

To Fight Like a Man?

The NFL bullying scandal has raised questions of conscience: What is the measure of a man? What are the consequences of exalting brutality and violence? How do we define human weakness and strength? How to best protest and deal with abuse? How to best control harmful impulses in us all? We call them "football heroes", but aren't heroes usually more humanitarian than barbarian?

NFL defensive lineman, Johnathan Martin, is being held in contempt for breaking the locker room code of silence and "failing to be a man", by calling out the abuses of Richie Incognito as unacceptable, rather than physically retaliating or bearing it silently. To many men, being a man is to never walk away from conflicts, to absorb or inflict pain, and never admit to weakness, which they consider to be "female" and contemptible. This sad perception of reality, may not be the real one, however.

I'd like to tell them that the females in the two Missouri prisons for women can be as brutally bullying and as physically aggressive as men, not a good thing. Blood lust and the code of silence are very strong here in prison. Physical strength and cunning matter most here, not strength of character and integrity. The assailant is not held accountable by the criminal mind; the victim is fair game for being vulnerable. The stronger prey upon the weaker naturally in this jungle setting of survival of the fittest. Glorifying violence does not make us fit to return to society. But civil society exalts violence on its playing fields, in bestselling novels, in movies, and in the most popular video games, as normality too.

Of course in theory, morality is to prevail over brutality and violence in society and within state departments of corrections. So offenders caught violating rules and laws are placed in disciplinary segregation and sometimes are charged with assault and even conspiracy to murder. To avoid such violence, an offender can declare his or her enemies and request protective custody status, which I have been on for twenty months out of the last two years in both the women's prisons. At age 68, I am no match to the younger women. Walking away from conflict, telling truths about what had happened to me, and seeking safety, have mentally liberated me (although I've given up the freedoms of activities, personal clothing, canteen food and drinks, and my television and typewriter to live in an administrative segregated cell), and may have even saved my life.

However, I am told by staff that I may not be as expediently paroled (after 22 years of a good record of incarceration, I should be eligible for parole by now), because of my failure to make it in the prison population. But perhaps I have ^{more} life skills, better enabling me to adapt and contribute to society, than many inmates who are making it in prison population, including my enemies who have been released, only to return to prison upon violating their paroles. In fact, I had contributed to the prison community before being harmed by those deemed to be "stranger". I may be weak but I don't want to be that kind of strong nor to "fight like a man."

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