Boys to Men

Columnist Jill Scott is issuing a desperate call to outstanding brothers to teach our boys how they, too, can become great and powerful men.

While traveling in Africa, I met a man who shared with me that when boys in his village are about 6 years old, they are sent "up the mountain." He told me that they leave their homes alone and climb to a place where the men of the village meet them. While there, he said, the adult men teach the boys how to fight with their hands and how to wield several different weapons. The boys are taught how to hunt for their food and how to cook it, and they are taught that a woman's happiness is vital to the well-being of society. And then they are circumcised with a hot rock. (Yes, Yes, I know.) After all these lessons are given and rites performed, the boys make the painful climb back down the mountain into the arms of their mothers. They arrive as men.

Of course, as an American with a son of my own, I preferred to have him circumcised as an infant. But the rest of the ritual seems immeasurably valuable. Where is this mountain climb for our African-American boys? Where is their community of great men? Too many of our sons are being raised and schooled, for the most part, by television, by hustlers in the streets, with only their mothers to tell them how to be a man.

As a single mother I pray I can give my son the values that will enrich his life. I will teach him to live within his means because I don't want him to be chained to debt. I will challenge his thinking because I believe one's own discovery of truth is the building block of character. It will be my pleasure and my greatest task to assist my son on his path, but there are lessons that are naturally beyond my capacity. How can my XX chromosomes truly comprehend his testosterone-fueled XY? I have no idea how an erection feels or how to control it. I can fight if I have to, but I don't think it's a good idea to shadowbox with my son. What would I be teaching him about hitting women?

The truth is, there are things that only a man can teach a boy. I can show my son the world. I can give him knowledge of many different facets of life, but I believe there are experiences only the male of our species can share. While there are men who take pride in raising and instructing their sons, there is very little communal education. Just imagine if our men taught our boys conflict resolution—how to settle a dispute so that everyone walks away alive. Maybe if our outstanding men shared that one skill with our boys, there would be fewer violent deaths in our neighborhoods. Fewer of our strongest willed men would be locked behind barbed wire. What if our great men taught our boys how to nurture women and children with love, respect and understanding? Maybe our artists would be more creative when depicting women in their music and videos. Maybe more of our baby daddies would stay accountable. Maybe domestic abuse would crumble like dry leaves and many more of our marriages would last.

Our boys need a community of men to stand up for them and help them fully appreciate their true worth. Our boys need this desperately. This is a call to action. This is a mother's request. Okay, I am begging. Please.

Jill Scott is a three-time Grammy Award–winning artist, writer, actress, philanthropist and mother.