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## Becoming Whole Men

One of my favorite fairy tales starts with an orphaned boy wandering alone in the forest at night. Far off through the trees he sees a glimmer of light. Following it, he finds a huge bonfire in a clearing and a giant man asleep by the fire. He lays down against the giant man's legs and falls asleep. In the morning, the man asks, "Who are you, and where do you come from?" The boy answers, "I am your son, born in the night." The giant man accepts this, and they begin to live together as father and son.

Over time the boy observes that the man does not laugh or smile and has no desires or joy in life. He asks about it, and eventually learns that the man was attacked by some evil elves who stole his soul, and that is why he is unable to feel any joy or move from this spot.

The story tells how the boy fights a musical duel with the elves and eventually outwits them. He wins back his father's soul, which the elves have imprisoned in a bottle, and brings it home to him. The father and son celebrate the recovery of the father's soul by dancing for joy all night, and at the breaking of dawn the father asks, "How can I ever repay you?" And the boy answers, "By letting me remain your son forever."

I tell you this story because I think it illustrates the situation with men today. No matter what our outward accomplishments, in many ways we feel like orphaned boys, wandering alone in the woods at night. 'Orphaned' means that we do not feel nourished and supported by our ancestors. 'Alone' means cut off from our families and community and other men. 'Wandering in the woods at night' means that we are trying to find our way through life without a map or a path, without a sense of where we are or where we are going. And 'boy' means without initiation into manhood and connection to something larger than our selves.

The story also tells us the source of the problem: our fathers have lost their souls, their

ability to feel the joy and desire that moves them towards what they love. We're even told one place to look for our father's soul: in a bottle. (As the son of an alcoholic father, I almost fell off my chair when I read that one.) And finally the story tells us what we must do: we must find and bring back the male soul so we can reconnect with our fathers and become complete men ourselves.

It would be easy to dismiss this as 'just a story' if the same pattern of male isolation were not showing up in national studies. One study found that while 87% of women have a female best friend, only 7% of men have a male best friend. Another study found that 2/3 of men have no best friend at all, and that of the 1/3 that do, most of those best friends are women. Both studies defined a 'best friend' as some one you can talk to about personal problems. Other studies revealed that only about 1% of men had a close relationship with their fathers.

As someone who has led men's groups for 16 years, I would say that this sense of isolation is the biggest problem men face today. And underneath the disconnection from others -- and causing it -- is an inner disconnection, a disconnection from our own inner experience, from our own souls.

### CAUSES

How did this situation arise? There are many interlocking causes, but we can explore a few.

Before the Industrial Revolution, most work was done in or near the home and it was done by everyone -- men, women, and children. Various tasks were the province of one or the other gender, but since all work was done by hand and no one was paid, it was all seen as about equally valuable. Children worked alongside adults and had time to absorb not only how to do the job, but how to be an adult man or woman in their community.

The Industrial Revolution changed all that. Much of the work of men was moved out

of the home and into factories. This separated men from their families\* for most of the day, and changed the basic divisions of labor in the home. Whereas child-rearing had previously been shared by all the adults in the home, it now became the domain of women. Women ruled the home and child-rearing, and men ruled the outside world.

It also turned labor into a commodity, in that its value was now determined by the amount paid for it. Since men's work in the factory earned a wage, it came to be seen as more valuable than women's work in the home, which didn't. Men's status went up; women's and children's status went down. Women and children became even more closely connected emotionally, while men became more emotionally isolated. And it derailed the process by which boys develop their feeling life and mature into men. To understand this, we'll have to look at how children become adults and at the effects on that process of being mother-reared.

**Being mother-reared.** First, remember that children need help learning about their feelings. They need adults to name for them what they're feeling ("you seem angry", "you look scared"), and they need to see adults having a feeling life so they can see how it works. The fact that each of us modeled our own feeling life on that of our parents becomes obvious every time we find ourselves reacting just like they did, despite having promised ourselves that we wouldn't.

Now consider the possibility that there might be two different forms of adult feeling life\* -- a male form and a female form -- and that these forms are passed down from father to son and mother to daughter. What happens when the men are no longer involved in child-rearing and it is all done by the women? Quite simply, the girls are taught by their mothers how to have a female feeling life, but the boys are not taught by their fathers how to have a male feeling life. A boy may learn the female form from his mother, but it will never quite fit for him or seem indigenous to his masculinity. Over the generations, the male feeling life gradually dies out until we arrive at the situation today, in which most of the men are undeveloped emotionally or even numb, and society believes that feeling itself is inherently feminine.

As infants, we form our sense of identity through our relationships with the adults around us. A little girl says to herself, "I know who I am, I'm just like Mom." Both her personal security and her gender identity are reinforced

by being close to Mom. Dependency on Mom is okay because she and Mom are similar. All she has to do is wait and someday she'll be a Mom, too.

For a little boy, the story is quite different. As an infant, he needs his mother just as much as a girl does, but to establish himself in a masculine identity, he needs to shift his attachment to his father. If his father is physically close and available, all goes well. But if there is no man to attach to, the boy has a problem. He has to identify himself by differentness instead of by sameness. He has to look for security in separateness and distance instead of in closeness. Dependency on Mom becomes a threat to his maleness, and he is constantly torn between his personal need for closeness and his gender-identity need for separateness and independence. This creates an unresolvable anxiety in him and to cope with it he begins to shut down his feelings and go numb inside.

#### EFFECTS ON MEN

**Shame.** The boy doesn't know that the whole child-rearing process is flawed. He only knows that his Dad is distant. He wonders, "Why doesn't Dad love me?" If he decides it's because "I'm bad," he will conclude, "I hate myself." If he decides that "Dad is bad," he will progress to "I hate Dad," thence to "I hate men," and again arrive at "I hate myself."

And underneath it all he will long for his father and for his father's love. This longing will probably be denied and hidden under anger or indifference, but the size of the anger or indifference testifies to the size of the longing. He will decide that his father or masculinity itself is flawed in some way, that it is not lovable or trustworthy. He will feel shame around his maleness and may need to attack it in others or defend it in himself. He will feel anxious about whether he is a 'real man'.

**Isolation.** In order to keep these feelings repressed, he will have to isolate himself emotionally. He will develop 'The Wall.'

If he lets a woman close, it throws him back into the fear that closeness with Mom will erode his masculinity. To cope with this fear, he has to control the woman and/or his feelings. Much of men's violence towards women arises from this dilemma.

If he lets a man close, it re-stimulates his longing for Dad and all the shame, despair, fear, and anger associated with it. These feelings are generally even stronger than men's fear of being close to women, and are a main source of men's enormous fear of love between men

(homophobia), and of the violence used to suppress it.

Sex becomes the only way to feel close to someone, so his desires for intimacy become sexualized. Since his heart is blocked, the energy of the heart gets shunted into the sexual channel. When he wants to be held or loved, he thinks he wants sex. This makes sex seem very important, but it also makes it unsatisfying to the extent that it is being used as a substitute for something else. So he keeps thinking that he needs more: more sex, more variety, more partners . . . It also makes him fear intimacy with other men, because he thinks feeling close means he wants to have sex with them.

**Stunted feeling life.** Since much of his feeling life has been shut down, it has not had a chance to develop and mature. No one ever showed him what a mature male feeling life looks like, so he has no model to help him figure it out. He tends to distrust and devalue his own inner experience and substitute thinking for feeling. This causes his behavior to be overly rational and controlled, but punctuated by eruptions of raw, undigested emotion.

The energy of the prohibited emotions (usually fear, hurt, shame, need, love, and joy) gets shunted into the allowed emotions (usually anger, competitiveness, and sexual arousal). For instance, he may not recognize that he feels hurt when his lover disappoints him ("Big boys don't cry"), but only feel the anger that covers the hurt. Or his fear of approaching someone he finds attractive may be expressed as sexual bravado.

Sex and conflict become the main avenues to feel alive and engaged with others. He may engage in them passionately, but he will try to keep them from becoming too personal. He will more easily commit himself to an abstraction, such as a team or an idea, than to a personal relationship.

## SOLUTIONS

So we see that the main root of all this trouble is the separation of fathers from their children, especially their sons. From that comes the disappearance of the male feeling life and generations of men who are increasingly shut down and isolated. What can we do to heal these wounds and resurrect male feeling life? The main thing we can do is to help men reconnect with their own inner experience and with other men.

Any situation that puts a man in the company of other men and supports his emotional openness can be helpful. But, for most men, the internal walls are high and hard

to breach. Often the unconscious prohibitions on vulnerability will sabotage his attempts to open up. To overcome this, he needs the support of a sustained, conscious attention from outside. For many men, the most effective approach is to join a men's group or work one-on-one with a male therapist. Here, there is an explicit intention to tell yourself the truth, and the support required to do so.

In a men's group, a man gets to watch as other men work with their own feeling life. He gets to see how they do it, what works and what doesn't. He can try on new behaviors and see what fits. He can ask for feedback on how he comes across or on how to handle a particular situation. He can discover that he is not bad or broken.

In the context of a male community, he can discover that closeness and connection actually reinforce his masculinity, rather than diminish it. He can explore his feelings and learn to work with them skillfully. But most of all, he can experience being held and supported by a masculine love. This is the blessing that boys need as they develop into men.

I have seen again and again in my groups that as a man receives this blessing and his wounds heal, his feeling life blossoms. He experiences himself as more full and alive. He becomes generous and begins to nurture those around him, both inside and outside of the group. He becomes a more active and involved father and often a coach, mentor, scoutmaster, or the like. His intimate relationships become deeper and stronger as he begins to relish intimacy rather than retreat from it.

As more and more men develop this way, we will see fathering come back into vogue. Indeed, we have already seen good-father images reappearing in movies and advertising, and recently also in social and political debate.

The women's movement has made great strides in reclaiming power as a feminine attribute. I applaud them for it. Now it is time for the men to reclaim feeling as a masculine attribute. We will know we have succeeded when sons everywhere see their fathers dancing for joy.

*\*from Robert Bly, oral teaching, 1984.*

© 1996 Steven Kessler. *The fairy tale mentioned is called "Mogarzea and his Son" and can be found in Andrew Lang's Violet Fairy Book. Steven Kessler is a psychotherapist practicing in Albany, CA who began leading men's groups in 1984. He can be reached at [www.EFTTherapyCenter.com](http://www.EFTTherapyCenter.com).*