

Dr. Bednar

Journalism

Abbey Archer

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Macho Man

“Alright boys, gather round,” sang the camp counselor, an aging man with a thick dark beard with a slight southern twang. A long table was set up in the middle of the field. Sausage links were strewn alongside thick slices of brisket and hefty turkey legs. Flies swarmed the meal from a respectable distance. The meat glistened in the afternoon sun.

Anthony surveyed the scene, feeling slightly nauseated by the idea of partaking in this cholesterol feast with his bare hands. His dad Mark, however, exuded a fearless confidence when facing the challenge.

The two attended their church’s “Dads, Sons, and Guns” event each year. Although Anthony looks back on this event fondly, he does not miss trying to meet the expectations of what a “man” should be. The event’s masculine itinerary included a Viking buffet which was a meat-centric meal eaten with your God-given utensils while standing. The festivities also included firing muskets, playing paintball, and learning how “as boys become men, it is normal to have lustful feelings towards women.”

Anthony still has an action photo taken during a game of paintball to commemorate the event. The father-son team had their wrists tied together with a blue rope as they rounded an enormous bale of hay. Both of them are outfitted in Mark’s military attire. The clothes are extremely baggy on Anthony, who appears to be in the lanky stage of his early teens. His thin forearms poke out of the billowing sleeves, the extra fabric ripples to mirror his movement. Mark is holding both guns, and is looking forward with a sharp, focused expression on his face as he braces himself for a long stride. Anthony is slightly hunched over jogging alongside his dad, and is looking through his face guard with wide eyes. The phrase “*Oh shit!*” is written all over his

face. This photo says a lot about each of their characters: Mark is competitive and athletic, whereas Anthony, on the other hand, is clumsy and non-confrontational. Their opposing nature wasn't the only impediment to their father-son relationship.

When Anthony was 3 years old, and his sister Yazmine was 1, their dad was deployed to Saudi Arabia. Upon being reunited, Anthony experienced a vague, disorienting recognition. He wasn't immediately able to place the man in his life, much like facing a strangely familiar face in the grocery store. When his dad was around, his parents often fought, and his dad drank heavily. A dark cloud roamed just out of reach above Mark's head. His trauma was compartmentalized and his emotions went undealt with. This emotional suppression led to unresolved issues in his marriage.

Anthony's parents got divorced shortly after Anthony's sixth birthday, and he sparsely saw his dad for four years. He isn't quite sure what his dad was doing during the time he was absent, and he feels now it would be rude to ask him about it. For a long time Anthony resented his dad for divorcing his mom; he felt pressured to step up and be the *man* of the house. There was an added layer of stress growing up in a single-parent household, but instead of acting out like many children who come from broken family structures, he did his best to not create extra trouble for his mom. He performed well in school, and tried his hardest to be a good big brother to Yazmine.

Mark became a more prominent part in his son's life when Anthony neared ten. Although present, he still was an inconsistent figure in his son's life. His appearance fell between that of a cameo and a side character in the metaphorical TV Show *The Trials and Tribulations of Anthony*. It is a show that, if narrated by its humble protagonist, would take two steps forward before taking one step back. *Well... I mean... like... I'm just trying to get the story straight, but... also?*

The first weekend Anthony spent at his dad's house did not go smoothly. He returned to his mom's house with a sad look on his face.

"I don't want to go back to Dad's. He always yells. I think he's mad at me," he softly admitted, after being lovingly waterboarded into confession by his mother. She stormed off to call up Mark. The accusation rang true, and was met with a tired excuse from its perpetrator:

"He's so sensitive and always cries! I'm just trying to make him into a *man*."

Anthony sat outside the crouched door, hearing both sides of the familiar conversation.

"Stop trying to make our son into some type of *macho* man!"

"I'm just trying to toughen him up..."

His parents rehearsed this argument over the phone several times. Mark was really hurt that Anthony didn't want to see him anymore. He eventually agreed to stop yelling, and attempted to be more understanding.

These days, Anthony is very in touch with how he feels, but he still finds it difficult to validate his emotions by grounding them in life events. Regardless, he is very certain of the time he began to see his dad as a father. In 2015 a dramatic shift occurred Mark: he retired from the army, quit drinking, reconnected to his religion, and became a more attentive dad. However, the biggest change was he began both expressing and encouraging emotional vulnerability.

Anthony initially found the shift in his father's attitude jarring. He went from not being there at all to being there whenever he could. From then forward, it was then clear that his dad wasn't a bad guy and that he was actively trying to be a better person.

At one point, Anthony even aspired to join the Army like his dad. However, this idea faded the more his true peaceful nature came out. On his first hunting trip, he watched his oversized boots disrupt the morning dew with utter disgust. He felt like an imposter in Mark's camo attire, which wrongly suggested he was one with the trees. He knew it was only a trick to fool the animals. The frighteningly chilling breeze was a natural refrigerator for tasty game in a

hunter's eyes, but to him it was a result of damaging climate change. Anthony was quickly overcome with remorse as his bullet propelled forward, narrowly missing a bunny rabbit.

Mark began to explain the proper way to hunt. "It's better to hit them when they're still so they won't suffer too long," he said.

Anthony silently gasped at the beginning of his dad's lecture; he didn't want the bunny to suffer at all. As far as he was concerned, he was the one who dodged the bullet-- not the bunny. Anthony had closely (or not so *closely*) avoided full on bunnyslaughter. That bunny probably had a family! Mark quickly transitioned into discussing gun safety, which was his main concern. In retrospect, Anthony wonders how he ever thought he could become a soldier.

Years later, now that Mark has mended his relationship with Anthony's mom, who he now has in his contacts as "Kiddos Mom." No longer was this woman only thought of as his "ex-wife." First and foremost, she was his children's mother. The divorced parents share a crucial commonality: their kids are the center of their world. Now they are amicable co-parents who regularly attend Yazmine's soccer games together.

Mark was beside his "Kiddo's Mom" when she got the devastating call saying her father had passed away. The death was sudden, so funeral arrangements had yet to be made. Immediately, Anthony's dad stepped up to the plate to organize a veteran funeral for his children's Abuelito, who also was in the Army. He spent hours making phone calls to arrange for a proper military service, and managed to secure a plot in El Paso's veteran cemetery. Mark conveyed he held a lot of respect for Abuelito by showing up to the funeral in full uniform. He even assisted in carrying the casket when they found themselves short-handed. Anthony really admires the large role his dad played after his grandfather's passing.

Since the loss of the family's patriarch, Mark has been a huge source of emotional support for his children. This couldn't be farther from his old, emotionally neglectful ways. He regularly checks in on Anthony to make sure he is adequately coping with his grief, and

encourages him to take as much time as he needs to mourn. Anthony views his dad as an unsung hero for the role he played in making funeral arrangements. He greatly admires the man that his dad has become.

Among the cluster of presents on the kitchen table was a small, thin, rectangle wrapped in shiny blue paper.

To: Anthony

Love, Dad

Anthony's mom, dad, and sister stood behind him waiting for him to pick a present to open.

"Just pick one, already!" Yazmine moaned. She appeared to be easily annoyed by her brother's hesitancy.

"Ok... Let's see... uh..." His eyes immediately attached themselves to the blue package, but he was too overwhelmed by every possible option to grab it.

"Start with the blue one," Mark said as he grabbed the package and handed it to his son. Anthony's chest fell. He was relieved to have someone else make the decision for him.

As he began to carefully unwrap the present, Yazmine rolled her eyes. He was taking forever. Her facial expression quickly shifted to match the annoyance was quickly overridden by the unusual sentimentality that arose in the room. A rare tear fell down Mark's cheek causing waterworks to flow from every direction.

It was a glass plaque with a photo of Mark hugging Anthony from behind, both of them beaming with happiness. One of the only commonalities the father and son share is that they hate to smile in photos, but this picture was an exception to the rule. In the moment the photo was taken, neither could hold back their smiles. The snapshot was taken after Anthony had been moved into his dorm, just before an emotional goodbye. The image was framed as an album cover and beneath it there was an inscription:

Arms Wide Open by Creed

Mark had always said this song described how he felt taking on the role of a father. He took out his phone and began to play the song. The family sat in silence listening to the lyrics, each line ringing true. The song admitted what his dad couldn't:

"Well I don't know if I'm ready

To be the man I have to be"

At that moment, Anthony understood why his dad is so proud of him. Mark is proud that his son isn't a macho man. He is proud that his son is comfortable approaching the world with his arms wide open-- that he is brave enough to face his emotions, and tough enough to deal with them.

Mark always tells Anthony, "I'm really proud of you son."

And every time he says it, it has the same weight to it. And Anthony never gets tired of hearing him say it.

Author's Note

Before turning in the second draft of this paper, I completely rewrote this entire article to be told from an omniscient perspective. It was very challenging but I feel it was well worth it. I have characterized Anthony throughout the story and now he is much more present in this piece. There is definitely a lot more that I could go into between the asterisks but this is as far as I could dig within this short period of time. I found this article very hard to write. The thought of Mark, Anthony's Dad, reading this scares the shit out of me. I couldn't imagine writing an article from this perspective in the real world but found it interesting to experiment with here. I hope Anthony is happy with how this article turned out. I did my best to accurately depict the person that he is. For my final draft I revised according to feedback from both Dr. Bednar and Anthony. I smoothed over a couple things to better match how Anthony feels. I also showed how the characters were feeling in the last scene more. I made it more obvious how I knew what the

characters were feeling. Overall I learned a lot in this class. All that I learned is well reflected in this article specifically because it evolved the most between drafts.

“I have acted with honesty and integrity in producing this work and am unaware of anyone who has not.” – AA