

GUEST ESSAY

This Isn't Your Old Toxic Masculinity. It Has Taken an Insidious New Form.

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By Alex McElroy

Mr. McElroy is the author of the novel "The Atmospherians," about two friends who start a cult to reform problematic men.

Toxic masculinity is so 2017.

It hasn't disappeared, of course, but in the years since #MeToo, many men have been trying to drop the stoicism and anger that have long warped masculinity. Some are seeking therapy. Others have enrolled in workshops and men's groups in an effort to get in touch with their feelings and become better men. For better or worse, everyone you know is watching "Ted Lasso." The strong, silent type is losing some of his allure.

My personal relationship to masculinity is fraught. I spent my first 31 years moving through spaces where I didn't feel I belonged, and I was often told implicitly or explicitly that I wasn't performing maleness correctly. I cried often as a child, and a cousin once pulled me aside to tell me that as a boy I should never cry unless I had a cut running from my eye to my ankle. In high school, after telling my best friend that my grandfather died, he asked me to please leave his house if I was planning to cry.

Two years ago, I came out as a nonbinary trans person. Expressing my true gender identity did not immediately fix my relationship with vulnerability, but it led me to delve deeper into what vulnerability is and how it can operate. As it happens, vulnerability was having a cultural moment — as the topic of popular TED talks and the focus of groups invested in helping men evolve, such as The ManKind Project and Evryman (whose men's retreats echoed earlier movements encouraging self-reflection in men, including Robert Bly's "mythopoetic men's movement").

It has been exciting to watch as more men embrace vulnerability. At a men's group meeting in 2019, I saw men like those I knew growing up taking responsibility for their actions and feelings. This was far from the new normal, but at least men were coming together to talk. I began to feel hopeful about the state of masculinity.

But my hope has begun to diminish as I've watched male vulnerability curdle into something toxic: Let's call it petulant vulnerability.

Think of the boyfriend professing loneliness to ensure his partner never sees their friends. Or the hundreds of texts and anecdotes of so-called softbois collected on the @beam_me_up_softboi Instagram account — men who express their feelings the way avalanches share snow, often as a form of manipulation or passive aggression. On the HBO Show "Succession," Kendall Roy professes his empathy with the plight of abused women only to feed his narcissistic desires. And the film "Promising Young Woman" showcased the horror of the "nice guy" whose sensitivity slides stealthily into misogyny and abuse.

There have been some extreme examples in high-profile court cases of the past year. The courtroom tears of Kyle Rittenhouse, who was later acquitted in the deaths of two men he shot and the wounding of another, and Travis McMichael, who, along with his father and a neighbor, was convicted of the murder of Ahmaud Arbery, were public displays of petulant vulnerability. They show strikingly how this aggrieved, self-righteous mind-set privileges one's own vulnerability over that of others: The crying killer doesn't recognize the vulnerability of his victim.

The aftermath of last year's Jan. 6 attack on the Capitol was a festival of petulant vulnerability. While the attack itself was violent and wrathful, many in the mostly male mob, who screamed obscenities or threw heavy objects at police officers that day, later wept as they expressed shame, offered excuses or complained about jobs and friends they lost. One rioter even blamed "Foxitis" for his actions: His lawyer argued that months of watching Fox News had destabilized him to the point where he started believing untruths. Classic toxic masculinity was on full display when those would-be heroes rallied to "save America" on Jan. 6, but some became hapless patsies once they were held accountable. Their capes became baby blankets.

Petulant vulnerability is not, of course, confined to men. An example can be found in the case of Amy Cooper, the woman who was filmed falsely reporting to the police that "an African-American man is threatening my life," her voice sounding breathless and panicked, after a bird watcher in Central Park asked her to leash her dog.

What is real vulnerability? Brené Brown, a researcher whose work on vulnerability has made her a celebrity, defines it as "uncertainty, risk and emotional exposure" in her 2013 book "Daring Greatly: How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead." Petulant vulnerability, however, uses the language of vulnerability as a cudgel. If true vulnerability means accepting

change, personal fallibility and the human condition of reliance on others, petulant vulnerability feigns emotional fragility as a means of retaining power.

If true vulnerability seems scary, it is — but that doesn't make expressing it any less necessary, for men as for everyone. What if, on Jan. 5, 2021, a man upset by Donald Trump's electoral defeat had confessed to friends and loved ones that he was afraid and that he felt he was losing control in a world he believed no longer valued him? What if he had sat with those feelings, cried if he wanted to and discussed how to chart his path in a changing landscape? *That* would have been vulnerable.

This kind of vulnerability can be difficult, of course. Even as men's groups committed to positive change gain prominence, our society still broadly enforces traditional masculinity norms and restrictions. And online there are plenty of spaces where extremely toxic behavior is encouraged and applauded — some of which also deploy the language of vulnerability. In incel forums, for example, rather than working through the pain of being sexually rejected, men lash out at the women they feel they deserve — occasionally resulting in horrific violence.

So, what's to be done? Though men's discussion groups and more nuanced male leads on TV cannot, on their own, shift our expectations of manhood, the fact that they exist and are gaining popularity counts for something. "Men cannot change if there are no blueprints for change," bell hooks wrote in her 2005 book "The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity, and Love," where she uses feminist thinking to show men how to overcome their conditioning.

The hard part is yet to come. Change is taxing and boring and scary. It requires humility and vulnerability — the real stuff, not the cheap imitation. And it requires letting go of what some men feel entitled to. The rewards, however, will make this effort worthwhile.

"To know love," Ms. hooks writes, "men must be able to let go the will to dominate."

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