MEN AT WORK

Is there a masculine cure for toxic masculinity?

By Barrett Swanson

"You're being reborn," the voice says. "Exiting the womb of your mother. Coming into the earth as a small baby. Everything is new." It is a Saturday morning in mid-March, and right now I'm lying on a yoga mat in a lodge in Ohio, surrounded by fifty other men who've come to the Midwest for a weekend of manhood-confirming adventures. The voice in question belongs to Aaron Blaine, a facilitator for Evryman, the men's group orchestrating this three-day retreat. All around me, men are shedding tears as Blaine leads us on a guided meditation, a kind of archetypal montage of Norman Rockwell boyhood. "You're starting to figure things out," he says, in somniferous baritone. "Snow, for the first time. Sunshine. Start to notice the smells, the tastes, the confusion. The fear. And you're growing. You're about ten years old. The world's huge and scary."

Even though it's only the second day of the Evryman retreat, it's worth noting that I've already been the subject of light fraternal teasing. Already I've been the recipient of countless unsought hugs. Already I have sat in Large Groups and Small Groups, and watched dozens of middle-aged men weep with shame and contrition. I've had a guy in the military tell me he wants to be "a rock for his family." I've heard a guy from Ohio say that his beard "means something." Twice I've hiked through the woods to "reconnect with Mother Nature," and I have been addressed by numerous men as both "dude" and "brother." I have performed yoga and yard drills and morning calisthenics. I've heard seven different men play acoustic guitar. I've heard a man describe his father by saying, "There wasn't a lot of ball-tossing when I was growing up." Three times I've been queried about how I'm "processing everything," and at the urinal on Friday night, two men warned me about the upcoming "Anger Ceremony," which is rumored to be the weekend's "pièce de résistance."

As we lie there on the floor, I'm vaguely aware of Blaine, a U.S. Special Forces veteran with tattooed shoulders and a corn-silk mustache, who's pacing around the labyrinth of yoga mats, still exhorting us to recall certain touchstones from our childhoods. Earlier in the weekend, he'd recounted for us the sense of brotherhood he'd shared with his platoon, as well as the abyss of anxiety and depression he'd fallen into after returning from deployment. "I had lost my tribe," he'd said. Blaine now serves as a director of programming at Evryman, which is run by a coterie of guys from the tech and media industries. For the past two years, they've been holding weekend retreats in places like the Berkshires and Joshua Tree, hoping to foster what they call "masculine emotional intelligence." In preparation for the retreat, I did my best to acquaint myself with their rhetoric. Mostly this consisted of spending a lot of time on their Instagram, marveling at the preponderance of Ansel Adams–type photographs: black-and-white shots of mountaintops overhung by frescoed skies, with smiling guys in the foreground wearing rucksacks and ball caps. The photos were underscored with heart-rustling captions—about men breaking down stereotypes, about men no longer suppressing their emotions—to which had been appended a host of earnest

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Collages by Ben Giles

hashtags: #manup, one said; #wildernessmakesyoubetter, said another.

After several minutes, Blaine's meditation transitions into adulthood, and almost immediately, the mood in the lodge changes. Lots of guys around me are sighing raggedly as Blaine offers a more grueling contemporary update: "Then all of a sudden you're responsible for a lot. Wife, kids, partner—everyone is looking at you. *Dad, dad, dad: What do I do?* And you don't even know if you know yourself. You gotta make the money. You gotta be tough.

"That's great and all," Blaine continues. "But today you're dead. You're going to die today."

Early last January, the American Psychological Association promoted its new treatment protocols for men and noted, decisively, that "traditional masculinity" was toxic. Owing to outworn habits of stoicism and aggression, it argued, men were hurting themselves and others, and were eschewing the care they needed. It was difficult not to read this as an understatement. After all, over the past few years, men have been killing themselves in unprecedented numbers and, as of 2017, made up 79 percent of the nation's suicides. Men have also been disproportionately affected by the recent opioid epidemic, and account for nearly 80 percent of the arrests for violent crime.

I came across this information last winter, but in truth, I didn't need a bulletin from America's foremost corps of psychologists to know that a lot of men are struggling. It's hard to say when it started exactly—two years ago, maybe three?—but most of my conversations with male friends had begun to resemble unofficial therapy sessions. Lots of these guys, whom I'd known since college, were scattered in cities across the country, and whenever we called one another to catch up, the charade of light chitchat quickly devolved into a dirge of existential updates. Several of these men struggled with addiction and depression, or other conditions that could be named, but the more common complaint was something vaguer—a quiet desperation that, if I were forced to generalize, seemed to stem from a gnawing sense of purposelessness. Granted, I myself was no stranger to the bleak terrain of melancholy. I'd weathered a series of Richter-scale depressions in my midtwenties, and if these friends confided in me so readily, it was probably because they sensed that, on some level, I could understand.

Then there was my neighbor, the thirtysomething man who occupied the apartment next to mine, who lived alone and worked at one of the big tech companies in town—I knew this thanks to his corporate-issue tote bag. I had never exchanged more than a passing greeting with him in the hall, but through the scrim of our parchment-thin walls, I could hear the war-blitz of his video game console, which began like clockwork each Friday evening and continued without rest—rain or shine, winter or summer, with little regard for holidays—until the end of the weekend. It's difficult, in hindsight, to account for the sadness I experienced listening to him holed up for days on end in front of a screen, blasting Elder Dragons or whatever. Sometimes, late at night, he would get drunk, put on indie music from the late 1990s, and sing along in a voice that was full-throated, plaintive, and remarkably on key.

ONE IS DISINCLINED THESE DAYS TO FEEL SORRY FOR MEN, CONSIDERING HOW ADEPT WE'VE BECOME AT FEELING SORRY FOR OURSELVES

For a long time, I told myself that none of this was new. Probably everyone felt this way as they began the long, slow descent into the doldrums of middle age. And anyway, one is disinclined these days to feel sorry for men, especially considering how adept we've become at feeling sorry for ourselves. One need only take a look online to find the reactionary and often violent ways in which men have responded to their ailments. On the rightmost end of the spectrum are factions like incels, those pale, misanthropic creatures who contend that feminism has caused their downfall on the sexual marketplace and who have responded with either "blackpilling" (accepting one's fate) or "looksmaxing" (using extreme plastic surgery to carve oneself into an Adonis). No less odious are the clerics of the "alt-right," such as the lantern-jawed Gavin McInnes, the paterfamilias of the Proud Boys, who thunders about the virtues of patriarchy and forbids masturbation among his adherents. And let's not forget the self-help maven Jordan Peterson, he of the all-beef diet and three-piece suits, who relies on fossilized Jungian archetypes to parse the differences between men and women.

Most of the contemporary men's movement, though, isn't so overtly political. For instance, the *New York Times* recently lauded the ManKind Project, which has been enlisting fresh recruits into its "New Warrior Training Adventures" since the mid-1980s. There's also Brett McKay's *Art of Manliness* podcast, which has garnered over a million subscribers and which idolizes the bullish virility of Theodore Roosevelt. McKay believes that, just as in the nineteenth century, men have been swaddled by conveniences and thus suffer from "malaise" and "excessive softness," as well as faulty mental control. The panacea for such enervation, McKay believes, is his online training regimen called "The Strenuous Life," which is essentially just Boy Scouts for men. After completing "Weekly Agons," participants earn "badges" for competence in myriad skills, which are denoted with epithetic signifiers such as "Gentleman Scholar," "Social Dynamo," "Lock Picker," and "Sartorialist." The twelve-week program offers participants a snazzy gray and army-green uniform, plus a "handsome, pocket-sized" handbook "styled like the scouting manuals of old," all of which veers into the self-parodic and possesses the zany, boutique aesthetics of a Wes Anderson film.

By far the savviest and most normal-seeming of the new men's groups is Evryman, a benefit corporation founded in New York City during the winter of 2017. I stumbled across their website

early last November and scrutinized their sleek, unfussy aesthetic, no doubt intended to appeal to a more sophisticated gentleman, the kind of guy who might scrub himself with Dove's Men Care and consult Esther Perel's podcast.

What set Evryman apart was that they seemed acutely conscious of the tradition of men's groups, which have a knotty history of being both reactionary and essentialist. This was most glaringly apparent in the knuckle-dragging machismo of the Iron John movement from the 1990s, when men partook in "hero quests" and occasional nudity to recover their "true" masculinity. More than anything else, Evryman seemed hell-bent on destigmatizing men's groups—to the point where their insistence bordered on preemptive apology or outright embarrassment. The group's most popular ad to date opens with Evryman's brand and marketing director, Ebenezer Bond, offering a "candid" testimonial. Wearing a Williamsburg beanie and a faddish lumberjack beard, he says, "When I told people I was going to a men's retreat, I was like, 'This is going to be fucking awful. If I have to get in a loincloth and dance around a fire and beat a drum, I'm never going back.'" "So Evryman isn't that?" asks some off-screen interlocutor. "It's not that," Bond says.

Evryman had already received splashy news coverage from *GQ Australia* ("This Men's Camp Is Fixing Toxic Masculinity") and *Men's Health* ("Inside the Retreat Where Men Purge Toxic Emotions"), plus a hagiographic spot on the *Today* show, where some of the guys got emotional with Carson Daly and Al Roker. And yet I couldn't quite see how a gender-exclusive space would be the best venue for interrogating masculinity. Still, they were promising to provide a "life-changing experience." They were promising to help men get in touch with their emotions. For a thousand bucks, I could spend three days in the woods and find an enduring brotherhood. The condition was I couldn't just be a fly on the wall, they said. "If you want to write something, you have to participate."

It's the first weekend in March, and I'm driving along meandering county roads toward the Cedar Grove Retreat Center in Logan, Ohio, a shire of log cabins studded among the quaint Hocking Hills forest. As with most men's groups, Evryman operates from the Thoreauvian premise that bucolic isolation can be good for the spirit, that this kind of "work" can only be performed when one is sequestered from one's family.

Inside the main lodge, I'm bombarded by the roar of fifty male voices meeting one another for the first time. Introductions are made with vise-like handshakes, plus baritone recitations of provenance and profession. "I'm Matt. I do finance in Michigan." "I'm Rick, and I'm a scientist from Ohio." Before dinner, I meet a lean, tan man with basset-hound eyes named Robert, who tells me that he's authored over twenty volumes for something called greatbooksforboys.com.

"What a lot of literacy folks don't realize is that boys have a different brain structure than girls," he says. Females are auditory learners, he tells me, whereas boys are "more visual." Over the past decade, Robert spent a million dollars on market research, trying to figure out what boys wanted to read by visiting schools and speaking with parents and teachers, all of which yielded an adventure series called *Time Soldiers*. In it, camo-clad tweens defy the space-time continuum with helmets and skateboards. The series pairs cinematic photos with skimpy blocks of text, creating what Robert suggests is an entirely new type of literature. To me, though, it sounds like your standard picture book. "What do you call this genre?" I ask. "They're movie books," he says. Part of the reason he's joined the Evryman movement is that he lost four million dollars in the venture and has been lugging around a surfeit of anger as a result. Soon he introduces me to Ben from West Virginia. Both of them have previously attended Evryman retreats and freely admit to being "criers."

After dinner, we hunker down in a circle of bone-white folding chairs, over which the cambered ceiling of the lodge has been festooned with Italian lights, an accoutrement better meant for a shabby-chic wedding. For all the enlightened bluster on the Evryman website, I can't help noticing that both registration and the catered dinner were staffed exclusively by women,

who subsequently disappear, presumably to some other cabin on the grounds, as the facilitators settle down to business.

On the far side of the room is the Evryman staff, a veritable A-team of "new" masculinity. This includes the movement's éminence grise, Owen Marcus, a man in his sixties who's been running men's groups for over three decades. Next to him is Dan Doty, the public face of the organization and the host of the Evryman podcast. Before serving as a director for a Netflix hunting show called *MeatEater*, Doty ran therapeutic wilderness adventures for juvenile offenders, leading groups of boys through the forest, discussing coping mechanisms for life's problems, and gathering them around the fire at night for readings from *Siddhartha*. Also in attendance this weekend is Lucas Krump, Evryman's CEO, who made his bones in the tech industry, until the soul-withering demands of corporate life left him isolated and bereft. Now he's funneled his wealth into the Evryman business, hoping to spawn an international movement. Beside him are the aforementioned Aaron Blaine, as well as Dan MacCombie, whose LinkedIn profile describes him as "Entrepreneur, Coach, Human."

Blaine and MacCombie are leading the retreat this weekend and begin by reviewing the Evyrman "Agreements." These include an indemnifying waiver and a promise of confidentiality. Moreover, in the spirit of getting in touch with our "true, authentic" emotions, Evryman has put a strict embargo on any mood-altering substance. Later, however, I'll get wind of several rogue factions who scuttle into the woods to smoke weed throughout the weekend, and journalistically speaking, this will be kind of a nightmare, since the unsanctioned bowl-smoking will make red eyes an untrustworthy signifier, and it will no longer be clear whether the heavy-lidded guy in question has had an emotional breakthrough or has maybe just returned from hitting some really dank sativa.

Whereas the male liberationists of the 1960s and '70s were inspired by second-wave feminism to interrogate the ways in which modern masculinity was socially constructed, both by the imperatives of Madison Avenue and the fiats of consumer capitalism, today's men's movement tends to focus on emotional intelligence. Instead of "consciousness-raising" sessions, Evryman is big on somatic awareness.

"Turn the feeling lever up," Blaine commands at one point. "And turn the thinking lever down." The linchpin of the Evryman program is something called the ROC (read: "rock") method, which stands for "relax, open up, and connect," an acronym that seems designed to subvert the notion that emotionality is somehow effeminate. To relax, we perform a brief meditation because, as men, we've supposedly been inculcated with the belief that we should muzzle our pain as a means of proving our toughness. But this, Marcus stresses, only causes our emotions to putrefy and fester. What this weekend will offer, in other words, is a chance to open the spigot of those emotions.

Blaine and MacCombie then launch into the evening's central exercise, and we're asked to start wandering around the main hall, gazing into the eyes of the men we pass. Soon the room is clotted with male bodies, a haphazard ballet of anxious gaits and uncertain smiles. Some men maintain unabashed eye contact, while others are so overcome with trepidation that their eyes are glinting with tears. All around me is an epidemic of Carhartt and Patagonia, plus an impressive spectrum of facial hair, ranging from chic stubble to Talmudic beards. The ages span from early twenties to mid-seventies, and the group turns out to be resoundingly Caucasian.

Finally, after a couple minutes of this anguished waltz, MacCombie tells us to pair up with whomever we're looking at, and I find myself standing across from a short blond man starchily attired in a powder-blue merino sweater and loosely fitting pants. We trade restive salutations, and when he glances up at me, his wide searchlight eyes are panning across my face. MacCombie then instructs us to take a step closer to our partner until we're facing off at a kissable proximity, at which point we're enjoined to complete the following prompt: *If you really knew me, you'd know . . .* For me, this resembles nothing so much as the forced intimacy of a middle school sleepover, but out of journalistic duty, I can do nothing but dive right in. "If you really knew me, you'd know that I'm full of self-loathing. That throughout my twenties, I struggled with addiction and depression. That there have been several times throughout my life when I've contemplated suicide." I'm a little surprised by my promiscuous self-disclosure, and I watch now as the man's Adam's apple bobs up and down—a courage-endowing gulp. Then it's his turn. "If you really knew me, you'd know that I've never had any friends, that I've never wanted any. If you really knew me, you'd know that I recently came out as gay, that I've had sex with over four hundred men, that last October I tried to commit suicide after I confessed everything to my wife."

"Switch!" MacCombie yells.

Briskly, I thank the man in front of me for his courage and candor, and proceed to execute this confessional musical chairs with two other men, hugging each one in turn. For the final face-off, I'm paired with a hulking, bearded guy from Ohio, who has boyish eyes and a twangy, land-grant accent, something you only find in rural quadrants of the Midwest. Our prompt this time is: *If I wasn't acting out of fear, I would …* He tells me he'd finally start his real estate business.

The next morning, I'm the first man to cry in Small Group. In my defense, I've slept a total of four hours across the past two nights, doubtless the result of the cramped and foreign sleeping arrangements, which involve bunking with five other men whose nocturnal rumpus of flatulence and snoring has pierced my every attempt at unconsciousness. Plus, I like to think that I'm fairly in touch with my emotions, becoming, as I do, a geyser of tears at the slightest provocation. I confess that, among friends in middle school, my special playground epithet was "The Sprinkler."

Small Group takes place in Stillwater Lodge, a three-story cabin outfitted with a pool table and hot tub, plus a panoramic balcony overlooking a pond of Kermit green. Right now, we're sitting on a quadrangle of brown Naugahyde couches, while a gas-fueled fire sizzles in the corner.

First up is Matt, an active-duty Green Beret who reports his passion for "kicking down doors and shooting guys in the head." He speaks uxoriously about his wife but laments his inability to reconnect with her between deployments. Possibly sharing his war stories would help, but he knows they'd give her nightmares for the rest of her life. Next is Tim, an ashen man in his early thirties with a swoop of wheat-blond hair, who confesses that he tried to kill himself in 2017 and that Evryman has saved his life. Apparently, this is his second weekend retreat. But the real emotional acme of today's Small Group occurs when Andrew takes the floor. A scrubbed corporate guy from Cleveland, he is handsome in the bland, sanitized manner of Ken dolls or newscasters, and in all his relationships, he explains, he puts others before himself.

"Can I help you with that?" Owen Marcus says. He's helming our Small Group and has settled into a rakish posture on the couch. "You're very articulate, and you're very good at describing those emotions, but see if you can slow down and just feel them."

At this point, Andrew is squirming in his chair, his hands flexing like anemones. "Um, in order to do that, I think we'd have to go outside."

"Let's do it," Owen says.

Soon, we're gathered on the balcony overlooking the scum-laden water, and Andrew clutches the railing, quaking with disquiet and grief. I'm standing directly behind him, giving him the widest possible berth, and so forcefully is he juddering that it looks as though he's manning a jackhammer.

"IF YOU REALLY KNEW ME, YOU'D KNOW THAT I'VE NEVER HAD ANY FRIENDS, THAT I RECENTLY TRIED TO COMMIT SUICIDE"

"Okay," Owen says. "Let it come out. From your balls all the way up."

Andrew rears back and screams. "FUCK IT ALL!"

We listen as his echo booms desolately across the forest. Disturbed by the uproar, a flock of mallards erupts from the shrubbery near the pond, flapping as it ascends, the birds' honks dull and metallic. I glance at the other guys, who watch Andrew's purgation with bemusement and approval, like flinty-eyed onlookers at a boxing match.

"Let it overwhelm you," Owen says.

The intervening silence is woodsy and tranquil. Somewhere across campus, the female staff members are preparing food for lunch, and I picture them all looking up from pots and pans to identify the source of this commotion.

Pausing between each syllable for emphasis, Andrew yells, "FUCK. IT. ALL." Then, after a brief caesura, "IT STARTS NOW!"

When we get back inside and perch beside the fire, Owen commends Andrew on his "work," while the other guys are smiling and slapping him on the thigh with chummy jocularity. The atmosphere in the room is primal and festive, as if we were celebrating a rite of passage—a cliff summited, say, or the vanquishing of one's enemy. What baffles me, though, is the utter lack of a post-script. Scarcely do we wonder whether Andrew's impulse toward selflessness is actually a virtue, nor do we conjure solutions to his interpersonal dilemmas. Instead, what takes primacy is the outpouring of his emotions. That these discussions are resistant to broader considerations won't fully hit me until later that day, during our second Small Group, when I'll share feelings of isolation and disenchantment as a result of teaching university students, whose sadness and despair is so rampant that, on my evening commute, I often find myself in tears. Audibly, I wonder if we, as a culture, are doing enough to furnish them with meaningful systems of belief, or if their only recourse has been to the dictates of corporate success and the soft nihilism of self-improvement. Yet even this attempt to discuss larger social phenomena gets trampled, because Owen will ask if I've ever heard of "Mirror Theory," suggesting that perhaps my characterization of my students is actually a fun-house reflection of my own sadness, so instead of talking about the culture, why don't we talk about that maybe?

Notions of American masculinity have long drawn on a shallow pool of tropes, most of which we tend to associate with fictionalizations of the frontier: the lonesome swagger of John Wayne, the gruff reticence of the cowboy. But up until the end of the nineteenth century, the ideal of American masculinity was far more communal. The historian E. Anthony Rotundo has observed that the masculinity of the colonial era wasn't defined by chest-thumping machismo or brawny, entrepreneurial pluck, but was measured instead by a man's willingness to forfeit his time and resources for the betterment of his community. Hardly was this a matter of "emotional intelligence." Rather, his duties were fulfilled

through "publick usefulness." Often this led to nascent forms of mutual aid, because in a world where "creditors were neighbors and kinsmen were clients, a man's failure at work was never a private concern." Meanwhile, those men who saddled up and lit out for the territories were roundly condemned as "frontier wastrels," as the historian Vernon Louis Parrington called them, princes of thoughtlessness who pursued their own agendas and roamed the country as they pleased.

Yet the rise of industrialization and the birth of modern capitalism rewarded precisely those attributes that colonial communities were prone to denigrate: aggression, guile, and an overwhelming will to power. Even when men failed to thrive in the marketplace, they nevertheless succumbed to its sanctioned forms of masculinity. The feminist scholar Joseph Pleck notes that during the Great Depression men no longer had access to the sorts of external achievements that once granted them a stabilizing dose of virility—wartime brawn or financial independence—so they deferred instead to psychological or behavioral attributes to restore their sense of identity. Lacerated by the dehumanizing conditions of the factory, male workers typically responded with a cocksure "hardhat culture," as the writer Pankaj Mishra calls it, whereby heavy drinking, coarse language, and prurience became tokens of masculinity, a conception that Mishra believes has "reached deep into blue-collar workplaces during the decades-long reign of neoliberalism."

Rather than confront these structural changes head-on, men were often encouraged to blame other culprits: usually immigrants or women. In *Backlash*, her mammoth history of antifeminism, Susan Faludi notes that the antagonism toward women in the 1980s coincided with lackluster growth of traditionally male industries, causing a precipitous drop in real wages for households in which a man was the sole breadwinner. In describing this era, she writes, "The 1980s was a decade in which plant closings put blue-collar men out of work by the millions, and only 60 percent found new jobs—about half at lower pay." And yet instead of investigating the economic woes behind men's fear and instability, the powers that be put the onus on women. "Part of the unemployment," Ronald Reagan suggested in a 1982 address on the economy, "is not as much recession as it is the great increase of people going into the job market, and—ladies, I'm not picking on anyone but—because of the increase in women who are working today."

Such outpourings of essentialist machismo have always accompanied surges in feminism. Even before the acquisition of female suffrage, men reacted to the entrance of women into politics with wariness and hesitation. Theodore Roosevelt, for instance, added women's suffrage to his Progressive Party platform, but he compensated for this by doubling down on testosteronic rhetoric and championing football and boxing. The Iron Johns responded to third-wave feminism by resuscitating their inner "Wild Man," a term coined by the Minnesotan poet Robert Bly, who founded the mythopoetic men's movement. (His book *Iron John* spent sixty-two weeks on the *New York Times* bestseller list.) Invoking Jungian archetypes about masculinity and relying on harebrained interpretations of Brothers Grimm fairy tales, the Iron John movement believed that the Industrial Revolution sequestered fathers from sons and created an environment in which patriarchal authority became rotten and suspect.

IT'S NAÏVE TO THINK THAT THERAPY ALONE WOULD BE ENOUGH TO REDRESS THE SYSTEMIC FORCES BEHIND TOXIC MASCULINITY

Though Bly's Iron Johns and Roosevelt's disciples claimed to be in sympathy with their era's feminist movements, most critics saw in their objectives an attempt to reclaim the patriarchy. Sometimes even Bly himself let the mask slip. At a 1987 seminar, a male participant asked Bly what he should do if he revealed his true feelings to women and they dismissed him, to which Bly responded, "So, then you bust them in the mouth." When a flabbergasted audience member accused Bly of condoning battery against women, he tried, fruitlessly, to walk back his statement. "I meant, hit those women verbally."

It's easy to see how this revanchism has played out in the Trump era. And yet even when men aren't exhorted to engage in such blatant Otherism, the American male has been inculcated with the belief that the culprit behind his woes is either psychological or biological. Keen ironists will note that when biological factors such as testosterone are pegged as the locus of toxic masculinity, the argument relies on the same sort of essentialism that gets invoked by chauvinists who claim that women are biologically determined to be more emotional or diffident. When the A.P.A. noted that traditional masculinity was toxic, it was suggesting that men's hard-nosed disposition causes them to reject therapeutic assistance. Scanter attention gets paid to the structural forces behind this reluctance, which include not only the steep economic costs of therapy but also the paucity of resources in many rural communities. Around the time the A.P.A. released its guidelines, a number of other, less-talked-about articles recounted the shortage of psychologists and counselors in America's heartland, with stories of rural men sometimes traveling several hours to receive the care they need. Oddly, in supposing that men's lone motivation for eschewing mental health services is toxic masculinity, we are assuming that their hesitance is a personal choice rather than a structural impediment, thereby perpetuating the Marlboro Man myth that each guy is in control of his destiny.

Of course, it's breathtakingly naïve to think that therapy alone would be enough to redress the larger systemic forces behind a problem like toxic masculinity. But this hasn't stopped a whole plethora of personalized remedies from getting pitched to men as a tonic—a new membership with CrossFit, a cathartic jaunt to Burning Man, a weekend retreat in the woods to recover his "deep masculine." "Popular accounts of the male crisis and male confusion," Faludi writes,

> are unrelievedly ahistorical. The conditions under which men live are ig-

nored and men themselves are reduced to a perennial Everyman … How would men's problems be perceived, though, if we were to consider men as the subjects of the world, not just its authors?

The rest of day two is a derby of self-expression. We take a midafternoon hike through the woods and "reconnect with Mother Nature," which involves staggering through the wilderness and "speaking to the universe." It's a ritual, we're told, that's been performed in the Middle East for thousands of years, with roots in early Judaism, though I don't remember the Torah mentioning anything about Moses' unbalanced chakras. For all their attempts to distance themselves from the mythopoetic men's movement, Evryman nevertheless embraces essentialist precepts (gender exclusion, for one), as well as the Iron Johns' impulse toward postmodern sampling. Whereas Robert Bly pulled from Teutonic folklore and African fables, the new men's movement relies on Gestalt therapy and Eastern traditions, as well as lush strings of corporate slogans and the frothiness of wellness bromides. I can't tell you how many times I heard guys, when struggling with vulnerability, say they really wanted to "lean in."

Still, the carnival of openness affords me a chance to learn more about my Evryman brothers. I hear about lost jobs and unfaithful wives, gambling problems and squandered ambitions. One man, during a "connection" ritual in the woods, confesses to me that he's grown addicted to massage parlors, a meager compensation for his etiolated marriage. Rick, the abovementioned scientist from Ohio, recounts his earliest memory: his stepfather trying to drown him in a bathtub when he was only two years old. Up until he started doing this work, he mitigated his trauma with a whole menu of iniquitous behavior: pathological overachievement in high school, visits to brothels in the Air Force, to say nothing of monstrous eruptions at his kids and spouse. "My son has not spoken my name in eleven years. Will not say my name," he says. "I was kind of a bear when he was growing up."

Like Rick, a few of these guys have gothic backstories and are dealing with unresolved childhood trauma. But more consistently the men report feeling spiritually lost or existentially adrift. High achievers in their professional lives—CEOs or team leaders, tech moguls or restaurateurs—these men feel wary about their status in the workplace and are searching for more meaningful interpersonal connections. Again and again throughout the weekend, the guys will sing arias about the soul-withering effects of corporate life, claiming that all the benchmarks of neoliberal achievement—"big salary," "sexy title," "an office in the C suite"—have not conferred upon them any sense of lasting fulfillment.

After yoga that morning I meet Francis,* an oaken-voiced man with an Anderson Cooper haircut, who tells me, "My career has been a fucking mess." A graduate of the Wharton School, he worked for a long time on Wall Street, where, he avers, "you don't have time to be a human being." While he was checking all the boxes from a professional standpoint, "making my parents happy and doing what I was supposed to be doing," he was vitiated by the cutthroat wagers of the job, and when the markets failed in 2008, he decided to become an entrepreneur. First, he tried to buy a tortilla-manufacturing plant, and later he started a frozen yogurt shop in Florida, but when both ventures crumpled, so did his mental health. "At the time, I was living in Miami, with the balcony overlooking the ocean, and I kept having visions of going over. And that really scared me. That was when I hit my bottom. So I pulled myself up by the bootstraps and made the best of my situation." What he proceeds to describe is a regimen of self-curated therapies: reading books on psychology and neuroscience, experiments with acupuncture and massage, as well as a revolving door of self-actualization trainings through various corporate platforms. And yet, despite this pageant of self-renovation, Francis says, "There's somebody different who shows up at work. I'm not the guy that's there. I get stressed and fall into a warlike mode and become a different person,

* *This participant's name has been changed to protect his privacy.*

which leads to loneliness and disconnection." You'd be forgiven for thinking that such callousness was at least partly due to his vocational situation. But when I posit this, Francis is quick to personalize the issue, saying the onus is on him to recalibrate his temperament.

Back in the Main Lodge, it seems like everyone's defenses have been lowered. One consequence of having overactive tear ducts is that the other guys keep assuming I'm having a slew of emotional breakthroughs and keep sidling over with tender voices to ask how it's going, jokingly wondering if I'm maybe getting more out of this reportorial assignment than I had initially bargained for. At one break, Owen totters over and rubs my back encouragingly, saying, "Wow. Way to show up in Small Group." But if you spend three days in a claustrophobically isolated environment with four dozen other men, all of whom are reckoning with childhood trauma or existential dissatisfaction, then see if you, too, aren't shredded and raw. See if you, too, aren't strangely moved.

The relevant question for me, though, by the end of day two, is whether this torrent of emotion is a meaningful intervention into the debate about masculinity, whether Evryman is treating the symptom or the cause. So insistent are they about auditioning and accepting each man's grief that sometimes I find myself alarmed by the statements that go unaddressed. At a Large Group check-in on Saturday, after a hike through the forest, one man says, "I found an animal bone in the woods. And I put mud on my face. And I missed the meeting." He starts crying. "And I realized that I'm a wild man unfit for modern society. And for that I feel shame." Another man named Tom tells me that he came to Evryman because he felt timid and unassertive but that during his initial Small Group the first words out of his mouth were, *I hate men.* "And I looked around and I'm like, fuck, I just ruined the whole weekend. They're going to chase me out of here with burning sticks." Instead, his Small Group facilitator looked him in the eye and invited him to elaborate. "And I said, 'I hate the way men can take up all this space.' And I threw my arms out, and one of the other guys in the group asked, 'How does that feel?' And then I sat with it for a second, and I was like, 'Actually, this feels really good.' And he was like, 'Right. Yeah, take it up and enjoy it.'"

That such comments might benefit from feminist scrutiny seems too obvious to mention, but the docket is so chock-full of activities that we're soon shepherded to the evening's next event, which is the Evryman Talent Show, during which one of my bunkmates, Steve, sings Tom Petty's "Learning to Fly," a sterling tenor rendition that leaves several men (okay, me) in tears. By this point, unabashed fraternal P.D.A.s have become rote and commonplace. Two men during the second half of the Talent Show—one a real estate broker from Canada, and the other a construction worker from Illinois—take turns tenderly resting their heads on each other's shoulders, looking very much like high school sweethearts.

This is mostly nice, and in this climate, who could possibly complain about well-intentioned men partaking in fulsome acts of affection? After all, is this not a herald of our "masculine emotional intelligence?" Except I remember that I have paid for this open-armed embrace. I've shelled out good money for a domain in which I can say anything without fear of judgment, where I can wail and caterwaul without batting anyone else's eye. And because the Evryman protocol asks us to refrain from sharing our "stories," and because I have offered only thumbnail sketches of my isolation and despair, there's no meaningful sense in which these guys actually know me, apart from having a vague understanding of my most tender psychological wounds. What else could result from this but the thin simulacrum of brotherhood, a bond based not upon the specifics of my life but upon the shared condition of a Y chromosome? That there might be more important similarities or differences between us—that our respective ideological, spiritual, or political commitments might actually be radically divergent, if not downright antithetical—none of this matters at Evryman. What matters is your pain.

Sunday morning, pre-dawn darkness. The men of Stillwater Lodge lumber through the gloom of our bunkhouse, looking for jackets and boots. We've been asked to report to the Main Lodge in outdoor gear, and soon we're trudging across campus, shuffling under a dark lavender sky still salted with stars. Inside, the coffee tastes like a brown crayon and does little to remedy my exhaustion. Sifting through my emotions, "holding space" for other men, plus the gauntlet of hikes and exercises, has left me ragged with fatigue. I can barely uncurtain my teeth for a smile or a morning hello, and in the bathroom mirror, I observe with interest that my eyes and jowls have begun to sag like those of second-term presidents.

Pretty soon we're told to congregate in the central hall and find a place on the ground. Fifty men now lie supine on the floor, their arms splayed out messianically to the side. Leading this exercise is Tom, one of the Evryman facilitators, a svelte, handsome man from New York City who moonlights as a photographer. "So we're gonna do some pranayama breath work," Tom says. "I just want you to know that there's nothing dangerous about what we're doing here."

The doth-protest-too-much quality of Tom's proviso already makes me uneasy, even before he explains the technique. It consists of two huffy in-breaths and one violent outbreath, a labored respiration that when performed sounds vaguely Lamaze-ish. "In-In-Out," Tom intones, snapping his fingers, keeping us in time, occasionally pelting us with varsity-coach commendations: "Good!" "You've got it!" "Listen to the cadence of your brothers!"

I now confront the problem of conveying just how discomfiting this gets, how unnatural it is to respire so forcefully while exerting no other physical effort. The result is a self-imposed hyperventilation. The result is a vertiginous nausea that sends me pinwheeling toward the bathroom, though the men still breathe at a decibel level loud enough to permeate its heavy chestnut door. *Sip-sip-ah,* they breathe. *Sip-sip-ah.*

I don't quite know how to describe what happens next. Tom instructs the men to pick up the pace and says, "If there's a noise that wants to come out, let it come out." One man unfurls a woozy bellow, a sound that recalls the zigzagging deflation of an unknotted balloon. Another man groans Neanderthalically—the first croak a zombie makes after it's been disinterred.

"Let your body do what it wants," Tom yells. "Nothing is wrong here. Make noise. Get primal!"

Now the men become loudly unglued. There are ferocious growls and unbridled sobs, anguished shrieks and boyish gasps. It sounds Dantean in its anger and pain.

"Almost there," Tom says, after a half hour. "Just a few more minutes. Let it scare you."

"I need help!" one man cries. "Please! I need help!" Quickly I dash over, whereupon I discover that the anguished man is Steve, one of my Stillwater bunkmates, and already he's been swarmed by Doty and two other facilitators, one of whom says, "He's hyperventilating. Does anyone have a paper bag?" I hustle to the nearby kitchen and scan the storage cubby, but there's nothing in either cabinet. Yet when I glance back at Steve, it looks like he's calmed down while Doty lies beside him, whispering assuagements in his ear. Meanwhile, the floor is covered with several dozen men who still writhe and weep, like figures in a tableau vivant of a Hieronymus Bosch painting. Once I settle back on my mat, it proves difficult to reenter "the cadence of my brothers," and so I mostly just try to wish myself elsewhere. No matter how daffy and potentially dangerous I find this exercise, it's clear that the pain unleashed by these guys is bone-deep and very real. The man to my right is sobbing inconsolably, his limbs tangled in a fetal position, and he's rocking back and forth in a lost, desolate way, his face violet with woe.

Things reach some sort of apogee when the boy to my left, an undergrad from Ohio State who's spending his spring break with Evryman, whimpers, "Holy shit. This is everything."

Owen Marcus comes over and kneels beside the boy, putting a hand on the kid's chest. He talks now in a fatherly, pastoral way. "Let it come out. You've been holding that for a long time."

"This is insane," the kid says. "I feel like I'm on acid right now."

"Yeah," Marcus says. "Just let the acid take over. Enjoy the trip."

The analogy turns out to be startlingly accurate. For while the Evryman crew alleges that this breath work derives from the pranayama tradition, which Tom later tells me he learned about in "a class at a yoga studio," it is actually a form of Holotropic Breathwork, a method developed by Stanislav Grof, a Czech-born transpersonal psychologist who influenced the New Age movement throughout the 1970s. Grof came up with Holotropic breathing after lab experiments with LSD were outlawed, and he found that hyperoxygenation of the blood could produce similar results. Participants underwent visions, muscle spasms, and hysterical crying jags, all of which induced near-death experiences and helped participants uncork long dormant emotions. Setting aside the technique's possible salutary effects, it bears noting that over the past few decades the strategy has received no small amount of disapproval. A 1993 report on the practice, for instance, found that it could often trigger seizures in participants or lead to psychosis in vulnerable people. To be fair, Evryman isn't alone in resuscitating this technique. Holotropic Breathwork has become popular at many wellness junkets and spiritual retreats, the sorts of places where muumuus are worn without irony and people sip kombucha on tap.

Huffing on a yoga mat, I'm now in a position to grasp the contemporary men's movement's fundamental appeal. Far from interrogating masculinity head-on, these groups are approaching the issue at a dodgy, sidelong angle, pitching men's work as a hip, new wellness therapy, no different from any of the other practices that have become faddish in Silicon Valley. See, for instance, Jack Dorsey's regimen of weekend fasts or Elon Musk's use of nootropics. Later that weekend, Evryman's CEO will tell me that he wants men's groups to be regarded as "CrossFit for your

insides," which is precisely what so confounds me about the weekend thus far. They are operating from the premise that masculinity can be depoliticized and dehistoricized, that all men need is a good old catharsis. It is a worldview that persists under a kind of end-of-history insouciance, a belief that because the system cannot be changed, the best that one can hope for is the chance to blow off some steam.

Even though many of us are still visibly attenuated from the Holotropic Breathwork, we are immediately shunted outside and told to walk toward a copse of distant trees, for what activity, exactly, the facilitators will not say. In single file, we tramp across blond, withered grasses, with low clouds scudding overhead, their edges pink-tinged by the dawn. Several men are still glassy-eyed from the purge, and so our procession into the woods has a somber, funereal aspect.

At long last, we enter a clearing and wordlessly gather into a circle. Some of the men have put their arms around one another's shoulders, sort of in a band-of-brothers-ish way, and all of our faces are woebegone and depleted. Eventually, Aaron Blaine says, "Okay. This is the Anger Ceremony. It's your chance to be a victim and let things come up."

In case any of us are confused about what this might mean, Owen Marcus elucidates, "This is a chance for you to let it rip. So, a few things: Be safe. Use your body, but don't throw things or break things, because there might be other guys around." The goal, in other words, is a kind of volcanic expulsion. "Choose someone to get mad at. So who is that person in your life that you're pissed at? It could be your partner. It could be your business partner. It could be your father. Just start with that one person, and if it goes somewhere else, fine. But not you!" he says. "The earth can take it. Grandmother Earth, and all the four elements. Actually, it's a release. The traditional people say, 'Give it away to the earth.'"

Aaron then explains that we should spread out across the forest but stay in view of a partner, presumably for safety purposes. "Once everyone's in place, we're gonna howl. Like a wolf. That's when it starts."

"Don't start howling on your own," Dan MacCombie says. "No false howls."

After all the early morning activities, I can't imagine who might be feeling constipated or repressed, but before I can ask what we're supposed to do if we're already feeling well-ventilated, Aaron says, "Go ahead and find your spots."

With this, we disperse crunchingly through the forest, weaving around a wasteland of sclerotic-looking trees. Eventually, I stumble upon a clearing, at which point Dan and Aaron unleash the inaugural wolf call, one that ricochets crisply across the forest. In the distance are the sounds of men stirring with pent rage, the tentative throat-clearings of long-suppressed ire. Out of a sense of journalistic obligation, I do my best to participate in the exercise and train my mind on a figure for my anger. But flipping through the Rolodex of possible subjects—my wife, my parents, my students, my siblings—I find myself wholly devoid of the impulse to, as it were, "let it rip." Whether this reveals my habits of suppression and self-blame, or whether this exposes Evryman's false assumption about the exigency of catharsis, I cannot say. All I can tell you for sure is that over the next twenty minutes, I'm made to endure the catacombs of the male psyche, an opera of full-throated pain.

"I'm not your fucking parent! Take care of yourself!"

"Stop fucking laughing at me!"

"Get out! Get the fuck out!"

"Pay attention to me! Fuck me!"

"I don't want to be fucking dead!"

"Be a parent!"

Apart from the troubling implications of this exercise, I can't help wondering whether this aural hellscape might be triggering for some of the men in our company, several of whom are Special Forces veterans, and others of whom have confided that they were victims of abuse as children. For a while, in the interest of not going to pieces here in the forest, I turn away from the ceremony and stare at the sylvan resplendence of the clearing, watching the early-morning sun peek through a raft of fast-dispersing clouds. Here I find my buddy Tom, a general contractor from California, not screaming but down on his knees, his hands threaded in prayer until he eventually presses them to his ears. Whatever else I might feel about the virtue of this exercise, I find myself choking up at the sight of a man praying for, and terrified by, this outpouring of human emotion.

It turns out Tom and I aren't alone in our trepidation. After the group reassembles for a round-robin of check-ins, several men reveal their skepticism about the purpose of the Anger Ceremony. "Having grown up with all of that in the house," one man says. "I had a hard time with those noises." Another man says, "Anger just isn't in me." Other men, when asked to describe how it went, are far more enthusiastic. One bull-necked man named Tony, who ascended the glade and rejoined the circle shirtless and glistening, says, "Mother Earth took a beating today. And for that I'm grateful." Later that day, I'll notice that his knuckles are gashed and bleeding, grim relics of the pummeling.

After the Anger Ceremony, we're given a much-needed respite, and since this is the final day of the retreat, lots of us are engaged in last-day-of-camp valedictions, swapping hugs and phone numbers, tentatively expressing the kernel of new friendship. I myself, in the weeks and months to come, will trade emails and texts with Rick and Francis, trying to stay engaged in the switchbacks of their lives. Francis wants to set up a monthly phone call and work on "staying connected," and Rick wants to apply to M.F.A. programs, so I offer to lend advice. This is part of what Evryman calls the "reintegration" process, a term with a pungent whiff of the military.

At lunch, I sit with a group of guys to whom I haven't spoken yet. One is a redheaded Aussie who works in corporate branding. He tells me that he came to "the wilds of Ohio" on a fact-finding mission. One of his clients is looking for "an institutional response to masculine challenges," and with Evryman, he believes he's found

the best bet. It turns out the Aussie isn't alone in thinking so. Evryman has already been approached by several marquee corporations looking to run workshops for their employees. While loath to give specific names, the Evryman crew does tell me they've been approached by a tech colossus in Silicon Valley, as well as one "large-scale blue-collar industrial giant." And yet by focusing so monomaniacally on the crusade of unbridled catharsis, Evryman has ignored the extent to which these institutions themselves can be instruments of injustice. After all, we may have good reason to be wary of kinder, gentler men, particularly when they're willing to let the structures of capitalism do the work of patriarchy for them. And in failing to address how some of these men are themselves victims of patriarchy, Evryman has erased the potential for men to see their plight as bound up with other communities, particularly those who've long suffered, in far greater ways, under the yoke of this arrangement.

That afternoon, we reconvene in the Main Lodge and gather into one last scrum, with our arms hitched at the elbows or threaded over one another's backs. And as Owen Marcus proceeds to put us into a kind of trance, gruffly exhorting us to "feel what it feels like to be supported," I begin drifting off into my own internal hypnosis, feeling myself float to some removed point overhead, and I'm remembering ten years ago when I put a leather belt around my neck. I was living in a garden apartment on the North Side of Chicago, where my life had contracted to something dismal and small, a reality trivial enough to abandon. And yet in the waning afternoon light of the retreat center, arm in arm with my Evryman brothers, I am skeptical of dwelling exclusively in the bog of my own sadness. After all, when we shed tears for the veteran Matt, we're ignoring the extent to which his grief has been caused by his armed service, that his inability to connect with his wife stems from the foreign-policy decisions that we civilians have tacitly endorsed. Or when I lock arms with a smart-home entrepreneur, I'm invited to ignore the fact that the automation of Silicon Valley might eventually put some two million truck drivers out of work, an impending structural shift that no doubt runs the risk of increasing toxic masculinity. It is an insidious habit of our time to assume that personal deprivations don't have social or political dimensions, that the cure-all can be found in the detour of a retreat or the ablutions of self-care. But what I feel most acutely in this moment, and during the long drive home across the byways of the Midwest, is loneliness. We had talked of an enduring brotherhood, and yet as soon as I leave the retreat center, I realize these men are strangers to me. I try to imagine them making similar journeys home, drawing divergent routes across the country, waiting out layovers in airport lounges, standing under the sickly lights of convenience stores—each man returning to his private grief. ■