

Disappearing Act

Where Have the Men Gone? No Place Good

By Michael Gurian

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In the 1990s, I taught for six years at a small liberal arts college in Spokane, Wash. In my third year, I started noticing something that was happening right in front of me. There were more young women in my classes than young men, and on average, they were getting better grades than the guys. Many of the young men stared blankly at me as I lectured. They didn't take notes as well as the young women. They didn't seem to care as much about what I taught -- literature, writing and psychology. They were bright kids, but many of their faces said, "Sitting here, listening, staring at these words -- this is not really who I am."

That was a decade ago, but just last month, I spoke with an administrator at Howard University in the District. He told me that what I observed a decade ago has become one of the "biggest agenda items" at Howard. "We are having trouble recruiting and retaining male students," he said. "We are at about a 2-to-1 ratio, women to men."

Howard is not alone. Colleges and universities across the country are grappling with the case of the mysteriously vanishing male. Where men once dominated, they now make up no more than 43 percent of students at American institutions of higher learning, according to 2003 statistics, and this downward trend shows every sign of continuing unabated. If we don't reverse it soon, we will gradually diminish the male identity, and thus the productivity and the mission, of the next generation of young men, and all the ones that follow.

The trend of females overtaking males in college was initially measured in 1978. Yet despite the well-documented disappearance of ever more young men from college campuses, we have yet to fully react to what has become a significant crisis. Largely, that is because of cultural perceptions about males and their societal role. Many times a week, a reporter or other media person will ask me: "Why should we care so much about boys when men still run everything?"

It's a fair and logical question, but what it really reflects is that our culture is still caught up in old industrial images. We still see thousands of men who succeed quite well in the professional world and in industry -- men who get elected president, who own software companies, who make six figures selling cars. We see the Bill Gateses and John Robertses and George Bushes -- and so we're not as concerned as we ought to be about the millions of young men who are floundering or lost.

But they're there: The young men who are working in the lowest-level (and most dangerous) jobs instead of going to college. Who are sitting in prison instead of going to college. Who are staying out of the long-term marriage pool because they have little to offer to young women. Who are remaining adolescents, wasting years of their lives

playing video games for hours a day, until they're in their thirties, by which time the world has passed many of them by.

The old industrial promise -- "That guy will get a decent job no matter what" -- is just that, an old promise. So is the old promise that a man will be able to feed his family and find personal meaning by "following in his father's footsteps," which has vanished for millions of males who are not raised with fathers or substantial role models. The old promise that an old boys' network will always come through for "the guys" is likewise gone for many young men who have never seen and will never see such a network (though they may see a dangerous gang). Most frightening, the old promise that schools will take care of boys and educate them to succeed is also breaking down, as boys dominate the failure statistics in our schools, starting at the elementary level and continuing through high school.

Of course, not every male has to go to college to succeed, to be a good husband, to be a good and productive man. But a dismal future lies ahead for large numbers of boys in this generation who will not go to college. Statistics show that a young man who doesn't finish school or go to college in 2005 will likely earn less than half what a college graduate earns. He'll be three times more likely to be unemployed and more likely to be homeless. He'll be more likely to get divorced, more likely to engage in violence against women and more likely to engage in crime. He'll be more likely to develop substance abuse problems and to be a greater burden on the economy, statistically, since men who don't attend college pay less in Social Security and other taxes, depend more on government welfare, are more likely to father children out of wedlock and are more likely not to pay child support.

When I worked as a counselor at a federal prison, I saw these statistics up close. The young men and adult males I worked with were mainly uneducated, had been raised in families that didn't promote education, and had found little of relevance in the schools they had attended. They were passionate people, capable of great love and even possible future success. Many of them told me how much they wanted to get an education. At an intuitive level, they knew how important it was.

Whether in the prison system, in my university classes or in the schools where I help train teachers, I have noticed a systemic problem with how we teach and mentor boys that I call "industrial schooling," and that I believe is a primary root of our sons' falling behind in school, and quite often in life.

Two hundred years ago, realizing the necessity of schooling millions of kids, we took them off the farms and out of the marketplace and put them in large industrial-size classrooms (one teacher, 25 to 30 kids). For many kids, this system worked -- and still works. But from the beginning, there were some for whom it wasn't working very well. Initially, it was girls. It took more than 150 years to get parity for them.

Now we're seeing what's wrong with the system for millions of boys. Beginning in very early grades, the sit-still, read-your-book, raise-your-hand-quietly, don't-learn-by-doing-

but-by-taking-notes classroom is a worse fit for more boys than it is for most girls. This was always the case, but we couldn't see it 100 years ago. We didn't have the comparative element of girls at par in classrooms. We taught a lot of our boys and girls separately. We educated children with greater emphasis on certain basic educational principles that kept a lot of boys "in line" -- competitive learning was one. And our families were deeply involved in a child's education.

Now, however, the boys who don't fit the classrooms are glaringly clear. Many families are barely involved in their children's education. Girls outperform boys in nearly every academic area. Many of the old principles of education are diminished. In a classroom of 30 kids, about five boys will begin to fail in the first few years of pre-school and elementary school. By fifth grade, they will be diagnosed as learning disabled, ADD/ADHD, behaviorally disordered or "unmotivated." They will no longer do their homework (though they may say they are doing it), they will disrupt class or withdraw from it, they will find a few islands of competence (like video games or computers) and overemphasize those.

Boys have a lot of Huck Finn in them -- they don't, on average, learn as well as girls by sitting still, concentrating, multitasking, listening to words. For 20 years, I have been taking brain research into homes and classrooms to show teachers, parents and others how differently boys and girls learn. Once a person sees a PET or SPECT scan of a boy's brain and a girl's brain, showing the different ways these brains learn, they understand. As one teacher put it to me, "Wow, no wonder we're having so many problems with boys."

Yet every decade the industrial classroom becomes more and more protective of the female learning style and harsher on the male, yielding statistics such as these:

The majority of National Merit scholarships, as well as college academic scholarships, go to girls and young women.

Boys and young men comprise the majority of high school dropouts, as high as 80 percent in many cities.

Boys and young men are 1 1/2 years behind girls and young women in reading ability (this gap does not even out in high school, as some have argued; a male reading/writing gap continues into college and the workplace).

The industrial classroom is one that some boys do fine in, many boys just "hang on" in, many boys fall behind in, many boys fail in, and many boys drop out of. The boys who do fine would probably do fine in any environment, and the boys who are hanging on and getting by will probably re-emerge later with some modicum of success, but the millions who fall behind and fail will generally become the statistics we saw earlier.

Grasping the mismatch between the minds of boys and the industrial classroom is only the first step in understanding the needs of our sons. Lack of fathering and male role

models take a heavy toll on boys, as does lack of attachment to many family members (whether grandparents, extended families, moms or dads). Our sons are becoming very lonely. And even more politically difficult to deal with: The boys-are-privileged-but-the-girls-are-shortchanged emphasis of the last 20 years (an emphasis that I, as a father of two daughters and an advocate of girls, have seen firsthand), has muddied the water for child development in general, pitting funding for girls against funding for boys.

We still barely see the burdens our sons are carrying as we change from an industrial culture to a post-industrial one. We want them to shut up, calm down and become perfect intimate partners. It doesn't matter too much who boys and men are -- what matters is who we think they should be. When I think back to the kind of classroom I created for my college students, I feel regret for the males who dropped out. When I think back to my time working in the prison system, I feel a deep sadness for the present and future generations of boys whom we still have time to save.

And I do think we can save them. I get hundreds of e-mails and letters every week, from parents, teachers and others who are beginning to realize that we must do for our sons what we did for our daughters in the industrialized schooling system -- realize that boys are struggling and need help. These teachers and parents are part of a social movement -- a boys' movement that started, I think, about 10 years ago. It's a movement that gets noticed for brief moments by the media (when Columbine happened, when Laura Bush talked about boys) and then goes underground again. It's a movement very much powered by individual women -- mainly mothers of sons -- who say things to me like the e-mailers who wrote, "I don't know anyone who doesn't have a son struggling in school," or, "I thought having a boy would be like having a girl, but when my son was born, I had to rethink things."

We all need to rethink things. We need to stop blaming, suspecting and overly medicating our boys, as if we can change this guy into the learner we want. When we decide -- as we did with our daughters -- that there isn't anything inherently wrong with our sons, when we look closely at the system that boys learn in, we will discover these boys again, for all that they are. And maybe we'll see more of them in college again.

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