

## 4. Masculinity Neither Avoids Nor Causes *Conflict*.



At the very core of masculine behavior and speech is how a man handles his emotions; and to begin with, what a man does when he inevitably feels the “fight-or-flight” urge (the body’s natural state of heightened alert in response to a perceived survival threat). When the threat is not actual but only perceived, a scared man runs away and an enflamed man gets angry. The rarest and most masculine response is to do neither. The real man stays engaged. He’s a

good listener and speaker, and is confident in his ability to resolve conflict with honesty, humility, restraint, rationality, and kindness. Most women are turned-off by both the scared man and enflamed man, but because real men are so rare, women have to choose. So some women prefer soft men, usually because they are tired of men who are abrasive and abusive. Other women prefer men with bad tempers who treat them poorly, often because they just cannot find the wimps attractive. In the long run, however, nearly everyone is disappointed. Generally speaking, women do not want either in their lives, but they are stuck with little choice.

**The Scared Man.** Masculinity does not avoid conflict, to take “flight”, at the moment when he feels the onset of the “fight or flight” urge. Nor does he avoid situations that he fears might lead to this urge. Usually this urge is a trustworthy indicator that something of value is being threatened, and the best course of action is to communicate openly, clearly, and honestly about it; in order to resolve conflict. Conflict resolution is how we learn from others, and about ourselves, so it is best to stay engaged. The roots of relationships grow deeper and stronger. Trust is built. Although conflict-avoiders may be following a formula that results in being seen as diplomatic, politically correct, tolerant, and “nice”; the truth is that they are burying their heads in the sand, missing out on all the potential benefits of honest and open communication. When men shy away or run away from potential conflict, they are delaying the inevitable, contributing more to problems than solutions, and they are demonstrating that they are weak and scared, whether they realize it or not.

**The Inflamed Man.** Masculinity is rarely prone to anger. Anger is masculinity’s failure to maintain humility when pride grants the license to act impulsively - to defend, attack, or otherwise cause harm – to “fight”, when the “fight or flight” urge is felt. This is not to say that the urge is to be suppressed, only that the impulse to act immediately is resisted until the perceived threat is assessed, and a rational and constructive action is chosen. Sometimes, but very rarely, a swift and violent reaction is appropriate; for example, when an immediate physical threat is posed. However, even this reaction can be executed in a cool and calm fashion, and no anger is required.

**How did this happen?** Humans evolved to experience a wide range of emotions in response to immediate and tangible survival pressures. In modern-day, Yang-dominated, patriarchal western civilization, we’ve conquered most of these pressures, a wonderful achievement in many ways. Never before in human history have there been so many people on the planet and at the same time such a high percentage of people living free from daily survival pressures.

Compared to our ancestors, we are safe, well-fed, disease-free, and less likely to experience person-on-person violence. We can be grateful and resist the temptation to feel that we deserve these inherited comfortable conditions and that they will continue without our being vigilant against new, less obvious threats. But we don't. The generations alive today haven't created these conditions of unprecedented comfort and safety, and are complacent about preserving them.

### **Timeout - for an Important Side Note**

It would be wrong to rewind to the past and abolish all of the excellent progress we've made. There is no need to do that. In fact, let's forget about solutions for now, and follow the basic steps of any rational examination:

1. Gather and sort the data - the direct empirical observations – without prejudice
2. Identify any patterns in the observations with rigor and objectivity
3. Compare the patterns with a common set values – ethics and morals - and if an incongruence exists, call it a “problem”.
4. Try to solve the problems by making conscious and rational plans for change.

Usually, hard-working conscientious people are eager to solve the world's problems and will rush to Step 4 prior to completing Steps 1, 2, and 3. This is commonplace, even praised for its “good intentions”, but ultimately counter-productive, especially when the observations and/or patterns are obscure and complex. Too often we think we have enough observations, and think we see a pattern where none exist, so our “solutions” may do more harm than good. Another approach is deliberate ignorance: As soon as we begin to see a problem – a pattern that conflict with our values - and we do not have a solution right now, we flee altogether by shielding our senses from the initial observations. We say, “Well, there's nothing I can do about it, so I choose to just not think about it.” This can be premature.

It may be the case that the correct solution can be reached eventually, but our discomfort with not-knowing, and the pride that we feel in solutions engenders our impatience. We admire “problem solvers” and desire to be seen as “men of action.” It feels good to solve problems, and we want that pleasure *now*. We don't like to have unsolved problems dangling out in space and time. Uncertainty is a potent perceived threat. It makes us anxious, and we do not want to wait for relief, nor do we want to wait to be praised for relieving others of uncertainty; so we rush to the wrong solution or avoid the conflict altogether. This behavior, which is tantamount to a toddler who has not yet learned how to delay gratification, is much easier to pull off if you have a lot of distractions, which we certainly do in today's world.

Masculinity is patient and strong in the face of this anxiety, does not get distracted easily, has the ability to delay gratification, and remains dedicated to the hard work of empiricism and rationality; neither rushing to a solution nor choosing ignorance of the observations/patterns/problems.

The scope of this work is primarily Steps 1 and 2, with a little of 3.....but not 4. Notice that Steps 1 and 2 are empirical and objective, while Step 3 is partially subjective, because it is contingent on shared values. Therefore, for Step 3, I propose what I hope to be a fairly universal and uncontroversial set of values, namely those that support life and liberty. A reader who does not consciously regard life (all of life, not just human) and individual human liberty - *at the very minimum* – to be foundational will not find Step 3 arguments convincing, but at least will be able to relate to Step 1 (observations) and Step 2 (patterns).

This process is the power of empiricism and rationality in action, and would be employed by a man with a healthy and natural Yang/Yin, Masculine/Feminine balance. However, today, it is rare.

## ***Back to Fight-or-Flight***

The residual psychological/physiological needs for the broad spectrum of natural responses to vestigial survival pressures persist. These needs are bursting at the seams (especially if we are sleep-deprived and over-caffeinated, by the way), demanding to be expressed; so we experience them as virtual, responses to *perceived*, technically *imaginary* threats. This type of virtual experience could be dangerous if our pride blinds us to the dark side of growth, or worse, if it lulls us into such nonchalance that we accidentally relinquish our free will to a self-destructive force (more on that in the later chapters).

By imaginary threats, I do not mean to say that they are never threatening per se, just that they are not immediate threats to survival here and exactly now. For example, topics such as gun control, racism, politics, transgenderism, global warming, nutrition, etc., can indeed be survival threats in the long term, but they very rarely threaten our survival *right now*, although we react as if they do. When the fight-or-flight response is triggered, the uniquely human capacity to inhibit the urge to attack or run away while we do the work of deciding rationally the appropriate and constructive response is compromised. It's likely that mindfulness of our fight-or flight response, as well as our capacity for its inhibition, could prevent unnecessary and destructive conflict. In other words, the threat is not occurring right now, so I can take a deep breath and pause for thoughtful reflection before I run away or launch into name-calling, unfounded accusations, and verbal attacks.

### ***Examples:***

#### **Of Virtual *Fight*.**

- A stranger cuts us off in traffic, and I snap, aggressively thrusting out my middle finger.
- Someone makes an unpopular comment to a blog online, and there is a negative reply, then another reply, and it quickly escalates into fight between people who have never met.
- The person in front of me in line at the speedy checkout lane in the grocery store has twice as many as the allowable items, then pays with a check, and I feel anger.
- A dog barks at me and I yell "get it on a leash" at the anonymous owner.
- I offer my opinion about Barack Obama to a buddy, and he disagrees; so I get mad, maybe raise my voice, and insult him.
- Practically ALL ideological debates, like Democrat versus Republican, Christian versus Jew, Religion versus Atheism, etc.; escalates because of virtual fight, when no actual survival threat is present.

#### **Of Virtual *Flight*.**

- A friend offers an opinion with which I disagree, and I avoid any debate/fight by saying nothing, in order to "keep the peace" – meanwhile missing out on a potentially enriching point-of-view.
- I see someone feeding their child something I believe to be harmful, and I say nothing, except to myself, "to each his own," squandering the opportunity to help.

- A co-worker accuses another of something I'm certain is false, and I ignore it, rationalizing my silence with words like "Don't get involved in other people's business" or "Silence is golden", thus perpetuating the injustice.
- In a group of people, a friend tells me something I believe to be false, and I say nothing in order to avoid an argument and save my image, because I know we are both short-tempered and I have been telling people that I'm not.
- Someone asks me a question about politics or religion, and I change the subject, or make a joke, or say something that I don't really believe, just to avoid what I think is an inevitable argument. I rationalize my response by saying "everyone's opinion is equal" or "one should never judge another", often taking pride in my so-called "tolerance".

Virtual fight unnecessarily creates/escalates conflict. Virtual flight suppresses the free exchange of insights and information. Masculinity does not participate in virtual fight or virtual flight, but the temptations to do so are greater and more numerous than ever. In the past, living in smaller more intimate communities we went into fight-or-flight mode only occasionally, like when encountering a stranger. Do I flee, fight him, or stay put and get more information? Today, strangers are everywhere we look, so we must grow accustomed to it, despite subconsciously putting the nervous system on high alert. The new anonymous social environment is perilously foreign, and our reactions to it are not masculine.