

**“The hurtful definition of masculinity in America can be redefined for our sons by his friends, parents, and his mentors”**

American boys learn about the world through 3 major relationships: friends, parents, and mentors. Each one has a huge amount of influence on anything from his self-worth and confidence all the way to his respect and humility. The Mask You Live In goes over the media's influence on boys, but, while still a big factor, the media does not know our sons personally and can't offer him support in the same way a friend can, or hold him the same way a parent can, or guide him the same way a mentor can.

However, our son's relationships are double edged blades. Yin and Yang. Focusing only on what we can do to help our sons solves only half the problem. We need to know where we are going wrong because somewhere along the way, a boy became 4 times more likely to commit suicide than a girl. One of the facts that The Mask You Live In presented was “As of 2014, males were four times more likely to commit suicide than their female counterparts, representing 79% of all U.S. suicides.” There needs to be a reason why. Also, understanding that there can be very serious and permanent repercussions is an important start to making a change.

But where and how can we actually make the change?

## The Friend

*'Societal norms have been around for ages and they are not going anywhere. To redefine masculinity for our sons, we need to let them know of the dangers of societal norms. A boy's friends can have the biggest impact on his perceived societal norms because what he experiences when he is not at home, such as a friend giving him a hug or helping him study, defines his perception. In The Mask You Live In, Joe Ehrmann talks about what society expects of a man. He says "masculinity is rated on a three-pronged scale of athletic ability, economic success, and sexual conquest. . . any man seen to fail in one of these areas fails as a man." A friend's most powerful tool for redefining masculinity is not to strive for or even break this ideal, but instead to work together to give it a new, personal meaning.'*

A long time ago, there was a young nobleman who lived in a castle. Whenever he got bored of being in the keep, he would walk through the slums with three beautiful women following behind him and throw gold coins at the feet of beggars just to watch them fight for it.

On one of these days he noticed one young beggar in particular who would fight for the coins and then spend every single one on medicine for his sick friend. Curious as to why anyone would do this, he approached the young beggar.

"I am the wealthiest noble of this castle," he said in a very regal voice. "I demand to know why you do not keep the gold coins for yourself."

"I must care for my neighbor for she is very sick, my lord" the young beggar explained. This intrigued the young nobleman.

"Come with me to the keep. If you do I will make sure your friend receives the medicine she needs."

The young beggar accepted the nobleman's offer and followed him to the castle keep. When they arrived, the nobleman showed the young beggar around the keep. The first room they walked into was a massive and ornate stadium for a combat arena. "Look how strong I am!" The nobleman bellowed as the young beggar observed in awe. The second room they walked into was full of young, beautiful women. "Look how loved I am!" the nobleman declared as the young beggar continued to observe in awe. The third room they walked into was the biggest room yet and was full to the brim with gold coins, precious jewels, and artifacts. "Look how rich I am!" the nobleman rejoiced as the young beggar continued to observe in awe.

After the tour concluded, the young nobleman invited the young beggar to stay for as long as he wants. Much time went by while the nobleman spent gold on fine items, bedded whichever woman he pleased, and sparred in the combat arena. Three years passed.

One day, however, the nobleman's exorbitant lifestyle caught up to him when he decided to run off with a rival king's daughter. The enraged rival king launched an attack on the castle,

and after a lengthy siege, captured it. The once rambunctious nobleman lost all of his wealth, his women, and his strength.

Under the new crown, the young beggar was thrown to the streets once again, and the nobleman was chained and left to rot in jail. The young beggar returned to his neighbor with the clothes on his back and the knowledge to not fall into the same trap as the nobleman.

“In the End, we will remember not the words of our enemies, but the silence of our friends.”  
-Martin Luther King, Jr.

Excerpts from an article by Jerry Davich on masculinity and understanding and adapting to its changing definition (10)

“Crying is still considered a fault. Vulnerability is still deemed a weakness. Backing down from a fight of any kind is still shameful. Showing a tender side is only acceptable in certain circumstances, certainly not in public. . . Such masculine behavior has been ingrained in us since birth, literally. We played with soldiers, not dolls. If we even entertained the notion of playing with dolls, we were mocked or, worse yet, excluded from boyhood perks and rituals.”

“Citing 40 years of research, the APA warns men against the “masculinity ideology,” defined as a set of standards that have held sway over large segments of men, including anti-femininity, achievement, appearance of weakness, and adventure-risk and violence. . . According to the association, conforming to the long-held social norms of this masculinity ideology can result in all kinds of emotional troubles for young boys. Such behavior can lead to the suppression of emotions, unhealthy risk-taking, inability to seek help, tendencies toward bullying and homophobic traits.”

## The Son

*'Arguably the relationship with the most influence over our sons is the one he shares with his parents, especially his father. Dr. Michael Thompson from The Mask You Live In says "Every boy measures his masculinity, at the deepest level, against his dad." The film also shares that "1 in 4 children—around 17.8 million in total—[are] being raised without a father." which is very concerning. Both parents play a big role in their son's emotional development, so parents need to listen and sympathize with their sons.'*

A long time ago, there existed a village with high walls and many warriors to protect it. The eldest child of the village's chieftain was a boy. One day, the boy explored beyond the high walls of the village. His young curiosity took him far away from his family and his neighbors. He explored the woods and the swamps and the fields and the mountains and the deserts and the rivers and the ocean.

When he returned to the village that night, he told his parents of everything he had seen and learned. He told them of the animals in the woods, and he told them how he waded through the murky waters of the swamp. He told them of the wild grass swaying in the meadow, and he told them of the view from the top of the mountain. He told them of the cacti in the desert and of the rainbow fish in the river. And he told them of the smell of the breeze from the ocean and how he thought about what was beyond it. He told them everything he could remember about his adventure.

After he was done telling his story, his father stood.

"Son, you are never allowed to leave the safety of the walls. The people of the village need to be able to trust you when you are chieftain. If you run away all the time your people will not respect you." His mother did not speak. He said, "Why can't the village respect me if I leave the protection of its walls?" His father said, "Because that is the way it is."

He stayed within the walls of the village for the next season. There was not a day that past when he was not thinking about what awaited beyond the walls. But as a young boy does, he succumbed to his curiosity once again. He escaped the confines of the village and explored as much as he possibly could. In the woods he saw a bloody struggle between two bears and in the swamp he saw lurking crocodiles. In the meadow he saw dead and wilting grass and the view from the top of the mountain was blocked by dark clouds. The cacti in the desert had dried up and the fish in the river were gone. The ocean smelled bitter that day. He returned that night but did not tell his parents about what he had seen.

Another season passed before he ventured out again. This time his adventure brought him through the woods and past the swamp. It took him by the meadow and around the mountain. He walked across the desert and swam through the river to the ocean. On the beach,

he started thinking about what the horizon hid. He walked into the water until it covered his knees. And then until it covered his belt. And then until it covered his neck. And then until there was none of him left above water.

“I cannot think of any need in childhood as strong as the need for a father's protection.”

-Sigmund Freud

## The Pupil

*'The Mask You Live In talked a lot about how boys tend to hold in their emotions, and how doing this often leads them to violence. A mentor can do a lot for a boy with pent up emotions by helping them name and express their emotions appropriately. This leads to understanding and controlling them. To help them express their emotions properly, they first need to learn to name them. Naming emotions has been shown to take the intensity of an emotion away. For example, this technique is often used to help people with depression overcome it. By simply not being a parent, mentors have a very unique opportunity to unbiasedly teach our sons to understand themselves.'*

Once there was a genius commander whose calm demeanor and precise orders were respected by friends and foes alike. In the midst of a long siege, he fell gravely ill. He knew his time was coming so he called for his second in command who had studied under him since a young age and told him, "Let your heart be as true and precise as your mind."

On the eve of great battle, the young commander wrestled with his mentor's last words. In the morning, the clash began. With his mentor's words echoing in his head, the young commander kept his head level and was able to split and route the enemy army, saving his people. His success with the siege earned him praise from every man, woman, and child in the town.

*"I am indebted to my father for living, but to my teacher for living well"*

-Alexander the Great

Excerpt about Martin Luther King Jr. and his mentor Howard Thurman (9)

"On Sept. 20, 1958, a mentally disturbed African-American woman named Izola Ware Curry came to a book signing in upper Manhattan. There, King was signing copies of his new book, "Stride Toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story." Curry moved to the front of the signing line, took out a sharp-edged letter opener and stabbed the 29-year-old minister, who had just vaulted to national prominence through his leadership of the Montgomery bus boycott.

King barely survived. Doctors later told King that, if he had sneezed, he easily could have died. Of course, King later received a fatal gunshot wound in April 1968. Curry lived her days in a mental institution, to the age of 97.

It was while recuperating in the hospital afterward, that King received a visit from Thurman. While there, Thurman gave the same advice he gave to countless others over

decades: that King should take the unexpected, if tragic, opportunity, to step out of life briefly, meditate on his life and its purposes, and only then move forward.

Thurman urged King to extend his rest period by two weeks. It would, as he said, give King “time away from the immediate pressure of the movement” and to “rest his body and mind with healing detachment.” Thurman worried that “the movement had become more than an organization; it had become an organism with a life of its own,” which potentially could swallow up King.

King wrote to Thurman to say, “I am following your advice on the question.””

## Bibliography

1. Abblett, Mitch. "How Labels Help: Tame Reactive Emotions by Naming Them." *Mindful*, 5 June 2018, [www.mindful.org/labels-help-tame-reactive-emotions-naming/](http://www.mindful.org/labels-help-tame-reactive-emotions-naming/).
2. Newsom, Jennifer S, Jessica Congdon, Jessica Anthony, Regina K. Scully, Joe Ehrmann, Michael S. Kimmel, Caroline Heldman, Lise Eliot, Michael G. Thompson, William S. Pollack, Carol Gilligan, Madeline Levine, Judy Y. Chu, Terry A. Kupers, Niobe Way, Pedro Noguera, Philip G. Zimbardo, Byron Hurt, James Gilligan, John Behrens, and Eric Holland. *The Mask You Live in.* , 2015. Internet resource.
3. "Boys and Their Friends." *FamilyEducation*, 6 Dec. 2007, [www.familyeducation.com/life/friendships/boys-their-friends](http://www.familyeducation.com/life/friendships/boys-their-friends).
4. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Division of Violence Prevention. "Suicide Prevention: Youth Suicide." Injury Center: Violence Prevention, 2014. <[http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pub/youth\\_suicide.html](http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pub/youth_suicide.html)>
5. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention/National Center for Health Statistics. "Deaths, Percent of Total Deaths, and Death Rates for the 15 Leading Causes of Death in 5-year Age Groups, by Race and Sex: United States, 2011." National Vital Statistics System, 2012. <[http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/dvs/LCWK1\\_2011.pdf](http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/dvs/LCWK1_2011.pdf)>
6. "5 Reasons to Mentor Youth." *Stand Together*, 25 July 2018, [www.stand-together.org/5-reasons-mentor-youth/](http://www.stand-together.org/5-reasons-mentor-youth/).
7. <http://www.pbs.org/parents/expert-tips-advice/2015/08/helping-toddlers-understand-emotions/>
8. [https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/sigmund\\_freud\\_138674?img=2&src=t\\_father](https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/sigmund_freud_138674?img=2&src=t_father)
9. <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/this-theologian-helped-mlk-see-value-nonviolence-180967821/>
10. <https://www.chicagotribune.com/suburbs/post-tribune/opinion/ct-ptb-davich-toxic-masculinity-versus-decades-of-social-conditioning-st-0121-story.html>