

Fragile Boys and Pretend Men

By Bill Chisholm

It is amazing how many conversations I have among both older men and woman, but especially men in the trades or owners of businesses about the lack of a “work ethic” and stick-to-itiveness among young men. While blame often seems to fall on the young men, I think its roots are much deeper and widespread.

I know of parents that worry about that aspect of some, certainly not all young men, I know of young women that are concerned about that among their male peers. There are quite a number of wilderness therapy programs out there designed to help young men find that something in themselves that creates a more authentic person.

I am a tradesman myself, manage a small piece of ranch land, worked in a wilderness therapy program and as an activist been concerned about what this issue might mean not only to the young men, but to society as a whole. Driving on the backroads of Idaho one time thinking about this issue, I came up with the term “Fragile Boys” to describe this phenomenon.

When I got to the Salmon River town of Riggins I stopped in a tap room for food and beverage and as I had been thinking about this situation, took a notebook inside and was making notes about my notion of Fragile Boys, in fact I had written those words in capital letters at the top of the page and was then making a list of what made or did not make a young man a fragile boy. I couldn't think of any of my peers at that age being what I would categorize as “Fragile Boys”, even the most physically less strong still knew how to work.

As I sat making my list, a young man stepped into the tap room and asked if he could talk to me. I said sure and asked him to sit down and tell me what was on his mind. He said, “I'm nineteen and I don't know how to do anything.” I went “Wow, look what I have been writing!” and turned my notebook around. I asked him about why he felt that way and what he saw as the cause.

The first thing he mentioned was getting trophies for participation. He said “We knew it was bullshit, but took them anyway.” He said it took

out some of incentive to excel. We also talked about technology and video games and the “bubble wrap safety net”, taking away of risk.

When I was a kid, we got out for “harvest vacation” to help bring in the spuds, learn to work and earn our own money. We were constantly making vehicles of various sorts and forts a plenty. By high school we were working on cars, by my early 30s, I was even trading the rebuilding of VW engines for other items of value and never thought twice about heading on a road trip in a clunker, because they were probably repairable on the road.

What it really comes down to is a matter of “confidence”. How does one gain confidence, but by taking risks, figuring things out, becoming independent, being held accountable. One only need look back through the last few decades and see how the means for achieving that confidence has slowly eroded either through social changes or so called technological advances. While I do hear lots of talk about the short comings of a generation of Fragile Boys, I hear very little talk about society’s responsibility for creating them.

Pretend Men is in many cases the other side of the coin, what one might call the Ramboization of a generation, the glorification of the “macho man”, of muscle over heart and brain. I believe it is innate desire in most young males to be “manly”, the problem is we have a skewed definition of what that means. The Army’s “Be All You Can Be”, is a myth, what they mean is “Be All We Want You To Be”.

Probably the best story in regards to wholeness comes via Native American Activist and POW, Leonard Peltier. During the FBI siege of Ogala in the early 70s young armed Native warriors were flexing their muscles and their egos as they patrolled the reservation. Leonard said to them. “There is more to being a warrior than being armed and prepared to defend the people. There are old women that need the firewood chopped and stacked, water carried to their homes. That is also part of being a warrior.” That quote may not be exact, but it is the essence of what Leonard was trying to impart.

As with other attributes, being physically strong is a gift, and the true nature of a gift is that it should be shared. Using one’s physical strength to inflict pain on those weaker is not “manly” in anyway, using it to help other is.

Somehow guns have taken on a far bigger importance than they once were. I own guns, I live in an area where a lot people own guns. They were once just a tool along with all the other tools that one used to live. Guns like chainsaws, give one a false sense of power, not false in that it gives one the ability to do things they otherwise couldn't do, but false in the sense that they make one feel stronger than truly are. Guns are a false strength when used to intimidate others.

It is ironic that we live in a society that has diminished the status of the manual laborer, yet the image of the hard working is used to sell beer and big pickup trucks to men, who don't know the sense of fulfillment that comes with doing a hard days work and actually use that big pickup truck to accomplish a job... before heading for a beer with friends.



We need to rethink what it means to be a man and how to create opportunities for boys to grow into men, a right of passage and also to define manhood more fully to not just strength of body, but strength of character.

Bill Chisholm, Buhl, Idaho
handyman/carpenter, yoga instructor,
wilderness educator, activist,
avid reader, engaged listener
chisholm3@mindspring.com