

Video Transcription of "A Call to Men" with Tony Porter¹

I grew up in New York City, between Harlem and the Bronx. Growing up as a boy, we were taught that men had to be tough, had to be strong, had to be courageous, dominating -- no pain, no emotions, with the exception of anger -- and definitely no fear; that men are in charge, which means women are not; that men lead, and you should just follow and do what we say; that men are superior; women are inferior; that men are strong; women are weak; that women are of less value, property of men, and objects, particularly sexual objects.

I've later come to know that to be the collective socialization of men, better known as the "man box." See this man box has in it all the ingredients of how we define what it means to be a man. Now I also want to say, without a doubt, there are some wonderful, wonderful, absolutely wonderful things about being a man.

But at the same time, there's some stuff that's just straight up twisted, and we really need to begin to challenge, look at it and really get in the process of deconstructing, redefining, what we come to know as manhood.

This is my two at home, Kendall and Jay. They're 11 and 12. Kendall's 15 months older than Jay. There was a period of time when my wife -- her name is Tammie -- and I, we just got real busy and whip, bam, boom: Kendall and Jay.

And when they were about five and six, four and five, Jay could come to me, come to me crying. It didn't matter what she was crying about, she could get on my knee, she could snort my sleeve up, just cry, cry it out. Daddy's got you. That's all that's important.

Now Kendall on the other hand -- and like I said, he's only 15 months older than her -- he'd come to me crying, it's like as soon as I would hear him cry, a clock would go off. I would give the boy probably about 30 seconds, which means, by the time he got to me, I was already saying things like, "Why are you crying? Hold your head up. Look at me. Explain to me what's wrong. Tell me what's wrong. I can't understand you. Why are you crying?"

And out of my own frustration of my role and responsibility of building him up as a man to fit into these guidelines and these structures that are defining this man box, I would find myself saying things like, "Just go in your room. Just go on, go on in your room. Sit down, get yourself together and come back and talk to me when you can talk to me like a --" what? (Audience: Man.) Like a man. And he's five years old.

¹ Published on January 12, 2014 at <http://everydayfeminism.com/2014/01/a-call-to-men/>

And as I grow in life, I would say to myself, "My God, what's wrong with me? What am I doing? Why would I do this?" And I think back. I think back to my father.

There was a time in my life where we had a very troubled experience in our family. My brother, Henry, he died tragically when we were teenagers. We lived in New York City, as I said. We lived in the Bronx at the time, and the burial was in a place called Long Island, it was about two hours outside of the city. And as we were preparing to come back from the burial, the cars stopped at the bathroom to let folks take care of themselves before the long ride back to the city. And the limousine empties out.

My mother, my sister, my auntie, they all get out, but my father and I stayed in the limousine, and no sooner than the women got out, he burst out crying. He didn't want cry in front of me, but he knew he wasn't going to make it back to the city, and it was better me than to allow himself to express these feelings and emotions in front of the women.

And this is a man who, 10 minutes ago, had just put his teenage son in the ground -- something I just can't even imagine. The thing that sticks with me the most is that he was apologizing to me for crying in front of me, and at the same time, he was also giving me props, lifting me up, for not crying.

I come to also look at this as this fear that we have as men, this fear that just has us paralyzed, holding us hostage to this man box. I can remember speaking to a 12-year-old boy, a football player, and I asked him, I said, "How would you feel if, in front of all the players, your coach told you you were playing like a girl?"

Now I expected him to say something like, I'd be sad; I'd be mad; I'd be angry, or something like that. No, the boy said to me -- the boy said to me, "It would destroy me." And I said to myself, "God, if it would destroy him to be called a girl, what are we then teaching him about girls?"

(Applause)

It took me back to a time when I was about 12 years old. I grew up in tenement buildings in the inner city. At this time we're living in the Bronx, and in the building next to where I lived there was a guy named Johnny. He was about 16 years old, and we were all about 12 years old -- younger guys. And he was hanging out with all us younger guys. And this guy, he was up to a lot of no good. He was the kind of kid who parents would have to wonder, "What is this 16-year-old boy doing with these 12-year-old boys?" And he did spend a lot of time up to no good. He was a troubled kid. His mother had died from a heroin overdose. He was being raised by his grandmother. His father wasn't on the set. His grandmother had two jobs. He was home alone a lot.

But I've got to tell you, we young guys, we looked up to this dude, man. He was cool. He was fine. That's what the sisters said, "He was fine." He was having sex. We all looked up to him.

So one day, I'm out in front of the house doing something -- just playing around, doing something -- I don't know what. He looks out his window; he calls me upstairs; he said, "Hey Anthony." They called me Anthony growing up as a kid. "Hey Anthony, come on upstairs." Johnny call, you go. So I run right upstairs.

As he opens the door, he says to me, "Do you want some?" Now I immediately knew what he meant. Because for me growing up at that time, and our relationship with this man box, "Do you want some?" meant one of two things: sex or drugs -- and we weren't doing drugs.

Now my box, my card, my man box card, was immediately in jeopardy. Two things: One, I never had sex. We don't talk about that as men. You only tell your dearest, closest friend, sworn to secrecy for life, the first time you had sex. For everybody else, we go around like we've been having sex since we were two. There ain't no first time. (Laughter)

The other thing I couldn't tell him is that I didn't want any. That's even worse. We're supposed to always be on the prowl. Women are objects, especially sexual objects.

Anyway, so I couldn't tell him any of that. So, like my mother would say, make a long story short, I just simply said to Johnny, "Yes." He told me to go in his room. I go in his room. On his bed is a girl from the neighborhood named Sheila. She's 16 years old. She's nude. She's what I know today to be mentally ill, higher-functioning at times than others. We had a whole choice of inappropriate names for her.

Anyway, Johnny had just gotten through having sex with her. Well actually, he raped her, but he would say he had sex with her. Because, while Sheila never said no, she also never said yes.

So he was offering me the opportunity to do the same. So when I go in the room, I close the door. Folks, I'm petrified. I stand with my back to the door so Johnny can't bust in the room and see that I'm not doing anything, and I stand there long enough that I could have actually done something. So now I'm no longer trying to figure out what I'm going to do. I'm trying to figure out how I'm going to get out of this room.

So in my 12 years of wisdom, I zip my pants down, I walk out into the room, and lo and behold to me, while I was in the room with Sheila, Johnny was back at the window calling guys up. So now there's a living room full of guys. It was like the waiting room in the doctor's office. And they asked me how was it, and I say to them, "It was good," and I zip my pants up in front of them, and I head for the door.

Now I say this all with remorse, and I was feeling a tremendous amount of remorse at that time, but I was conflicted, because, while I was feeling remorse, I was excited, because I didn't get caught. But I knew I felt bad about what was happening. This fear, getting outside the man box, totally enveloped me. It was way more important to me, about me and my man box card than about Sheila and what was happening to her.

See collectively, we as men are taught to have less value in women, to view them as property and the objects of men. We see that as an equation that equals violence against women. We as men, good men, the large majority of men, we operate on the foundation of this whole collective socialization. We kind of see ourselves separate, but we're very much a part of it.

You see, we have to come to understand that less value, property and objectification is the foundation and the violence can't happen without it. So we're very much a part of the solution as well as the problem. The center for disease control says that men's violence against women is at epidemic proportions, is the number one health concern for women in this country and abroad.

So quickly, I'd like to just say, this is the love of my life, my daughter Jay. The world I envision for her -- how do I want men to be acting and behaving? I need you on board. I need you with me. I need you working with me and me working with you on how we raise our sons and teach them to be men -- that it's okay to not be dominating, that it's okay to have feelings and emotions, that it's okay to promote equality, that it's okay to have women who are just friends and that's it, that it's okay to be whole, that my liberation as a man is tied to your liberation as a woman. (Applause)

I remember asking a nine-year-old boy, I asked a nine-year-old boy, "What would life be like for you, if you didn't have to adhere to this man box?" He said to me, "I would be free." Thank you folks.

(Applause)