

The Gender Journey

Too close to home

by Michael Rudy

“I’ll talk to you tomorrow. Good night,” I said in hanging up the phone. My friend Laura was in the hospital with no one really able to say definitively why her arm suddenly ballooned. My good pal, Lance, had just been telling me about his experience. “My doctors didn’t know what they were doing! Tell her she has to get an infection specialist,” he said supportively. Those were the last words I can remember him saying to me. Maybe he said, “Good night,” I can’t remember now. The whole conversation was one of those ‘throwaway’ chats, like a hundred others I have each week. I think my real last words to him were, “I’ll check in with you tomorrow,” with an absent-minded assurance as if the event was guaranteed. It wasn’t. Lance was only two hours away from uncapping two .22 caliber bullets into a heart that had been dying for all of his 36 years. How symbolically perfect! Shot in the heart!

I am firmly convinced that for all of us, the self-assessment of our esteem is the primary category we live in, in all of our waking hours. Sure, getting killed may be existentially more important, but in the end, it’s the loss of one’s self that makes this psychologically painful! Ernest Becker, in his Pulitzer Prize winning book, *The Denial of Death*, was particularly effective in capturing this critical matter of self-esteem. He wrote,

“In childhood we see the struggle for self-esteem at its least disguise. The child is unashamed about what he needs and wants most. His whole organism shouts the claims of his natural narcissism. We like to speak casually about ‘sibling rivalry’ as though it were some kind of byproduct of growing up, a bit of competitiveness and selfishness of children who have been spoiled, who haven’t yet grown into a generous social nature. But it is all too absorbing and relentless to be an aberration; it expresses the heart of the creature: the desire to stand out, to be the one in creation - the first in the universe.”¹

If positive self-esteem development has its seeds planted in childhood, Lance had a pretty bare garden. By his own assessment, he had a poor relationship with his mother. It was a long history. Once, after he felt he could trust me, dragging on a cigarette, he let loose with a torrent of feelings, ranging from anger to disgust to frustration and in the end, to an exasperated despair at ever getting his mother to praise him or acknowledge any of his real achievements. He hated how she adamantly refused to believe he might be capable of picking his own girlfriends. At about this time, he was breaking up with a girl he deeply loved. She couldn’t abide Lance’s mother’s abusive way of calling her a “whore” to her face or ignoring her, like she wasn’t even in the world, let alone in the same room. He told me of the variety of ways his mother had been consciously cruel to Rhonda during several holiday dinners and celebrations. Though he had an understanding and supportive father, it was far from being a sufficient foundation. Lance’s self-esteem rested on quicksand.

In addition to breaking up with his girlfriend, Rhonda, not much else was working either. His business was not thriving. He had a lot of his tools stolen. His landlord suddenly revoked his lease. You wouldn’t have thought he was having any trouble handling all this. I surely didn’t.

He seemed to be managing it all. He had that nervous knee bounce and smoked too much, but this was Lance. Later, after his death, a close friend of his told me that Lance was self medicating with cocaine. You get the picture inside the assessment was likely, "I'm a complete fuck up." And without a history of self-acceptance and healthy self-love, there wasn't much resilience or resources he could call to shore up his crumbling positive self-regard. With 20/20 hindsight, it's easy to see the inevitable tragedy in its final incubation.

If we get the seeds of our self esteem in childhood, we get the next major boost to a solid self esteem by having our talents and accomplishments mirrored and acknowledged by our teachers, mentors and lovers as we move from childhood to adulthood. We need to know. "What makes me special?" and "How can I make a difference?" Again, Becker gets at it directly,

"The question that becomes then the most important for a man to put to himself is simply this, 'How conscious is he of what he is doing to earn his feeling of heroism (read: specialness or self esteem)?"

It is so ironic that men are, on the one hand, so physically powerful while, on the other hand, so utterly fragile in matters of emotional pain. Our very strength contributes to our vulnerability: the traditional male role calls us to be strength embodied, the pillar for the family, the breadwinner, the grand creator of stability. It's not uncommon for us to believe that being emotionally strong is also a necessary part of the definition of being a "real man." Asking for emotional help is infinitely more repulsive than any plea for physical support.

There's really no consensus as to why men get depressed or depressed enough to kill themselves, but they do and it's not all that rare. I loved Andrew Solomon's *The Noon Day Demon* as the most readable and accurate geography of depression I've yet found. A brilliant psychoanalytic husband and wife team - Jack and Kerri-Kelly Novick - have a treasure trove of profound insights into the development of self-loathing in their rich book on sadism and masochism. The pain of these childhood traumas do, in fact, last a lifetime. *Fearful Symmetry* - if you can find it - should be a must have for every psychotherapist's library. It's a great road map into the dark world of violent forces and impulses that populate our unconscious, destroying relationships, careers, therapies and ultimately, the self.

While Lance could point to enough evidence of sadistic treatment in his childhood, pointing to it as the 'cause' of his suicide doesn't quite hit the proverbial nail on the head. I want to suggest that there is a specific kind of sadism that can be inflicted quite consciously and ends up generating what many now like to speak of as abandonment anxiety. But because the term is bandied about with such ease, it no longer serves to capture the torture chambers of the experience as lived. Maybe the real word we should be using here is loneliness.

I recall as a young therapist being led to an article by the celebrated analyst, Frieda Fromm - Reichman titled "Loneliness." I recall how impressed I was with her descriptions: how she used her patient's poetry to convey the terrifying and brutal experience that lived-loneliness is. Reading it, it resonated to times in my own life when yet another lover called it a day. I can easily recall those times as ones of horrid pain, yearning with every cell in my existence to reconnect, and having the infinity of cells in by being all screaming out my utter futility at ever being able to connect to what felt like the very sources of my life, air and meaning. Loneliness was not an abstraction for me during those dark days and weeks.

In that hell hole, there was a gnawing conviction that my pain would never cease nor would it ever get any easier to bear. The truth is that the pain does become less acute over time. There are scars; time does not heal all wounds.

Still, acknowledging all the pain of depression, from the relentless self-accusation of self-loathing and the devastating experience of lived-loneliness, it seems to me that something more must be present when that trigger gets pulled. And it's absolutely ironic: I believe it's loss of courage! Maybe it doesn't take any courage to pull a trigger in the throes of despair. I can understand the solution that death could provide for a life time of lived despair. But at some level, there is something still terrifying at leaving the familiarity of one's own history, pain, hopes and possibilities. I would assert that it is the loss of courage that, in the end, brings men to pull the trigger. Maybe it is simply the loss of hope. But I like to speak specifically of courage and specifically the courage talked about so beautifully by the theologian, Paul Tillich in his *Courage to Be*. He speaks of the despair inherent in being alive as a human; the limits inherent in being merely mortal. Tillich's rich discussion has been helpful to me in dark times. Where he lands is pointing to how crucial it is for all of us humans to "accept acceptance."

We now have come full circle. Self-acceptance and self-esteem are two sides of the same coin. I like how my new friend, Madelainne, has been talking about these things with me: there is something to say about men making heroic investments in something other than grills and guns, bank accounts and lives that lead to monuments; maybe the better investment is investing in becoming a self that you can accept, nurture and enjoy hanging out with. For even in the aura of being loved from the outside, what is still required is to have grown a capacity to receive that love, such that it resonates with something already present within the self. Within the love-desert of Lance's life, no love that I could give or that his girlfriend could give could overcome that inner being that was so completely unacceptable to Lance's own self. In the end, Lance ran out of courage before learning to grow his little boy's self-esteem.

What love did I get in my childhood that saved me from Lance's fate? How did my investment in years of therapy serve as reparative healing of the damaged self-esteem of that little boy who lost father, mother, sisters and brothers? What ever it was, I'm here and Lance isn't.

Months later, I still miss him a great deal. As this reflection suggests, I'm still learning from him just how important it is for me to courageously say "yes" to my self, in spite of ... in spite of my endless mortal shortcomings.

I miss you, Lance

1 Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death*, New York, NY: The Free Press, 1973, p.3.

Michael Rudy of Ypsilanti, Michigan, USA, invites you to join him in the gender journey. Send your thoughts/ideas/articles (600 words maximum) to him by email at wolakota@comcast.net

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