

Definitions

National Public Radio recently interviewed Pulitzer Prize-winning author Jeffrey Marx and former Baltimore Colts player Joe Ehrmann. It was an interesting discussion between men of their perceptions of what it means to be a man and defining success.

Marx' book about Ehrmann, Season of Life: a football star, a boy, a journey to manhood is about relationships: that of Marx and Ehrmann; Ehrmann's life journey; and Marx and his father.

When Ehrmann left pro football, he became a minister and through a combination of his ministry with inner city children and his own personal experiences and growth, he gradually formulated a philosophy he termed "Building Men for Others."

Ehrmann also is the assistant coach for Gilman High School, a Baltimore area high school. The coaching philosophy is not about winning games as much as it is about preparing young men for manhood. As an aside, the team is also highly successful, showing the players respond to stepping up to a higher plane.

Ehrmann postulates that fathers do not always adequately instill in their sons what it means to be a man. Fathers may consciously or unconsciously pass along limiting, outdated, or negative behaviors to their sons, thereby reinforcing dysfunctional behavior generation after generation.

"Well, what we end up with is a cycle that keeps going," Joe said. "The father has no clue what it means to be a man, no strategic definition whatsoever. The son gets whatever the dad gives him. And so the whole thing keeps getting repeated. Without a definition, most of us don't even know if we're good men or not. But most of us feel that whatever the criteria are, we're just below whatever that definition is." (Season of Life, p. 99)

Ehrmann isolates three common indicia of success that he calls "false masculinity": athletic ability, sexual conquest; and economic success. He summarizes the culture simply as from ball field to bedroom to billfold. If one or more of these is perceived as inadequate or missing, then masculinity is challenged.

"As a young boy, I'm going to compare my athletic ability to yours and compete for whatever attention that brings. When I get older, I'm going to compare my girlfriend to yours and compete for whatever status I can acquire by being with the prettiest or the coolest or the best girl I can get. Ultimately as adults, we compare bank accounts and job titles, houses and cars, and we compete for the amount of security and power that those represent. We will even compare our children and compete for some sense of fatherhood and significance attached to their achievements. We compare, we compete. That's all we ever do. It leaves most men feeling isolated and alone. And it destroys any concept of community." (Season of Life, p. 73)

Instead, Ehrmann suggests "strategic masculinity", which is defined by relationships and having a cause beyond yourself.

"Masculinity, first and foremost, ought to be defined in terms of relationships," Ehrmann says. "It ought to be taught in terms of the capacity to love and to be loved. It comes down to this: What kind of father are you? What kind of husband are you? What kind of coach or teammate are you? What kind of son are you? What kind of friend are you? Success comes in terms of relationships. And then all of us ought to have some kind of cause, some kind of purpose in our lives that's bigger than our own individual hopes, dreams, wants, and desires. At the end of our life, we ought to be able to look back over it from our deathbed and know that somehow the world is a better place because we lived, we loved, we were other-centered, other-focused." (Parade Magazine, August 29, 2004).

"Building Men for Others" is based on this focus beyond oneself. The Gilman coaching staff teaches both by instruction and example those ideas that encourage growth of their players into emotionally healthy men. The "Building Men for Others" concept can be simply stated as:

- Allow yourself to love and be loved. Build and value relationships.
- Accept responsibility, lead courageously, and enact justice on behalf of others.
- Practice the concepts of empathy, inclusion, and integrity.
- Learn the importance of serving others. Base your thoughts and actions on “What can I do for you?”
- Develop a cause beyond yourself.

Try to leave the world a better place because you were here. Certainly in a professional sense, both male and female lawyers actively work toward many of these ideals. It is altruistic in the best sense of what we all strive to be as lawyers.

Season of Life: a football star, a boy, a journey to manhood, Jeffrey Marx, Simon & Schuster, 2003.

To read an article about Joe Ehrmann written by Jeffrey Marx, see http://www.parade.com/articles/editions/2004/edition_08-29-2004/featured_0

Other online articles about Joe Ehrmann:
<http://www.inyoregister.com/articles/2004/12/27/sports/104spo01.txt>,
<http://www.amorenaturalway.com/pamphlets/detail.asp?ID=105>.

Listen to NPR’s “The Diane Rehm Show” featuring Jeffrey Marx and Joe Ehrmann at <http://www.wamu.org/programs/dr/04/12/16.php>.

Ehrmann’s website: <http://www.buildingmen.org/2005/default.htm>

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