

The World of a Middle-Aged Male

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Last fall, in the course of a sermon at the Unitarian Church in Summit, New Jersey, I found myself suggesting several times that much of our common world, our political, economic and social system has been shaped and molded in response to the perspectives, the values and the view point of white, middle-class, middle-aged men. In the discussion which followed that sermon, one of the men in the congregation was intrigued enough by those references to ask me to say a bit more about the peculiar nature of this masculine perspective. As is often the case in the discussion following the sermon, I found that I was being called to address an issue which I had not thought through fully. I stumbled around the question a bit and then admitted that it was a subject which demanded more thought.

Since that time, I have found myself thinking about the role of the middle-aged male perspective in our common world. I have found it surprisingly difficult to get my mind around this topic, perhaps because I am seeing it from the inside and therefore it tends to get all mixed up with my understanding of reality. It is quite possible that I might have walked around the topic without ever really addressing it, were it not for one simple fact. When it came time to celebrate--rather to observe--my fifty-sixth birthday I suddenly realized that I am now on the far side of middle-age, that if I did not address the topic soon, I would have to confront it from memory rather than immediate experience. And so, this morning, in the conviction that my experience is not unlike that of others in my cohort, I would like to use our time together to describe something of the world of this middle-aged, late middle-aged male.

The first thing I would share with you concerns the persistent sense of contingency and insecurity which surrounds the status of a male in our culture. There is no clear boundary between childhood and manhood in our society. Oh, there are some minor indicators along the way--the inevitable physiological changes, the inescapable psychological changes, the social indicators. One moves from short pants to long pants and back to shorts again; one rejects the world of girls, embraces the world of buddies, and returns to the world of women or acknowledges a permanent commitment to men; one obtains a driver's license, registers for the draft, can drink alcohol legally. But none of these is more than a pointer on a journey which has no clear end. One is less a boy, but never securely a man. In my experience, that insecurity about his status stays with the male in our culture throughout his life, emerging again and again in surprising ways. It may go far toward explaining such things as our overt and latent homophobia, and aspects of this nation's foreign, economic and social policies. Indeed, I would

suggest that the recent war in the Persian Gulf, and our even more recent bombing of Iraqi facilities says far more about masculine insecurity and the need to prove something to someone that it ever said about our true national interests.

I am reminded that my first solo venture into the world of men involved the regular visit to the neighborhood barber shop. There, in an atmosphere redolent of tobacco smoke, hair tonic, and after-shave lotion, I sat quietly in a corner, the leather seat of the chair sticking to my bare legs, trying not to be seen, listening to men discussing politics and sporting events and jobs. Occasionally they would make some comment that I only half-understood, and after an outburst of laughter, someone would glance in my direction, and I would pretend that I was totally absorbed in my comic book and that I heard nothing of what was being said around me. Always I felt as if this was a world in which I did not belong, a world of arcane knowledge, of secret handshakes and shared mysteries which I might some day enter, if I were good enough and strong enough, but to which I had no claim at the moment. And, that sense of intruding upon a world in which I do not belong is with me still when I make my visits to the barber shop. I sit as quietly as when I was a small boy, and try to be inconspicuous, and hope that I will not be noticed until my turn has come.

As I grew older, I entered upon the responsibilities of men in our culture. I took my first job when I was twelve years old, and I have never been without regular employment since. I left home at seventeen, three days after graduating from High School, to begin my college career. I worked my way through school. I was married at nineteen, and a father at twenty-five. Despite all of this, my sense of being a man was fragile and insecure. Even after Beverly and I were married, I was frequently stopped by highway policemen. The officer would insist, "You don't look old enough to be driving, son. Let me see your driver's license." And there he stood, looking at the license and then at me. Shaking his head he would hand back the license and return to the patrol car without a word, silently suggesting that I was pretending to a world in which I had no place--the world of men.

I still remember vividly the first time someone acknowledged me as an adult. I was in graduate school, married, and a father. I was walking down Fifty-seventh street in Chicago, when I heard a voice call, "Sir, Sir!" At first I didn't answer, assuming that the call must be addressed to someone else. When it was repeated again, I turned around. There was a young man, perhaps college age. He was, indeed, addressing me. He needed directions. I gave them to him, and he said, "Thank you, sir," and went on his way. I stood in the middle of the sidewalk for sometime, reflecting on the fact that for the first time in my life, someone had gratuitously included me in the world of men. An invisible boundary had been crossed that spring afternoon. But it was an unstable boundary--one which needs to be crossed again and again. To be sure, as the years have accumulated, people no longer assume I am too young for anything, but that early sense of insecurity about being a man in this society remains part of my inner life, and the

consequent need to prove something to myself and to others emerges at strange, unexpected and sometimes inappropriate moments.

The second thing I would tell you about the world of the middle-aged male is that it is lonely. As a young child, I had friends of both genders, with whom I played games and shared hopes and fears. I remember a free-wheeling, uninhibited quality to those early relationships. But I remember, too, being told "be a man," and "stand on your own two feet," as if the two were synonymous and as if relationship were subversive of manhood. As I grew older, friendships with girls were viewed as indicative of flawed masculinity, and male friends gradually metamorphosed into competitors. To be masculine was to be the best, the king of the hill, the alpha animal. And so masculine relationships became contests, ways in which we measured ourselves against each other. Our "friends" were those we competed against, sometimes winning and sometimes losing, not people with whom we could share our pain or our hope. We buried our weaknesses, our insecurities, our fears and flaws under a mountain of bluster and bravado and let no one see our inner selves, for there, hidden deep inside, was the clear evidence of our inadequacy, ample reason to be rejected. On the other hand, our successes were always interpreted as having been gained at the expense of others, and therefore were, by their very nature, isolating. We were caught in a painful paradox. To lose was to be isolated, to win was to be isolated, and the contest was the only model of male relationship we knew. For us, language became a way of holding each other at arms length, of sparring with each other. Early on we learned to wall off our inmost selves, lest our weaknesses be used against us by our friends in the competition to be alpha.

As I emerged from childhood, I learned to keep my own counsel, to enter into those contests I could win and avoid those which would expose my weakness, to expect no intimacy from my friends and to offer none. I learned to hug my pain and my grief and my uncertainty to me and to share it with no one; I learned to be modest in sharing my joys and my accomplishments. I learned to live lonely in a world full of people. And that loneliness is still part of the world of this middle-aged male. When people congratulate me for some accomplishment, I seldom know how to respond, for it conjures up that old sense that in winning I have diminished someone else and therefore cut myself off. When I am in distress, I have difficulty sharing my pain with others. As a man, I am supposed to be strong enough to handle such things alone. The world of the middle-aged male is often a lonely world. Long ago, we locked our most private selves away behind a door and over the years we have misplaced the key. What is worse, often we have forgotten that inner-self is even there, behind the locked door. We learn to live in a world of bluster and bravado and pretense as if that were the only reality.

As a third element in the structuring of our world, the middle-aged male is often strangely distanced from the world of natural rhythms and processes by which life is sustained. For males in our culture, life is a linear progression, growing from strength to strength, from power to power, from accomplishment to accomplishment, and then facing, inevitably, the decline, defeat and death. We do

not have the experience of the monthly menstrual cycle to remind us that we are part of a larger cycle of existence, and that our lives and our deaths, our accomplishments and our failures are all contained within that recurrent reality. And so, for us, life is a series of challenges to be met, obstacles to be overcome, difficulties to be swept aside as we move from one struggle to another, onward and upward forever. There is little in our experience to reassure us or remind us of our natural limits. We are inclined to believe that only our own lack of vision, strength, power, courage limits what we might accomplish. For us the natural world is to be struggled with, to be shaped and molded in keeping with our dream and our sense of responsibility. We stand outside the world of natural necessity.

In this connection, I remember the birth of my first child. Beverly's labor began late on a December afternoon. I took her to the hospital, where she was admitted, and I was allowed to sit with her in her room for a while. Then, I was ushered out and down a corridor into the "fathers' room"--a cell of a room on a corner of an upper floor of the old building. It was furnished with one settee and several chairs, upholstered in the same shade of bilious green vinyl. There was a bare light bulb hanging from the center of the room, a table propped against the wall because one of its legs was missing, and a stack of magazines, all at least six years old. There was nothing else and no one else in the room. I was told to make myself comfortable until someone came for me in a little while.

I waited and I waited and I waited and I waited. Hours passed. No one came to the door; no one else was in the room. After a while I thought perhaps they had forgotten me. I went out into the corridor. The lights had been dimmed. One person dozed at the nurses station. No one else was to be seen down that long corridor. I returned to the room and waited. I listened to the wind howling around the corner of the building. I walked to the window and long I watched the snow falling like a universe of stars into the pool of light from a street lamp far below me. I waited. There was no place to lie down. I wrapped my coat around me and dozed in a chair. At last, shortly after dawn someone came to tell me I was a father. "A boy or a girl?" I asked. "Don't know," was the answer, "someone will come for you in a little while." Again I waited.

At last I was taken to see Beverly and learned we had a son. I asked to see him. They took me down a hall where I could look through a glass window into the nursery, where my son lay in a bassinet. Later that day, I was visiting with Beverly when a nurse came into the room carrying my son. Seeing me, she acted as if I had leprosy and ordered me from the room. I stood in the hall and waited while Beverly nursed our child. Then he was whisked away and I was readmitted to the room. I had no chance to hold him or touch him until the day we took him home. The message was clear and unmistakable. Men are what is called in the theater "Fifth business." We play a small, essential part, necessary to the development of the drama, but we are not central characters. We are, you will forgive the play on words, merely spear carriers. There is a world of profound mystery out there which we can sometimes glimpse, but never fully own or understand. And so our lives are often one dimensional--focused upon

achievement and accomplishment in a rationalized and structured world but strangely and dangerously disconnected from the reality in which it is rooted.

This brings me to the fourth element in the world of the middle-aged male: an inordinate sense of responsibility. One of my earliest memories concerns the aunt who was my surrogate mother smiling down at me and telling me that when I became a man, when I grew up, I might be president of the United States. And then, the women who were her two best friends looked at me and asked, "When you are in the White House, you will let us come live with you, won't you? When you are a man, you will take care of us, won't you?" I now know that it was a joke. Like many jokes it carried a message. A man is responsible for taking care of other people, especially women. And that message was regularly reinforced.

As I mentioned, I was twelve years old when I took my first job--delivering packages on my bicycle for a local women's garment store. I vividly remember my first pay-day. I received three dollars for five days of deliveries. I took the money home and handed it to my aunt, who took it and put it in her purse and commented, "You are really growing up. Now you are a bread-winner." And that was the case with all the money I earned until I left home at seventeen. It was not mine to use for my own purposes, or to save for my future. It was part of my contribution to the family, my means of accepting masculine responsibility.

One consequence of that sense of responsibility is a persistent need we often feel to control and to be right. To be a responsible man is to accept the burden of structuring the world, of fighting against the inevitable, of knowing what is good for others, of looking out for those who depend upon you, smoothing their paths, protecting them from dangers, even dangers of their own making. To be responsible as a man is to know what is best for other people and to act in their behalf. To be responsible as a man is to act for others even though they misunderstand the motives, and would rather not be protected, and would rather stand or fall by their own efforts. To be responsible as a man is to be burdened with the weight of the world, and to struggle to conform the world to your vision of what is right and proper and safe and acceptable by whatever means may be necessary, to save the world, even if in doing so, you must threaten its destruction. Sometimes, to be responsible is to be misunderstood and to have motives questioned, but whatever the cost, a man does what he must to meet his responsibilities. For a man is, above all else, a doer, an actor, a shaper of the world and of people in the world, driven by a sense of remorseless responsibility.

Assuming that my experience of the world is not all that unique, that to some degree, many white, middle-class, middle-aged males in our culture have been formed and shaped by similar experiences, what are we to make of the fact that most of the positions of power and influence in our society are filled by white, middle-class, middle-aged males? These are the people who dominate the congress, the state houses, the court houses, all the agencies of government. These are the people who dominate the educational establishment, the religious establishment, the media, the military and para-military organizations, and the

world of business and commerce. And we bring to our positions of power and influence a fundamental insecurity which requires that we prove our masculinity to ourselves and to others over and over again, sometimes in the midst of the most inappropriate situations. We bring to our situations a profound loneliness which keeps us from acknowledging our pain and hurt or owning our weaknesses and failings, or reaching out for the healing touch of another human being. We substitute power for relationship and rely upon a brittle sense of our own virtue to justify our decisions and actions. We bring to our destiny a persistent detachment from the natural rhythms of life. We stand outside the door, we look in from behind a glass partition, we wait in our isolated cells while the winds howl around us and new life is brought into being somewhere out of our sight and awareness. And we bring to our struggles a crushing sense of responsibility which causes us to want to protect those we love, even at the expense of smothering them, to structure the world according to our dreams, even at the expense of destroying spontaneity, to do the manly thing even at the price of our own moral and ethical values. There are times when I think that we, white, middle-class, middle-aged males represent the most profound of all threats to the entire human venture.

Is there hope for us? I don't know. At times I wonder if we can ever overcome all the years of conditioning that have led us to identify our condition with innate human nature. But every now and then I have a glimpse of another possibility. Recently I watched "A Gathering of Men," a video program in which Bill Moyers interviews the poet, Robert Bly. As I remember it, there was a moment when the program shows Bly talking with a group of men. Suddenly, in the midst of his talk about the need for mentors, the need to break through the isolation, the insecurity, the compulsion to control, he stopped and asked all the men in the room fifty-five or older to stand up. Then he asked all the men in the front row to get up and move to the back, and allow the elders, the men fifty-five and older, to come and sit in the front of the room. For a moment no one moved. Then, slowly, the younger men got up and moved to the back. The older men came down front, and took the seats of honor. Again a moment of silence. Then someone began to applaud. And the young men stood and gave the elders a standing ovation. And the old men, some of them at least, began quietly to weep.

And I began to weep with them, for here I thought I saw a hopeful sign: Perhaps our manhood is not something that needs always to be proved; perhaps loneliness is not our necessary state. Perhaps we can reach out to each other, affirm each other, learn from each other, own our weakness and our strength without diminishing ourselves or others. Here I thought I saw a sign that we, too, are part of the process by which life is forever renewed. We do not give birth, but only we can convey the message of what it means to be fully a man, and perhaps that is our true calling, our real vocation, our major responsibility--not to bear the burdens of the world alone, not always to shape resistant reality to our dreams, but to share from generation to generation a wholesome, richer, deeper view of manhood. Here I found a sign that perhaps we can break out of generations of conditioning, begin to see the world from other, less lethal perspectives than those of power and responsibility, of insecurity and loneliness. Here I found a sign that

perhaps even my generation might begin to discover a new definition of what it means to be a man in our world

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