

Acts of Courage, Acts of Cowardice

TRANSCENDING THE
CULTURE OF VIOLENCE

by

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WRITING SAMPLE

from

Chapter 4

That boy's life: Growing up male in America

May, 2010

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Chapter 4

That boy's life: Growing up male in America

“We wish we were otherwise and that is our hell,
our resistance to life. . .

Our models, our ideas of who we are
and how the world is supposed to be, create a cage.”

— Stephen and Ondrea Levine

Who Dies?

It is 6:42 AM, Sunday morning. The streets are deserted except for the boy standing transfixed on the corner of Fauntleroy Avenue and Willow Street. Lost in a stupor, he stares down at a rich red pool of blood on the coarse gray concrete sidewalk. The morning is still. The pool has an arresting symmetry and sheen. The exquisite red color fascinates him. The blood is his.

His face is hot. Out of breath and paralyzed in his reverie, he vaguely notices the blood drip from his throbbing, swollen nose and from the slow trickle making its way from the still-stinging wound on his scalp, down his forehead, and finally falling away from his left eyebrow. Everything is so quiet, still. The drops — slowing now — are warm, rhythmic.

In the distance behind him, a lone police cruiser approaches. The officer at the wheel, seeing the lone figure of a boy — probably no more than eight years old — brings his car across the center line into the empty oncoming lane. Slowing quickly, he pulls up on the parking strip of scrubby brown grass, grabs his baton and opens the door.

Startled by the sound of the closing car door behind him, the boy pivots quickly, reflexively. He freezes. A man. This one with a club and, worse, a gun. His heart begins to pound. He gets ready.

The officer approaches and kneels in front of the boy. “What happened to you, son,” he asks softly.

“Nothing,” the boy replies suspiciously.

“Did someone hurt you?”

“No, sir.” He hesitates. “I fell down.” Keeping his eyes focused upon his feet, the boy raises his arm to brush away the blood on his forehead. The officer notes the fresh marks on the underside of the boy’s forearm. Defensive bruises.

“Son, I think we better get you some medical attention.”

Instantly, the boy panics. He steps back, glaring fearfully at the stranger.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa,” the officer says. “Easy, son. Easy. We don’t have to go anywhere if you don’t want.” The officer sees that the boy, young muscles coiled like a spring, can easily break free and sprint to the passageway between the houses and into the convoluted safety of the dump immediately west of them. And he knows that, if the boy was assaulted by an adult caretaker, taking him to the clinic could endanger the boy further. If it were known he was with the police, he could be further at risk — he could face more violence as the caretaker attempts to discover what was disclosed to the authorities. Without solid evidence of who it was that assaulted the boy, the chances of removing him from the abusive environment are minimal.

“How about this,” the officer says. “How about we just fix things up here? I can get you cleaned up and send you off — you won’t have to worry about anything. That sound okay?”

The boy studies the officer’s face, body posture, and the sound of his words. He weighs the opportunities immediately available to him. His eyes dart to the right — to the narrow slot between the two houses leading to the dump and the gully beyond — then back, intently reading the officer’s face.

The boy nods.

They step over to the patrol car. The officer takes out the first aid kit and gently cleans and disinfects the boy’s wounds. He reaches for his notepad. “Tell you what,” he says as he scribbles quickly. “I’m going to write down my name, my phone number at the police department and my home number. You call me anytime you need help.” He hands the boy the paper. “If you fall down again or if someone helps you fall down, you call me. You hear me? You call me. Anytime. Day or night. You tell whoever answers that I told you to call me and that I said it’s very important. All right? And you put that paper somewhere so that you’re the only one who sees it. This is between you and me. Okay?”

The boy stares down at the paper, then looks up and nods his assent. Clutching the note, he steps back cautiously, then turns and sprints for the narrow slot between the two houses. Just as he approaches the passageway, he stops and looks back toward the officer standing beside his patrol car, following the boy with his eyes. Again — transfixed, searching — the boy studies the officer’s face. He turns, bolts down the passageway and disappears.

The boy will never call the officer. He will keep the note hidden in a secret place beneath the porch. In those times when he is frightened or when he is thrown out of the house by a raging parent, he will hide beneath the porch and study the note, then grip it tightly while he rocks back and forth in a daze, wondering who he is and what he is doing in the world. The marks on his body are from one kind of man. The paper is from another. What kind of man will he become?

A central focus of childhood is to explore three critical questions, the answers to which will shape who a child is to become: “Who am I?”, “What is the nature of the world?”, and “How should I be in that world?” A child arrives at those answers through experience. As with all children, if a boy’s beginnings are marked by love, safety, warmth, caring touch, and reverence; if he is physically healthy; if his community is nourishing and safe; and if his culture is supportive, he has the opportunity to grow true and strong. If his beginnings are filled with violence and its precursors — terror, exploitation, humiliation, injustice, and neglect — he will be crippled and infected, at risk for transmitting the savagery brought upon him to those now around him. The experience of violence is a defining element in shaping a boy into a man. And, in a majority of instances, men are the purveyors of the most savage forms of violence in the world.

Who are these boys and men who have known and been molded by violence? What has and will become of them? What is it they believe about themselves, their lives? What can be done to ensure that all children coming into the world will never know the horror of violence brought upon them by those charged with their safety and well-being? What can be done to inoculate them against the inevitable exposure to this terrifying disease of the heart and soul? What can be done to help set free those — so terribly many — already ravaged?

The questions eat at me. How can I bear my own sorrow in seeing their struggle — the price for having opened my eyes and my heart to their suffering? The boy on the street corner is one of many males. These are our sons and brothers; our fathers, husbands, and friends — each someone’s child. If I leave them and their sisters to the insanity of violence, if I don’t take it upon myself

to act on their behalf, how will I explain myself to their mothers, to the others who love them? What will I say to those who believed in me and patiently led me away from the bloody fields of my own childhood? What will be the excuse that exempts me — that I paid my dues; that I was too blind, too busy, too uninformed, too removed, too confused, too preoccupied with creating a fortress of comfort and denial for myself? How will I justify my own being in the world? What am I to tell my children? What will you tell yours?

There are boys among us who have been abandoned to the crippling myths of boyhood. There are a number of writers who have explored this insidious legacy in their books about boys and men. These myths are the foundation for central themes in a boy's life: be strong, don't show your feelings, be cool, be tough, and be important. These myths of boyhood annihilate a boy's emotional self. These models, these ideas of who men are and how their world is supposed to be, create a prison for a boy's soul. Boys learn there are severe penalties for being a "sissy" — the code word encompassing the attributes of empathy, dependence, and tenderness. Too rarely are they told, "Be yourself." Instead, they are reminded continually to "be a man" — an absurd and impossible demand upon a boy. This discount and denial of their fundamental being wounds them deeply. They drive their pain inward, cramming it into secret corners of their being where — in time — it will disappear from their awareness. There it will gnaw at them in silence — a cancer producing a fever of powerlessness, weakening the boy's resistance to the seduction of violence. These myths are so widespread that they are commonly considered normal and healthy. Go to a soccer or Little League game and you can hear parents admonish their sons with a tragic litany of shame (all of which I noted one Saturday morning): "don't be a wimp"; "quit complaining"; "get up, damn it, get up and get back in there"; "don't let him push you around;" "are you going to let him beat you?"; and "don't be a cry-baby."

The foundational task of a boy is to grow: in his body, in his learning, in his becoming. To grow he must belong, for without belonging he will not survive. And there is no expression of the life-urge within him without survival. Because he so wants to belong and — seeing, in some measure, that belonging is about doing his part — he does not want to let others down. Not his team nor his friends. Not his teachers or coaches. Especially not his parents — the people directly linked to his identity and survival. He is phobic about being humiliated and he will do most anything to escape that experience. This fear can create within him a breeding ground for rage. That rage — especially during the challenging teenage years — can become savagely self-directed, the ultimate expres-

sion of which is suicide. Compared to girls, six times the number of teenage boys kill themselves.

In America, some boys are immersed in a sea of hostility and insanity, where their talents, abilities, and humanity are crushed under the intolerable weight of racism, poverty, bigotry, superstition, and oppression. They are separated out and denied respect because of the color of their skin, their economic condition, their physical limitations, their education, or their ability to speak English fluently. It makes no sense. They know their skin color, their accent, or the thickness of their wallets have absolutely no bearing on who they are. They are not their circumstances. Their hearts are true, their minds are capable, and they want no special treatment. They want only the opportunities given their more accepted brothers. But they are consistently reminded that they do not fit the images of success projected on television and in films. They do not live in the neighborhoods, visit the vacation spots, drive the cars, dine at the restaurants, wear the clothes, maintain the stock portfolios, or have the other trappings of those personifying success in advertisements, television interviews, or on talk shows. Often, they do not even speak or look like these caricatures.

When they see images of failure — police arresting drug dealers, violent men, or petty criminals — they are too often African-American, Latino, poor, uneducated, or other disenfranchised males. When they are pulled over by police because they are driving in the wrong neighborhood, when cab drivers pass them by to pick up white or well-dressed fares, or when they witness the unspoken yet eloquent expressions of suspicion and hatred directed toward them from “successful people,” they are wounded by the incongruity and injustice. Coupled with the invocations of boyhood, young men growing up within this power-robbing madness can develop a cancerous rage, putting them at risk for the malignancy of the quick, cheap, and momentarily freeing power of violence.

Then there are those among us who are hounded, humiliated, beaten, bullied, and broken — ordinary boys condemned to an extraordinary hell. There are some who fight back against enemies who are bigger, stronger, more powerful, more cunning, and more experienced. But a 40 pound boy is no match for a 124 pound woman or a 187 pound man — in raw strength, prowess, and resources. Some flee — into the night; into hidden spaces under the house or apartment building; into secret places in their minds, safe from an awareness of time, space, and terror; into gangs that offer belonging and improved safety; or into the snake pit of drugs and alcohol. Others freeze and wait for the horror to be over, feeling their bones flexing from the blows, as if in slow motion; each nuance of pain parading past the senses as they remind themselves to be still and wait — it will

be over soon. Sometimes, they hear the cracking sound that echoes up through their young bodies as those bones break. They feel the stinging of wounds moments old, the pressure from the swelling, then the throbbing numbness. They know the iron-taste of blood in their mouths and teeth that the tongue can now move side to side. Sometimes they pray for unconsciousness so that they can sleep unaware through the horror.

They know the smell of hospital disinfectant and the drill with the social workers from the state. They do what they must to live; the life force within them clawing for survival. They lie, bargain, and cower — selling off the precious real-estate of their dignity and self-worth to buy a few more moments of life. Poet William Blake said, “Life delights in life.” Given the opportunity, it does. But negotiating savage terrain, life limits itself to the struggle for sanity, safety, and survival. Violence has happened before and will happen again. It will keep happening until the savagery is stopped. It happens now as your eyes take in these words.

Who will stop the horror? If not you, who? If not now, when? But, of course, this is nasty business. The magnitude of this epidemic stuns us. Is it really that bad? How can that be? This is not something about which we want to know. This is a dark cloud that can rain down upon our otherwise sunny lives. It is a downer, a bummer, an annoyance. Epidemics always are. And this one is particularly unpleasant.

This illness of the soul will tempt you to turn away. It bares its fangs, hisses forth a foul and repellent breath, and relies upon you to recoil — to back away so that it can live on; so that it can replicate itself in those without the physical, emotional, mental, environmental, and/or spiritual immune system strong enough to withstand its onslaught. It depends upon your blindness, aversion, and cowardice to give it life. It even grips those unaware of its presence: their unsuspecting complicity is one measure of its insidious malignancy.

Do not turn your eyes away from this sorrow. There is hope in this, even exhilaration and, ultimately, perhaps some keys to your own freedom. Be patient. We will come to that discussion presently. But first, we must come to know violence for what it is. Only then can we unleash a relentless compassion and the heart of healing upon it.

The chapter continues...