On a recent Saturday morning, I attended an anti-violence gathering at the Maximum Security Correctional Facility, where I teach a few nights a week. Not knowing what to expect, I strolled into the auditorium planning to take a seat in the back, thinking I would be listening to politicians and law enforcement talk about how violence disrupts the community, and possibly some constructive conversation on prevention. I was a bit surprised to find this wasn't the scenario. Men were sharing honest, heartfelt stories about growing up with violence, an all too common story for many who used force as the knee-jerk reaction to life's problems.

I applaud these men for going to an uncomfortable place, an emotional journey not easy to do. The years of dissociation from childhood pain, and often shame, can result in desensitization, making talking about uncomfortable memories even harder, but it is cathartic. Looking back on the trajectory that has led many to a place we prefer not to be, allows the freedom to discover why we took the road we traveled. When we finally understand what got us here, and then recognize that we don't have to be responsible for our parents' or anyone else's actions, it is liberating. But with that knowledge comes the responsibility for our future choices.

Violence seldom eradicates a problem; it usually creates more problems. Exploding with aggression when someone does something you don't like rarely gets you what you want. It just gives you another set of troubles.

So why do some people still resort to violence, and why is it usually men in our society?

That question is debated among professionals and scholars. We know that violence is a gendered issue, predominantly a masculine problem in America, and although hormones are not solely to blame, they do play a part. After testing hundreds of men, researchers from the California Institute of Technology, Wharton School, Western University, and ZRT Laboratory reported, "there is a clear and robust causal effect of testosterone on human cognition and decision-making," said Caltech researcher Colin Camerer. Their study found that higher levels of testosterone are likely to be blamed for making impulsive decisions. Testosterone enhances confidence, which may increase a male's desire for social status, consequently helping men to act carelessly to attain the reputation they desire.

"We think it works through confidence enhancement. If you're more confident, you'll feel like you're right and will not have enough self-doubt to correct mistakes," explained Camerer.

This may be part of the reason why men commit more crimes, notably more violent crimes than women who conclusively commit fewer crimes, with less violence. It is only a small part of the explanation, given that both men and women need the proper amount of testosterone to develop and function normally; however, men do require more. There may also be other motivators that are specific to one's gender, such as socialization.

Socialization into one's culture, along with the gender identity and behaviors that match each societies' view of the gender role, unquestionably shape our actions. Gender identity refers to our personal and cultural understanding of how we feel and how we believe being male or female should play out in our lives. In all cultures, gender stereotypes begin the moment we are born, and as we grow, we learn the appropriate behavior for our gender. We hear messages that boys shouldn't be a sissy, and girls shouldn't be bossy. Female gender role socialization often restricts or forbids aggression offering no societal supportive or positive responses to it. Subsequently, females often turn anger inward with self-sabotaging actions, whereas a masculine gender identity often encourages roughness that gets rewarded with positive societal support. These factors can have valuable and different contributing influences on violence. Since culture and society have a substantial impact on determining our performances, it is hard to tell where the line is drawn between nature and nurture, as both play crucial roles in our development. Regardless of exactly how we got here, we undeniably know that men commit more acts of violence than women.

Without differing messages of socialization, is it possible that men and women would experience similar feelings of aggression? I posed this question to author James Garbarino, who has written numerous books on male behavior including *Lost Boys: Why Our Sons Turn Violent and How We Can Save Them* and his new book *Miller's Children: Why Giving Teenage Killers a Second Chance Matters for All of Us,* where he talks about the brain of an adolescent male and the impact of adverse childhoods.

In answer to my query, he said we are all born with the same amount of aggression until about age three when girls have learned it isn't acceptable for females to show anger. In his book, *See Jane Hit*, Garbarino talks about how girls are suddenly becoming more violent, and he explains how childhood abuse affects us all and how angry, problematic patterns take hold early regardless of gender. This is nothing new, but what was more immediate and different was the fact that when he wrote the book about violence among females, he explained that media makes it "cool to be mean." He was right; it was. When movies like *Mean Girls, Kill Bill*, and *Tomb Raider* were popular, there was a rise in harsh female behavior. This has always been true of the masculine, tough-guy stereotypes we see in all forms of media, though not so much with females as we rarely romanticize or glamorize violence with girls as we often do with male characters. Media plays a massive role in how we live our lives. If we see it, we imitate it.

It is not just movies we imitate; it is also the role models we are raised with, the learned behavior from childhood. Once socialized, boys generally see more of and relate to the formulaic male violence intrinsically glamourized and abundant in media; thus, that performance is exhibited stronger and earlier in males, more so than in females.

Correspondingly a study published at Wake Forest University Baptist Medical Center found violence is a learned behavior, especially if you are male and have been exposed to violence growing up.

"Children learn violent behaviors in primary social groups, such as the family and peer groups, as well as observe it in their neighborhoods and in the community at large," said Robert H. DuRant, vice chair of pediatrics at Wake Forest University School of Medicine.

"While you can't change your gender, you can start addressing these other risk factors at a young age and get them involved in pro-social groups," DuRant added. "These behaviors are reinforced by what children and adolescents see on television, on the internet, in video games and movies, observe in music videos, and hear in their music."

Occasionally watching aggressive movies, video games, or TV shows is not going to make someone suddenly violent, but a repetitive diet of violence can desensitize viewers and unconsciously give permission to act out destructive, enraged behavior stuffed down inside.

For any of us who grew up in homes where abuse was either brazen or hidden (as in mine), the scars last years. We don't get to take off equally at the same starting gate as others who enter adulthood with few traumas. We often spend years guarding our injured, vulnerable souls with thick armor that portrays toughness.When someone attempts to dent that armor, we lash out, until we learn that does not make it better.

Michael Gurian, who I first interviewed when he had just written *The Minds of Boys: Saving Our Sons From Falling Behind in School and Life,* has spent his professional life writing books tackling gender issues and creating The Gurian Institute. "What are we doing so wrong," was a question I asked him several times in radio interviews. His answers were numerous and varied but his solution always came back to the same premise: we need to help boys and men thrive in our culture. He doesn't attribute violence solely to gender norms and "toxic" masculinity, though he acknowledges it does play a part. That, he believes, is just the mask that is worn, not the full problem. He is not looking to replace men; instead, he wants to instill in men the strong, confident, well-loved, and productive new male that every man has the right to be. He is sure we can do it with the right socialization and intervention.

At the Gurian Institute, they hold Initiatives and Summits where they talk about male role pressure, masculinity and toxic masculinity, and go further into the science of the male brain, looking at all three aspects of male and female development: nature, nurture, and culture.

The men in that auditorium are at the forefront of a new society, one that leaves behind that old insidious masculine culture of sexual intimidation, violence, and gender inequality we have accepted for too many years. The way we do masculinity in society is shifting from that old paradigm that taught men they must be tough and that expressing any emotion other than anger is weak. That same paradigm educated men that violence is acceptable, and that being female equates to having fewer opinions, choices, and rights in this world.

What we are now starting to experience in society is a new standard of respect and integrity for everyone. The modern masculinity's power is backed by confidence, not aggression, leaving behind the old culture of violence, entitlement, and toxicity.

GQ Magazine recently published *The New Masculinity Issue* addressing this topic in a straightforward, fashionable way. The editor, Will Welch, says it is about time society acknowledged "that traditional notions of masculinity are being challenged, shifted and overturned." The new masculinity he says is rebuilt on "a foundation of traits and values like generosity, honesty, openness, and love."

Welch reveals that empathy comes up often in the issue, and he writes, "it strikes me that before you can feel what others are feeling, you must first be in touch with how you feel. In other words, you have to have empathy for yourself…toxicity simply cannot thrive in the golden presence of genuine self-love."

This genuine self-love was what I witnessed in that auditorium. I respect these men for getting in touch with how they feel and acknowledging the events on the steep road they have traveled. They are role models for those who have yet to take that first step to a life without violence.

If violence is learned, then it can be unlearned. Standing up for yourself doesn't have to mean embracing violence. Standing up for yourself means making good choices with the present-day knowledge and strength one has earned and achieved. Standing up for yourself means being proud of who you are and where you are going. For incarcerated men who have limited daily choices, that is the currency that will move them forward in the direction of taking responsibility for who they struggle to be.

While it is not easy for them, it can be as simple asMaya Angelou's saying*,* "Do the best you can until you know better. Then when you know better, do better."