

An Essay on Androgyny

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Upon first reading of the essay "*Androgynous Man*" by Noel Perrin, I was pleased to find the author presented the concept that men who did not fit into the stereotype of "*a real man*" could be happier and more fulfilled. He suggests that such "*spiritually androgynous*" men are freer and able to find greater satisfaction than those who are "*all male*".

The essay opens with his reflection on taking an inkblot-based magazine quiz 'How Masculine/Feminine Are You?' and finding he was rated "*barely masculine at all*". He quickly analyzes the test and determines its weakness; stereotypes about gender meant that not selecting blots appearing to be man-made objects decreased his 'manliness'. He then tells us that it was many years later when he realized that he was not unmanly; just a different kind of man.

For the author, men who are "*all male*" (he uses that interchangeably with "*100 percent red-blooded American*" and "*he-male*") are driven by "*a little biological set*" that drives all their behaviours- from being sports fanatics to acquiring encyclopaedic knowledge of the intricacies of gas-powered internal combustion engines. And so 'he-men' aren't as free as the androgynous (spiritually) man who has "*a range of choices*" in what they do, and how they react. The author uses, as an example, that being open to his 'androgynous self' has made the largest impact in how he parents; "*I am, among other things, a fairly good natural mother. I like the nurturing role*" Such freedom is available only so long as the "*spiritually androgynous*" man is able to stop trying to be what he is not, stop being "*too busy trying to copy the he-man*".

This reminds me of a high school classmate ("*Alan Q*") who seemed to epitomize the author's example of a man who was perhaps "75% *red-blooded*" (Canadian in this case) - "*busy trying to copy the he-men*". Alan spent all those years trying so hard to not be the feminine man that he so clearly was. As a result he faced continual teasing from classmates; mostly jokes and double entendres; with the occasional 'practical joke'. The more he tried to fit in, the more the jocks and cool kids baited him. To my knowledge it never went farther; no physical abuse. The teasing was worse than what I experienced; but in those days such behaviour was considered part of life; "*boys will be boys*".

I was teased for my lack of interest in, my lack of ability at, and my lack of concern over that lack of ability at, sports. But I never tried to fit in, and so my lack of concern was largely met with an equal lack of aggression. It seems clear to me that I am what the author calls "*spiritually androgynous*". Although I didn't know that term, I know I felt content with who I was. As one of the 'liberated' men of this modern age, I should be in total agreement with the author's thesis; after all I am also released from "*the single ideal of the dominant male*."

Upon a re-reading of the essay, I felt a certain unease at the piece. Reflecting on the author's choice of words, I realize that the tone is condescending towards those "*100 percent red-blooded*" Americans. The initial 'dig' is subtle ("*completely masculine men are quite often wonderful people*") and could be passed off as attempted humour ("*some of my best friends are...*"). But if they are limited by having to "*be what they are*" is the "*spiritually androgynous*" really any different? They also must "*be what they are*" - it's just that he finds that to be better by virtue of being more interesting to him. Clearly that variety of options may well be appealing to many people; I know it is to me.

At the same time the author spends much effort showing that he is one of those “75% *red-blooded*” men; recounting how much he thrilled at “*leading troops in combat*” and telling us (and himself) that he is most assuredly neither gay nor a transvestite. Between that and his presumption that the “*he-male*” lives an inherently less-fulfilling life, I end up feeling less happy for the author's sense of fulfillment than annoyed at how much of that is gained by belittling others.