



## What Makes a Man? by Roberto Rivera

For as long as I can remember, I've been a Knicks fan. Since they haven't won an NBA title since before most of you were born (1973), most of my strongest Knicks memories are less than positive: John Starks shooting 2-for-18, including 0-for-11 from 3-point range, in game seven of the 1994 Finals; and, a year later, Reggie Miller of the Pacers silencing the Garden--and more importantly, Spike Lee--by scoring *eight points in eleven seconds* to beat the Knicks in game six of the Eastern Conference semi-finals.

Now, it's the Isiah Thomas reign of error, where the on-court failures pale before the off-court farce: the Knicks' president threatening sportswriters on New York radio shows, and being accused of, among other things, trying to improve the Knicks' chances by getting other teams' players drunk before games. (Given Thomas' track record in personnel matters, this makes a perverse kind of sense.)

Given this august history, you'll understand why I consider Antonio Davis' recent actions at the United Center in Chicago an especially proud moment in recent Knicks history. During a Jan. 19 game against the Bulls, Davis thought that he saw his wife, Kendra, being harassed and/or threatened by a fan he believed to be intoxicated. He then stepped over the scorer's table into the stands.

If this had been a Warner Brothers cartoon and Davis had been Bugs Bunny, he would have first looked into the camera and said something like "I know I'm not supposed to do this but...." That's because, after the November 2004 near-riot at the Palace in Auburn Hills, Michigan involving Ron Artest, Jermaine O'Neal, *inter alia*, of the Pacers, the NBA regards players going into the stands as the unforgivable sin, which, Davis, the president of the NBA Players Association, knows better than anyone else.

But, hey, it was his wife, so upsy-daisy over the scorer's table he went. Mind you, unlike the psycho from Springfield Gardens, Queens, Davis didn't throw a punch or otherwise threaten anyone. He simply made sure that the Missus was okay. Still, rules are rules, and NBA commissioner David Stern suspended Davis for five games. In contrast, Artest was suspended for the remainder of the 2004-5 season and O'Neal received a 25-game suspension, later reduced to 15 games.

The disparity in treatment was applauded by sports fans: a poll at ESPN.com, by a nearly 2-to-1 margin, thought that the punishment was too severe, given the extenuating circumstances. Even more interesting was the response of female listeners to Tony

Kornheiser's ("Pardon the Interruption") radio show: they told TK that if their husbands had not reacted as Davis did, it would have spelled the death of their marriage.

Even if they're exaggerating, the sentiment, and the expectation it creates, is clear: men are supposed to protect the ones they love. What's more, it's not a reciprocal obligation--if you're out with your wife or girlfriend and some guy starts wailing on you, while you expect her to go for help, you don't expect her, unless her name is Buffy Summers, to jump into the fray.

While our intuitions in this matter are sound, our ability to articulate why this should be the case isn't. That's because these intuitions are in conflict with what we, at least publicly, profess about the relationship between the sexes. These professions downplay any intrinsic differences between men and women and posit not only a legal and social equality between women and men but an equality of possibilities, as well.

In this kind of thinking, any *meaningful* differences between men and women are the products of socialization. The obvious physical differences between the sexes are treated as accidental, in the Aristotelian sense of "how," rather than "what," something is. Men and women are *essentially*--again, in the Aristotelian sense--interchangeable.

This idea of essential interchangeability reaches a kind of *reductio ad absurdum* in Norah Vincent's new book, *A Self-Made Man: One Woman's Journey into Manhood and Back Again*, which came out the day after Davis went into the stands. Vincent, a columnist for the *Los Angeles Times*, spent 18 months passing herself off as a man. She prepared for her exile in Guyville by lifting weights, taking voice lessons, getting a flat-top haircut and applying fake stubble to her face. She attended a "men's movement" retreat, complete with drums and "tribal dances"; she joined a bowling league and went to strip clubs; and, of course, she went on dates with women, which as a lesbian, wasn't much of a stretch.

Or was it? While Vincent's account of the "unspoken codes of male experience" is sympathetic and contains valuable insights about what guys really think and feel, she's still a few astronomical units away from knowing what it's like to *be* a man. Obvious case in point: her dates with women were--shades of "Victor, Victoria"--as a woman disguised as a man. She acknowledges that her dates were attracted to the feminine qualities that seeped through her disguise, especially in her writing. (She "met" most of her dates online.) Once her dates met "Ned," (Vincent's alter ego) his slight stature and metrosexual vibe left most of them wanting someone more, well, manly.

This left Vincent asking Freud's famous question: "What do women want?" The obvious answer in this context is "a man," by which I mean neither the reductionist account that I've described nor the caricature of maleness that is the stock-in-trade of the likes of Howard Stern. I mean someone who *complements* her.

Talk about complementarity inevitably leads to the subject of mating and childbirth. "Ned" could never understand what being a man (as distinct from being *treated* like a

man) is like because, by definition, fatherhood, and all the ways it shapes the male of the species, wasn't possible for "him."

I use words like "mating" and "species" to emphasize an important point: you don't have to be a Christian or even a theist to believe that there are essential differences between men and women and that these differences should influence our expectations regarding relations between them. Evolutionary psychologists like Harvard's Steven Pinker (*The Blank Slate*) also reject the idea that these differences "can be altered with the right changes in social institutions."

Whereas Christians talk about the Garden of Eden and "male and female created He them," Pinker and company write about the "environment of evolutionary adaptation" and neurochemistry. Both agree, even if they don't know it, that the essentially different roles of men and women in mating and childbirth shapes not only the relationships between them but their interior lives, as well. Even if a guy isn't consciously living his own version of "How I Met Your Mother," his thoughts and actions bear the imprint of --take your pick--being created male by the biblical God or several hundred thousand years of *homo sapien* evolution.

The only place this imprint isn't acknowledged is, ironically, in our public discourse about the differences between men and women. Why? Part of the answer lies in our mistaken ideas about "nature versus nurture." We think of nature as being intractable and nurture as being malleable. (Hence, the interminable quest for the "gay gene.") But biology isn't destiny and "It wasn't me, it was my amygdala" isn't an excuse for wrongdoing. There's still such a thing as free will, whether you believe it's a gift from God or the "product of particular circuits of the brain." Likewise, these differences between men and women have little, if anything, to say about a particular person's abilities.

We also forget that nurture can be every bit as difficult to overcome as nature, if not more so. Anyone still carrying the scars from an unhappy childhood or adolescence knows that while medication can help the depression, medication cannot keep our past from intruding on our present.

Another reason for what Pinker called "the modern denial of human nature" is the dark uses to which ideas about intrinsic differences between men and women have been put: when previous generations used phrases like the "fair sex," they often meant "inferior." This led to unjust restrictions and limitations on women. (Whenever people treat the 19th century as some "golden age," I roll my eyes, and not only because I'm rather fond of antibiotics and HDTV.)

But, as the Latin expression goes: *abusus non tollit usum*. The abuse of something does not negate its proper use. Past abuses are a reason to be scrupulous in our discussions about the differences; it's not a reason to deny them altogether. This denial makes it impossible to know what women or men really want (or need) because it avoids seeing people as they really are. Worst of all, it leaves us without a satisfactory explanation for a

great moment in recent Knicks history, and that hurts a particularly vulnerable class of males: Knick fans.

---

Copyright © 2006 Roberto Rivera. All rights reserved. International copyright secured.  
Roberto Rivera y Carlo is a regular contributor to Boundless. He writes from his home in Alexandria, Va.

---

To unsubscribe from this mailing list go to  
[ccoi.org/inc/unsubscribe](http://ccoi.org/inc/unsubscribe)