

THE GRAIL QUEST: MALE SPIRITUALITY

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Sam Keen writes in *Fire in the Belly*: "H. L. Mencken once said that the person who coined the term 'near beer' was a very poor judge of distance. I suspect the same error in judgment in the effort to eliminate the distance between men and women." I suspect Keen is right. I know Mencken was.

Before anything else, let me offer a distinction that might help negotiate a thorny field, the distinction between sex and gender: male/female sex on the one side and masculine/feminine gender on the other. Male/female is a matter of bodily fact, the only objective difference between males and females---along with whatever psychological differences arise from these physiological differences. Masculine/feminine (in the Jungian sense) is a matter not of the body but of the soul, the psyche, the self. Unlike the sexual either/or, gender is more a matter of degree, a judgment call. What Jung meant by "masculine" were all those qualities too long stereotyped to the male, the potential of the left brain: analysis, decisiveness, aggressiveness. By "feminine" he meant qualities too long stereotyped to the female, the potential of the right brain: synthesis, inclusiveness, intuition. Norman Mailer and Alan Alda are physically virile males, but Mailer is psychologically more aggressive-defensive while Alda is more sensitive-vulnerable. Margaret Thatcher and Helen Hayes are both physically females, but their psychology and "style" are quite different.

The stereotyping has been psychologically corrosive: boys thinking that men don't cry and that any genuine affection for another male is a hint of homosexuality; girls believing women are by nature homemakers and any urge to stand up and challenge is a threat to their womanhood. On the contrary, although empathy with "The Elephant Man," even to tears, may be a "feminine" quality in a man, it does not make him *effeminate*, and although rigid analysis may be a "masculine" quality in a woman, it does not make her *macho*. Any unspoken strictures against a boy taking ballet lessons or a girl being a mechanic are strictly subjective, societally induced. Thus, to avoid misunderstanding and the stereotyping of Jung's "masculine" to maleness and "feminine" to femaleness, it might be prudent to refer to "masculine" as left-brain qualities and "feminine" as right-brain qualities---whatever the sex of the person in question. But if I use either "masculine" or "feminine," read them with quotation marks around them every time.

There have been studies of children in their earliest years, before societal customs can have *too* much effect on their psychological predispositions (though with television, a virgin psyche is hard to come by after a child is out of Pampers). Those studies---by Erik Erikson, Janet Lever and others---seem to show that, by natural desire, boys play outdoors, competitively and longer than girls, because boys' games are lengthened by arguments over the rules, which the boys seem secretly to enjoy as much as the games themselves. (Unfailingly, when I mention that in class, boys chuckle in knowing agreement.) Girls play house, jump rope, hopscotch and change the rules---or the game itself---rather than exclude anyone (they like) who is less skilled.

Both boys and girls want to get their own way, but by different means, boys by one-upmanship, girls by persuasion (cf. Samson and Delilah). After about age two, boys continue hitting other children to get their way, but most girls stop, preferring to get their way more by

fear of exclusion than by force. Boys judge their place in a group by who gives the orders; girls judge by how alliances shift. Again, how much those preferences are rooted in objective sexual differences and how much is induced by spoken and wordless expectations from parents and from the inescapable television is difficult to say. But at least for the moment, according to the experts, that is the case: Boys are (more) defensive-aggressive, girls are (more) inclusive-adaptable; boys want to compete and win, girls just want to be included in play with others.

But one objective difference in nurturing makes an important contribution to the male and female psyche, at least since the Industrial Revolution. Since then, most fathers have not worked like Pa Walton (and Cliff Huxtable), on the spot at home as part of both boys' and girls' maturing. Therefore, girls' psyches are formed with a parent of their own sex, and boys' psyches with a parent of the opposite sex---whether a stay-home mother or day-care personnel or mostly female grade-school teachers. As Deborah Tannen says, a brother and sister grow up "in different cultures." The boy defines his psyche by *separation* from his mother or mother-substitutes and the girl by *bonding* with them. Boys raise up ego boundaries; girls try to be open and inclusive. That doesn't mean that girls develop no sense of a separate self or that boys would find solitary confinement easier than girls. But at least it's a tendency that nurturance generally furthers.

What's more, that separation is now left almost completely to the boy himself, without the assistance more primitive societies give boys to help them accept their maleness and their position in the society (or church): rituals wherein the males literally scared boys into adulthood. This loss causes a kind of silent malaise resulting from what Robert Bly calls a "father wound," since most fathers are no longer available all day at home to help boys with problems their mothers can't resonate with---or feel they can't. It is a hunger painfully depicted in Biff and Happy, the two soul-dead sons of Willy Loman, who was always on the road. And it is manifest in Willy himself in his hallucinatory, yearning conversations with his dead father-figure brother, Ben. Not only are the sons blighted by that "father distance," but the fathers are impoverished by it as well.

What the new men's movement is asking us to consider is that, granting a woman's objective equality in the marketplace, a man is not a woman and a woman is not a man, just as a bull is not a cow and a stallion is not a mare. When we evolved from our simian cousins, we didn't leave our animal nature behind. Each of us is a psyche, but an *embodied* psyche. Unlike animals, we can make at least some attempt to understand our psychosexual differences and use them to enrich the one life each embodied spirit has.

No embodied spirit is "neuter." A bull is not a cow, but neither is it an ox. A stallion is not a mare, but neither is it a gelding. The women's movement has, mercifully, forced us to see that a father can enrich not only his children but himself by being more "mothering" than his own father would ever have dared. But the father is not the mother. This can be seen in the incalculable but nonetheless painful incompleteness in a family that has a loving mother but whose father is absent.

Once the aggressive male has been civilized by establishing a healthy relationship with his own "feminine," what Jung called the Anima, he has to go back and re-establish his relationship with his maleness, with what Robert Bly calls his "Wildman." If not, he becomes not merely civilized but domesticated, which is quite different.

Perhaps boys are more aggressive by nature, but they surely are by nurture. As a result of more parenting by someone of the opposite sex, most boys have what Walter Ong calls "adversativeness," the need to haggle over rules, duke it out, debate ideas more

disputatiously than most girls find comfortable. Again, perhaps as a result of psychologically distancing themselves from their mothers and establishing ego boundaries, most boys treasure personal freedom, resist being told what to do, being bridled and domesticated.

Ironically, too, the male need to break free, struggle and take risks also involves vulnerability, a trait formerly too facily attributed to women. Both warlike Achilles and the statue of Nebuchadnezzar had fragile ankles. The male who doesn't realize---and bow to--- that fact is a fool. But the male who does make peace with his own weakness can become a wounded healer. Such vulnerable men are the recovering alcoholics and addicts who can reach out to those now weaker than themselves. Think of the difference, too, between the surgeon who treats his patients like so many biological specimens and the one who cares for them as fellow suffering humans.

Also, when we stopped being beasts roaming from one played-out encampment to another, males developed the need to protect, to be responsible, to be accountable. Of course, women have those same needs in order to be fully human, but a male "feels" them in a different, more likely proprietary way ---surely by nurture. "Patriarch" and "king" have become touchy terms in the church, but males simply can't think of themselves as solely "mothering." There is the need not merely to console but to set things right---which males share with females, surely, but toward which males by nurture feel an irresistible---and frustrating--- compulsion.

It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the official church acts in regard to both male and female members far less as Holy *Mother* Church than in an almost exclusively left-brain, "masculine," analytical way. In contrast, it expects members of the church--both males and females---to respond in an almost exclusively right-brain, "feminine," submissive way. Even the lower-level all-male clergy are expected to be inoffensive, harmless, acceptable, domesticated. Ironically, what men in the pews need from the official church is *exactly* what a growing number of rightly aggressive women have been asking for: empowerment---to share in religious celebration and decision making. Yet, except for deacons, no married man has any more active contribution to make than any woman: Count the collection, help with the heavier jobs for the parish bazaar, buttonhole fellow parishioners for contributions. Otherwise, they have to defer to the clergy as helplessly as to their plumbers, as if they had nothing to offer but their presence and their pocketbooks.

Whether the male psyche is the way it is from nature or nurture or both, there is little to stir that psyche in Roman Catholic practice today. Nor is it only the liturgy, with its Hallmark hymns and passive "participation," that impoverishes both male and female spirits. The picture of Jesus we get from even the best biblical movies is one I've called elsewhere "Jesus, the Warm Fuzzy" and which Old Testament scholar Patrick Arnold, S.J., called "the bearded lady." The apostles and saints seem just as neutered, like the "safe" pictures of St. Joseph, old and no longer a sexual threat. The very challenge that made the church important in periods when it was genuinely apostolic now seems irrelevant: the "masculine" solidity of the work "kingdom" (for both males and females) has been toned down to the less threatening ---and less stirring--- "realm." Not much adventure there, not a kingdom to be won but a realm already cozily established. The God for whom we struggle is no longer "King" but "Sovereign"; not "Father" but a neuter "Parent." The Ignatian meditations on the Kingdom and the Two Standards are now almost heretical by the standards of Catholic political correctness.

Granted that God is not male, my experience of God shows that if the Creator is a mother, she is one tough cookie. Granted also that God is nurturing, supporting, enfolding and rapturously creative, God has also dealt me some pretty bitter blows over the years and has

rarely paused to give me reasons for them. And it's very difficult to take a walk and bawl hell out of an Old Friend of 60 years who seems to have betrayed my trust (again)---and forgive God, when God has suddenly become a neutered "Parent."

If there is anything true of a fully actuated male, it is an aversion to homogenization. The male soul thrives on challenge, the heroic, the wild, the individuated---qualities not expected in Catholic males, in the pew or in the pulpit. At work, a man is expected to be a stallion; at Mass, to metamorphose into a gelding. That temporary neutering is not possible. What Catholic males need to re-gain is our sense of pilgrimage, of the bloodless crusade: the Grail Quest.

WHAT CAN WE DO?

Positively, what can Catholic ministry---that is, healing---do to save the Christian male's soul, not from some future hell but from atrophy here and now? It is unlikely any of us can affect the official church's attitudes regarding unordained males, but what can we do at the level of the schools and parishes to offer genuine life to the male-embodied soul.

The very first step is to recognize and accept the fact that we have a real problem. Unless we admit we have a crisis, we will go on congratulating ourselves for doing a good---or at least adequate---

job "saving souls." We must admit, on the one hand, that most males are turned off by "churchy stuff," and , on the other hand, that most males are still hungry spirits.

Most males are not roused by the Catholic experience. Next Sunday, count heads to see the proportion of women to men at Mass. Quite likely it will be three to one, sometimes even five to one. The official structure of the church is unbendingly "masculine," but the soul-life of the church is overly "feminized" and unappealing (and certainly unstimulating) for the male soul, no matter what the source of that resistance.

It is unarguably true that the difference between Christianity and nearly every other Western world religion is that it was open to the civilizing, humanizing and divinizing values of the "feminine," surely more "feminine" than the Jewish or later Islamic patriarchies. The gifts which St. Paul says come from the Holy Spirit are: love, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, fidelity, gentleness and self-control.

But no one can argue that Jesus or Paul went about his task of spreading that liberating "feminine" message in a "feminine" way. As Father Arnold writes, "Masculinity is *assumed* in early Christianity and shoots through the whole New Testament like an electric charge: Jesus' bold confrontations with the Pharisees, Peter's outrageous leadership of the new sect, Paul's aggressive missionary strategy, and so on. Most of the first generation was martyred for its beliefs---hardly a mark of the meek and mild! (And those resilient souls were both males and females.) The Catholic Counter-Reformation and the new Jesuit spirituality rang with military metaphors that appealed not only to the "masculine" in males but also to the fully realized "masculine" in the healthy female soul. After all, both Joan of Arc and Dorothy Day were females. Catholic males are indebted to the women's movement for forcing them to encounter their own "feminine." But they have now been stranded in an almost exclusively "feminine" spirituality that turns them off: butterflies and balloons. (I was criticized the other day for calling a boy "manly.") such a lopsided approach to the soul is erosive not only to male spirituality but to female spirituality as well!

On the other hand, Catholic males do have what Arnold calls "a God-sized void" that is left hungry, and the soul settles for The Great Numbness, the inability to feel joy or meaning or grief or *anything*. Bland, boring, homogenized. There is no "rush" to being a male Christian

today, no sense of greatness. So many of our young and not so young settle for beer and football, *machismo* and horseplay, drugs and casual sex: junk food for the soul.

The woundedness of the male soul is manifest in statistics that show American men can expect eight fewer years of life than women, commit suicide three times as often, are more likely to be victims of alcohol and drugs and suffer disproportionately more fatal illnesses. Men are the most frequent perpetrators---and victims---of assault and murder and outnumber women in prisons nine to one.

Sam Keen makes the case that, just as the cathedral was the sacred center of a medieval city, now banks and commercial buildings are the center of the modern city. "The Dow," Friederich Franck writes, "has replaced the Tao." But corporations, universities and government are all suffering from burn-out, often in men who have never truly been on fire! "Stress cannot be dealt with by psychological tricks," Keen says, "because for the most part it is a philosophical rather than a physiological problem, a matter of the wrong worldview." It is not a sickness of the mind but of the spirit. The same could be said for dis-spirited sex. "We are able to lose ourselves in loving sexuality only to the degree that we have found the self elsewhere. It takes a very secure person to surrender to another in love."

What's more, the soulless marketplace--"the jungle"--is infectious. It is wrenchingly difficult for a man to keep his guard up all day and then switch gears into the loving father, the sensitive husband, the compassionate friend. If we could first convince men of the absolute need of at least a half-hour a week to meditate and pray, and then teach them methods of centering, we might give men, not only a sense of personal meaning and hope, but vigor again.

Perhaps men do not realize that the malaise---what Thoreau called "quiet desperation"--is a hunger of the starved spirit, that they truly *need* an active relationship with God and their own souls, even though they don't yet *want* one. But that "soullessness" is evident not only in the grinding routine of many adult males but in a great many becoming-adult males as well: the blahs, the spiritlessness of "senioritis," the aversion to commitment or any incursions on freedom, often trying to prove to everybody that they even have a self and are "here" through graffiti and boom-boxes blasting out territorial claims, and at worst "wilding" sprees and random shootings of strangers. There's a hunger there all right, but most males don't find that hunger appeased in the Catholic Church. Certainly dramatically fewer males want to dedicate their lives to "her."

Yet consider the entire male-fixated Arab world coming to a halt five times daily in order to manifest its belief in the power and peace of Allah, Hindu and Buddhist monks abounding all over Asia, Jewish men pressing their palms and foreheads to the Western Wall in Jerusalem. Perhaps other world religions do boast an overly "masculinized" religiosity. But modern Christian spirituality seems to eschew it altogether, and the "God-sized hunger" other males in the world find no hesitation in satisfying rumbles in the male Catholic soul, unsatisfied and often not even understood as the restlessness that can be satisfied only by God. "Don't worry. I can handle it myself."

Christianity is a religion of love, but love is ordinarily limited in our minds to compassion, healing, forgiveness. Yet love is also active, dynamic, aggressive, even "tough." The Holy Spirit is a spirit of fire! And every mystic who ever suffered the Spirit's love has been aware of the burning. Love is not always gentle; it is sometimes fierce, challenging, relentless. That is the kind of Christian love men need far more of.

AN INITIATION RETREAT

A parish or school that acknowledged the need for a distinctively male soul-life could organize a team of about 10 older men who would go away for a weekend with 10 boys who are just undergoing puberty, to explain to them not only their new function in the human family but also their new function in the church. Jesus was not a lecturer; He taught with stories. Let each session, then, begin with a story that embodies some aspect of the uniquely male psyche: the need to develop the “feminine” Anima, to return then to what Bly calls the wildman, to be both warrior and wounded healer, to be a prophet who stands up confidently, relying not merely on his own self-esteem but on the one who calls and sends.

Patrick Arnold's *Wildmen, Warriors, and Kings* (Crossroad) takes on precisely that task, applying the insights of the new men's movement to the spirits enlivening the great male figures in the Bible. He finds in the Old Testament prophets, Jesus and the apostles all the Jungian archetypes: Abraham the Father and Pilgrim, Moses the Warrior and Magician, Solomon the King, Elijah the Wildman, Elisha the Healer, Jeremiah the Prophet, Jonah the Trickster and Jesus, the perfect archetypal fusion of them all. The book would make a fine outline for such a retreat.

After the story and an explanation of what it embodies about a man's response to God's call, let each of the men tell one of the boys his own story: his struggles with his sexuality, his need to pray, his concerns about his family, his expectations of himself as a Christian male. Finally, let the weekend conclude with a eucharistic meal during which there is a ceremony of initiation as Christian adults with some kind of token of induction that the boys would find meaningful and memorable.---No. Not boys anymore. Young men.

Perhaps, too, once every month or so, there could be one Sunday Mass just for the older and younger men who have made such retreats, so that they could continue to explore the one God and their own uniquely embodied souls.

If the church would pursue such strategies actively to elicit those qualities in males, there would be fewer men and boys holding up the rear wall of the church--or home watching Charles Kuralt. Surely it would profit not only the boys but the men, who would not only understand but experience that they *are* integral elements in the soul-life of the church. And they would experience their own souls as growing, in an atmosphere where no one need apologize for being part of a kingdom focused on a Grail they discovered where it first began, on a eucharistic table where men were not embarrassed or uneasy to be, a meal where wounded warriors were welcome.