Welcome back to the Masculinist, the monthly email newsletter about the intersection of Christianity and masculinity. If you think it's important for the church to reach men, then please forward this newsletter to others, because I need your help to make it a success.

As promised, I did change my web address. The new link to subscribe, read back issues, and download additional resources is: https://www.aaronrenn.com/masculinist/

Thanks to all of you who support me on Patreon. If you haven’t already, you can still become a financial supporter of the Masculinist here: https://www.patreon.com/masculinist

The Importance of Positivity

Thanks again to Rod Dreher for a nice write-up on last month’s issue. He made an interesting observation, saying:

Renn’s critique of Moore’s book (which I haven’t read, so I can neither agree nor disagree with it) reminds me of readers of this blog who say that I’m too focused on what’s going wrong in church and society, and not enthusiastic enough about what’s going right… Renn’s piece also reminds me of my days as a newspaper movie critic: it’s a truism of the profession that the greater the film, the harder it is to write about. That is, it’s easy to pick out why a film goes wrong, but when everything works, it can be difficult to say exactly why. There are no foolproof formulas for great movies, or for great marriages.

Or more famously, “All happy families are like. Every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.” It’s much easier to talk about what’s wrong than what’s right. This is actually one of the points Nassim Taleb stresses when he advocates the “via negativa.” We are much better are figuring out what not to do than what we should be doing.

My critical analysis pieces get more engagement than my positive suggestion ones. In part that may be because I’m better at the former than the latter. But I think it’s also that negativity sells, perhaps a corollary to “if it bleeds, it leads.”

Yet I insist on including largely positive pieces designed to build people up, as I previously discussed in Masc #19. Why? In part it came from studying what other people were doing online. The people who focus on negatives tend to end up at a dead end. They exhaust their critique space and basically repeat variations on the same thing over and over, generally featuring the same angry commenters, etc. Also, they become places full of negative energy (or “cortisol” in the model I’ll outline below).

The people who seem to do best include significant amounts of positive ideas and suggestions for change. Now a lot of these are truisms or bunk. Much as with diet advice, there’s a never-ending market for self help because it doesn’t work for most people. And let’s be honest, making even a minor change in life – change that doesn’t just come from our natural maturity process, that is – is extremely difficult. But at least you have a chance. This equipping people with models and tools for change is a big part of the appeal of people like Jordan Peterson (though following up on a comment I made in Masc #25, Peterson appears to be in significant decline as he transitions to the cashin’ in phase).

So I at least want to try to keep the positive energy up. Because despite all the very real problems we can all see, I actually am extremely optimistic about the future – maybe more optimistic than I’ve ever been. From the standpoint of eternity, now is actually a great time to be alive.

Since many of you are new, I want to review some of the key positive “news you can use” articles I’ve written.

Social Confidence. An early series of articles focused on building social confidence in men. In Masc #4 I described the eye contact drills I do to help me establish and maintain strong eye contact. I was terribly plagued my whole life by
not being able to make eye contact, but this is one thing I have changed with big results. In it I also talk about some similar drills I did to grow more confident in initiating conversations with people I don’t know. In Masc #12 I complement this with some ways to help improve your posture. And in Masc #8 I show why you should stop apologizing as a form a self-deprecation when you’ve done nothing wrong.

When I’ve said that we as the church need to stress the benefits of marriage much more than we, one kind of pushback I get is that it’s not enough to try to convince people to want to get married; we also have to help them get there in a world where it’s not obvious what to do. I agree, and that’s what I’m doing here. All of these things for building social confidence are about helping men to be able to start actually having the guts to ask women out on dates, hopefully ultimately leading to marriage. And confidence is one of the most important drivers of attraction. But you know what? If you stand up straight, made good eye contact, and can initiate conservation with someone without apology, that will benefit you immeasurably in many domains of life.

I feel like I should add a caveat that you always need good situational awareness in doing these things. One reader who lives in a neighborhood with high gang activity said he got threats from doing the eye contact drills. So don’t get into a staring contest with a gangbanger. But even this story I think shows the power of good eye contact. It gets people’s attention.

Prayer. Prayer is the single most foundational aspect of the Christian pattern of life. In Masc #6 I talk about how to establish a consistent prayer life by integrating prayer into a morning routine with physical triggers. I also talk about a technique of small, continuous improvements I call “the ratchet.” (Interestingly, a new book seems to make the same ratchet suggestion. Presumably many people have independently found this technique useful for them).

Building Relationships. In Masc #16 I talk about how to build relationships, with a focus on platonic relationships with friends or would-be business associates.

Skilling Up. In Masc #2 I talk about making a habit of continuously learning new skills, large and small. And how we need to teach others what we know. By the way, I mentioned in there that I was about to start learning French. I’m now in my third year of study. And while I’ve still got a long way to go, I’m starting to get where I can get the gist of a news broadcast or article.

I hope you find some of these useful to you.

Habits of the Home

In Masc #27 I put out a call for you to send me your household habits so that I could compile and share them with everyone else. Thanks to all of you who did so. You can now download the habits of the home compilation.

Keep in mind, other than the ones I listed in Masc #27 these suggestions are from readers and so aren’t things I personally do (yet). So do your own due diligence on them. I plan to give at least some of them a try myself.

I can continue to update this document, so if you want to add contributions, send them my way.

The Testosterone-Cortisol Ratio

We live in a world that’s contains a lot of crazy. One way I deal with it is to manage my emotional state by monitoring and adjusting what I call the “testosterone-cortisol” ratio.

Testosterone and cortisol are hormones. But this ratio is not based on their actual level in my bloodstream and is a conceptual model only, not a medical intervention.

Testosterone is the principal male hormone. It’s been widely suggested that winning a competition raises your testosterone level, while losing lowers it. This may well be bunk (studies conflict), but we can still use the idea of this to think of testosterone as the hormone for winning or positive energy.

Cortisol is, among other things, the body’s stress hormone. Stress can be good at some level, such as that coming from a vigorous workout at the gym, but chronic stress is unhealthy and some say even dangerous, with a wide range of reported negative effects. I think of cortisol as the hormone for losing or negative energy.

In my experience today, far too many people are way too saturated with stress (cortisol) on a persistent basis. The
culprit is pretty simple to identify in many cases – national politics – but there are many other possible sources.

It's natural to be anxious about election results, but even prior to Trump, the news cycle and social media were increasingly keeping people in a perpetual state of agitation.

I see so many people today who regularly post rants on Facebook about the outrage du jour. Even when I agree with them, I can't help but think that some of these folks have damaged their mental and even physical health by working themselves up like this daily.

Most of the things that get me upset fall into two categories: 1) minor indignities of daily life that quickly pass, such as getting cut off in traffic, or 2) macro events that I cannot plausibly effect. The former tend to be self-correcting. The latter will turn me into a cortisol factory if I let them.

So I actively take steps to try to ensure I'm raising my “testosterone” and lowering my “cortisol.” For example, while I did personally vote, I didn't even watch the midterm election results roll in. I kept my computer shut and just woke up the next morning to see who had won. Similarly, I tuned out the news and social media the final week of the Kavanaugh confirmation process.

When there is something in the news that I consider “bad,” I try to tune things out. Conversely, when something happens that I see as a “win,” I spend a lot of time on Twitter. In other cases, when I feel I need a jolt of energy, I engage on social media regardless. (See below for some planned changes).

The point is to avoid getting perpetually stressed out over things I can't do anything about. It's not that I don't care, but I try to focus my engagement where I do think I can make something of a difference, even if small scale. For example, there's a lot wrong in the world and the church, but I choose to focus on the intersection of Christianity and masculinity, and to some extent a broader exploration of what it means to live in what I call the “negative world.” So last year I read over 20 books related to my Christian masculinity project, for example.

Another way to think about this comes from Stephen Covey's *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*. I've actually never read the book, but a mentor used an illustration from it to kick me in the butt one time. This model involves two circles, one nested inside the other. The smaller, inner circle is our "circle of influence" (or control). This is what we are responsible for or can affect in some way. The larger outside circle is our "circle of concern," which is everything we are worried about or can affect us.

Our circle of concern should be bigger than our circle of influence, because that's how we grow. We expand our influence into new areas this way. But if our circle of concern is too much bigger than our circle of influence, then we end up distracted from focusing on the things we can do something about or the things we are actually primarily responsible for. What's worse, because we can't do anything about the things that are inside our circle of concern but outside of our circle of influence, we get eaten up with useless worry, etc. This is the zone of negative energy where our cortisol levels spike up and our effectiveness decreases and our health can even be jeopardized.

This mentor told me my circle of concern was way too big – far larger than my circle of influence - and it was only going to get me in trouble. And he was right.

Because of social media and other things, our circles of concern today tend to be gigantic. We are worried about all sorts of macro things, especially national politics, far removed from our sphere of influence in our daily lives. Again, this only causes us mental and even physical health problems, and takes our focus and energy away from where it should be.

This is another reason to make sure that I include positive, not just negative newsletters. I want to be a source of testosterone, not just load you up with more cortisol, of which you no doubt already have more than enough.

I'm trying to take this to the next level. I logged out of Facebook about a month ago and haven't been back since (or missed it). The bigger challenge is exiting Twitter. I deleted the app from my phone and logged out on my desktop and plan to avoid scanning my timeline or posting if I can. I'm not sure this is one I can maintain long term. I actually do use Twitter professionally. But maybe I'm just rationalizing because that app is basically a toxic waste dump.

In any case, I do consciously try to control the inputs into my system such that I try to keep my testosterone up and my cortisol down. I try to actively manage my mental and emotional state through management of the stimuli I subject myself to. When I go into a stress inducing situation, which is in fact frequently, I want it to be positive stress for me to take on: a physical workout, addressing a family or business issue that needs to be faced, forcing myself into social
I don’t want it to come from the social media or news cycle outrage du jour. This same principle applies to other areas too. For example, I love reading magazines, but I no longer read most of the ones I previously enjoyed, because their sole function is stoking FOMO and the desire to consume.

As always, this is just what I do. You have to make your own choices. But I see many people who seem to have gotten themselves in a bad place through too much outrage over things that, while they may well be legitimately outrageous, are things we actually can’t do anything about.

The Joys of Family

Thanks to those of you who sent me your family pictures and stories about the joys of marriage and family life. I will be including some of these as I can. First here’s a picture from a reader named Peter.

He writes:

I've attached a recent family pic that fills me with joy. There is of course a story with this one. It's a bad picture in terms of pretty much every technique of photography (and taken with a not-very-good camera), but it captures a moment of real joy and familial love and, most significantly, captures every one of us smiling in the way we do when we are most free and caught up in the moment. There is nothing forced here, no camera faces from anyone.

The occasion was the departure of my eldest son (in the back center) for a semester of study abroad in Lithuania back in August. We took the picture in the airport just before he hugged us all and walked off through security. This study-abroad thing was something that my son initiated and arranged more or less all on his own and with little input from us. For my wife and I, this was a special moment. Watching our own son assume the mantle of manhood and slip into it naturally and without fanfare as though he were made for it... that is a heady draught for a parent. This trip was symbolic of that, a sort of milestone in a process of growth and maturing that we have been privileged to watch over the past several years with him. And everyone else is smiling too because it was for all of us a time of celebration.

And a reader named Ben writes to say:

Last June I got married and my wife and I are expecting a baby in April. We did a marriage prep course
beforehand and the older couple were surprised at our keenness for kids (most Christian couples in their experience wait for years which is another problem with the modern Christian view on family!). We had no plans for waiting and happily God answered our prayers quickly. It has taken me by surprise how much joy just the announcement of pregnancy has bought our family and friends. Bringing a new family member into existence seems likely to strengthen existing family bonds and deepen friendships too. One of the reasons we were both so keen to have a family is because both my wife and I had such happy and joyful childhoods.

Congratulations!

If you have positive family stories and/or photos you'd like to share, email them to me. I will plan to include one or two in most issues going forward.

**Noteworthy**

American Psychological Association: APA issues first-ever guidelines for practice with men and boys

WSJ: How Fortnite Triggered an Unwinnable War Between Parents and Their Boys

Bloomberg: Wall Street Rule for the #MeToo Era: Avoid Women at All Cost

Time: I Spent My Fertile Years Training to Be a Surgeon. Now, It Might Be Too Late for Me to Have a Baby

As a surgeon, I can’t honestly say I have spent a lot of time looking for a partner. I’ve been too busy spending my time with people—patients, colleagues, nurses, staff—in hospitals. I have prioritized my career over my personal life, and when I was younger, this tradeoff felt worth it. But now that I’m 38, it feels time to consider my own life…For now, all I really want is to preserve the possibility of having a child if I ever find a partner I care enough about to create a life with. Although the first cycle was devastating, I am going ahead with another cycle with a different medication protocol, crossing my fingers.

NYT: Divorce African Style

He didn’t hit her. He didn’t yell. He didn’t cheat, as far as she knows. It was just that, less than two years into their marriage, Zalika Amadou’s husband had changed. He’d become far too neglectful and indifferent for a young woman who expected, well, more.

...They want to choose whom and when to marry, not be pushed into marriages like so many generations of women before them. They demand respect and, better yet, love, speaking openly of wanting a healthy sex life. And when their husbands fall short, women are the ones driving this new culture of breakups.

Quartz: Polyamorous sex is the most quietly revolutionary political weapon in the United States

**Coda**

The definition of risk is to expose to the chance or possibility of loss. Most people erroneously try to assign a numerical value to that chance, which simply confuses risk with probability. In the markets we are talking about unique, nonrepeatable events, so we can’t assign a frequency probability to their occurrence. In statistical terminology, such events are categorized under case probability, not class probability. This means the probability of market events is not open to any kind of numerical evaluation. All you can actually determine is the amount of your exposure as opposed to the probability that the market will or will not go to a certain price. Therefore, all you can do is manage your exposure and losses, not predict profits.

Brendan Moynihan, *What I Learned Losing a Million Dollars*