

You Throw Like a Girl: The Blind Spot of Masculinity | Featuring Don McPherson

[Transcript]

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This program contains raw, explicit language, sexual content & images of misogynistic violence that some viewers may find offensive.

MCPHERSON: Think about this. I said before that sex is amazing-- the most wonderful, amazing, incredible thing that human beings do is to be physically intimate and vulnerable with one another. And the language that we use for it-- did you hit, did you beat, did you smash, did you fuck-- it's awful. Now, I'm not just talking about college men having this conversation. This is our culture because we're afraid to have that bigger conversation.

When did I learn what it meant to be a man?

TITLE SCREEN

You Throw Like a Girl: The Blind Spot of Masculinity
With Don McPherson

MCPHERSON: I knew that I wanted to get out of the game. I was ready to retire, and I got convinced to do another year after about three or four months of not preparing for another season. And then I got there, and I realized, you know, I'm really not into this. And I got pulled in by the head coach, the general manager, and the owner.

We signed a contract with you to pay you as the guy we thought was going to compete for the starting job. Right now, you're number three on the depth chart. We're either going to pay you number three money or you got to go back. And I cried, and I sat in this office in front of these three men and I cried. And I wasn't crying because it was over. I knew it was over.

I was crying because I had to look at, how did I get here? How did I let this place bring me to the edge of a cliff and then push me off of it? And who was I? All the things I believed, all the things I thought mattered, all those supposed transferable skills of leave it all on the field, and there's no I in team, and winning isn't everything if it's the only thing, and a lot of it was BS. None of it really prepared me for life without the game.

One way or another, you're going to have to have this conversation, whether it's being a student here on campus, whether it's going into employment when you have to deal with sexual harassment in the workplace and you're going to hear about this for forever in that environment, whether it's when you become a parent and you have to talk to your son or daughter about these issues, whether you get in a relationship. They're all issues that we've all been raised not to talk about.

BE A MAN

REVERSAL OF FORTUNE (1990)

- Well, say something. Do something. Be a man.

MCPHERSON: I will never forget. I was sitting in the airport, and there was a boy, three or four years old, with his mom. And he's bouncing all over the place, and I'm laughing because that's what I would have been doing. At some point, she tried to calm him down. She'd sit next to me, and then of course, he sits next to her and he's still moving. And ultimately, she just turned to him and she said, will you be a man? And I remember before he even responded, my heart sank. What's he going to do with that? And immediately, he shut down. His shoulders slumped. His face went stoic. And all of that energy, all of that exuberance, all of that playful boy just disappeared. Why did "be a man" shut him down? And I watched it in real time. I watched the shutting down of this boy-- who he was.

I see it so often in men who were never allowed to truly be an innocent boy, the expectation to be the little man. Being a little man is one of the most awful things that happens to a boy because it means he has to shed the innocence of being a boy.

PATTON (1970)

- It's my nerves, sir. I just can't stand this yelling anymore. [sniggling]

- Your nerves? Well, hell, you're just a goddamn coward. Shut up!

MCPHERSON: We don't raise boys to be men. We raise boys not to be women or gay men because we're very comfortable telling boys what not to be. It's the moment that a boy expresses something in his innocence and he is slammed by being called a sissy, or being called a pussy, or being called a faggot. He is slammed by people around him, and it's devastating.

And what's amazing about shame is that we carry it, even if no one sees it, even if no one knows about it, even if no one knows that place where it rests. But we start layering on all these behaviors, all this posturing to prevent our full self from ever being exposed again for fear that it's going to get attacked. It is because that has been beat out of them repeatedly that men don't cry.

THE SANDLOT (1993)

- Oh, no.

MCPHERSON: I was a Sandlot boy in my neighborhood. We weren't particularly wealthy, but we were just kids. So we played in the street clothes. We didn't have uniforms.

THE SANDLOT (1993)

- Yeah. It's easy when you play with a bunch of rejects and fat kids, Rodriguez.

- Shut your mouth, Phillips.

- What'd you say, crap face?

- I said you shouldn't even be allowed to touch a baseball.

MCPHERSON: The most powerful scene, when the boys come from the other side of town and they start throwing insults back and forth.

THE SANDLOT (1993)

- Right here, right now. Come on!

- Yeah.

MCPHERSON: It's the scene from Braveheart when the two armies stand across from each other before they do battle, and they start throwing and taunting each other, and the taunts are gender-neutral.

THE SANDLOT (1993)

- You play ball like a girl.

MCPHERSON: And the music stops, and the kid he said it to was like physically hit with the language and he's like, what'd you say? And the next line is, "Tomorrow, our field, noon." Those are fighting words. You can call a guy-- that's my dog. He's a cool cat. Hits like a truck. He's got pipes. You can refer to guys as an inanimate object or an animal and it's a compliment. But you compare us to our sister, and it's the ultimate insult. That's misogyny. That's misogyny.

As much as it was a thing to be a black quarterback, and the thing that felt like a burden to some extent, I enjoyed it. It provided discipline in my life, that I knew I had to be not perfect, but I had to be good. I had to behave myself. And this was what was interesting when I started understanding masculinity differently. It was the performance, and it was the performance of privileged masculinity that I had to demonstrate.

I often don't go down the conversation on race, and I don't want even for my background to be part of the conversation because it's irrelevant. I'm Chinese, Jamaican, and English is my lineage, and my last name is McPherson because there were slave owners named McPherson. My gender had a more negative profound impact on my life than even race because I was a black quarterback, but I was a quarterback, so I still got to play the position.

THE MAN BOX

MAGNUM FORCE (1973)

- Man's got to know his limitations.

MCPHERSON: I refer to this as the box of masculinity. Some people call it the man box. Whatever it is, it's kind of a very narrow understanding of masculinity. Be strong. Be tough. Don't cry. Don't show your emotions. Be reliable. Be honest. It's kind of the things that we all think is being a noble man. I don't call this toxic masculinity, I call narrow masculinity because it's narrowly

defined. And what we do to each other-- not some strange guy, not somebody we don't know-- our boys use this language.

It's a great visual because it shows the confinement and the trapped space that men feel themselves in. There are qualities that are in who we are as men that just don't show up when we ask men, what does it mean to be a man? And there's nothing wrong with what's in the box as it is. The problem is when that's the narrowness of what we're allowed to be. And what we don't say as men is being loving and caring. And I always think of the box as a tool box. And what we say about what it means to be a man in that box is the narrowness of the tools that we get to use-- to be tough and strong no matter what, when the reality is that we carry around a tool box of emotions and feelings of being sensitive and vulnerable. We carry the weight of all that, but we don't know how to use all those things in the box.

I'm not talking about our feminine side. I'm talking about the reality of our wholeness. You know what we do to each other? We ask very little. This is why I say that this conversation is not simply about the prevention of violence against women. For us as men, we have to have this conversation about who we are and how do we help each other be better. That's the challenge. How do we, as men, love each other enough to allow each other to live in that wholeness, to encourage each other to make better decisions-- as I always say, to love each other differently.

GAME ANNOUNCER

15 seconds. West Virginia's coming. McPherson back. They pick up the blitz. To the end zone. Kelly! Yes! Yes!

MCPHERSON: I've always said that my life was more adversely affected by gender than by race. I had privilege because of being an athlete, and so that gave me a pass. That gave me access to a place that maybe other black people didn't have access to, whether it was in higher education, whether it was in certain social circles where I was accepted because I was an athlete. But my gender kept me from realizing my whole self.

Being a football player really did limit what people expected of me as a person, as a man. The assumption was that I was tough, and that I was violent, and that I womanized, and that was about it. And that was consistent with being a real man. My father, my uncles, my brothers-- we were all living by this really narrow understanding of masculinity that kept us from growing in a lot of ways. Passed down a lot of traditions of silence, being the stoic man that my father was, so that stoicism, that kept me from being emotional. It kept me from accessing relationships in a way that I probably should have. It kept me from my full and whole authentic self.

THE SIXTH SENSE (1999)

- I know that I've been a little distant. I know that it makes you mad. I just feel like I'm being given a second chance and I don't want it to slip away. Anna.

- Happy anniversary.

MCPHERSON: What made *The Sixth Sense* believable was men's emotional incompetence. You believed that he had become this workaholic, was not communicating with his wife. You would believe he could be in a room and almost be invisible because he was so consumed with his own problem. So being the stoic, silent, analytical guy was believable and it made the movie believable. You went, oh, he was dead all this time, yes, because he was so emotionally distant from the experience of his life and he was able to talk to this boy without any emotional connection. You kind of were cheering for him [laughs] because you knew that he was just a guy struggling through this world of not being emotional.

MASCULINITIES

MCPHERSON: The reality of what it means to be a man-- to me, that's complex and it's broad. It's not masculinity, it's masculinities. I think there's so many different ways in which being a man manifests in our relationships. So what does being a man mean to the man who has children? What is being a man to the man who has a spouse? What is being a man in a same-sex relationship? What is being a man as a boss? The full complement of who we are has to come into play and we have to live it authentically. So I can be tough if I have to talk to a child about a tough conversation, but I can also be sensitive if I have to listen to that child cry about that conversation. And so I have to use my sensitivity. I have to use my emotions. I have to use the full complement of my humanity.

Chris is the 32nd guy that I knew playing this game who's dead. Four of them played for the Eagles. I got a therapist on speed dial, partially because I learned from people like Chris who couldn't do that. He couldn't say, I need help. I'm struggling. I'm hurting. I can't do this. I'm weak. He had to man up. He had to suck it up. He couldn't say, I need help. And I'm not talking about when he was walking with a fucking shotgun in his hand. I'm talking about when it first started.

In talking with students, I had a young man come up to me afterwards and say, I'm so glad you said that you have a therapist. And I mentioned that in passing. I don't mention it to say, I have a therapist because I need help sorting through my emotions. I say, no, I've got a therapist on speed dial. There's someone I need to talk to get through the day and to get through some of the issues that I'm working through in my own life. And that's one of the other things around masculinity is that we're supposed to have it right. We're supposed to know what we're talking about. We're supposed to be sure about what we're talking about. It's OK to say, I don't know.

PATRIARCHAL MISOGYNY

LATE NITE (2019)

- Jen and I just had our second baby, Taylor. Adorable, eh?
- She takes after you.
- Yeah, thanks. So there's just a lot of expenses at home right now, and I think it's time for a raise.
- I see. This is actually very exciting to me.

- Really? Great.

- Because what you're describing is the most clear-cut example of the classic sexist argument for the advancement of men in the workplace. You're asking for a raise not because of any work-related contribution you've made, but simply because you have a family. And that's why in the 1950s, family men were promoted over the women they worked with. I've never encountered it, actually, in such a clean, teachable way.

MCPHERSON: The misogyny of a patriarchy is necessary to maintain patriarchy. In order for men to maintain power and to maintain control is that we had to have something that we disdained enough.

This is the critical intersection between men's violence against women and narrow masculinity. Just as the lives of women and men are inextricable, so too are these issues. Whether they want to or not, women represent the vulnerability and empathy that men spend a lifetime beating out of themselves and each other.

The impact of not raising boys in the wholeness is necessary to maintain power among older men because boys who sought to validate the wholeness of humanity validates women.

THE WIZARD OF OZ (1939)

- Do not arouse the wrath of the great and powerful Oz. I said, come back tomorrow.

MCPHERSON: The blind spot of masculinity, the privilege of masculinity is that we don't examine it. The way that power maintains itself is to not be examined. It is the Wizard of Oz. Pay no attention to the cowardly man behind the curtain who's governing with fire, and brimstone, and noise, and distraction.

THE WIZARD OF OZ (1939)

The Great Oz has spoken. Pay no attention to that man behind the curtain.

MCPHERSON: Here's what happens when we do nothing. We don't grow. We don't get better. We don't become a part of the solution. Bless you. We will continually be the problem. The lack of ability to fully express, and full emote, and fully participate in relationships, which means communication, and listening, and understanding-- when that spills out, when it comes up in the bucket, it comes out in violence. And it comes up in violence towards women or violence towards others. The people who are the victims of that violence need it to stop. And so what they see in men, and the only thing they see in men, that they need to deal with is the toxic elements of masculinity. And because men aren't standing on a conversation that's about the wholeness of masculinity, all we're talking about is the toxicity. And so we've conflated the toxicity of masculinity with being male.

TOXIC MASCULINITY

GLENGARRY GLEN ROSS (1992)

- You can't play in the man's game. You can't close them, then go home and tell your wife your troubles. You hear me, you fucking faggots? Nice guy? I don't give a shit. Good father? Fuck you. Go home and play with your kids. You know what it takes to sell real estate? It takes brass balls to sell real estate.

MCPHERSON: This is really central to where we are in this moment because in order to engage men in a sustainable conversation that is about us, and is for us, and it's for our growth in how we raise boys, we have to move beyond this notion that the toxicity of masculinity is who we are. And the reason why toxic masculinity really caught on was because women were saying, this is what we're dealing with. This is what we're dealing with. This is what we're seeing. So we validated the term because it fit in what the problem was. But it doesn't get us to what the solution is. It's up to us, as men, to understand that the parts of ourselves that are damaging women's lives are the only part that we're presenting to the world. If we are really honest about it, it's the part of ourselves that hurts us the most. It's the part of myself that keeps me from fully saying, I love you.

8 MILE (2002)

- It's OK. Don't worry. I'm taking care of it.
- Don't. [shrieks]
- Fuck, man? The fuck is your problem? You don't touch my mother, man.
- No, stay out of it. Stay out of it.
- I'm out of here.

MCPHERSON: What's in the well is going to come up in the bucket. So all your feelings, your emotions is going to come up in any kind of conflict or any kind of discord, and it's going to come up. So all your feelings, all of your emotions, all of your insecurities-- we're incapable of fully processing those things that we've shoved so deep inside of ourselves.

Because if you believe that another group of people are less than, you're going to be violent towards the group of people and you're going to be silent in the face of that violence. I've got to take my humanity out of it first that I'm not worthy of a caring, loving, gentle, intimate relationship. That's what we have been taught as men. It's not that sex and intimacy is something we do with women, it's what we do to. And in order to do that, we have to take our stuff out of it. I believe we, as men, want. We want meaningful relationships. We want loving relationships. We want committed, honest relationships. But we have no model on how to do that.

Our silence-- men and women-- that's what made #MeToo so powerful was that it was the breaking of that silence for so many women. This was a moment and is a moment for women to express their truth and for their truth to be heard. And so men's voices got further diminished with not knowing what to say, not knowing how to respond, not knowing what to do with this new knowledge of the pervasiveness of this problem that sits in their midst.

REVOLUTIONARY ROAD (2008)

- Goddamn--

- What're you going to do now? Are you going to hit me to show me how much you love me?

- Don't worry! I can't be bothered! You're not worth the trouble it would take to hit you! You're not worth the powder it would take to blow you up.

MCPHERSON: Men have co-opted certain qualities and then limited the definition of those qualities. So strength is to shut down your emotions, and to suck it up, and to take on your feeling and ignore your feelings, ignore your pain. That's strength. No, strength is actually living in those emotions, and being brave enough to confront those emotions, and being strong enough to feel those emotions and keep on going or live in the moment with grief, with joy, with whatever the emotion is, to be able to express it and live in it. We use the toxicity on ourselves. I've got to control that first. I've got to control my emotions, and that's my strength and that's my power to eliminate my humanity in myself.

One of the stories I used to tell all the time was about separating my shoulder in a football game, and it was the worst injury I ever sustained in my life. Complete third-degree AC separation of my left shoulder. And I said to the doctor, as he was taping my bone literally in place-- I remember saying, doc, it's too tight. You're constricting me. I won't be able to pitch the ball going to my left, as if I was going to continue to play, which was ridiculous. But I had learned to ignore my own pain. I had learned to ignore my own feelings physically. And I would always say that if I have accepted a certain amount of pain, if I have accepted a certain condition of physical pain that I'm willing to live with, how could I understand the pain that I inflict on somebody else?

BRAVERY

BEAUTIFUL BOY (2018)

- I know now I need to find a way to fill this big black hole in me.

DON MCPHERSON: What I am expressing is a different type of bravery. It's that bravery of living in the vulnerability and demonstrating that vulnerability. And it allows different definition of strength, a different definition of bravery, a different definition of power and control to be able to say that in a way that men can access. You can access the bravery of saying, you know what? I don't know. You can access the bravery of being a whole person, saying that you are vulnerable, that you are scared. You can access that bravery. That provides a place, I think, that we want to walk towards. And that feels consistent with the way that we think bravery is doing the hard thing that you know you have to do in a way that we, as men, need to heal from the ways in which we have suppressed all that.

I know one of the things that I've dealt with in my life about how I deal with trying to reconcile feelings and emotions is to completely just withdraw and not disturb it, because if you disturb it and you stir it up, then you got to deal with it. And so that's part of men pulling ourselves out of that which challenges the wholeness of ourselves. And so we withdraw from so much that's

beautiful, so much that's loving, so much that's out there that would make us have to live in our vulnerability. There's nothing wrong with being tough, and strong, and athletic, and even aggressive. It's because that's the only thing that we're allowed to be that it becomes the problem. It's not so much that men need to ignore those things or get away from those things, which is what a lot of the conversation is about men getting rid of this part of ourselves, which is why terms like toxic masculinity are not helpful, because then what does it look like?

SEX & INTIMACY

GREASE (1978)

- Oh, yeah?
- Yeah. [laughs]
- Sandy.
- Danny?
- What're you doing here? I thought you were going back to Australia.
- We had a change of plans.
- I can't-- that's cool, baby. You know how it is, rocking, and rolling, and whatnot.
- Yeah.
- What happened to the Danny Zuko I met at the beach?
- I do not know. I mean, maybe there's two of us, right?

MCPHERSON: The thing that we're not allowed, as boys, to express and to talk about is the softness of relationships, the comfort of relationships, the care of relationships. We're not supposed to talk about that. We're supposed to be indifferent to our feelings. And it's one of the reasons why women will say, how come a guy is so nice, and lovely, and sweet when we're together, but when his buddies come around, he becomes a jerk? He's performing for his buddies because he's not allowed to show he's sweet, and loving, and caring. And that ability to demonstrate that is dependent on having women in our lives that allow us to do that and hold that in a sacred place. There's a tremendous amount of vulnerability that we desire as men that women do have control over because we have to give them that control. And that also feels uncomfortable. We are so dependent on women to provide a safe space for us to be whole, and yet, we have been taught to see women as less than.

AMERICAN PIE (1999)

- Here's the deal. We all get laid before we graduate.
- Dude, it's not like I haven't been trying to get laid.
- Separately, we are flawed and vulnerable. But together, we are the masters of our sexual destiny. This is our very manhood at stake. We must make a stand, here and now.

MCPHERSON: How many of you in here, from the people who raised you-- taught you please and thank you, yes ma'am, no sir-- how many of you from those people got a graphic, honest, and sustained conversation about sexual behavior, your bodies, intimacy? Raise your hand. I see about seven or eight hands. And then we're asking you to make good decisions around

relationships and sexual behavior? It ain't fair. All the more reason for us, as men, to have to step up and start having those difficult, uncomfortable conversations.

We've never talked about these things. We never talked about intimacy, and loving intimacy, and physical closeness. That is scary because the ways in which so many young men learn to understand and think what they're supposed to be doing sexually is dangerous because it is completely devoid of any emotional involvement with themselves. And it is an accomplishment. It is a notch. It is a thing to do, not something that is shared. And that's why even consent doesn't fully solve the problem. It doesn't get to, what are you asking for consent to do?

Because now, we're asking you to make good decisions. Instead of having a constructive conversation, especially with men, we're talking about things like toxic masculinity and redefining masculinity, which is very unfair because we haven't had a conversation about sex to begin with.

There are all these things that we're supposed to innately know how to do as men that we are tremendously insecure about because they are not innately learned. And the next conversation has to be one that men take ownership of the conversation and not just do what women have asked us to do, but to really have a penetrating conversation with each other about how we've gotten here.

When we don't talk to boys about intimacy and sexual behavior, and we don't talk to them about what's going on with girls and their body, then there's no frame or understanding of the impact that we have on each other. And while we have always been concerned with the objectification of women in pornography, we've always been concerned with the violent, misogynistic pornography, in that concern for the impact on women, we have completely failed-- are not even capable of considering the psychosocial development of young boys who are watching pornography. And they're not watching it as the objectification of women, they're watching it because I'm supposed to do with that guy is doing. They're being disassociated from their own bodies and their own sense of themselves. But I think it's one of the greatest public health issues of this generation that our boys are being exposed to this level of violent, misogynistic pornography, and we're not talking about it at all in any way. And that's the blind spot. That's the blind spot of masculinity is that we don't look at the impact on men.

GOOD BOYS (2019)

- I have an idea. Are you 18 or older?

- I'm going to click yes.

MCPHERSON: There is this disassociation that boys have with their own bodies, which is why even the ways in which masturbation is talked about-- you choke it. You pound it. You beat off-- like even the violence that we commit to ourselves. If we've accepted that that's how we treat ourselves, what is it that we do extend to women in our intimacy? Are we sharing with them the violence that we commit against ourselves in that regard? Are we sharing with them the way in which we understand the sensitivity of who we are as physical beings, as well as emotional?

CONCLUSION

MCPHERSON: Men will talk about defending their manhood like it's this thing that they own. We'll own manhood, but we don't own masculinity because masculinity is a continuum. It does change based on where we are in our stage in life and our proximity to others. It's fluid. But manhood is this fixed thing that is narrowly defined, and it's old school, it's traditional.

In the life of a boy, we're sweet, and we're loving, and we're sensitive, and then we start to realize that we're not supposed to be that way. And so we start to shut down those feelings, and we get a little stubborn and grumpy as little boys, and then we become little jerks as boys who prankster and get in trouble. And then we become teenage boys, and we're assholes. And then we're college guys, and we're jerks and assholes, and we're just trying to get laid and move on. And if we're lucky enough to start a family, then we're the young, incompetent dad who's babysitting their own child and can't do laundry. And then we become, hopefully, dads and grandfathers one day. And as grandfathers, we're sweet, and loving, and gentle all over again.

And I laugh because I remember talking with my editor at one point and saying, what I'm trying to do with the book is shrink the asshole years. Shrink the number of years where we're grappling with how do we become successful men and carry on this manhood performance, and still be appealing enough that we attract a partner in our lives.

If we are going to address these issues around this, which gets policed by sexism and homophobia, that confines how we take care of ourselves, how we love each other, how we support each other, this conversation is not going to happen and not going to be solved in one night. It is how we love each other.

What feminism did for me was it freed me from the narrow ways in which masculinity was asking me to live my life. I want that for men. I want men to be freed from the dogma of narrow masculinity that says that this is the way masculinity and men's lives should be lived. And that we live in a more whole, more loving, more expressive, more authentic way of who we truly are with emotional competency and honesty of our spirit. That's what I hope for men, that we are freed by the ability to live in our wholeness.

[END]