

The Resurgence of Patriarchy

Terry Real Explains Why Now, More Than Ever, We Need to Leave Neutrality Behind

Terry Real (/author/bio/2449/terry-real) • 9/25/2017 • 3 Comments



Not long ago, I used to joke that as a feminist family therapist I was obsolete twice over: once for being a family therapist and a systemic thinker—instead of being, say, a CBT practitioner—and then once again for being a feminist. I mean, who cared about feminism anymore? The points had been made, the lessons learned, and to some degree at least, the battles won—or at least on the way to being won. Feminism

seemed to be old news. Gender issues in therapy? If anyone spoke about that anymore, it was to reenvision the whole idea—trans kids, gender-fluid kids, straight men sleeping with other straight men. As for the impact of traditional gender roles on couples, on society—as for conversations about patriarchy and its effects—psychotherapists seemed largely to have lost interest.

Then 2016 happened.

When I gave a workshop called “Working with Challenging Men” at the 2015 Networker Symposium, it drew an audience of about 50 participants. When I was asked this year to give the same workshop, it drew an audience of more than 250. What happened to swell the ranks of those interested? We all know the answer: Donald Trump.

No matter what your political persuasion, it's hard to deny that we have a man in the White House who behaves in ways that are not only challenging, but atavistic, offensive, and often downright frightening. Trump has called women “fat pigs,” ridiculed their appearance on social media, objectified and mocked them in person, and in his most unvarnished moment, bragged about assaulting them.

So here's a sobering thought: suppose Trump was elected not *despite* his offensive, misogynous behaviors but, at least in part, because of them. Trump is a type. He fits the mold of other uber-tough guys of either sex that he openly admires and emulates: Erdogan in Turkey, Orban in Hungary, the Brexit leaders and Theresa May in the UK, and of course, there's his storied bromance with Putin. Rarely noted is the fact that not just in the US, but sweeping throughout the West, this new so-called populism is gendered. Its appeal doesn't lie exclusively with men. Factions of men and women these days are feeling a powerful pull toward many of the notions of traditional masculinity—and not just those few that make for good character, like real courage or

loyalty. What we're witnessing is a reassertion of masculinity's most difficult and harmful traits: aggression, narcissism, sexual assaultiveness, grandiosity, and contempt.

And yet we psychotherapists, as a field, have remained largely silent about this resurgence, hamstrung by an ethical code that prohibits diagnosis or clinical discussion of public figures from afar. In our offices, we assiduously practice neutrality with regard to anything that smacks of the debates going on in the political realm, petrified that we might impose our values on vulnerable clients. But is neutrality in these times really in our clients' best interests?

The Hazards of Masculinity

Let me be clear. I haven't been for 40 years, nor will I ever be, neutral on the issue of patriarchy in my work. Traditional gender roles are a bad deal for both sexes. And they're particularly toxic for men. The evidence couldn't be clearer. In fact, the World Health Organization (WHO) has issued a statement implicating traditional masculine values as inimical to good health.

Let's take a stark, bottom-line issue: death. Men live 7 to 10 years less than women do, not because of some genetic differences, as most people imagine, but because men act like, well, men. For one, we don't seek help as often as women do; it's unmanly. Indeed, as I once wrote about male depression, "A man is as likely to ask for help with depression as he is to ask for directions." And men are more noncompliant with treatment when we do get it. Also, we take many more risks. That driver without a seatbelt—odds are that's a man. Men drink more, take drugs more, are more than three times as likely to be imprisoned, and five times as likely to commit suicide.

Traditional masculine habits not only hurt men's physical and psychological health, but also produce the least happy marriages. Study after study has shown that egalitarian marriages—which often involve dual careers and always encompass shared housework and decision-making—unequivocally lead to higher rates of marital satisfaction for both sexes than do "traditional" marriages, based on hierarchy and a strict division of roles. Yet most therapists, even today, act as if these choices in marriage were simply a matter of personal preference, of legitimate, sometimes clashing values.

Where do we stand on issues like toxic masculinity and paternalistic marriage? For the most part, we don't stand anywhere. We blink. So let me ask, if we were a group of dentists, knowing that candy is bad for teeth, would we be silent on the issue? Would we consider tooth brushing a personal value, not to be judged, only a matter of preference to be negotiated between family members?

Cut from the Old Cloth

Just observing the way 53-year-old Bill sauntered over to my couch, clearly owning the room, I was tempted to label him an Old-School Guy. Lydia, his wife of 20-plus years, who was on the verge of

leaving him, had another label for him. "Basically," she tells me right off the bat, "he's been a dick." She bends down to scratch her ankle. "A real dick," she reiterates. "For years, decades," she sighs. "And I took it. I loved him. I still do. But, well, things have changed." They'd come to my office in Boston from their home in Texas for what Bill described as a Hail Mary pass.

Here's the story. Bill is a type: driven, handsome, relentless, utterly perfectionistic, and vicious to himself and others when a benchmark isn't cleared. As their kids were growing up, there wasn't much Lydia could do right: the house wasn't picked up, the kids were too rowdy, the food was late or bland or both. Bill was both controlling and demeaning.

Lately, he'd become obsessed with physical performance, and he wanted to share his passion with his wife. Unfortunately, the way he invited her to the gym with him was to tell her how overweight she was. "I'm just attracted to fit women," Bill says, shrugging.

"Yeah," Lydia adds bitterly. "He thinks it'll motivate me when he says, 'That fat hanging over your belt disgusts me.'"

"I don't have a very high emotional IQ," Bill confides to me, his expression bland, untroubled. I'm thinking that I agree with him. Lydia, by the way, had been a competing amateur tennis player, with a figure many women would envy.

For his entire life, Bill credited his success in life to his fevered drive for perfection. He thought his harsh inner critic, which he never hesitated to unleash on others, was his best friend, holding up the standard, goading him to achieve. I tell Bill that like most of the men I treat, even like Icarus winging it toward the sun, he thought it was the achievement of glory that made him worthy of love. And like Icarus, he was about to fall, and fall hard.

"My drive is my edge, my equalizer," he says, "I may not be as smart as some of the boys in the office, but, man, I can work."

"Let me help you out here," I tell him. "I promise you that as we work together, you won't lose your edge. All the guys I see worry about that. But you can be just as tough and, at the right times, just as driven."

"So what will be so different?" he asks.

"You," I tell him. "You'll be different. Radically different if you want to save this marriage. You'll have *choice*."

Like most feminist therapists I know, I don't want to "feminize" men any more than I want to "masculinize" women. I want *choice*. When the moment calls for combat, I want men to be ferocious. But when the moment calls for tenderness, I want men to be sweet, compassionate, soft. Mostly, I want men to be able to discern which moment is which and behave accordingly. I

want men to hold fast to those elements that are good and right about the traditional male role—courage, loyalty, competence—but men like Bill also deserve to have access to emotion, particularly the vulnerable emotions that connect us to one another. He deserves to have more empathy for himself first of all, and for those he loves.

By the end of our long session, we all agree that Bill—or “the old Bill,” as I begin to call him—was selfish, controlling, demanding, and unhappy. He based his shaky sense of self-worth on his performance, on whatever he’d amassed materially, and on his wife’s nurture. Although he’d have been loath to admit it before, Bill needed an overhaul.

“You’ve been acting in this marriage in a lot of ways as though you were still single,” I tell him. “Six hours a day at the gym, 10-hour bike rides, call girls when you travel. You need to learn to become what I call a real *family man*,” a term that deliberately harks back to some of the positive ideals contained in traditional notions of masculinity. Contrary to what gender conservatives claim we feminists are after, I don’t want the men I work with to discard every aspect of masculinity. Rather, I talk to Bill about the differences between living life as a self-centered boy and living it like a family man. It’s not “repeal and replace” the entire notion of masculinity so much as “sort through, use the best, and transform the rest.”

“Bill,” I tell him. “You’re a statistic. All over America, men like you are being dragged off to people like me so that we can help you learn how to be more relational, more giving, more empathic, more vulnerable—just a more thoughtful, connected person. There are hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of Bills in offices like this one. We can’t make it all about personal failings; there are too many of you.”

With Lydia at the threshold of her own relational learning on how to break the traditional feminine role of silence and anger, I’m thrilled for her, too. I’m eager to teach her how to stand up for herself with love, how to switch from statements like “I don’t like how you’re treating me!” to ones like “I want to be close to you. I want to hear what you’re saying. Could you be kinder right now so I can hear better?”

Both partners need to learn how to be more skilled. But moving each toward increased intimacy requires leaving behind the old roles for them both. Real intimacy and patriarchy are at odds with each other. To the degree that a couple approaches the former, they move beyond the latter. As the old roles seek to reassert themselves in our society, it seems more important than ever to take a stand in favor of new ones, new configurations that provide more openness in men like Bill and more loving firmness in women like Lydia.

This blog is excerpted from "The Long Shadow of Patriarchy,"
(<https://www.psychotherapynetworker.org/magazine/article/1112/the-long-shadow-of-patriarchy>)by Terry Real. The full version is available in the September/October 2017 issue,

[The Future of Couplehood: Esther Perel is Expanding the Conversation.](https://www.psychotherapynetworker.org/magazine/toc/170/the-future-of-couplehood)

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3 Comments

Saturday, September 30, 2017 1:33:44 PM | posted by Linda Elliott

Thank you, Terrence Real, for reminding me again of why you are my go-to resource for couples work. Thank you for having the courage to speak up with regard to the impact our current social/ political culture is having in our local communities, relationships, and homes. Your description of manhood is sorely missing from our national conversation. My hope is that more men will speak up and not abandon their responsibility to men and women alike, to move our society forward in a kinder, more respectful and mature manner.

Saturday, September 30, 2017 4:24:48 PM | posted by Rick Bauer

Its is obvious the author is a very frustrated , stuck in the 60's, feminist who has never really devoted any significant amount of time to RESEARCH to back up her claims and hyperbole. How about the NEXT TIME (and I am sure there will be a next time) you instead of spouting rhetoric, bias, opinion and basically a negative rant against our President (which is really disgusting and unprofessional), you provide a little substantive basis for your affirmations. Some of us actually belief that traditional male models (to a certain extent) are valuable to building strong, healthy families. Also a lot of us also firmly believe (WITH the back up of numerous research studies that usually are NOT conducted BY SJW's like yourself...) that the garbage that feminists have been spewing for the past 50 years have been STRONG influences on the moral decline and deterioration of the family structure. Listen ... we get it that SJW's like yourself do not like our President .. honestly we are getting just a little sick and tired of people like yourself using these forums as platforms for ranting and raving.. you want to do that go to a rally or post something on CNN .. you want to post something that has some merit and research value.., than by all means please do...

Friday, October 20, 2017 4:54:23 AM | posted by Caroline Paltin

Comment to Rick Bauer's comment: Terry Real happens to be a man, not a woman. Do your research.
