

Dancing and the Survival of Men

Sam Gill

A friend of mine teaches special education in a grammar school and she told me that all of the students in her “special ed” program are boys. I got an email from another friend who told me that of her 6 grandchildren, 4 boys and 2 girls, “the girls are easier to enjoy but I miss all of them.” My daughter recently volunteered among a group of parents to do special programs for small groups of second graders. She was assigned three boys and two girls and the teacher told her that if the boys were impossible to manage she would re-assign them. They were making films. On the second meeting the boys did need to be reported to the teacher because they were so rambunctious that nothing could be accomplished and the teacher responded by taking strong disciplinary measures. My daughter also reported that the boys were obsessed with including violent acts in the films and described these acts in graphic detail. I saw the two movies that were produced and the boys were great and creative and contributed well. My daughter enjoyed working with them. My sister reported to me that her grandson loves ice hockey and is very good at it, but he struggles with reading. Another friend who has a boy reports the same. Okay, these are just things I’ve heard in the last month and notably I didn’t seek any of this information. But here are some casual observations. All these reports came from women. All the boys who were reported as having problems were being educated by and cared for by women. In the same timeframe I heard these anecdotes I didn’t have a single male say anything to me about their experience with or care of children or boys. The comments the women made about these boys had no counterpart of women talking in largely positive terms about the accomplishments and behaviors of the boys they know. I don’t think these anecdotes vary much from national trends and practices. Women take care of and educate male children and there is both expectation (which is significant) and experience that boys are “hard to manage” and are more likely to have academic and behavioral problems than their girl peers.

So here are some sobering facts as recently summarized in the *New York Times* (March 28, 2010):

- High school GPA for boys is 2.86 compared to girls’ 3.09
- Girls now score equal to boys in math (but boys more often score extremely high or extremely low)
- Girls outscore boys in verbal
- Girls appear to make more effort
- 64% of National Honor Society members are girls
- In many colleges, boys now given “special consideration” so ratios won’t become out of balance (i.e., affirmative action for boys)
- Girls are out-reading boys at all age/grade levels in all states, with the number of girls achieving proficiency level at 79%, boys at 72%.
- Boys are two times more likely to repeat a grade as are girls, two times more likely to be suspended, and three times more likely to be expelled
- 25% more boys are dropouts in comparison to girls

- 57% of master's degrees awarded to whites go to females, and 62% of doctorates go to females
- 66% of master's degrees awarded to blacks go to females, and 72% of doctorates go to females
- In the national writing exam, 32% of girls are proficient, but only 16% of boys

Guy Garcia in his 2008 book *The Decline of Men* predicted that in 8 years women would hold as many jobs in America as men. In an early 2010 NPR interview Garcia expressed shock that this had actually already been achieved. Of course, this does not mean that women yet make a combined wage equal to men, although that is predicted to occur by 2028 and will surely happen before 2020, or that discrimination against women does not still exist in the work place.

There has recently been a rapid increase in the number of women CEOs and women in politics at every level, both areas almost exclusively controlled by men until very recently. Few would even question the likelihood that a woman might well be President of the US. Women have long outnumbered men as voters. Increasingly women are heads of households and do not think that they need a man to have a family. There are increasing numbers of relationships where the female earns more than the male. In hard economic times, women get jobs more readily than men.

That boys/males are lagging behind girls/females is not really news because it has been known for 25 years at least, yet it is not widely acknowledged among the general populace. It is not just in the education and rearing of boys that this is occurring; the rebalancing of gender positioning is working its way throughout society—the work force, politics, leadership positions—and it is taking place at a remarkably rapid pace. This trend is being accompanied by a shift in the way women look at men and, increasingly, at men's self-image and self-esteem. As alarming numbers of men simply don't finish high school, don't go on to college, don't compete with women for jobs, the question is becoming "Where are the men?"

It is not just the US that is experiencing this shift, this realignment. As Hanna Rosin points out in her August 2010 *The Atlantic* article titled "The End of Men," "Up to a point, the reasons behind this shift are obvious. As thinking and communicating have come to eclipse physical strength and stamina as the keys to economic success, those societies that take advantage of the talents of their adults, not just half of them, have pulled away from the rest." (p. 58) Rosin cites the dramatic shift and attitude towards a preference for girls in South Korea and concludes that "with few exceptions the greater the power of women, the greater the country's economic success." So this isn't simply about an overpowering western feminist movement, it is deeply entwined with economics.

Now for some of the solutions that are being posed for this situation as it relates to boys. In his 2007 book, *Boys Adrift*, physician and psychologist, Leonard Sax, offers five underlying causes:

- The current way schools do business does not typically permit boys to be boys.
- When they do try to be boys, they tend to get (falsely) diagnosed with ADHD and (over) medicated, leading to an unmotivated, alienated anomie.

- Meanwhile, years of consuming foods and beverages poisoned by estrogen-mimicking phthalates from plastic containers has led to endocrine imbalances and anomalies.
- This triple-whammy has nudged many boys into the “safe” virtual reality of video games and pornography, where they can have thrills without responsibilities.
- The family and society have allowed negative cultural role models (epitomized by Homer Simpson) to reinforce an image of boys and men as lazy, unambitious, and lacking in courage, with too few positive role models demanding that young boys exhibit courage and service in approaching manhood (epitomized by the scouting movement)—what is known as “rites of passage.”

Okay, so the fault is schools, Homer Simpson, plastic containers that give off estrogenic chemicals, and the scarcity of “real” manly models. I don’t even dare follow out the implications of these silly positions.

Christina Hoff Sommers’ 2000 book *The War Against Boys: How Misguided Feminism is Harming Our Young Men* is an ax-grinding often, to me anyway, annoying book that also argues a “naturalness” base for the solution. Repeatedly she returns to the position presented by Sax that “boys will be boys” after all and nothing is about to change that, indeed, it has been an unfortunate product of twentieth century feminism that boys have increasingly been treated like girls—expecting them to be able to learn to read and to sit quietly and so on. Sommers ends her book by citing a number of espoused feminists who have discovered the “misguidedness” of their feminist perspective when confronted with their own sons. And, indeed, Sommers is the mother of two sons and one would suspect the book was her own way of trying to realign herself, being utterly obnoxious about every influential feminist who has promoted female-friendly education, most particularly Carol Gilligan, and ends her book with these words, “If you are a mother, as I am, you know that one of the most agreeable facts of life is that boys will be boys.” (p. 213). I understand this statement about as well as the rest of her book. She has shown that it is overwhelmingly recognized that boys being boys is rarely agreeable to anyone who is anywhere near them. If she means that mothers agree that they can’t do a damned thing about the way their sons behave, and thus this boys will be boys view finds some consensus among mothers, that’s another face of the same sad valence. It is incredulous to me that the same argument would be admitted for girls, as I have discussed in another lecture, and that “girls will be girls” that is throw awkwardly with all the subtle and not so subtle pejoratives associated with this. Yet, if it is of boy nature to be a certain way, then it has to hold that there is also a girl nature that one must simply accept and do one’s best to work with.

But, while the intention to support the more meaningful and successful education of boys is obviously well intended, the whole set of premises on which Sommers’ argument is based is flawed and the recommendations it produces are highly distasteful, to me anyway. She recommends that boys be isolated, rigorously disciplined, punished for misbehaving, taught morality (although who determines what is moral is not discussed), and placed in environments of competition.

What is missing, among many things actually, is that, however natural boy behavior appears, it is in significant measure a product of history and culture. One should set this whole “naturalness” argument

even in the context of the history of the child in the west to recognize that the behavior identified among boys that seems to be natural to maleness today, wasn't there in such universal ways not that long ago. What is missing is an adequately sophisticated means of understanding what creates and maintains the seemingly natural boy behavior. So many observers hold that since boy behavior appears very soon after birth that it must be naturally male. We have yet to understand and appreciate the extent to which gestural and movement patterns that are insinuated by adults on infant bodies are themselves gendered and reflect gestural and movement patterns deeply bodied. We have been simply unaware of the impact of adult gendered gestures on infants. We must recognize that infants can imitate gesture within the first hour of their lives and thus, right from the start, their pliable tissues (muscles and neurons) are shaped in gendered movement patternings. We surely do not recognize that adult gestural and movement patterns unconsciously enacted when an infant reaches for a toy—truck or baby doll—scream gender expectations in the ways babies understand deeply; that is, adult facial expressions and movements even at the micro level are inputs to the groping movements of infants. Before they can speak these gestural patterns enculturate the infant with gender identity in ways deeply set in the tissues of their muscles and brains. Then when they are school children, we sigh in resignation to what now seems innate that “boys will be boys” while, increasingly in recent decades, also being secretly thankful that “girls will be girls.” The apparent naturalness is that human identity arises in a rich complex of genetic potentialities shaped by experience of the environment. And, while there is not so much we can do about the genetic part, the amount we can do about the experiential part is far greater than we likely ever imagined. David Schenk argues this point rather convincingly in his 2010 book *The Genius in All of Us*.

Now appropriate to the principal subject of this series of lectures and to my personal interests we must ask the question, “So what does dancing have to do with all this messy situation about the decline or possible even disappearance of men?” I've been waiting and waiting to write this lecture and I haven't quite known why. It is the last of the entire series to be written. I thought to myself a few times that this lecture might simply be an optional one, yet every time I thought that, my visceral reaction was strong. But perhaps now I know why. Last night I went to Denver to see the musical version of “Billy Elliot.” As today I think of this musical and reflect on how it deals with the gender/dancing issue compared with the movie version which I discuss in another lecture, I think I now understand why I have been waiting. I really needed to see and experience “Billy Elliot” the musical to give me some of the terms and perspectives valuable to communicating what I want to say. So here goes.

I've been eager to experience the musical “Billy Elliot,” because I knew I'd enjoy it, but also because of the critique I've written about “Billy Elliot” the movie focused on the treatment of gender roles and dancing. Okay, first, I have to say that I loved loved loved this musical with its great music by Elton John and amazing dance numbers ably performed by the young Billy. Generally, the musical correlates closely with the movie in the treatment of gender roles related to dancing. One slight yet comical twist is the treatment of Billy's friend Michael “the puff.” Michael is a cross-dresser and he does so with amazing flare for a pre-teen, yet he finds Billy's ballet dancing far the greater candidate to be interpreted as weird or queer than his own dressing in women's clothing. He tells Billy, “Dad does it all the time.” The entire male mining community eventually comes round to support Billy's audition for

admission to the Royal Academy of Ballet in London, although retaining a clear identity of ballet dancing with femininity. Billy gets in the academy, but, in contrast with the film version which ends with Billy as an adult dancer, in the musical the only sense of Billy as an accomplished adult dancer comes in a mid-second act Christmas fantasy in which young Billy performs a boy-man *pas de deux* of Swan Lake. In this breath-taking dance (I literally had trouble getting my own breath throughout this dance) the young Billy dances (and flies) with himself as he is to become. This dance is, for me anyway, the artistic climax of the show, but the final dance scene featuring the entire cast is done with all cast members wearing tutus. The adult men, miners and policemen, wear bulky overalls with white tutus. During the dance young Billy is given a tutu which he steps into over his long pants and joins all the tutu-clad others. So what is the message here? Surely it is, in at least the not so subtle register of costume, that dancing is feminine in that sense that I have been developing throughout these lectures. It produces nothing; it says nothing; it is done for its own sake; it is the play of signs that transforms and transcends (others) the dancer.

At his audition Billy is asked “how do you feel when you dance?” His response is Elton John’s “Electricity” whose lyrics capture the same understanding of dancing.

I can't really explain it,
I haven't got the words
It's a feeling that you can't control
I suppose it's like forgetting, losing who you are
And at the same time something makes you whole
It's like that there's a music playing in your ear
And I'm listening, and I'm listening and then I disappear

And then I feel a change
Like a fire deep inside
Something bursting me wide open impossible to hide
And suddenly I'm flying, flying like a bird
Like electricity, electricity
Sparks inside of me
And I'm free I'm free

It's a bit like being angry,
it's a bit like being scared
Confused and all mixed up and mad as hell
It's like when you've been crying
And you're empty and you're full
I don't know what it is, it's hard to tell
It's like that there's a music playing in your ear
But the music is impossible, impossible to hear
But then I feel it move me

Like a burning deep inside
 Something bursting me wide open impossible to hide
 And suddenly I'm flying, flying like a bird
 Like electricity, electricity
 Sparks inside of me
 And I'm free I'm free
 Electricity, sparks inside of me
 And I'm free, I'm free
 I'm free. Free I'm free

Elton John gets, just right I think, the self-othering freeing electric flying transcending paradoxical conflicted feeling; the loss of self that makes you whole, the bursting open, the inside burning. Remarkably Elton John's words are very close to those of religious traditions and western philosophers that I have drawn on throughout these lectures.

Let me take this discussion a bit further and try to address the topic of this lecture in terms of the "Billy Elliot" musical. In the very scene in which Billy learns he has been accepted by the Royal Academy of Ballet, the coal miners learn that the union, after a year on strike, has caved in and the miners must go back to work under the old conditions. There is a powerful dance done by the miners wearing hard hats with lights atop them raging against Margaret Thatcher's government and the coal industry because they recognize that their union's loss is the loss of their entire way of life as lived by coal mining men for generations. Billy realizing the crisis indicates that he won't go to the ballet school; he'll stay home and work with the men. But he is forcefully told to leave because the men and their way of life is over and will soon be gone forever. One miner tells Billy "Go, we can't all be dancers." And the men grouped together in the dark at the back of the stage seen only in silhouette with their lights shining out on the audience appear to descend into the mine, yet the feeling is clearly that they are descending into a grave. So this musical also bears the message that this male work of producing coal, working at brute labor, doing crude dirty dangerous male work is done, over; yet, the tutu-wearing, thus feminine, occupations—here dancing—remain joyfully on stage at the end of the show celebrating vitality and joy. The conjunction between dance and the feminine (even when danced by so many males including the star of the show, Billy) marks, it seems to me in the musical version of this show, the way to the future and that way is iconized as dancing.

I don't want to suggest that the solution to the crisis of the decline of men is to enroll all boys in ballet and hand out tutus to all men. But I do want to suggest that there is something gestural in dancing that is fundamental to understanding the issue.

We can say that "boys will be boys" and argue that since the dawn of "man" (surely this word says much) the male gender has been physically strong and distinguished by broad forceful thrusting aggressive whole body gesturing as needed to provide shelter, food, and protection for their families. Perhaps because men have been so successful over the long haul, the developments afforded by having these basic survival needs met, this has allowed the development of tools of increasing sophistication

and complexity, tools that have been accompanied by gesturing that has needed to be increasingly refined, subtle, and sophisticated; gestures that correspond more closely with the long evolutionary history of women's activities of preparing food, making home, child-rearing, making clothing, multi-tasking, simultaneously using multiple body parts, and so on. The gestural patterns associated with gender images, especially the male image, have persisted more than the gestural patterns associated with the development of tools and, I would argue, there has come a tipping point (and this has occurred only recently and in such a short period as to have little impact on the evolution of gendered gesturing) where women's gesturing prepares them far better for the tools and practices of the contemporary world. Doesn't this make sense?

I strongly avoid the "by nature" or "essentialist" view that "boys will be boys" because that leads us to have expectations captured in such phrases as "throw like a girl" and "men can't dance" both of which are sexist and crude and simply stupid. The contemporary period will surely be understood above all else, if we survive, as the period of plasticity, that is, the period in human history when we understand that we are amazingly malleable, that we can change ourselves in fundamental ways and do so without awaiting the eons it takes for evolution to do it for us. And one of the major forces and hopefully deep insights I want to present in this series of lectures is that movement, gesture, dance do something more than reflect gender, history, culture, upbringing that has been inherited in the composition of our bodies. Much more importantly I believe movement, gesture, dancing actually transform the very tissue, muscles and neurons, that comprise our identities, our basis for meaning, our vitality or life-force.

Rather than holding that "boys will be boys" and finding ways of coping and somehow surpassing the negatives of "boyness" we imagine to be innate, we need look to the construction of gestural practices that, through endless repetition and imitation, will permit boys to do more than measure up a bit better to girls, but rather to actually take their places in the world that is emerging from the male and female efforts of eons. Human roles are changing, including gender roles, both males and females need to create themselves, at the very level of tissue, in ways that seem "natural" in that they feel easy and obvious, so that all have a meaningful and gendered rightful place in the emerging and rapidly changing world.

The challenge is to imagine, create, and construct distinctly "male" gestural movement patterns that shape the male organism in such a way that it is prepared for the emerging world. One of the lessons of "Billy Elliot" is the very old and culturally very widely practiced notion that dancing is one of these movement gestural forms in which such issues are worked out or it represents something essential to the gestural forms to be created. And dancing is now being embraced in some clearly male-friendly environments like hip hop and break dancing. Still, as studies have shown, as reported by Garcia, "beginning early in childhood, girls as a group are more coordinated than boys and are better at tasks that require fast and nuanced physical movement. Girls also tend to be more articulate and have better communications skills than boys." (p. 5) This means that parents and anyone around children must understand that from the first moments of life children are deeply influenced, including the markers of gender, by the tiniest gestures they observe.

My point is that we (and I can't even imagine who will constitute this "we" and I'm feeling remarkably gender lonely at this moment) need to aggressively invent male movement/gesture/dance that will directly reshape maleness in such a way as to create men that are equal to yet complement in a decidedly masculine way women so that men will contribute powerfully and confidently to the emerging society.