declaration. Chuffed because he’d been anointed a “man”; crestfallen because he knew something priceless had just been ripped from him.

It was 22 years before these two men would embrace again, and only because the son spontaneously pulled his father towards him one night and hugged him. “Dad, I’ve been wanting to do this for years.” The pair wept in each other’s arms.

Australian psychotherapist Steve Biddulph – author of the seminal 1997 book *Raising Boys* – has thought about these issues for almost 40 years, and he describes this sorrow for lost contact and love as “father hunger”, a term first coined by Jungian writers.

“This ‘father hunger’,” he tells me when we meet at his home in Tasmania on an afternoon of soft falling rain, “is the sorrow for lost contact and love; the simple need to be affirmed and valued by older members of one’s own gender – not just our fathers, but uncles, teachers, grandfathers, gay or straight, and of different ethnicities and natures. Each boy needs to create a masculinity that is his own, and to do that he must experience a wide range of masculinities from different kinds of men. This is especially the case when his own father is a terrible, or not very relevant, example of manhood.

“Role modelling is the way the human brain learns almost all complex behaviours, attitudes and skills, and so boys need to know good men close up. All of us are a bundle of the good people, male and female, we have known. But we have let that enrichment disappear on the male side, and many boys today have never seen what a good man looks like close up.”

Biddulph believes this is a key insight into the defective nature of male psychology, an impairment that began during the Industrial Revolution. For the first time in history, men abandoned their agricultural communities and went in search of jobs in the cities, thereby splitting their family roles between home and work. Men were no longer working alongside women and children; they were miles away in factories and mines. “In a break with eternal tradition,” Biddulph wrote in his best-selling 1994 book *Manhood*, “boys began being raised solely by women. The lack of male input into growing boys created a huge break in the family fabric, yet we adjusted to it and soon assumed it was normal. The possibility that boys might need fathering for many hours a day, not just minutes, and that uncles and grandfathers had a critical role in male mental health, was forgotten.”

For 30 years, Biddulph has travelled Australia and the world talking to men about fathering, encouraging them to become more engaged, inviting them to talk about their own boyhoods.

“When I meet with groups of young dads,” Biddulph tells me, “I conduct a survey and the results are always the same. About 30 per cent of men report that they don’t even speak to their fathers. Their relationship is non-existent. Another 30 per cent have a somewhat prickly or difficult relationship. They do sometimes spend time with their father, but it’s a painful and awkward time. Around another 30 per cent fare somewhat better – they visit their father or phone him regularly, show up for family get-togethers, go through the motions of being a good son, and yet discuss nothing deeper than lawnmowers. Fewer than 10 per cent of men are friends with their father and see the relationship as deep and sustaining. Only about one man in 10 says, ‘My father is fantastic. He’s an emotional backstop in my world.’”

By contrast, many women absorb an entirely different type of role modelling, from which they naturally develop a capacity for intimacy and connection. “They have spent hours a day, over years of their lives as girls, in deep conversation and exposure to good people of their own gender, which boys just don’t get,” says Biddulph. “As a counsellor, you find this all the time – the man just doesn’t seem to have found a voice, beyond clichés or platitudes.

And that's why men feel so liberated and alive when they start talking to other men, and find shared depth and experience.

"Women tell me, 'Finally I know what he is thinking and feeling!' And of course, a man who can express himself, and think about his inner self, is far less likely to hurt others on impulse, take his own life on impulse, or act stupidly in any number of ways."

Each culture produces its own kind of man. An Irishman is not an Indian, a man from Kansas is entirely different to one from Kenya. Men wheel prams all over Denmark, something we've only just begun to see in Australia and in this generation's Britain where, Biddulph says, a "typical British father was like a log of wood, except that from time to time, he blazed out in violent rage, or an alcoholic blur, or lashed out with a verbal coldness that made millions of sons feel that they never measured up". We know all manner of men – good men, dangerous men, corporate men, artistic men, alpha and beta men, terrifying and tender men, physical and bookish men, gregarious men, silent men, old-world men, New Age men, rescuers, narcissists, hopeless romantics, cynics ... For Biddulph, however, one of the common denominators, certainly throughout the Western world, is the correlation between the time a father spends with his children and a child's sense of self-worth.

"A father's absence from his daughter's life has been found in research to increase her chances of risky sexual behaviour, experiencing teen pregnancy, doing poorly in school. For sons, it prevents them from seeing the fullness of what it means to be a man. There is no access to the interior world of male feeling," he says. "There's been a vast improvement in this over the past 20 years because of how much time fathers are now devoting to their children. But generations of men have carried the legacy of this gaping hole."

In the early days of giving talks around the world, Biddulph noticed certain men leaving the theatre. He assumed they were bored or indifferent, or felt they had better things to do. Then, at one gathering in the British Midlands, he was told by ushers that they'd seen men leaving in tears, although who can say why. Perhaps because of the grief of their own broken relationships with their fathers. Perhaps because, as the 19th-century American poet Henry Longfellow wrote, "Often times we call a man cold, when he is only sad."

For all my father's tenderness, I still remember his often long, impenetrable silences, particularly as old age began to overwhelm him. These silences were born, I'm sure, from his troubled German youth, where he was shunned at school for being Jewish, and then force-marched through the streets of Nazi Germany and pelted with rotten fruit by jeering crowds. He never forgot the indignity of Kristallnacht, the "night of broken glass", when Jewish homes, businesses and synagogues were destroyed across the country.

My father's silences also probably mirrored his own father's, although, in my grandfather's case, this had more to do with the injuries he sustained in the trenches during World War I and then bore throughout his life with stoic acceptance.

Perhaps we all know a version of this male silence. Certainly, in the Australian context, it's easy to see how our ideas of masculinity were shaped by our felon origins for one, but also the Great War which saw hundreds of thousands of husbands, fathers, sons and brothers return home as husks of the men they'd once been – that is, if they returned home at all. Everywhere, households were enveloped by the muteness of male anguish.

"We've militarised men and commodified women for thousands of years," Biddulph tells me. "War became one of the definers of masculinity and we're still raising boys as soldiers of empire – which is why they don't cry. If we need you to go and die in the trenches of France, or in Iraq, we don't want you to complain about it. Similarly, if you're a policeman pulling bodies out of cars, or you're a surgeon tending horrific injuries, you don't want a man to burst into tears. It can be a positive thing to suppress your emotions. The problem is when it becomes a lifelong characteristic."

Biddulph describes a place in Rotorua, New Zealand, where Maori men were traditionally known to do their weeping after battle. There's a hot spring there that runs into a stream, before tumbling over a waterfall. "The Maori said this was their ritual place. They used to wash the blood off themselves there, and then do their weeping so that they could release the warrior mode. After that, they could go back to being safe, trusting men again with open hearts. We've never done that, not since World War I. And it was a century of hammer blows. We've never grieved or raged against the monumental waste, and we're now in the fourth or fifth generation since that war."

In Australia, there's also the enduring power and myth of the bush, which defined ideas of manliness for generations – squatters, soldier settlers and farmers who, alone in nature, controlled and governed themselves as they attempted to control and govern the land. It was a hard-boiled self-sufficiency, and it came at great cost, not just to the land and its original inhabitants, but to the way in which men were able – or unable – to communicate. The elemental silence of the bush seemed to find its ghostly reflection in the reserve of the men who sought to tame it.

"The bush has always been as much for hiding pathologies as repairing them," Don Watson wrote in his exquisite rendition of the Australian landscape and character, *The Bush*. "The no-speak rule of old persists. In the city, opinion corrodes the outer layer of existence; in the country it eats the inner."

All the stock definitions of masculinity prevent boys from dealing with the "storms and subtleties" inside their hearts. Only yesterday, as I wrote this, one of my oldest and dearest male friends told me that he didn't think he'd cried since he was nine years old. That's more than half a century ago. "I'm hard-wired not to cry," he said. "I was nine when my father died, and I was determined not to cry in front of my friends, or even myself. But I think by that time I'd already decided I would never cry. That's because only girls cried, so it's almost like I can't cry now. It's baked in. It would be like weeing in your pants, which is just like tears coming out the other end."

This is the suppression of pain that Eve Ensler referred to – “the caging of the feminine” – which, if unexpressed, can harden and direct its fury outwards. Quite possibly, this is the first act of violence that the patriarchy commits: a wholesale assault on the qualities of softness and vulnerability, of emotional attachment and spirit that reside inside a man. That’s the desecration of the feminine right there.

My late friend Neil Roberts spent more time than any man I’ve ever known exploring the boundaries of masculinity. As an artist and human being he was a gentle giant among men, a warm-hearted, brilliant and creative force who challenged the way we thought and felt about everyday objects and the memories they contained: a piece of wood, an old garden tool, a shard of glass, a length of rope, a bicycle wheel – all of them grist for his prodigious mill. Up until his sudden death in 2002, he was always looking for the hidden meaning of things, fragments of history, human traces that told us stories about ourselves. For one of his exhibitions, Roberts unstitched footballs, then flattened them out and re-presented them as flower petals, so that they would appear as both floral arrangements and a study of the masculine force and energy contained inside those once bloated, leathery bladders. In the late 1980s, amid the corporate madness of a Western Australian political scandal, he strung two words in neon across the Perth skyline: Tenderly, gently.

Although physically tall and imposing, Roberts was as tender and gentle a man as you could meet. In his company, men dropped their guard and women could be intimate without ever feeling threatened. He was the first man I ever knew who deliberately crossed the road at night to avoid walking behind or towards a woman on her own. Somewhere deep in his marrow, he understood women’s fear, and wanted to shoulder some of the responsibility for it.

Maybe the struggle between the sexes will never be put to rest. Maybe, in the unfathomable reaches of the male psyche, men have always been frightened of women – or at least frightened of the feminine qualities within themselves: those qualities that point inwards, to that place where our deepest feelings are lodged, but which centuries of masculine culture have repressed or removed.

Perhaps, this is the place where violence against women begins: in the shutting-down of this inner world where relationships and connection truly reside, because the models we’ve been given for manhood fail to recognise a fundamental truth, which is that nothing meaningful in life ever happens without the ability to be vulnerable.

Edited extract from Women, Men and the Whole Damn Thing by David Leser (Allen & Unwin, \$30), which is out on August 5. The book began as a Good Weekend cover story with the same title on February 9, 2018.