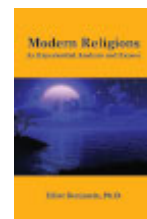




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# Masculinity, Politics, and Tennis

## An Integrated Experiential Perspective

### Elliot Benjamin

"Exploitation, Greed, Dehumanization—I am very upset." I think [this] haiku captures the essence of what I am trying to convey in this essay.

Perhaps we all have some demons in our closets. This essay is a story of one of my own demons that recently came out in the open: my masculinity issue. It came out in the context of my playing competitive tennis for my local Maine tennis team. The macho masculinity dynamics that I experienced from my tennis team partners somehow reminds me of much that I believe is wrong in the world. In particular it reminds me of the horrific teenage episode of the soon-to-be Republican candidate for president of the United States leading the vicious hair-clipping aggression as part of a group of macho high school boys in the 1960s. Thus I see these connections linking masculinity, tennis, and politics—from my own integrated experiential perspective.

Some researchers in psychology actually view autism as an expression of the “extreme male brain,” in which there is a poor ability in understanding the emotions of others and experiencing empathy for others' feelings (Baron-Cohen, 2003, 2005). In other words, the ability to form social intimate relations with others is severely diminished and is replaced with treating people mechanically as objects. It is not hard to see the connections of this kind of extreme masculinity to the kind of destructive political environment we now live in, where billions of dollars are spent in negative campaign ads to destroy the character and image of one's political opponent. Concerns about the dangers of children growing up with the worst aspects of aggressive masculinity are described in the current edition of the most prestigious journal of the American Psychological Association, along with a description of an innovative pilot program to teach middle school and high school-aged boys of different ethnicities to keep what's positive about traditional masculinity while discarding what's negative (Clay, 2012). These kinds of concerns about the negative effects of masculinity were focused upon in one of the conference talks at the recent International Qualitative Inquiry Conference that I attended (Henderson, 2012). But when you experience these destructive aspects of masculinity for yourself, it enters a whole new dimension.

My story goes back to my own high school days, when I tried to live up to the “normal” version of masculinity prescribed by America in the 1960s for a 15-year-old boy. Perhaps this is why Mitt Romney's cruel hair-clipping episode had an especially strong effect on me. I grew up with an artistic nature that did not fit into the stereotype of American masculinity for a teenage boy growing up in the 1960s—or today for that matter. When I tried to ignore my nature and become part of a group of “normal” aggressive masculine teenage boys during one of my summer camp engagements, I was mercilessly made fun of and stigmatized, and I was left with a traumatic experience that stayed with me my whole life. This occurred 47 years ago, and although in many ways I have risen above my traumatic teenage masculinity experience, my deeper organism hasn't forgotten it—as became

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painfully clear to me a few days ago during my competitive tennis tournament.

I played tennis for my Brooklyn, New York high school tennis team, and over 45 years later I started playing competitive tennis again, for my local Maine tennis team. I'm one of the oldest players on my team, and most of the men I play with and against are somewhere between 20 and 40 years younger than me. I pride myself on still being able to play competitive tennis, and I thoroughly enjoy the game and the sport. I've been playing weekly tennis as part of my Maine tennis club for about 5 years now, and I hope to continue playing tennis for as long as I am able to. But I must say—I did not appreciate the masculinity social dynamics that I experienced from my fellow team players a few days ago while they were watching the match of the team we were soon to play against.

In order to have a chance to win the tournament (which we ended up winning), we needed the team we were soon to play to lose the match they were currently playing. There we all were, upstairs in the large viewing room lounge, my teammates zooming in on every move of the players of the tennis match being played on the first court. Everyone but me was zooming in on the match, while I was trying very hard to ignore all the condescending and aggressive vocal non-stop chatter that my teammates were displaying in their analysis of the tennis match. I had my Differential Equations math book opened up in front of me, as I was trying my best to concentrate on preparing a syllabus to teach my new online mathematics course. But it became very socially awkward for me, as I was obviously not part of this group. It all felt so wrong to me, as I saw every tennis player's moves and mistakes get harshly critiqued and appraised. The players being watched were treated as objects, and the condescending analysis gradually became more critical and more jeering. I wanted no part of this, and I tried my best to not watch the match and continue working on my math, as everyone all around me was having a grand time engaging with each other in their tennis comradeship. I could picture myself being on the tennis court, being analyzed in the same way as an impersonal object, especially as I had just experienced an awful tennis match in which me and my doubles partner were paired up with two players who were much bigger and stronger, and our match was a fiasco.

I didn't know exactly why my body was feeling all its very strong feelings of immanent danger, as my traumatic camp experience as a teenager did not come to me until later that night in my motel room on my way to meet up with my old college buddy Mike. But listening to my tennis teammates go on and on in their condescending detailed analysis felt to me like I myself was being attacked: “That ball was in and he called it out—once I would let him get away with—maybe twice—but not three times....He should have creamed that shot....I spent hours watching each player and taking notes.” Finally their analysis led to them severely criticizing the player on the team they wanted to lose, for engaging in “foot faults,” which is when a player's foot falls below the service line while serving the ball: “There he goes again—that's his third foot fault!” And then all of a sudden, one of the women standing next to me spoke up: “I need to let you know that I'm feeling very uncomfortable listening to you—that player you're talking about is my husband. And I'm standing right here and his foot did not cross the line.” Dead silence for a long minute—and finally one of my teammates apologizes: “I'm sorry—I guess we got carried away,” and while laughing in a good-natured manner, he adds: “We're really bad.” The woman laughs a little and soon half-apologizes for her self-expression, while my teammate who spoke up reassures her that he would have done the same thing. Thus the situation got remedied on the surface, and the demeaning tennis analysis ended and the conversation became more commonplace social chit chat.

Well that's my story—a little tennis microcosm for me in which to view the worst aspects of extreme masculinity in politics: treating people as objects, competing to win at all costs, ignoring the feelings of others, etc. My friend Mike's wife Paula wrote a haiku for me during our breakfast yesterday that said the following: “Exploitation, Greed, Dehumanization—I am very upset.” This was inspired by one of the messages she saw in the Occupy exhibit tent in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. And I think Paula's haiku captures the essence of what I am trying to convey in this essay. Is not exploitation, greed, and dehumanization the epitome of the extreme male brain? Is this not what is giving us the vicious negative political character-destroying campaign ads, the insane unlimited capitalist Wall Street extravagant business misadventures, and the interminable war escalation our country is continually engaged in? Treating people as objects—whether it is condescendingly analyzing a tennis match, clipping a high school boy's “too long” blond pony tail, replacing personal face-to-face relationships with an

over-indulgence on Facebook, or killing people by pressing computer buttons to launch bombs from drones thousands of miles away—appear to me to all have a common ingredient. Call this common ingredient what you will—greed, lack of caring, impersonal interaction, extreme male brain, etc. But what I think is most important here is the remedy.

We as a people desperately need to remember what it means to listen and care about how a person feels—to see a person as more than an object on a computer screen to be analyzed, “chatted” with, or bombed. Perhaps our American society—and our whole world—is escalating into extreme masculinity non-stop with the end result being the destruction of our world, as described by many environmentalists inclusive of former vice-president Al Gore. For me personally, masculinity, tennis, and politics are all inter-connected in an intricate thread that I cannot ignore. And thus I leave this little essay as my way of expressing how I have personally experienced the threads of the intricate connections of masculinity, politics, and tennis.

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