

Snips and Snails and Puppy Dog Tails

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"Dottie" Metcalf-Lindenburger, Stephanie Wilson, Naoko Yamazaki, and Tracy Caldwell Dyson.

Those names probably don't mean anything to you, but you might have heard those women referred to collectively in the media this past week--they comprise the largest group of women ever in space at the same time. Such record-breaking events and first-of-their-kind designations are getting more and more rare for women as we have broken almost every gender barrier, except President of the United States or Cabinet level military appointments.

Male firsts are, in my casual and highly unscientific observation, even more rare these days. Law, politics, medicine, research, manufacturing, agriculture, government, telecommunications, diplomacy, law enforcement, the culinary arts, forestry, professional sports--almost every profession I can think of was once the sole province of men, with women only grudgingly admitted, at different times and different rates in the various fields. Even library science, teaching, secretarial/clerical fields and nursing, considered traditionally feminine occupations were once dominated by men. In this country men held property, the right to inherit, and the right to vote long before women. Why, just recently I saw the *Andy Griffith Show* rerun of the episode in which a woman running for City Council divides the city of Mayberry along gender lines!

I sat in an auditorium in Dallas listening to Sally Ride speak about being the first American woman in space, and I shared a lunch table in South Bend with Mae Jemison, the first African American woman in space. Amazing women who went and did where and what no woman had gone and done before. But the names Yuri Gagarin and Alan Shepherd blazed their way into global consciousness more than twenty years head of the women. The first man in space, we say, and the first American man in space, but as was common in that era *man* meant not simply *male person* but *human*. First person in space, period. First American person in space, period. Gagarin's and Shepherd's glory lie not in being males who accomplished a first but in being humans who accomplished a first. Space is but one instance in which the same is true. We recognize the first individual to do something and we recognize the first woman to do something--and almost without exception the first individual was a man. It was this persistent state of affairs that drove successive waves of feminism--including but not limited to the push for women's suffrage in the nineteenth century and the bra-burning, Pill-empowered Women's Lib movement of the mid-twentieth century.

I spoke last month about growing up in the nineteen seventies in a society engulfed in the turmoil and the possibility of Women's Liberation. Given the tenor of those formative years and my own female gender, it is not surprising that I am susceptible to the widespread and mistaken belief that girls are imperiled at every turn and that boys

live on Easy Street, with jobs, decent wages, scientific achievement, government and prime acting jobs handed to them on a platter. My sermon a few weeks back might have left some of you with the impression that my vision begins and ends with that narrow perspective.

While it is true that I have an innate feel for the situation of girls in America, I am also aware of the precarious situation of boys in America. Boys finish school at lower rates than girls. Boys go to college at lower rates than girls. Boys get poorer grades than girls. And between the ages of fifteen and twenty boys are three times more likely to die than girls--usually from accident, violence, or suicide. Facts that should alarm parents, grandparents, teachers and everyone who loves and cares about a particular boy or boys in general.

I recently had the opportunity to interview a couple of eleven year old experts fresh from their growth and development discussions in fifth grade and full of life experience as well. They were able to tell me all the basic physical differences between boys and girls from reproductive organs to muscle mass, from the age of onset of puberty to the tangible evidence of hormonal differences--that is to say, boys are stinkier than girls. They also informed me quite confidently that girls don't get in fist fights but are harder biters than boys. With regard to that death by accident statistic, my eleven year experts also pointed out that boys are more likely than girls to jump off cliffs.

That's straight from the horse's mouth, as it were. Research reveals slightly different but no less interesting tidbits of information.

Years ago one of the newspaper comic strips had a story-line involving the birth of a baby. I think it was the *Cathy* strip, and Cathy's friend who gave birth. The parents gave the baby a gender neutral name, gender neutral clothing, gender neutral nursery and gender neutral toys. They were determined that their child would be free to grow to be himself/herself without the possibly negative influences of gender expectations and stereotypes. As I recall it, their whole scheme fell to pieces the first time someone referred to their child by the wrong gendered pronoun.

It was common and even fashionable for several decades to proclaim that all differences between boys and girls, other than the obvious anatomical ones, were due to socialization alone. We believed that dressing boys in blue and girls in pink, putting cowboys or robots in boys' nurseries and princesses or unicorns in girls nurseries, and giving boys trucks and girls dolls, alone accounted for the differences between the genders. In other words, the actions and attitudes of *adults* made boys masculine and girls feminine. More recently we've begun to learn that simply isn't the case. A fact, by the way, most observant parents of both boys and girls have always known. A mother of two grown girls and a grown son this week quite without my asking told me how different sons are from daughters.

In early infancy the needs of boys and girls differ little. They need and thrive with the secure, loving presence of dependable primary caregivers. But soon differences

emerge. Infant boys experience greater separation anxiety than infant girls and benefit more from stay-at-home parenting. Boys are also a bit slower at one of the central task of infant development--developing social interaction skills (laughing, recognizing and reading faces, early verbalization). Persistent, calm, loving interactive attention from a consistent caregiver helps boys catch up.

Similarly subtle yet profound differences appear at every stage of development up to adulthood, when boys now fathers tend to rile their children up and girls now mothers tend to calm them down. And at each stage the core parental and societal needs of the developing child, adolescent, youth, are the same for boys and for girls--love, acceptance, boundaries, freedom--but the formulae differ a bit from gender to gender.

Boys relate primarily to their mothers from birth to age six years or so, as they learn to love and be loved. From age six to about thirteen years fathers become central in the lives of boys, as they learn what it is to be male. And, this is important, boys need their mothers to remain available, attentive, and involved, in the background, lest they feel abandoned and learn to coat their love and tenderness with protective armor. From fourteen onward boys need safe, positive attention from non-parental adults, males in particular. It is not by accident that most coming of age programs, ceremonies, ritual, our own included, call for a mentoring relationship between the youth and a non-parental adult. Child advocate Marian Wright Edelman goes a step further, jokingly suggesting that friends and neighbors swap kids for a few years during their teens.

Cars, guns, gangs, selective service and on-going wars in two countries are dramatic and easily identified dangers to boys and young men. School is often a more hidden danger, but one with the potential to cause great lasting harm to all boys. Too often overworked, budget-constrained educators are forced to boil the day to day school experience down to two goals--getting girls to achieve and getting boys to behave. A positive revamping of our educational system would call for not only smaller classes, more teachers, and less "teaching to the test" but also more male teachers and a greater recognition that children and youth of both genders simply are not wired for sitting quietly still for hours at a stretch.

Novelist Barbara Kingsolver has said of children, "It kills you to see them grow up. But I guess it would kill you quicker if they didn't." Mothers, fathers, grandparents, aunts and uncles and other adults who love boys know that it also kills you to see them hurting, struggling to be tough and cool AND loving and respectful, when the rules seem to change mid-game. It kills you to see them give up reading and hate school. It kills you to see them degrade girls and women. It kills you to see them cry and to see them refuse to cry.

As we all remember from our own childhood and adolescence, growing up is hard work, joyful and painful, confusing and empowering, and exhausting. The good news is two-fold: From our advanced perspective we know survival is possible. And our children and youth don't have to go it alone. We learn more each year about how to parent and

mentor and companion our sons, grandsons, nephews and friends from infancy through childhood to young adulthood.

I started with a false premise this morning, when I spoke of the rarity of male firsts. Every boy's life is full of firsts. First breath, first smile, first word, first step, first friend, first day of school, first crush, first wet-dream, first job, first car, first heartbreak. Milestones for recognition, for celebration, for discussion and understanding. Each an opportunity for parents and grandparents, aunts and uncles, teachers and friends and allies, to step up, love more deeply and broadly, and ease as much as possible the way forward. Let us cherish our boys, that we all might be blessed. Amen.