

UP

One Man's Journey to Feminism

Peter W. Pruyn

he / him / his*

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Cover photo: 7,500 feet over Galveston Bay early on a Saturday morning. ©2020 Peter W. Pruyne.

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Content warning:
Contains descriptions of physical and emotional violence

* Pronounced "prine". He/him/his: This is the set of pronouns I ask others to use when referring to me. People who identify as transgender or gender nonconforming may use pronouns that do not conform to binary male/female gender categorizations, such as "they, them, theirs."



Figure 4: Yours truly at 4 months.

1: New York

Age 0-18
(1967-1985)

“What cannot be communicated to the mother cannot be communicated to the self.”
— John Bowlby

First Memory: The Basement Stairs

In 1969 my parents bought a house in upstate New York. One of the reasons they bought the house was that its basement ran the full-length of the house, and my father had visions of turning it into a wood-working shop.

There were two flights of steps that went down into the basement from the kitchen. After a set of a dozen or so normal-sized wooden stairs, there was a small concrete landing, and then to the right were five or six more concrete steps. These concrete stairs were larger-than-average in size, and instead of having a rounded front edge like most wooden stairs, they had a sharp 90-degree concrete edge, easy to hurt yourself on if you fell.

My first memory is of my father holding my hand tightly so I won't fall as I tentatively navigate going down these mountainous concrete steps for the first time, one chubby leg at a time.

I am two years old.

He is so big, and I am so small.

Second Memory: The Babysitters

When I was growing up in the 1970s, my parents would periodically go out and leave my sister and me with a baby sitter. All our sitters were girls, except one, who was a tall skinny teenage guy with glasses we had just once. He was very nice.

One night when I was about three years old, my parents left us with two teenage girls. It's hard for me to judge their age in retrospect, but I'm guessing they were in their mid-teens, say 15 or 16. One was clearly the ring-leader of the two.

At some point during the evening I said I either needed to go to the bathroom or that I was afraid I had gone in my pants. In response, they led me and my sister into my bedroom. They had me sit on my bed and pull down my pants. In my underwear there was a single ball of stool about an inch in diameter. The ring-leader asked the other one to go into the kitchen and get a gravy sucker. I knew this didn't sound right.

What were they going to do with that?

She returned and handed it to the other one. As my six-year-old sister stood next to the bed looking on, the Alpha then took the gravy sucker and used its suction to pick up the ball of feces. Holding it on the end of the gravy sucker, she held it up to my face and said tauntingly, “This is

poop!”, as her friend smirked.

At some level I knew what they were doing was wrong, but I couldn’t say why. I knew using a gravy sucker that way was wrong, but I felt what I had done was wrong, too. At that moment I exchanged a fleeting glance with my sister. Our deer-in-the-headlights gazes met. In that moment I felt we exchanged our mutual understanding that this was wrong while also not knowing what to do.

I never told anyone, and my sister and I never talked about it.



Figure 5: One-and-a-half-years-old with my sister and a Richard Scarry book, a favorite. Apparently, I liked Christmas trees.

Nursery School

When I am four years-old, I go to a nursery school in the basement of a large brown stone church. On one side of the room is a large stainless-steel sink and counter-top that's used for washing art supplies. The rest of the room is a large carpeted area where we can play. Our teacher is Mrs. Cascio, a kindly, affectionate woman with long dark hair that she lets the girls comb. She always wears a light blue and white checkered apron.

It's mid-morning, and I'm on the floor playing with some toys with the other children. At some point, a very small girl stumbles and knocks into a boy. They both fall and start crying. Then more and more children begin to cry. A few sob, "I want my mommy!", but most just cry. None of them are saying anything about why they're crying. I'm not really paying attention. Kids cry all the time.

Mrs. Cascio has read about hysterical crying that can spread in a class of very young children and assumes that that's what's going on. She does notice one boy who has fallen asleep under a table.

At this point I start to have a headache. I don't pay much attention to it at first, but it persists and begins to feel like it's getting worse. I think I might be getting sick.

I finally get up off the floor, walk up to Mrs. Cascio in a slight haze, and say slowly in the midst of the clamor, "I ... don't feel too good." This is the first indication Mrs. Cascio has that something may be physically wrong with the children.

With this prompt, she looks around the room and notices that several children are now lying on the floor, apparently sleeping. Something is terribly wrong. She's not sure what, but something is wrong. Immediately, she knows she needs to get everyone out of the room as fast as possible. Meanwhile, the crying has gotten so loud that the school secretary has come downstairs to see what's the matter. She rushes back upstairs to call all the parents.

We wait outside on the sidewalk in the mid-morning sun. My mother comes and gets me. She had received a curt phone call that said, "Come immediately and pick up your son." No reason was given as to why.

Later, we would find out that the basement room we were in was next to the furnace, and it had developed a carbon monoxide leak. Because I was tall for my age, I was affected more slowly than the other children.

Mrs. Cascio would later tell me, "If you hadn't told me, I don't know what would have happened."

Apartment 16E

I was born in 1967 and grew up on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. Our apartment was on the 16th floor, giving us a view of a thin sliver of the Hudson River and New Jersey.

My father's first career was as a photographer. He worked for himself specializing in industrial and architectural photography. Later, he got involved in aviation, eventually working for himself as an aircraft broker, connecting buyers and sellers of small aircraft engines and equipment together and making a commission off the sale. It was work that was very sensitive to fluctuations in the economy.

My mother was a life-long school teacher, teaching mostly in all-girls schools. Her bookshelf included books like linguist Deborah Tannen's *You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation*; *Driven to Distraction*, one of the first mainstream books about Attention Deficit Disorder; and Mary Pipher's *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls*, all of which I read out of curiosity. Later, I added Harriet Lerner's *Dance of Anger: A Woman's Guide to Changing the Patterns of Intimate Relationships*. I found these books fascinating. I was particularly disturbed and moved by the picture Mary Pipher painted of the challenges facing American girls and the consequences when these challenges were not addressed. Even though I wasn't a girl, at some level I felt like I related to what she was talking about without being able to say why. This passage, in particular, made me tear-up, again without understanding why:

You are in a boat that is being tossed around by the winds of the world. The voices of your parents, your teachers, your friends and the media can blow you east, then west, then back again. To stay on course you must follow your own North Star, your sense of who you truly are. Only by orienting north can you keep from being blown all over the sea.

True freedom has more to do with following the North Star than with going whichever way the wind blows. Sometimes it seems like freedom is blowing with the winds of the day, but that kind of freedom is really an illusion. It turns your boat in circles. Freedom is sailing toward your dreams.⁶

Throughout my childhood, I was inspired by the space program. I'm not sure where I first learned about it. It might have been the black and white photos of Mercury astronauts in my father's collection of *U.S. Camera* anthologies or coverage of the space program in *National Geographic*.

Whenever we went to our local thrift shop, I would meticulously comb their shelves of old magazines for *National Geographic*s that had articles about the space program. I memorized the names of the original Mercury, Gemini, and Apollo astronauts and read every astronaut autobiography I could find. Michael Collins' *Carrying the Fire* was my favorite. I was particularly taken by the following passage where he described orbiting the moon alone in the Apollo 11 Command Module while waiting for Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin to return from the lunar surface:

I have turned the lights up bright, and the cockpit reflects a cheeriness which I want very much to share. ...inside, all is well,...it is a happy place, and I couldn't make them more welcome unless I had a fireplace

Far from feeling lonely or abandoned, I feel very much a part of what is taking place on the lunar surface.... I don't mean to deny a feeling of solitude. It is there. I am alone now, truly alone.... I feel this powerfully, not as fear or loneliness, but as awareness, anticipation, satisfaction, confidence, almost exultation. I like the feeling. Outside my window I can see stars and that is all⁷

⁶ Pipher, Mary. *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls* (New York: Penguin, 2005), pp. 254-255.

⁷ Collins, Michael. *Carrying the Fire: An Astronaut's Journeys* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1974), pp. 401-402.



Figure 6: Top: The view out of our apartment on the 16th floor in Manhattan. The view is looking west with the Hudson River and Fort Lee, New Jersey visible in the distance. Bottom: My childhood bedroom. The view out the window is of the building on the right in the top photo. The blue ribbons on the left are a bunch of helium balloons from a recent birthday party with the helium tank in the lower right.

I dived into model rocketry and built my own rockets out of used paper towel rolls. I identified as a Trekkie and idolized Mr. Spock. I was enchanted by my father's aviation books by Charles and Anne Morrow Lindberg and other aviation pioneers. Anne's poetic prose in *North to the Orient*, her account of her and her husband's 1931 survey flight across Alaska and Asia, made it a favorite. It kindled my imagination.

One day browsing in the U.S. Government Printing Office bookstore in lower Manhattan, I ran across an obscure small white book that was a compilation of one-page biographies of all U.S. astronauts and Soviet cosmonauts to-date. I poured over these bios looking for clues as to what it would take to be selected as an astronaut. It became clear that the most common path was being a military test-pilot. Another was being a research scientist.

I remember meeting my first astronaut at one of my favorite places growing up, The American Museum of Natural History. Within walking distance from our apartment, I would spend hours there. I remember the quotes of Theodore Roosevelt carved into four walls of the lobby on the topics of nature, youth, manhood, and the state. While I didn't necessarily see myself in all the words or know exactly what he meant by "manly", the over-arching sentiments of conviction and nurturance were inspiring to me.⁸

One day at the museum I saw flyers that Astronaut Dr. Jeffrey Hoffman would be coming to the museum to give a slide show. I went. I was in awe. Around the same time the museum became one of the first museums to show I-MAX movies. I watched the first one on the first flight of the *Columbia* space shuttle, *Hail Columbia*, three times. A family trip to Washington, D.C. solidified the *National Air and Space Museum* as nothing less than sacred to me.

For the first three decades of my life, I filtered every major life decision through the lens of what would increase my chances of becoming an astronaut. Meanwhile, I kept my dream mostly to myself. There was something about telling others that felt arrogant.

⁸ For more on the history of these words, see: <https://www.amnh.org/exhibitions/permanent/theodore-roosevelt-memorial/roosevelt-rotunda>. For a contemporary update to the museum's Roosevelt memorial see: Robin Pogrebin, "Roosevelt Statue to Be Removed From Museum of Natural History", *The New York Times*, June 21, 2020. Retrieved from: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/21/arts/design/roosevelt-statue-to-be-removed-from-museum-of-natural-history.html>

NATURE

THERE IS A DELIGHT IN THE HARDY LIFE OF THE OPEN.

THERE ARE NO WORDS THAT CAN TELL THE HIDDEN SPIRIT OF THE WILDERNESS, THAT CAN REVEAL ITS MYSTERY, ITS MELANCHOLY AND ITS CHARM.

THE NATION BEHAVES WELL IF IT TREATS THE NATURAL RESOURCES AS ASSETS WHICH IT MUST TURN OVER TO THE NEXT GENERATION INCREASED; AND NOT IMPAIRED IN VALUE.

CONSERVATION MEANS DEVELOPMENT AS MUCH AS IT DOES PROTECTION.

YOUTH

I WANT TO SEE YOU GAME, BOYS, I WANT TO SEE YOU BRAVE AND MANLY, AND I ALSO WANT TO SEE YOU GENTLE AND TENDER.

BE PRACTICAL AS WELL AS GENEROUS IN YOUR IDEALS. KEEP YOUR EYES ON THE STARS AND KEEP YOUR FEET ON THE GROUND.

COURAGE, HARD WORK, SELF-MASTERY, AND INTELLIGENT EFFORT ARE ALL ESSENTIAL TO SUCCESSFUL LIFE.

CHARACTER, IN THE LONG RUN, IS THE DECISIVE FACTOR IN THE LIFE OF AN INDIVIDUAL AND OF NATIONS ALIKE.

THE STATE

OURS IS A GOVERNMENT OF LIBERTY BY, THROUGH, AND UNDER THE LAW.

A GREAT DEMOCRACY MUST BE PROGRESSIVE OR IT WILL SOON CEASE TO BE GREAT OR A DEMOCRACY.

AGGRESSIVE FIGHTING FOR THE RIGHT IS THE NOBLEST SPORT THE WORLD AFFORDS.

IN POPULAR GOVERNMENT RESULTS WORTH WHILE CAN ONLY BE ACHIEVED BY MEN WHO COMBINE WORTHY IDEALS WITH PRACTICAL GOOD SENSE.

IF I MUST CHOOSE BETWEEN RIGHTEOUSNESS AND PEACE, I CHOOSE RIGHTEOUSNESS.

MANHOOD

A MAN'S USEFULNESS DEPENDS UPON HIS LIVING UP TO HIS IDEALS INsofar AS HE CAN.

IT IS HARD TO FAIL, BUT IT IS WORSE NEVER TO HAVE TRIED TO SUCCEED.

ALL DARING AND COURAGE, ALL IRON ENDURANCE OF MISFORTUNE—MAKE FOR A FINER, NOBLER TYPE OF MANHOOD.

ONLY THOSE ARE FIT TO LIVE WHO DO NOT FEAR TO DIE AND NONE ARE FIT TO DIE WHO HAVE SHRUNK FROM THE JOY OF LIFE AND THE DUTY OF LIFE.

Figure 7: The quotations of Theodore Roosevelt on the walls of the lobby of the American Museum of Natural History in New York City.



Figure 8: Me with my 100th-scale model of the Saturn V moon rocket, 1979, age 12. This model flew twice.

Geography Lesson

Our fourth-grade homeroom teacher, Mr. Fiedler, is handing back our recent geography test. The last question on the test was extra-credit: Why is the Pacific Northwest of the United States significantly warmer than the Northeast when both regions are at approximately the same latitude?

I am surprised at the grade written at the top of my test paper: 104. While I am not a straight-A student, on this particular test I not only got every question right, I also got the extra-credit question correct. The answer Mr. Fiedler was looking for was: because the Japan current brings warm water up and over the Pacific, which warms the U.S. west coast.

And then Mr. Fiedler does something that I now regard as a teaching error. He announces to the class that only one person got all the questions and the extra-credit question correct—and that that person was me. A room full of eleven-year-old boys all turn and look at me. I am an island in a sea of envy, feeling an uncomfortable mix of accomplishment and embarrassment. Mr. Fiedler then proceeds to go over the test with the class.

When he finishes the test review, four boys, led by Anthony Gavins and Carey Burke, march over to my desk, rip my test out of my hands, and indignantly go over it with a fine-toothed comb attempting to find any mistakes Mr. Fiedler might have made in grading my test, thereby attempting to lower my score.

Much to their disappointment, they don't find any.

This is the all-boys school I attended for twelve years.



Figure 9: I grew-up surrounded by folk music. From my father's reel-to-reel tapes I heard the likes of Pete Seeger; Peter, Paul & Mary; The Kingston Trio; the Chad Mitchell Trio; and many others. For my school's fourth grade talent show, I sang the song *The M.T.A.* accompanied by my father on banjo. In this photo I am giving the audience the Kingston Trio's spoken introduction to the song that ends with "Citizens, hear me out! This could happen to *you.*" Little did I know that forty years later I would live in the city described in the song: Boston.

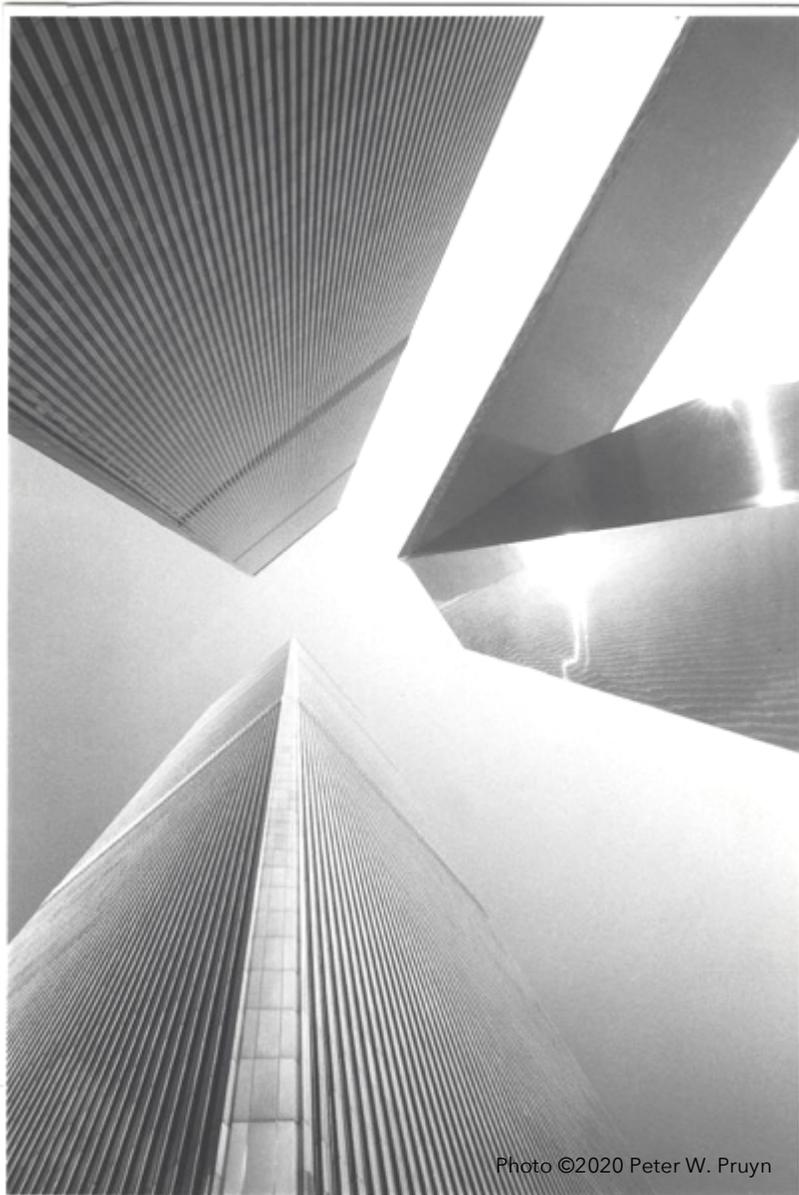


Figure 10: In high school I would borrow my father's camera equipment, take black and white pictures of the city, and develop them in his darkroom in the basement. This photo was taken early on a Saturday morning lying on my back looking straight up between the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center. Directly between them was an abstract angular stainless-steel sculpture visible on the right which I am lying directly underneath. It was 1983.

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