

DISCOVERING OURSELVES AS MEN BEFORE GOD

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IN THE SYNOPTIC GOSPELS, as in our own lives, there comes a moment at which the disciples must grapple with the identity of their master. Up to this point, they have been impressed by his wisdom, astonished by his authority and amazed by his miracles. They have even enthusiastically shared in the proclamation of his message throughout Galilee. However, they still have not come to realize the implications of all this activity in terms of the identity of the one they follow. As Matthew tells the story, Jesus uses a kairoic moment at Caesarea Philippi¹ to invite the disciples to take another step into their understanding of their experience. He does this by setting up a dialogue: 'Who do people say that I am?' They respond with all the rumours, gossip and guesses current among the people. Then Jesus pops the real question: 'And *you*, who do *you* say that I am?' Peter's experience of Jesus' activity, along with the banter about Jesus' identity in the public forum, sets the stage for the revelatory breakthrough. The insight comes in a flash, and Peter responds, 'You are the Christ'. Of course, as the story further unfolds, it becomes obvious that the conscious appropriation of the full implication of that answer still requires time and experience.

I would like to suggest that this story provides an important model for all human beings as we seek together to enter more fully into the mystery of the identity not only of Jesus, but of ourselves as men and women, brothers and sisters, living the mystery of our identity in God. Jesus sets up a conversation which engages a number of different perspectives on the issue at hand. Then he invites his friends to place their experience of him in dialogue with the conclusions of others. That critical step prepares the disciple for the inbreaking of greater clarity and insight. In this article, I would like to explore how this story can assist us in evaluating the various perspectives and experiences which I believe must come together as men attempt to deepen their self-understanding beyond the definitions currently provided by our culture.

¹³ Keen, Sam and Zur, Ofer: 'Who is the new ideal man?' in *Psychology Today* (November 1989), p 54.

¹⁴ Rohr, Richard and Martos, Joseph: *The wild man's journey: reflections on male spirituality* (Cincinnati OH, 1992); or Arnold, Patrick M.: *Wildmen, warriors, and kings: masculine spirituality and the Bible* (New York, 1991).

¹⁵ Luke 4:18-19a.

¹⁶ Matthew 15:21-28 or Mark 7:24-30.

¹⁷ Matthew 12:46-50, Mark 3:31-35, or Luke 8:19-21.

¹⁸ Nelson, James: *The intimate connection: male sexuality, masculine spirituality* (Philadelphia, 1988), pp 62-63. See also Blumenfeld, Warren J.: *Homophobia: how we all pay the price* (Boston, 1992).

¹⁹ John 13:23-25; 21:20.

²⁰ Rilke, Rainer Maria: *Letters to a young poet*, trans Stephen Mitchell (New York, 1984), p 92.

Just as the disciples with Jesus need to grapple with the various images which shape their expectations and perceptions of the Messiah, so too we must deal with the concepts which have been formative of our imaginations with respect to masculinity. We are called first to answer the question: Who do people say that men are?

My first experience in seriously engaging that question came about in the mid-eighties as a result of reading Anne Wilson Schaef's *Women's reality*.² In this work, Schaef deftly described a social reality with which I experienced a growing dis-ease, not only as I listened to the stories of women, but also as I reflected more upon my own experience of life in Northern American society.

Schaef postulates a 'White Male System' as the current mode for organizing society. It consists in the manner in which white males structure the accurate perception of social reality, the belief systems which inform our behaviours, and the rituals which pattern our everyday life. It rests upon four myths which she postulates as follows:

The White Male System is the only thing that exists.

The White Male System is innately superior.

The White Male System knows and understands everything.

It is possible to be totally logical, rational and objective.³

Schaef's articulation of this mythology certainly helped me to make some sense out of much of the personal formation I had received. I was certainly indoctrinated into the belief that the only viable social organization was that described by my white Catholic parents and my teachers, who were mostly male from secondary school onward. They were very good Christians within their own milieu, but they also had great difficulty comprehending the insufficiency of their grasp of the world. Oftentimes they responded to the questions and concerns raised in the late sixties about race relations, the inadequacy of sexual mores, the limits of authority and so on, with hostile incredulity that such issues would ever be postulated. To a large extent, I agreed with their vision of reality until I began to travel and came to the realization that the world was much more complex than that which I had experienced in the white, predominantly Catholic, American neighbourhood in which I grew up and received my education. As I interacted with people in other societies, I began to experience other perceptions of reality and came to question much that I had been taught in my mostly all-male surroundings. I also came to know other aspects of myself which had previously remained hidden. Reading Schaef helped me more adequately to name the imaginative construct that had shaped my self-understanding as a man and the dis-ease I had with its implications.

Since then, I have been attentive to the ways in which other people have critiqued the formation of male imagery. Much of my attention was initially focused upon the critique of feminist writers, but I often found myself objecting to the barrage of negative stereotypes coming from women's experience of men. I do not wish to imply that their critique was ill-founded. It simply did not supply sufficient information. I needed to access the experience of other men. Recently, men have begun to name their experience and struggle with the negativity involved in various answers to the question: 'Who do people say that men are?'

To explore this question, I would like to examine briefly some articulations of the expectations of men in today's society and the resulting images we tend to appropriate.

Kent Nerburn, writing to his son, summarizes the expectations of manhood his father attempted to embody: 'To raise the brightest, be the strongest, earn the most, need the least'.⁴ These norms arose out of the felt demands of the times:

To get food he had to work and to get work he had to be stronger and work harder. Soon Nazism and Fascism appeared on the world stage, and he was called to take up weapons against other men. After the war was over, he came back with nothing and had to carve out a place for his family in an economic and social order he had never seen . . . No wonder his sense of manhood was so deeply tied to his sense of male dominance and mastery.⁵

In this context, 'needing the least' did not involve so much a denial of emotional reality as it did the embrace of an aspiration to provide opportunities and delights for one's children. Nevertheless, the norms of masculinity which dictated that any man who worked hard enough could attain financial security for himself and his family, and even become president, ultimately led the father to regard himself as a failure.

Cooper Thompson reflects on the way in which we have carried such expectations beyond the reality of Nerburn's father into current society:

Traditional definitions of masculinity include attributes such as independence, pride, resiliency, self-control, and physical strength. This is precisely the image of the Marlboro man, and to some extent, these are desirable attributes for boys and girls. But masculinity goes beyond these qualities to stress competitiveness, toughness, aggressiveness, and power. In this context, threats to one's status, however small, cannot be avoided or taken lightly.⁶

This progression in the development of socially acceptable masculine qualities has insidious ramifications. It heightens the achievement need felt by many males and bolsters the perception that any vulnerability or weakness is indicative of inadequacy as a man. Furthermore, it encourages the polarization of characteristics which one regards as appropriate to males or females, often leading to a neurotic clinging and overdevelopment of the characteristics of masculinity which Cooper describes and an increased abhorrence in men of any personal qualities or traits stereotypically labelled as 'feminine'.

One response to these expectations is found in the cultivation of the 'he-man' image. Many men today attempt to reinforce their sense of masculinity by carefully sculpting their physical image. According to recent articles in the *Toronto Star*⁷, the current boom in both the health-club industry and plastic surgery results directly from the need of many males, especially adolescents, to enhance the physical masculine appearance. As the *Star* reports, some men maintain that it is a question of economic advantage. They believe that better-looking men obtain the better jobs. Generally speaking, however, one can link the obsession with body-sculpting to the confusion resulting from changing sex-roles. Unsure of *how* to live out one's manhood, one attempts at least to appear manly, modelling oneself after the images of masculinity portrayed in movies, TV shows and advertising. Ironically enough, this pursuit of masculinity leads many boys to develop the same neurotic disorders related to self-esteem as are observed in girls. Furthermore, many of the bodies they seek to mirror are not those of real persons, but computer-enhanced images.

Another image is that of the 'sportster'. I differentiate the sportster from the athlete in that the sportster utilizes athletic imagery in a very immature manner. He does not embody the values of discipline and joy in performance but rather indulges in competition and aggression for the sake of winning. The ability to dominate, whether on the playing field, in business or in personal relationships, forms the core around which he organizes his ego. Don Sabo describes the effects this attitude has on relationships:

Dating becomes a 'sport' in itself and 'scoring', or seeking sex with little or no regard for emotions, is regarded as a mark of masculine achievement. Sexual relationships get defined as 'games' in which women (or other men) are seen as 'opponents', and 'winners' and 'losers' vie for dominance.⁸

This disposition can become quite lethal when played out within the home. Studies of men who batter tend to agree that the trigger which

impels a man to become physically violent frequently centres around a perceived threat to his authority.

The 'macho' image arises out of the increased polarization of masculine and feminine qualities. It can take many different forms, but by and large tends to develop out of an aversion to any quality or interest which might be regarded as feminine. Studies at the University of Guelph indicate that many adolescent boys form their identities in a comparative mode. They learn to contrast what society regards as masculine and feminine and combine it with evaluations of what is good or bad.⁹ The negative assessment of anything 'other' supports the development of misogynistic and homophobic attitudes. The macho male does not so much embrace the masculine as shun anything he deems feminine, i.e. inferior to masculinity.

The 'slob' or 'couch potato' is a final image I would like to propose. This image arises out of some encounters with male university students. When asked how others see them, a surprising number drew pictures of a hairy pig dressed in a ragged T-shirt, sitting in front of a television set, watching football while drinking beer, smoking cigarettes and scratching his crotch. The image, perhaps derived from media characters similar to Homer Simpson, expresses the futility some young men feel about their capacity to meet the expectations of manhood which society holds out to them. Faced with bleak job prospects, despite their university education, they embrace the negative stereotype of the economic failure: 'Men are good for nothing but sitting around the house, watching sports, belching and farting and making a mess'.

I find the prevalence of these images or variations on them tragic. They are by no means the only ones. One could also explore the image of the bumbling father/husband or that of the eternal youth (perhaps a variation on the 'sportster'). These, however, stand out in my mind as the dominant depictions of masculinity flowing out of the expectations of our patriarchal society. Toughness reigns over goodness, success over integrity, wise guys over men of heroic virtue. It is little wonder that the stress involved in trying to embody such images leads to:

a suicide rate 300 times that of women; a life expectancy 10 years less than women's; nine times as many men in prison; higher rates of male alcohol and drug abuse, and higher rates of victimization from murder, assault and major disease than women.¹⁰

As the titles of current writing about men and society suggest (e.g. *Refusing to be a man*¹¹ or *The hazards of being male*¹²), men face a critical challenge. Strangely enough, while many men struggle to live up to

such models, others do not necessarily embrace the character traits held out by the media.

In a study done by *Psychology Today*, the masculine ideal revolves much more around 'an inward-turning hero whose search is for self-understanding, wisdom and compassion . . . [not measured] by his works or his chest expansion, only by his commitment to personal growth and his family'.¹³ The readers of this journal display a significant preference for men who are receptive and courageous, capable of awe and appreciation as well as expressing their feelings. They exemplify strength that is intellectual and moral as well as physical. Granted that the readers of *Psychology Today* remain somewhat limited to a portion of the affluent and educated in North America, I still find the shift away from John Wayne, James Bond and Arnold Schwarzenegger types encouraging. It helps to point out the importance of where men look in order to find acceptable models. If one looks only to the street culture or other pseudo-communities, one tends to define oneself according to fears and expectations which foster individualism and bravado or, in the case of the 'slob', seeking camaraderie in one's hopelessness.

Jesus asks Peter a second question: 'Who do *you* say that I am?' Who do we, as men, say that we are?

Sometimes I will ask students to bring to class something which, for them, symbolizes masculinity as they would like to embrace it. The results are fascinating. One student brought a pictorial advertisement for London Fog, the brand name of a major men's clothing manufacturer. It depicted a fairly ordinary-looking man gazing out on a gentle, rolling landscape. For him, it captured the gentle peace which comes from a contemplative stance *vis-à-vis* nature. Another student came with an old, gnarled walking-stick which embodied his sense of being a pilgrim. We have had family photographs, intricately formed stones, animal figurines and tools, among other things. I was deeply touched by the creative openness which allowed the students to discover and share in the most varied manner their visions of manhood. I also noted the general absence of any specifically religious symbols. Only twice was there any representation of Jesus, and one of those had more to do with the person's experience of the people who carved the piece than with the image of Jesus *per se*. As we discussed our offerings, it became clear that while everyone shared something deeply spiritual with the class, they did not, by and large, look to our religious tradition for their symbols.

Many men today look to the mythopoetic movement and what it has to offer. They draw upon Jungian psychology and the fairy tales in our

cultural heritage in order to find masculine archetypes which offer alternatives for embodying their masculinity. Recently, some men have sought to wed these archetypes such as the king, the warrior, the wild-man and the magician to images from our Christian Scriptures.¹⁴ They, like Peter, are discovering insights and direction from dialogue taking place within a faith context. It is here that revelation takes place.

As Christian men, we can and should look to the heroes within our tradition, especially as they are revealed in our Scriptures, for guidance in appropriating alternative images of embodied masculinity. Our ultimate norm, however, is the person of Jesus. How does his life reveal to us what it means to be a man today?

The starting-point for exploring the life of Jesus as an invitation to discover more appropriate guidelines for embodying masculinity lies in understanding the context of his life. Jesus lived with an acute belief that he was a participant in salvation history. He experienced a profound connection with his Jewish heritage. Thus, his life was shaped and coloured by the continual act of remembering how this current moment in history grew out of the ongoing, concrete dealings of God with Israel. By recalling the various ways in which God interacted with the people throughout their history, Jesus came to realise that his own life was part of a much greater story. This story was a documentation of growth and failure involving painful reminders of the hurts and foolishness which constituted that narrative and the incredible, concrete interventions of God to save the people from danger, often despite themselves. Embracing that history in all its fullness, Jesus (as a man) came to know himself in relationship with the God of Israel and could declare, as a present reality, the words of Isaiah:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
... to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.¹⁵

Jesus, as a model for men, invites us to steep ourselves in our own story as Christians, of which he forms an integral part. We are thus invited to lead our lives with a profound awareness of the historical and cultural currents which generated our moment in time. Many of us experience this moment as filled with the confusion and ambiguity which arises from the inadequacy or irrelevancy of our male role-models, particularly in light of the prophetic challenges of many women. We cannot ignore the sinful attitudes we have held nor the behaviours which have flowed from those attitudes, directed at our sisters and at one another. Jesus does not hold out to us derision and

condemnation but the offer of a time of reconciliation, should we be willing to accept and respond to God's graciousness. The year of favour which Jesus proclaims 'today' is a kairotic moment in which nothing should stand in the way of restoring whatever has gone afoul in our relationships with one another. Thus, the context of Jesus' life offers men the opportunity to embrace our lives in their broader perspective and respond to this moment as one of promise.

Another aspect of looking at Jesus' life in context involves the role which community plays. Too often in our history, religious as well as secular, our language has betrayed a mentality which would have us think of ourselves as purely individual. We say that *a man* must learn to stand on his own two feet. We ask ourselves, what does it mean to be *a man* before God or *a man* of faith. We speak of *human beings*, bolstering the illusion that we exist independently, instead of embracing human being as a communal reality. However, the Jewish community in which Jesus grew up was radically characterized throughout its history as a *people* formed by relational bonds between one another and their God. The Scriptures which grounded Jesus' self-understanding and his ministry constantly emphasized the fact that God's invitation to various humans was always either to form or to serve community. Furthermore, Jesus advocated new and more inclusive ways of understanding ourselves in relation to one another, as modelled in his response to the Syrophenician woman,¹⁶ his parables (e.g. the good Samaritan) and his redefinition of family ties.¹⁷

The invitation to create life-sustaining communities and to learn from those we have often excluded radically challenges the aversion many men experience *vis-à-vis* what we deem appropriate to our manliness. This not only challenges our attitudes toward women, but also, and perhaps more importantly, our homophobic attitudes. The antipathy and disgust so many men experience towards gay males is often rooted in two false convictions. We imagine that in gay-male sex, one partner must act as 'the woman'. Hence, any possibility that a gay male might experience an attraction to me leaves me feeling 'womanized'. Furthermore, we fear that any closeness to a gay male might 'rub off', i.e. transform me into what I have been raised to consider an 'unnatural deviant'. As James Nelson points out, such fears distort friendships among men and limit male-male bonds to relationships of 'competition, task cooperation, and "buddyship"'. They also limit the development in males of many interests and characteristics and prevent us from finding authentic validation and intimacy among one another.¹⁸ Jesus' interaction with others, particularly his male friends, challenges

the distortions arising from our homophobic attitudes today. The Gospels consistently represent Jesus as a man who did not allow the fears of his day to dictate how he related to others. Jesus did not fear 'contamination' from those whom society kept at a distance. In fact, he was comfortable with intimate, physical gestures. His encounters with others were frequently characterized by touch and, as observed in his relationship with the Beloved Disciple,¹⁹ he did not shrink from such contact with other males. Jesus displayed little concern for social acceptability as a criterion for inclusion among his circle of friends, as evidenced in his relationship with Levi/Matthew; and we know that in his friendship with Peter humility held priority over perfection. Jesus' personal sense of integrity, not the fears and opinions of others, set the standards for relationship.

Jesus models for men varieties of ways to incorporate the full spectrum of human emotional response. His patience with the petty disputes of the disciples and their inability to understand him knows no limits. At the same time, the self-righteous posturing of the religious leaders incites unambiguous anger. Jesus grieves the death of his friend Lazarus as well as the refusal of the people of Jerusalem to acknowledge and accept God's gracious offer of a path to justice and peace. Over and over again, Jesus' sense of solidarity with others and passion for the kingdom move him to whatever action is necessary to counter the various forces which hold people in bondage, and he embodies gratitude at any sign of God's Spirit at work, whether or not he or his disciples are the instruments of it.

More than anything else, however, the example of Jesus' life teaches us that all our activity needs to be rooted in contemplative communing with God. Initially, the Spirit leads Jesus into the desert to discern the meaning of the revelation of his identity, given at baptism. There Jesus opens himself to understand that revelation in all its implications. He becomes vulnerable to God and to all the temptations we experience that try to distort our sense of ourselves. Yet, out of that struggle emerges a man whose life flows directly from the appropriation of his identity in relation to God. That sense of self and mission must be refined over and over in the rhythm of involvement with others and contemplative withdrawal.

Without the willingness to open ourselves to such moments of solitude, we men will never be able to sort through the images which clamour for our attention, promising true masculinity. Only by shifting our attention away from what others tell us we should be, can we discern who we truly are. The revelation of our true identity comes when we

are willing to risk openness to God's Spirit speaking to our own. It is a precarious enterprise for, like Abraham, we will be called to forsake the nest of patriarchy to embark on a strange, new journey. We need community to cultivate the new ways of being that we discover in prayer. In community, we discover what it means to be open and vulnerable to God through the practice of being open and vulnerable to one another. In community we receive support from one another to sustain the commitment to return anew to prayer and to continue the rhythm of revelation and appropriation. Finally, it is in community that we can establish relationships of mutual mentorship with one another, modelling for one another the courageous fidelity to the task of discovering our true selves in partnership with God. When God's invitation leads us into dimensions of ourselves that we would prefer not to face, we need the voices of other men who can remind us:

How could we forget those ancient myths that stand at the beginning of all races, the myths about dragons that at the last moment are transformed into princesses? Perhaps all the dragons in our lives are princesses who are only waiting to see us act, just once, with beauty and courage. Perhaps everything that frightens us is, in its deepest essence, something helpless that wants our love.²⁰

NOTES

¹ Matthew 16:13–20.

² Schaeff, Anne Wilson: *Women's reality: an emerging female system in a white male society* (San Francisco, 1985).

³ Schaeff, pp 7–15.

⁴ Nerburn, Kent: *Letters to my son: reflections on becoming a man* (San Raphael, California, 1993), p 10.

⁵ Nerburn, p 11.

⁶ Thompson, Cooper: 'A new vision of masculinity' in Franklin Abbott (ed), *New men, new minds* (Freedom, California, 1987), p 155.

⁷ See Friedman, David: 'Men struggle to measure up' in the *Toronto Star*, 24 September 1994; and Socha, Miles: 'Pressure on teens to be "he-men"' in the *Toronto Star*, 17 July 1993.

⁸ Sabo, Don: 'The myth of the sexual athlete' in Franklin Abbott (ed), *Men and intimacy: personal accounts exploring the dilemmas of modern male sexuality* (Freedom, California, 1990), p 18. Parenthesis mine.

⁹ Guldner, Claude: 'Teen sexuality'. Address given to Catholic school teachers at the Education Centre in Mississauga, Ontario, on 15 November 1993.

¹⁰ Arnold, Patrick M.: 'In search of the hero: masculine spirituality and liberal Christianity' in *America* (7 October 1989), p 209. A far more startling report on the price of being a man in contemporary North American society can be found in Farrell, Warren: *The myth of male power* (New York, 1993).

¹¹ Stoltenberg, John: *Refusing to be a man: essays on sex and justice* (New York, 1990).

¹² Goldberg, Herb: *The hazards of being male* (New York, 1976).