

The urgent message coming from boys

August 30 2024, by Samantha Laine Perfas

"This book might just save America from itself."—LISA ARRASTIA, founding director of the Ed Factory and associate professor of education at Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts

REBELS WITH A CAUSE

reimagining boys,
ourselves,
and our culture

NIOBE WAY

Harvard Ph.D. Niobe Way, author of "Deep Secrets: Boys' Friendships and the Crisis of Connection" and, most recently, "Rebels with a Cause: Reimagining Boys, Ourselves, and Our Culture," is less interested in what boys and men can learn from the culture than what the culture can learn from boys and men.

Following the lead of Carol Gilligan and other Ed School mentors, Way, now a New York University development psychologist, has made it a point in her work to talk directly to young men about their experiences. In "Rebels with a Cause," these moments reveal a deep desire to build rich relationships with others. Way talked to us about the research behind the book, and the argument at the heart of it, in a conversation that has been edited for clarity and length.

Early in 'Rebels' you distinguish between 'thin' stories and 'thick' stories. What's the difference and why does it matter?

A thin story is a story we tell that exists on the surface. It's the difference between asking, "Do you want to know what I think or what I really think?" It's what we say when someone first asks us a question. But the thick story takes into account our context, the power structure, and what's valued in the culture as a way to understand what we think and feel.

So when boys say, "I don't care, I'm not emotional," you don't take it as

simply a fact of how they feel, but as a reflection of a culture that doesn't allow—in the case of boys—space for tender feelings without feminizing them. Or—in the case of girls—to have tender feelings without viewing them as lame or overreacting. We oftentimes find thin stories about culture—what people wear, how they talk, what they eat. But culture is also patriarchy, capitalism, white supremacy, and the predominant power structure. And within those power structures, we have values that we promote.

Here's another example: When you first ask boys about friendships, they will oftentimes say they have lots of friends. They hang out, do things, play basketball, and everything is great. But when you start to ask deeper questions, like to share a time when one of their friends hurt their feelings, you will start to hear an entirely different story. They will step out of what we call the mask of masculinity and start to tell a more complicated, nuanced human story.

Why is it damaging to believe thin stories?

It's so interesting to me that we tell so many thin stories when we know oftentimes they're not true; and it's really because we think they are true. These stereotypes start to perpetuate themselves. I don't generally like to use the word "toxic" because I think it's overused, but thin stories are toxic because they get us to believe in stories that are not true.

Why does 'boy' culture perpetuate the myth that it's not natural for men to express emotions? Where did that idea originate?

One thing to clarify is that "boy" is in quotation marks because the culture doesn't actually represent real boys. It's a stereotype of a boy who only values his hard side, and there's no such thing. Friendships are

critical for men. There's a whole history of men writing intimate letters to each other as friends. If you go to many of the other places I've lived—like France, Abu Dhabi, the Middle East, China—they value men's friendships and boys' friendships (although that's starting to change as they're getting more influenced by American culture).

One point of the book is to have us wake up and see the waters in which we swim. We're all swimming in "boy" culture, privileging the hard over the soft. The solution is disrupting it. We're a deeply immature culture in that we're not recognizing our individual responsibility to take collective responsibility for the damage we're doing to our children and to ourselves.

A lot of the boys you interviewed for the book had contradictory things to say about masculinity. On one hand, they would acknowledge that emotions are healthy, but on the other, they would struggle to actually express those emotions or allow themselves to be vulnerable. What is that telling us about the tension boys are feeling?

We do have boys saying that they don't talk about their feelings, but they also know another story—they just have to have a safe space to be able to articulate the "thick" [story](#) about themselves and what they desire, which is [deep connection](#).

We raise our children to believe that being sensitive to another is "overly sensitive." We study [emotional regulation](#), but we don't study emotional sensitivity. We're a brutal culture, and boys speak that contradiction. Sometimes this conversation gets oversimplified by saying it's about giving boys permission to cry; that misses the point.

What both "Deep Secrets" and "Rebels" reveal is that boys and young men have remarkable emotional and relational intelligence. They can see these contradictions, they can articulate them, and they're able to speak to their natural desire for connection. We are born so stunningly emotionally, cognitively, and relationally intelligent, but when we grow up in a [culture](#) that only values part of us, we become less intelligent.

How can we love our boys better?

I want to reframe that question: How do we love our children better? Because we're now seeing girls and women suffer too. We love our children through valuing their sensitive, tender side from day one, as well as valuing their ability to hold it together and be stoic. It's not prioritizing the soft over the hard, but valuing the two equally.

When they say tender, beautiful, emotional things, rather than saying, "You're overreacting" or "You're being too sensitive," say, "Tell me more about why you feel that way." Have conversations about feelings and thoughts, with your son, husband, brother, sister.

We have to start asking questions and talking about things that are meaningful to us. Talk about your friendships with your kids. Talk about the struggles you have had to find a good friend with your kids. We need to see the full humanity of our children, and by nurturing their full humanity, we nurture our own.

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