



## How to Be a Real Man

*The old rules don't work—as I've learned being married to a powerful woman. Here's what I'm telling our son about modern manhood.*

by [Dan Mulhern \(/authors/dan-mulhern.html\)](/authors/dan-mulhern.html) May 01, 2011



Dan Mulhern

*Editor's note: Mulhern is married to star Democrat Jennifer Granholm, the former governor of Michigan. After reading NEWSWEEK'S April 26 cover on how the Great Recession has left many men feeling shamed and powerless, he composed this letter to his son.*

Dear Jack,

At your physical yesterday, the nurse measured you at 5 feet 9 inches. You have officially passed your old man. And at 13, you're not done growing.

There's never been a better time to grow into manhood, but not everyone thinks so. NEWSWEEK recently reported on the plight of the "Beached White Male." "Man down!" they're crying—and insisting we'd better man up. It got me thinking about what it means to be a man.

I always thought that I would become governor, and then I'd "be the man." But the train tracks got switched, and instead Mom pulled into that station. I came to wonder about my strength. Do you remember when I took you along to my speech about leadership to some Cisco executives in Chicago, where you ran the PowerPoint slides? During the Q&A someone asked you why your dad was a great leader. You told them that I faithfully visited the young man I mentor in the Big Brother program, even when he was frustrating and difficult. Then someone asked, "Why is your mom a great leader?" and you said, "Wow, my mom—where do I even start?" I felt my armor pierced by that contrast—Mom's obvious, overwhelming heroism, and my leadership, such as it was, smaller, humbler.

Male armor had always seemed to fit me well. As a young man I felt comfortable behind Ivy League walls, then moved easily through halls of power. When I launched my leadership consulting business, I enjoyed "eating what I killed," as the macho maxim puts it. But the choices Mom and I made to put her public service in front of my career, and for me to lead at home, left me vulnerable and caused me to rethink what it means to "be a man." It has not been a tragic end to my manhood, but a wondrous beginning. It'll get even better for you.



When your grandmothers were raised, being a woman meant being a housewife. But Mom and her generation seized new opportunities. As a prosecutor and attorney general, Mom developed extraordinary executive skills. I was proud, and learned to exult in her strengths. Her success freed me to see a man can be good—or great—without being a hero in war, sports, business, or politics. A strong man, Jack, is not threatened by others' greatness. He's comfortable with his own.

I have loved raising you and your college-age sisters. It's been a gift. I stepped out of my male armor. I now cry when I'm sad, afraid, or just overwhelmed by the beauty of a sonata or a newborn baby. I don't feel less of a man. I do feel more of a human being.

Jack, you can play all kinds of roles in your time. You can whack at someone with a lacrosse stick—or express courage as you did last week, when I watched you console your goalie

while everyone else was mad at him for giving up the deciding goal. You showed me a strong man.

My dad, like so many men of his generation, could tell his wife what to do. He could tell his staff. And his boss could tell him. You and I need a more nimble strength. For example, you will have to stand up to your woman. You will honor her when you treat her as an equal, neither unduly backing down nor asking her to give up her principles and experience. You won't have clear social roles to inherit. Instead, you'll have to talk, negotiate, sacrifice, and make it up as you go along. A modern warrior prevails not by sheer physical strength but by exercising his values with discipline.

As a modern man, you'll learn way more than if you were large and in charge. It used to be a man's world (and, in some measure, it still is). If you lead like Mom, you'll know how to persevere. You need not fear strong women, or dismiss gentle men. And if you so choose, you'll be a great stay-at-home or lead parent, giving and receiving incredible lessons and profound joy. Either way, it's a great time to be a man.

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