

ESSAY

A Man's World

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It's a man's world. That's the caveat. As men we have more rights and more power and more possibilities than women. It's deeply unfair. But even within a man's world, not all men are equal. Different men have different degrees of power or autonomy or privilege. Living in Asia has taught me how much of my male privilege is also related to the colour of my skin, something that was never apparent to me when living in Europe among people who looked more or less like me. And English is my mother tongue. This puts me at an advantage compared to other men, in fact compared to most men. I've basically won the lottery due to the circumstances of my birth. And yet ...

And yet I struggle, and have always struggled, with being a man. Even the label man is one that doesn't fit easily with me. Well into middle-age I still often think of myself as a young boy, confused about how the world works and what my place in it might be, half-suspecting everyone else was properly briefed on how to be a man in today's world, that they've read and understood an instruction manual that I was never allowed to see. Or maybe I missed school the day they taught that bit.

Of course, I know I'm not a boy. I'm probably closer to the end of my life than the beginning. And I know that there are no arcane instructions for being a man, or being a human for that matter. We're all expected to muddle through and somehow figure it out for ourselves.

I think that's an important point. Everyone is just making it up as they go along. That bears repeating. Everyone is just making it up as they go along. There's a certain power in knowing that. That knowledge, and more importantly, actually believing it, can be liberating. If we can just make everything up, we don't have to stick to a strict template of some notional idea of masculinity. We can allow ourselves the freedom to be whoever we want to be. Will that match everyone's idea of what a man should be? Probably not.

But that shouldn't be our concern. What's much more important, if we want to be able to look ourselves in the mirror, is that we be honest and authentic with ourselves.

There are a lot of toxic stereotypes of masculinity, and a lot of nasty role models, some of them in very powerful positions. We are constantly bombarded, whether explicitly or subliminally, with ideas of what a man should be — and lazy preconceptions of what he should not be. Kindness and compassion are for the weak. Nice guys finish last. Boys will be boys. We may even have experienced it: being walked over or disregarded because we weren't prepared to be as uncaring or ruthless as some other men we might have had the misfortune to encounter. But things are starting to change. Safe spaces are opening up where it's okay to air and share our doubts.

This year has given most of us a good kick in the behind, and perhaps even provided us with the time and space to reflect on our fleeting mortality, and what it is we really want out of the few short years we have left to spend on this peculiar but fascinating planet.

This pandemic has become the new normal. It's part of the background noise. But there was a moment, or maybe a period even longer than a moment, where things were quite frightening. It's quite possible that the thought might have crossed our minds that we might not be among the survivors. Terrifying though that might be, it has a way of focusing the mind on what is important. What is important?

We all have our own definitions of what is important to us. It could be earning, or embezzling, enough to buy a luxury yacht, or a penthouse apartment, or wrangling with lawyers on how to stay out of jail. Or it could be something more reasonable and achievable, like finishing that book that's been lying half-read on the bedside table for the last six months, or deciding we can allow ourselves not to finish it. Aware of our mortality, and the roles we play in the lives of others, we might resolve to be a good father or a good husband, or a good son, nephew, uncle, grandson, grandfather, cousin ... perhaps several at once. Or if not good, at least a little better. Again, that's the beauty of it. We get to decide and define the kind of men we want to be. And if we can't be good men, hopefully we can be better men, because there's always room for improvement, and no one knows our flaws and weaknesses better than ourselves.