
The Masculinist #8: Stop Apologizing

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Welcome back to the Masculinist, the monthly email newsletter about the intersection of masculinity and Christianity.

Are you a Christian man concerned about the state of young men, masculinity, and marriage today? If so, please share this far and wide with anyone you think might be interested, because this is a critical topic and I need your help. Readers can subscribe at this link: www.urbanophile.com/masculinist.

I alternate newsletters between cultural critique and practical, actionable steps men can take to improve themselves as men. This is another self-improvement dedicated newsletter.

Before I get to this installment, someone sent me [this piece from Atlas Obscura](#) about how and why Japanese rail employees are frequently pointing and talking to themselves. It's because that helps them be more compliant with routines and protocols, less likely to forget something important.

This just adds support to what I talked about two issues ago in establishing a regular prayer life. It helps to build prayer into a morning routine that involves linking it to physical activities you always perform, such as brushing your teeth, doing decline pushups, or posture stretches.

Americans Men Apologize Way Too Much

Have you ever noticed that American men apologize all the time? I'd say a third or more of the presentations I see start off with an apology.

I often feel tempted to apologize for things, even when I objectively have nothing to apologize for. For example, I'm leading a group of men who are reading through Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age*. As it happens, I've yet to buy a sofa for my apartment. I've got a couple of arm chairs and a couple of kitchen table chairs. As there are four of us in the group, that's enough for everybody, and they are perfectly comfortable for seating. Yet, when the guys came over for our meeting, I was very tempted to apologize for the seating even though I hadn't done anything at all wrong or failed to be a good host in any way.

Why?

The answer is a sort of self-deprecating shame. Most of the apologizing people do has nothing to do with a wrong or harm inflicted, but is rather a form of self-deprecation. Look more broadly at how often people do this, and it's at epidemic levels.

When I started writing about cities, I was a partner at Accenture and posting on a blog as a creative outlet. I used to basically apologize or self-deprecate right out of the gate whenever I'd talk to anybody important about my work. I'd say things like, "I'm not a Senior Fellow at Brookings or anything. I'm just a guy with a blog."

I guess my thought process was that since I had no formal qualifications or experience in this area, I sort of had to beg people to pay attention to me.

One day it dawned on me that I was simply cutting myself down for no good reason. As I discovered, my takes on cities were at least as good as a lot of high profile, highly credentialed urban writers – in some cases even better. Ultimately I became a think tank fellow myself. There wasn't any good reason for me to preemptively sell myself

short.

Once I became conscious of what I was doing and how frequently, I made a conscious effort to stop it. I didn't apologize for the seating in my apartment, which was plenty good enough. And as I rule I don't apologize for anything unless I've legitimately done something to apologize for. If I'm in the wrong, I own it. But if I'm just going to be cutting myself down or wallowing in shame, I don't do it.

Self-deprecation can be an appropriate technique we can use relationally in some cases. But for too many of us, self-deprecation and unneeded apologies are our go to tool. This only makes us look weak and incompetent. If I don't think I have something important to say, why should anybody else?

This is something you should pay attention to in your own life to figure out how often you do this - and if you think you need to change. I have personally tried to eliminate unneeded apologies. I even try to say "Excuse me" instead of "Sorry" when I squeeze past someone in a theater or something.

Can I point to some great result I got from this? No. But I certainly feel more confident these days, and I think that change made something of a contribution to this.

Again, this is what I've observed and what I do. You have to decide for yourself what the best approach is for your own life. I'm just giving you ideas to consider. You have to live your life.

Meta-Awareness of Change

Since that was short and sweet, I want to add on an observation I've made about life.

When I was around 16 or 17, my dad and I were driving down the road listening to music on the local Top 40 station in Louisville (99.7 WDJX at the time). A very popular song came on, but my dad didn't know what it was. This stunned me. I figured that my own musical tastes would change over time, but I couldn't imagine that there would ever be a day when I wouldn't even know what the top ten songs were, even if they weren't my personal style.

Suffice it to say, that day came for me a long time ago.

This is an example of not having what I call "meta-awareness of change." I knew that I had changed in my life in the past. But I couldn't understand nearly as well that I would continue to change radically in the future.

I have observed that until age 35 or so, most people lack this capability. They don't get it in their gut that they will be as different ten years from now as they were ten years ago, and they are likely to have radically different life preferences.

I think this is one reason people start getting midlife crises about age 35-45. All of a sudden they acquire more appreciation for the story arc of a human life. They are able to at some level project their path forward into the future. And they don't like what they see there.

As another personal example of this, when I was in my 20s and even into my early 30s, I was radically against the idea of having children. Why would I want to ruin my life - as I saw it - by having kids? Over the course of my 30s I started softening on this point and began to see kids more positively.

Things really changed for me one year when my grandmother went into the hospital. My mother called and several family members came into town to stay with her around the clock in the hospital. She recovered, thankfully, though has now passed away.

I'd been to visit people in the hospital before. But for the first time I could suddenly emotionally relate to my own old age. I imagined a 90 year old me in the hospital sick, only there was no family to come be with me. That wasn't an attractive future.

It took several years, but I made some bigtime changes in my life (including becoming a Christian), and made an aggressive priority of getting married and having kids. As it happens, I got married last fall and my wife is already pregnant. Believe me, that's something I'm very thankful for, since by rights I blew it in life.

Luckily for me I'm a man, so I was able to have kids later in life. Women who experience this reversal sometimes face

an incredibly short runway to having their own kids.

One particular high profile Christian woman recently posted a piece about turning 40 while still being single. In it she talks about how earlier in life she'd laugh at people who'd hinted at her that she was on a track to spending life alone and childless. (In fact, she still doesn't seem to realize that's what they were hinting at).

She's not laughing now. She's having an emotional crisis and has talked about her fear of dying alone. At 40 there is still hope for her to have kids of her own. The Bible has many stories about God "lifting the reproach" of barren women by giving them children. She would certainly improve her odds with a major reorientation of her life, though sadly she doesn't seem to be doing that. She's still following the script she laid out for a very different self a decade or more ago. Still, things very much can still work out for her, but her runway is short and she is behind the 8-ball.

The desire for kids is hardly the only example we could use. For the first time in my life, I recently realized that there are things going on in the world that I'm not likely to see the end of the story on before I die. This epiphany didn't surprise me. I now expect that I'm going to experience future changes that are going to reshape how I think about the world, why my preferences are, etc. Some of them I can imagine by projecting my life forward. Others will be a surprise. It's actually kind of exciting to get to find out what they will be. This was just one of many I'll experience as I age. I'm sure I'll have a very different perspective on many of the issues I write about in this newsletter 5, 10, 20 years from now.

Younger people's lack of meta-awareness of changes is one reason that elders were traditionally held in such high regard. And why society put guardrails in place in terms laws and social conventions that channeled young people into good long term decisions during the time in which they were most likely to be blind to the future consequences of what they were doing. Sadly, we've eliminated most of these, and the result is a lot of people blowing up their lives or prematurely closing the door on things like marriage and children that they aren't yet aware they will deeply long for later in life when it's too late. We live in a youth oriented culture, where young people are held to be wiser and more moral sophisticated than their elders. Many of them will get a painful comeuppance later in in life.

Nassim Taleb likes to contrast what he calls the "[intellectual yet idiot](#)" class with people like grandmothers:

With psychology papers replicating less than 40%, dietary advice reversing after 30 years of fatphobia, macroeconomic analysis working worse than astrology, the appointment of Bernanke who was less than clueless of the risks, and pharmaceutical trials replicating at best only 1/3 of the time, people are perfectly entitled to rely on their own ancestral instinct and listen to their grandmothers.

As he notes, while psychology, etc. face a replication crisis, [your grandmother has a pretty good track record](#):

If you hear advice from a grandmother or elders, odds are that it works at ninety percent. On the other hand, in part because of scientism and academic prostitution, in part because the world is hard, if you read anything by psychologists and behavioral scientists, odds are it works at less than ten percent, unless it is also what has been covered by the grandmother and the classics, in which case why would you need a nerd-psychologist?

One reason your grandmother's advice is so good is that she's lived through the story arc of life. She knows experientially what you can only speculate about: the future of your own life as you age.

The church and society has to do something to restore the wisdom of the elders, and reconstitute it again in functioning guardrails to channel young people into good long-term decisions. The upper middle class to some extent already does this, but as Charles Murray has noted, they don't preach what they practice.

A plan for that is beyond the scope of this post, but for now just be aware of this inability to image and emotionally relate to future life change that people under 35 tend to have.

In the Culture: I Knew You Were Trouble When You Walked In

Your typical pastor says that women are looking for quality men but end up exploited by deceptive, abusive cads. Popular culture is often far more realistic about the nature of desire than these guys. Consider the Taylor Swift song "I Knew You Were Trouble." You can [watch the video here](#). The monologue at the beginning is particularly interesting. NB: This video has been watched 359 million times, probably mostly by women.



*Once upon a time a few mistakes ago
I was in your sights, you got me alone
You found me, you found me, you found me*

*I guess you didn't care, and I guess I liked that
And when I fell hard you took a step back
Without me, without me, without me*

*And he's long gone when he's next to me
And I realize the blame is on me*

*'Cause I knew you were trouble when you walked in
So shame on me now
Flew me to places I'd never been
'Til you put me down, oh
I knew you were trouble when you walked in
So shame on me now
Flew me to places I'd never been
Now I'm lying on the cold hard ground
Oh, oh, trouble, trouble, trouble
Oh, oh, trouble, trouble, trouble*

Noteworthy

Thomas Edsall: [The increasing significance of the decline of men.](#)

The Economist: [Escape to Another World:](#)

A life spent buried in video games, scraping by on meager pay from irregular work or dependent on others, might seem empty and sad. Whether it is emptier and sadder than one spent buried in finance, accumulating points during long hours at the office while neglecting other aspects of life, is a matter of perspective. But what does seem clear is that the choices we make in life are shaped by the options available to us. A society that dislikes the idea of young men gaming their days away should perhaps invest in more dynamic difficulty adjustment in real life. And a society which regards such adjustments as fundamentally unfair should be more tolerant of those who choose to spend their time in an alternate reality, enjoying the distractions and the succor it provides to those who feel that the outside world is more rigged than the game.

Nicholas Kristof: [Are your sperm in trouble?](#)

Coda

We serve a great God, and he has shown us what his plans are for the future. We have every reason to be confident. He is also able to make us far stronger men than we are capable of making ourselves. I often think of the Sanhedrin's response to Peter and John in Acts 4:13: "Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated, common men, they were astonished. And they recognized that they had been with Jesus." It's worth noting that the early church devoted much of its apologetic energies to arguing that the Christian faith was capable of achieving greater *virtue* (literally: manliness) than paganism.

- Gabriel Wingfield, seminary student

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