Perspectives on MARRIAGE

A Reader

Edited by

Kieran Scott

Michael Warren

30.

The New Man and Male Identity

Kieran Scott

Men are awakening today to a crisis of their gender identity. If patriarchy is spent and if we have seen enough of Rambo and the Marlboro man, where does that leave us? What does it mean to be a man? What is required of mature men? What is distinctive in our humanness? These questions are percolating today as an increasing number of restless men face ontological and ultimate questions in their lives.

Men are facing a profound vocational crisis, and many feel as if they are involved in a night battle in a jungle against an unseen foe. Exactly what we are supposed to become is not clear. At the root of the problem is a defective mythology of manhood, a kind of male mystique. This mystique, propagated during the industrial age, fostered an image of men as autonomous, rational, efficient, intensely self-interested, and disconnected from the earth. Men are slowly realizing that they cannot solve their problems within this current understanding of masculinity. It has led to a deep malaise in men's lives and a loss of their generative potential.

This essay points to the deep substance and structure of a reshaped male identity. It is a guide toward a recovery of the core of masculinity in the depths of the psyche and body. The attempt is to reappropriate an authentic male identity—a lived life of courage, responsibility, energy, and compassion.

Some questions for reflection on the essay follow:

1. *What are the causes of the current dislocation of mature masculinity?*
2. *How do you account for the near-universal demand made upon males to be "real men"?*
3. *What criteria or ideal measures manhood in the U.S. today? What ideals/images of mature masculinity would you propose?*
4. *Is the contemporary men's movement reactionary (anti-feminist) or reformist (pro-maleness)?*
5. *What impact, if any, do you see the new men's movement having on marriage?*

Revised version of a paper presented at the annual convention of the American Professors and Researchers in Religious Education, New York, November 3–5, 1989.

Who is the American male? And what do men want? The simplest and truest answer is: we don't really know! This essay points to the current male predicament, links it to the misguided quest of finding male identity in the feminine, and redirects the search to the inner depths of men's lives.

The essay explores: 1) the historical evolution in male identity over the last quarter century, 2) the meaning of "the new man," with his gifts and liabilities, and 3) the distinctive character of male identity and the search for a new basis of its support.

Our normative cultural model of what it means "to be a man" has changed dramatically in the past thirty years. A brief historical sketch (while not inclusive nor exact) can disclose the sense of confusion there has been over what "a man is" in the United States in the latter part of the twentieth century.

The '50s Male

Before the rise of feminist consciousness, the image of the male in our society had massive inadequacies. During the '50s it was a fairly clear vision—aggressive, hardworking, emotionally unexpressive, athletic, and patriotic. He got to work early, labored responsibly, supported his wife and children, and admired discipline. He defined his masculinity, if not his identity, in these terms. This was not so much a matter of choice as of convention. Negligence in fulfilling these roles was considered a failure—a masculine failure. Ronald Reagan (or John Wayne) is a sort of mummified version of this dogged male: paternalistically patriarchal, boyishly patriotic, and aggressively antiplanet.

The '50s male didn't see women's souls well, but he looked at their bodies. He tended to treat them as objects. Men of this generation were encouraged to equate effeminacy with un-Americanism and to use their leisure to escape—into sports, hunting, or simply the basement—from women and all things feminine. The male persona was strong and positive, but underneath the charm and bluff remained much isolation, deprivation, and passivity. The vision was unbalanced. It lacked compassion. This man needed an enemy to feel alive—and he had it in communism. Vietnam was very much a '50s man war—it was a logical manifestation of errant masculinity. (Today this same man seems to have a sense of nostalgia for the Cold War.) Helen Mayer Hacker, in her classic 1957 essay, captures the '50s type succinctly: "The ideal American male personality has been described . . . as a 'red-blooded, gentlemanly, go-getter' and any confessions of doubt, uncertainties, or insecurities would tarnish this image, any sign of weakness might be taken for effeminacy. Perhaps this is the greatest burden of masculinity our culture imposes."

The '50s male had a clear vision of what a man is and what men were supposed to do, just as Oliver North had, but the vision involved massive inadequacies and flaws. It was terribly one-sided and disastrous for men, women, children, and the planet.

The '60s Male

The cultural upheaval of the '60s sparked a psychic upheaval in many men. The monolithic male model—bully, bluffer, breadwinner—began to crack and come apart. Another sort of man appeared. The Vietnam War made men question whether they knew what an adult male really was and the war helped discredit masculinity in its more lethal expressions. The "bell had tolled" on the '50s male. We now began to consider that the enemy was *within*.

The women's movement encouraged men to actually look at women—and made them sensitive to concerns and sufferings that the '50s male tended to avoid. As men began to look at women and women's sensibilities, some men began to notice their own feminine side and pay attention and be receptive to it. The process continues to this day. Most young men—at various levels of consciousness and to different degrees—are involved in it. This is a positive and significant development in our time.

The '70s–'80s Male

In the last twenty years we have seen the emergence of what is popularly known as "the new man." He is more thoughtful, more gentle, more receptive. He has journeyed from machismo to mutuality (Ruether and Bianchi). Mark Gerzon's *A Choice of Heroes* aptly captures this shift in his advocacy of five images of masculinity as an alternative to the destructive patterning of patriarchy. The polar images are outlined in the accompanying chart:

A Choice of Heroes—Mark Gerzon

The *Frontiersman* is the quick-fisted white male loner conquering the frontier—Daniel Boone, Kit Carson. His enemies were untamed nature, the outlaw, the savage redskin. Conquest, especially of the wilderness, was the key. The land was a virgin "she" and every real man wanted a piece.	In place of the frontiersman, Gerzon suggests a new image, the *Healer*. This is a man with a different view of himself and the land. He is aware of the need for healing the environment.
The *Soldier* is the defender image. Strong and courageous, he armors his body and emotions. He represses his feelings of vulnerability, his fears, and his sensitivities. He must be ready for violence. His sexuality, and his penis, become weapons of aggression.	An alternative model for the new man is *Mediator* . . . one who stands in the middle. Heroism here is not fighting but rather coexisting peacefully and cooperatively. Conflict resolution rather than battle is his directing imagery and energy.

The *Breadwinner* is head of the family and responsible for its economic support. Here is the patriarchal family, with a public man and a private woman, an absent father and a nurturing mother. His ethic is work and success. His manhood is established by the size of his paycheck.	An alternative image is that of the *Companion*. Companion, the word, is a composite of eom (together) and panes (bread). The term suggests a shared life. The daily bread is not won by men and given to others, but rather made and eaten together. Mutuality is the hallmark.
The *Expert* is another traditional image. This man possesses knowledge and hence is in control. Knowledge here is power and a means of control. It is utilized, not to seek truth, but to serve his human interests of maintaining his position of authority.	A better image is the *Colleague*. The word literally means "to choose together." The Colleague respects competence and expertise but knows that its value lies in sharing. He resists hierarchies and champions shared reciproeal power.
Finally, *Lord* is the divine image of the masculine soul. God is male and male is god. The feminine in the divine is denied and repressed, and hence also the feminine in man. This man is authoritarian—lording it over all.	The alternative imagery, suggested by Gerzon, is the *Nurturer*. Authoritarianism or power over is out of place here. He is not burdened with the pressure of saving people but rather is receptive to a process of mutual empowerment allowing people to save themselves. This is man as midwife—delivering people to themselves.

Gerzon's analysis is helpful and constructive. He has taken seriously the feminist critique of a truncated masculinity. His alternative imagery is suggestive—reflecting awareness of the earth, of work and family, and of the human body, mind and soul. Furthermore, he claims, the human qualities symbolized by the images transcend sexual identity. Whereas the old archetypes were for men only, the emerging characteristics are for all. Our destiny is to be androgynous.

Barbara Ehrenreich (*The Hearts of Men* and "A Feminist's View of the New Man") agrees with the basic shifts and direction outlined by Gerzon. She is less benign, however, in her interpretation. Yes, the new man of the '80s has been, in a word, feminized but without necessarily becoming more feminist. In fact, feminists may not be eager to take credit for him at all. "In the 1970s," writes Ehrenreich, "it had become an article of liberal faith that a new man would eventually rise up to match the new feminist woman, that he would be more androgynous than any 'old' variety of man." This change, which was routinely described as the great evolutionary leap from John Wayne to Alan Alda, was uncritically assumed to be an unambiguous improvement. Ehrenreich is not so sure.

The new man emerging today, notes Ehrenreich, is not simply the old one minus the old prohibitions and anxieties. There *is* a new complex of traits and attitudes that has come to define manhood and a kind of new masculine gentility. We have witnessed the "feminization" of male tastes and sensibilities, and a transformation of the male psyche. But the transformation, she claims, has been superficial and self-indulgent. The old man was (and is) a tyrant and a bully. But the new man tends to be a fop. He is Narcissus, and lost in an androgynous drift. He shows few marks of ideological struggle, personal pain and arduous sacrifice, namely, the prerequisites for self-transformation. His is a state of "cheap grace" or pseudo-liberation.

The most striking characteristic of the new man, writes Ehrenreich, is that he no longer anchors his identity in his role as family breadwinner. He may *be* or *intend to be* the chief economic provider for his family, but his status comes from another source—himself, his own efforts and the self (persona) he presents to the world. The prototypical new male is likely to be from 25 to 40 years old, affluent, urban, and, more often than not, single. This is the man women are losing patience with today because of his "lack (or fear) of commitment" and his "refusal to grow up." Typically, he is focused on three major concerns: 1) consumerism; 2) physical well-being; and 3) presenting a sensitive persona before the world. Our new man, according to Ehrenreich, is an avid and self-conscious consumer, not only of clothes but of food, home furnishings, and visible displays of culture. He is highly class conscious and self-consciously elitist. In terms of physical well-being, one might say the new man is obsessed with his physical health and fitness. His devotion is now focused on sagging muscles and suspect arteries. The old man smoked, drank, and puttered at golf. The new man is a nonsmoker, drinks in moderation, and frequents gyms and spas. Death remains his mortal enemy and the only obscenity. Finally, in contrast to the old masculinity, the new man is concerned that people find him, not forbearing or strong, but genuine, open, and sensitive. Sensitivity has become the distinguishing mark of the educated, middle-class male. The old man defined himself *against* femininity. Currently, the new man defines himself *as* "feminine," proud of his sensitive feminine sensibilities.

"Is this the new man that we want?" asks Ehrenreich. While promising in some respects, he is not a model of authentic humanness. It is not enough, anymore, to ask that men become more like women; we should ask instead that they become like what both men and women *might be*—sensitive, socially just, and deeply committing. On this note, Ehrenreich rests her case.

Ehrenreich's observations are astute and painful. They call the bluff of the contemporary pseudo-liberated male. Yet her concluding and alternative proposal falls flat. It seems particularly unsatisfactory in terms of authentic masculinity. To be fully masculine means embracing something of gender foreignness, strange to our own male bodily experience. The key to nonpatriarchal masculinity lies in men turning to their sensitive side and appropriating what Jung called their feminine soul. The end result leaves male identity dependent on the feminine and tied psychologically to women.

James Nelson (*The Intimate Connection*), however, asks: Is there anything

authentically male about men, independent of women's contribution, that is important to their male identity? Is there not something good, important, and *distinctive* about the experience of maleness itself? Something that can produce an energy that is not oppressive but rather creative and life-giving—and recognizably male? A "deep masculine" that men can find in themselves and justly celebrate? Nelson finds assistance on this question in the provocative work of the poet Robert Bly. Bly (*The Pillow and the Key* and *When a Hair Turns Gold*) is enthusiastic about men welcoming their own feminine consciousness and nurturing it—it is important—and yet he senses there is something wrong:

> The male in the past twenty years has become more thoughtful, more gentle. But by this process he has *not* become more free. . . . I see the phenomenon of what I would call the "soft male" all over the country today. . . . They're lovely, valuable people—I like them—and they're not interested in harming the earth or starting wars or working for corporations. There's something favorable toward life in their whole general mood and style of living. But something's wrong. Many of these men are unhappy: there's not much energy in them. They are life-preserving but not exactly *life-giving*. They are living provisional lives marked by a lack of passion.

Bly then turns to the Grimms' Fairy Tale "Iron John" ("Iron Hans" in the original). Here is the scenario: Once upon a time . . . something strange was happening in the forest near the king's castle. People are disappearing. One day a hunter shows up at the castle looking for work and volunteers to investigate the mystery. He goes into the forest with his dog and they come across a pond. As they are walking by the pond a large hand reaches out of the water, grabs the dog, and pulls it down. The hunter, not wanting to abandon his dog and being a sensitive man, returns to the castle for help. He recruits a team of men and together they go back with buckets to drain the pond. Lying at the bottom is a big man covered with reddish hair, the color of rusted iron. They capture him and take him back to the castle, where the king orders him to be placed in a cage in the courtyard.

Bly interrupts the story and interprets. When a male looks down into his psyche, through his feminine side, to the bottom of his deep pool he finds an ancient man covered with hair. This mythological and archetypical figure is symbolic of the instinctive, the sexual, and the primitive. Every modern male has this Wild Man (Iron John) at the bottom of his psyche. Making contact with his Wild Man is the process many men yearn for but have not explored. It is the step the '70s male or '80s male has not yet taken. It is the journey that lies ahead and the task to be undertaken in contemporary culture. The Wild Man will point them to forgotten depths and be their guide to male initiation.

The story continues. One day the king's eight-year-old son is playing in the courtyard with the golden ball he loves. The ball rolls into the cage, and the wild man grabs it. Iron John will return the ball only if the young prince will release him from the cage. This is going to be a problem. The Wild Man knows, however, that the key to the lock on the cage is under the queen's pillow. Since the boy's parents are away and since he wants the ball so badly, the young prince fetches the key and opens the cage. As Iron John begins to leave, the prince

becomes terrified that his parents will be angry. He calls to Iron John for help. The Wild Man scoops him up, places him on his shoulders, and they go off into the forest together, where the prince will learn the secrets of manhood.

This is not the complete fairy tale, but it is all that Bly uses at this stage to make his point. Bly observes that the golden ball (a recurrent fairy-tale image) suggests wholeness, unity of personality, a sense of connectedness. This is the childhood stage of undifferentiated unity that we lost and spend the rest of our lives trying to get back. For some thirty years, men were told that the golden ball was in their feminine side, in receptivity, in cooperation, in nonaggressiveness. They entered but did not find the golden ball—because that's not where the ball rolled when it was lost. Bly asks us to consider the possibility, as the story suggests, that the golden ball lies within the magnetic field of the Wild Man. What he is suggesting here is: The deep, nourishing spiritual energy for the male lies in the *deep* masculine, not in the shallow, macho masculine, but in the deep masculine, the instinctive one who's underwater. It is something a woman cannot give a man. It has to be appropriated slowly and resolutely, bucket by bucket, with the help of other men. It is something like that which the Greeks called Zeus energy, which encompasses intelligence, robust health, compassion, decisiveness, goodwill, and positive power in the service of the community.

Bly is well aware that he can be misunderstood here. His proposal is not a patriarchal backlash, but may, in fact, be profound, if not provocative, in the next step toward male wholeness/liberation. To guard against misunderstanding, Bly insists that men and women both have to keep in mind two critical distinctions: between the Wild Man and the savage man; between fierceness and hostility. Male wholeness is toward engaging the Wild Man and reincorporating fierceness. Whereas the savage man and hostility are the embodiments of patriarchy. He explains. When a man gets in touch with the Wild Man, a true strength may be added. The kind of wildness the image implies is not the same as macho energy—which man already knows enough about. Rather, it is a form of energy, springing from the depths of masculinity, that leads to "forceful action undertaken, not without compassion, but with resolve." The savage, on the other hand, epitomizes what men have been trying to get away from: the destructive, chauvinistic, unrounded, uncultivated.

The New Age '80s men and some feminists tend also to confuse fierceness with hostility. Noting the distinction made by anthropologist Ashley Montague, Bly explains. Men need fierceness in their lives, and it is important that we stop slandering it by identifying it with hostility. The instinct for aggression is in the genes; but hostility is learned in families. The ability to defend our community is present in our DNA; in hostility, we follow the modeling given by our parents. The instinct and heat of fierceness we possess at birth; the copying and coldness of hostility we learn in the family. The ability to be fierce does not imply the habit of treating people as if they were objects or ravaging the land as if it were a utility. Violence and brutality toward women, children, and the earth are not the function of fierceness but evidence of the absence of it. Fierceness implies passion, positive energy, response, alertness to boundaries, defense of one's desires and

interests. The soft man of the '80s mistakenly wanted to root out all these traits. He only wanted to be receptive.

But men (and women) will be fierce at different times or in different situations. In every human relationship something fierce is needed once in a while. This may show itself as Eros, in love for each other. Parents today need some daily fierceness in order to resist the endless demands of their children. Law-enforcement officials need fierceness to guard the welfare of their communities. Children need the heat of fierceness if they are to develop steadfastness, endurance, and vigilance. And we all need fierceness to protect the planet.

Bly's use of the fairy tale to examine the meanings of gender images is original and suggestive. It opens new avenues of possibilities for men. It directs them to explore their deepest and most distinctive selves. And it is at this point where a *religious* dimension of their maleness will be revealed to them. Bly enables us to tap into images of the Wild Man and visualize him. In doing so, he puts men in touch with their own natural male energy. This enables men to reclaim their identity and re-image their masculinity.

However, the integration of the Wild Man may not be the final chapter in the male's journey to maturity. Additional work may need to be done. With a purpose similar to Bly's, but with an alternative image and archetype, Eugene Monick (*Phallos: Sacred Image of the Masculine*) inquires: What is the place, if any, of that age-old distinctive emblem of manhood, the male genitals? Monick explores the psychic and religious dimensions of the male experience of his phallus, his erect penis. He starts with the assumption that men need to discover another basis of support for their maleness. Patriarchy is spent. Psychologically, it is on the rocks. Its substance can no longer support male identity or male bonding. The new basis of that support, he suggests, is phallus. His proposal is provocative. It tends to make us uneasy. And, again, it may lend itself to fears and misunderstandings.

In Monick's interpretative scheme, phallus is the archetypical image of the masculine. It is a fundamental characteristic and universal attribute of maleness—its standard, stamp, and subjective authority. As a symbol, the erect penis embodies the mysteries of male masculinity. It opens the door to masculine depths. From time immemorial it has been the source of *mysterium tremendum* and functioned as a divine image. Men have to search no further than phallus to ground their distinctive identities. There is no other source to return to, no other support structure, no other spring of energy to return us to our original wholeness. Yet, males feel highly ambivalent about the phallus.

Furthermore, Monick notes, there is a double-sidedness to the phallic experience. One dimension is the *earthy* phallus. This is the phallic experience as hot, throbbing raw sexuality. In some measure it is Bly's Iron John maleness. We may be tempted to hide from this side of our sexuality and judge it severely. But if we do, we will lack life-giving energy, lose the possibility of ecstasy, and run the serious risk of becoming a shell of masculinity.

Earthy phallus is distrusted. And there is reason for distrust—it has a shadow side. There can be an ugly, brutal side to the earthy phallus that uses others for

gratification. It can be characterized by insatiable desires, possessiveness, domination, ruthless competition and violence. Life is replete with examples of its stupid and devastating behavior. Yet without the positive presence of earthy energy a man is bland. He is gentle without strength, peaceful without vitality, tranquil without vibrancy.

Men also experience *solar* phallus. Solar (from the sun) represents higher things. It means enlightenment. It puts a man in touch with the excitement of achievement. It is the pride a man takes in his social reputation. It is what he would like to see noted in his obituary. Solar phallus is a man's profession. It is how he speaks, thinks, intellectualizes. A solar man wants the facts, loves institutionalization, and strains to go further intellectually, physically, and socially. Carl Jung believed this to be the substance of masculinity.

As with earthy phallus, there is a shadow side to the experience of the solar phallus. It is motivated by conquest, ideological principles, and can tyrannize whatever is considered to be in error. It is patriarchal oppression, proving one's worth through institutional accomplishment, and the use of technical knowledge to dominate. This is the arrogant academic, the political ideologue, the social snob. Feminists and environmentalists attack patriarchal phallus. Yet without the integrative positive energy of solar phallus, a man lacks direction and movement. He remains mediocre and is blocked from transcendence. What we are witnessing in our culture, Monick maintains, is a perversion of phallus as patriarchy. The journey to the center of masculine identity, however, lies in placing phallus—earthy and solar—at the root of male consciousness.

Monick's explorations are interesting, if not suggestive. James Nelson substantially agrees with him as far as he goes. Monick's proposal, according to Nelson, falls short. For Monick, phallus, the erect penis, is *the* archetype and sacred image of the masculine. That seems to be enough. But it is not. Yes, it is a vital part of the male's experience of his sexual organs. But it is only a part. A man's (flaccid) *penis* is as genuinely his reality as is his phallus, and just as important to his male humanity. We tend to overvalue phallus (erection) and undervalue penis. That is the road to patriarchy. On the other hand, the affirmative experience of penis gives men permission to embrace their own corporality and sexuality *as it is*. Acceptance of their corporal givenness allows men to receive and respond to the web of relations in which their lives are immersed. We named that style androgynous. It is time to move beyond the usual (literal and conventional) meanings of androgyny. The term itself is not free from difficulty and misunderstanding. As a transitional concept, it is helpful in pointing toward the transformation of sex-role stereotypes and human integration. However, the notion of androgyny, argues James Nelson, operates with a "combinationist assumption." It begins with a fixed notion of masculine traits and a fixed notion of feminine traits. Then it moves to the contention that these fundamental different qualities can and should be combined in men and women.

The androgynous perspective is grounded in an underlying dualism. From its assumption it follows that, in developing "the feminine" in himself, a man will add on a different (or foreign) set of gender traits to that which is essentially himself. But, as Nelson indicates, in a basic sense, we do not have to *become*

androgynous, for we essentially *are* . . . unique individuals, female and male, each with the capacity to be both firm and tender, receiving and giving, rational and intuitive. We have been given "bilingual bodies." Even if one language has been developed more than the other, the second language is not foreign to us. It is not something we need to add on. It is just as originally part of us as the language with which we have been most familiar.

To be fully male, then, does not mean embracing something of gender foreignness. The vision for men is not to develop "feminine" energies (or for women to develop "masculine" energies). Rather the vision for men is the *fullest* development of our *masculine* energies. These are the only human energies we have, and the invitation is to develop them more richly.