The burden of 'manning up'

SARAH ANJUM BARI

AS an only child, and the only one in my entire extended family for quite a few years, I've spent a lot of time with my parents alone. Watching television snuggled between my parents or grandparents; talking to them for hours; rubbing their feet when they were tired from work. On quite a few of these occasions, my father will say something that he means as a compliment, but one that takes me by surprise every time. He wonders aloud if I'd still be spending time with them this way if I were a son. I argue, every time, that that's beside the point.

I noticed a similar trend in the ads and infomercials that flooded the media this past week in celebration of Father's Day. Nearly every commercial focused on the bond between a father and a daughter, reflecting the common idea that fathers can be openly affectionate only with their daughters, while the 'father-son' bond relies more on "manly" dynamics of support, solidarity, and gruff practicalities. By prioritising power over kindness, and mechanical rationality over emotions, fathers all too often tend to decide what kind of personalities their sons should embrace. In the worst of circumstances, it is these imposed ideals of manhood that encourage traits of domination and cruelty in many men.

A study "Understanding Masculinity: The Role of Father-Son Interaction on Men's Perception of Manhood (2009)" carried out by the University of Denver explains how fathers leave a much more significant impact on boys' ideas of gender roles than friends or the media. These interactions form the mental representations of "masculinity" for sons, which they in turn respond to. The ideals change into habits and, once emulated enough times, they become institutionalised. The idea of masculinity that takes root in one household becomes embedded in the social fabric, shaping the wider cultural definition of what it means to be a man. It is these imposed ideals of power, infallibility, and repression of emotions that contribute to the lack of empathy seen in many men, according to the study. It is also what heavily influences the idea of "girl-watching" not as a form of harassment, but an element of the power that is seen by many as the birthright of all men. The result is the misogyny, sexism, and even gender-neutral cruelty grasping parts of our society. For all our achievements, girls are still forced to drop out of school or work by domineering fathers and husbands, violence against women is rampant and manifold, and gang violence has seen a significant rise in the past year.

SOURCE: ILBICCHIEREDIHANKY.BLOGSPOT.COM

Father-son dynamics that promote toxic ideals of masculinity are all too common in popular media as well. Fans of Harry Potter will remember the arrogance of Draco Malfoy - a gift passed down from his proud, insensitive father. Lucius Malfoy's ceaseless exploitation of wealth and political clout, and his haughty treatment of everyone around him cast a shadow over Draco from a young age, who mirrors the same behaviour as a bully in school. Draco regularly throws around the line "Wait till my father hears about this" to cover up for all his misdemeanours against students and teachers alike. But his true failure as a villain is proved when he is marked as a Death Eater – yet another legacy from his father – and ordered by Lord Voldemort to kill Albus Dumbledore. Draco crumbles under the pressure, realising eventually that he cannot live up to his father's standards of cruelty. This turn of events highlights another outcome of the effects of imposed "manliness" – when the son doesn't agree with the father, when his natural character contradicts the one that he is expected to have, confusion, frustration and psychological pain are often the results.

A friend of mine, a 17-year-old at the crucial phase of choosing an academic path, was recently telling me how hard it is for him to talk to his father. His father doesn't outwardly make demands, but often asks him to "man up" in situations that call for more open exchange of their emotions. "His definition of 'manning up' is different from mine," my friend tells me. "He wants me to get a particular kind of job, go to a particular school. But it's more important for me to be a humble person and pursue my passion, which my father thinks is a waste of time." As someone who knows both this boy and his father very well, it was upsetting to see how their respective definitions of being a 'man' and a good human being aren't all that different. Their relationship is devoid of any negative influences or untoward expectations; but it's also devoid of open, meaningful communication.

Both my best friends are men. While picking their brains on this subject for an insider's perspective, I asked them if they've ever felt similarly pressurised by their fathers. "I've never felt that kind of pressure, and that helped shape who I am. I've never looked at anyone through stereotypical gender roles. I've never judged others for their choices," one of them shares.

The other friend explains how his notions of manhood were subconsciously shaped by his father in a positive way. "My father had to fend for himself and our family completely on his own. My Nana was more proud of him than his own sons. He inspires everyone around him through his hard work. I want people to have the same impression about me too, someday," he shares. These stories show how fathers, in their capacities as role models, can teach their sons to be kind and to take care of others, instead of focusing on the template ideals of robotic "masculinity".

It confuses me when my father asks whether a son can be as affectionate with him as I am as a daughter. Not because I don't agree with his ideas of what it means to be a man, but because we spent about two years apart once when I was a teenager. He had moved to Thailand to take care of my grandmother, his mother, as she battled with cancer in a hospital in Bangkok. Today, he spends more time with my Nanu than my mother, actively participating in all her social activities. He watches everything from Harry Potter to sappy Nicholas Sparks' movies with me. It is these outward shows of affection, kindness and empathy that helped form my definition of a man. It's about time that fathers promoted more of these qualities in defining "manhood" to their sons. This society, darkening more and more each day with violence and stunted liberty, needs such men now more than ever before.

The writer is a member of the Editorial team, *The Daily Star*.

PROJECT SYNDICATE

Helmut Kohl's vision and legacy

CHRISTOPH BERTRAM

WITH Helmut Kohl's death, "the largest figure on the continent of Europe for decades," as Bill Clinton described the former German chancellor, has left us. Kohl possessed most of the talents of a successful politician: ambition, ruthlessness, tenacity, tactical skills, and a sense for the minds of ordinary people. In contrast to his two predecessors, Willy Brandt and Helmut Schmidt, he had no charisma (which Brandt had in abundance) or gift for words. What he did have, in contrast to his successors, was a clear vision for the future of his country. It was this that enabled Kohl to achieve the previously unimaginable: Germany's reunification within a united Europe.

Many, particularly in Germany, who recall those extraordinary months of late 1989 and early 1990, when Soviet control over Eastern Europe slipped away, still seem surprised that this supposedly provincial and boringly normal man could have grasped the chance to unite his divided country and deftly outmanoeuvred opponents. Kohl, they seem to think, was lucky to be in the right place at the right time.

But lucky outcomes in diplomacy are rarely a matter of chance; luck must be earned. In the summer of 1989, Kohl was just as surprised by the speed of events as everybody else. But he had used his time since becoming chancellor in 1982 to prepare should history beckon.

Domestic policy issues inevitably demanded Kohl's attention and skills; had it been otherwise, he scarcely would have been the dominant figure in his party and country for longer than any German chancellor since Otto von Bismarck. But what remained uppermost in his thoughts, and brought forth his greatest gifts, was the goal of ensuring Germany's future within a peaceful Europe. As a journalist at the German weekly *Die Zeit* at the time, I had frequent personal exchanges with him in his Bonn office. "Foreign policy," he used to tell me, "is more important than domestic policy, because mistakes can be very costly."

Kohl's chief method to avoid mistakes was to build trust with all powers, big and small, that were relevant to Germany's wellbeing. Moreover, Germany would need external support for any degree of national reintegration should the opportunity present itself. While for Schmidt the key strategic tool was the assurance of calculability, for Kohl it was the creation of trust. And he set out to strengthen and build it.

With the country's major and indispensable ally, the United States, Kohl sought the closest possible relationship from the start of his tenure. After Schmidt's government fell in 1982 over massive popular opposition to the stationing of US medium-range nuclear missiles, Kohl stood firm, recognising that bowing to public pressure and reneging on Germany's commitment would be a blow both to the respect and trust of the US and his credibility in Moscow.

Years later, when the walls in Europe began to crack, Kohl had established a unique relationship of trust in Washington, DC. And he found in President George H.W. Bush a firm and decisive supporter of reunification who would ensure that the Germany that emerged from the process remained firmly anchored in the West.

In the meantime, although the Soviet Union's aging and infirm Communist leadership offered little prospect for progress, Kohl stuck to the *détente* policies of Brandt and Schmidt, which his own party had bitterly opposed. When Mikhail Gorbachev took over, Kohl initially dismissed the new Soviet leader's bold arms-reduction proposals as mere propaganda *à la* Joseph Goebbels.

Helmut Kohl, former Chancellor of Germany, helped unite East and West Germany.

But as Kohl recognised Gorbachev's seriousness, he hurriedly applied his trust-building strategy and established a close personal relationship with the man without whom no peaceful change of Europe's Cold War map would have been possible. When that opportunity presented itself, the agreements that followed, remarkable given the political climate, were possible only because Kohl had kept his eyes on the prize.

For Kohl, a closely united Europe was a deeply emotional matter, as well as the key condition for Europe's peace and Germany's wellbeing. He succeeded in winning the trust of French President François Mitterrand and the friendship of Jacques Delors, then the president of the European Commission and the architect of Europe's single market.

Equally significant, Kohl wove a network of contacts in all the countries surrounding Germany. He was well-read on these countries' history and had a knack for understanding how it shaped their attitudes toward Germany. He was convinced that, as Europe's largest economy, Germany had to be the most constructive, if not the most generous, member of the European club.

Kohl once asked me, to my surprise, if his big bulk — he was 6 feet 4 inches (193 centimetres) tall, and weighed more than 300 pounds (136 kilograms) during his leadership years — might not confirm fears of an overbearing Germany. I had no difficulty reassuring him. And when, in 1989, German reunification approached, the trust Kohl had built up over the years paid off, allaying concerns in enough European quarters that he was able to gain the necessary support.

Today, Kohl's strategy of building trust still echoes in official German rhetoric, though it has been more erratic in practice. It is futile to speculate how he would have reacted to Russia's estrangement from the West at a time when it might still have been averted; or whether, unlike Chancellor Angela Merkel, he would have reacted with immediate solidarity, and more immediate effect, to the Greek debt crisis of 2010. Would Kohl have responded to President Donald Trump's behaviour by publicly distancing himself from the United States? Or would he have tried instead to strengthen the underpinnings of transatlantic ties?

One thing seems clear: Kohl would not have sought only short-term or domestically popular solutions. Instead, he would have understood these challenges in terms of their impact on the European order of which Germany was (and remains) a major beneficiary. And he would have integrated any policy response into his long-term vision for the future of Germany and Europe.

It is for this indispensable quality of statesmanship, not only for having helped bring about German reunification that Kohl deserves to be remembered and mourned.

The writer is former director of the German Institute for International and Security Affairs in Berlin.

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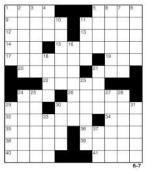
CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

1 Trumpeter Al
5 Emporium
9 Mariner's place
11 Creative sort
12 Kind of question
13 Polite Post
14 Great serve
15 Deli buys
17 Sockeye and coho
19 Put on the line
20 Cloth fold
21 Okra unit
22 Ill will
24 Letter after zeta
26 Food served with kraut
29 Lingerie item
30 Greets, in a way
32 Trays
34 Bran bit
35 Key
36 Bakery come-on
38 Particulars, in slang
39 Chad neighbor
40 Screws up
41 Hotel units

DOWN

1 George-town team
2 Pole feature
3 Flip
4 Shoe hue
5 Cry from the crib
6 Hands on hips
7 Depended
8 Secret meeting
10 "Forget it!"
11 "Alice" diner
16 Dove's stance
18 Butte's kin
21 Llama's land
23 Certain Sooner
24 Pencil part
25 More statuesque
27 Fall guy
28 Joined forces
29 Half of a 45
30 Workout makeup
31 Flag features
33 Docs for dogs



YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

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BEETLE BAILEY — BY MORT WALKER

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