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Op-Ed 2: The Mask You Live In

It is no secret that boys are typically more violent, and less open to emotional expression. In the documentary *The Mask You Live In*, directed by Jennifer Siebel Newsom, this issue looked at from a viewpoint from which all of society is to blame. From the way children are raised to how men are portrayed in the media, researchers, teachers, coaches, parents, and men themselves explain what and how males have come to perceive themselves and what they consider to be the “ideal” construction of a man. The opening scene sets the mood, “stop crying … don’t be a pussy… be a man” these phrases are representative of what every boy is told growing up. Men are supposed to be strong, stoic, entirely independent, assertive individuals that don’t scare easily or back down from a fight; or at least that is what they’re taught. From day one, boys are instilled with the notion that they need to be big and bold, and to not let emotions get in the way. But who’s to say that this is what truly makes a man? Who’s to say this is healthy?

As a male, I myself have experienced these pressures and I know that this kind of talk, this mentality of extreme self-sufficiency and hardness is far from the epitome of healthy thinking. As a boy I remember hiding in bathrooms or vacant rooms (even at home) when I cried because I was afraid of being found out. I don’t think I’m alone in that; we are afraid to show sadness because it has fallaciously been connected to weakness, and weakness is “unmanly”. This train of thought, as argued in the film, is detrimental to the human psyche with lasting effects on one’s self-perception as well how one is treated and treats others. Because of how we view masculinity, emotional needs are ignored, and the desire for deep meaningful connections with other males is overlooked. Just look at how males interact with each other; Dr. Judy Cho explains “Within their peer group culture each of them is posturing based on how the other boys are posturing and what they end up missing is what they each really want, which is that closeness.” Standing not too close, always weary of exposing chinks in one’s armor, conversations hardly expand beyond shallow topics of interests, ultimately hindering one’s relations. In striving to seem fearless and strong, we have become afraid and weakened by our own feelings, which are constantly pushed down into the darkest crevices of our souls, where they pile and fester, robbing us of what it truly means to be a man, to be human with a full range of emotion and expression, and the sense to recognize and use such feelings to help ourselves and those around us.

There is no concrete definition, no set of commandments, no unequivocal traits that every man has. Violence does not make a man, neither does being a loner, or lack of emotional expression. To combat these misapprehensions, a broader face of masculinity must be made. We need to teach our boys that it is ok to be sad and to show it, it is ok to have feelings and need help from others. We need to let them know that they don’t have to face the world on their own, and we need to provide them with a place of refuge. Whether that is home, schools, or extracurricular facilities doesn’t matter, what does matter is that they feel safe and that they able to talk about the things that trouble them. The idea that men are aggressors that don’t show feeling is something that is taught, and it is time we brought an end to it, it’s time to teach boys that being a man means being human.