

We need a better masculinity

I stumbled upon a helpful book recently that sheds light on some of the more troubling myths of manliness.

by [Peter W. Marty](#) in the [March 2023](#) issue



Photo by AndreyPopov / iStock / Getty

When NPR correspondent John Burnett retired recently after 36 years, *Weekend Edition* host Scott Simon asked him what lesson he would take away from his years of covering global events. “If I could wave my wand and make one simple change in the world,” said Burnett, it would be to “elect more women leaders. There’s too much testosterone in positions of power. They get us in these foolish, macho, prideful, and unnecessary conflicts over and over and over.” As the interview concluded, I thought to myself: how true.

On the American scene in recent years, millions of men nervous about their loss of cultural centrality have turned to hypermasculine posturing and regressive gender politics. Embracing a tough-talking, White male identity politics probably feels good when you’re losing ground with respect to your share of the population and

electorate. Men who find softness, vulnerability, and feminine perspective inconvenient to their worldview often lean into traditional understandings of manhood that emphasize masculine strength and macho performance. From vigilantes in tactical gear who monitor ballot boxes, LGBTQ events, and even local library board meetings to those who run for office convinced that aggressive masculinity is the only sure way to defend America, plenty of White males seem eager to assert their manhood.

Whatever else the angry mob that stormed the Capitol on January 6 was, it was overwhelmingly White and male—rioters whose own leader’s rhetoric encouraged a combative form of masculinity. “You’ll never take back our country with weakness. You have to show strength and you have to be strong,” President Trump said in his fight-like-hell speech from the Ellipse. It was a day on which Georgia governor Brian Kemp’s small stature was belittled, assorted legislators were labeled wimps, and the vice president was mocked with a misogynistic vulgarity.

I stumbled upon a helpful book recently that sheds light on some of the more troubling myths of manliness: *Jacob’s Shadow: Reimagining Masculinity*, by Herbert Anderson. The author and pastoral theologian uses the biblical Jacob story to offer a vision for a new masculine humanness. Anderson challenges ideologies of male power in which swagger, aggression, tough talk, and the swallowing of tears are regularly extolled. Not until we locate ourselves in Jacob’s flawed humanity, his thirst for power, and his eventual woundedness, argues Anderson, do we have a chance of experiencing God with the depth that Jacob did.

For Anderson, it was the onset of prostate cancer in his own body, a private battle that for many men deeply touches issues of power and potency, that provided the impetus to write the book.

It’s worth noting that men don’t suddenly exhibit stereotypical manliness upon becoming adults. Male power and privilege are socially constructed over time, beginning in adolescence and earlier. Fifteen years ago, I interviewed former NFL defensive tackle Joe Ehrmann, who was then coaching high school football in Baltimore. The three most frightening words in the English language, he told me, are “be a man.” Boys are taught that to “man up” is to control life’s situations and exert power. They start to believe the myths that athletic ability, sexual conquest, and economic success make a man.

But Ehrmann preaches love and humility every chance he gets. He challenges every young male he meets to practice the embodiment of two principles that he believes are fundamental to healthy masculinity: nurturing the capacity to love and be loved, and making the world a fairer place for everyone. Sounds biblical to me.