

February Reflections

The ongoing effort to develop a viable spirituality for men requires attention to situation and context. In an explicitly Christian context, spirituality has to do with responding to the call of God the Father, putting on the mind of Christ and following the guidance of the Holy Spirit. From a secular perspective, spirituality involves developing a solid personal identity and healthy relationships, finding meaning and purpose in life, and discerning a transcendent dimension in ordinary activities.

The societal context for developing a male spirituality can be called “post- patriarchal.” This term suggests that many people in the Western world now recognize the contradictions built into modern patriarchal structures and are engaged in creating a more equitable and just society. It is unfortunately true that both men and women continue to suffer from lingering sexism. At the same time, progress is being made in many areas: husbands and wives sharing domestic duties; male and female colleagues collaborating at the worksite; divorced men getting shared time with their children; and women holding high positions in public institutions, including the Supreme Court and the President’s Cabinet. Our post-patriarchal society offers men a great opportunity to develop a personal spirituality and to collaborate with women in creating a society where both sexes can flourish.

In the United States, the 1990 publication of the best-selling *Iron John: A Book About Men*, by the poet Robert Bly, sparked renewed interest in developing a distinctive masculine spirituality, designed, in part, as a response to the sophisticated feminist spirituality that had been growing in influence since the early 1970s. Bly argued that modern culture, including the feminist component, produces soft men who are vulnerable, domesticated, beaten down, and passive. These men are lacking in energy and passion, out of touch with their feelings, angry at their fathers, and less than truthful in their relationships with women. Drawing on traditional mythology, Bly advised men to follow the advice Hermes gave to Odysseus: “Raise the sword.” The raised sword symbolizes warrior energy, setting boundaries, learning to fight constructively with women, acting courageously on behalf of a higher cause, resisting the temptation to be shamed by strong women, and maintaining the erotic energy associated with the wild man, Iron John, in Grimm’s fairy tale. To become strong and disciplined, men must go into “the garden,” a place of solitude, where we can reflect on the stories that define our relationships and develop our own inner sources of energy.

Christian authors have used some of Bly’s insights to develop a spirituality for men. For example, the popular spiritual guide Richard Rohr puts great emphasis on what he calls “father hunger,” which can easily become a more serious “father wound” (cf. *From Wild Man to Wise Man*, 2005 edition). Rohr argues that in contemporary society fathers are largely absent from their children as they grow up. Some have abandoned or abused their offspring, while others are too busy or too absorbed in other concerns to pay much attention to them. Moreover, in today’s world, sons seldom observe their fathers at work or know what they actually do. Rohr believes that absent fathers are at the bottom of many personal and societal ills, including low self-esteem and lack of passion in young men, high crime rates, family instability, greedy competition and violent militarism. To heal the father wound, sons must forgive their fathers and reconnect with them while developing healthy relationships with other men.

Healing father wounds is no doubt an important task for many men, but it is best understood in light of the broader spiritual responsibility of living the fundamental relationship of sonship. Not all men are fathers or husbands, but all men are sons with relationships to mothers as well as fathers. Each of these relationships has its distinct challenges and usually presents both positive aspects that invite prayerful gratitude and negative factors that call for forgiveness, healing and reconciliation. Achieving a healthy, mature relationship with our mothers is a developmental task of crucial importance. Sons who grew up in a domestic world shaped by their mothers have to separate themselves in some way from that world in order to achieve a proper sense of freedom and autonomy. This hard-won freedom enables men to reconnect with their mothers on an adult basis and to assist them as they suffer the diminishment of age. The maternal relationship becomes dysfunctional when mothers either neglect their sons or thwart their quest for autonomy, and when sons either stay stuck in the maternal world or persist in obstinate rebellion against their mothers. Men seeking to grow spiritually must take responsibility for their part in any dysfunction, while forgiving the offences of their mothers and seeking reconciliation.

Many sons report positive feelings about their mothers, praising them for a variety of virtues: unconditional love, hard work, ready forgiveness, wise guidance, individual attention, compassionate care and prudent encouragement. A healthy maternal relationship is a great resource for spiritual growth. It reminds us that God is present in the ordinary experiences of daily life and prompts prayers of gratitude for blessings often taken for granted. It is especially helpful for men to apply positive perceptions of their mothers to their image of God, who is beyond gender but is popularly described exclusively in male imagery.

In our post-patriarchal society, a growing number of sons have known the attention and care of their fathers, which prompts celebration and gratitude. Even men suffering from the father wound, who are properly working on forgiveness and healing, can often find some virtues in their fathers worthy of imitation. Many sons today, deprived of direct experience of their father's work life, bond with them through the world of sports and outdoor activities like hunting and fishing. These interactions tend to generate energy and passion, while providing opportunities for conversation on weightier matters. Athletic competition no doubt has a dark side, but it is also an effective teacher of teamwork, sportsmanship, discipline and excellence as well as how to deal graciously with victory and defeat.

Within a comprehensive framework that includes positive and negative interactions with both mothers and fathers, individual men can discern their particular path to spiritual growth. For some sons this means recognizing, celebrating and imitating parental virtues, such as hard work and personal sacrifice. For others, the task is to forgive and reconcile with parents, living or dead, who were absent, abusive, domineering or manipulative. Spiritually mature sons forge their own unique path in life, striving to avoid the mistakes of their parents while building on their virtues.

For Christian men, Jesus is the prime example of genuine sonship. From the sketchy Gospel accounts, we know that Jesus was obedient to his parents (Lk 2: 51), but found ways to become his own person. Already at age 12, he established some distance by staying in the Temple for discussion with teachers of the law (Lk 2: 41-54), and, as an adult, he left his family to connect with the reform movement of John the Baptist (Mk 3: 21). During his public ministry, he rejected efforts of his mother and brothers to get him to

return home because they thought he was “out of his mind” (Mk 3: 21). Nevertheless, he continued to listen to his mother and learn from her, as suggested by his response to her request for more wine at the wedding feast at Cana in Galilee (Jn 2: 1-12). This close relationship with his mother continued to the end of his life when, dying on the cross, he put her in the care of the beloved disciple (Jn 19: 25-27). Furthermore, we can assume that Jesus had a healthy relationship with his father Joseph, since he spoke so affectionately of God as “Abba,” a familiar term, like Daddy, used by children in addressing their fathers. For Jesus, his experience of Abba provided perspective and motivation for dealing with his family relationships (Mk 3: 31-35).

Reflection on Jesus as son of God and son of Mary and Joseph reminds all sons of our responsibility to become our own person, to develop our distinct talents, and to achieve personal integrity and wholeness. The current literature on male spirituality commonly advises men, who are assumed to be rational active agents by nature and culture, to strive for wholeness by integrating the feminine characteristics of emotion and nurture. This flawed strategy is based on a popular understanding of the theory of contrasexual archetypes propounded by the Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung (1857-1961). Without going into detail, the theory generally claims that the male psyche includes an opposite sex, mostly unconscious feminine archetype known as the “anima,” characterized by Eros or psychic relatedness. Through the process of individuation, directed by the organizing archetype known as the “Self,” a man can move toward psychic wholeness by bringing the feminine anima principle into the light of consciousness, where it can energize and expand his relationships and activities. By a similar dynamic, women achieve wholeness by embracing their contrasexual archetype called the “animus,” characterized by Logos, or outer-directed rationality. Contemporary Jungian scholars tend to interpret this theory metaphorically so they can speak of “evolving masculinity and femininity as two energies within each individual,” without perpetrating a sexist bias. On the other hand, when spiritual mentors employ the theory in a literal and uncritical way, they often reinforce the gender stereotype that men are rational and women are emotional.

Searching for a more acceptable approach to male spiritual development, we can begin with the Christian understanding, rooted in scripture, that we humans are inspirited bodies. This incarnational anthropology implies an essential connection between biology and psychology, between sex and gender, which effectively rules out new androgynous theories that deny any gender differences between men and women. Christian anthropology, however, is open to a more flexible and fluid relationship between physical bodies and gender traits. For example, men generally have greater upper body strength and are better suited for certain types of military combat than women; but this does not mean that women cannot serve effectively in the army. Mothers create a special bond with their infant children by breastfeeding them; but this does not mean that men cannot play an effective nurturing role.

Some studies suggest that men have a strong emotional need to achieve success, combined with a fear of failure, while women have a great desire for intimacy, accompanied by a fear of being alone. Thirty years ago, when I presented those two emotional options to couples getting married, almost all men chose success and almost all women intimacy. Today, when couples are presented those same options, a growing number of women choose success and men intimacy. This anecdotal challenge to traditional gender roles finds support in the common experience of both sexes: for example, stay-at-home fathers lovingly care for their children and women compete vigorously in sports.

This new fluid situation demands a more flexible approach to developing a viable male spirituality. Individual men must find their own path to holiness. For some, this means creatively setting a direction suggested by these tasks: becoming more interdependent in relationships; seeing God as compassionate and forgiving; recognizing the role of divine grace in failure and success; learning from Christ, the community builder; participating more fully in the church; treating those who are different more charitably; spending more time in meditation and prayer; and trusting less in self and more in God. For other men, the path is set by a quite different set of spiritual tasks: developing greater self-confidence; dealing more effectively with strong women; seeing God as Abba; imitating the commitment of Christ to the cause of God and humanity; taking a leadership role in the church; working for justice and peace; relating prayer and everyday life; and cooperating with God in bringing the kingdom to fulfillment.

Men searching for a balanced spirituality must attend to their head and heart, understand their strengths and weaknesses, decide on the most helpful path to holiness, and adopt practices to become better disciples of Christ. God calls us by name as unique individuals. We do not have to live up to any gender stereotype. We do need to integrate undeveloped or repressed parts of our psyche (whether traditionally identified as masculine or feminine) that impede our personal growth and cloud our relationships.

Some men make spiritual progress through the traditional Christian practices of weekend liturgies, bible study, spiritual reading, meditation, examination of conscience, mortification, devotions and the sacrament of penance. Others have derived great benefit from male support groups and retreats, where they openly discuss and symbolically address often hidden aspects of their lives, such as their experience of greed, their private prayer life, their sexual temptations, and their work-related stresses. Participants often come away from these sessions with greater respect for the virtues and struggles of other men.

An authentic male spirituality must have a social dimension. Some of us humans, especially women, still suffer from lingering patriarchal patterns that must be challenged. Too many of us men are in horrible circumstances: unemployed or underemployed; lacking education and job skills; on the streets or in jail; affiliated with violent gangs; no fathers or mentors and no hope for a better future.

Without fanfare, many individuals are doing their part to improve the situation. We need to celebrate the fathers who take seriously their responsibilities to their offspring, the sons who rise above the limitations of their fathers, the mentors who spend time with disadvantaged youngsters, and the teachers and coaches who show special care to troubled teenagers. It is clear, however, that we need systemic change to deal with our massive problems: better education opportunities for disadvantaged students; wider employment opportunities; alternatives to gang membership; more equitable treatment by law enforcement; fewer minorities going to jail for minor drug offenses. Christian men who have made it in society have a responsibility to assist those left behind. An integrated male spirituality includes not only mature sonship and personal growth, but also commitment to help create a more just society where all human beings can flourish. These challenges, that can seem overwhelming, thrust us into the care of the Source of all hope, the One who makes all things possible.