

## Feminist Manhood

Say that you are feminist to most men, and automatically you are seen as the enemy. You risk being seen as a man-hating woman. Most young women fear that if they call themselves feminist, they will lose male favor, they will not be loved by men. Popular opinion about the impact of feminist movement on men's lives is that feminism hurt men. Conservative antifeminist women and men insist that feminism is destroying family life. They argue that working women leave households bereft of homemakers and children without a mother's care. Yet they consistently ignore the degree to which consumer capitalist culture, not feminism, pushed women into the workforce and keeps them there.

When feminist women told the world that patriarchy promotes woman-hating, the response was that feminists were being too extreme, exaggerating the problem. Yet when men who knew nothing about feminism claimed that feminists were man-hating, there was no response from the nonfeminist world saying that they were being too extreme. No feminists have murdered and raped men. Feminists have not been jailed day after day for their violence against men. No feminists have been accused of ongoing sexual

abuse of girl children, including creating a world of child pornography featuring little girls. Yet these are some of the acts of men that led some feminist women to identify men as woman-hating.

Even though not all men are misogynists, feminist thinkers were accurate when we stated that patriarchy in its most basic, unmediated form promotes fear and hatred of females. A man who is unabashedly and unequivocally committed to patriarchal masculinity will both fear and hate all that the culture deems feminine and womanly. However, most men have not consciously chosen patriarchy as the ideology they want to govern their lives, their beliefs, and actions. Patriarchal culture is the system they were born within and socialized to accept, yet in all areas of their lives most men have rebelled in small ways against the patriarchy, have resisted absolute allegiance to patriarchal thinking and practice. Most men have clearly been willing to resist patriarchy when it interferes with individual desire, but they have not been willing to embrace feminism as a movement that would challenge, change, and ultimately end patriarchy.

Feminist movement was from the outset presented to most males via mass media as antimale. Truthfully, there was a serious antimale faction in contemporary feminist movement. And even though the man-hating women were a small minority of women's libbers, they received the most attention. Failing to care for women rightly, men through continual acts of domination had actually created the cultural context for feminist rebellion. In the chapter on "Feminist Masculinity" in my recent book *Feminism Is for Everybody*, I write: "Individual heterosexual women came to

the movement from relationships where men were cruel, unkind, violent, unfaithful. Many of these men were radical thinkers who participated in movements for social justice, speaking out on behalf of the workers, the poor, speaking out on behalf of racial justice. However when it came to the issue of gender they were as sexist as their conservative cohorts. Individual women came from these relationships angry. They used that anger as a catalyst for women's liberation. As the movement progressed, as feminist thinking advanced, enlightened feminist activists saw that men were not the problem, that the problem was patriarchy, sexism, and male domination."

It was difficult for women committed to feminist change to face the reality that the problem did not lie just with men. Facing that reality required more complex theorizing; it required acknowledging the role women play in maintaining and perpetuating patriarchy and sexism. As more women moved away from destructive relationships with men, it was easier to see the whole picture. It was easier to see that even if individual men divested themselves of patriarchal privilege, the system of patriarchy, sexism, and male domination would still remain intact, and women would still be exploited and oppressed. Despite this change in feminist agendas, visionary feminist thinkers who had never been antimale did not and do not receive mass media attention. As a consequence the popular notion that feminists hate men continues to prevail.

The vast majority of feminist women I encounter do not hate men. They feel sorry for men because they see how patriarchy wounds them and yet men remain wedded to patriarchal culture. While visionary thinkers have called

attention to the way patriarchy hurts men, there has never been an ongoing effort made to address male pain. To this day I hear individual feminist women express their concern for the plight of men within patriarchy, even as they share that they are unwilling to give their energy to help educate and change men. Feminist writer Mimmie Bruce Pratt states the position clearly: "How are men going to change? The meeting between two people, where one opposes the other, is the point of change. But I don't want the personal contact. I don't want to do it. . . . When people talk about not giving men our energies, I agree with that. . . . They have to deliver themselves." These attitudes, coupled with the negative attitudes of most men toward feminist thinking, meant that there was never a collective, affirming call for boys and men to join feminist movement so that they would be liberated from patriarchy.

Reformist feminist women could not make this call because they were the group of women (mostly white women with class privilege) who had pushed the idea that all men were powerful in the first place. These were the women for whom feminist liberation was more about getting their piece of the power pie and less about freeing masses of women or less powerful men from sexist oppression. They were not mad at their powerful daddies and husbands who kept poor men exploited and oppressed; they were mad that they were not being giving equal access to power. Now that many of those women have gained power, and especially economic parity with the men of their class, they have pretty much lost interest in feminism.

As interest in feminist thinking and practice has waned, there has been even less focus on the plight of men than in

the heyday of feminist movement. This lack of interest does not change the fact that only a feminist vision that embraces feminist masculinity, that loves boys and men and demands on their behalf every right that we desire for girls and women, can renew men in our society. Feminist thinking teaches us all, males especially, how to love justice and freedom in ways that foster and affirm life. Clearly we need new strategies, new theories, guides that will show us how to create a world where feminist masculinity thrives.

Sadly there is no body of recent feminist writing addressing men that is accessible, clear, and concise. There is little work done from a feminist standpoint concentrating on boyhood. No significant body of feminist writing addresses boys directly, letting them know how they can construct an identity that is not rooted in sexism. There is no body of feminist children's literature that can serve as an alternative to patriarchal perspectives, which abound in the world of children's books. The gender equality that many of us take for granted in our adult lives, particularly those of us who have class privilege and elite education, is simply not present in the world of children's books or in the world of public and private education. Teachers of children see gender equality mostly in terms of ensuring that girls get to have the same privileges and rights as boys within the existing social structure; they do not see it in terms of granting boys the same rights as girls—for instance, the right to choose not to engage in aggressive or violent play, the right to play with dolls, to play dress up, to wear costumes of either gender, the right to choose.

Just as it was misguided for reformist feminist thinkers

to see freedom as simply women having the right to be like powerful patriarchal men (feminist women with class privilege never suggested that they wanted their lot to be like that of poor and working-class men), so was it simplistic to imagine that the liberated man would simply become a woman in drag. Yet this was the model of freedom offered men by mainstream feminist thought. Men were expected to hold on to the ideas about strength and providing for others that were a part of patriarchal thought, while dropping their investment in domination and adding an investment in emotional growth. This vision of feminist masculinity was so fraught with contradictions, it was impossible to realize. No wonder then that men who cared, who were open to change, often just gave up, falling back on the patriarchal masculinity they found so problematic. The individual men who did take on the mantle of a feminist notion of male liberation did so only to find that few women respected this shift.

Once the "new man" that is the man changed by feminism was represented as a wimp, as overcooked broccoli dominated by powerful females who were secretly longing for his macho counterpart, masses of men lost interest. Reacting to this inversion of gender roles, men who were sympathetic chose to stop trying to play a role in female-led feminist movement and became involved with the men's movement. Positively, the men's movement emphasized the need for men to get in touch with their feelings, to talk with other men. Negatively, the men's movement continued to promote patriarchy by a tacit insistence that in order to be fully self-actualized, men needed to separate from women. The idea that men needed to separate from women

to find their true selves just seemed like the old patriarchal message dressed up in a new package.

Describing the men's movement spearheaded by Robert Bly in her essay "Feminism and Masculinity," Christine A. James explains:

Bly claims that women, primarily since feminism, have created a situation in which men, especially young men, feel weak, emasculated, and unsure of themselves, and that older men must lead the way back.... Bly holds up the myth of the Wild Man as an exemplar of the direction men must take and never challenges the hierarchical dualisms that are so integrally linked to the tension he perceives between men and women. Arguably, the notion of the Wild Man merely reinforces clichés about "real masculinity" instead of trying to foster a new relationship between men and women, as well as the masculine and feminine.

The men's movement was often critical of women and feminism while making no sustained critique of patriarchy. Ultimately it did not consistently demand that men challenge patriarchy or envision liberating models of masculinity.

Many of the New Age models created by men reconfigure old sexist paradigms while making it seem as though they are offering a different script for gender relations. Often the men's movement resisted macho patriarchal models while upholding a vision of a benevolent patriarchy, one in

which the father is the ruler who rules with tenderness and kindness, but he is still in control. In the wake of feminist movement and the diverse men's liberation movements that did not bring women and men closer together, the question of what the alternative to patriarchal masculinity might be must still be answered.

Clearly, men need new models for self-assertion that do not require the construction of an enemy "other," be it a woman or the symbolic feminine, for them to define themselves against. Starting in early childhood, males need models of men with integrity, that is, men who are whole, who are not divided against themselves. While individual women acting as single mothers have shown that they can raise healthy, loving boys who become responsible, loving men, in every case where this model of parenting has been successful, women have chosen adult males—fathers, grandfathers, uncles, friends, and comrades—to exemplify for their sons the adult manhood they should strive to achieve.

Undoubtedly, one of the first revolutionary acts of visionary feminism must be to restore maleness and masculinity as an ethical biological category divorced from the dominator model. This is why the term patriarchal masculinity is so important, for it identifies male difference as being always and only about the superior rights of males to dominate, be their subordinates females or any group deemed weaker, by any means necessary. Rejecting this model for a feminist masculinity means that we must define maleness as a state of being rather than as performance. Male being, maleness, masculinity must stand for the essential core goodness of the self, of the human body

that has a penis. Many of the critics who have written about masculinity suggest that we need to do away with the term, that we need "an end to manhood." Yet such a stance furthers the notion that there is something inherently evil, bad, or unworthy about maleness.

It is a stance that seems to be more a reaction to patriarchal masculinity than a creative loving response that can separate maleness and manhood from all the identifying traits patriarchy has imposed on the self that has a penis. Our work of love should be to reclaim masculinity and not allow it to be held hostage to patriarchal domination. There is a creative, life-sustaining, life-enhancing place for the masculine in a nondominator culture. And those of us committed to ending patriarchy can touch the hearts of real men where they live, not by demanding that they give up manhood or maleness, but by asking that they allow its meaning to be transformed, that they become disloyal to patriarchal masculinity in order to find a place for the masculine that does not make it synonymous with domination or the will to do violence.

Patriarchal culture continues to control the hearts of men precisely because it socializes males to believe that without their role as patriarchs they will have no reason for being. Dominator culture teaches all of us that the core of our identity is defined by the will to dominate and control others. We are taught that this will to dominate is more biologically hardwired in males than in females. In actuality, dominator culture teaches us that we are all natural-born killers but that males are more able to realize the predator role. In the dominator model the pursuit of external power, the ability to manipulate and control others, is

what matters most. When culture is based on a dominator model, not only will it be violent but it will frame all relationships as power struggles.

No matter how many modern-day seers assure us that power struggles are not an effective model for human relations, imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchal culture continues to insist that domination must be the organizing principle of today's civilization. In *The Heart of the Soul* Gary Zukav and Linda Francis make it clear that while humans may have needed to create external power to keep the species alive at one time, this is no longer the case: "With or without reverence, the pursuit of external power leads only to violence and destruction. It is an evolutionary modality that no longer works. It is the wrong medicine, and nothing can make it the right medicine again." Patriarchal masculinity teaches men that their selfhood has meaning only in relation to the pursuit of external power; such masculinity is a subtext of the dominator model.

Before the realities of men can be transformed, the dominator model has to be eliminated as the underlying ideology on which we base our culture. We already see that within patriarchal culture men can be more emotional, they can parent, they can break with sexist roles, but as long as the underlying principles are in place, men can never be truly free. At any moment this underlying patriarchal ethos can overshadow behaviors that run counter to it. We have already seen that many men changed their thinking for a time when feminist movement was a powerful force for social change, but then when the patriarchal thinking that undergirds our society did not change, as the energy of the movement began to wane, the old order began to reestab-

lish itself. Sexist thought and action that had been harshly critiqued during the height of feminist movement have once again become more acceptable. Clearly, ending patriarchy is necessary for men to have collective liberation. It is the only resolution to the masculinity crisis that most men are experiencing.

To offer men a different way of being, we must first replace the dominator model with a partnership model that sees interbeing and interdependency as the organic relationship of all living beings. In the partnership model selfhood, whether one is female or male, is always at the core of one's identity. Patriarchal masculinity teaches males to be pathologically narcissistic, infantile, and psychologically dependent for self-definition on the privileges (however relative) that they receive from having been born male. Hence many males feel that their very existence is threatened if these privileges are taken away. In a partnership model male identity, like its female counterpart, would be centered around the notion of an essential goodness that is inherently relationally oriented. Rather than assuming that males are born with the will to aggress, the culture would assume that males are born with the inherent will to connect.

Feminist masculinity presupposes that it is enough for males to be to have value, that they do not have to "do," to "perform," to be affirmed and loved. Rather than defining strength as "power over," feminist masculinity defines strength as one's capacity to be responsible for self and others. This strength is a trait males and females need to possess. In *The Courage to Raise Good Men*, Olga Silverstein stresses the need to redefine male sex roles in ways that

break with sexist norms. Currently, sexist definitions of male roles insist on defining maleness in relationship to winning, one-upmanship, domination: "Until we are willing to question many of the specifics of the male sex role, including most of the seven norms and stereotypes that psychologist Robert LeVant names in a listing of its chief constituents—'avoiding femininity, restrictive emotionality, seeking achievement and status, self-reliance, aggression, homophobia, and nonrelational attitudes toward sexuality'—we are going to deny men their full humanity. Feminist masculinity would have as its chief constituents integrity, self-love, emotional awareness, assertiveness, and relational skill, including the capacity to be empathic, autonomous, and connected." The core of feminist masculinity is a commitment to gender equality and mutuality as crucial to interbeing and partnership in the creating and sustaining of life. Such a commitment always privileges nonviolent action over violence, peace over war, life over death.

Olga Silverstein rightly says that "what the world needs now is a different kind of man"—she posits that we need a "good" man—but this binary category automatically invests in a dominator model of either-or. What the world needs now is liberated men who have the qualities Silverstein cites, men who are "empathic and strong, autonomous and connected, responsible to self, to family and friends, and to society, and capable of understanding how those responsibilities are, ultimately, inseparable." Men need feminist thinking. It is the theory that supports their spiritual evolution and their shift away from the patriarchal model. Patriarchy is destroying the well-being of men, taking their lives daily.

When Silverstein does workshops focusing on changing sexist gender roles, it is women who question her about whether a male with the qualities described above can survive. She responds to their fear by pointing out these truths:

Men aren't surviving very well! We send them to war to kill and be killed. They're lying down in the middle of highways to prove their manhood in imitation of a scene in a recent movie about college football. They're dying of heart attacks in early middle age, killing themselves with liver and lung disease via the manly pursuits of drinking and smoking, committing suicide at roughly four times the rate of women, becoming victims of homicide (generally at the hands of other men) three times as often as women, and therefore living about eight years less than women.

And I would add that many men striving to prove patriarchal masculinity through acts of brutal and unnecessary violence are imprisoned for life. Clearly, lots of women survive leading happy, fulfilling lives because we do not embrace an identity which weds us to violence; men must have the same choice.

Women are not the only group who cannot imagine what the world would be like if males were raised with wholeness of being. There seems to be a fear that if men are raised to be people of integrity, people who can love, they will be unable to be forceful and act violently if needed.

A Masai wise man, when asked by Terrence Real to name

the traits of a good warrior, replied, "I refuse to tell you what makes a good morani [warrior]. But I will tell you what makes a great morani. When the moment calls for fierceness, a good morani is very ferocious. And when the moment calls for kindness, a good morani is utterly tender. Now, what makes a great morani is knowing which moment is which." We see that females who are raised with the traits any person of integrity embodies can act with tenderness, with assertiveness, and with aggression if and when aggression is needed.

Men who are able to be whole, undivided selves can practice the emotional discernment beautifully described by the Masai wise man precisely because they are able to relate and respond rather than simply react. Patriarchal masculinity confines men to various stages of reaction and overreaction. Feminist masculinity does not reproduce the notion that maleness has this reactionary, wild, uncontrolled component; instead it assures men and those of us who care about men that we need not fear male loss of control. The power of patriarchy has been to make maleness feared and to make men feel that it is better to be feared than to be loved. Whether they can confess this or not, men know that it just is not true.

This fear of maleness that they inspire estranges men from every female in their lives to greater or lesser degrees, and men feel the loss. Ultimately, one of the emotional costs of allegiance to patriarchy is to be seen as unworthy of trust. If women and girls in patriarchal culture are taught to see every male, including the males with whom we are intimate, as potential rapists and murderers, then we cannot offer them our trust, and without trust there is no love.

When I was a girl, my father was respected as the patriarchal provider and protector in our family. And he was feared. That ability to inspire fear was to him the sign of real manhood. Even though the knowledge that our dad could take care of his own was comforting, the moment he unleashed that will to do violence on us—his loved ones—we lost him. We were left with just our fears and the knowledge that there was no emotional connection great enough to soothe and transform our father's violence, to keep him connected.

How many men have lost this bond of love via acts of relational violence, acting out the notion embedded in patriarchal masculinity that in every male there is a predator, a hunter hungry and ready for the kill? Silverstein argues that men suffer by the patriarchal insistence that they enact rituals of alienation that lead to "estrangement from women." She states, "As anybody who works with the elderly will tell you, when octogenarians utter their dying words, it's 'Mama' the men call for, never 'Daddy.' These men may not even be calling out for an actual mother but for the symbolic mama who stands for nurturance, care, connectedness, whose loving presence lets us know we are not alone."

Patriarchal masculinity insists that real men must prove their manhood by idealizing aloneness and disconnection. Feminist masculinity tells men that they become more real through the act of connecting with others, through building community. There is no society in the world made up of one lone man. Even Thoreau in his solitary cabin wrote to his mother every day. When John Gray tells readers in *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus* that men will go into

their cave—that is, that men will disassociate and disconnect—he is accurately describing patriarchal masculinity. But he never suggests that men can be fulfilled living their lives in the cave. However, many men caught in patriarchy's embrace are living in a wilderness of spirit where they are utterly and always alone.

Feminism as a movement to end sexist domination and oppression offers us all the way out of patriarchal culture. The men who are awakening to this truth are generally younger men, who were born into a world where gender equality is more a norm. Unlike older generations of men, they do not have to be convinced that women are their equals. These are the young males who take women's studies classes, who are not afraid to identify themselves as advocates of feminism. They are the feminist sons of feminist mothers. Hence in his afterword to his mother's book *The Courage to Raise Good Men*, Michael Silverstein praises his mother's work: "The notion that men who have lost touch with their mothers have lost touch with parts of themselves is a powerful one—powerful enough to provoke change. I am proud that my mother has had the courage to open these issues for me and herself, and for other mothers and their sons." These men are the living example of the ways feminist masculinity liberates men.

Older generations of men who have shifted from sexist thinking to feminist masculinity were often moved by the women in their lives to make changes in thought and action, but for many it was the experience of assuming an equal parenting role that really transformed their consciousness and their behavior. I have had many conversations with men who in parenting daughters suddenly find

themselves enraged by patriarchal biases that they had been unaware of or cared nothing about until the moment when they saw sexism begin to threaten their daughters' action and being. Feminist theorists argued from the onset of the movement that were men to participate in parenting in a primary way, they would be changed. They would develop the relational skills often seen as innate in women. Parenting remains a setting where men can practice love as they let go of a dominator model and engage mutually with women who parent with them the children they share. Male domination does not allow mutual intimacy to emerge; it keeps fathers from touching the hearts of their children.

As long as men dominate women, we cannot have love between us. That love and domination can coexist is one of the most powerful lies patriarchy tells us all. Most men and women continue to believe it, but in truth, love transforms domination. When men do the work of creating selves outside the patriarchal box, they create the emotional awareness needed for them to learn to love. Feminism makes it possible for women and men to know love.

Visionary feminism is a wise and loving politics. It is rooted in the love of male and female being, refusing to privilege one over the other. The soul of feminist politics is the commitment to ending patriarchal domination of women and men, girls and boys. Love cannot exist in any relationship that is based on domination and coercion. Males cannot love themselves in patriarchal culture if their very self-definition relies on submission to patriarchal rules. When men embrace feminist thinking and practice, which emphasizes the value of mutual growth and self-actualization in all relationships, their emotional well-

being will be enhanced. A genuine feminist politics always brings us from bondage to freedom, from lovelessness to loving.

“Mutual partnership is the foundation of love. Feminist thought and action create the conditions under which mutuality can be nurtured.”

A true comrade and advocate of feminist politics, John Stoltenberg has consistently urged men to develop an ethical sensibility that would enable them to love justice more than manhood. In his essay “Healing from Manhood” he shares that “loving justice more than manhood, is not only a worthy pursuit, it is the future.” As Stoltenberg explains, “Choosing loyalty to manhood over selfhood leads inevitably to injustice . . . loving justice more than manhood relocates personal identity in selfhood—relationally, reciprocally, realistically.” He, like other male advocates of feminist thinking, knows firsthand that it is no easy task for men to rebel against patriarchal thinking and learn to love themselves and others. Feminist masculinity offers men a way to reconnect with selfhood, uncovering the essential goodness of maleness and allowing everyone, male and female, to find glory in loving manhood.

## Popular Culture: Media Masculinity

Mass media do the work of continually indoctrinating boys and men, teaching them the rules of patriarchal thinking and practice. One of the primary reasons the feminist demand that we challenge and change patriarchy had so little impact on males was that the theory was primarily expressed in books. Most men were not buying or reading feminist books. During the peak moments of white female-led contemporary feminist movement, the late sixties and early seventies, male authors contributed books that took on the issues of destructive masculinity, critiquing patriarchy. Books such as *The Male Machine*, *Men's Liberation*, *The Liberated Man*, *The Limits of Masculinity*, *For Men against Sexism*, *Being a Man*, and *White Hero*, *Black Beast* challenged male passive acceptance of stereotyped sex roles.

These books and the discussions they generated had nowhere near the impact on male consciousness that feminist books focusing on womanhood were having on female consciousness. For the most part these white male writers did not strive to reconceptualize masculinity; instead they encouraged men to learn behavior patterns previously asso-