

Trish Nemore: Talking about Boys

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Talking about Boys

It feels a little beside the point, given the events surrounding Susanna's hospitalization this past week, to be standing up here doing anything other than bearing witness to Seekers' intense caring for children, to the strength of community and to all the prayerful energy emanating from all of you in our direction. It's pretty awesome.

But, in fact, I think my exhortation today derives from the facts that Seekers is a community caring about children, that it is intentional about community and that it is one filled with creative, loving energy. So maybe this is not all beside the point

I want to talk today about expanding opportunities for boys in two arenas: first, in terms of what our culture names, in our bipolar gender language, as feminine and second, in expanding our understanding of the so-called masculine virtues of courage, toughness and strength. And I want to talk about why this should matter to Seekers, why it should be a topic of concern for an intentional Christian community, not merely the subject of a parenting course.

Why are we talking about boys? Men have had it all for millennia and women have just begun to claim space and rights and value and voice and now I am asking you to pay more attention to the needs of boys? The answer is yes.

The women's movement's claiming of power and economic equity and equal opportunity in traditional male provinces is among the great accomplishments of our time and the work is not complete. The battles must continue to be fought, the barriers broken down, the harmful images smashed. But if we, as women, seek to embrace male arenas without also wanting our men and boys to seek out and have access to so-called "feminine" arenas, doesn't that suggest that we value the male arenas more highly? Doesn't that devalue the "feminine," suggesting that I as a woman can only find wholeness through pursuing what is masculine? Perhaps the better message is that we as human beings find wholeness through embracing a wide spectrum of characteristics that our culture has labeled either feminine or masculine.

Brenda Seat named the reason for this part of the conversation succinctly at the first gathering sponsored by Journeying with Children to discuss this topic earlier this year. She said: Boys have less role freedom than girls.

We have made far greater strides in breaking gender stereotypes for girls and women – and I reiterate, there is plenty of work to be done still – than we have for males.

The difficulty of breaking cultural stereotypes for boys is palpable in the example of the efforts in the 1970s of Marlo Thomas and others to promote the value of nurturing as a legitimate role for boys by, among other activities, encouraging boys to play with dolls. Toy manufacturers responded with GI Joe. Now, I am not wild about GI Joe dolls; some of you may be more comfortable with them. But I'll bet I'm right in thinking that "nurturer" is not the first word that comes to your mind when you think GI Joe doll.

And consider dressing and appearance. Women crossed the gender dressing barrier decades ago and have pretty much successfully claimed the right to wear so-called men's clothes to a degree considered scandalous a half a century ago. But male to female

cross-dressing is still big time taboo and subject to social sanction, except for drag queens who are entertaining us in nightclubs or movies, or Robin Williams who is reclaiming the right to care for his children in "Mrs. Doubtfire."

As I was preparing this sermon, I was thinking these issues of gender-based toys and dressing were principally cultural ones that came to us at the toy store or on billboards or magazine ads or in movies and TV shows. But in the past week or two, I have been reading a book called Gender Shock that tells the horrifying stories of children as young as three and five years old being treated for Gender Identity Disorder, a mental illness diagnosis which is alive and well in 1996. Children diagnosed with this disorder— whose symptoms include playing with genderally-inappropriate toys and wearing genderally inappropriate clothes — may be subject to "fixing" by intense behavior modification.

This is not the time to retell the tragic stories included in this book except to say that my response to these heartbreaking stories was "Why did these children have to be fixed? If parents were genuinely concerned about problems they might encounter with peers, why did they not give their children safe space to play as they wished and strategies to cope with hostility they might have to face?"

Whether or not a small boy exhibiting nurturing qualities is diagnosed with Gender Identity Disorder, there is a catch for boys and men in claiming and holding onto so-called feminine qualities. The catch is expressed one way by Angela Phillips in a book with the unfortunate title "The Trouble with Boys"

For a girl being more boyish means being more powerful in the world. For a boy, to be more female is to be less powerful. The pursuit of equal rights with men has inadvertently confirmed the preeminence of traditional masculinity by seeking to emulate it. In so doing, it has actually narrowed the options available to boys. To be better than a girl, a boy

has to be more of a man.

Angela Phillips names two points: first, that women's pursuit of male domains at some levels confirms the higher value we place on those domains. And second, that for boys to claim those qualities labeled feminine is to be (at least perceived as) less powerful. If we believe her last sentence contains any truth, we might ask ourselves "Why is it necessary for a boy to be better than a girl anyway – where does that value come from and how can we get rid of it?" and "What does it mean to "be more of a man?"

Moving to the other end of the spectrum, let us consider the conflicting messages we send to boys: we want you to be tough, be aggressive, learn to be courageous fighters and protectors of your women and families and country, but we don't really like it when you use physical violence as a way of solving problems.

What do we mean when we talk about toughness, strength, courage? These are all words and qualities we have traditionally called "masculine," yet I, for one, recoil at Rambo or Arnold Schwarzenegger being the model for our boys of those qualities. How do we claim or re-claim from the culture what we value of those qualities?

Someone, in one conversation, said "We need our boys to be tough, to really be able to make it through a difficult situation." Another voice: "But we want that for our girls, too." Perhaps the first phase of our task is to identify qualities we want for our children, and to determine if those qualities are different for boys and girls. We might each name the qualities a little differently, but our understanding and experience of Christianity informs our choices. Some that I name are courage, compassion, strength, gentleness, joyfulness, vulnerability, willingness to take risks, respect for people and resources, ability to connect with and relate to other people. And as far as I can tell, I don't name them

differently for the boy and girls in my family.

So is the answer that everything is everything and nothing is differentiated and we don't want distinctions between men and women? I don't think so. Marjory affirmed for us last week that she welcomes the distinctions between men and women as well as Seekers' intentional sharing of leadership between men and women. I agree. That women are important in Seekers' worship and community life in part affirms that women bring something valuable from their end of "the spectrum." The issue for me is not whether men and women are different but how we claim wholeness and how we give meaning to qualities that is different from the meaning contained in the cultural messages.

There is a song that I can no longer find in my ancient record collection at home that begins: "Jesus was an androgen, Jesus was a he and she." When I mentioned this to Pat, I got a bemused reply, and his scholarly inquiry: "I wonder what the source for such a statement is." Well, I confess I did not find scripture to authenticate the statement. In any case, in my lost version, it is sung by a woman. Perhaps the writer, if a woman, was trying to make a claim of Jesus for herself that she had not been able to discern from more traditional presentations of him. If we believe in a God who is mother and father, as our Seekers belief statement says and that Jesus and we are all made in God's image, then our quest for wholeness includes reaching out to all points on the spectrum. The effort and the challenges to find our courage and our compassion, our toughness and our gentleness, will be framed by our individual selves, but also by the barriers our culture presents in terms of gender roles.

So what do we do for boys? What are the issues peculiar to their situation? One participant in our conversations noted that our church teaching does not offer much that speaks to boys, especially pre-adolescent and adolescent boys, in the same language as the cultural stereotypes. To me, this raised the issue that the messages to boys, especially as they

approach adolescence, are that being a real man means being macho and dominant and in control and competitive and winning; that courage means being willing and able to pick up a gun and kill another person "for your country." In contrast, "church" messages are "the meek shall inherit the earth," "love your neighbor," "act with compassion," "Jesus suffered the little children to come to him," "Jesus is the shepherd finding the lost sheep."

The apparent mildness of our imagery of Jesus came home to me when Sonya recently reported that Art Carpenter had played the part of Jesus in a church drama, but had observed that he would have preferred to play the part of Pontius Pilate. I took this to mean that he found Pilate more interesting as a dramatic character.

Why don't we hold up more brightly for ourselves and our children the model of Jesus as courageous, as tough, as strong? Jesus spoke truth to power, Jesus challenged authority, Jesus saw his cousin John the Baptist killed for what he spoke and did. Jesus knew a similar fate was likely his own and yet his relationship with God was so strong and nourishing and nurturing that he was able to hold his chosen course.

In a paper prepared for the New Testament course in the School of Christian Living last year, Alan Dragoo said "It is not the transcendent, eternal Whatever mysterious being of Christ which fascinates me, but the human person of Jesus as it appears in the Gospels and as it has been made real in the lives of a few people I have known at some critical moments of life." Alan's comments were very instructive to me. When I read Marcus Borg's book, "Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time," not so long ago, I realized that for most of my life, I carried a very wooden and magical image of Jesus' role in the world. He seemed to have a pre-ordained script that he was just living out - he was going to play out his part then go live with God in heaven, so even though there was a little

pain along the way, it was all going to be all right in the end (as, of course, he knew). So it was kind of hard to relate to the pain. And the doubting and being tested and suffering. They were not real to me. It is only by putting aside the magic and considering Jesus as a real human being living his life in the political and cultural milieu of his day that Jesus makes Christianity come alive for me. And from that view, I can appreciate Jesus' actions as incredibly courageous.

Even as we seek to model for our children the power of love and compassion and God's grace that are the messages of Christianity, we can also find in Jesus a model of courage and toughness. Maybe there is a place here even for pre-adolescent and teenage boys. It is for us to claim those qualities and give them different meaning from the stereotypes that confront us and our children in so many commercials and movies and images all around us.

But, perhaps you are saying to yourself, why are you talking about this, Trish? What has this to do with Seekers? Well, Seekers has its own children and has a corporate commitment to caring and advocacy for children both in our community and in the world at large. Seekers claims itself as an intentional Christian community. And Seekers has lots of good role models.

In the past two weeks, [Marjory Bankson](#) named our advocacy on behalf of children as central to who we are as intentional Christian community. Our advocacy for children takes many forms including strong connections to FLOC and Hope and a Home, sending Roy Barber off to South Africa to continue his work of putting the stories of children there into dramatic form. Our caring for children is also expressed in our community's attention to our own children, our twice yearly intergenerational pajama parties, known as family overnights where kids and adults have opportunities to interact with each other outside of family structures and in a setting more informal than Sunday worship. And, at least for our high

school class, we have encouraged and enabled them to be community to each other giving them both safe space to find and claim their true selves and support in the challenges the culture and the world present to them.

Seekers is also a community filled with models of caring and sensitive men, men nurturing their children, men claiming their "feminine side," men offering new meanings to the words "courage" and "tough."

There is [Peter Bankson's](#) story of building an orphanage in Duc Pho, Vietnam, during the war, his life in danger virtually every day; and David Lloyd's adventure as a young college graduate going off to Ethiopia, a totally foreign land, culture and language, to work in a small village as a member of the Peace Corps, and Pat Conover's early morning face to face confrontation with the tough Chicago Blackstone Ranger, in connection with a voter registration project on which he was working in the Woodlawn neighborhood and Gary Robertson's story of setting off alone in a van, at a time of great physical frailty in his life, leaving behind all family and friends and support to pursue his dream of painting. Each of these is a story of courage and adventure. [Paul Holmes](#) brought us what Pat referred to as "not a sermon, but a psalm," about understanding God and Jesus in a new way through his experience of being a father. Roy Barber was envisioning, more than 20 years ago, less rigid definitions of what it means to be a man, saying "The rigidity of traditional gender roles is rejected with the realization that each person is a unique synthesis of all human potentialities. Healthy human growth would be defined as "going new places; developing untapped personal dimensions." Ron Arms has acknowledged his failure to qualify for the Boston marathon, not with shame and humiliation at some deficit in his manhood, but as "An Accomplished Failure."

Each of these people has more stories to tell; everyone in this room has a contribution to make. For starters, our

children need to hear the stories that we adults know about each other, some of which we hear during worship when kids are not present. We need to think about creative ways to hold up our own stories to our children, to tell them in ways they can understand their truths. Cultural norms won't be changed for us or our children unless we are intentional and persistent and inventive in our push against them. What are some other ways we can engage our boys in conversation and experiences that help them challenge stereotypes? Roy Barber has suggested the importance of adventure in kids' lives. How can we connect adventure with the idea of being engaged in the world?

As we consider programmatic responses, we adults also need to do our own reflective work, both personal and corporate. Journeying with Children, in collaboration with many others in the community, is developing some questions for personal reflection as we consider the broad questions:

1. What are the qualities we want for our boys?
2. What cultural or other barriers impede our efforts to help our boys develop these qualities?
3. What can we do about overcoming the barriers, in our personal lives, in Sunday school classes and Sunday worship, in our Seekers community life generally, and in the world at large?

I invite you to conversation, to reflection and to creative action.

Amen.