



America's New Man

Introducing the men's movement—or how to turn a bunch of patheticos into a loving and hugging band of drum-bangers, poem-shouters, and Dad-haters.

by Andrew Ferguson

Austin, Texas

It's early Saturday morning and Chuck is getting down in his body. Chuck is overweight. His jeans are cinched a good distance below his waist, down where his stomach descends into his pubic bone. His jeans have been ironed. The crease brushes the top of his Nikes, which look brand new.

Chuck is getting a divorce, his third. Too, he's a drunk, as he told me last night, or rather a recovering alcoholic, also a sex addict. These are the two addictions he has so far been able to acknowledge and process through. He is worried there might be more. Plus his life is littered with co-dependencies.

All of which led him inexorably to the First International Men's Conference: A Journey Toward Conscious Manhood in the basement exhibition hall of the Stouffer Arboretum Hotel in Austin, but none of which he's thinking about at the moment, for the moment is the place where he is now, it's all there is in fact, and Chuck is trying to experience just this moment by listening to his body. A speaker with a microphone at the front of the hall is guiding the experience. Chuck rolls his head loosely on his shoulders. He bends his knees, rises and falls on the balls of his feet, pushing himself downward, lower and lower onto the indoor-outdoor carpeting, past the cigarette burns and the flattened wads of gum, deeper and deeper into his body. All around him are other men, more than 700 of them, dressed in Dockers and Izod shirts, some in T-shirts and running shorts, each trying to listen to his own body, too, while at the same time listening to the speaker at the podium.

The speaker is Shepherd Bliss, a pioneer in the men's movement and an acknowledged expert in bodywork. "Feel the weight of your hands," Dr. Bliss says softly, and Chuck swings his arms gorilla-fashion,

Andrew Ferguson is an editorial writer for Scripps Howard News Service.



palms facing backward. "Root your body to the ground with your proud serpent's tail," says Dr. Bliss. Chuck pushes his skinny bottom outward behind him. The room is as silent as eternity. "Let the fullness of your bellies relax," says Dr. Bliss, "feel the pride in your belly." Chuck thrusts the arc of his stomach outward, straining the buttons on his oxford cloth shirt. "This is the great bow of a male pelvis," Dr. Bliss says. "Now let go!" His voice is a thunderous whisper over the PA, and from the back of the silent swaying group comes a high keening sound, then a sob from somewhere else, and Chuck begins to sniffle. It is only in the last year or so that he has learned to cry. Someone in the exhibition hall calls out for his Dad. Chuck's sniffle descends from his nasal passages into his throat and as his throat chokes up the sniffle is squeezed deeper, into his chest cavity and then down into his pelvis, and then suddenly it shoots back up, opening his throat, and his face contorts and turns upward and from deep in his body comes a yowl: "Yeeeeiiii!" The leader falls silent while the mewling and yowling and keening fill the room. "Listen!" says Dr. Bliss. "Hear the sounds of men!"

Harken to the sounds of men, of men made new! Whimpers, sobs, shuddering grunts from the solar plexus, high-pitched beseeching whines for the mom and dad who did you dirt—these are the sounds of men today, drowning out the beer-belly belching and ulcerated gurgling and hapless farting and midnight snorting and locker-room scratch-scratch that have been the signature noises of men in the past.

Take it from Robert Bly, a poet who once won an award, and from Bill Moyers, his PBS flack whose "A Gathering of Men" runs like a tape loop on public television stations. Take it from "20/20" and *Newsweek* and the *New York Times*; take it from *Fortune* and *USA Today*: The men's movement is "sweeping the country," scooping up bricklayers and accountants, lumberjacks and corporate attorneys as it rolls through every village and hamlet, leaving sobbing men transformed in its wake, more sensitive, more in touch with the inner child, more resistant to the oppression of a heartless culture. Take it from Victoria Rich Communications, the public relations firm wisely hired by the sponsors of the conference in Austin:

All across the country, men are coming together to explore the meaning of being a man in the '90s. Members of the rapidly growing men's movement, a phenomenon already totaling more than 100,000 predominantly professional men, are searching for and finding the courage—in the company of other men—to look deep within themselves for answers to difficult questions about their manhood.

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All across the country . . . rapidly growing . . . a phenomenon! But all is not well. Leaders of the movement—the seminar-holders, book writers, newsletter publishers, videotape lecturers, drum makers, and mail-order cataloguers—are getting a little annoyed. Not every press account has shown the same respect as *Newsweek* and Moyers and "20/20": some have focused on the "externalities" of their movement, the drums, the chanting, the feathered headdresses, the American Indian affectations, the pseudo-orgiastic dancing, to the exclusion of the substantive issue, which is, let's face it, to explore a deep masculinity that does not oppress women, children, or other men. And it's undeniable. Each of these outward signs has by now been used for target practice by every freelance satirist and cheap-shot artist in the country.

For the purposes of this account, then, let's stipulate that the drums are fine. The chanting is perfectly okay. The feathers—they look fabulous. Really. And the dancing is no fruitier than what you'd find at a Tri Delt Oktoberfest in Champaign-Urbana. But the movement leaders should hon-

or the showman's cliché that all publicity is good publicity. Every Jay Leno wisecrack and smartass piece in *Esquire* reinforces the notion that the men's movement actually exists. And the notion, however implausible, is an undoubt-

ed moneymaker. Men's movement leaders can get annoyed if they want, but they're getting annoyed all the way to the bank.

The Men's Conference in Austin was, as its title suggests, the world's first, "an important next step in the further development of the men's movement"—the words of the conference chairman, Marvin Allen. Marvin is a slight, bearded man with an understated Texas accent, if such a thing is possible, and an uncertain manner that suggests he might at any moment have to break off conversation and dive into a foxhole. His bio describes him succinctly as "director of the Texas Men's Institute, founder and creator of the Texas Wildman Gatherings, psychotherapist, writer and national lecturer on men's issues." He is also, let it be stressed, an operator of great gifts. This conference was more than his idea: it was his monument. But the practical limits of his leadership were painfully evident, too. Where, one wondered, was Robert Bly, the movement's Grand Wizard? It was a question that would not be resolved until conference's end.

The siting of the conference was auspicious, not to say inevitable. Austin is one of those American cities—like Eugene, Santa Fe, Boulder, St. Paul, Taos—with a sufficient supply of men in ponytails and women in wraparound skirts to sustain any trend, no matter how preposterous, until *Newsweek* can get around to putting it on its cover. Stroll down Sixth Street in Austin or Telegraph Av-

enue in Berkeley and you'll find the Hare Krishna temple across the street from the Roling Center, around the corner from the Yogananda Society and down the block from the Institute for Spiritual Rebirth, which is in the old est headquarters. Add to these now the local Men's Center. Every progressive town has one.

Any such movement must take its life from a story, not a metaphysics exactly but a shared belief accounting for how things are. Distilled to its essence by Bly and his colleagues, the men's movement's myth, like so many others, postulates a dreamy ideal world in the faraway past, a long-ago estrangement from paradise, and the possibility of return. The movement's Eden, in which fathers nurtured sons and taught them intimacy and emotional resilience through a community of tribal elders, was shattered by the Industrial Revolution, which dragged men away from their sons into the workplace. Dad devoted himself to the daily grind, neglected the kids, and often resorted to the bottle and such vulgar pursuits as Sunday afternoon NFL games.

The result, says the movement, is plain to see: grief, rage, disorientation, dysfunction, this last a portmanteau borrowed from a sister (brother?) movement led by specialists in "co-dependency." The commonest figure cited by movement

leaders is that 96 percent of American families are dysfunctional, providing an almost bottomless pool of potential subscribers to newsletters, purchasers of audio tapes, buyers of drums, and attendees of men's conferences. The key is to become conscious of oppression, which can take time. Most of the New Men are middle-aged. "In your twenties you buy into the American Dream, that if you get married and buy the station wagon and get a job, everything will be okay," Marvin Allen says. "By your late thirties, you learn that the Dream is a fraud." And the New Men are not only middle-aged but white. I saw two blacks attending the conference, but a gathering of men's leaders is snowier than David Duke's campaign staff. "We heard of one man of color who did seminars in men's work," Marvin Allen said, explaining the conference's complexion. "We couldn't find him. I think he's up in Canada someplace."

But under the skin, of course, all men are, well, *men*, equally capable of grasping the insidious dynamics of oppression. "They gave white men the semblance of power," another movement leader, John Lee, told *Newsweek*. "We'll let you run the country, but in the meantime, stop feeling, stop talking and continue swallowing your pain and your hurt and keep dying younger than you need to be dying." *Newsweek* followed this sobering thought with a recitation of mortality rates for American men. But the referent for *they* is of course left unidentified.

The methods for overcoming dysfunction—the conveyances for a return to that faraway ideal community of

men—were also on display in Austin. There is the drumming, first and foremost (and I'll try to mention it only this once). My acquaintance Chuck bought his drum for \$400, an octagonal affair based on a design borrowed, the drum maker told him, from the Indian tribes of the Great Plains. All weekend he walked around the hotel, clutching at it like Linus's blanket. For three mornings straight Chuck and several hundred other men gathered in the Stouffer's basement exhibition hall for a heaving hair-raising session, the boom-boom shaking through the walls and ceiling and up into the hotel's nine-story atrium while the tourists and the businessmen hurried through. Inside the exhibition hall the noise was deafening.

Why drum? One of the movement leaders put that question to an assembly of the New Men one evening. "It goes boom!" hollered one. "It grounds me!" "It clears a space for my healing!" "It connects me to something primal!" And: "It's naughty!" In a word! All the affected civility, the weak-kneed you-betcha-boss, sorry-honey-I-didn't-mean-it

deference, the subservience and subjugation of true selfhood, the *sucking up*, that has been so fastidiously pressed upon us by . . . by *them* . . . well, drumming strips it away, sends it streaming out into the world with the great sonic thunder-

strike of those \$400 drums. "It doesn't work so well when you do it alone," Chuck told me regretfully. But with hundreds of other men! The crescendo and then the final *whump!* leave an unearthly silence. Nobody should deny the effect such concentrated drumming can have deep in a listener's body, especially at 8:30 a.m. after a couple of cups of coffee.

After drumming there's bodywork, the thrusting outward of bellies and fannies, and the swinging of arms and rolling of heads in utter silence, inevitably inducing the sobs that rise from deep in the body. Then the New Men might chant the ancient ancestor chants—"Grandfathers we are calling come come." It creates the healing space, the place for safety. It connects them to the Old Men, not the workadaddy drones the New Men once were but the primal men of the forest, for the old men too chanted, locked man to man and arm in arm in thatched huts or under the great wide sky in that ideal world before . . . *they* invented the lathe and the division of labor and Caterpillar tractors and spreadsheets and the machine-shop torture devices to which . . . *they* strapped men in order to divorce them from feeling.

After chanting a movement leader will take the microphone and recite poetry in the emphatic, hyper-dramatic sonorities made famous by Bly. Each poem is greeted with a cry of "Ho!"—another signature sound of the movement, an ancient Indian phrase, the men have been advised, that translates roughly as "Right on." And stories are told, primal stories of dragons slain and treasures found, while the men ease themselves onto the indoor-outdoor carpeting, sit-

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ting cross-legged in the attitude American kindergarteners once called Indian style. All that's missing in this carefully orchestrated sequence is for an elderly woman to pass around cookies and milk before naptime.

Drumming and bodywork and chanting and storytelling and then each morning the men dispersed to workshops. The choices were daunting: Does one forgo "Manhood in the Making" in favor of "Incorporating Gestalt Therapy and the Men's Movement in Working with Men"? Could "Healing Each Other's Wounds: Straight Men & Gay Men in Dialogue" possibly be more enlightening than "Warrior's Journey Home: Healing Men's Codependency and Addictions"?

Regardless of the advertised subject matter, all movement workshops center on a common activity, which is *talk*. New Men cannot talk enough. A gathering of New Men is more than a gabfest, more than a talkathon, it is a flood of words, confessions, preachments of pain and explications of anger, tales of villainous victimization told not just in workshops but in the hotel atrium, at the urinals in the men's rooms, over Diet Cokes in the hotel bar, while having a smoke on the verandah overlooking the Arboretum. Passing two men in a hallway you might hear: "Getting fired was the first chance I had to create a space for my grieving." Talk unlocks the treasure chest of self-dramatization. It is the means whereby your tiny, simpering grievances—the sarcasms of a co-worker, the smirks of an ex-wife—are refined into a narrative with twists and turns and climaxes and delicious denouements. The day Dad missed your football game becomes a hero's tale, and the hero is—Yes! Talking about yourself (*What was I feeling at that moment? What do I feel now while I think about what I was feeling then?*) is the most delirious of intoxicants, and for the New Men it is the one addiction that dare not speak its name.

That scumbag of a boss! That bitch of a wife! Mom just stood there, while Dad—don't even ask. (You don't have to ask.) If the New Man is the Luke Skywalker of the epic, Dad is the Darth Vader, always, his heavy bronchial breathing rumbling beneath every tale a New Man tells.

“People say I’m blaming it all on my Dad,” said John Lee, during his workshop “At My Father’s Wedding.” “I’m not blamin’ anything on my Dad. I blame it on this fuckin’ culture.” A very important point, a bow to logic—after all, if you blame Dad for everything you embark on an endless regression, since Dad can blame his Dad, who was in turn screwed up by his Dad, and so on, stretching backward into the primordial soup of victimization. It’s far tidier to blame the culture. Unfortunately, in John Lee’s most famous book—*The Flying Boy*, which launched him into men’s movement superstardom and engendered a mini-industry of videotapes (“Grieving: A Key to Healing”) and follow-up books and audio tapes (“Saying Goodbye to Mom and Dad”) and lecture tours that fly the boy from Eugene to Chapel Hill and all points in between—he does indeed blame Dad for everything, and damn the endless regression. Of course Dad figured prominently as

well in his workshop, held in one of the larger meeting rooms of the Stouffer, in deference to his superstar status.

“My father ain’t here,” Lee began in his Alabama drawl. “Is yours? My father would think this was funny. And basically what I have to say to my Dad is: Fuck you.”

“Ho!” said the New Men.

“He’d say, look son, it wasn’t that bad. What the hell are you doing spending all this money doing this for? I put a fuckin’ roof over your—”

“Head!” shouted the men.

“And fuckin’ clothes on your—”

“Back!” shouted the men.

“And fuckin’ food on yer fuckin’—”

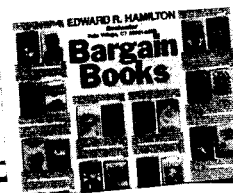
“Table!”

Laughs! Cheers! Dad always said that! John knows!

But soon the hilarity was over. There was work to do, stuff to process through. It is one of the ironies in a movement that disparages the nine-to-five grind that all this delicious self-absorption is called “work” (but still delicious!). John himself admitted that he and his girlfriend “had been working our asses off” with a Gestalt therapist to process through some of the “stuff” that was threatening their relationship.

“Tell me about your fathers, you all know about my father,” Lee said, and they did—*The Flying Boy* is in its fifteenth printing (and soon to be a major motion picture, according to the publisher). “But I must ask you this—make your comments short and succinct, so we can all talk.”

Good luck, fellows! It was an impossible request. One lucky guy from Lubbock jumped in first: “My dad—I feel a real need to reconnect with the other men here because it was just like his hyperreligiosity that I just couldn’t work through when he’d come to me and . . .” Good luck John! But it is not for nothing that John Lee is a superstar, a workshop sultan. He vacuumed the fog of logorrhea that was gathering in the center of the room



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by cutting the fellow off. He instead suggested the men break up into little groups, according to what kind of Dad they had.

"All you with passive fathers, leave your seats and come up to the front of the room. I tell you, the passive father is one of the most abusive kinds of father there is. He just won't do it. 'Dad,' you say, 'I want to talk about masturbation,' and it's like 'Argh, I ain't gonna listen to ya.' Like that. You know?"

"Ho!"

"Critical fathers—really abusive—you all come up here."

"What about if your father was passive until he drank?" asked one of the men.

"Over here," said John authoritatively. "If you had a Dad who just wasn't fuckin' there, just a disappearing Dad, you all get here in the center." People with aggressive Dads were put over by the windows. A number of the men had questions about what kind of Dad they had, and they inquired at great length.

"What if your Dad wasn't exactly invisible, it was that you were just sort of invisible, he wouldn't notice you unless sometimes—like there was once . . ." John put him with the disappearing Dads.

A mountain, a Matter-horn, an Everest of grievances! They dissolved and poured out in tears and sometimes in gut-wrenching field hollers. One fellow had to sit all by himself, because he said his Dad was okay. This brought John up short. Momentarily. "We'll talk about this Dad later. Because let me tell you," John said, full of pity, "this Dad—this one who did a pretty good job—this Dad is the toughest of all. We've got some work to do."

Meaning: Let's talk. "My dad never taught me how to be intimate with a woman," one man said.

"The men's movement will teach you," John reassured him. "It's going to take some time, you better be in it for the long haul."

One fellow's Dad refused to go out to brunch with him. "Ho!" said the other men. Nobody's Dad would talk the way the New Men wanted him to talk. They wanted to talk about their feelings; Dad wanted to watch football or read the paper or, worse, go to work.

But there comes a point when talking must cease and another kind of work be done. The last half-hour was given over to a guided meditation. The men let their heads fall as the lights in the room went down and they were told to envision Dad in their mind's eye. John's voice was quiet. "Tell your Dad goodbye. Goodbye, Dad. I gotta letcha go. Dad left you. Now you leave him. Gotta letcha go." The sniffles began in the darkened room, and then the keening, and the mewling, and then a loud "Daddy!" And then another: "Bastard!"

When the lights came back up the workshop was over. Men wiped their eyes. There had been some healing here. John announced, as an afterthought, that he would be happy to see everyone that afternoon—at a "booksigning thing" for himself.

"Ah," sighed the man next to me as we gathered our things to go. "It's amazing what ten minutes of crying can do. I feel supergreat."

It is vital that people who talk as much as the New Men never be embarrassed by anything they say; embarrassment would cramp the enthusiasm for talk, especially the talk about the subject of the day (week, year, lifetime!), which is of course *me*. Of necessity no word is too hackneyed, no sentiment too overdone, to be employed in the task of further expressing as precisely and affectionately as possible how the men's movement man might be feeling about himself at any given moment. "I've gotten better at getting in touch with my feelings," one New Man actually said one afternoon, "which is important to me, because I'm a people person."

We were all sitting in a big circle—a pow-wow!—out in the forested office park that abuts the Austin Stouffer. We had signed up, and paid \$12, for a "ropes course," in which all fifteen of us "would discover self-

empowerment, joy and hope." Our guide was Steve, who told me he was a "certified wilderness therapeutic counselor." "We use wilderness as a modality for bringing up issues and processing through them," he explained.

This requires some heavy unblocking, and of course lots of talk. We started by forming a tight knot of men, a New Age scrum, with arms crisscrossed and interlaced, and then tried to untie ourselves and expand into a large circle without letting go of one another's arms. In such close contact you realize again, with considerable force, that men are hairy creatures, often neglectful of the rudiments of hygiene, and as I felt legs rolling over the back of my neck and heads bobbing next to my thighs I wondered, not for the first time that weekend, why anyone would strive to come into closer contact with this gender.

But we did it! And this was the beginning of our coming together. So we all unlocked and sat down and talked about what we had just done several seconds before. "Some people took charge, other people just laid back," said Larry from Dayton. "I think I was taking charge too much, and this is a problem for me, one of the things I have to honor and work through. I run a small construction company, and one of the guys at work is always telling me . . ."

"Yes," said Steve, interrupting, aware that we only had three hours to complete our ropes course. "Anyone else?"

"You probably noticed what I did with my arms," said

Nobody's Dad would talk the way the New Man wanted him to talk. They wanted him to talk about their feelings; Dad wanted to watch football or read the paper or, worse, go to work.

my acquaintance Chuck. "That's a Marine Corps thing, I can't get that monkey off my back."

"Honor it," said Steve, consolingly. "Then you can start the processing through."

"I guess there's a lot of work ahead of me," Chuck admitted glumly.

"Be careful not to go up into your head too often," said the counselor. "Try to stay down in your body more."

The men were led to perform other tasks, most of them involving similarly close body contact, from which I demurred. Each exercise was followed by glowing self-appraisals, startling in their detail. The coming together grew tighter. We were a group of men, relying on one another, as men, with great enthusiasm and encouragement. We began to resemble a team on "Family Feud," with lots of clapping and commenting and hopping up and down.

After one exercise, as we sat in a circle on the ground, Larry from Dayton told us that he was feeling better. "You can see how I stood back there for a while, let somebody else take over," he said. "I've always got this stuff: 'I gotta do it.'"

"Ho!" said a couple of men.

"Did everybody hear Larry?" Steve said. "Is that old male? 'I gotta do it, I gotta earn the money, I gotta succeed, I gotta pay the bills.' We're getting rid of that. That's what this conference is all about."

Larry looked modestly at the ground, from which he had just torn up several square inches of turf.

"I want to honor Larry," Steve said, as everyone applauded. ("Good answer!") "He just made himself very vulnerable here. I want to celebrate that." The drama, the little revelations, the climax, the delicious denouement—all for Larry!

"Ho!" the men shouted.

"It's like that song," Larry said, stretching out the exquisite moment as long as possible. "'Why can't I just let someone else be strong?'"

See what I mean? A businessman from Dayton, near tears, quotes a line from "Have You Never Been Mellow," by Olivia Newton-John, and more than a dozen men answer with the Indian word for "Right on." Unembarrassable.

There were many movement leaders at the conference; the Big Dogs of the New Age, Pooh-Bahs among men; the conference brochures offered brief bios of each. Beautiful Pointed Arrow "is following a vision of creating sound chambers around the world used in chanting for world peace." Rich Armington is a

"Certified Bioenergetic Therapist"; Gaya Erlandson is a "Certified Imago Relationship Therapist." Coyote is "a ceremonialist in private practice in New Mexico," presumably uncertified. Stephen Johnson's "public work is in the areas of co-creativity and the development of an integrated, spiritually centered brotherhood of men who serve in planetary stewardship."

Among the rank-and-file, the spiritually centered brotherhood seems to be coming along quite nicely. The following colloquy, which I witnessed during one of the workshops, is exemplary of the decorum that obtains among the New Men:

WORKSHOP LEADER: You mentioned your gayness. I want to thank you for that.

MAN: Well, thank *you*. It's liberating to have that honored.

LEADER: You're welcome. But really, thank you. I do honor it.

MAN: Thank you.

LEADER: And I think that for us as men, it's important for us to celebrate it, even. So thanks for that.

MAN: Thank you.

LEADER: No, thank *you*.

MAN: No, no . . .

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Isn't it about time somebody printed how *you* feel?

This Alphonse-and-Gaston deference can get a bit suffocating, so I'm happy to report that among the Big Dogs themselves the relationship is more Tom and Jerry.

By any measure the Biggest of the Big Dogs in the men's movement is Robert Bly, and for many participants his absence from the conference was puzzling and hurtful, although not, as one leader told me, "fully negating": Like a gathering of Trekkies without William Shatner, or even George Takei, the men at the conference soldiered through, vaguely aware that their experience lacked the validation of a hero's presence.

Bly had of course been invited, but had declined. On Friday morning, he faxed to many movement leaders a letter denouncing Marvin Allen as a media hound, a sensationalizer, who was using the conference to further his own career. It was too early in the movement's growth, Bly wrote, to coalesce, much less to do so in a Stouffer hotel in full view of the press. Bly demanded moreover that the letter be read to a plenary session of the New Men at the Austin gathering.

Ignoring the wise counsel of his PR advisers, Allen decided not to read the letter to his fellow men, but word of it spread, from workshop to workshop, in hushed tones between chants and drum-banging, throughout the weekend. A rift! A cynic less advanced in the grieving process might suggest that it's easy for Bly to disparage Marvin as a press hound, now that PBS and countless fawning profiles in the slick magazines have made him a millionaire, but for the New Men the breach was hard to fathom. How could Robert Bly, who had told the world of the Wildman within, himself an Adult Child of an Alcoholic, the poet who had won an award, a man who was so . . . so *there*, how could he be wrong about Allen? But then who could doubt the good faith, the *thereness*, of Marvin Allen, originator of the Wildman weekend, founder of Austin Men's Center, not to mention the revered Texas Men's Institute, the self-effacing leader featured in *Fortune* and *Newsweek* and the *New York Times Magazine*?

"There's some pain," Chuck told me. "This conference was a chance to create a space of safety, of healing. To see this bickering between two men we all love and respect . . . obviously, there are some wounds there. But I honor them

both." This was Sunday morning, right before the closing session. All 700 of the New Men gathered in the ballroom just off the lobby for a particularly frenetic session of drumming, a bit of bodywork, and a reading from D. H. Lawrence. Then Marvin Allen climbed the stage.

He looked more fretful than usual. A few minutes before, unknown to most of the men, in the empty exhibition hall one floor below, Marvin and his conference co-chair Allen Maurer had got in a shouting match with Shepherd Bliss, the bodywork expert. Bliss insisted Bly's letter be read. Marvin demurred. It got ugly. When Maurer tried to defend his co-chairman, Bliss turned on him. "From what I can see," Bliss said, "you are acting as a co-dependent protector for Marvin!"

Devastated, the chairmen offered Bliss the podium to read the letter to the men in the ballroom, after which poor Marvin, his reedy voice faltering, took the microphone. "I've known Robert Bly for four years," Marvin said. "And in those years I've learned a lot about Robert Bly that I could share with you right now, but I won't." An even lower blow! Innuendo, betrayal, secrets among men for whom there can be no secrets! Hollers rose from the floor, say-it-ain't-so protests, the rumble of drums—war drums!—began to build, until a man popped up from the front row and grabbed the microphone from Allen.

This fellow, plump and balding, had spoken earlier in the conference, identifying himself as a "recovering Presbyterian minister," and had apologized to the men "for all the ministers in the world and the damage they've done to you." He carried, I mean to say, a good deal of moral authority.

"I know Robert Bly," said the minister, "and I know Marvin Allen, and I tell you that what they think of each other is beside the point. This is the new church. We're the healthiest group of men on this planet, but that doesn't mean we

aren't still fucked up. Bly still has a lot of work to do, so does Marvin Allen. Bly's fucked up and"—he pointed to Marvin trembling on the podium—"he's fucked up. I'm fucked up. You're fucked up. The point is, we're all fucked up!"

Ho! Another revelation, a peak experience. The drums began again, uniting them in an unbreakable bond of



fuckedupness, and there was chanting, and Shepherd Bliss told the men to telescope their necks like turtles and feel the fullness of their bellies, letting go of all the stuff that sometimes comes up when you do menswork. Coyote, the ceremonialist, lit a peace pipe in closing, and smoked it right there at the podium, honoring all the fathers who have gone before, back to the earliest days, long before the invention of fire regulations and the posting of no-smoking signs in hotel ballrooms.

Marvin regained the microphone for a final word. "When you go back to that real world—you know, the one that isn't really real, where you can't be yourself—I hope you can take some of this with you."

And so they trudged out of the ballroom, through the vast hotel atrium, hugging and sobbing, taking, by the look of it, much with them: a new drum from Drums for Modern Man, Inc., perhaps, or an extra copy, this one autographed, of *The Flying Boy*, maybe a smudge stick of sage (\$4.00) or several audio tapes from Sounds True cassettes (\$12.95), the new edition of *Is It Love or Is It Addiction?*, meditation cushions for bottoms made weary from hours of self-exploration, packets of incense, bongers for self-massage, thuribles painted in sacred Aztec symbols, Indian feathers . . .

If the men's movement didn't exist, the purveyors of all these goods would have to invent it—Say's law applies to self-empowerment, too. But the men's movement doesn't exist in any definable sense, and certainly not as we have been led to believe. I had my own peak experience during one of the conference's plenary sessions, when John Lee asked how many of the 700-plus New Men gathered before him had been in a Twelve Step program—AA, for example, or Cocaine Abusers Anonymous. A forest of hands shot up. Lee said it was about 80 percent of the participants; my own informal polling put the figure at closer to 90 percent. A large industry has long been in place to proffer salves to these unhappy people; the men's movement is for those who have gone from one to the next, from Twelve Step to Rebirthing to est to Holistic Healing. It provides them with a new gimmick, yet another excuse for thinking about, studying, exploring, investigating, dwelling on . . . me.

They share certain characteristics. All, clearly, have way

too much time on their hands. Many of the men I spoke with had been divorced twice or more. "It's beginning to dawn on me what's so odd here," a woman journalist told me one evening. "There are no—I mean *no*—good-looking men here." New Men tend to be paunchy, with much facial hair to compensate for the diminishing crop up top. Calling the Austin gathering of men the First International Losers' Conference would have been unkind but more accurate. One morning I attended a workshop, "The Healing Power of Relationships," led by an affable husband-and-wife team from Southern California, Jim Sniechowski and Judith Sherven, who have become the Regis and Kathie Lee of the movement. Amid the wisdom—"Most of you already know this stuff," Jim told them; "It's just a matter of organizing it in such a way that it speaks to what a relationship can be rather than what it is"—Judith asked a question. "How many of you are in a place where you can never, ever please a woman, sexually or otherwise?" The unanimous "Ho!" almost blew out the windows.

It is of course in the interests of *Newsweek*, with fifty-two covers to fill a year, and of Bill Moyers, constantly polishing his reputation as America's chronicler, and of Bly and Marvin Allen and Shepherd Bliss and the rest of the workshop-holders and marketers of grief to persuade us that



the movement really is rolling through every city and suburb, even where men stay married and like their kids and tolerate their jobs and have pleasant conversations, once in a while, with their parents. The claim isn't true, but we should remember that less outlandish propositions have sometimes proved self-fulfilling. The sales success of such movement bibles as Bly's *Iron John* and Sam Keen's *Fire in the Belly* (reviewed by Yale Kramer on page 64) is an ominous sign. Is it possible that the men's movement can swell outward from the ranks of the balding and sodden and pudgy and sexually inept, to overtake the well-coiffed, employed, and reasonably fit

middle-class American male? Could this rock on which American prosperity has been built, this hard-working, self-denying model of rectitude and enterprise at last succumb to the siren song of self-flattery and indulgence, and come to believe that he too is oppressed and wounded and desperately needful of expensive healing?

Sure. □

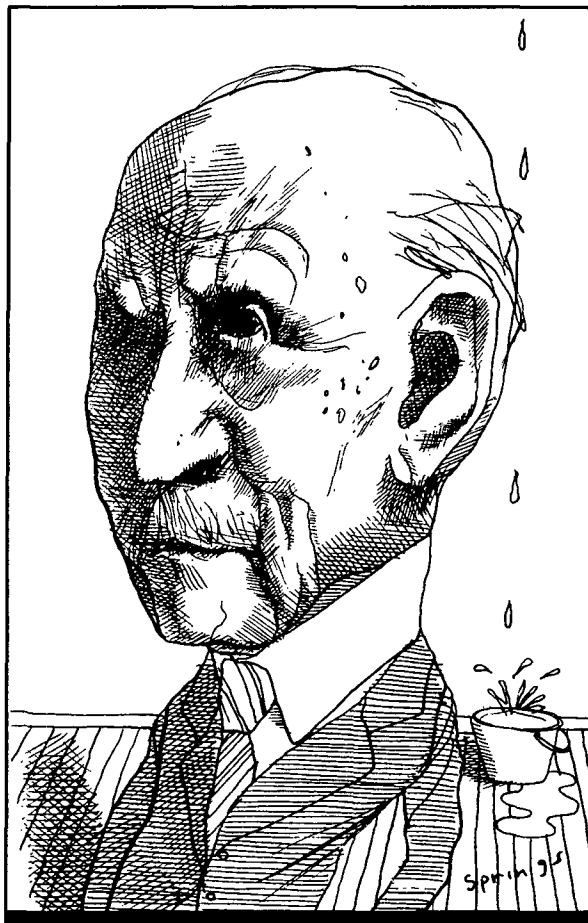
Joshua Muravchik

MacArthur's Millions

A foundation created by a strange right-winger has become a treasure trove for a variety of leftist "geniuses" and other lost causes.

In view of the fate of socialism, it seems hard to believe that an imperishable faith in socialism is a mark of genius. But the talent scouts of the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation appear to believe it. Of the 350 Americans from all walks of life who have won MacArthur Fellowships—better known as “genius awards”—no fewer than four are members of the editorial board of *Dissent*, the small quarterly devoted to what its principal editor, Irving Howe, calls the “steady work” of bearing the torch for democratic socialism. Roughly one out of every million Americans is a MacArthur genius; and one out of every ten members of the *Dissent* board. In comparison, the number of editors of *TAS*, *National Review*, and *Foreign Affairs* who are MacArthur fellows is zero. The *New Republic* and the *Atlantic* each have one (a contributing editor), the highest number I’m aware of for any political journal other than *Dissent*.

In addition to the four editors (Howe, Meyer Schapiro, Deborah Meier, and Paul Berman), at least four other MacArthur geniuses are drawn from the only slightly wider



Joshua Muravchik is a resident scholar at the American Enterprise Institute and the author, most recently, of Exporting Democracy: Fulfilling America's Destiny (AEI Press).

circle of *Dissent* contributors (Tina Rosenberg, Richard Rorty, Henry Louis Gates, William Julius Wilson). But the MacArthur selections are not entirely unbalanced. Notwithstanding its strong attraction to *Dissent*, the foundation recently conferred a MacArthur fellowship upon a fierce critic of *Dissent*—from the left. To radical historian Mary Jo Buhle, a newly anointed genius, democratic socialism is but a bourgeois subterfuge and the *Dissent* crowd are sellouts. She debunks Howe in her *magnum opus*, the *Encyclopedia of the American Left*: “He appeared prominently identified with [the] extreme rightward edge of liberalism in the pro-contra, Cold War hard-line position of the *New Republic*.¹”

Socialists, whether of democratic affinity like Howe or totalitarian affinity like Buhle, may receive another kind of windfall from the MacArthur Foundation in addition to the money, fame, and prestige of its awards. The little told story of the man whose wealth endowed the foundation holds great heuristic value for the indictment of capitalism.

John D. MacArthur fled the grasp of his overbearing father as a penniless teenager and died in 1978 as one of the

¹Of course, this is quite fantastical: Howe never let a pro-contra word pass into the pages of *Dissent*.