

MEMORIES THAT TURN INTO TALL TALES OF MAGIC
RINGS AND MEN CARING FOR ONE ANOTHER:
AN INTERVIEW WITH MICHAEL MESSNER

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Michael Messner needs no introduction to those who are involved in Gender and Masculinity Studies. Professor Messner has been teaching for more than twenty years now at the University of Southern California, and his manifold sociological works on men and sports and on gender-based violence have been widely read and discussed by all who are interested in his fields of research. Yet, it is not his strictly academic work that is focused on in this interview, but the publication of his memoir, *King of the Wild Suburb: A Memoir of Fathers, Sons and Guns* (2011). With a different tone and style to his academic works, Messner continues reflecting on manhood in his book, where he presents alternative views to the corseted models of masculinities offered by mainstream culture. Both in his book and in this interview, Messner deals with the many ambivalences a man like him has had to face regarding the social and family models of manhood that surround him, and it is in the coming to terms with, and acceptance of, ambivalence that his work becomes especially inspiring.

In an interview given to *The Huffington Post* after the publication of his memoir, Messner recounted an anecdote about his grandfather; when he was at

graduate school he had commented, one day at dinner, on a book by a historian which spoke of the positive reactions of young men participating in World War I, as it proved a good way of upholding their baggy masculinity: “My story done, he peeked up from under his visor and made brief eye contact with me, glanced down momentarily at his fork as though carefully choosing his words, looked up again and barked at me, mouth still full of food, ‘I was drafted!’ Face reburied in his plate, he muttered disparagingly, ‘Masculinity!—kinda’ crap they teaching you up at that university!’”¹ *King of the Wild Suburb* proves that neither those early, albeit dubious, attempts at discussing masculinity nor Gramp and Dad’s teachings, were any kind of “crap.” In reflecting on his relationship with his grandfather and father and wondering about the future that awaits his two sons, Messner clearly shows how his academic work is engaged with his personal life: how the personal, for him, is political. And I think that is worth all the contradictions that the “king of the wild suburb” has had to confront.

IG: *Your memoir is obviously written as a homage to your grandfather and father and as a legacy to your sons. Is this the only reason why you decided to “write your life”?*

MM: My hope to connect with my grandfather and father—both of whom died many years ago—and my two sons was a key impulse, to be sure. But the book is also a personal exploration of my own lifelong ambivalence about the heroic, mid-twentieth century masculinity embodied by my dad and grandfather.

IG: *Albeit it is obvious that you wove your memories with the intention of highlighting your relationship with the men in your family and the women remain in the background/against the light, the figure of your mother stands out with a special light. There is no doubt for those of us who follow your work that you are a feminist man in academia—and that there is no oxymoron in that definition: Is it possible that the second-wave feminist idea that the personal is political also motivated your writing the book?*

MM: There is no question about that. Like many men of my generation who came to define themselves as feminists, I was inspired in the 1970s by women in my life who were in feminist consciousness-raising groups, exploring deeply personal issues and collectively building feminist theory and action from those discussions. Since then, it has always been crucial in my teaching and research to be reflexive about both the privileges accorded to me as a man, and about the emotional limitations that often accompany those privileges. The memoir is an exercise in this sort of personal/political reflexivity. And yes, I do continue to be inspired by my mom—now 88 years old. I wrote a book focused mostly on the men in my life, but I consciously tried not

¹ Jackson Katz, “Men’s Emotional Connection to Guns: An Interview with Michael Messner (Part 2).” *The Huffington Post* (November 18, 2012). 15 Nov 2012 <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/jackson-katz/mens-emotional-connection_b_1079042.html?ref=fb&src=sp&comm_ref=false>.

to fall in to the trap of writing my mom out of my story, as many male memoirists have done in the past.

IG: *Could you comment about the actual process of collecting your memoirs? Photographs must have been helpful, but you especially mention the meetings with your memoir writing group. Has any part of the process been especially difficult or painful?*

MM: The year after my dad died, I started graduate school and moved in with my grandparents, for what would be the last two years of my grandfather's life. Following my grandfather's death, I collected a good number of artifacts: furniture from his den, photographs, letters from World War I and World War II. These objects became touchstones that stimulated my own memories, as did a handful of photos and of my childhood. The stories in my book—of hunting with Gramps and Dad, of time spent playing in Gramps' den with his guns and fantasizing the heroics of war—spun in my mind for years, and I jotted notes that became fragments of stories. In 2008, during a sabbatical from university teaching, I took a memoir-writing class at a local bookstore. My four classmates and I formed a writing group that continues to this day. I can't over-state the importance of this group to my project. I had already written several books, but not a memoir, and I was frankly lacking in confidence that I could shift to such a different, more literary voice. In our group, we write short pieces, distribute them in advance to each other, then meet to read aloud and discuss the work, both in terms of form, content, and emotional impact. It really helped for me that none of the four women in my writing group are academics; they kept me honest any time I strayed too close to academese in my writing. But even more important, they helped me to believe that my story was relevant and interesting to others. One of them even claims to have fallen in love with my Gramps!

IG: *You certainly show self-awareness as a life writer, admitting that your memories finally became tall tales. In doing that, you root yourself in the most typically American oral tradition, but can it also be interpreted as a warning to your readers about the veracity of your words? Could you tell us something about that?*

MM: I've read other memoirs, and also critical writings about memoirs. And the issue of "what is truth?" is often central to these works. How does the reader really know to trust the veracity of the author's memory? How, indeed, can the writer even trust the accuracy of his or her own memory? After all, memory is always partial, always re-constructed in light of what we currently know, value, or believe. So I consciously played with the concept of tall tales in my memoir—partly because it was an important part of drawing the character of my Gramps, who was a spinner of tales that were, even to a young boy, clearly not always factually true, but gave hints instead about his values. I was conscious never in my story to write something that I knew was untrue. But I understand that my knowledge is always situated in my own experience, so it follows that a differently situated person may have experienced (and thus interpreted) the same moment very differently. It's been very interesting to hear my family members' and old friends' takes on



the book. My sister and mom have never disputed my take on anything in the book. Most interesting is the take of Lenn Kimura, a close friend since I was about 11 years old, who lived in the same town, went to the same schools, experienced the same generational immersion in the Beatles music, etc., but told me after reading the book that he was “blown away with how different my experience was from yours.” And the differences, for Lenn, lay in family context and the fact that as a Japanese American in a California farming town, growing up in the decades following World War II, he felt very often like an outsider. Other male friends, my age, who grew up gay have also commented on how the book invoked a simultaneous shock of generational familiarity coupled with a very different personal trajectory. This sort of reading is most interesting to me, as it illustrates the limits of assuming some “universality” to a generational story.

IG: *Tall tales and hunting used to be associated, but hunting is more than that in your narrative: it becomes a very important leitmotif, shown as the crucial element for your relationship with your grandfather and father to flow. One of the most interesting aspects of your book is precisely how you have managed to find something positive in that activity which, for many, is associated with cruelty and “machismo,” as it becomes the best excuse for communication among the three of you.*

MM: I agree, but I guess instead of using the term “excuse” I would say that hunting became the “mode” of communication between my grandfather, father, and I, and a locus for the creation of a certain kind of bounded intimacy. To the extent that boys are brought up to deny, fear, or even loathe the softer emotional expressions that might make us vulnerable in the public world of boys and men, we still retain a human need for closeness with others. A key question that has motivated much of my academic work on men and sport, and the central question that drives my memoir, is this: after we harden boys emotionally, and scare the hell out of them with the knowledge that they will have to fight in wars and/or in the public world of work and occupations, how do we still manage to find avenues for closeness, intimacy and love? For my dad and my grandfather, it was hunting. They initiated me in to this field of male intimacy, but when I rejected hunting, guns and warfare in my early adult years, how then was I to connect with them? And how do I now connect with my own sons? This is the puzzle I try to assemble in the book, and for me, some of the pieces are still missing.

IG: *It seems that each generation has to live under a particular rhetoric of war and/or postwar. This would apply to your family, a good example of 20th century and early-21st century American History: your grandfather (WW I), your father (WW II), you (Cold War, Vietnam), and your sons (9/11, Iraq-Afghanistan). It is in tracing back how that rhetoric of war has developed that the remarkable changes can be observed, and your book gives testimony of that. Were you aware of this when you were writing your memoir?*

MM: Yes, though the book focuses centrally on hunting and masculinity, war is a strong secondary theme. I write with what I hope is a proper mix of hu-



mor, irony and dread of my own boyhood fantasies of heroism in war, and juxtapose this to my grandfather's grim stance on the horror of all war. I was very aware of tracing a trajectory, from my grandfather, through my dad and myself, to the present moment where my sons are coming of age during a time of Orwellian "permanent war." Part of this trajectory is also a story of intergenerational class mobility, where each generation of men is progressively distanced from the close-up horrors of war: my grandfather was a working class miner with an 8th grade education who was drafted into the Army and sent fight in Russia in 1919. My father was the first of his family to attend university, and was a Navy officer serving as a beach master in the Pacific during WW II. During the latter stages of the Vietnam War, I lucked out with a high lottery draft number, did not have to serve in the military, stayed in college and eventually earned a graduate degree. My sons live in an era with no U. S. military draft, where the children of the upper and professional classes are effectively insulated from military service and wars are fought in our name by men (and some women) mostly from poor and working class backgrounds.

IG: *The necessity of revising concepts regarding gender and our understanding of gender relations has been defended by many academics for a long time now. I think that the traditionally masculine concept of "hero" has been transformed, improved, enriched in your book. You confess to have grown up in the company of many heroes, and in fact the title of your book points to that idea. What do you conceive as a hero, nowadays?*

MM: I love that question. For sure in the book I write of my boyhood heroes—I allude to Davey Crockett in the book's title. But I also admired baseball player Willie Mays, early 1960s U.S. astronauts, and I especially admired and looked up to my dad, who was the high school basketball coach. All of these heroes were competitive men who stood out from other men through public accomplishments. During my youthful feminist awakenings, I announced that I'd rejected these conceptions of masculine heroism, but in the book I write about my continued attachment to them, and the sense of ambivalence that developed. I'd say today I admire people who stand up for social justice. In my profession, my heroes are women a bit older than me—like sociologists Barrie Thorne and Raewyn Connell—who fought to establish feminist scholarship and pedagogy. In my current research I am meeting men who are heroes: not-famous men who are doing the hard and necessary work with boys and men to prevent gender-based violence. I still think Willie Mays was pretty great, though, too.

IG: *What are the prospects for the future as regards issues such as violence (domestic, political, social) or gender relations?*

MM: Feminism has had a huge impact, especially with respect to legal barriers to equality in much of the world. Gender inequalities, however, obviously still exist. And gender-based violence is still a worldwide problem: women are raped and beaten in the contexts of families and wars, and sexually abused or harassed in workplaces. Gender non-conforming women and



men, gay, queer and transgender people still face prejudice, and often violence. There is still much work to be done by feminists, and it's heartening for me to see a new generation of women and men working together to prevent gender-based violence. In my current research, I'm interviewing older men and young men who are doing violence prevention work with boys and men. These younger guys take for granted some of the things that my generation of men saw as radical revelations in the 1970s—that to achieve gender equality, men must be allies with women, and that men have much to gain in the process, broadening their emotional and relational capacities, becoming more fully human. This sort of transformation from cultural celebrations of narrow, dominating, violent men toward the emergence of life-affirming, egalitarian and peaceful men who take risks, asserting themselves for gender justice, is the sense of hope that underlies my memoir, and indeed all of my work.

IG: *It seems to me that in your academic writing, as well as in this book which is more personal, you offer an alternative, and very positive, model of masculinity, instead of longing for an essential masculine self which has been lost somewhere and needs to be recovered (Iron John-like). I have been particularly impressed by the image of yourself as a young man in the 1960s, obviously thinking about having fun, but also loyally taking care of your grandparents. With all the work in which you are engaged concerning this matter, what are your thoughts on contemporary views of masculinity?*

MM: It never ceases to amaze me how, despite several decades of a feminism and gender scholarship that shows, time and again, no evidence for claiming natural, categorical differences between women and men, that most of what we observe as “differences” are at best average differences, that much of these average differences are socially constructed and thus exaggerated—how committed and devoted many people seem to be to the idea of natural categorical differences: women are from Mars, men are from Venus. And though adults seem to have developed a much more varied and flexible conception of a range of possibilities for girls—a real positive legacy of feminist cultural impact—their views of boys are still very narrow. Boys are still largely seen as undifferentiated beings, driven by testosterone, and destined for competition in sports and public life. I do see this shifting among some young people I work with in universities; it's heartening to see a broader sense of possibility among some young men today, even an outright rejection of narrow, homophobic masculinity among some boys and men.

IG: *The epilogue to your memoir finally transforms your story into a gift, and the legacy that you leave to your sons is especially moving. This is what I have gathered after having read your book: that they have a father ideologically and intellectually engaged, who learned some lessons from his father and grandfather, who was taken care of by and took care of his ancestors and who now takes care of his family; a father who was king of a wild suburb—or maybe still is, as he is the owner of a magic ring. And although he does not know what it is exactly that the ring stands for, he knows how to give different meanings to it, as his*



sons will be able to give other meanings to it in the future. And maybe that is all that matters.

MM: Thanks for putting that so nicely, and thanks so much for this opportunity to reflect with you on my memoir. I will only add that it's particularly meaningful to me that my sons Miles and Sasha (ages now 23 and 19) both read my book and told me it was meaningful to them. I hope it continues to be so, and that my stories become some valued part of the textures of their lives as they move forward.

