



HOW I LEARNED TO WRITE LIKE A MAN

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Depression, anxiety, and addiction defined my adolescence, and these formative years will always be a part of who I am, both as a person and an agent of expression. This was also the time when my social education as a man was coming to a head. I was actively learning to suppress many forms of expression that would otherwise have been available to me. This meant that as I accumulated the experiences that would shape and misshape me, I was also slowly constricting my capacity to speak to and engage with them. Burying my ability to define my own identity, particularly through the self-expression of writing, was a condition for my passage into the image of manhood I was raised in.

My parents met as journalists. Our house was filled with books, and as a child I developed an intimate relationship with reading and writing. But a clear line was drawn between the edifice of writing and the act of self-expression. Sitting at the kitchen table of a family with a paternal history of depression and anxiety, men were expected to talk about these things in code, if at all. Questions about identity had neither context nor audience.

By sixteen, I had shut myself off to the possibility of who I could be, learning to perform all the tricks of maleness and having none of the confidence to pull them off. Just as I learned by observation how to sit, stand, and walk like a man, I taught myself how to talk and write like one. I became humiliated by the words I used or the way I laughed; my handwriting lost its curls and character to become demonstrably careless. The content of my writing narrowed.

Facing identity with your words requires vulnerability—this was unacceptable for a young man growing up in my familial, social, and scholastic environment. Recognizing this, I made it unacceptable to myself.

The boys who were my peers were also coming to grips with who they were and who they had to be. But I did not dare invite whatever my friends' responses would be to the fears that paralyzed me. I could not have imagined that there might be someone to read the things I would have written and say that I was not the only one who thought them. No—better to occupy my nervous hands with paint pens, Marlboros, and the corks of stolen wine bottles than to let them betray with pencil or pen some unregulated expression. When I write, always, the first audience and the first voice of criticism is the one in my head. His work is to keep me from writing at all. He is the one who taught me how to be a man, and how to write like one.

In my sophomore year of high school, I was arrested and began a program of group drug therapy. In this numb period of recovery I was isolated from my words. Each Wednesday, a dozen men circled up against introspection. Our facilitator guided us in meditation, a silent form of reflection. I was taught coping mechanisms, guided to outlets, and re-educated in the virtue of wordless persistence. I did not write about my experience, and in forgoing this, gave up the opportunity to do what I think I needed most: to touch what was raw and give witness to my own cries of pain. In the outside world, shared cigarettes and silence persisted among us as acceptable forms of communication between men.

There was harm in the lessons I relearned in therapy, but sobriety allowed me to look up from the years of my adolescence and open my eyes to my external reality. I was suddenly aware that I had only a short time left in high school, and it was hard not to notice that the future beyond it was blank. In this period of receptiveness, I was encouraged to take AP English. Here in the 11th grade, I entered my puberty as a writer.

The curriculum dealt not so much in empowerment as in the power I was already predisposed to possess. It was a blowtorch applied to a pilot light, flattering hyper-masculine assertiveness in thought and language. I learned how to make claims and drive them home, how to argue and convince. I was not graded on my ability to write in order to ask or to listen, even to myself.

My expression remained constrained. I had learned to hold in without learning to let out, because this was not taught when I was taught to write. Academic writing became a carefully closeted form of expression for me: a safety valve for the things I needed to talk about. I wrote these essays repeatedly and feverishly, happily imbibing the powerful libation of claim and contention, argument and assertion.

I had lived in a state close to destruction for long enough to forget that I was capable of simply creating something. This feeling of actually having made something with my hands was my quiet victory. But I think I was so able to engage with this energy because of the way it engaged me—through my coming-of-age potential for an uncritical relationship with my maleness. I didn't yet know how to use the blocks of language to build an identity for myself. Instead, I wore it down to facelessness with the acid idea of maleness that I couldn't quite embody but could still project with the same toxic consequences.

My senior year of high school, I participated in a youth leadership program that taught social justice concepts alongside a different kind of writing. Workshops emphasized poetry as a tool for exploration, understanding that each person is a poet in telling their own story. This was no Wednesday exercise in numbness. There was no meditation, no willed escape, only a circle of peers. It was a powerful thing to be considered a poet, trusted to create something vital, and given the task of writing not off a prompt but about what I had to say. I came gradually to engage with my identity, and learned how I could define myself through my writing. In retrospect, it makes sense that it felt like I was meeting myself for the first time.

Without knowing it, I had been delineating the terms of my own rite of passage. I left this program feeling like a man for the first time: complete in my own body, with both its scars and its frailties; comfortable in the awareness that the masculine and feminine in me were parts of the same whole;

sure of the mindful, open, and sincere way I wanted to conduct myself in the world; and trusting that in the future I would feel this way again. Through that writing I had been able to define this manhood and, in certain moments, embody it.

When I write now, I have to realize that no matter how I define and relate to my maleness, I am still a man. So when I write with the expectation of an audience, paying attention to what I say and how I say it is important. There is a difference between filling a void and taking up space, between expressiveness and the lack of a filter, between knowing when to stay quiet and simply succumbing to the hateful impulse to silence myself. It can be hard to distance mindfulness from anxiety—to identify when I own my self-examination and when it owns me.

The practice and process of writing is conducive to the deliberate and intentional expression I want to make. But when I share my writing publically, I open myself up to the regulatory scorn of other men. Every time I write, I face an internal audience whose every member is a reflection of the hardest parts of myself to acknowledge: a mental auditorium of men's men braying spitefully for my silence. Writing this, I remember that I have another, far more eloquent critic within me: one who holds me accountable to my own definition of *man*, and reminds me of the person I can explore and become with the help of the written word.