



What Is a Man?

Essays on men and men's gatherings

An exploration of men's gatherings, their mythological aspects, the hero's journey, and what it means to be a man

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Introduction

This e-booklet contains a few of the essays I have written over the past decade about men and men's gatherings. I think it captures the spirit of gatherings of thoughtful men everywhere.

We start with a run-down of various types of men's gatherings, explore the mythological underpinnings in the hero's journey, and then try to answer the question, "What is a man?"

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Acknowledgments

The initial idea for this booklet came from Denis Ledoux and Rudy Narvaez, two of the many men who make Mainely Men happen. Mainely Men is a semiannual weekend retreat for men that was established three decades ago, at the beginnings of the men's movement. It has served as the model for men's weekends in many states. The Mainely Men website at www.mainelymen.org offers a free download of a special Mainely Men version of this booklet, called *Men...Becoming*. Deep thanks to Denis and Rudy for their encouragement.

My wife and first reader, Ann Landsberg, has been indispensable in keeping my commas in order, my thoughts coherent, and my claims from going too far off the deep end.

This booklet is dedicated to the men who continue to do the hard work of being men on our own terms, and to the women who applaud and encourage us in our journey.

1

What Happens at Men's Gatherings?

We sit in a circle, fifteen or twenty men. An object—a stick, a stone, a rattle, a small drum—sits in the center. A man stands up, takes the object, and begins to speak.

He says his name and gives a brief report on his state of affairs—why he's there, how he's feeling, or anything else that comes to mind.

The man replaces the object, and another man rises and takes it. He gives his own accounting.

And so it goes, until each man who wants to speak has spoken. The talking stick or other object is simply a reminder that the man holding it is the only one speaking. There's no commentary, no cross-talk.

This checking-in activity begins many men's gatherings. It's a way to break the ice and get to know new guys or catch up with news from guys we already know.

The activities at men's gatherings are many and varied. If you've never been to any or many gatherings, you may be curious, and a little bit apprehensive, about what takes place. I'd like to share some of my experiences in the hope that some of you may want to do more of the kind of men's work that has enriched many of our lives.

Gatherings

I've noticed four basic kinds of men's gatherings.

The first kind I attended, almost 20 years ago, was led by some of the luminaries (or perhaps celebrities) of the men's movement of the 80s and early 90s—Robert Bly, James Hillman, and Michael Meade. They were the pioneers of the mythopoetic movement, which involved story-telling and poetry to remind men that there was a spiritual and psychological aspect of their lives that was worth paying attention to. The evening presentations, weekend retreats, and week-long retreats had experiential activities (more about these later), but much activity centered on the leaders and their seminar-like presentations. This often was our first, heady taste of what came to be called men's work. We met leaders who seemed to know a lot of stuff and had written books about it. We also met ordinary men like us. It was the first time many of us had been around a large number of

men in a non-threatening atmosphere of mutual respect and non-competitiveness.

A second kind of gathering is facilitated by a small staff of men who plan and participate in most of the activities. There is no celebrity-expertise on the staff, just a bunch of men who have wrestled fruitfully with life as men and are dedicated to helping men have similar experiences. The gathering has a theme and a planned series of experiential activities. For ten years, I've attended the Men's Wisdom Council, an annual week-long retreat in western Massachusetts. The facilitators are as varied as the men who attend: One leads various men's retreats full-time. Two are carpenters. One is a gardener and retired chiropractor. One is a poet and retired insurance executive. One is a massage therapist. One was a contractor who now does alcoholism counseling. The men attending this gathering work and play hard in the activities that the facilitators plan—and the facilitators work and play right alongside us.

A third kind of gathering is organized by a small group of men who arrange for the location, the food, and some of the all-group activities. But the cooking, cleanup, and workshops are done by the men who show up. The weekend may have a theme, but the workshops are quite varied. Since there may be two or more workshops in the same time slot, the workshops are not whole-group activities. I've seen workshops on pornography, computer repair, knife sharpening, intimacy, touching and being touched, prostate cancer, tree husbandry, a sweat lodge, and many more. Whole-group activities include dancing to music or drums, sitting in opening and closing circles, reading our poems in poetry circles, participating in talent shows, and drumming. Mainely Men, started almost 30 years ago, established this format. The format has spread to the other New England states with annual or semi-annual weekend gatherings.

A fourth kind of gathering is the vision quest, though the ones I've participated in included women. A vision quest involves a few days of careful

physical, psychological, and practical preparation followed by a four-day solo camp-out in the wilderness with just water—no food and no tent. After the solo adventure, the participants share their experiences over the ensuing few days.

There are no doubt other formats and variations on these. They have a few things in common, to varying degrees: contact with a variety of men; emphasis on self-discovery, especially as men; spiritual awakening; contact and communion with nature; a safe, nonjudgmental atmosphere; and a temporary escape from the crazy or humdrum aspects of our daily lives.

Activities

I've already mentioned some activities—check-in circles, workshops, sweat lodges, camping out. Men's gatherings offer many other activities, which fall into several broad categories with considerable overlap: transi-

tion or preparation; trust; emotional release work; physical challenges; consciousness-altering (without drugs); celebration.

At every gathering I've been to, the leaders or facilitators have emphasized that all activities are optional. One phrase for this is "radical freedom," which is the only explanation a man needs to opt out. I've never seen anything but respect for a man who chose to sit out an activity.

Many gatherings open with some kind of **transition or preparation activity** to dramatize that we're leaving behind ordinary place and time and entering a sacred space that is not measured by rulers and clocks. This activity might be as simple as meeting in a common room and lighting a candle as we express our intentions for the gathering. It may include a trust activity, such as a blindfold walk, holding onto the shoulder of the man in front of us. The careful preparation for a vision quest is a kind of

transition, culminating in a blessing circle as each member of the group hikes to his or her solo camp.

Trust activities are a way to assure ourselves that the gathering is a safe place to be and that the other men are of good will. The activities seem to include blindfolds much of the time—a blindfold walk or even a blindfold run across a field. The most dramatic activity for me was mask-making. It is a strange feeling to have to lie perfectly still as a new acquaintance covers your face and obliterates your vision with heavy strips of wet plaster-soaked cloth.

Emotional release work (also called rage work or grief work) includes techniques of flushing into the open whatever demons are plaguing us, so we can wrestle with them, defeat them, or perhaps even befriend them. This is perhaps the most heavy-duty activity in men's gatherings. In my experience, these activities take place only after having formed a commu-

nity of men, which serves as a safe container. In our western society, it is typically very hard for a man to express feelings to himself, much less to other men. In a safe community, in which deep mutual trust has developed, men know that whatever they experience or witness will stay within the community.

One form of this kind of activity is called mat work, named for the use of mats on the floor to keep us safe. After appropriate preparation, which may include guided meditation, a man mentions to a group of five or six men some person or aspect of his life that has hurt him deeply. One or more men personify the source of the hurt, taunting the man. The others hold him back as he fights to get at his tormenter. The rage builds as the men hold him back; as it ebbs, they slowly release him, letting him push through the hurt and grief.

Another form of rage work involves a man's striking a pile of cushions or mats with a stick as he expresses his rage or grief.

Milder forms of emotional release work include finding or making an object to carry the emotion or other personal challenge and then getting rid of it by burning it, burying it, throwing it away, or doing some other symbolic action.

Most of the **physical challenges** I've experienced have been on vision quests—hiking with a heavy pack, going without food, being alone, withstanding the cold night. These special challenges tend to focus the mind and put life's day-to-day challenges into perspective. The vision part of a quest may not be so much a hallucinatory experience as it is a clarifying experience.

Consciousness-altering activities help us explore the inner spaces of our psyches and open us to the world just beyond the veil of ordinary per-

ception. Since the use of drugs or herbs is rare or prohibited in most men's gatherings, the altered states are induced in other ways. The *vision quest*, with its physical challenges, is designed partly for this kind of altering. In a *sweat lodge*, men sit in total darkness around a pit inside a Hogan-like structure as glowing hot rocks are brought in. The extreme heat and disorienting darkness can bring out deep insights and feelings. A *trance dance* is done blindfolded to music with a driving beat. Helpers with cushions keep dancers from banging into walls, furniture, and each other. *Holotropic breathwork* and its cousin, *integrative breathwork*, involve an hour and a half to two hours of rapid deep breathing to extremely loud music. Responses can range from feelings of peace to visions to very strong emotions. *Drumming*, especially when carried on at length and accompanied by dancing, brings sound and rhythm into play as a consciousness-altering experience.

Celebration is an important ingredient in many gatherings, usually taking place toward the end. It could be in the form of a meal, a talent show, a dance, or drumming. Celebrations are for expressing joy, zaniness, humor—often of a kind that the larger culture (including many women) finds off-putting or offensive. Within the context, or container, of a men’s community, celebrations bring relief from the more serious work, making it seem a little more ordinary and easier to integrate into our daily lives. A wry comment, a joke, a silly costume party, or a wildly hilarious skit lets us not take ourselves so seriously that we can’t cope with the everyday stresses and challenges that crowd into our lives after a gathering or retreat.

Great Outdoors

If we look at the long march of human civilization, we see that the vast majority of our time has been spent outdoors. Even if we date our progress

from the first agricultural settlements about 10,000 years ago, we have still not been urban dwellers for more than a tiny fraction of that time. (The word “civilization” implies cities, by the way—it shares the same root with the words “civic” and “city” and “citizen.”)

Most of the men’s gatherings I’ve been to have taken place far away from “civilization,” that is, far away from cities and towns. The natural settings in my case have been mostly eastern forests; others may include islands, desert wilderness, isolated seashores, or other remote places. Since most of us live in cities and towns, the change of venue creates a sense of transition, even a sense of quest. As we drive out of town, onto a freeway or turnpike, and then onto a side road deeper and deeper into the country, and then perhaps onto dirt roads, we feel the ordinary concerns of our daily lives dropping away. We are entering a magical realm.

This is not a romantic, Rousseauian, back-to-nature plot on the part of the leaders of men's gatherings. Going into the wilderness has, for me, two functions. First is the symbolic, or ritual, distancing ourselves from our daily lives. We are crossing a threshold into a place of strange wonders; we're shifting from ordinary space and time, and our senses are put on alert.

Second is the acknowledgment that the wilderness was once not a strange place. We are, in a sense, returning home to a setting that long ago was as familiar as our house or apartment, to earth and trees and rocks and animals that our ancestors could read as easily as we do the morning newspaper. Traditional societies, at least in my imagination, revered (shall we say worshipped?) their natural environment as a matter of survival. They weren't "in" the environment; they were an integral part of it. Without a level of intimacy with their surroundings and fellow creatures, they would have perished: I wouldn't be here to write this, and you wouldn't be

here to read it. We have mostly lost our reverence for our natural environment, and we never had much reverence for our urban environment.

Even with a cabin and a nearby bath house, and perhaps even the whoosh of tires on a distant freeway, a natural setting has much to offer: the smells of fresh air, but also of vegetation, rotting and fresh; the sounds of songbirds at dusk and dawn, and owls at night; rustling in the leaf litter underfoot; a lizard sunning itself; a cactus standing sentinel, or a tall pine making offerings to the sky.

Getting further away from civilization, we see eagles soaring, loon families diving for breakfast in the morning mist, foxes skulking off the path. At night, we're startled awake by a hoot, a howl, a splash, or the deafening crash of a moose too big to care where it steps. We nervously aim a flashlight at the source of a sound and see two neon-yellow eyes shining

back, too widely spaced to be a small critter—but fortunately far enough away not to be interested in us.

All of these experiences can resonate with pieces of our genetic inheritance that have lain dormant for millennia. Our modern minds thrill with apprehension; our ancient bodies sigh with comprehension.

Ritual and Ritual Objects

Ritual plays an important part in the activities of men's gatherings. Ritual involves a more or less formal sequence of events whose goal is to create some kind of change in the individual, the community, or both. I've seen changes—some subtle, some dramatic—in the men I've been privileged to share these activities with. All of the activities mentioned above can involve ritual or contain ritual aspects. Often the activity is itself a ri-

tual, but equally often there are other incidentals that help mark an activity as ritual.

The incidentals—fire, incense, sound, darkness—are, among other things, ways of marking an activity as something outside ordinary time and space.

Smudging is the use of incense, typically sage or a combination of sage and other herbs like sweetgrass, burned loose in an abalone shell or as a smudge stick. A smudge stick is simply a bundle of sage in a cigar-like shape that is lit at one end. A facilitator may smudge the room or area in which the activity takes place, or he may smudge each man. As in the religious use of incense, smudging is a way of purifying the space and the participants and signifying that the space and the activity are sacred—set apart from day-to-day activity.

Fire has a magic all its own, as you can probably appreciate if you have ever just sat in your den or living room and stared into the fireplace. In rituals, fire can appear as a huge bonfire (to watch or dance around), a way of igniting a smudge stick, the heat source for a sweat lodge, or the flame of a candle signifying the presence of our ancestors. It can also be the means of burning away—symbolically—our worries, griefs, or inadequacies that we’ve written on a piece of paper or bark.

The talking stick (or other object) has been a source of amusement for some women (“You have to hold a stick to talk??!”), but it signifies mutual respect between the man who holds the floor and the men who are listening. Like many ritual objects, the talking stick has roots in the wisdom of older cultures.

Some men create and wear a medicine bag containing objects important to them—stones, seeds, feathers. The bag is usually a small square or cir-

cle of leather tied with a leather thong. The creation of a medicine bag is a ritual—gathering the objects and sewing or tying the bag.

Ritual and ritual objects are metaphors for a reality that is larger than our everyday perceptions and concerns. The common ground for all ritual is intention. Anyone can start a fire, light a smudge stick, or sit in a sweat lodge, with no more motivation than to have a nice experience or be one of the guys. Conscious intention can make ritual acts and objects meaningful, enriching our relationship with nature, the universe, and our companions—and with ourselves.

A Community of Initiated Men

In my experience, any time men get together with the intention of connecting with something larger than themselves, a kind of magic happens. Trust-building, council circles, sweat lodges, group meditation, or any of a

myriad of other activities can build a male community that is bigger than the sum of its participants. “Male bonding” can sometimes be a cliché or a joke if seen through the myopic lens of popular media. But the closeness and mutual support of a male community, however rare it is in our fragmented society, keeps many of us grounded and gives many of us the sense that we are not alone and that our struggles, failures, triumphs, grief, humor, and zaniness—as men—belong to us all.

When we journey into the unknown—when we go through physical and emotional ordeals—when we expose past wounds scarred over or still festering—when we battle demons as surely as the heroes of mythology did—when we return to our male community—when we sing and play together, we capture much of the essence of initiation in traditional societies. We are preparing ourselves to be effective members of the wider community. A man’s process may be sudden, or it may be slow, taking several years. Finally, at some point in our 20s, 30s, 40s, 50s, 60s, 70s, or

even beyond, we bid good-bye to the world of boys and become fully men. We return to gatherings over and over, to further our initiation process or as elders offering our wisdom and blessing to the others.

2

The Hero's Journey

One of the things I never quite got about the mythopoetic aspect of the men's movement was the question "What is your myth?" or "What myth are you living now?" I couldn't imagine myself in the role of hero, off on a quest to slay a monster, find a hidden treasure, save a beautiful princess, or whatever. I didn't have a vast or deep knowledge of mythology, so I couldn't identify an existing myth that fit my situation, even imperfectly.

I had a similar problem with the idea of initiation. Here I was, in my mid-fifties, without a mentor, without a council of elders looking after me and challenging me. And it seemed to me that any kind of initiation ordeal would be somewhat contrived and a bit like playing Indian.

As much as I loved the company of other men, as much as I loved the poetry, as much as I loved hearing myths, as much as I loved playing my drum, as much as I loved hanging out at men's retreats with the likes of Robert Bly and Michael Meade and James Hillman, I was still just a late-middle-aged white suburban male with a mortgage and a family and a desk job.

Stories

At men's gatherings, men get to tell their stories. Typically, men in the circle listen attentively; offer no side comments or me-toos; make no

judgments; dispense no advice. For some men, this can be the first time they have been heard, truly heard with respect and compassion, especially from other men.

I have yet to hear from a man who has had a totally easy, happy life. Maybe men's work attracts a self-selecting bunch of miserable men, and happy men are too busy being happy and successful to get involved. I seriously doubt that. Even the most easy-going, handsome, healthy, charismatic, well-off man will eventually run out of the happy stuff in his life story (a story in which he perhaps completely believes and thinks is complete) and discover the demons, the monsters, the wounds, the unhealed hurts, the unattainable treasures.

Whether or not we admit it, we all have unfulfilled longings and parts of us that need healing, and the sharing of our stories can be a beginning of the fulfillment or healing process. As our stories are heard, and as we

hear other men's stories, a balm of compassion reaches deep into our essence.

The Backwards Leap

How does a man acquire his wounds? The same way, I think, that a mythic hero does—by going up against an adversary, often with the odds stacked in the adversary's favor. And if we start with our wounds and scars, we can work backwards into a realization that we have been engaged in nothing less than a heroic struggle and, most of the time, an ordeal of initiation.

What is a hero anyway? Most of us, if we close our eyes, can see a composite, larger-than-life strongman with crafty intelligence and a pure soul. A Superman. A Spiderman. A Hercules. The heroes in many stories, however, are the least likely characters in the story. The youngest son of

the king. The put-upon stepdaughter. The lost children. The wooden-puppet rascal. The hobbit. The orphan. This kind of hero faces ogres, evil relatives, dangerous journeys, dark witches, ghosts, and so on, the same way any of us would: with abject fear and trembling. Each hero is at one time, or several times, or constantly, convinced that all is lost. Even when the hero is a bona-fide warrior, he is faced with impossible situations that reduce him to tears.

How does the unlikely hero get through the ordeal? In many, perhaps most, stories, an ally comes along in the nick of time. Sometimes it's a fairy godmother or genie or other being with vast magical powers. Just as often it's an old man, a wild man, a crazy man, a witch, a little boy, an animal, a fool. The ally may have been ignored or even abused by other characters in the tale. The help offered, and accepted by the hero, may be magical, or it may simply be good advice or a companion along the way.

Heroes are usually transformed by their ordeal. They may realize that they are the true heirs to a throne, or that they're brave after all, or that the journey has brought them to their true home, and so on. They may also carry a wound from the ordeal—a proud scar or a nagging ache or an unhealed place deep inside.

Most heroes undertake some sort of journey, and most of them come home. Some come home to parades and feasts and a huge wedding with the daughter of the king. Some come home in disguise, revealing themselves at the appropriate time. Some just come home to heal their wounds (if they can) and start a new life (if they can).

Not all tales end with “happily ever after.” We can be suspicious of happy endings if only because we know that the story must go on, and all stories can have both happy and unhappy events. The prince may marry the princess, but their son may eventually try to overthrow him, or the

princess may fall under the spell of a jealous witch, or some other calamity may occur. Sometimes the hero becomes very melancholic, yearning for the excitement of the journey, for the friends he made, for the very magic that brought him home.

Our Place at the Heroes' Table

We all have earned, or will earn, a place at the heroes' table. This is no trivial thing, like the "everybody's a winner" philosophy of the self-esteem movement. When mythic tales tell us the hero's story and what a hero is like, they are holding up a mirror and saying "Life is this. You are this." We are different only in the details. We all have challenges, are all called to embark on difficult journeys. And the prospects scare the crap out of us.

What challenges?

Here's a laundry list of ogres, witches, evil spells, wicked princes, and so on. Feel free to jump in and add your own: Alcohol. Depression. Tobacco. Cancer. Sudden or chronic illness. Accidents. Drugs. Food. Sex. Abusive parents, teachers, relatives, bosses. Neglectful parents, teachers, relatives, bosses. The evil spell of consumerism, mass media, managed news. Lying and corrupt leaders. Lovelessness. Death of loved ones. Humdrum, boring, day-to-day existence. Poverty. Joblessness.

Each of these represents a journey we must undertake, with or without allies. Most of us can name more than one journey, so our stories will be ongoing and interlocking. The challenges may seem overwhelming, the journey endless. And if we don't feel heroic, or heroic enough, we can remember the youngest sons, the stepdaughters, the puppets, the orphans, and all the other unlikely heroes of myth.

What happens at the heroes' table? We talk. We listen. Together we celebrate victories and weep over setbacks. And we all know that each time we sit down together, our stories will be different. We feed ourselves and each other with heroic helpings of respect and compassion, and sometimes of bitter defeat. Sometimes the sweet dessert of joy arrives, and we share it around eagerly, but knowing that this is but one course in a huge banquet.

Where is this table? It exists anywhere good-hearted people gather with a purpose—men, women, men and women together. A ritual retreat, a vision quest, or a medicine walk can offer such a table. The table also exists in our hearts, as we recognize the hero inside us and become aware that everyone else is on a difficult or impossible journey—and that we, or the other person, may be the ally. Such a virtual table may be very difficult to find on one's own, without a ritual gathering, but I wouldn't rule it out.

Initiation and the Heroes' Table

It's unlikely that many boys in the West will go through a traditional initiation complete with a council of elders, a ritualized ordeal (sometimes with a wounding), and a return to the council of elders as men prepared to be of service to the community. Anything our Western culture can devise is likely to be quite artificial. Even adult and middle-aged men, eager for initiation, wouldn't welcome spending a week or month naked in the woods, having a tooth knocked out or getting a burn or scar.

Initiation is a way of preparing a boy or man-boy for true adulthood. How can we accomplish this? We can re-imagine our heroic journeys, our challenges, our stories, our wounds as initiatory experiences. Then we can bring the tale back to the heroes' table, our council of elders, to be told and heard and appreciated and celebrated as a hero's journey.

3

What Is a Man?

At about seven weeks into your mother's pregnancy, the Y chromosome (of the X and Y pair that determines male sex) triggered the release of testosterone, masculinizing the brain and genitalia of the embryo. Up until then, there was no way to distinguish between a male and a female embryo.

This hormonal phenomenon would make the early release of testosterone a kind of gold standard for answering the question, "What is a man?"

But the question remains. If biology were the only determinant, no man would question his manhood, and all men would be essentially alike. (We'll ignore, for this essay, anomalies such as XYY and XXY males.)

We know that men are not all the same, any more than we could say that all humans are the same. While most men are more similar to each other than they are to women, men do look, think, and behave differently from each other. So, what does it mean to be a man? I want to explore men in their social setting, men and hormones, men as partners in reproduction, "male" behavior, "experts" on men, and some descriptions of "real men."

Social Settings

We are all shaped by our families and by the community and society in which we grew up. In some countries, heterosexual men can be seen holding hands and kissing in public; this would be startling in the US. In some

eras in the US, men were usually the only wage earner in a family, and the women stayed home to manage the household and raise the kids. Nowadays, many men are much more involved in the daily life of their families. Financial necessity or the desire for a different kind of fulfillment has drawn many women into the workforce, triggering in many cases a renegotiation of domestic chores. And men—in response to the feminist ascendancy or to their own yearnings—are taking much more active roles with their children.

Is the man of the 1950s more of a man than the man of the 2000s? Harvey Mansfield, a Harvard professor of government, theorizes that the 1950s man is closer to the ideal—that housework and childcare are unmanly and that men are at their best showing “confidence in risky situations” (*Manliness*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006). Mansfield doesn’t even follow his own paradigm; in a Boston Globe feature on him and his book, he admitted to doing housework. And I suspect he’s hardly a

risk-taker, at least physically: He's a college professor, not the John Wayne character he sets up as a model.

Social norms change from generation to generation, as we all can see and have experienced. Does this mean that the basic essence of manhood has changed? It's silly to think that our physical, spiritual, and social essence tracks with social norms.

Ranging Hormones?

There is a range of testosterone in men that is considered "normal." A few men have too much, and a few men have too little. Some authors theorize about a kind of male menopause caused by the natural decline of testosterone with age. At least one men's magazine (*Men's Health*) offers a diet purported to increase testosterone. Does testosterone provide a scale of manliness? Can we determine who is a real man by a simple blood test?

While testosterone can be implicated in certain behaviors (optimism, increased energy, sexual drive), would we want it to be the only criterion by which we assess ourselves? Maybe so. But that means half of us will be below-average men.

Serious medical or inherited problems with low testosterone can sometimes be remedied with injections or other medications, with accompanying risks. Sometimes a low reading cannot be remedied because of higher than normal risks (enlarged prostate, for instance). The frustrations, especially about sex drive and overall energy, can be distressing and frustrating. But men with this problem are, in my experience, not seen by other men as lacking in manhood. The internal feelings of frustration may arise from not matching up to their perceptions of society's expectations and norms.

Male-female is not a continuum. Once testosterone has done its work in our mother's womb (in the course of normal development), no one is sort-of male, much less even bordering on female.

Reproductive Criteria

Is a "true" man someone who can, at least potentially, participate in creating new life? Let's see, there seem to be two criteria here: the ability to produce viable sperm and the ability to have an erection. Actually, only the first is biologically necessary.

But what happens when a man is infertile or impotent? Is he less of a man? Some men lacking one or both of these abilities may feel less than manly, especially in a society that emphasizes virility and studliness in every action movie and most TV commercials aimed at men. In my opi-

nion, either or both inabilities take away just one aspect of manhood that in no way take away the whole man.

Some otherwise intact men choose not to father children—monks, celibate priests, or just men who don't want children. It would be ridiculous to label them as something less than true men.

Behave Yourself

Dozens of books have been written about what constitutes “male” versus “female” behavior. We're from Mars, women are from Venus. Men don't communicate much. Men don't or won't show their feelings. Women face each other to talk; men sit side by side. So it goes, round and round. I'm sure some of these observations have some validity. There are, after all, differences in brain chemistry that must have some effect on behavior. And there are the mythologically-based sets of male behaviors,

like the quest, that are said to characterize men. But if you go down a list of things that are supposed to be typical of or unique to men, what happens if you don't recognize some of the things in yourself? Are you less of a man?

Some descriptions of typical male behavior are stereotypes. The stereotypes may be based on usual male behavior, or they may be based on the behavior of a small subset of us. We may rankle at the portrayal of men's behavior in TV commercials and sitcoms, and the most useful response to most of it may be to explain to our children, if we have any, that not all men are like the ones on TV, and that some people think it's funny to put down men. We can respond to the really offensive stuff (a Verizon DSL commercial depicting a dad as a possible child molester comes to mind; Verizon pulled the ad after protests), but for the most part I guess we need to lighten up.

Expert Testimony

There are a lot of experts on manhood out there in books and on the Web. They write essays and make lists of what a real man is like. The sources may be sociological, psychological, mythological, or just based on wishful thinking. The problem with all of these, I think without exception, is twofold. First, no one measures up to all of the items in any checklist. Second, many of the items—such as courage, ability to get things done, inventiveness, loyalty, and many more—are not the exclusive province of males.

It can be fun to read some of this expert testimony and measure ourselves against it, as long as we don't take things too seriously. I try to keep a couple of things in mind when I read this stuff, such as whether the observations and pronouncements are culture-bound (read: white, Western or American, middle-class and above; or "traditional," meaning "indigenous")

or even “primitive”, and so on) or are based on the thinnest of logical foundations.

And I mostly conclude that maybe, just maybe, the philosophers, psychologists, and mythologists haven’t found the true keys to the manly kingdom.

I’ll tell you where I think the keys are: hidden in the inner recesses of our own being. The Latin word for “being” is *esse*, from which we get the words “essential” and “essence.” We were born as men. Our essence is that of men, whatever the details may be of the accidents and incidents of our existence. The truest men we know are the other men we see every day, and the man we see in the mirror every day, the man inhabiting our skin and blood and bones. Our stories, the complex and kaleidoscopic stories of our lives, are based on those keys, that essence.

Real Men

You and I have met a lot of real men. You may recognize elements of yourself, or men you know, in the following men I have seen or met. All could be seen as quite ordinary, living within the culture into which they were born.

- A real man who served in the Army in Europe, sold insurance, installed bells in towers, and became a poet and mentor.
- A real man who filled a large room with his howling sobs of loss and regret over a lost father.
- A real man who cooked, cleaned, raised toddlers, got a PhD, took care of a wife in crisis—all at once.
- A real man who meditates and prays and takes care of others, even though he is unemployed.

- Two real men who are lovingly raising their adopted son.
- A real man cradling another man as he weeps for joy at a week-long retreat.
- Many real men sober for dozens of years.
- Real men who run a prison curriculum on emotional and personal responsibility for incarcerated men.
- A real man who realized that medication was the only alternative to crippling anger.
- A real man enduring repeated and sometimes painful prostate biopsies, trying to track down an elusive diagnosis—and in the meantime showing up at work, worrying about relationships, and so on.

- A real man who spends several afternoons a week with his grandchildren.
- A real man who arranged for legal help—without recriminations—for a son in trouble with the law.
- A real man who goes to work every day, comes home, plays with the kids, does housework, fixes things, and loves his wife.
- A real man who, tortured by injustice in the world, attends protests and invites others to join him.
- A real man who quietly donates time and considerable money to local causes, without publicity.
- A crew of real men building a dock, almost wordlessly cooperating in carrying, measuring, cutting, placing, fastening.

- A real man who runs a scrupulously honest auto repair shop and makes sure that the whole crew eats lunch together.
- A real man who dons a clown suit and entertains hospitalized children.
- A real man who taught college students practically until the day he died at 86.
- A real man who fled Nazi Germany, served for the US in WWII in the precursor to the CIA, survived blackballing in the McCarthy era, and was writing on international economics in his mid-80s.
- A real man who lived over half his adult life on the road as a salesman, with all its attendant hardships.
- A real man who works with his hands during the week as a craftsman and makes beautiful music on the weekends.

These, and millions more, are the real men who quietly help others, keep their commitments, keep things running. What's the unifying theme here? For me, the ideal is just men of good heart doing the best they can. There's a stunning diversity among real men, something that no list, no book, no guru, no philosopher, no psychologist could hope to delineate.

Each man in the list, aware of it or not, discovered one or more keys to his inner manhood. Each man's search, each man's story, is different.

What's my story? What's your story? We're writing them right now.

4

What Kind of Man Are You?

The question in the title is more than a Ray Charles classic, a superficial quiz in a magazine, or a bad line spoken by an overbearing wife in a 1940s B movie. It's a serious, man-to-man (or self-to-self) question.

We love to categorize things, sometimes making the categories more important and real than the members of the categories. That's a danger. But categories are also a useful way of thinking about things.

Here are some ways of thinking about men, about ourselves. As you might expect, the categories overlap to a greater or lesser extent.

Victims

I'm going to start here partly just to get it out of the way. It may be one of the smaller categories, but one about which a lot has already been said and written. You're probably aware of most types of male victims, even if you don't quite fit into the group.

Men can be victims simply because we're men. A few examples:

- Rape in prison
- Unfair divorce and custody laws, or applications of them by clueless judges
- Unfounded accusations of ex-spouses (abuse, child abuse)

- Membership in the “death professions”—soldiering, police work, fire-fighting, lumbering, farming, and so on—with high rates of accidental injury or death
- Shorter lifespan in general than women
- Prostate cancer, which hits almost 17 percent of us, kills 3 percent of us. Publicity and research dollars lag far behind those for breast cancer, with similar statistics.
- General ridicule and disregard in media and advertising
- Oh—and if you’re black it’s even worse.

The women’s movement also identified a lot of victims, but it had an easily identified enemy: males in power, and eventually (for some women) any human with one or more testicles. We don’t have things that simple. Male victims can blame individual women, or women in general, for just a

few of our ills. The rest of the perpetrators are other men (males in power, again), general societal expectations we've bought into, or ourselves (making bad choices about our safety or health). Maybe that's why there was no successful men's movement.

Grievance Carriers

Some male victims, along with people sympathetic to them, have carried men's grievances into public awareness. Warren Farrell may be one of the more recognizable examples, along with Rich Zubaty, Sam Keen, Jack Kammer, William Pollack, and many others. Some women have also become advocates of men (and victims in their own right of their angry sisters): Susan Faludi, Cathy Young, Norah Vincent, and Christina Hoff-Sommers, to name a few.

These people's writings are full of statistics and anecdotes, and sometimes proposals and potential remedies. I'm not sure their collective effect has been much more than to increase our overall sense of grievance, even among those of us who are not "victims," although some individual men may have been motivated into making changes in the conditions of their lives.

Victims and grievance carriers are reactive, having experienced or seen inequities and sometimes having set about to remedy them. I have to confess that the tone of Menletter has at times been one of grievance—a reactive position I'm less and less comfortable with.

A more proactive approach has been taken by men stumbling along the path to masculinity. But first I need to address the largest group.

Silent Majority

The silent majority of us men is the largest and most varied group. It consists of a portion of the male oligarchy that profits from exploitation of both men and women; a huge bunch of men who don't see or don't care to see ourselves as disadvantaged; and some men who are jaded or have given up the fight. This group must be a huge challenge and frustration for the grievance carriers trying to raise male consciousness. (I imagine the leaders of the early women's movement felt the same frustration trying to move millions of housewives out of their [male-induced?] numbness and complacency.)

We can deride some of the silent majority as Joe Sixpacks, sleepwalking through their lives with no concern for a larger picture. Or we can recognize that many of us men simply feel lucky to get from paycheck to paycheck, provide for ourselves and our families, and worry more about

gas prices, war, rent, food costs, and heating oil than about whether we're fulfilled as men. We're silent not because we have nothing to say, but because we're too busy coping.

Men Stumbling Along the Path

Some of us, perhaps in quiet reflective moments, or perhaps from reading or hearing about other men doing “inner work,” have wondered if coping is enough, if carrying grievances is enough, if recognizing our shared victimhood is enough. We begin to suspect that there's a larger man inside us, a man connected with places deeper and broader than work, home, and the commute in between.

Two decades or so ago, some men had these same suspicions and began to dig around. They discovered poetry, mythology, and something they called the deep masculine. And they began to organize men's retreats and

write books. Most of these men are still active in promoting the discoveries they made: the poet Robert Bly, the mythologist and story-teller Michael Meade, and the psychologist James Hillman. Those days carried the promise, at least, of a new movement, a men's movement, based on mythopoetic studies and notions of the "wild man" within us all. For a while, we were led to see the damage done to us by women and by our absent or abusive fathers. I remember being among the angry and confused men, seeing our fathers as ogres or irrelevant ciphers, wondering (as soft, suburban white men with desk jobs) what the hell a wild man really was, and trying to find out by playing Native American in the woods and devouring poetry and folk tales. I think some of us suffered a little spiritual whiplash as we found something positive to aspire to while we were still being reactive grievance carriers.

We may have been stumbling along a path with no clear destination, but at least we were moving, and we were on a path. As the path became

more experiential—with participatory men’s retreats, more life experience, and less sitting around listening to gurus—some of us discovered for ourselves what we had been told: The real demons in our lives came from within. By going deep into our pain and wounds and using our physical or emotional scars as marks of initiation, we healed our relationships with our fathers, enhanced our marriages, and found a wellspring of compassion. The inner work began to bear fruit in the outer aspects of our lives.

Complete Men

I know of a few men who have the feel, for me, of complete men. They are not immensely successful materially, or even spiritually. But they have a certain natural wildness about them. It’s as if they’ve lived the myths that the rest of us have only read about. These men still fall into pits, like any wild animal or mythological hero, pits of failed relationships, pits of

temporary failures, pits of despair. But they keep on working, keep looking for allies, keep on keeping on. They are complete in their incompleteness. And I love being around them.

And another thing about being complete: These men have been all of us—victim, grievance carrier, silent majority, stumbler, man. They've been through the tough stuff, and their stories make them the elders in the community of men.

We're All Together

In any of the multiple facets of our lives, we can be all or any of the categorical types: victim, grievance carrier, silent majority, stumbler, or complete man. It would be folly to look down on a man showing qualities of any category. We can't know what time and life will do for a man, or what may be going on inside him that nobody—not even the man him-

self—is aware of. Maybe it's best to see all men as stumbling along a path toward complete manhood. We may need to follow some of them, lead some of them, or just go shoulder to shoulder with each other.