

**PERSPECTIVE**  
**REDEFINING THE AMERICAN MAN**  
**JAMIE LIPTAN TAKES A PERSONAL LOOK AT THE CHANGING ROLE OF**  
**MEN IN TODAY'S SOCIETY.**

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Lately, I have been reflecting on what it means to be a man in our society, particularly a young man. How do I meet the changing expectations of my family and peers while pursuing my own dreams? Where can I find other men who have successfully met this challenge?

In the past several decades, the societal definition of American men has drastically changed—from one of leaders of the family unit and unquestioned decision-makers for all of society's issues to co-participants in a more fundamental and broad-based democracy. While this shift in roles is completely appropriate from a Buddhist perspective, it has in many ways left young men very much on their own in discovering what it means to be a "true man."

It used to be the place of a "true man" to, without questioning, take up arms and die for his people. He might have nobly taken on a career totally unrelated to his field of interest to support his family, spending his life frustrated and depressed that he never pursued his dreams. He was often told to "take it like a man," and taught that violence was the way "true men" proved their worth in the eyes of others.

These themes have been played out in movies, books, music—and reflected in the lives of men all around us. We can clearly see the effects of such ideas in the violence and destruction we experienced in the 20th century, a time in which men were primarily responsible for society's decisions.

The role of men is changing very rapidly. Now, we have more choices. We don't have to be the bread-winner—many women are choosing to take on this role. We don't have to be the emotionally removed husband and disciplinary father. We can choose any path in life, regardless of its traditional definition.

The problem for many of us has become that because these choices are so new, there are not yet many role models among the men around us to provide guidance on how to get there. How then, do we become the sensitive yet strong, bold but gentle, confident but humble men that society is clamoring for us to be?

Recently, I have been reading the newly published *A Youthful Diary*, SGI President Ikeda's personal record of growth from 1949 through 1960. This book is incredible! Here is a young man, in the midst of post-war chaos and a society redefining itself, earnestly seeking the best way to become a great man. He is unrelenting in his quest to understand his true nature and foster his character.

He writes: "Scolded by Mr. Toda. Agonizing. All my fault. Must reflect on myself. I believe in Mr. Toda, and I'll strive to the bitter end. I've got to recognize my weak points and change them... otherwise I'll be miserable all my life. Must advance again, with all my might. Remember the childhood and youth of great men of the past" (*A Youthful Diary*, p. 9).

In another entry, he says: "Periodically, ideals and reality mix and my mind becomes very complex. There are times I want to blame others, while overlooking my own faults.

Must not forget to self-reflect and consider my own shortcomings. Want to live powerfully and righteously throughout my life...” (p. 177).

As a young man struggling to better myself, three themes strike me most deeply in reading this book. First, no matter what the obstacle or suffering he is experiencing at the time, he is constantly self-reflecting, desperately wanting to discover how to improve himself. You can often feel discouragement or anxiety in his words, yet he is always writing that he will overcome whatever it is, as if he were trying to convince himself that he could. I am constantly battling for this type of hope in my life.

Second is his unwavering commitment to Josei Toda. He seems hell-bent on learning everything he can from this great man, overjoyed at having found someone he believed could show him the way to live a valuable life. I am starting to feel the same way about President Ikeda. My fortune at having this time to learn from one of the greatest men to ever live astounds me.

Third is his unwavering determination to save people from suffering. Regardless of his own suffering, he continually expresses his resolve to create a peaceful world free of the terrors of war that he had witnessed firsthand. His example shows me the importance of a commitment to humanity. Through his desperation to help others, he grew into the man he wanted to become.

In scanning society for role models in my own quest to become the best man I can be, there are a few who exemplify one or two of the qualities to which I aspire. To date, however, I have found only one man I can confidently declare is redefining what it is to be a man. I am determined, through continually striving to understand President Ikeda’s example, to help pioneer my own definition of a “true man.”