

Scene on Radio

The Juggernaut (MEN, Part 10)

<http://www.sceneonradio.org/episode-56-the-juggernaut-men-part-10/>

John Biewen: All right, Celeste, I've got another childhood memory to inflict on y'all.

Celeste Headlee: OK, alright, I'm ready, let's hear it.

John Biewen: It's maybe more cringeworthy than the boxing story I told in Part One. I'm not sure how old I was, probably 12-ish. There in that smallish town in Minnesota. You know, there's the well-known, awful tradition in boyhood of using words like "sissy," "pussy," "wuss," to disparage other boys. Well, in my little group of friends, for a while, we got even more direct about it, dispensed with even the thin veneer of those euphemisms. I don't know who started this, it might have been me for all I know, but I remember uttering the words, more than a few times, "What a *woman*."

Celeste Headlee: So... let me be clear. You were using woman as an insult? Just calling them a woman. Do you remember what things your friends did that led to you calling them a woman?

John Biewen: I don't remember the specific situations. I'm sure we only said it about guys. I don't think I said it in a direct bullying way. You can imagine really hurtful scenarios, for example saying that to a boy that I perceived as effeminate

or something. I don't think I did that. I'm not gonna say I was never a jerk to other kids. I was one of the popular, sporty boys, no doubt taking up more than my share of space – I mean that figuratively. I was physically small at that age. But I wasn't a bully. I don't think. I think if I said "what a woman" to somebody, it would have been in a bantering way, with a friend whose so-called masculinity I wasn't really challenging. Or we might have said it about somebody who wasn't around.

Celeste Headlee: I mean it's abundantly clear you're still uncomfortable about this.

John Biewen: Uh, yeah. It's bad no matter what. I guess I'm feeling the need on behalf of my 12-year-old self to not make it sound even worse than it was.

Celeste Headlee: But for a boy of 12 to use the word "woman" as an insult, in any sense, is kind of amazing to me. It speaks volumes about your youthful state of mind, right? That it's not all right to be a girl or a woman. You weren't even putting an adjective on it like horrible woman, nasty woman. You were just saying woman.

John Biewen: It's pretty direct isn't it, yeah. To be clear, what I was saying I'm quite certain was it's not okay for a boy to be a woman. I loved my mother and my sisters, I had friends who were girls and I was fine with *them* being girls and women. Now, I was sexist, there's no question, given the water I was swimming in as a boy in the 1970s. I'm still unlearning that. I was interested in girls and women

mostly for what they could potentially provide to me I think that's fair to say— although if we're talking about sex, that was a distant abstraction at that time. So frankly I think I just wasn't very interested in girls. They were over there, doing their girl thing. I was into boy stuff.

Celeste Headlee: But you at least subconsciously had a list in your mind of things that were girl stuff, what was girl stuff and what was boy stuff. And the point was that a *boy* shalt not be, in any way, a girl. A man cannot be whatever it is that's on that list for women.

John Biewen: And it pains me now to say that as a boy I participated in that kind of policing.

Celeste Headlee: And it sounds like you had a very clear idea of what a woman was, what a man was, and how bad it is for someone to veer out of their particular lane. At 12, you thought you knew all you needed to about what it was to be a man and why that was better or at least distinct from being a *girl*. I don't mean to jump to conclusions, but can I also assume there was some homophobia involved in all of this banter?

John Biewen: Um, yes. Check. Tell you what, though, let's say more about that on the backside, because our story is gonna go there.

[MUSIC]

Celeste Headlee: From the Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University and PRX, it's *Scene on Radio*, Part 10 of our series, MEN. A dive into sexism and patriarchy and masculinity – how we can see it better so we can find a better way.

John Biewen: This time: A story from a progressive, feminist father trying to raise his sons in this patriarchal, homophobic society. Psychologists say boys get the message **very** early – before kindergarten – that being a boy means **not** being or doing the things that society calls feminine.

Celeste Headlee: But the age you're talking about can be a really intense time in the socialization of both boys and girls, as they move from childhood into adolescence. We're talking middle school, for god's sake.

John Biewen: Speaking of which, listen to this.

Ben James: So I have talked to you about how I have felt my own ideas changing
[Huck burps]

Huck: Okay. (laughing) I won't do it again.

John Biewen: That's Ben James and his son, Huck. Huck is twelve, and he has signed off on everything in this piece, but he did ask that we and his dad use his middle name.

They live in western Massachusetts – we'll meet the rest of the family in a minute. Ben is a writer and a farmer. He's written for the *Atlantic*, among other places. I met Ben this past summer. He came to an advanced audio documentary short course I lead at CDS and he brought this piece he was working on. I wound up asking him to work up a version for our series.

Celeste Headlee: Ben's piece is a little different in tone from most of our episodes in this series. Kind of an audio essay with tape, you might say. It's sort of literary, and sometimes funny. But it also gets at some the very serious themes we're talking about in this season. In fact, a small content warning here: offensive homophobic language, quoted by young boys, is just ahead. We left it in because, well, it's central to the point of the story.

John Biewen: We'll listen to Ben's story, then bring in a leading expert on the psychology of masculinity and how boys and men learn it ... and we'll talk about it all. Here's Ben James.

Ben James: In August 2017, a couple days before my older son started his first year of middle school in our small, New England college town, an oddly-behaving skunk showed up at our farm.

Huck: It was walking like it had a sock in its butt. And it was like chasing the chickens, but it wasn't moving that fast. And it looked confused. It looked like it was on drugs.

Ben James: That's Huck. He's twelve now. But it wasn't him who first saw the skunk. That was our neighbor, another kid starting middle school that fall. He'd spotted the skunk shuffling around, and like any self-respecting twelve-year-old who happens upon a skunk in broad daylight, he got as close as he could and took out his phone.

Pliny: So he showed me this video on his phone—

Ben James: This here, this is my little guy. I'll call him Pliny. He was seven at the time.

[Chicken sounds]

Pliny: —and it was of the skunk walking around with the chickens... And me and momma were both very surprised that he went that close to a skunk.

Ben James: Momma. My wife. Oona. Neither she nor I thought Huck should start middle school that year. He could easily have spent sixth grade at his cozy, progressive elementary school and make the leap to middle school the following year, for 7th grade. But the kid was determined to make a change. Plus he'd been doing really well in all sorts of ways. We said, OK, sure.

[Music]

Pliny: And we didn't know what we should do about this skunk wandering around outside. So we just watched it for a little bit, 'cuz momma was like, Let's just ignore it for a little while.

Ben James: Later, after I'd brought the dead skunk's body to animal control, after they'd cut off its head and sent the head to Boston, after the school year had started and I had begun to wonder whether Oona and I, in sending Huck to this new school, had made our worst decision so far as parents, after all that, a woman would call me from Boston and tell me that the skunk was, in fact, rabid. But Pliny and Oona and our neighbor didn't know that then.

Pliny: Then we saw chickens in the garden so we told momma there's some chickens in your garden. So then we went back to look, and the skunk was in the garden... And the skunk was chasing the chickens around in the garden.

Ben James: Huck and I weren't actually home at this point. We hadn't SEEN the skunk yet. We were in the car, driving home from his friend's house. And this is where the story gets weird. Our neighbor and Pliny lost track of the skunk for a while. They were walking around the farm, looking for it. Finally they came to the barn, where the chicken coop is and our four goats live. Juniper is the mother goat, tough and fiercely protective.

Pliny: So we were walking up, we thought it was around the house, then when we got to the barn Juniper was outside, and the skunk's tail was in her mouth, and she was swinging the skunk.

Ben James: I'm going to play that last part again.

Pliny: And the skunk's tail was in her mouth, and she was swinging the skunk.

Ben James: Huck and I pulled into the driveway. I told the neighbor to go home, told the boys to stay on the deck. And then there it was, the skunk, ambling toward the house. It was a juvenile. Not like a baby, probably a teenage skunk. It was cute, actually. But Huck is right, it looked disoriented, like it was on drugs, and it just wasn't scared of the right things. I still didn't know, maybe I was just going to scare it away, or trap it in a box or something. But by now I had a two-by-four in my hands, and when the skunk moved under the deck, when it found a hole and started burrowing its way under the house, I lifted the two-by-four and drove it down like a piston, directly onto the skunk's back, crushing its spine. It scabbled its legs a tiny bit, died pretty quick. There were some whispers above me. I looked up. Huck and Pliny were crouched on the deck, their faces pressed to a crack in the floorboards, watching.

[MUSIC OUT]

Ben James: Months later, I finally sat the boys down and asked them to tell the story of the rabid skunk. By then Huck had made it through the train wreck that was the sixth grade. Pliny said, good thing it hadn't been a rabid bear.

Pliny/Ben/Huck: **[Pliny]** The thing about a rabid bear was how would the skunk get the bear into rabies? **[Ben]** *I think it just bites it.* **[Pliny]** Yeah but the bear would get really mad at it before it bit it. **[Ben]** *I don't know. That's the thing about rabid animals. They start acting like, totally—* **[Huck]** Spazzes. **[Ben]** *Yeah they do like, I was going to say superhuman things, but it's more like super skunk things.* **[Huck]** I mean wouldn't that mean that like half my school has rabies? I mean, everyone at my school acts like a spaz pretty much. Like, I would have rabies. **[Ben]** *You know, if part of rabies is like your brain matter gets eaten out from the inside—* **[Pliny]** Then a bunch of sixth graders have it. **[Huck]** Alright, are we done? **[Pliny]** Yeah, the end!

Ben James: I wish that was the end. I wish it was even close to the end.

[MUSIC]

Ben/Huck: **[Ben]** Alright, just talk a little normal here, alright? **[Huck]** 'Sup. (Ben laughs) I'm talking normal. **[Ben]** *OK, keep talking normal.* **[Huck]** Where's the weed at?

Ben James: You know how when you get up close to fresh skunk spray, how intense that odor is? I don't mean driving past it on the road, or when the fumes waft benignly through your bedroom window at night. I mean your dog shows up at the door, whimpering, her whole face dripping with caustic fluid intermixed with her own tears and saliva. It's industrial, that smell. Burnt chemicals, scorched rubber. The odor is so acute that it's difficult to even identify it as skunk. That's

more or less what it's like to have occupying your house what previously you've understood to be a human being, but what is now revealed as—almost—a teenager.

Pliny: Yeah he wears a lot of nylon now.

Oona: For me just the getting in trouble at school I think, and the not doing his work.

Pliny: He kept trying to jump high and touch the ceiling.

Oona: The hair gel came pretty early on, and he was pretty explicit that that was like, manly.

Pliny: Swearing.

Oona: Just swearing all the time, just could not stop.

Pliny: It wasn't words I'd never heard before. I've heard you say all of them. Shit. Fuck. Damn.

Oona: He had to have white bread, and in fact he wanted to go to Stop & Shop and do his OWN shopping, because he wanted the whitest of white bread, that was discounted, everything had to be like 99 cents.

Pliny: No, he ate a bunch of junk food, too. He ate so much junk food.

Oona: Donuts. Coffee. Like drinking coffee on the way home from school without us knowing about it for a while.

Ben James: Adolescence. It's not an idea, it's a THING. It's a tidal wave. So I don't begrudge my son his right to transform himself on a dime in ways neither he nor anyone else can comprehend. But there was one thing that got under my skin, one aspect of the sudden, chemical-burn arrival of this particular sixth-grader that I really could not handle. It was him coming home day after day, week after week with stories involving a repeated derogatory expletive: FAG.

Huck: Well, like, there are kids who just call other kids gay. Like, you're a fag. Kids just do that.

Huck/Ben: **[Huck]** Sissy, fairy, there are other less appropriate ones — **[Ben]** *you can just say them here* — **[Huck]** pussy, fag. Shit like that.

Huck: If someone talks about their feelings, they're like, Oh, that's the gayest shit I've ever heard.

Ben James: Alright, number one: it broke my brain AND my heart to hear my kid repeating this language. Two: despite all the crap that Huck got thrown at him that year, he never once called anyone a fag. Three: I went out and did some research, talked to several parents at the school whose kids I knew are queer and

pretty out about it. Had their child ever been targeted with homophobic language while at school, I asked? The answer was a solid NO—a sign that the school was doing SOMETHING right—which leads to number four: It was the boys who'd decided they had an investment in proving themselves both straight and undeniably masculine. They were the ones targeting each other.

Huck: This kid. He was just following me around saying shit to me. Just calling me gay, saying everyone else thinks I'm gay. It's not true. And yeah, he just didn't let up. He just made stuff up about me, and I got pissed off and I wanted to punch him.

Ben James: This wasn't even close to an isolated incident. It was the daily norm. As the fall progressed, it became clear that the boys with whom Huck spent his time—they were middle class and working class and wealthy kids, White boys mostly, some Latino and African American kids, too—these boys were engaged in a full-on project to socialize one another. It was a project that was occurring almost entirely under the radar of the adults in the school building. This shouldn't have surprised me, I guess. I'm a man. It's not like I've never seen homophobia in action. But we live in one of the most queer-friendly towns in New England. Saying you have two moms in this town is about as noteworthy as saying you like pancakes. Not only did I NOT expect blatant harassment from Huck's peers, I assumed that the rules had changed for what boys of their generation were permitted to be.

Huck: My friend was like, suck my dick, get out of here. And the other kid said, What dick? And my friend got pissed and he was like, My dick. Wanna feel it?

Ben James: The summer after sixth grade, I asked Huck if I could interview him about what had gone down the previous year at his school. Specifically the homophobia, I told him. The enforced rules of masculinity. He said, Sure.

Ben/Huck: **[Ben]** *OK should I ask my questions first, or do you want to ask your questions?* **[Huck]** You ask first. **[Ben]** *OK, so—* **[big yawn from Huck]** Sorry. **[Ben]** *No problem.*

Ben James: I didn't know exactly what I wanted from these interviews, maybe just an opportunity to be curious, after a full school year in which I'd been judgmental, cranky, even—in my own passive-aggressive ways—cruel to my son. The changes he was undergoing, the emotional shutting down, the abandonment of previous interests, his willing participation in the harassment that surrounded him—I didn't WANT to take it personally—but, it's true, it felt to me like a betrayal. Helpful, right? I thought maybe I could do better if I cut the distance between us with a microphone.

Ben/Huck: **[Ben]** *Well, how important is it to not be gay, to not seem gay, for a boy?* **[Huck]** Pretty important. Pretty important. Like depending on their friends they could lose all their friends if people thought they were gay. **[Ben]** *And what do you have to do to show that you're not gay?* **[Huck]** Pump iron. Like, yeah, do

masculine shit I guess. **[Ben]** *Just tell me, like what?* **[Huck]** Play sports, date girls, win fights, Yeah.

Ben/Huck: **[Ben]** *Like, a kid who's masculine enough, right. What are the ways that they could be expected to relate to their teachers in class, say?* **[Huck]** Ignore them. I mean, they can do their work. That's allowed. And they can get good grades. **[Ben]** *Oh Ok good.* **[Huck]** But they can't LIKE it. **[Ben]** *Showing enthusiasm.* **[Huck]** Yeah. **[Ben]** *When did you realize that? Was there a moment when you—* **[Huck]** The second day of school maybe. **[Ben]** *What did you see?* **[Huck]** Kids not paying attention in class. Boys not paying attention in class. **[Ben]** *Are you telling me this because you think this is the answer I want?* **[Huck]** No, it's just the truth. Like, a lot of boys not paying attention in class, and telling other people that, Oh, why do you care so much?

Ben James: For our interviews, knowing I might well make a radio story out of them, Huck had one rule. I was allowed to say almost nothing about what he used to be like, his former interests and habits and ways of being. Fine, no prob. But there's one thing I'll tell you, a small thing. I don't think this is breaking the rules. On the first day of sixth grade, Huck walked up to his homeroom teacher and told him he'd be joining the GSA. That's the gay-straight alliance. It's not that he himself identified as gay. He had a good friend who was trans at his old school. His brother doesn't follow all the standard gender norms. This was all perfectly normal to Huck. Three weeks into the new school year and EVERYTHING had changed.

Huck: It's like the very beginning of middle school. Everyone's freaking out and like, trying to identify their groups. I just feel like it was too much putting myself out there. **[Ben]** *Right, so what I heard you say then is, Poppa, if I go to that meeting, everybody's gonna say I'm gay.* **[Huck]** That's true. That would have happened. And you were like, What's the problem with people saying you're gay? It's fine to be gay. I feel like that's the thing you kept saying this year that really ended up not helping. Like saying, What's the problem with being gay? Just be like, It's fine to be gay. I couldn't have done that. People can't do that. It won't do anything, for one thing. It will just make things worse.

So, as a dad, right about the time my kid says I'm doing a terrible job, I generally think I've gotta be doing something right. But Huck nailed it here. My inflamed reactions to the gender policing and the homophobic slurs—plus the idea that I'd kept my kids in a bubble of tolerance, possibly to their own detriment—it GOT to me. It felt like an unsolvable puzzle, a maze that was itself made out of quicksand. I asked Pliny if I could do an interview with him.

Pliny: This is the recorder I got in my stocking that's just like this weird thing. And this is... WHAT'S UP? WHAT'S UP? WHAT'S UP? **[Ben]** *Alright, so that dude tells me that I've been praising you too much for not following gender norms. Do you think that's true?* **[Pliny]** You haven't exactly been praising me. You've just been like getting me stuff that doesn't follow gender norms. **[Ben]** *Like what?* **[Pliny]** My fleece, remember? It has pink sleeves and a pink zipper. **[Ben]** Which you like? **[Pliny]** Yeah. **[Ben]** *Cause you like pink. Like your pink raccoon-on-a-bicycle-t-shirt. It's like the best t-shirt.* **[Pliny]** Purple's better than pink I think.

BEN/PLINY: **[Ben]** *What was that like, when you went to basketball camp this summer and there were ninety kids there, and none of them had long hair except you?* **[Pliny]** There was one other kid. **[Ben]** *Oh good. Did that feel weird?* **[Pliny]** Yeah. **[Ben]** *What did it feel like?* **[Pliny]** It felt like, Why does everyone need short hair to be a boy? You can have good hairstyles with long hair too, people.

Ben James: OK, here's a question. Is this just me being a lightweight dad, unable to stomach the idea that my dear, dependent boys are actually going to grow up? Because it feels almost unbearable to me, the idea that Pliny's cute, fierce, comfortable, weird sense of self might eventually be taken down—willingly or not—by the juggernaut of middle school boy culture. But then there's always this other voice in my head, too, this premise I've absorbed from friends and professionals, from books and movies, that suffering social cruelty is just what middle school's about. It's developmental. A rite of passage. Kids try on new identities, and it's hard to watch, but they'll be stronger for it in the end. It was good to talk to Oona about the boys in Huck's school, what they were doing to each other. She reminded me of the stakes.

Oona: It made me think differently about the boys in my middle school, and how BORING most of them were, and to feel like, Oh wow, they were really stunted. And that's what I'm experiencing. Like the behavior that's being enacted is emotionally stunting these kids and keeping them from having access to who they are in a much fuller way. And that stunting for some men lasts their whole lives, it feels like. Definitely into adulthood.

BEN/HUCK: **[Ben]** *Is it possible to opt out? Is it—* **[Huck]** You've already asked me this question. And the answer is, No. **[Ben]** *You can't be a boy that doesn't call other kids gay?* **[Huck]** Well I mean I've done that. You can not call other kids gay, but you can't act like you think it's OK to be gay. **[Ben]** *So you've just got to be silent.* **[Huck]** Yeah, or you have to like flip someone off when they call you gay or something. You definitely have to get pissed off at someone when they call you gay. **[Ben]** *Not pissed because they're—* **[Huck]** Not pissed because they're being homophobic, no. I mean, maybe you are pissed because they're being homophobic, but you have to ACT like it's an insult at least.

Ben James: Late-March. We're at the kitchen table, Oona and me. We're talking about the meeting I've asked for with the school, to discuss with administrators the many incidences of homophobia and harassment we've been hearing about all year. There's a loud bang, sounds a lot like a gunshot. Then there's another, and another. I get up and look out the kitchen window, but I don't see anything.

[MUSIC]

Claudia: So I was in the back yard one day, and I saw coming out from one of our sheds a skunk that was mostly white.

Claudia: It's an unusual, rusty-looking white skunk.

Ben James: This is Claudia, my neighbor.

Claudia: Skunks are perky creatures. They're black and white and they have a certain aspect about them. And they walk, they have a great...presentation. With their tail up and stuff. This skunk was slinking along.

Claudia: So then I thought, the skunk needs to be dealt with. I'm going to call the police.

Claudia: So finally about 20 minutes later the police officer shows up, and he comes out and the first thing he says is, I hope you know I'm not going to rescue this skunk, and I said, Well I hope not. I expect you're going to kill the skunk.

Ben James: So this was actually—no joke—the THIRD rabid skunk to appear in our neighborhood last year. There was the cute little rabid dude that showed up in August, right before the start of school. Then came a patchy, crusty-haired, full-grown mofo of a skunk. It looked like it had spent the morning scraping plaque off the grim reaper's teeth. That one appeared in the fall, in our goat yard, right about the time the first wave of sixth-grade hypermasculinity was reaching its peak. I killed it, just like the first one, with a two-by-four. And now here was a third sick skunk and a cop who'd shown up to deal with it.

Claudia: So he had his gun with him, you know. So we go in the backyard with the officer, and the skunk is lying just where it's been lying all this time, it's not been moving.

Claudia: And so the officer said, I'm going to have to call headquarters and tell them I'm going to shoot my gun, because there's houses all around here. So then sure enough, BANG BANG BANG, in the backyard, three shots at the skunk.

Claudia: So the poor guy, he was a bit humiliated, and he tried to explain to us, you can't shoot it in the head, because its brain will explode, and if it's rabid it's going to scatter all over. So there's no place to shoot it, I guess to kill it, you know whatever.

Ben James: The problem of my entire year: How do you take down a rabid skunk without spreading its infected brain matter all over your yard, and your house, and yourself?

Claudia: So the skunk lay there, and alas, it died, and we buried it.

[MUSIC OUT]

Claudia: Rabid white skunks loose in your neighborhood. Whatever. What are you gonna do?

Huck: Why is this such a big deal to you? Like, are you some crusader or something? Like, because you're kind of acting like it. You're acting like you have a job to do for this, and like it's important for the world. **[Ben]** *You're not impressed.* **[Huck]** You're not doing a great job of it.

Ben James: Our third and final interview. This time, Huck had some questions for me.

Huck: Like, why do you hate it when people follow gender stereotypes, or you act like you hate it at least. And why do you act like it's the best thing that's ever happened to you when you see someone, when you see like a boy wearing a dress or something? Because you do. You do that.

Ben James: There was that moment after I killed the first rabid skunk, when I looked up to see the boys watching me through the cracks in the floorboards. In my mind, this image is perfect. Two boys raptly watch their father destroy the unnatural evil that threatens the safety and sanctity of their family. But here's the problem with this Norman Rockwell painting in my mind. For one of those watching boys, for Huck, I'm not the vanquisher, I'm the skunk, spraying my irrelevant and just-plain-stinky ideas around. In Huck's version, he's the guy with the two-by-four, ready to knock me into consciousness, show me how little I actually understand.

AX: *You underestimated the world, Poppa. Yeah, I think that's right, well, say that again. You underestimated the world, Dad.*

Ben James: So I didn't know how to answer Huck's questions. I told him I thought fearful, domineering, emotionally-damaged men were the primary culprits screwing the planet, spreading racial and economic injustice in our wake. But honestly, however true that is, and however much I include myself in that

regiment, this answer feels like a dodge. It's so much more personal, this sense I have of what I've missed out on as a man, whether it's through my defensive need for emotional control, or the many ways I channel my insecurities and fears into my sexual desires, or even how often I keep my distance from other men.

Huck/Ben: **[Huck]** Ope, you just blew one of my questions. I was going to ask you why you're so out of the guy culture. Like with grown up men. I was going to ask you that. **[Ben]** *Yeah, thanks for asking. I think that's a really—* It's kind of a cut, to be honest. **[Ben]** *I get it. But, wait, you can't do this.*

Ben James: He's checking himself in the bathroom mirror, fixing his hair.

Huck/Ben: I just need to look better. **[Ben]** *Do you look better now?* **[Huck]** Slightly.

Huck/Ben: I feel like there are plenty of macho guys that aren't meatheads. Do you agree? **[Ben]** *Aahhh, uuummmm, tentatively.* **[Huck]** I mean maybe it's like plenty like you said you have plenty of guy friends. **[Ben]** *[laughs] Right, that statement is just negated by the fact that I don't have plenty of friends. But friendships with women come easier than friendships with men. Really?*

Ben/Huck: *I think I have some preconceptions about men that I haven't gotten over with yet, or haven't figure out yet. Some, like, biases. Like old trauma from high school? Yeah I wonder where, yeah I think it did have to do with not feeling like I could be myself around guys. And it had to do with some of the same things*

you're dealing with, like, I really liked to read books. I don't. I hate books.

[laughs]

Ben James: We were deep into the summer, farther away from school. Huck was easier to talk to, less fronting going on. Even the register of his voice had shifted. It felt good to laugh with him.

Ben/Huck: *Last question: If you could make it different in some way— Would I? —what would you make different? How do you think it should be in relation to the culture?* I don't think people should give a shit whether someone's like gay or not. I don't even understand where that came from, to be honest. Like, I mean now I sound gay that I'm saying this kind of, and I'm not, but like, why do people give a shit? It just makes them seem weird.

Huck/Ben: OK. Alright. Thanks Poppa. *Thank YOU. Shake my hand.* No no no. We need to do it the RIGHT way. Come on *[laughing]* *You've got to show it to me. Everybody does it differently.* You're bad at that.

Ben James: All that summer between sixth and seventh grade, friends asked us, Are you sending him back? The same school, the same situation? We told them Huck WANTS to be there, and some people got it, while other people's eyes went buggy at the thought. The truth is, if the kid wanted to try another school, I'd help him make that happen in a heartbeat. The premise that cruelty is developmental, or that surviving middle school homophobia is a satisfactory rite of passage to provide for our children—this is horseshit. But it's also the traverse that Huck has

chosen. I'll intervene when I have to, but, in the end—if this is a rite of passage—it's not mine. Best I can do is stay curious, keep talking to my kid, try not to blink. A couple weeks ago we got a promising sign. We were driving home late, just Oona and me. As we came down the driveway, in our headlights, right next to the tool shed: a skunk. Glossy-haired, jaunty-tailed, healthy—just sort of pattering around in the dark. Uh oh, Oona said, but I was like, This is GREAT. Finally, no rabies, no rapidly-expanding brain cavities, a skunk just being itself. It was crawling under the building, and while I watched it I experienced—this was DEFINITELY a first for me—a genuine surge of affection toward this skunk. Dude, my shed is your shed. That's what I would have said if I spoke skunk.

[MUSIC]

John Biewen: Ben James. What do you say, Celeste?

Celeste Headlee: I have a lot of thoughts about that story, and I have to imagine that most people will have an opinion one way or the other, we're probably gonna get feedback. I find it difficult to question what's happening in any other family because frankly grappling with all this stuff as a parent is really freaking hard. My son faced many of the same pressures at his elementary and middle school, even in high school. He wasn't accepted by the cool kids partly because he embraced difference. But I asked him about this recently and he said he consoled himself for being ostracized by telling himself how dumb those kids were to make fun of gay people. In other words, his refusal to say sexist and homophobic stuff wasn't just the cause of his unpopularity, it was also his consolation. So John, how

does Huck's experience compare with what you remember from your own adolescence?

John Biewen: It sounds familiar but actually, if anything, more harsh – some of what Huck is describing, I mean. We've already talked about my friends and me throwing the word "woman" around as an insult. But I don't remember direct conflicts like the ones Huck describes, especially kids calling each other homophobic names. Now, my friends and I were homophobic. Just among ourselves with our little quote-unquote "jokes." I cringe to say that now. I work with gay people every day. I have lots of good friends who are gay and lesbian. But yeah, in my young life, queerness was something to joke about.

Celeste Headlee: I mean, to be fair, our whole culture was pretty homophobic. Go back and watch the *Police Academy* movies, I dare you. Looking back at what we thought was not just okay but funny, entertaining, will cause many of us to cringe.

John Biewen: Yeah. I got well into college, I would say, in the 80s, before I got the right kind of people around me to teach me that homophobia is not all right. It's bigotry.

Celeste Headlee: But you're saying you don't remember what Huck describes here, boys attacking each other directly with homophobic slurs.

John Biewen: That's right. And you could say I was in a tame environment, in a small town in the Midwest. But Ben, Huck's dad, went to school in Queens, New York, in the 1980s, and he told me he didn't experience kids engaging in direct homophobic attacks, either. That made him all the more stunned to hear it from Huck, especially in their gay-friendly town in New England, and in what we usually think of as an increasingly gay-friendly, trans-friendly time. Ben and Huck were talking about all that and here's something Huck said:

Huck: To me, it just seems like more trans kids are coming out, but I don't think the other kids are changing. Who knows, maybe it's just because of, like, that orange guy in the White House.

Celeste Headlee: Meaning, Donald Trump. Huck is speculating that there's a general meanness in the culture at this particular moment, inspired by our racist, sexist president who so proudly rejects what he calls "political correctness" – but which a lot of other people would just call decency and respect for others.

John Biewen: In fact, there's been a spike in hate crimes against LGBTQ people since Trump's election, including a near-doubling in anti-gay homicides in one year, from 2016 to 2017.

[MUSIC]

Celeste Headlee: Even if we're going through an especially cruel period because of the divisive politics that are coming out of the white House, the broader

problem of patriarchy is much deeper and long-lasting than one presidential term. So, one obvious question is, how should parents raise their sons in the face of this very sexist culture that boys are almost certain to face out there in the world, regardless of what they're learning at home? You actually talked with someone who thinks about that a lot, and has written books about masculinity.

John Biewen: Yeah. Terry Real...

Terry Real: ...my name is Terry Real. My pen name is *Terrence* Real, so that everybody knows I'm a boy."

John Biewen: He's well-known in some circles, but I actually had not heard of him until I saw him quoted repeatedly in bell hooks's book about men, *The Will to Change*.

Celeste Headlee: That's a very good endorsement.

John Biewen: Exactly. Terry Real is a psychologist, therapist, and author. He says parenting boys – or girls – has to start with understanding what our culture does to them.

John Biewen: You talk about the halving, h-a-l-v-i-n-g, which is a problematic word in radio, quite honestly. (laughter) Works better on the page.

Terry Real: Well, Carol Gilligan calls it the binary process, so pick your poison on that one.

John Biewen: Whatever we call it, it's a central feature of patriarchy.

Terry Real: You take a whole human being. You put a line down the center. You say, all the qualities to the right of this line we're going to call masculine and all the qualities to the left of this line we're going to call feminine. And we all know what goes on which side, do we not, John. Strength, competence, aggression on the masculine side; dependency, expressiveness, nurture on the feminine side. Everybody knows the drill.

Celeste Headlee: This echoes what Lewis Wallace talked about in our last episode, from his perspective as a trans person – being expected to cut away his more tender and loving side when he transitioned from a “she” to a “he.” For so long, most people have thought – and still think – that's normal and natural for our children to differentiate themselves according to these ideas about gender. But of course what we've said again and again in this series is that when it comes to personality traits and mental aptitudes, gender is mostly if not entirely a social construct.

John Biewen: In other words, *not* natural. And Terry Real says when it hits kids, when the patriarchy “lands on” them, as he puts it, the psychic results can be severe.

Terry Real: Now if you read the literature on girls, and girls development, that trauma – and I use that word on purpose, [it] is traumatic to excise, to cut off, half of your humanity. That trauma lands on girls about twelve – eleven, twelve, thirteen – the edge of adolescence. That's when they learn what Carol Gilligan calls “the tyranny of the nice and kind.” They learn to over-accommodate, and resent it. That's the traditional setup. Fifty years of the women's movement has changed that for a lot of girls and women. But it's still part of the culture.

John Biewen: We'll come back to that change that he refers to in a minute. But Real says the patriarchy comes down on boys, and demands they give up half of themselves, much earlier than girls. Age three, four, five.

Terry Real: Before our children have entered kindergarten, they show demonstrable disinclination to be emotional. They'll feel it, but they already know better than to express it on the playground. They've already learned the code. I say before our kids have learned to read they have read the code of patriarchy, and they're right. If you step outside of that code, your liberal family may support you, but boy, you better watch yourself on the playground. Because that code is very much alive and well.

Celeste Headlee: Sounds like Huck would agree with all of that. So both codes are alive and well, the feminine and the masculine. But we've had about fifty years now of the modern women's movement. Women trying to break out of the old expectations that we'd just be “nice and kind” and provide nurturing and support

to you men. And even though there's a long way to go – a LONG way to go – we've seen real change on the women's side of the ledger, as Terry Real alluded to. More and more, we're encouraging girls to be strong and assertive and accomplished, if they want to be, and lots of girls and women are doing that, no longer feeling any obligation to take a backseat to men. The question is, are we seeing an equivalent expansion of the masculine straitjacket.

John Biewen: Terry Real's answer to that question is no. He mentions a recent survey that asked boys what they think of as male characteristics. And the study looked at how much those answers have changed over these decades that coincide with the modern feminist movement.

Terry Real: When they did this survey of tens of thousands of kids and they surveyed boys...You know what difference they found from the way boys saw themselves fifty years ago?

John Biewen: Very little.

Terry Real: None. Patriarchy reigns supreme. Strength, power, invulnerability, independence. All of the old values were what our boys think being a man is all about.

Celeste Headlee: So, given this, what advice does Terry Real have for parents like Ben and Oona?

John Biewen: He tells parents it's important to be gender literate, meaning: understand things like that binary process he just described, and what it demands of kids of any gender. And he said, with a kid in Huck's situation, the best thing parents can do is talk with the boy and lay it out for him. Basically, explain the choice that the boy faces.

Terry Real: And the binary under patriarchy is that you could be true to yourself and be a whole person, you can venture into those feminine qualities, quote-unquote, and pay the price, or you can conform and lose yourself and pay *that* price. What would you like to do, little Johnny? And let's talk about the ramifications of either choice.

Celeste Headlee: Yes! This is the choice my son faced as well, and he chose to pay the price for non-conforming. But it made him angry and resentful when he was in school. It sounds to me like Oona and Ben are basically trying to do what Real is suggesting, in their conversations with Huck. To just get him to articulate the choice he's making and to have his eyes open about it.

John Biewen: I think so, too.

Celeste Headlee: But you know where I'm gonna go with this next.

John Biewen: I have a hunch.

Celeste Headlee: I'm gonna say that we shouldn't be satisfied with giving parents advice on how to navigate this godawful set of gender expectations. Yes, we should do that, help our kids get through it all in one piece as much as possible. But we also have to recognize that we're responsible for giving our kids this impossible choice between rock and hard place. We need to remake this culture so that boys – and girls – are not asked to cut themselves in half.

John Biewen: As the mother of a son, Celeste, you'll be interested in this. Terry Real says one of the most damaging ideas in our culture is that in order for a boy to become a man, he needs to be torn away from his mother. So we have lots of stories in which the mother of the youthful male protagonist dies, setting the boy off on his journey of self-discovery. Everything from Percival, of the Knights of the Round Table, who went off in search of the Holy Grail – that was written almost a thousand years ago – to Bambi in the Disney movie. Here's Terry Real:

Terry Real: And one of the great myths is that we have to turn boys into men by pulling them from the arms of their sort of intrinsically regressive, incestuous mothers. It takes a man to do that because God forbid a mother should be left alone with a boy. She'll just infantilize him and turn him into that dreaded creature, the mama's boy. This is all bullshit.

Celeste Headlee: Amen. And it goes right along with that incredibly damaging business of halving, h-a-l-v-i-n-g, the splitting of people into rigid gender categories.

John Biewen: Real says, mothers, stay in your son's life. And all parents, fight for your sons to keep the tender parts of them alive and present.

Terry Real: That's what I want us to do for our boys. I want us to insist on whole boys. People tell me sometimes that I'm trying to feminize men. That just makes me crazy. I'm not trying to feminize anybody. I'm trying to insist on wholeness for both our boys and our girls. You know one of the great models of masculinity for me was in 9/11, the first responders in New York. These are tough New York cops and firemen. They were there and you saw pictures of them crying in each other's arms and comforting each other. And, you know what, you can be tough and you can be strong and you can be brave and you can have a big heart, all at the same time. That's what I want. I want to undo the halving process. I want us to be whole again, strong and sensitive at the same time.

Celeste Headlee: We need an honest reckoning, a new recognition of the sexist foundations of our culture and how it molds both our children and ourselves. We've got to let young people be who they are, boys, girls, gay and straight, genderqueer and trans kids. More people with influence in the lives of children – not only parents but also teachers and administrators and coaches, people running youth programs – need to have this gender literacy, to teach kids, and their parents, a different way.

[MUSIC]

John Biewen: When I was that 12-year-old boy, trying to demonstrate my masculinity by saying, “what a woman,” I was at the same time a sensitive kid who cried easily. Not in front of my friends, come to think of it, but at home. And I remember the moment when I decided that had to stop. It might have been something my big brother said, something cutting that let me know I was too old to be crying, as a guy. Whatever it was that brought on the resolution, I just remember thinking, all right that’s it. I’m shutting that down. And I did. I cried **very** rarely, if ever, for probably about twenty years.

Celeste Headlee: What got you crying again?

John Biewen: I think probably the biggest thing was my kids. Becoming a father sort of broke my heart, in a good way. Softened me up. My kids will tell you – they’re young adults now. My wife’ll tell you. I cry at movies, I cry reading the newspaper now these days, and sometimes I’ll tear up just having a conversation with my kids over dinner or something. Just because they exist, really, and I’m just moved by ‘em.

Celeste Headlee: Well, that’s a happy ending. I’m sorry you repressed all of that for as long as you did, but you can cry again.

John Biewen: And because I was raised a dude, I get a little bit embarrassed every time.

Celeste Headlee: You do?

John Biewen: Just a little. But yes, not much.

Celeste Headlee: Do they tease you about being a crybaby?

John Biewen: Well my kids will smile and say, dad are you crying? But I think they're actually, I think they..

Celeste Headlee: It's affectionate.

John Biewen: Yes, it is. It is.

[MUSIC]

Celeste Headlee: Next time: Winning. What Men Talk About When They Talk About Sports.

John Biewen: Please tell your friends about the show, and this series. We know a lot of you are out there doing that. But maybe this week, if you think more people oughta hear the MEN series, post about it on social media? Always trying to reach more ears, and we'd be grateful.

Celeste Headlee: Music by Alex Weston, and Evgueni and Sasha Galperine. Music and production help from Joe Augustine of Narrative Music. Additional music this

time by Blue Dot Sessions and Kevin MacLeod. *Scene on Radio* comes from the Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University, and PRX.