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Finding the Zone

Beyond the Social Construction of Masculine Gender Identity

David Forbes

Meditation and contemplative practices help inner-city youth develop new levels of awareness and being.

Out beyond the ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing,
There is a field. I'll meet you there. (Rumi)

In explaining how urban youth develop, many educators tend to assume a social constructionist model. For example, in their call for papers for a special issue of the *Teachers' College Record* in 2003, the editors stated that

youth create meaning, identity, and a sense of themselves in the world by utilizing a variety of sources, including, perhaps most centrally, existing social constructions of ethnicity, race, gender, and social class.

Youth, the editors suggested, also negotiate, appropriate, and resist elements of their social environment. While youth do engage in active constructions of social meaning and identity, I will argue that a social constructionist view is not the best or only means to account for youth development today. A social constructionist model limits our understanding of how youth can and do evolve. It shortchanges the youth themselves by failing to provide them with a means to transcend social constructions that lead to higher development. I propose that educators consider a more inclusive approach, a contemplative perspective that incorporates and transcends social constructions. A contemplative approach is non-conceptual and discloses the non-duality of all human existence. It opens human development beyond socially determined categories and identities to higher levels of awareness. I will provide some examples of this development based on my work in a meditation and discussion group with mostly black, working



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class football players in a Brooklyn high school (Forbes 2004).

The Social Construction Approach

Urban male youth struggle to define themselves as men in a world in which they face conflicting constructions about masculinity. Conventional masculinity is an example of a socially constructed norm. Young men learn that being a man in this society means being stoic, staying in control, and acting in a vigilant, aggressive, and competitive manner. I met with members of an urban high school football team as a group once a week after school during two seasons and one spring. Besides football we discussed feelings such as anger and stress, relationships with teammates, fathers, and young women. The young men meditated to increase their ability to play "in the zone," a higher state of awareness that athletes describe when they are performing at their peak (Cooper 1998; Murphy and White 1995). The group work confirmed what much of the literature suggests (e.g., Brooks and Silverstein 1995; Pollack 1999; Real 1997), that many young men experience considerable pressure to uphold the conventional version of masculinity, and that maintaining it in order to gain male privilege comes at a considerable emotional cost. Many of them were defensive and aggressive with each other. They felt the need to always prove their manhood and found this to be a stressful experience. The stress is particularly intense for black male youth; society regards them as a threat and has little vested interest in their growing up as men. My aim in the group was to employ meditation as a developmental tool to help the young men extend their awareness and envision authentic ways of being beyond those offered by constructed versions of masculinity.

A counter social construct of masculinity suggests that men should be more expressive, nurturing, and open to themselves and others. Some of the young men on the football team were receptive to aspects of this model. For example, they took a personal interest in fashion and other expressive activities such as drama. They were aware of the double standard with regard to young men and women's sexual behavior and considered it unjust to women. However, most of the young men had good reason to refrain from

adopting the alternative construct to any considerable extent. To do so led to negative consequences within their harsh milieu: they would run the risk of being seen as wimps or gay, and of being ostracized and even physically abused.

In short, the group discussions and interactions confirmed that young men experience painful consequences for pursuing either version of masculinity. The conventional construct restricts emotional ex-

Meditative awareness allows for the higher realization that everything is interconnected and that things to which we become attached do not have solid, impermeable boundaries.

pression and places pressure on the young men to maintain their posture of tough masculinity. Young men pay an emotional price for upholding the defensive, cool pose and other marginalized images of black masculinity; these social postures can hamper their ability for personal development and fulfilling relationships (Lazur and Majors 1998; Majors and Billson 1992). Alternatively, taking on the second, softer construct can lead to harsh teasing and rejection. Risking a more gentle, vulnerable way of being a man can be construed as acting gay or white. Some young black men are subject to teasing by peers if they value academic achievement, as many young men regard overt resistance to schooling as a criterion of masculinity (Ferguson 2000; Fordham 1996; Herbert 2003).

The dilemma for many African American young males, then, is to find a third, authentic alternative. Finding a new way of being requires mindfulness of one's experience that opens one to a higher sense of self and selfhood than those offered through social constructions.

A social constructionist perspective is useful and necessary to help explain how young urban males interpret and negotiate meanings of masculinity. Ultimately, however, it is not sufficient; it cannot provide a satisfying, comprehensive way to address

higher levels of identity development. Socially constructed identities of masculinity, ethnicity, race, gender, and class, and socially defined power relations are assumed to be the parameters of human development; yet this assumption forecloses higher possibilities of consciousness.

The current trend in postmodern analysis of popular youth culture is to study how youth attempt to resist dominant meanings and construct their own. Yet this approach does not have a way out of the language and consciousness of popular culture itself. MTV and corporate commercials co-opt images of resistance and alternative expressions. Within this realm there is nothing for male youth to resist and, as Fuchs (1996) points out with respect to alternative music, there are no real alternative ways to define one's own masculinity. For example, the gangsta pose, rather than signify rebellion, becomes the basis for the next expensive trend in fashion or consumerism. The popularity of the TV show *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* and the recent use of the term *metrosexual*, could, in theory, point toward more highly developed, expressive forms of masculinity and consciousness. More likely, however, the show will merely provide new products and services that appeal to men's egocentric and narcissistic tendencies.

Within the limits of social construction, categories and narratives of male identity are never surpassed, only rearranged in newer social configurations. Counter-narratives must rely on the same language as before. If social constructs are all there is, youth at best end up in endless opposition to dominant narratives. Societal images of the self at best can be reassembled, not transcended (see Gore 1993).

While literacy skills are necessary for urban male youth, by themselves they do not help young men transcend social constructs of masculinity. Social construction theorists such as White (1998) would like to see youth build new models of identity based on new narratives. But if these writers are correct, if there is no truth except that governed by power and determined by social relations, there is nothing to prevent any newly constructed narrative from being governed in turn by unsatisfying power relations. This is especially true if, as social constructivists argue, no one form of identity is truer than any other.

For example, Denborough (1998) wanted to help male adolescents challenge the conventional male narrative of acting tough and dominating others. He invited them to come up with a counterplot to resist being tough, "being yourself." However, it is not apparent that the young men evolved beyond conventional masculinity. At one school, the students "called the old way of being a man 'cool and tough' and the new way 'a new cool and tough'" (Denborough 1998, 104). Without a notion that some ways are more developmentally advanced than others, the same language of cool and tough, in turn, is likely to be used to justify another cool and tough version of masculinity and lapse into an endless power struggle with other socially constructed conventions.

Another like-minded program aimed to promote young African American men's sociopolitical development and liberation (Watts, Abdul-Adil, and Pratt 2002) through critical interrogation of popular culture, such as gangsta rap music, in order to generate the positive values of a "warrior." However, there is nothing in the program that enables male youth to liberate themselves from the socially constructed dualism of Us versus Them, and from shifting from one socially defined role to another.

The ultimate goal of the warrior program appears to be the liberation of the oppressed group. Yet the goals of the program — survival, security, prosperity, community, and unity — are sufficiently ambiguous that even harmful and exclusionary groups could use them to justify their actions. In contrast, Trungpa (1988) defined *warrior* in higher developmental terms as anyone who has the courage to examine the nature of all of one's experience in order to establish an enlightened society for everyone. This kind of warrior courage depends on the cultivation of an awareness that transcends socially defined categories.

A Developmental Alternative

Many youth today harbor and express a desire to find higher meaning and purpose in life and a sense of connectedness with the universe (Kessler 2000). This yearning extends beyond dualistic, socially defined constructs of liberation and oppression as well as socially determined identities (Forbes 2004). For concepts to be meaningful at a higher develop-

mental level they must point beyond the limitations of language and link up with this contemplative awareness.

Western psychologists and educators are beginning to recognize that there are higher levels of human development that extend beyond the socially conventional ego and socially constructed categories (Wilber 2000). Meditation is the most common practice among many contemplative traditions that lead to higher states of consciousness. Of late, meditation is receiving serious consideration in academic and scientific circles to promote wellness and emotional intelligence through mindfulness (Brown and Ryan 2003; Dingfelder 2003; Goleman 2003; Hall 2003). Elsewhere (Forbes 2004) I have described the benefits of meditation for masculine gender identity development through enhancing young men's capacity for self-awareness, empathy, and lessening attachment to the ego (see also Garbarino 2000).

The young men on the Brooklyn high school football team with whom I worked conveyed an awareness of possible higher realms of identity and experience than those made available to them through their everyday schooling, families, and peers, or through political figures, pop culture superstars, or the media. They sensed there was a more evolved way of being than that constructed through their own language and culture and were willing to seek it.

The Zone

Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi and his associates have described *flow*, an optimal state of being in which one experiences full absorption in the present (Csikszentmihalyi 1997; Jackson and Csikszentmihalyi 1999); moreover, they have stressed the importance of promoting flow among adolescents (Csikszentmihalyi, Rathunde, and Whalen 1993). The young men with whom I worked were familiar with the experience of flow, often referred to by athletes as "being in the zone." They knew the zone is a higher state of awareness in which one is in complete harmony with one's body and performance, unimpeded by thought. They also knew that Phil Jackson, a Zen Buddhist and coach of the NBA champions Chicago Bulls and Los Angeles Lakers, has his players meditate in order to increase the chance of playing in the zone, since meditation is a way to be fully present in the mo-

ment. His players also may be more attuned to what is occurring on the court and sensing where their teammates are (Kabat-Zinn 2000; "Peak Performance," n.d.).

From a social constructionist point of view, meditation in this case is a social practice or technique that can earn athletes success in playing sports. As I explained to the students, however, the zone is an internal state of knowing that must be experienced by each individual himself. It cannot be constructed or willed into being; and if one becomes self-conscious of being in the zone, it disappears. While I used the zone as an incentive to encourage the young men to meditate, I emphasized that meditation is not just a means or technique to gain some personal goal or even reach a desired state. Rather, it is a way of being that lets one experience everything as it is and examine the nature of that experience. This includes loss, sadness, frustration, anger, and pain. Besides playing football in the zone, I invited the young men to consider living life in the zone: being mindful of themselves and of the world, gaining insight into the nature of things, and becoming more responsible, more evolved beings.

In our group the students learned insight (*vipassana*) meditation in which one first attends to the breath. As thoughts, sensations, and feelings arise, one notices them in a non-evaluative manner, without being drawn into them or trying to repress them, and returns to the breath each time. With meditation, over time the mind is able to calm down and let go of all passing thoughts. One lets thoughts enter, becomes mindful of them, and lets them go. One stays in the present.

Meditation and mindfulness also lets one perceive the world, including other people, more openly. One begins to see them as they are, without putting them into categories. It enables one to become more compassionate toward others.

Over time, as the mind is able to rest, it contextualizes all thoughts, feelings, and sensations themselves within a vast spacious awareness. People who meditate for greater lengths of time are able to breathe through sensations, distractions, and thoughts about the past or future that prevent them from experiencing the present moment. They take a meditative approach to pain, anger, sorrow, and suf-

fering and see that these and all things are always changing and have no permanent nature.

Meditators are able to realize that dualistic categories of self and other, even of good and evil, are relative constructs that do not have a solid, unchanging basis. They come to know that socially defined categories such as one's ethnicity, class, and color are not the real nature of the self, and that even the ego itself is a social construct that does not exist and is always changing (for a discussion on color see Wideman 2003). Meditative awareness allows for the higher realization that everything is interconnected and that things to which we become attached do not have solid, impermeable boundaries. It includes an active engagement with the world, compassion in action (Jones 2003). Rather than leading to mindlessness, or pre-rational regression, meditation is transrational; it extends beyond the boundaries of the rational ego and can bring one to a higher level of development. It allows one to transcend the incessant chatter of the mind, such as judgments, ruminations, and attachments to desires, and fully attend to the present moment from a higher state of awareness. As the spiritual-minded rapper, KRS-One (2002), says, there is nothing wrong with the intellect, it just may be the beginning; "it might be time to move on."

I hoped that by meditating, the young men could come to realize that conventional constructs of selfhood and masculinity were just that, constructs, and that over time they could become less attached to them as they became more aware of their own experience. They then might no longer feel compelled to follow a script of what defines a man or get attached to a restrictive self-concept that would lead to inauthentic, mind-less responses.

I met with up to 23 young men once a week after school during the off-season as well as during the football season over the span of two school years. We practiced meditation each time as a group from anywhere from 10 to 30 minutes. I used a guided meditation tape by Jack Kornfield (1996), an insight meditation teacher. One student said he found it helpful that Kornfield compared meditation practice to training a puppy: as the mind wanders, gently bring it back to the breathing: stay, stay. A number of the young men said they began to practice meditation on their own at home. At first many of them were self-conscious

about meditating among themselves. For example, some would open their eyes to see what others were doing. After a time they more easily settled in to the practice. They would even challenge those who did not appear to take the meditation seriously. However, they continued to tease each other, sometimes in hurtful ways, and I encouraged them to become mindful of their part in the interactions. After a time some of them learned to catch themselves, become aware of their feelings, and monitor their reactions. We also did meditative visualizations in which the young men would see themselves as confident and successful. After some of these sessions a number of them said they were able to get deep into the visualization and that it helped their playing.

During the rest of each session we engaged in a group discussion in which we addressed a broad range of issues important to the young men, including relationships with young women, fathers, coaches, and each other as teammates. The theme throughout was mindfulness, being aware of how one feels and how others feel, and not just reacting in an impulsive way. The goal was to be mindful of thoughts, feelings, and events while not being controlled by them, so one can stay focused and in the zone — that is, act out of one's highest self.

After a few months of practicing meditation and engaging in a mindful awareness and discussion group, many of the young men did become more conscious of their own thoughts, feelings, and behavior. They were better able to assume more responsibility for themselves and to monitor their thoughts and behavior when they became angry, frustrated, or sad. Most of the students on a written questionnaire responded that they gained the ability to avoid distractions and to focus and concentrate. As one boy wrote, meditation "makes me a more focused and stronger person." They also became more aware of their feelings towards themselves, women, and their teammates. For example, one wrote,

I do feel that I have more awareness of my thoughts[s] and feelings now than before I learned meditation practices. I feel it in football a little but mostly in my life and in how I put things in perspective.

The zone became a code word for being mindful and doing the right thing out of one's highest self.

Football in the Zone

The immediate goal was to apply meditative practices to football. After a tough loss played at the other school's field, the young men talked about how they lost their concentration. One admitted that he used to be "violent" on the field but this time he hesitated before tackling an opponent. He thought too much about whether to tackle high or low, and how hard. I pointed out that if one practices football properly during the week then meditation can prepare one to play the actual game with less disruptive thinking, not more. Just as one lets distracting thoughts come and go during meditation, and stays focused on one's breathing, one can avoid getting caught up in distractive thoughts during the game. One recognizes the thoughts, but keeps one's awareness on the task at hand. Players began telling me, "Meditation works." As one said, "I was able to concentrate on catching the ball, and not letting my mind get ahead of myself, like I used to."

We also practiced visualization, which helped with James. Before one session James spoke with me privately. He told me he feels a lot of pressure to excel; he was recruited from another school to play football and feels very pressured to prove how good he is. What's worse, he's concerned about playing too tough and hurting an opposing player. So then he lays back and doesn't play well enough. He also hears his mom's voice telling him not to play too hard so that he won't hurt himself and others.

I told him first that he doesn't have to give in to the pressure; he knows he's good and doesn't have to prove anything to anybody. I then asked James if he can visualize or imagine a middle way to play that was based on mastery, and drew this on the board. On top he is playing too aggressive, hurting himself or others. On bottom he is playing too soft, not playing well. I asked him, Is there a middle ground where he can play well, not be ineffective, yet not be hurtful? He said yes, he can imagine it. I encouraged him to visualize the third way of playing during practice and see how that went. Eventually he was able to do so. He told me the visualization practice helped him to have a good experience

during summer training. James then went on to play a solid season during the fall.

James benefited from a non-conceptual visualization of a higher way of performing that did not fit into his socially constructed identities of being a football player. On one hand, he rejected the conventional, peer-based role of being aggressive and hurtful; nor did he wish to view himself through his mother's eyes as being too sensitive and worrying about hurting himself and/or someone else. His socially determined world did not provide him with the language or the vision of how he could accomplish his goal of being a good football player without falling into the two pits of toughness or weakness. Based on our meditation group, the zone was familiar to him as a valued but as-yet unattainable realm of being. Because of this he was able to use it as the image of his highest desire. By taking a contemplative perspective, visualizing while meditating, James was able to find the higher ground and see what he needed to do. This realm of consciousness is what athletes aim for and is not adequately described by the social construct of mastery. It is a higher way of being that transcends giving in to the harsh, hurtful, and commodified aspects of competitive sports. Yet it also allows one to enjoy sports without succumbing to a blanket, one-dimensional, social critique that considers current sports, especially football, to be oppressive (Messner and Sabo 1990).

Over time, attending to the present cues, noticing the distractions, and returning to the present demands of the sport may allow the athlete to perform in the zone. The mind gets out of its own way and the athlete becomes one with the experience. There is no ego, no social convention or approval; just mindful attention. This way of being extends beyond athletics to all areas of life

Ethnicity, Race, and Conflict

Meditation and contemplative practices can extend well beyond football and help people in their broader social lives. People can learn to appreciate themselves and others more fully as people—as more than conventional categories.

Actually, a number of the young men came from diverse backgrounds that did not easily fit into conventional ethnic or racial categories. For example al-

though most of them were black, only a minority were African American. Many of the students were first generation Americans whose parents were Guyanese, Jamaican, Puerto Rican, Jamaican/ Puerto Rican, Barbadian/ Indian, Haitian, Dominican, Panamanian, and African. I asked some of them how they identified themselves, especially those whose parents were from different countries. While they were aware of their ethnic backgrounds, many shrugged and dismissed the question, or just said they were American. Yet, what is striking is the extent to which they assimilated to an American black youth subculture: hip hop clothing, language, music, and mannerisms. They called each other "niggaz" and "son," adopted a similar dress code (e.g., do-rags), and listened to the same music. To some extent this was an active choice. However, it may also reflect the fact that in this society, the socially constructed identity of being black trumps whatever cultural or ethnic background they possess. For example, when racial tensions flared up between some white and black students, the black students, regardless of their ethnic background, construed the situation in black and white racial terms.

Among these students, then, there already was some rejection of traditionally constructed ethnic identities and a desire to freely define themselves as existing beyond these categories, except when it became unsafe to do so. From a social constructionist perspective, hip hop represents the highest, culturally accessible way for youth to meld urban life across ethnic differences through the common expressive forms of clothing, music, language, and attitude. Hip hop culture, however, is ambiguous with respect to higher development. For example, a range of rap artists reflect commodified, materialist, conformist, nationalistic, and sexist values, while others represent more liberating values of social justice, equality, and personal expression. Sometimes these contradictory values are even apparent in one rap star.

An encounter in the group between a white student, Larry, and some of his teammates of color shows how a contemplative perspective can point the way beyond the limitations of socially constructed categories into a transcendent zone of being. At the beginning of a discussion on race, Larry be-

came upset and said he felt uncomfortable. He told his teammates he didn't like it when they called him a "cracker" and "redneck." This occurred after a few months when group members began to feel safe enough with each other to risk telling teammates they were not happy about being "dissed," (teased in a harsh manner). The group was able to hear Larry's statement and acknowledge his feelings. They assured him he was "one of them" and did not want him to feel excluded. However, they replied that they too had felt dissed and hurt by him whenever he joined another white student and teased them about being black. Larry was able to hear them and acknowledge his piece in the conflict. A black student, Pat, then said he had a close relationship with another Italian American teammate. He asked Larry would he too "openly bring me to your house in Bensonhurst and take me to see all your friends and introduce me to your mom and do all that? Would you feel comfortable comin' back to my 'hood doin' the same thing around my black friends?" Larry said he felt he could.

I framed the group interaction and Pat's experience as one in which people are in the zone; a higher level of awareness in which one is open to the present and not drawn away by fear to a preconceived thought or an imagined scenario. I pointed out that this is the same process we practice during meditation in attending to one's own mind. The students were able to hear each other, and Pat alluded to what many of the students wanted but did not have the words for, a way of being with oneself and others that acknowledged (that is, did not deny) but also transcended socially determined categories and identities. Because we were familiar with the experience of the zone through meditation and had discussed how it manifests itself in everyday life, the students could envision the connection. They could experience being with a teammate in this capacity as being in the zone, beyond self and other from a higher vantage point. For some black students, this was a way of expressing one's highest self. It required neither an alienated, resistant pose to maintain their black identity nor the necessity of conforming and assimilating to another, dominant culture. In developmental terms, it was neither egocentric nor conventional; rather, it reflected a higher level of be-

ing that respected difference but from a universal basis that transcended social categories such as race. Framing this level of awareness as the zone gave it a name, and gave the internal experience of being in the zone a face as well.

Relationships with Young Women

In one group discussion Drew described his troublesome encounter with a young woman at the elevated train station after school. She rebuffed his overture, and they both became angry. Drew hit her first "to calm her down" and the police were called. To some extent Drew expressed remorse but he still blamed the young woman for provoking him as well as making him look bad in front of his friends.

Most of the group members felt that even Drew's initial come-on to the young woman was disrespectful. They challenged his view that it was normal and that they all would have said the same thing. I asked the group, "When you guys are really in the zone are you ever going to say something disrespectful to a woman?"

"No," almost all said.

"I wasn't in the zone," Drew admitted.

Another young man, Calvin, expressed an empathic response for the young woman in that situation, imagining what it would be like for her. The discussion then turned to the fact that Drew and many of them were often angry and unable to handle their feelings. I extended the analogy of being in the zone as one in which you are aware of what is going on with yourself and then act responsibly out of your highest self.

Drew was still struggling with feeling disrespected and embarrassed and with wanting to retaliate. Stephen offered a somewhat higher response: Try to calm the other person down, restraining rather than hitting her. Another student, Charles, said he thought he could be a bigger man and walk away. I pointed out that that was the highest response of all, to let it go or find a way to defuse the situation, and that it took more courage than fighting. If you have to defend yourself, you do, but you do it in order to end the fight, not for retaliation.

"I understand what you saying, Mr. Forbes, I thought about it," Drew said.

I understand what Calvin said, that you gotta think of the female point of view. When I was locked up [for one night] I thought about that. I said, "Yo, what if that was me and I was walking down the block, and shorty tried to pull me into some shit, I could think of other ways to approach it."

Drew was capable of some empathy and of taking the other's point of view. I told him he needed to keep sitting with his anger and underlying pain, to examine what they were and where they were coming from, and then to realize how these feelings led to self-destructive and aggressive behaviors. In this case, a higher way of being a man involved mindfulness, empathy, skillfulness in relationships, and the courage to take responsibility for one's actions. Being in the zone means sitting with what is going on, inquiring into it, and doing the right thing — not on the basis of attachment to ego, social pressure, or convention, but from a higher place of compassionate awareness. After the discussion the group members were eager to meditate.

Conclusion

For urban young men today socially constructed versions of masculinity are problematic. Conventional masculinity is harsh and hurtful and restricts the full range of human feelings. The alternative norm offered to young men, insisting they be kind, soft, or nice at the expense of their authentic experience, is also inadequate. Young men working in supportive groups can share in creatively constructing new narratives of masculinity that are healthier and more fulfilling for everyone. They need support and help to evolve in ways that are neither harshly confrontational nor threatening.

To be sure, critical awareness of social inequities and social identities is essential to promote full development of all. Yet new social constructions alone are not enough for full development; as externally defined categories they risk endlessly reverting to dominant paradigms that are in turn used against new Others. My work suggests that male African American and other youth can develop a higher, more authentic awareness that is not limited by socially constructed conditions. Meditation as a form of self-awareness is a means to help young men do

so. It enables them to notice their feelings and then create a space between their experience and their reactive response. It helps them face what is happening concretely in urban life and yet also to evolve to a higher self that no longer requires external validation. Educators and counselors who care about urban youth can consider adopting a contemplative practice themselves and to introduce this way of being in their work with all children.

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