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# **CONVERSATION AS A PROJECT: MASCULINITY INTERVIEWS**

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“Masculinity (also called manhood or manliness) is a set of attributes, behaviors, and roles associated with boys and men.” - Wikipedia.

At the end of May 2017, I texted a male friend of mine to ask if I could come over with tea and cookies to talk about masculinity. He said “yes.” In the following eleven months or so I did the same to eleven more men. It created something I now call “masculinity interviews.”

It wasn't always cookies, and I did one interview over Skype (which didn't seem like the right set up despite how well it went). But it was always just the two of us in an undisturbed, secluded enough place, mostly their homes, where I would ask things like:

*How do you relate to the word “masculinity”? Do you use it in everyday life, in what context? Who was your favorite superhero in childhood and why? Are you close to your father? What do you admire about him? What did you learn from him as a child? Was he masculine? Was he the head of the household? What about your mother? What did you learn about emotions as a child? Who were your role models? Were you popular in school? What about masculinity in relation to sex? Has anything or anybody changed your views on being a man throughout your life?*

Basically, how did you learn your way of being in the world and how did it change over time?

At the time it seemed like my most undefined project. It began with a sudden “Oh I want to do this thing,” and I did, and I just kept doing it. At some point, it started asking to be more defined. One reason being – it wanted to feel legit which I wasn't very interested in. The other – it wanted to be clearer to be able to evolve, to go deeper. Also, when I started interviewing people outside of my immediate community, I felt some pressure from myself to “officially” know what I was doing and where I was going. It never really got more defined. When somebody asked me last September why I was doing interviews about masculinity, I just said “Well...we need to talk about it”. I think by “we” I meant society.

I felt ecstatic after each interview. I liked having long, rich, open conversations. I liked feeling welcomed into somebody's home space. I liked an element of a ritual, of care about the whole set-up – intentionally creating space with no distractions and giving it time. I tried to listen fully and then some. Sometimes I interrupted. Sometimes I judged. Sometimes I drifted away. But most of the time I was there and loving it.

I don't know what these interviews did for the men. I think for me they were filling the need to connect and understand something. Who truly knows what. Things I remember from then are so (seemingly) random and all over the place:

I remember one man admitting to getting into romantic relationships and taking care of others in search of being valued.

I remember one man who thought he wasn't man enough in bed.

I remember one man who mentioned to his wife that if they were to fight in front of their kids, the kids should also see them make up, they should also see them being affectionate.

I remember two men with experiences of punching holes in walls when angry.

I remember a man who was the peacemaker of his family as a child.

I remember a man who was always smarter than everyone else and learned not to be arrogant about it to have friends.

I remember a man who went to a male retreat after a devastating break-up.

I remember a man who talked about performing masculinity for dating apps.

I remember a man whose mother cried when he dyed his hair purple.

I also remember the time I realized I had only interviewed white men and reached out to a friend who was black. And the first time I questioned my definition of "a man" and interviewed a trans boy. I remember the time I started asking about their pronouns and what they identified as while worrying if it was too invasive.

I never recorded the interviews, just scribbled down things along the way, the original reason being safety and comfort. I wanted people to be able to share intimately without restrictions. So it's all very ephemeral. Just a little encounter. No records left, nothing material to hold except for an experienced connection, new learning, consequently a new memory, and some poorly scribbled notes that I am not sure even I can understand half the time.

On the one hand, it felt good, that structure. On the other, the scientist in me panicked: "What? You're not recording? I am losing data. I am losing something that could have been looked at later and could have led to some revelations that would

only have been possible with some distance. Also, where is it all going? Is this it, just interviews?”

Looking at it now - this is it, just interviews. It seems this is all it has needed to be. At least for me. At least for now.

And for the scientist in me: I interviewed twelve people, laughed, cried, had some of my most deep and personal conversations with men, accidentally fell in love with one of them (not mutually), discovered some of my own biases, made a new friend, and tried to really listen.

Thank you everyone who was a part of this.

Follow Irina's work.

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