

Masculinities Keynote

Though I look like a man, not a man—I am a transsexual, what people are now calling “non-binary.” Ever since I was a kid I had friends who were girls and friends who were boys and I was just always something else. Though I share pieces of the experiences of both men and women, I’ve never actually lived as either of those. My entire life has been an exploration of the grey areas of gender.

I’ve been out as transgender since 1995 and went on hormones in 2006. Although I am totally open about being a transsexual, including to the hundreds of students that pass through my gender studies classrooms at CU every year, strangers who encounter me in my everyday life universally assume, because of what I look like, that I am a man. In fact, I regularly have people enthusiastically “compliment” me that I’m so realistic-looking as a man, they would never guess that I’m transgender.

For me, being trans was always about my relationship with my body. I waited for 11 years to go on hormones because, though I wanted to change my body, I knew that changing my body would change my whole relationship to the human community in ways that I would have no control over and would probably find very disturbing

[This totally came to pass: I now have a new name--“buddy”—which guys call me everywhere I go, which has yielded such rewards as auto mechanics giving me special deals, and women at the gym literally jump off their weight machines to accommodate me if I even glance in their direction. Such experiences, though extremely disturbing, were not unexpected. As a feminist professor, I am well acquainted with how male privilege operates in the world.]

Though I may have wanted—for whatever reason—a more masculine body, I largely find masculinity repellent. The world that I want to live in is filled with kindness, tenderness, nurturing, listening, and cooperation, so I have spent my life cultivating these qualities, which are classically feminine. And I was fortunate enough to grow up with a Dad who was the emotional center of our family, so, for me, a masculine package coupled with gentleness, emotional and physical expressiveness, and nurturing wasn’t unusual at all.

There is the idea that “transitioning” as a transgender person helps you to finally be recognized for the person you feel yourself to be. For me, going on hormones definitely made my bodily vehicle feel more like home in ways that have greatly increased my happiness and peace of mind. But I am still not any more recognized as the person I experience myself to be, nor do I feel any more at home in the human community. In fact, there are many ways that I now actually feel more invisible than at any other time in my life. We live in a society that non-consensually categorizes people based on their bodily appearances and when it comes to gender, even with the recent explosion of trans visibility, there are still really only 2 choices.

I had 2 experiences in a row recently on campus that typified the invisibility I feel. As I approached my office building, I saw 2 guys walking towards me holding hands. As they saw

me, they immediately dropped hands, assuming that someone who looked like me would be disapproving, since my queerness is no longer visible—even to folks I would consider to be “my people.” Across the path there were 2 guys canvassing for Planned Parenthood all afternoon. Despite walking back and forth several times, and despite the fact that the guys were approaching everyone else to ask them to sign petitions, make donations, etc., they never once approached me. Despite my smiling right at them, when they saw me, their eyes dropped and they waited for me to pass before resuming their campaigning. There are so many ways that I feel more unseen now than I did before going on hormones.

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I wanted to open with a story about my own relationship to masculinity, at it is a little unusual. As someone who has lived on both sides of the gender binary, as well as spending most of my life observing it from the outside, I have a somewhat unique perspective about how gender works in society. I can see clearly the ways that gender as a system is massively dysfunctional and does not promote the wholeness of either men or women. (as we saw in the Kermit/Elmo song last night)

When I sang with an LGBT mixed chorus several years ago, we did a song called “Bridges,” and one of the lines was that bridges can “change two things to one.” This is how I understand myself as a trans person. I am a bridge, healing the animosity and distrust between men and women within myself. I am a hybrid, a shapeshifter, a walker between worlds, I am multiple. While I have spent my entire adult life devoted to working for women’s freedom and well-being, ultimately I am not loyal to either camp, since my commitment is to the whole, to the greater good, to healing. And to the new day dawning where the either/or duality that we have been imprisoned by rules no longer.

What I most want you to take away from my talk today then is that toxic masculinity is not just bad for women and society, but also for men. Therefore, asking men to be allies to women in the struggle for gender justice is, in my opinion, a limited framework because it ignores the destructive impact of standards of masculinity on men and the work that needs to be done by men, not just to help women but for their own survival and happiness. (5 min)

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So let’s start with the impact of toxic masculinity on women, since that’s the most obvious. Who can think of examples? Let’s brainstorm a little bit. (Flip chart) Maybe we could start with some of the key aspects of toxic masculinity: Violent, unemotional, sexually aggressive

1) Impact on women (talked about last night)—partner violence, power/control, sexual objectification

sexual assault (rape culture, entitlement to women’s bodies—bar “are you here alone?” teach women how to not be raped rather than teaching men not to rape, genuinely confusing to

young men and young women when line between sexual assault and “normal heterosexuality” so thin (*Baby It’s Cold Outside*—men are taught to push boundaries, women to defend them), sexuality—**scoring** (winner/loser, achievement machines), men learn about sex from porn and other males, leadership/career, lack of **empathy** (rape), **emotional labor**

Much of this is due to the relational nature of gender—little meaning on their own, meaning is derived through their opposition (part of the dysfunction of gender/heterosexuality—only allowed to cultivate half of the potential human qualities and then expected to find a mate to embody the other half so doesn’t promote wholeness)

Masculinity not innate, residing in biological composition of male, not static or timeless—instead constantly changing collection of historically and culturally specific meanings, mostly defined in opposition to Others—especially women. Margaret Mead

Mostly being a man means not being like a woman, the flight from the feminine (impact on empathy)—masculinity is defined more by what one is not rather than who one is so tenuous and fragile (relentless striving to live up to impossible ideals, similar to beauty standards for women)—learns to devalue all women in his society, as living embodiments of those traits in himself he has learned to despise

As NFL quarterback Don McPherson notes, “we don’t teach boys to be men, we teach not to be women and not to be gay.” This has important implications for women: As Tony Porter, co founder of A Call to Men, explains in his TED Talk, calling boys “girls” as an insult perpetuates the idea that being like a girl is a negative trait. Toxic masculinity teaches us, as Porter explains, that men are in charge, which means women are not.

Masculinity a performance for other men who watch us, rank us, grant our acceptance into the realm of manhood, a defensive attempt to prevent being emasculated: “Manhood is demonstrated for other men’s approval. It is other men who evaluate the performance”—desperate for their approval so constantly parade markers of manhood in front of other men—women are a kind of currency men use to improve their ranking among men

Kimmel says “The nightmare from which we never seem to awaken is that those other men will see our sense of inadequacy, we’ll be revealed as a fraud so we keep exaggerating all the traditional rules of masculinity to keep others from seeing through us, a frenzied effort to keep at bay those fears within ourselves”—he argues that the great secret of American manhood is that men are afraid of other men—he says “homophobia is the fear of other men—the fear that other men will unmask us, emasculate us, reveal to us and the world that we do not measure up, that we are not real men”—and he says “this fear makes us ashamed because the recognition of fear in ourselves is proof to ourselves that we are not as manly as we pretend”

Kimmel says “Our efforts to maintain a manly front cover everything we do. What we wear. How we talk. How we walk. What we eat. Every mannerism, every movement contains a

coded gender language.” Key is to always be prepared to demonstrate sexual interest in women, showing how **Homophobia and sexism go hand in hand...**”

Compulsory: Alpha attack any man who tries to leave the pack, or who gets pushed to its edges

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2) Impact on society—gift of Trump (came up last night whether Trump is a setback), living caricatured embodiment of toxic masculinity so that we can actually see it, see how damaging it is, and choose something else (Trump: need to dominate, refusal to apologize/acknowledge mistakes or humanity of others, refusal to communicate), aggression, hierarchy (femininity organized horizontally/masculinity vertically—alpha, why hard to talk to men about the power they have because though as a group they may have the power, as individuals they rarely feel empowered, in large part because dominated by other men, yet feel entitled due to way raised), competition, independence/self-sufficiency, demonization of vulnerability, tenderness, listening—all the best qualities that make life worth living

School violence—restorative, gun=respect, legitimate response to perceived humiliation, violence comes out of shame and feelings of inferiority, National Coalition on Television Violence study which finds that on average, 18-year-old American males have already witnessed some 26,000 murders just on television (never mind films and video games), “almost all of them committed by men.”

As someone with a PhD in Feminist Studies, sad to me that the main thing feminism has taught women is that, in order to be respected and empowered, they need to be more masculine, so currently living with more masculine energy than at any other time, suffocating, draw diagram

“I would argue that today, the biggest bottleneck in the movement toward gender equity is not so much women’s lack of access to what has been traditionally considered the ‘masculine realm,’ but rather men’s insistence on defining themselves in opposition to women (i.e., their unwillingness to venture into the ‘feminine realm’). The greatest barrier preventing us from fully challenging sexism is the pervasive anti-feminine sentiment that runs wild both in the straight and queer communities, targeting people of all genders and sexualities.” (Serano)

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3) So what impact does this have on men and boys?

In a video by the Men’s Story Project, a straight man—in a piece called I Love Men—shares openly about the close male friendships he’s had over his life. He said one of the reasons it’s hard to talk about his love for other men is because men aren’t considered loveable—that when you think of characteristics associated with being a man, loveability just isn’t one of them. Indeed, a study in the U.S. on fears found that most men fear humiliation more than anything (generally at the hands of men), while women’s primary fear was of men—meaning something men and women have in common is that they both fear men.

How does it feel to be considered fearful? For Black men, it is highly dangerous. Brent Staples, an African American journalist, has written about what he calls his “power to alter public space”—namely the ways that white people will move to the other side of the street, lock their car doors, and bring out their ferocious dogs in response to his physical presence. He was even mistaken for a burglar in his own workplace, pursued by security as he attempted to turn in his latest story to his editor, and when doing a story on a murderer, police actually mistook him for the murderer and pulled him from his car at gunpoint and tried to book him.

Staples reminds us of the ways that being perceived as dangerous is extremely dangerous itself, as we know from the thousands of Black men who have been killed by police, vigilantes, and bystanders who claimed that THEY were in danger—including not only the more well-known Trayvon Martin but James Means, a 15 year old African American boy who was shot and killed last year in Charleston, South Carolina by a white man after Means had bumped into him on the street. (The killer, William Pulliam, went home and ate dinner after murdering Means and reported that, after feeling fearful for his own safety, he “took another piece of trash off the street.”)

[Aside: in addition to teaching at CU, I also lead a transgender choir and we are having a collaborative concert with Mosaic Gospel Choir (who I also sing with) on Sunday in Boulder and one of the songs we are doing is Janelle Monae’s Hell You Talmbout drawn from Black Lives Matter—a powerful invocation of the names of Black people who have been recently murdered by whites in the U.S.—so this season we have been engaged in much community conversation and education about this sickening slaughter of Black men due to the fears of white people.]

Whereas Asian men are continually emasculated by cultural stereotypes that highlight their small stature and mental abilities (draw on flipchart—geeks, feminized, small body, small penis, houseboy—geisha girl), Black men are dehumanized by cultural stereotypes that portray them as animalistic and larger than life (draw on flipchart—criminals/thugs/gangsters, rappers, athletes, bodies/physicality, hypermasculine, large penis, hypersexual, larger than life, animalistic)—leaving white men, without having to even define themselves, as the ideal: the appropriate combination of body and mind.

And just as depictions of Black women as hypersexual and animalistic were used to justify sexual violence against them—from slavery to the contemporary moment—such animalistic representations of Black men are continually used to justify their incarceration and slaughter. Their very existence is seen as inherently so threatening to white people that they must be caged or put down for the good of white society.

Staples—as well as others, such as Marlon Riggs, African American gay filmmaker who died of AIDS—talks openly about the emotional damage such dehumanization inflicts on Black men: the resulting levels of grief and shame and rage Black men must carry in silence and the amount of careful self-monitoring they must engage in to preserve their own survival. As Staples shares, “I learned to smother the rage I felt at being so often taken for a criminal”—because, of

course, showing any trace of anger when you are already viewed as scary and out of control will likely get you killed.

While Riggs links the internalization of such treatment to his own, and other Black men's, HIV status, struggles with addiction, and experiences of violence, Staples—who was Ivy League educated—shares how, as one of the many laborious precautionary measures he takes to make himself seem less threatening, he utilizes his class standing to reassure anxious whites, whistling classical tunes when he's out walking on the street, what he refers to as “my equivalent of the cowbell that hikers wear when they know when they are in bear country.”

But, as I mentioned earlier, it's not just Black men who inspire fear, but all men—and it's not just Black men who aren't allowed to feel. Though Black men carry a particular burden in this regard, we don't allow any men in our culture to feel, beyond a very limited range—namely, happiness and anger. While angry women are characterized as “bitchy” and “unladylike” and historically have been diagnosed as “crazy,” prompting women to dissociate from and internalize their anger, turning it in on themselves, men are encouraged to externalize (in an avoidance of self-reflection, which is coded as feminine, hence to be avoided) and male anger can be very intimidating, inspiring fear in women and children, as well as other men.

Whereas women rewrite their anger as “frustration” or hurt and it is much safer for women to show up in vulnerability, it is much safer for men to show up in anger than hurt or vulnerability. Any expression of feeling beyond anger or happiness for a man will likely result in him being ridiculed and labeled as “pussy,” “sissy,” or “fag.” In a video I show in class about gender in high school, one young man shared about how he became stigmatized as “gay” in his school because of openly displaying his grief at the break up of his heterosexual relationship with a woman. In childhood, girls' play emphasizes agreement and cooperation, and emotional expressivity is encouraged in girls—with the exception of anger. Boys' play emphasizes competition and toughness and young boys are taught to keep vulnerable emotions in check—except anger. Hence, for women, anger becomes a scary area to be avoided. While for men, anger becomes the channel for all emotion.

[Aside: I can say, from my own experience, that I was shocked to find that my partner has increasingly experienced me as bossy and authoritative and angry. Even when I am attempting to express the same concepts or vulnerable feelings, the new monotone and flatness in my voice comes across as dispassionate and domineering and hostile even, especially coupled with my new masculine package. It has been heartbreaking to me and very very lonely and isolating that, though I may be inwardly experiencing deep grief, vulnerability, and fear and wish to be embraced and comforted, it somehow comes across as invulnerable and intimidating and drives away the very people I wish to come closer.]

This emotionally damaging gendered training starts even before childhood, in infancy. Many researchers have demonstrated the negative impact of overprotectiveness on girls—the ways that baby boys are frequently positioned outward and encouraged to interact with the world,

while infant girls are often held towards their caretakers due to beliefs in their fragility. But it's only been in recent years that researchers have investigated the negative impact of these ideas on boys.

In his book *I Don't Want to Talk About It: Overcoming the Secret Legacy of Male Depression*, psychologist Terry Real shows how parents often unconsciously begin projecting a kind of innate "manliness"—and thus, diminished need for comfort, protection and affection—onto baby boys as young as newborns. As Real explains, "little boys and little girls start off equally emotional, expressive, and dependent, equally desirous of physical affection. At the youngest ages, both boys and girls are more like a stereotypical girl. If any differences exist, little boys are, in fact, slightly more sensitive and expressive than little girls. They cry more easily, seem more easily frustrated, and appear more upset when a caregiver leaves the room."

However, parents imagine inherent sex-related differences between baby girls and boys. When a group of 204 adults was shown video of the same baby crying and given differing information about the baby's sex, they judged the "female" baby to be scared, while the "male" baby was described as "angry." And these differences in perception create correlating differences in the kind of parental caregiving that newborn boys receive—a child who is thought to be afraid is held and cuddled more than a child who is thought to be angry. Real found that from the moment of birth, boys are spoken to less than girls, comforted less, and nurtured less—at the most vulnerable point in their lives.

It is a pattern that continues throughout childhood and into adolescence. Real found that both mothers and fathers emphasized achievement and competition in their sons and taught them to control their emotions and ignore or downplay their emotional needs and wants. Parents are more punitive toward their sons, presumably working under the assumption that boys "can take it." While independent play, away from parents, was encouraged in boys, girls received more positive feedback when they asked for help.

While studies done in school classrooms have shown the negative impact on girls of these kind of gendered assumptions—the ways that boys dominate classroom discussions and teacher's attention and girls receive less time, less help, fewer challenges, and less critical feedback (because teachers are afraid of upsetting girls)—the impact on boys has received less critical attention. Just as the teachers involved in such studies were generally stunned to watch videos of their differential treatment of girls and boys, completely unaware that they were doing this, similarly the parents in these studies were oblivious about the active role they played in socializing their children in accordance with gender norms, all stating that they treated sons and daughters the same, a claim sharply contradicted by study findings.

This training to disconnect from emotions has serious consequences. While women and children's needs for intimacy with men may go unmet when intimacy itself is feminized (hence can be threatening to men), the gendered training is perhaps most pronounced when men try to connect with one another. Allen Johnson, a male feminist, says that "men are like cold

blooded animals with little ability to generate heat on their own.” Instead they are dependent upon the attention and emotional warmth of women—for whom they often feel contempt as a result of this unacknowledged dependence.

Men, like whites and others with privilege, are trained to be at the center—so when two men come together, both are looking to be put at the center and do not think to put another man at the center. Men’s interactions with one another then are frequently based in competition and activity, rather than emotional connection and trust, leaving men’s experiences with one another (and life experience generally) frequently underscored by considerable loneliness.

This has been one of the most surprising aspects of my experience of masculinity since going on hormones—the degree of loneliness that I feel on a daily basis. While—since going on hormones—everyone now wants to know what I think—and attribute tremendous value and authority to my thoughts, almost no one asks me how I feel or how I am, so I am often left without a sense of others’ care for my well-being.

This is especially pronounced with regards to my needs for physical affection. I am a very physically affectionate person—it’s a big way that I connect with people and it helps me feel grounded. But now I find I no longer touch women because, in my current vehicle, that feels creepy. And I certainly don’t touch guys that much because that could result in violence. Women don’t touch me and guys don’t touch me, so I move throughout my daily life largely without the experience of touch, which makes me feel rather disconnected and diminishes my own sense of humanity. As is the case with many men, most of the physical affection I receive is in the context of sexuality.

This masculine training has impacted gay men especially severely, as Michael Hobbes recently wrote in a Huffington Post article on the epidemic of gay loneliness. While one might think that such gendered dynamics might be less pronounced in gay communities, because gayness is regarded as failed masculinity (indeed the original psychological definition of homosexuality was “gender inversion”), there is a high tendency to overcompensate, cultivated at an early age to avoid being suspected of being gay, and the same masculine ideals are promoted in gay communities.

For other minority groups, living in a community with people like them is linked to lower rates of anxiety and depression, but for gay men it is the opposite—feminine gay men are highly stigmatized by other gays and are at higher risk of suicide and depression, while masculine gay men have more anxiety and use drugs and tobacco with greater frequency. As one man shared, “I upload a shirtless picture and I start getting these messages telling me I’m hot. It feels good in the moment, but nothing ever comes of it, and those messages stop coming after a few days.”

While when 2 women come together in an intimate relationship, the focus is often on companionship and emotional intimacy (resulting in what is known as “lesbian bed death”—the loss of sexual intimacy), when 2 men come together, both trained to disconnect from emotion,

there is difficulty in forming stable emotional bonds and so the focus turns to sex and competition. Although men might seek out sex in the hopes of finding an intimate moment, most are left with a sense of emptiness that can never be filled, especially as the majority of gay men now use social media and apps such as Grindr to connect with one another rather than meeting through friends or places.

As a result, gay men suffer from alarming rates of a range of health and mental health issues, from cancer to asthma, from depression to substance abuse. And gay communities have generally built entirely separate infrastructures around mental illness, HIV prevention, and substance abuse, despite evidence that there are not three epidemics but one: as one researcher notes, “People who feel rejected are more likely to self-medicate, which makes them more likely to have risky sex, which makes them more likely to contract HIV, which makes them more likely to feel rejected, etc.” And the origin of most of the alienation that drives this epidemic is the shame and trauma that comes from not measuring up to societal ideals of masculinity.

While such health consequences might be expected in a marginalized population, societal ideals of masculinity exact a similar cost among heterosexual men. From 2009 to 2014, while mortality rates fell for most other Americans, they rose for middle-aged white heterosexual men, with most of the fatalities coming from what experts call “despair deaths,” including drug overdoses, alcohol-related liver disease, and suicide, all consequences of unhealthy coping mechanisms. While gender disparities like the wage gap—and even the orgasm gap—have been getting some societal attention, the longevity gap—the fact that men die on average 10 years earlier than women—is surprisingly disregarded.

Though the conventional wisdom about this difference is biology, the 10 years of difference in longevity between men and women turns out to have little to do with genes. Men die early because they do not take care of themselves—in large part because self-care is considered to be feminine [I even use a piece in my Masculinities class called *Sleeping is Feminine!*]. We see this mentality as a key aspect of masculine training—man up, play through the pain. Men wait longer to acknowledge that they are sick, take longer to get help, and once they get treatment do not comply with it as well as women do. They tend to suffer alone and in silence, largely because toxic masculinity teaches them to be afraid of looking “weak.”

The boyhood training that we discussed to not ask for help is a major detriment with regards to sexual health as it means men are not likely to ask questions about how to take care of themselves and their partners, especially in a realm such as sexuality where men are expected to have all the answers.

[My students are currently doing research projects and one interviewed young men and women about sexual health testing for her project. She found that all 10 of the women she interviewed get STI checks on a regular basis, generally before sleeping with a new partner.

However, only 1 of the 8 men she interviewed had ever been tested for STIs and only did so to protect his own health, after he'd been with a "sketchy" partner.]

Masculinity's death tolls are attributed to its more specific manifestations: alcoholism, workaholicism, violence, and risk taking behaviors undertaken to prove or defend one's masculinity (such as driving drunk or without a seat belt). Even when masculinity does not literally kill, it causes a sort of spiritual death, leaving many men traumatized, dissociated and often unknowingly depressed. Indeed, men are 4 times more likely to commit suicide than women (it is the biggest killer of men under 50 and men comprise 80% of all suicides)—in large part due to the pressure and isolation they feel as men.

Taking refuge in traditional masculinity is a coping mechanism. Masculinity is a hardening shell meant to protect men from the disappointments of life, a self-delusion that preserves them from feeling overwhelmed, but at the cost of their own humanity and connection to the humanity of others. (18 m)

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In order to cultivate healthy masculinities, men must be willing to do the hard work of interrogating the ideas they were raised with, which is why so many men resist it. It requires destabilizing your own identity, and giving up attitudes and behaviors from which you're used to deriving power, likely before you learn how to derive power from other, more just and productive places. These interventions start with a "feminine" (hence risky) activity: introspection. What did you learn about "being a man" and from whom? How are those lessons working out for you, and for the people you love and your communities?

Through such questions, we can begin to cultivate new values for upcoming generations of boys. What if demeaning women got you shunned by your friends? Or raping someone got you suspended from your team (rather than the Steubenville rape case in Ohio where boys accused of rape were allowed to play football while the boys who spoke to the police were suspended)? If the rest of us shift our relationship to masculinity, ideas like "she was asking for it" or "don't be a pussy" won't make sense anymore, and the guys who try to cling to them will find themselves isolated, facing serious social and legal consequences.

There are real risks for men who challenge toxic masculinity, from social shaming to actual violence—and such punishments won't ease until many, many men take the plunge. To encourage this, I suggest utilizing the strengths men already have. Concepts like courage, heroism, leadership, and risk taking often point men towards destructive aspects of masculinity, such as dominance and violence, but these concepts can be reinvented to highlight the affirming qualities that we might want healthy masculinities to embody.

For instance, standing up to men promoting toxic masculinity requires courage. Being vulnerable, asking for help, or sharing one's feelings are both risky and a form of leadership. Through such reframing, men can be encouraged to step off the path of least resistance

towards the direction of honorable manhood. Men can ask themselves and other men, what kind of man do you want to be and what's stopping you from being that man? We can focus not on what's wrong with men, but instead how to empower men towards self-improvement and positive contribution.

And we as a society need to support this transformation. One of the most striking pieces I use in my Masculinities class is about transguys like myself and what allows them to embody transformational masculinities rather than traditional masculinities. Basically, when they feel safe they can embody transformational masculinities and when they don't they revert to traditional masculinities. I don't believe that this is particular to transguys—I think all men need to feel safe in order to embody transformational masculinities, so what are some ways that we can make it safer for men to do that? This is something we all can contribute to, since men are gender policed not only by other men. It might involve intervening in dysfunctional femininity as well—for instance, the attraction many women have to bad boys (even though they might decry the lack of nice guys) and their training that a woman's love can change a man (seen in cultural narratives such as *The Beauty and the Beast*, which is currently having a resurgence of popularity).

Fundamentally, in order to transform toxic masculinity, we need to honestly recognize the toxic cultural environment that we all are swimming in and helping to perpetuate, even though we may also be being harmed by it in different ways. We have all been subject to extremely dysfunctional societal training and so we need to come together to reject and unlearn that societal training and create new healthier models of relating. (3.5 min)

Start Q&A by asking for their suggestions