

# “Positive Masculinity”

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a sermon by Dan Lillie, with Austin Silva and Andrew Mullen  
delivered on October 21, 2018  
at First Unitarian Church of Albuquerque

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## **PART I**

Back in April, Rev. Angela gave a sermon called “Me Too”, in which she pointed out the harmful attitudes and behavior around sexuality, committed mostly by men, that are all too common; and she addressed how the Me Too movement is building momentum and calling for a shift in the culture.

After that sermon, Andrew asked if he could meet with me.

The theme of toxic masculinity had stood out to Andrew in Angela’s sermon, and he had begun seeing that theme playing out in other places around him.

He noticed that the white supremacist rally in Charlottesville was not just white people, it was mostly *young white men* that were screaming and carrying tiki torches.

He noticed in his daily life, how some boys and men would respond to him when he would do little things that were not considered traditionally masculine behaviors.

And noticing these things around him currently, gave him reason to reflect on his past; to consider where his ideas of what it means to be a man, came from. And he was wrestling, not only with where his ideas about masculinity had come from, but also what choices was he making, based on his understanding of what it means to be a man?

So when Andrew and I met to discuss all of this, we agreed that one question in particular from Angela’s sermon stuck out to both of us: “What is being asked of good men these days?”

Andrew Mullen and Austin Silva are two good men. And while there are many good men in this congregation, I invited these two to join me in creating this service today. Our goal is not to definitively answer the question, “what is being asked of good men these days?” Instead, we wanted to respond to the question with stories and reflections, rather than concrete answers; stories and reflections that have shaped our formation as men.

One of the most formative experiences in my life occurred when I wasn't even old enough to realize what was going on. It was the divorce of my parents. And while this may sound like the start to a sad story - it is quite the opposite. Fortunately they parted as friends and I was raised in two harmonious families - a rare blessing for children of divorced parents. This also means that I have two fathers that serve as positive role models for me of what it means to be a man.

My fathers taught me that manliness isn't just acts of overt dominance, but that the most manly actions are those of courage and intentionality. Their guidance, as well as the actions of others who influenced me at a young age, was setting the stage of what I would come to know as healthy behaviors of masculinity and to this day I am still striving to be a better husband, a better son, and a better role model to my fellow men by following their examples.

On my mom's side of the family, I was the youngest of 5 children and was able to learn from the successes and mistakes of my older siblings. But on my dad's side, I was the oldest of the 3 kids. I remember not liking mushrooms because one of my older brothers didn't, and in the same way, I remember my younger brother's interests being shaped by what I liked and didn't like.

He listened to the same music, played some of the same sports, and joined similar after-school activities. In a lot of ways, some of my behaviors were more impactful to him than our father's. I remember many conversations between the two of us where he sought my advice.

Showing him how to grow up and become a man was a coresponsibility of mine since my small pieces of advice added up to what he would learn it meant to be a man. In the past, young boys learned and mimicked behaviors exhibited by those in their relatively small social circles, much as my brothers and I did: fathers, uncles, teachers, classmates. But nowadays, with the advent of the internet and our increasingly hyperconnected world, those social circles are expanding and kids are exposed to a larger spectrum of behaviors from television and social media sites like Facebook and YouTube. And anyone who is a regular on these platforms understands the toxicity that can often be a byproduct.

It's often difficult to parse out a positive signal amongst all this negative noise. So how do we continue to influence the signal being sent out about what defines masculinity? It is not an easy task. It takes courage to become a positive voice when others are not. Yet we must act because we don't want disrespectful actions to become normalized behavior in the absence of positive examples. In preparing for this talk, I asked many of my female colleagues what is being asked of good men these days. And the majority of their comments came down to awareness and asking ourselves the question, how do we treat women when they aren't in the room? In one specific story I was told, the men on a project team were polite when the female boss was around but as soon as she left the room, the male team lead began bad-mouthing her. These behaviors were then picked up by the other team members and the behaviors were normalized.

Unfortunately, this isn't the only story like this I heard, and this doesn't just apply to gender, we need to think about our attitudes toward those of different races, socioeconomic statuses, or belief systems. While simple comments in someone's absence may seem benign at the time, they still have a real impact on those who are present. Our words, even in private, have the power to send either positive or negative signals to others.

What it means to be a man and what is "manly" is not a static idea, it is constantly being redefined and evolving based on the actions that we take - the questions we ask ourselves and the standards we hold others to. As we all help to model and define masculinity going forward, there are three questions that I have been asking myself. I hope you all consider the following questions with me after you leave:

- Who do you look up to and what behaviors of theirs have you adopted?
- Who looks up to you and what behaviors are they adopting from you?
- What are actions that you have normalized even though you disagree with them; and what will you do next time you find yourself facing behavior by other men that you know to be unacceptable?

I have found that life becomes more difficult as I become more self-aware, but it gives me the opportunity to challenge the status quo and my own beliefs. By starting with the practice of deliberate awareness - listening to others, internalizing their struggles and concerns, and understanding my own actions...I am hoping to change my own behavior to create a better reality.

## Expectations

Andrew Mullen

My father defies some expectations. He taught for years at a military school. He's a big, stocky guy who loves woodworking and occasionally goes hunting.

He cries at stuff. Weddings. Christmas pageants. A scene from the film *Fantasia 2000* where a flying whale reunites with its family beneath the aurora borealis. Now, that last one sounds a bit strange. I certainly thought it did as a kid. I didn't see the underlying reasons for those tears: themes of family togetherness, empathy, caring. I just thought my dad was weird.

And at the time, I didn't think of his emotionality as a positive thing, as a powerful example that expanded the bounds of quote-unquote "acceptable" masculinity. He was just... an irregularity, an outlier from the clear rules on how men are supposed to be.

Where did I learn how men are supposed to be? Kids at school. Mass media... I have trouble remembering specifics, because that's how societal expectations work. We absorb them from a million data points - it's in the cultural air we breathe. My cultural air was that of white, heterosexual, rural American men. As such, I knew from an early age that men should be physically strong, skilled, capable, and in control of their emotions.. And what's more, that they didn't do "girly" stuff. Because for so often and for so long, masculinity has been defined in part in opposition to femininity.

Which means at 5 years old, when a Barbie animated film caught my eye at the store, I already *knew* that wasn't for me, and I expected an emphatic "no" when I asked if I could rent it.

Which means at 15 years old, when my sophomore science teacher was disciplining the class, I knew, in all my teenage wisdom, the reason for what I perceived as her bad mood. Men are in control of their emotions, I knew, but I understood that if that control slips if they're angry, well, that's ok. But not for women, said that same teenage wisdom, spun out of so many absorbed expectations. Women's anger is usually irrational, less controlled.

So I knew why our teacher was upset, and I shared that reason with the friend next to me. Sitting in the front row, I leaned over and said in vulgar and very clear terms that our teacher must be menstruating. She overheard, of course. I was in the front row. To her immense credit, she took me into the hall and explained why what I had just said was rude, unacceptable, and how it undermined her agency. And while I heard those

words, and I felt ashamed, it took years for that lesson to really sink in. Because like my dad's tears, that one interaction was just a single data point in contrast to so many others informing my views on gender norms.

Fast forward. I'm 25 years old, working the loading dock at a college bookstore. Plaid shirt. Sensible pants. Heavy boots. Big beard. Flesh-tone fingernails, but we'll get back to that. This style of dress fits certain masculine expectations, expectations that informed my social interactions with the predominantly male truck drivers and delivery personnel I encountered. Since we were all blue collar types with our beards and flannel, just a couple of guys getting through the day, we had a common social script. Small talk about our families, weather. Sports, guns.

Women. Not that I was comfortable with the subject, but it's part of the script.

One driver is particularly secure in this social script, in this shared masculine viewpoint. He jokes about how he's requested an attractive female assistant to **lighten his workload**. He jokes, when the receipt paper roll on his manifest printer is running low, when it's got that tell-tale red stripe down the middle—he jokes that the machine is menstruating. Because it's causing him unexpected problems. Because it's OK to equate women and objects. Because I'm just one of the guys, so it's safe for him to say that around me.

And I didn't say anything, didn't follow my sophomore teacher's example. I should have, but I didn't. Because that's another expectation men absorb—you shouldn't correct that sort of thing. Respecting people enough to not dehumanize them, asking others to do the same? That's not a fundamental part of what it means to be a man, and pushing against that idea when it comes up in conversations betrays those shared masculine expectations.

So what *should* it mean to be a man? My views on that have changed over the years, and I'm still figuring it out. But I know that so many of the masculine expectations I absorbed early in life felt restrictive. Why shouldn't I be able to cry? I don't like sports, or going to the gym—why should I put extra effort into strength training? Why shouldn't I question gender assumptions when they come up in conversation? Why shouldn't I push for a more expansive view of masculinity, of gender itself, that doesn't take basic human experiences like emotion or vocation and put them in little boxes marked "man" or "woman?" Why restrict things to two boxes when we know gender identity and expression are more complex—that

there aren't just two genders? With work, we can expand freedom of expression.

Part of that work rests on my fingernails. I paint 'em. I realize it's traditionally feminine, and I like how it looks. Because I also like how traditionally masculine fashion looks, my nails are a strong visual outlier, one more data point that might inform someone's conception of masculinity. Something that might spark a conversation. What if enough men have those conversations, consider their conceptions of masculinity, and question societal expectations? Maybe we can lift some of the traditional restrictions around masculine life, like the idea that we shouldn't reach out when we need help, or discuss our pains and our problems.

Maybe we can turn outliers into common data points that inform a broader, more expansive view of masculinity, a view with room for all kinds of men.

## **PART II**

Times such as these call men to do exactly the kind of wrestling that Andrew and Austin are doing, although you're not expected to do it quite so publicly, from the pulpit.

But we do need to do it together, in community.

Identity formation doesn't happen in a vacuum. We do not disappear to some remote and distant place to design and create our selves, and then emerge fully formed.

Identity formation happens in community, in our interactions with other humans; because we cannot understand the fullness of what it means to be human in isolation. There is just too much of the human experience we miss out on. We are relational beings. We know ourselves in relation to others.

And so, when it comes to understanding what it means to be a man, and what good men are being called to do, we need each other. And I don't mean men just need other men to figure it out.

We need to hear women. We need to *listen* to women. In our patriarchal society, men have had the power for, well, forever. If we wanted to fix the oppression and mistreatment of women, we would have done it by now. My suspicion is that men haven't fixed it because we don't want to, because we don't really want to give up our privilege.

But isn't that exactly what is being asked of good men? To use our privilege to dismantle the system that gave it to us? The system that is hurting women, People of Color, LGBTQ people, and people with disabilities?

The system works in sneaky ways sometimes.

The story that Austin shared about a female boss being bad-mouthed by her male employees when she wasn't around is an example of a phenomenon called the "backstage". Robin DeAngelo talks about this in her book *White Fragility*. The backstage describes the way people of a dominant group act when members of the minority group are not present. When the dynamic is racial, DiAngelo notes that white people act one way when People of Color are in the room, but then very differently when the company is all white. And what happens in the backstage serves to powerfully reinforce oppressive racial attitudes among whites, because to participate in the demeaning banter is to gain acceptance, while speaking up threatens one's place in the social order. This is one of the ways that "whiteness" is learned. And similarly, masculinity is learned, with many of the lessons taking place in the backstage.

When elected officials make boastful claims of sexual harassment and assault and then dismiss them as "locker room banter" they excuse and normalize bad behavior. This is an example of the backstage dynamic playing out. It is powerful, and it is dangerous.

So men: what are we going to do about this?

Remember when I told you we wouldn't have concrete answers? Well here are three concrete *suggestions*:

1) Call out men's bad behavior when you encounter it. Shine the light on the backstage and take the power out of social bonding at someone else's expense. Don't allow toxic masculinity to be normalized.

1.5) After you call them out, then try calling them in. Invite the men in your life to live a better version of masculinity that doesn't reward dominance, conquest, and the suppression of emotions.

2) Listen to Women! Believe women! Support women! We men have a long way to go to earn their trust, and we have a long history of men behaving badly to make up for. With every opportunity, show women that you care for and respect them. And this starts with listening.

3) Engage often in reflection about what it means to be a man, and what you as a good man are called to do.

How will you be a model of positive masculinity?

[PAUSE]

This is ongoing work. We are never finished. And as we engage in it, remember that we are not alone. Every once in a while, we all need somebody to lean on. Let's support each other as we all do the work of being better humans.