

# Toward a New Boyhood

From toxic masculinity to feminist overreach, angry white men to benevolent sexism, #HimToo to #TimesUp, American manhood is in disarray. Into the fray steps Michael Reichert, with a blueprint for raising the next generation right.

By Trey Popp

When he was a freshman in high school, Michael Reichert GEd'79 Gr'84 devised a singular method of battling boredom in algebra class. He and a classmate—another boy—started playing a “game” beneath their desks. Wearing hard-soled shoes, they would take turns kicking one another in the shin. The rules were simple. If you yelped loud enough to draw the teacher’s attention, you lost, and if you declined to deliver a kick after receiving one, you forfeited. Defeat, in other words, came in as many varieties as there are human responses to pain. The only way to win was by not losing.

The lurid bruises and scabbed-over cuts that soon lined their legs became tattoos of a kind of brotherhood. They broadcast a succinct warning to anyone who cared to look: *Just try me. I dare you.*

The audience for that message was more or less every other boy in their Wilmington, Delaware, high school.

“There were gangs,” Reichert recalls, “smoking in the bathroom, drug and alcohol use, and a well-defined hierarchy in which the bigger and meaner guys ruled. There was also the new phenomenon of the mob, when groups of boys spontaneously circled around two boys fighting, jeering, and egging them on.”

Reichert was not a troublemaker, but he was deeply steeped in the ways of young men. Born in 1952 to a mother who would bear six children in eight years, Michael relished being the second of five boys. “My brother was one year and six days older than me,” he says. “So I could kind of peg what I was trying to do against what he was doing.” They swam with and against one another, played one-on-one on the driveway basketball hoop, and let few chances for competition pass them by. Michael wasn’t a big kid, but that didn’t stop him from throwing the shot put on his middle school track team (alongside a six-foot-two eighth-grader nicknamed “The Beast”).

“We were a pretty boisterous crew,” he says of his brothers. Their lone sister, he recalls, used to wake up from nightmares, screaming, “The boys are going to kick me out!”

“We weren’t,” he chuckles, “but I think she definitely perceived an imbalance in the culture of the family.”

Athletics were a mainstay. Reichert came to specialize in tennis and other racquet sports, much like his father, an attorney at DuPont who picked up squash in adulthood and became a state champion. “He was very, very competitive,” Michael says, “but in a wonderful kind of way.” The elder Reichert was not the kind of man who let his children win. “It probably took me two years longer than it actually should have to beat him,” Michael reflects. “It wasn’t that I was afraid,” he continues, musing about the dynamic between them. “I think I didn’t want to do that to him—it was that burden of not upending the hierarchy. I remember that



when I finally resolved that I was going to play my game, and I did beat him, there was a little bit of an edge to it. Like I was tired of something—some domination that was built into the relationship. I was just hitting that age, you know—14, 15.”

By happenstance, the du Pont family had helped establish one of the country’s top badminton clubs in Wilmington, and Michael became a standout junior competitor, winning national championships at 15, 17, and 18.

Like the rest of the sports world, the Wilmington badminton scene “was very hierarchical,” recalls John Irwin GEd’83, a fellow competitor who was two years younger than Reichert: “Better was better, worse was worse.” Reichert “was really one of the hotshots,” Irwin says, and popularity flowed from his prowess.

In fact, anywhere traditional masculinity conferred rewards, Reichert seemed to thrive. “I loved being physical,” he recalls. “I was president of my class in grade school and successful academically, athletically, and socially. And I think I just kind of internalized something: everybody told me I was a winner, from second grade on. They sort out boys, you know, into those kinds of categories. There are winners, losers, and this great mass of anonymous boys in the middle ... [and] I was a winner.”

**W**hen I encounter him for the first time, in the atrium of the Haverford School, a private, all-boys K–12 school on Philadelphia’s Main Line, Reichert exudes the laidback self-assurance of a man long habituated to success and still keenly attuned to the athletic side of life. Greeting me with direct but friendly eye contact, he firmly shakes my hand, sizes me up, and poses a question I was last asked 25 years ago, as a lanky but athletic college freshman spotted across a quadrangle by an overeager coach with a roster vacancy to fill: Did I row lightweight crew?

No, I chuckle, but I still hold my own on the basketball court—and the two of

us sink comfortably into the safest conversational territory that exists for newly acquainted American males. Or for men who’ve known each other their entire lives, for that matter.

I’d sought out Reichert, a psychologist who has spent most of his 35-year career studying and counseling boys and young men, because in April he’d published a book that sums up everything he has come to believe: *How to Raise a Boy: The Power of Connection to Build Good Men* (TarcherPerigee, 2019).

It joins a crowded field. At a moment rife with lamentations that modern masculinity is in crisis—poisoned either by its own toxicity or by a feminized society’s overreactive intolerance of manly virtues—there is no shortage of manuals promising the one true way. Many, probably most, offer prescriptions that would have been familiar to parents and educators 30 years ago—and 30 years before that, and in fact at almost any time since the late 19th century, when technological and economic changes began to turn longstanding assumptions about family life and childhood upside down. (Adolescence, for instance, was not recognized as a developmental phase until the first decade of the 20th century, coincident with the expansion of universal education and the first national campaigns against child labor.)

In 2019, the most prominent purveyor of advice for young men is the Canadian psychologist Jordan Peterson, whose bestselling *12 Rules for Life* exhorts readers to “stand up straight with your shoulders back,” posits that men are inherently “less agreeable” than women (which is why men have historically amassed more wealth and power), and recommends projecting an aura of invulnerability and latent threat as the surest way to ward off actual violence. Peterson, who posits that boys are biologically “driven to escape their families,” is just one of many masculinity gurus who valorize toughness, self-reliance, and a stoic acceptance of one’s own suffering. In *Raising Men: From Fathers to Sons—Life Lessons from Navy*

*SEAL Training*, Eric Davis outlines parenting drills including “tying the hands and legs of my kids together and throwing them into a pool.” Less gung-ho but more numerous are authors who seek models in the Bible, often seen through the prism of “muscular Christianity.” A favorite anecdote that’s broadly emblematic of such tomes is a story told about Theodore Roosevelt’s pre-presidential days as a Sunday School teacher. As originally related by the Danish-American journalist Jacob Riis, when one of Roosevelt’s pupils turned up to class with a black eye and confessed to have gotten into a fistfight—on the sabbath day no less—Roosevelt pressed for more detail. It emerged that the combatant’s sister had been pinched by another boy, so afterward “they had a stand-up fight and he punched him good, bearing away the black eye as his share.” Roosevelt’s swift verdict continues to inspire admiration in certain quarters 150 years later: “You did perfectly right,” said the future president, and gave the boy a dollar.

Given the way Reichert emerged from the forge of his own boyhood—with scarred shins but a shelf full of trophies—it’s easy to see why he’d see fit to toss his own hat into this ring. But his ideas about how to build boys into good men run along a different track. Just how different becomes clear a few minutes after he leads me into a room packed with about 40 high school juniors and seniors, a great many of whom are instantly recognizable from my own adolescence: well-rounded jocks bound for selective colleges and, in a few cases, Division I sports.

I might as well have stepped into a time machine—only one that erases all the girls from my own high school. But what transpires over the next hour is unlike anything I ever experienced in my youth—or, if I’m being honest, my adulthood. Placing faith in a code of confidentiality that binds their peers (and me) from exporting any topic broached inside the room to the outside world, one by one each young man sits at the head of a long table and opens his heart in front of the

group. Some open wider than others, to be sure, and often the emotions that tumble out are still armored with a layer of deflective humor or self-deprecation, but the exercise is frequently remarkable. Reichert has been running these weekly peer counseling sessions for nearly 30 years. The explicit goal is to develop “emotional literacy.” Typically the boys pair off to take turns talking and listening to one another, and then one or two of them get a chance to hold the entire room’s attention to get things off their chest. But this happens to be the final session of the school year, so instead each graduating senior takes a shorter turn at

the head of the table to express himself to his peers one last time, and, as Reichert puts it, “say goodbye.”

The manner in which they do so ranges from bracing, occasionally hard-edged candor to halting, openly tearful sincerity. Over and over, Reichert places his hand on the speaker’s shoulder and says things like, “Slow down,” “Let yourself *feel* it,” “That’s good—now how does it *feel*?”

Many express relief at having found a setting in which they could let down their guard, talking through anxieties and fears and fuckups—and discovering that their vulnerabilities made them more like most of their classmates, not less.

“I know this sounds cliché,” a senior named Jesse Goldman tells me afterward, “but there really is a pressure in society for guys to act a certain way: be stoic, be tough, don’t show emotion. I’m not saying that every kid that walks into peer counseling is required to bawl his eyes out in front of everybody, but we’re not taught to think about our emotions. We’re taught to push them away and keep going. We’re taught to be these productive machines that just continue to do what’s in front of us, get it done, don’t worry about other things.”

When he started attending the peer counseling sessions (which the school of-



fers on a voluntary basis), it was mainly to get things off his own chest. “It helped me look at myself in a vulnerable manner, and see where I can improve and become a better person, or friend, or whatever it may be,” he says. The sessions helped him realize that “it’s OK to recognize a weakness in yourself—if anything it’s helpful, because your ability then to attack that weakness and make yourself as good a person as possible is much improved when you know what that weakness is, and you’re not just rejecting it and denying and pushing it away.”

Admitting vulnerability, or indeed any emotion at all, is a risky business, Goldman reflects. He recalls one of the annual sessions to which underclassmen are invited to learn about the program. “With the younger kids, we do this thing where one person goes up to the front of the room, and we start off just by saying things we appreciate about them. Like there was this kid in math class I didn’t know very well, but I talked about how when I was struggling, he could tell when something was wrong with me, and would offer help even when it wasn’t convenient for him,” he explains. “Well, when we did that with our sophomores, not a *single one* of them raised their hands when the guy was at the front of the room.

“And I don’t think that’s because they hate each other,” he adds. “I just think they don’t know how. We’re never taught how. Think back to when you were a kid—were you ever taught to, like: *Let me think about him and what I like about him?* No, because you think you’re being weird. But it’s just being able to think emotionally and show your appreciation for another person.”

Self-interest initially drove Goldman to Reichert’s peer counseling sessions, but after a while his motivation changed. “Even if I didn’t have much to talk about that week, I started feeling obligated to be there for other people,” he says. “Rarely in our lives are we able to just find a person that’s going to just sit there and listen to us. With your friends, they’re going to bust

your chops, and with your parents they’re going to try to give you advice ... Originally, peer counseling was great for me, and my character, and my friendships, and my life, but the further you go, you realize that you’re there not just for yourself, but for everybody else in the room.

“Boys aren’t born into being stoic and nonreactive and tough, they’re nurtured that way,” he declares, before effectively distilling Reichert’s book into a single sentence. “Boys, just as much as girls or anybody, need the care and love and affection that parents give and the support that friends give.”

Reichert’s boyhood mastery of the masculine code may have put him in the center lane toward individual success, but it also afforded sobering views of the wreckage on the roadside. The year he spent trading below-the-desk blows in algebra class turned out to be more memorable for a different reason. That spring, one of his classmates—“a very quiet fellow I knew only by name”—fell prey to a mob near the exit of the school gymnasium. Peering through the crowd, Reichert watched the boy crumple to the ground as a guy from Reichert’s regular lunch table kicked him without mercy.

The victim died that night from head trauma sustained in the beating. Reichert asked his parents to transfer him to a different school for the next year, and they did. But the escape was only partial. “The new school lessened the more immediate threat,” he writes, “but did not diminish the background noise of young men looking for trouble.”

Just how easy trouble was to find became clear during his first job after college, as a counselor in the juvenile presentencing unit of Delaware’s state family court. There he encountered a “deluge of adolescent males caught up in various delinquencies: stealing, fighting, not attending school, running away from home, robbery, car theft, and even homicide.”

As he struggled to make sense of what had happened to all these boys—and why

it always seemed to be *boys*—Reichert suffered a more intimate blow. One spring night his family’s doorbell rang at two in the morning. One of Reichert’s younger brothers, who had become alienated from family and school during a booze- and drug-filled adolescence, had recently turned 18. “Things had begun to look up” for him, Reichert recalls, but now a policeman was on the doorstep asking if this was his brother’s residence. He’d gone out on a bender with a friend, and their bodies had just been extracted from a fiery car wrapped around a tree trunk.

“While my brother clung to life in the hospital intensive care unit,” Reichert writes, “I grappled with what was happening. There was a common thread—an unspoken tragedy—at work in both my brother’s and my clients’ stories: their maleness. In each case, a confounded sense of self, some degree of numbness and cluelessness, disconnection and mental isolation, lay behind choices that ranged from self-defeating to self-destructive.

“Each was affected by a Darwinian masculine code,” Reichert concluded, “that is corrosive for their human development, their virtue, and their well-being.”

Reichert’s brother died from the crash. Grim fates awaited many of the young men he encountered in family court. Reichert came to trace his brother’s demise to his father’s alcoholism, which had deprived the younger siblings of the filial connection Michael had forged with his dad partly through racquet sports, and which Reichert believed had a distinctively masculine flavor. “He’d been a frat guy at University of Michigan. He’d been in World War II on Guam, and they drank their asses off all through the war,” he says. “What I came to believe underlay his getting lost in the numbing effect was that he was lonely. And he was lonely in a masculine way ... My dad just didn’t know how to really level with people about what was going on for him. And I think that he ached with loneliness.”

Looking back, Reichert realized that his father, for want of sufficiently genuine

friendships with peers (including, to some degree, his wife), had over-relied on “his kids—me in particular—to know him.”

“My dad used to confide in me,” he recalls, about anxieties that seemed awfully heavy to lay on a kid. “I always remember noting that he probably shouldn’t be telling me this stuff—I wasn’t in a position to do anything. Except I could tell he just didn’t tell anybody else.”

**E**arlier this spring, an article by Melanie Hamlett in *Harper’s Bazaar* went viral on the strength of its title alone: “Men Have No Friends and Women Bear the Burden.” “The persistent idea that feelings are a ‘female thing,’” it argued, “has left a generation of straight men stranded on an emotionally-stunted island, unable to forge intimate relationships with other men. It’s women who are paying the price.”

Reichert would nod, but add: and men too.

As he entered his own adulthood, Reichert realized that he was so habituated to dismissing his own feelings that he couldn’t even remember the last time he’d expressed emotion. “In fact, I could not remember a single time that someone had asked me how I felt—not my parents, teachers, coaches, or even my friends,” he writes. “If emotional intelligence consists of grasping feelings with awareness and coding them with language, I had become functionally illiterate.”

After college he’d gotten into Georgetown Law—“my parents had always counted on me being a lawyer”—but decided to decamp to Canada instead. With a copy of Paul Goodman’s *Growing Up Absurd* in his rucksack, he made his way by train to a town he’d picked off a map: Kamloops, British Columbia. It was a scruffy logging and mining outpost, and he rolled into it in October, without a plan. “What the hell am I doing here?” he asked himself as soon as the reality hit him. He wandered aimlessly for a couple days, and then a chance encounter led him to a nearby Anglican retreat called the Sorrento Centre for Human

## “Traditional masculinity is being disrupted. The present generation understands it doesn’t work.”

Development. There, in a “personal growth group” inspired by Fritz Perls’s Gestalt therapy, Reichert experienced an awakening.

“Although I was intellectually adventurous, I was pretty straight and conventional,” he says, so it felt a little strange when a bearded hippie who “literally looked like John the Baptist” came up behind him in a tiny room, bore down on Reichert’s shoulders with his hands, and told him to close his eyes.

“What do you see?” the man asked. Reichert didn’t see anything but tried to play along. “I said, ‘Well, I feel like I see red, like a red haze or something.’” Then, in a flash, he snapped. A blade of pent-up emotion seemed to cleave his body from his brain’s taut grip. “And I swear, the next thing I knew, I had exploded and thrown him across the room.”

Reichert had no idea what had overcome him. But obviously something had. Afterward he paced the shoreline of Shuswap Lake, whose banks were littered with spent salmon carcasses from the prodigious autumn spawning run. “It was a brilliant sunny afternoon. And the blue looked bluer. The yellow looked more yellow. Everything was vivid and sharp. And I realized something had changed in me,” he says. “I felt looser and freer and more alive. And I had no understanding of what had happened—what the connection was—but I was certainly intrigued to explore it.”

Reichert abandoned the idea of law school to pursue a master’s degree in education at Penn, where he also went on to earn a doctorate in psychology. He got back into badminton, often playing with John Irwin; the pair competed in doubles in the US Open one year.

Irwin noticed something different in his friend.

“We would go to bars together after we played, and he would really like to talk about things—sort of raise issues: What do you care about? What are you interested in?” Irwin says. “I was not used to that. I grew up in a place where we just didn’t talk about any of those things—*How do you feel?* It was almost like I didn’t even know you could do that.”

It unveiled a new vista for Irwin. “I don’t know what made him be interested,” he says of Reichert’s urge for intimacy. “I know what made *me* get more interested was somebody asking.”

During his master’s studies at Penn, Reichert took a job as a counselor for several Catholic schools in North Philadelphia. “Often these guys were experiencing domestic violence, alcoholism, street violence,” he recalls. “And there was some way I was prepared to recognize the vulnerability of these boys as a developmental problem. ... There was nobody really connecting with them, and I could.”

He did that for seven years. After completing his doctorate he worked for a year in an adolescent dual-diagnosis unit in a psychiatric hospital, and then opened a private practice. Not long after hanging his shingle, the Haverford School invited Reichert to give a talk about chemical dependency prevention. The “Darwinian culture” he found there, at the tail end of the 1980s, was all too familiar. “They were all about building leaders. And people who had learning problems, or behavioral or emotional problems ... they believed that if a boy needed help of that kind, they were in the wrong school—they didn’t have the right stuff.”

The talk led to an intervention with a high-profile student struggling with drug use, and ultimately to an invitation by the school to create what became the peer counseling program. It was just the

opening Reichert—who'd recently had a son of his own (the first of two)—had been waiting for.

"One of my first jobs was to do a literature review," he recalls. "What do we know about boys' development and boys' education? And what was out there was pure ideology masquerading as science ... People purporting to know what a boy was, what a man is, but mostly because they felt strongly about it.

"There's still a lot of that out there," he says, a "whole gang that argues that, for men, biology is destiny. You know: we're just dominated by hormones and anatomical structures that determine our fate: we are more feral. We're more aggressive. We're aversive to intimacy ... It's not true, but these folks are so deeply invested in that—Michael Gurian and Leonard Sax [M'86 Gr'86] and a whole gang that has built an industry arguing that boys are just different biologically, and that it's determinative."

For educators hoping to raise student achievement by tailoring instruction to different "learning styles," these thought-leaders offered an attractively straightforward solution: teach girls one way, and boys another. Sexual differences in brain wiring and development demanded it. When teaching *Lord of the Flies*, for instance, a question like "How would you feel if you were Piggy?" is an excellent prompt—for girls. But a teacher was likelier to engage boys by asking them to draw maps of William Golding's fictional island. Some of the neurological evidence buttressing these arguments was thin—Sax's case that human boys and girls literally "see the world differently," for instance, relied on findings about sexual differences in the retinal thickness of rats—but footnote sources mattered only so much in a country that had snapped up 15 million copies of *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus*.

Reichert, who in 2005 founded the Center for the Study of Boys' and Girls' Lives (which is independent but has enjoyed an institutional affiliation with the Graduate School of Education), aligns

with neuroscientists who emphasize the plasticity of the human brain.

"We build neural connections in plastic brains, depending on our experience," he says. "And if we don't talk to boys about their feelings, if we don't let them code feelings with language, naturally their brains are going to reflect those differences."

Reichert isn't the only one who laments the continued popularity of the "learning style" approach to pedagogy. In 2017, as a part of the UK's Brain Awareness Week, a group of 30 eminent neuroscientists, psychologists, and education professors signed a letter blasting it as a "neuromyth" that is "detrimental to learning."

In *How to Raise a Boy*, Reichert contends that if there's a secret to educating boys, it lies firmly in a realm stereotypically regarded as the special preserve of girls: interpersonal relationships. He describes a series of studies he conducted with Richard Hawley under the auspices of the International Boys' Schools Coalition. Surveying some 2,500 adolescent males and 2,000 of their teachers from 40 schools of all types across six English-speaking countries, they straightforwardly asked what had been effective in the classroom. To a large degree the students' and teachers' answers overlapped—with one significant exception. "Teachers focused on the craft of the lessons and spoke in technical language about them," Reichert writes. "But boys discussed the qualities and personalities of the teachers themselves." Remarkably, the boys did so against the explicit instructions of the survey. "Even though our directions had specifically asked them not to mention names, boys could not resist identifying the teacher or coach who had changed their lives and describing him or her in great, colorful detail."

In follow-up studies aimed at elucidating what, exactly, those teachers were doing to foster such connections, Reichert and Hawley concluded that, along with things like subject mastery and responsiveness to a student's personal interest or talent, the most effec-

tive teachers also tended to exercise restraint or humor when responding to oppositional behavior, and showed a "willingness to reveal vulnerability."

If boys are "relational learners," as Reichert insists, what does that mean for educators? For starters, it means jettisoning the notion that boys simply aspire to stoic self-reliance. It also means accepting that, like all young people, they are novices at cultivating the relationships they hunger for.

"Every relationship goes through cycles of connection, disconnection, and reconnection," Reichert says. "And yet when we asked [1,500 boys] in our survey, *How many of you have undertaken some strategy to repair a broken relationship with a coach or teacher?*, there were none." To educators, Reichert has a simple message: that onus falls to you.

"My job in going around to these schools is basically to say, a) don't hold your breath if you're waiting for the boy to repair the relationship; and b) it's your job. It's in your job description not to give up.

"I say the same thing to parents," he adds. "It's your job to be the relationship manager—because your connection with your son is the foundation of his virtue and his character development. What we know in the science of character education is that the way boys learn how to be a good man is to experience being cared for, and in a very natural way to extend that to caring for other people, grounding themselves in empathy and an ethic of care. Well, if boys instead experience themselves being dominated and controlled and punished and neglected, they're more likely to be assholes."

He readily affirms that these Main Line boys are "their families' lavish projects," especially compared to the unfortunate young men he encountered in family court and North Philly. "There's so much invested in them, and they really think of themselves as kind of the best of the best." But Reichert believes that what really distinguishes the two groups is that adversity has been kept at bay from the luckier

one. Sooner or later, though, adversity comes for us all. “And many of these boys are unprepared for how they’re going to feel when they encounter it,” he says. “You’re going to mess up in a relationship. You’re going to fall short in some sport or something, and you’re not going to know what to do ... [and] if your emotional intelligence is stunted, you’re going to trip up.

“That’s the bubble I was living in,” he adds, “prepared to sail right through life in this lane that had been paved for me,” when his brother’s death seemed to wash the whole road away.

**R**eichert is by no means the only contemporary critic of the “Boy Code,” as Harvard psychology professor William Pollack has termed the unwritten rules urging boys to be stoic, self-reliant, preoccupied with obtaining respect, and scornful of anything remotely feminine. But its champions outnumber its detractors, and they appeal to principles and convictions that run deep. What’s wrong with independence, they ask. Don’t we want raise our children to be able to fend for themselves? Life is harsh and full of hazards—is vulnerability really what we want to cultivate in our sons?

“Here’s what the science tells us,” Reichert replies. “We’re actually stronger, more independent, and grittier to the degree that we’re connected to other people, rooted in relationships, and grounded in a sense of someone knowing and caring for us. When we’re out there by ourselves, cut off from people, harboring all of our upsets and tensions in our own heads, we’re actually very shaky.

“We need some way of resolving the tension we feel,” he continues. “A drink or a bong hit often becomes the way to do it, instead of, I think, a much healthier way.

“What I’m training the boys to do is to discover the uplift that comes from getting shit off your chest. You just feel better, you can think better, and you can regulate yourself better. The point isn’t to be vulnerable—but that’s the means to the end. You actually have to be real about what

you’re feeling. And what comes with that is needing the ear of someone else, the understanding of someone else.

“As for Jordan Peterson’s 12 rules,” he remarks, “‘Stand up straight, be strong’ is a lovely admonition—but it doesn’t tell us much about how you get there for real.”

In *How to Raise a Boy*, he devotes chapters to schooling, bullying and violence, sex and pornography, brotherhood and boys clubs, and digital life, typically including sections on what parents and educators can do to bolster boys in each realm.

“I’m trying to counter the unchallenged messages that are still lurking in parents’ hearts, educators’ and coaches’ minds, and school routines,” he says. “And I’m contributing to something that’s already begun. I don’t think I’m driving it or shaping it. I think that what this movement to create a new boyhood has lacked has been a coherent overarching message that’s grounded in science. And that’s what I’ve tried to do in this book: describe a coherent picture of what traditional boyhood has done to boys, what’s been missing, and how we counteract that.”

Thirty years ago, he reflects, the mere attempt to teach boys “the most basic elements of emotional intelligence,” to help them “practice coding feelings with language,” was regarded as “countercultural.” But about 10 years ago, he started noticing an unmistakable shift—both in the number of Haverford boys who opted to spend their lunch periods talking about their feelings, and in the attitude they carried into the room.

Among other things, there was a striking diminution of the homophobia that had long been a hallmark of the way young men policed one another’s behavior. (The depth of this sea change may be the single biggest difference between my own boyhood and that of my two sons.) In fact, Reichert believes that for the growing number of adolescents who identify as “gender nonconforming,” a significant portion do so less as a declaration of sexuality than as a refusal to be straitjacketed by masculine norms that

have outlived whatever usefulness they may once have had.

“The carnage that I’ve witnessed over my lifetime—whether it’s in the juvenile justice system or the psychiatric hospital or educational losses or my own experiences in the streets—I think that I could trace much of that to a model of male development that has completely missed the mark,” he says. “And it’s not that I think that masculinity is a bad thing. I love being a man myself. My sons are proud, strong men. And my grandson is one that we celebrate when he runs and jumps and so forth. It’s just he’s not *only* that.

“This generation,” he says, “they know that their mental health is at least as important, probably more important than their physical health. They want tools, and they want skills. And they recognize, I think intuitively, that holding things in and trying to be stoic is not a very resilient way to be.”

What a growing number of them have discovered, he contends—and what he hopes his book will illuminate for more—is a perverse irony at the heart of American masculinity. As an ethos, it reveres self-possession, competency, fortitude, and resilience. But as a behavioral code, it demands submission—quiet acquiescence to a narrow set of stereotypes that fence off whole realms of human experience.

Which is why, even though we live in a moment when something as minor as a woke Gillette ad can ignite a battle royale between “angry white men” and “feminazis” over the proper shape of American society, Reichert is full of optimism.

“There has never been a better time to be raising a boy, or educating a boy,” he says. “Traditional masculinity is being disrupted. This present generation of young men—I think they mostly understand it doesn’t work. It’s not going to work in their relationships with girls. It’s not going to work in workplaces, which are more cooperative. It’s not going to make them happy.

“And they actually have a right to be happy. They actually have a right to feel good.”