I recently performed a search for the terms “man,” “masculinity,” and “men” on the formerly popular—and thankfully now mostly defunct—website Everyday Feminism. And then, I read the first 100 articles which appeared.¹ Anyone familiar with this site will understand immediately that such a task didn’t really take me all that long. Essays on that clearinghouse for all-things-social-justice aren’t very long, and most of the sentences are crafted more for their potential use as “hot takes” rather than to convey complex thought.

My goal in doing so was simple. For a site that had pushed so many articles about toxic masculinity into everyday social consciousness, I was curious how they defined “non-toxic”

¹ I really don’t recommend doing this.
masculinity. So, I read the first one hundred articles that came up in that search. And I’d love to report to you the long list of positive traits I gleaned from that reading. Ready?

They are:

- Non-violence
- Listening
- Nurturing/Care
- Opposing toxic masculinity.

That’s it.² Of the first one hundred articles, there were only four “positive” traits that men can embody. And two of those (non-violence, opposing toxic masculinity in others) are listed in the negative.

Unfortunately, sites like Everyday Feminism are hardly alone in this. In fact, with the exception of a very few writers (particularly bell hooks and Silvia Federici³), it’s impossible to find books, essays, or speeches by feminists outlining acceptable ways to be a man, or anything actually good about masculinity. Instead, you’ll find from all these sources what is wrong with men and what is wrong with masculinity, leaving you with the impression there is actually nothing actually right about men.

When I’ve brought this problem up, I often hear “it’s not the responsibility of women to tell men how to be good men.” Which is true, except that all these criticisms amount to that very thing. Criticizing bad or “toxic” masculinity implies that there is an opposite,⁴ a good or healthy kind of masculinity, one that we know and recognize, and one that men should attain. Unfortunately, telling someone what they are doing wrong without telling them what they should do right is a quick way to make them stop listening to you. ⁵

For any man, the relentless criticisms of masculinity without corresponding guidance as to how to be better creates a sense that maybe there is something innately and unavoidably bad about being a man, that being a man itself is the problem.

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² This is not surprising from a site that has also claimed that people suffering from anorexia regardless “have skinny privilege” and that Narcissistic Personality Disorder is everyone else’s fault but the person with NPD.

³ Feminism is for Everyone, by bell hooks, is probably one of the most liberating books every written about gender. Likewise, Silvia Federici’s books (including Caliban and the Witch), while focusing primarily on the exploitation of women, offer much in the way of helpful analysis about how men are exploited in capitalism as well.

⁴ We know what rotten fruit looks like because we have seen fresh fruit, we know what hate and cruelty feel like because we have felt love and affirmation.

⁵ This is also a well-known abuse tactic. Often, domestic abusers (men or women) will constantly reproach their partners for all the things they do wrong without revealing the desired behavior. The puts the person being vicimized in a state of constantly trying to satisfy the abuser, who then continues to move the goal posts of what is “good” or “loving” behaviour.
In such a situation, there are then only two options. The first is to live always with a sense of Christian guilt for being a man, constantly apologizing for who you are. Or there is the second option, one many male friends of mine have made over the years: ignore all the criticisms, and seek out ideological frameworks where masculinity is seen as neutral or even celebrated.

Unfortunately, while the second option can be extremely liberating, the frameworks available to such men are sometimes tainted with and even defined by the very things that feminism criticizes. While many feminist writers and websites offer very little (if any) advice for men on how to be “good men,” there is no shortage of writers and sites offering men really bad advice. Tips on how to pick up or manipulate women, the glorification of hyper-aggression or dominance over others—if you’re searching for guidance on how to be a man, these things are apparently your only other options.

Basically, what’s on offer is the mirror image of feminism, a kind of immature reaction to feminism. In this way, their masculinity is defined by feminism—what feminists call bad or toxic, they relabel as good and sell to men looking for something deeper and more authentic.

**Man and Myth**

I suspect the reason why this happens is that our modern industrial civilizations did away with myth. Cultures throughout the world and throughout history have each had their mythic models of men and masculinity. Stories and songs told of the lives of virtuous men, their actions, their struggles, their failures and their successes. Ancestors, heroes, leaders, warriors, tricksters, rogues, elders, mystics, and even just everyday men had their tales told, their deeds recounted, their memories kept alive.

And even more importantly, these stories were not the same. They were not of one man but many men, many kinds of men. That is, in mythic cultures there was not one story but many, not one way to be a man but many ways to be men. And also, there were many stories of how not to be a man, myths and histories of the fate of men who caused harm, or violated sacred boundaries between human and nature, or between men and women, or between humans and the gods.
In our industrial civilization, the bard, the poet, the village elder, and the sacred story itself has been replaced with mass media, Hollywood films and vapid television series force-feeding us depictions of capitalist heroes, men with new cars, or expensive technology, or well-appointed condos in urban centers most men will never attain. Success as a man, according to these empty myths, mostly just means success as a consumer or a soldier in service of a consumer order.

We need different myths, and we need a third way between the deadlock of feminist critique of masculinity and the “manosphere’s” repackaging of those criticisms. We need this for many reasons. It does no one any good to paint 4 billion people as innately bad because of their sex or gender, nor does it do feminists any good that their criticisms are being increasingly ignored by men who’ve come to realize that feminism offers no actual suggestions on how to be a man, only constant reproaches for being the wrong kind of man.

And especially, I needed this. I wrote in a recent essay how I struggled much of my life with being a man. For me, much of this struggle was linked to a hatred of my body, a sense that there was nothing good about any of its masculine or male traits, and a deep despair that led to multiple suicide attempts.

Two mythic frameworks pulled me from this despair. The first was the concept of the “alchemical wedding,” the idea that it is both possible and deeply important to fully embody masculinity and femininity within the same body (regardless of sex).

Just as transformative for me was the mythic framework of the elements: fire, water, earth, and air. In modern witchcraft as well as ancient philosophy and science, these four elements are seen as the primal forces which create and sustain the world. Everything is made up of at least one of these elements, and the more complex the thing is, the more the elements mix and act through it.

A CRASH COURSE ON THE ELEMENTS

As with the alchemical wedding, the elemental framework sees apparently opposite things existing and acting together. Wind is air, of course, but it is also earth (particles of dust), water (humidity in the air), and fire (warmth). Soil is earth, but it often also is water (even dry soil has a little moisture in it, otherwise it will fly away as dust in the wind), air (the looser the soil, the more air there is), and fire (again, warmth—even frozen soil is above absolute zero). The ocean is water but also air (fish would die otherwise), and earth (otherwise the ocean would have nothing in it), and fire
(heat differences cause ocean currents). A campfire is fire, but also water (steam is released even from dry logs), earth (the wood that is burning), and air (without oxygen a fire dies).

The elements are also associated with certain qualities and traits in the world, and also in humans. Earth, for instance, has the qualities of stability, safety, and structure, as well as wealth and tradition, and is most associated with the physical body. Water has the qualities of fluidity, permeation, and dissolution, and is most associated with emotions and birth. Fire has the qualities of transformation, energy, and, as the source of light (the sun, firelight), illumination and initiation, and is associated with the will. Air has the qualities of movement, lightness, and space, and is associated with thought and ideas in humans because of breath (to be inspired literally means to have “breathed in.”)

Because the elements are seen to compose all of life and to imbue certain traits of human interactions, it’s quite easy to use them to understand personality traits and stages of human development. In fact, that’s why there are four suits in Tarot. Each of the suits corresponds to an element (wands are fire, cups are water, coins/pentacles are earth, and swords are air), and each of the individual cards (the aces up through the kings) represent stages or states of each element.

This same concept can apply just as easily to understanding men and masculinity (as well as women and femininity). Used this way, we can see quickly that not only is there no one right way to be a man or to be masculine, but rather many ways according to what elements predominate within a man, elements which themselves are often in flux.

So I here present to you an elemental framework of masculinity and men, informed by my observations and experiences of men throughout my life. Just as in all other things, no man is truly just one element, but rather a constant symphony of the four elements mixing and acting upon each other. However, often times we can see in a man that one or two elements tend to be at the fore, certain qualities and traits having more active roles in the formation of his personality.

In this way, we can see these elemental frameworks acting much like archetypes, unconscious roles that men take on or are influenced by during multiple times in their lives. A man whose masculinity is mostly formed by elemental air, for example, may find himself more shaped by elemental earth in certain reactions (with co-workers or lovers, for instance) and by elemental fire in moments of crisis.

One important thing that you’ll notice as you read these is the complete absence of certain words in these descriptions, particularly the words “Good” and “Bad.” Moral judgments don’t really fit within such frameworks, nor are they even helpful. There is no “good” way to be a woman, nor is there a “bad” way, specifically because there is no one way to be a woman. It is the same for men.
Instead of moral judgments, I offer suggestions on where the traits of each element can clash with others, or be found unhelpful or mistaken as “toxic” by others. This is another core problem with our modern industrial societies in which all people—men and women—are reduced to worker and consumer. In other ways of organizing societies, it was recognized that men have as many diverse needs as women, and without ways to fulfill those needs or find meaningful places in society, helpful traits can become harmful.

For example, societies that have rituals of courting create spaces for men and women to meet, flirt, and enact their passions and desires in a way that the community can celebrate and be sustained by. These acknowledge the traits and qualities of adolescents and provide space for them, rather than suppressing such things, with the deep awareness that suppressed or repressed forces and desires always find a way to manifest. The desire for adventure, or to be a protector, or to struggle against others, are other such traits found often in masculinity, and societies that provide outlets, roles, and rituals in which these desires can be enacted are less likely to find bored men causing havoc or destruction.

Finally, as this is a mythic framework, it’s important to say something about the mythic itself. Because we do not live in a culture that understands the importance of myth, we can sometimes forget that the mythic is neither true nor false. The mythic can only be fully understood by the same part of our mind that understands poetry. In poetry, there is never a one-to-one correspondence between a word and its meaning. Instead, each word builds upon the words previous and the words that come after, and the poet chooses words not only for their sound but also their multiple meanings. Like herbs added to a soup or subtones and overtones in musical composition, each word adds not just a primary sense but a secondary sense which, when combined with other secondary senses, creates another realm of meaning inaccessible otherwise.

Put another way, the mythic is the exact opposite of math, in which each number can only signify one thing and one thing only. So in reading this elemental framework, do not approach it like math, but rather like poetry. It is neither untrue nor true, but both, and also something else entirely.

And finally, I’ll state that this is written for anyone who considers themselves a man, however that is defined. And it is also written for women who love men for who they are, rather than what they are told they should be. And it’s for mothers of boys and daughters of fathers, and especially for the increasing amount of people dissatisfied with both feminist and manosphere frameworks of masculinity and suspect there is something better out there.
You know the kind of guy who never seems to dwell on his emotions, or think too deeply about a matter? Who seems maddeningly calm when others are upset, who shrugs his shoulders at things others in his life think are world-ending crises? Who, when something goes wrong goes for a run, or spends hours in the garage or the backyard doing work instead of talking things through with his partner, his family, or his friends?

This is a man of elemental earth.

Earth is structure, stability, practicality, and pragmatism. Earth traits can seem boring to others, or un-intellectual, or conservative, leading others to think a man of elemental earth is stupid, stubborn, slow-witted, or emotionally immature. But a man of elemental earth has learned to understand something about existence that most of the rest of us tend to forget. We are physical bodies, with physical needs, and those bodies are very good at managing most of the crises that arise from life.

The man of elemental earth knows a nap or a jog or a good meal can be just as effective—if not even more so—than talking through problems or responding to life’s inevitable turns and troubles. When you have a roof over your head, a full stomach, and some savings in the bank, life is a lot easier.

The man of elemental earth seems to have an intuitive sense of the body that others only learn through meditation, therapy, or other forms of self-help. All emotions—be that anxiety, fear, depression, happiness, or desire—arise from the body and exist there. Difficult emotions are “all in your head,” and the best way to deal with them is to get out of your head and into the rest of your body.

Doing something with his hands, or his feet, going to the gym, or hiking, or having sex, or just experiencing something physical is the way he does that.
Earth is the material, which includes the materialistic. The man of elemental earth is a worker, whether for others or for himself. “An honest day’s work” is not just a saying for the man of elemental earth, but a kind of spiritual truth. Work feels good and true to him, especially work that puts his body to full use. He is a construction worker, a farmer, a gardener, a logger, a sanitation worker, and all those other “salt of the earth” jobs that keep the world running. Such men and the jobs they work are often seen as low class, crude, and stupid, but civilization would collapse without them.

The man of elemental earth is conservative, though not necessarily politically conservative. He’d rather figure out how to survive in this world rather than risk his life and abandon those that depend on him for the utopian fantasies of others. It isn’t that he necessarily likes the way things are, but rather that he doesn’t see the point in wishing things were different when he’s got a family to feed and limited time on earth to experience life.

That conservatism translates into saving, into cautious investments in tangible things (reliable cars, well-built homes) and people (direct family members, close friends) rather than abstract causes, get-rich schemes, foreign ventures, or high-risk stocks. If he opens a business it will be one that has a traditional and societally-useful role—a store selling basic goods, a restaurant offering reliable and uncomplicated fare, a mechanic’s garage—rather then one marketed as the “next big thing.”

A man of elemental earth is the most reliable person in your life, providing what you rely on him for is practical advice, a strong hug, help with a construction project, or borrowing his truck. It’s important to realize, though, that this reliability comes from the same place that makes him seem boring, stupid, thoughtless, or unemotional to others. He likes being useful and needed, likes and needs clear goals and directions, judges others not by their morals or status but their actions and stability.

He doesn’t like head games, emotional drama, or unnecessary tears, because none of these things get anything done. In this way, he can seem “toxic” or heartless to others—especially women—who might not have the same experience of elemental earth. Saying
“you should have known what I wanted” or “I shouldn’t need to ask you” to him is useless, because he doesn’t operate on the realm of subtle cues and nuance.

He can seem stubborn and often stern or harsh to his children, especially if the society they live in has gone through a radical change between his youth and theirs. His life probably looks a lot like his parents’ life did, because he saw what worked for them and adopted those things as his own. But if his children want to be something completely different, or are swept up by new ideas he doesn’t understand or trust, they might become hostile to him, rebelling from his legacy for years until, decades later, wishing they’d understood him better. Even still, though, the man of elemental earth will bail even his alienated and hostile children out of jail or help them pay medical bills—though he won’t lend them money to buy things he knows they don’t really need.

Because of his loyalty, his conservative nature, his stability, and his calm demeanor, he makes a good protector, defender, and soldier. This last role is where the man of elemental earth is the most likely to be exploited by more powerful men of other elements. If he joins the military, it’s out of a sense of duty, a desire to be useful, a need to make sure those he cares for are safe. He doesn’t join for ideological reasons, and anyway doesn’t live by ideas, and that will often keep in the lowest ranks of hierarchies. Thus, he’s more likely to be the first to be sent out to die, cannon fodder for generals and politicians.

There is a kind of quiet enjoyment of simple things in the life of a man of elemental air. He’s the guy who plays darts with his buddies at the bar, or throws around a football with his friends or kids, or goes on long camping trips with his partner.

He also tends to enjoy being around family a lot more than other men, his own or his wife’s or husband’s, and isn’t very likely to talk politics with them or really with anyone. Friendships and relationships are built around presence, being a body amongst other bodies, sharing meals or long summer afternoons at the beach or in the backyard with others.

If he uses crass language or makes crude jokes, it isn’t because he is trying to shock anyone. Instead, he’s just speaking the language of those around him, adapting to the
social framework in which they all exist. Out of those contexts, however, this adaptation can be seen as offensive, sexist, racist, or many other moral judgments, especially if he has moved from a rural setting with closer community ties to the alienating urban.

That’s why men of elemental earth are some of the most misunderstood by people wielding leftist, social justice, or feminist frameworks. Such frameworks are at their core urban and inherently complicated, often incomprehensible to those who don’t prioritize the mental at the expense of the physical. On the other hand, men of elemental earth are the most reliable union members you’ll ever find, because they value hard work and fair compensation much more than they value esoteric theories and academic frameworks.

The Man of Elemental Air

My really awesome 10 year old nephew is a ‘mansplainer.’ ‘Mansplaining,’ for those who haven’t encountered the word, is a term coined by Rebecca Solnit to define a problem she felt she encountered everywhere. “Men Explain Things To Me,” she bemoans in the book bearing that title, telling her things she already knows as if she were an uneducated idiot and those men felt some duty to enlighten her.6

And as I said, my 10 year old nephew is just such a mansplainer. He’ll explain anything to you, tell you how everything works. He has a story and a fact for everything (often but not always true) that ever happens, and has composed a long instructional video in his head for any question you might have for him and many that you don’t.

Most fascinating to me is that he never checks to find out if his 44 year old uncle or 37 year old mother maybe already know something he’s about to teach him. But that’s okay, and we find it funny, just as I find it amusing that similar adult men in my life do the same thing to me. My nephew, and those friends—mansplainers all of them—aren’t doing any of this to be assholes, though. It’s just that they’re all men of elemental air.

Air is mind, thought, spaciousness, the intellect, and movement. It’s communication, and the invisible vibrations called sound and radio waves that bring words and information to

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6 As with the other concept which was born at the same time and gained popularity through the internet, “manspreading,” it genders a behavior that isn’t exclusive to men.
our ears over vast distances. Air is a library, the internet, a university, the greek agora—open spaces full of ideas, histories, theories, and all the trivia humans have ever collected and shared with each other.

The man of elemental air loves ideas and mental objects, not because they are useful but because they are interesting. Unlike the man of elemental earth, practicality and pragmatism are the farthest things from his mind. Fantasy football statistics, the dates and casualties of skirmishes during the Napoleonic Wars, agricultural output changes after the introduction of nitrogen fertilizer to India, the calorie and protein content of each one of the 1500 or so French cheeses, the incarceration rate of Black or Indigenous youth in the United States since 1956, or the top five contenders in the Eurovision Song Contest since its founding; it doesn’t matter what it is, as long as he finds it interesting.

He doesn’t collect data and memorize dates and statistics to show he is intelligent or to prove something to anyone. He just does it because he does. Anything he turns his mind to gets absorbed quickly. And because air is not just thought but movement, the man of elemental air is always compelled to share the wealth of knowledge he has accumulated because to him that’s exactly what it is: wealth.

“Knowledge is power” is one of his founding beliefs, and he’s right. Those who know more than others can react quicker to crises, can trace the movement of historical forces, or can get better deals in economic transactions. “Ignorance is bliss,” on the other hand, is pure blasphemy to the man of elemental air. And do not say “a penny for your thoughts” to such a man, because you’ll get much more in return for that small investment than you’ll know what to do with.

Men of elemental air make excellent professors, instructors, scientists, consultants, bureaucrats and technocrats. The internet is their invention, as is television, and radio, and all other methods of communication. Anything that moves or spreads an idea is their joy.

In Tarot, air is represented by the sword, which reveals another aspect of such men. They love conflict. They love to argue and to debate, but not out of a desire for dominance or power, but merely for the pure joy of sharpening wit. In fact, it’s in this process that they eventually learn what ideas are the most durable, the strongest, the most powerful, and the most interesting.
If they engage in sports, they tend to do so competitively. Unlike the man of elemental earth, they don’t engage in the physical out of a sense of bodily joy, but out of an intellectual drive to increase, push limits, and sharpen their skills. This drive makes them just as likely to play video or board games as become Mixed Martial Arts fighters.

The man of elemental air knows how things work, not necessarily because he ever had experience with the thing but because he read it somewhere and remembered. From that knowledge he can usually figure out how to fix whatever’s broken, but he might use duct tape and forget to put a screw or two back in at the end.

That last part points to something anyone who has ever loved a man of elemental air knows intimately—he cares nothing for perfection, at least in others. He’s the most permissive and open-minded of all the types of elemental man, more interested in how you came to an idea rather than whether that idea is morally upstanding or socially acceptable. Tradition bores him endlessly, the “way it’s always been done” means it’s definitely high time to try a new way.

Because of his relationship to the realm of ideas, he innately understands something about the human condition that others take a long time to understand (if they ever do). That is: ideas, opinions, and beliefs don’t define us. They’re like clothes we wear, and can change, and take off anytime we want. That makes them deeply tolerant of others, even people with ideas and beliefs that others find morally repugnant or even evil.

This tolerance derives from elemental air’s trait of spaciousness. A man of elemental air can step back from a situation and see things from an emotional distance (an ability some—especially women—inaccurately read as heartlessness or cold rationality). This lets them separate out their current feelings and prejudices about a person or situation and shift their perspective.

“I can see where you’re coming from” is a true statement often uttered by the man of elemental air—he can actually see this in his mind’s eye. But just because he sees how
others came to their conclusions or perceptions of an event doesn’t mean he agrees with them, only that he understands and values the right of everyone to think for themselves.

His friendships often reflect this impartial view of humanity. He is just as likely to have women as friends as men, and friends outside of his social class as well as from within. These friends might not necessarily like or even ever know each other, because what connects them to the man of elemental air is always something specific, peculiar, and only perceived as universal to him.

He’s the man who’s most likely not to have noticed his partner cut their hair, or is wearing a new item of clothing, or that there is some unspoken emotional state written across their face. This isn’t because he doesn’t care about others or is refusing to do “emotional labor,” but because he doesn’t dwell in the realm of such physical signifiers. He cares for the thoughts of others, their ideas, and their personality, not for their looks or social status or even emotional states, a maddening quality to those who spend their efforts, money, and energy improving such superficial signifiers.

The man of elemental air is a thinker, a communicator, a learner and a teacher. He’s often employed as a journalist, a writer, a consultant, a trainer, and especially in office jobs where the labor is primarily mental, not physical. His ability to see things from different perspectives and with intellectual distance is particularly sought after for exploitation by the powerful, because he makes a good strategist. In addition, his ability to accumulate and sift vast amounts of information proves terrifyingly useful in legal matters and the crafting of political platforms and laws.

On the other hand, his ability to hold so much knowledge in his head can serve his community, friends, and family in ways that endure far beyond his own lifespan. He is the bringer of new ideas and inspiration, of sciences and new skills, and in many societies has acted as the historian and spokesman of the people, bridging the distance of time through his ability to see outside of the immediacy of the present.

His friends, family, children, and partners love him for the very same qualities that sometimes frustrate them about him. He’s the guy who tells “dad jokes” and the same story you’ve already heard many times before. His tolerance and acceptance of multiple perspectives can sometimes seem disloyal to those who wish he would ‘take their side’ in disputes, yet these very traits make those he loves feel they will always be loved regardless of their faults. He makes very few demands on those he loves, which can feel like a lack of attention to those more accustomed to straightforward expectations. For others, however, this feels like pure, liberating acceptance and freedom.
Every Hollywood depiction of a man—whether he is a hero or a villain, a soldier or a criminal, a romantic lover or a serial killer, a raucously funny fool or a profoundly serious intellectual or inventor, a superhero, a commoner, a king, a boy wizard or an ancient sage, has one thing in common: they were all depicted by men of elemental water.

Water is fluidity. Pour water into a glass and it becomes that shape. Boil it into steam and it expands to fill a room. Freeze it and it becomes hard as rock.

Water reflects. The first mirrors humans ever knew were still pools and puddles that showed them not just themselves but the sky and trees above them.

Water permeates, soaks through the earth and the sky. It dissolves and erodes, over aeons wearing down the most stubborn mountains and crumbling land into the sea. It absorbs and laughs at all our efforts of aggression. Bomb the oceans and all you get is a large splash. Punch a river and all you’ll get is wet.

Water is associated with emotion and feelings, but to understand why, we need to know something about the word emotion itself. In English, emotion has only meant “feelings” for the last 200 years. Before then, an emotion (ex-movere in Latin, “moving outward”) was an extreme agitation, anger that became rage, happiness that became mania, sadness that became suicidal despair.
More importantly, the word “feeling” (as well as “sentiment,” the other word in use before emotion came to mean what it does now) referred to something physically felt. What we see as emotions now was understood before as something outside of us, something that swept over us temporarily, something to be felt by our senses rather than something that came from within.

This shows us why elemental water is linked to emotion. When we go for a swim we are immersed in water, but we do not dissolve. When a wave passes over us we are soaked but then we dry off. When a torrent of rain falls the streets are soaked and may flood, but then it all flows away and evaporates.

The man of elemental water understands this innately. While the man of elemental earth prefers to run or work until the emotion passes, the man of elemental water swims and surfs through them. Both understand that emotions are temporary states, but only the man of elemental water comprehends the shift and flow of feelings.

That’s why elemental water is associated with the arts, with poetry, dance, acting, music, and all the other ways humans shape sound, light, and movement into moments of passion. An actor can be anyone he wants to be because he knows that every human experiences the same passions, just as the same rain falls upon everyone in the world.

Water is an animating element. Take out all the bones of the human body and we’d be a mass plump blob, but take out all the water and we’d be a shriveled husk. Water a wilted plant and watch it within hours reach again for the sky, irrigate a dried field and see it spring to life weeks later with blossoms.

The man of elemental water animates. He gives life to parties, to friendships, to his family. He laughs and the sorrow of others flees from them, he cries and those around him feel his sadness too.

The man of elemental water is the classic romantic. He says just the right thing and he has won your heart, makes just the right subtle gesture and even the most frigid of us can find ourselves suddenly tearing his clothes off with our teeth.

That’s why elemental water is associated with the arts, with poetry, dance, acting, music, and all the other ways humans shape sound, light, and movement into moments of passion. An actor can be anyone he wants to be because he knows that every human experiences the same passions, just as the same rain falls upon everyone in the world.
If you want a man to understand your emotions and feel with you, than you want an elemental man of water. But there is a catch, because he has emotions too. While the man of elemental air possesses an innate sense of equality in the realm of ideas, the man of elemental water possesses the equalizing trait of water. The tide that rushes out will always rush in again, and water always seeks an equilibrium of exchange.

Here is where many of the feminist criticisms of masculine emotions miss something profound. There is no one “right” way to experience an emotion. While the man of elemental air or elemental earth may seem emotionally stifled or repressed, the man of elemental water is often criticized for centering their own emotions. Be it sadness or rage or delight, to those who do not understand their experiences of emotions, these men are often labeled egotistical, unstable, or self-centered.

The problem here is that, within modern industrial society, masculine emotions are accepted only when they are useful. This is as true in conservative “patriarchal” parts of society as it is for feminist and progressive parts. The passionate man is seen as dangerous unless his passions can be channeled, be that in the service of nationalism, consumerism, religion, or social justice. Outside of that utility, passion in men is seen as a fearful, dangerous thing to be controlled, redirected, or destroyed.

This is particularly harmful for such men in the case of sexuality, whether that be same sex, opposite sex, or any-sex attraction. Ancient cultures, including and especially the less patriarchal ones, have had rituals and traditions around courtship. Games, dances, ruses, masquerades, and other forms of dramatic and passionate rites existed (and still exist in many cultures) in which men play out mythic and archetypal roles of the seducer. Such dramas created channels for masculine emotions and sexual desire within frameworks created and defined by the community of which they were part.

Holdouts of such rituals still exist even European cities. I’ve been witness to two such community rituals, both in Germany. The first involved a tradition where single men were “forced” to sweep the steps of the village church on their 30th birthday. All the single
women of the village who were looking for eligible men would then “co-incidentally”
gather in the square in front of the church, watching his performance, commenting on his
body and buttocks as he worked.

Another such ritual, also in Germany, requires that an unmarried man stand on the street
corner and hang a pair of just-purchased woman’s underwear from a post. Women who
pass and take interest in the man can then claim the underwear as their own, but only if
they can fit them over their clothes. What follows then is a scripted discussion about how
the underwear actually belongs to his future wife, a script the women already know
because it’s the very point of the ritual.

These rituals create moments in which a man seeking a partner can act out his desire and
passion in front of the community in ways that women are invited (but never forced) to
participate.\textsuperscript{7}

Our industrial societies have no such community rituals. Instead, the passions of men
have no outlet except the drunken raucous Friday night clubs in urban centers, filled also
with single women who have few other outlets to meet single men. Without the ritualistic
elements of community courtship, however, the chaos of such meetings can be
disorienting, unsatisfying, and sometimes abusive.

The man of elemental water, of all the types of elemental men, is most harmed by this lack
of ritual. His passions cannot flourish and create the way they want to, and his desires then
meet resistance and even sometimes cause harm. Other men are harmed by this situation,
because it is the man of elemental water who helps them feel more comfortable with their
own passions. And women of course are also harmed, because the frameworks which
empower them to stand as equals in their passion to the passions of men are long
forgotten.

Because most of all, the man of elemental water is a man of family and community. He is
the animating force that brings life to others, that supports partners and children through
their emotions, their sorrows, and their joys. He is who makes us laugh, and cry, and moan,
and sigh at all the things that can felt in the world. His innate ability to care and feel makes
him a great therapist or nurse, just as his ability to embody emotion makes him a great
artist and actor. In industrial society, however, such roles are only valued when they
support capitalism and consumption, compensated only when the feelings of man of
elemental water can convey to us will make us buy more.

\textsuperscript{7} Here the feminist critique of catcalling also misses something I have continuously noticed and many
women have pointed out to me. I remember being shocked when, while walking with a friend, a man
“catcalled” to her and she responded not with disgust or anger but a compliment. She, as with some
other women I know, enjoy such attention and eagerly return it, though others find such interactions
horrifying, disgusting, and oppressive. As with men, there is no one correct way to be a woman.
Fire is change. Fire is transformation. Fire is initiation.

There is a moment I experience every year at the end of a long winter. Months of sluggish life, fatigue, chill, and relentless repetitions of the patterns we create for ourselves to get us through the short days and long nights. Suddenly, as if from a dream, a bit of sunlight hits my skin in a way I had forgotten it ever could, and everything changes. I come to life again, awaken into a new understanding and thirst for life that I set aside as the previous year faded.

This is the power of the man of elemental fire. He does not just bear the spark of life, but he is that spark, an electric presence, a living fire that can warm even the coldest of souls.

While the man of elemental water is an artist or an actor, the man of elemental fire is a performer and a rockstar—even if he does no art at all. His life itself is a kind of art, a living poetry, a distant call from another world ancient or not yet born.

Though he is a rockstar and a performer, he is hardly always the center of attention. You’ve been to one of his parties, probably, full of people having the times of their lives yet without even knowing who their host is or what he even looks like. You’ve been to the events he puts on, the concerts he promoted or the cultural spaces he created, but probably weren’t even aware there was anyone behind those things at all.

That is the grace and power of elemental fire. In Tarot, fire is represented by the wands, and the figure of the knight of wands is a perfect metaphor for what such a man is. He is the revolutionary and the rebel, the man who rushes in and then just as quickly disappears on to a new cause, leaving a changed landscape in his wake.

While the man of elemental water is often employed in artistic or caregiver positions, you’re most likely to encounter men of elemental fire behind a bar pouring you drinks or pulling espresso. He’s taking your order in the restaurant and you can’t tell if he’s flirting or just doing his job but regardless he just made you feel beautiful and very, very alive.
He’s also the guy they put up on stage to entertain you between acts, or the man stuck with the shitty job of telling everyone that their boss is laying them off, the president is declaring war, or your mother just died in the hospital. Because though the man of elemental air is good at communicating information, the man of elemental fire is good at convincing you that information is true.

Fire is often associated with will and with spirit, the force within humans which manifests our ideas and desires into the world around us. That’s why you’ll also find many men of elemental fire tend to posses a kind of unshakeable faith, whether that is faith in religious truths, gods, science, humans, or just themselves.

They are just as likely to be deeply religious as they are to be deeply anti-religion, and in either case they take on the role of the “fire-brand” or true believer, seeking to bring some better way of being to others. The atheist who believes that religion is the cause of too much suffering in the world burns with elemental fire, as does the devout New Ager who believes meditation can raise the consciousness of humanity to a new level of aetheric existence. But because elemental fire is also change, it’s rare to find such a man holding to the same beliefs his entire life (a trait more often found in men of elemental earth).

This intensity coupled with a tendency to constantly change can seem like hypocrisy, instability, and shallowness to those who do not understand such men. But this isn’t really all that hard to understand if you have ever watched a fire for more than a few minutes. Its shape is never the same, but it is always the same fire regardless.

The friends, family, and community of a man of elemental fire not only learn to understand his nature but thrive because of it. He reminds them what is possible when they lose hope, “lights a fire under the ass” of his children when they fall into patterns of passive inaction, and has little patience for people who prefer to wallow in despair. This can make him seem harsh or uncaring, especially to people accustomed to blaming others or structural oppression for their poor material conditions.
Of the four elemental men, he’s the one you’re most likely to see out in the streets during protests, but not for the entire event. As soon as he realizes the revolution isn’t going to happen this afternoon, he’s off doing something else.

Because of his charisma he is often in leadership positions, even though this isn’t always the best role for him. The man of elemental fire does best when an action now has immediate and significant results. He’s not a long-term planner (that’s the province of air and earth), and can sometimes get pushed from below, from above, or from his own impatience to make decisions that have unintended consequences.

Especially, this can be a problem when hierarchies are obscured by ideology, a problem more often for the left than for the right. “Leaderless” movements always have leaders, and those leaders are often men of elemental fire. But without community support or clear expectations on what those men are expected to do, they can find themselves chained to the weight of other people’s faith and either breaking under the pressure or wielding that power in unhelpful ways.

This problem is what often leads to the feminist criticisms of “activist men” who don’t seem to take responsibility for their actions or listen to “the community.” What is missed here is that such men—often men of elemental fire—rarely intend to set themselves up as leaders or even notice that everyone suddenly sees them that way. They are men of action, and their actions draw our attention. Soon they have a following, people looking to them for guidance on what to do or how to change the world, though such men never asked the rest of us to set them up on pedestals.

This explains so much of the disappointment people express when their “heroes” don’t live up to their expectations. In our modern industrial societies, bereft of community rituals or mythic frameworks, we mistake our admiration for people and the hope they inspire with an unfounded sense of obligation and connection.

While the man of elemental fire might often become an activist, he’s just as likely to become a gang leader. He’s also just as likely to be a politician decrying the violence and destruction that gangs and political protests cause. Any role in which will and influence are valued and useful traits can appeal to him, depending on what belief system he currently embraces.

This also makes him the man most likely to feel stifled by the docility, traditionalism, and lack of opportunity for men such as himself within capitalist societies, especially if he has
no resources. “Male criminality” is the inevitable result of societies that don’t value and actively try to suppress masculine fire desires for adventure and intensity.⁸

On the other hand, most extreme sports seemed designed specifically with such men in mind. If there is any danger or risk involved, he’s going to be interested. As a child, he’s the kid always falling from trees, skinning his knee, breaking his arms, and getting stung by insects. This can be maddening for his mother especially, or for partners later on, but he’s learned something early in life that the rest of us often did not: no risk, no fun.

He learns this through experience, and learns to conquer his fears by constantly failing. Children who fall from heights very often do something completely counter-intuitive: they actually lose their fear of falling. This is because their bodies learn to rely on other senses besides sight to gauge distance, while adults who were cautious children, obeying their parent’s warning to not climb too high, become afraid and disoriented at great heights.

That is, by rebelling and by failing, the man of elemental fire learns what he and others are truly capable of. That spark of wisdom is what lights the lives of others on fire, initiating them into new realities and ways of being.

RHYD WILDERMUTH

Rhyd is a druid, a theorist, and a writer. He lives in the Ardennes. He’s mostly a man of elemental air.

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⁸ Older societies sent such men off on vision quests, or hunting expeditions, or raiding parties. Now, they are mostly sent to jail.