



Men Unlimited

by Chilton Williamson, Jr.

The comic, as Flannery O'Connor said, is the reverse side of the terrible. I suppose the spectacle of 50 to 100 men from 20 to 70 years of age disguised in Wild Man and Coyote masks as they prance in a forest glade, beat drums, eat buffalo chili, and exorcise the demon spirits of their fathers through poetry and the contemplation of Jungian archetypes could be either, depending upon your point of view as well as your sense of humor. Betty Freidan finds it "sick," but she doesn't need a mask.

Until recently my idea of a men's movement was the Commissary Commandos, an association of males from my hometown of Kemmerer, Wyoming, that spends the long third weekend of August annually on four-wheel-drive safari in the mountains, camping, eating, drinking Jack Daniel's through a bugle, playing cards and horse shoes, firing guns, and initiating new members by an agonizing ritual with which every range cow is intimately familiar. Since then I have realized that for my fellow Commandos and me to aspire to kinship with so enlightened a brotherhood would be presumptuous. While Jack Daniel's, Jim Beam, Fleischmann's, Boone's Farm, Coors, Anheuser-Busch, and Cutty Sark guarantee absolutely to make everyone a King, Warrior, and Wild Man for at least 72 hours, none of us is all that familiar with the Jungian reality underlying these archetypal characters. Also our many father-and-son pairs show no particular interest in exorcising one another. Confronted by the Commissary Commandos in the raw, Robert Bly, father of the so-called mythopoetic men's movement, would surely murmur, echoing T.S. Eliot, "That is not

what I meant—that is not what I meant, at all."

Nor is the men's movement—with the exception of small and uninfluential contingents—what feminists of both sexes assume it to be, either a force for counterattacking the political and judicial tyranny of organized feminism or a neo-Neanderthal conspiracy to round up nubile American females, hit them on the head with a club, and drag them by their hair back to home and hearth. In fact, it is a transparent ploy aimed at denying the necessity for such actions, which the men's movement, as merely another program of consciousness-raising in Native American drag, is not manly enough to perform.

In a sane and healthy society, consciousness-raising, rather than elevate consciousness, would raise hackles; in a supersane and disgustingly healthy one, it would raise leveled pistols as well. Healthy societies are unified communities, and unified communities produce individuals who are also persons whose psyches are intact because their view of the universe and of the reality behind it is predisposed by the ability to comprehend existence in the round. But ours is an insane and sick society that not only refuses to recognize ontological wholeness but denies the possibility of such a thing. Naturally this refusal makes people desperate and miserable, causing them to shop for therapists and support groups chosen according to whatever self-identity is uppermost in their minds: gay, straight, black, white, son, daughter, vegetarian, meat-eater, victim, oppressor, man, woman. In these matters, the conviction is that self-fulfillment—the secular equivalent of personal salvation—comes in selecting a dominant or simply preferred aspect of oneself and subjecting it to a single-minded course of rigorous development such as might be designed for an Olympic athlete in training to raise the Parthenon with his left foot. In physi-

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cal terms the result of such a program is a freak of nature, while in mental ones the program itself is comparable to treating a schizophrenic with a powerful drug devised to subdivide his already divided personality. The aim of consciousness-raising is a society in which everyone is a protected minority though never a minority of one, which is, after all, the meaning of "individual" in the most honorable sense of the term. The typical men's movement apostle on retreat in the wilds of Westchester County is conscious of himself as a participant in a variety of identities, which in ascending order would be: (unappreciated) Trickster, (abused) Son, (uninitiated) Male. The notion that he is, first and foremost, a human being probably never crosses his masked mind.

Aristotle and Aquinas taught their philosophical descendants that manliness is merely the human male's achievement of the fullest humanity, womanliness the human female's. Greek philosophers and Catholic theologians—and confessors—have always known that the determined quest for human perfection is the means by which this humanity is finally obtained. But this wisdom not only appeals to the modern mind, absorbed in scientism and technique, as hopelessly simplistic; it also strikes it as being exceedingly demanding, which it certainly is. Before I became a Catholic, I imagined that writing a good book was the most difficult task I could ever face in my life; now I know that being a good man is. Which brings me to another unpleasant subject, that of work. The English word virtue has as its root the Latin word *vir*, meaning man. And *La-bor est Virtus*, as my Episcopal school motto went.

Fran Lebowitz, the New York social critic and humorist, remarked some years ago that her father, by wearing a three-piece suit and fedora to the office every morning, registered his idea of work as serious business, unlike the businessman of today who commonly arrives at his place of work attired in a sports shirt and slacks, or even shorts. "Work," Mencken said, "is the only solution": not just the sole anodyne for the cosmic pain that seeps through every human life, but the activity that most directly and efficiently makes a man or woman fully human—Christian moralists say by participating in the creative action of the Divine Being Who made them in His image. Of course, this conception of work as a process—of self-discovery, self-dedication, and therefore true self-fulfillment—is today an outworn and strictly unfashionable one except among feminists, who have performed a miracle by resurrecting the old male myth of stock-broking and corporate lawyering as socially useful and humanly rewarding careers. ("Sensitive" men for decades now have suffered what Walker Percy called "fugue states" in the middle of such careers, bailed out, and devoted their time to golfing or existentialist philosophy instead.) Otherwise work has been degraded to a 40-hour week of boredom and frustration tolerated for the sole purpose of having enough money to stay soused through the weekends and make payments on the new car, the condominium, and the VCR.

But this matter of work does suggest that the mythopoetic men's movement, like so many bizarre contemporary programs, represents another silly response to a legitimately diagnosed complaint. The thesis of Robert Bly's *Iron John*, a genuinely interesting book, is that corporate industrialism has alienated fathers from their sons, both physically and spiritually, while indefinitely postponing the initiation into manhood that all male youth desire and that is in fact necessary for them to become men. Deprived of the workaday presence of their fa-

thers, young males come to suspect the abstract work performed distantly by adult males, which they finally see as something evil (multinational corporations, the CIA, the Pentagon) and indeed are so; denied the ritual initiation of pre-industrial cultures, they remain for most or even all of their lives the tender, callow youths—"soft men," Bly calls them, or naifs—that corporate society desires, encourages, and requires. If it often seems that we live in a country where there are altogether too many boys and far too few men, Bly argues, our perception is accurate enough. The Commonwealth of Peter Pan is not the same thing as Queer Nation.

What Robert Bly and the men's movement

perceive to be lacking in American and indeed contemporary men everywhere is best described as *vitality*, a quality that is being squeezed from the human psyche—but especially perhaps from the *male* human psyche—by the wine-press of Americanism, otherwise known as Modernism.

The Rocky Mountain press gave considerable coverage last summer to the increasing regional problem involving people—most of them non-Westerners—having to be rescued by expensive technological means (usually helicopters) from dangerous or daredevil expeditions in rugged wilderness country after they had attempted to scale mountain faces or ski down glaciers or simply exposed themselves to natural conditions of which they had no previous experience. From mountaineering to bungee-cord jumping, the past ten years or so have witnessed a dramatic increase in the number of sportsmen participating in hazardous activities whose rewards include, beyond cheap thrills, pride in performing feats of personal courage or the satisfaction of an experience more existentially real than those afforded by everyday life.

Part of the appeal is simply the chance to escape the boredom that afflicts all decadent societies, but most of it reflects the process—steady, inexorable, with no end in sight—of denaturalization, characterized and accompanied by suburbanization, homogenization, technologization, centralization, and abstractionism that is a crucial aspect of American decline. People who lead strenuous outdoor lives in their daily work—ranchers, game wardens, loggers, oil field roughnecks, professional hunters—do not deliberately put themselves at risk, either on the job or in their private activities: only computer programmers, ad executives, and other epicene creatures do.

Bly is onto something when he insists that it is necessary for a man, at some stage in his life, to make contact with the “Wild Man” within him if he is to discover and cultivate the fierceness (not aggressiveness) of spirit without which he can never truly be a man at all. Unfortunately, there is scarcely any opportunity in modern life to confront the Wild Man, and parents, teachers, career counselors, employment officers, social workers, cops, the BATF, the FBI, and politicians representing the two major parties offer pointed strictures against Wild Man behavior. What we need, says Bly, echoing Edward Abbey (who didn’t need a men’s movement), is more wilderness.

Last fall the *Casper Star-Tribune* printed some remarks by an employment specialist who had traveled from Denver to Cheyenne to give helpful advice to the young of the Cowboy State. Forget mining, forget ranching, forget timbering, forget roughnecking, the gentleman said or implied. There’s a whole new exciting world out there, but you gotta be smart and resilient in order to survive in it; gotta get that algebra and calculus down; gotta master those computers; gotta learn about the psychology of interpersonal relations, personnel management, the Role of the Corporation in Modern Society, and Making the World Safe for Corporations! Do that, and you got it made! A great career is in store for you in—the 1-800 number!

Put aside for the time being such “practical” (though the word isn’t of course a neologism, it is used like one throughout the American educational system) questions as whether anybody without half a million dollars can set up as a rancher these days or whether two decades from now coal mining will have

become so thoroughly automated that only robots will need apply. The issue is, young people who even a generation or two ago could look forward to active and spacious lives driving cattle and doctoring calves, breaking horses, supplying mountain sheep camps, tripping drill pipe, hauling logs out of the mountains with a team and sled, dynamiting rock formations, shooting grizzly bears and wolves, cutting wood, irrigating crops, putting up hay, tracking rustlers and arresting them, reforesting mountain slopes—all these tasks performed with the wind, soft or biting, in their faces, the warm sun on their hands and shoulders, and God’s good earth under their feet (or their horses’ hooves) where for the men and women of the American West it was and still is meant to be—are now solemnly advised to spend their adult lives planted on their butts in a climatically controlled office on the 20-something floor of a high-rise building in a futuristic Cheyenne or Casper, dressed in the regulation yuppie uniform and plugged into an electronic maze connecting them unmercifully for eight hours a day (45 minutes off for lunch) with America’s 250 million-person consumariat. Is the availability of technological and other baubles worth requiring human beings to immolate their essential humanity in the production and delivery of such trifles? What sort of society expects—in fact requires—its young to seek fulfillment and happiness in devoting their working lives to 1-800? The answer is a crazy society; a sick and degenerate and despiritualized society. A society that has lost all contact with and awareness of the reality of human existence and of the world itself—its meaning, its richness, its purpose. A society that deserves to perish, and indeed has little hope of escaping death.

What Robert Bly and the men’s movement perceive to be lacking in American and indeed contemporary men everywhere is best described as *vitality*, a quality that is being squeezed from the human psyche—but especially perhaps from the *male* human psyche—by the wine-press of Americanism, otherwise known as Modernism. Bly’s mistake, and that of his followers, is to treat the crisis as essentially a psychological one, to be solved first by coming to terms with the inadequacies of one’s father (when were fathers ever adequate?) and then by making an accommodation of sorts with the tyranny of technocratic society in alliance with the corporate state. But the solution is not Jungian psychology fortified by drumming in the woods: it is revolution, never a job for soft, oversensitized, solipsistic men. And what kind of revolution might that be? Probably not—not necessarily anyway—one with guns and prisons and guillotines; more likely a passive rebellion such as the one Wendell Berry in his new book *Sex, Economy, Freedom & Community: Eight Essays* (available from Pantheon and a small work of genius, by the way) advocates: a gradual withdrawal of our attentions and activities from the imperial periphery established by corporate industrialism to the locus of our lives, the placed communities in which we live; the refusal to tolerate longer the public concept of existence and the determination to embrace the communitarian one for the purpose of recreating community, without which sanity, independence, freedom, and, therefore, happiness are impossible. We will breed real men again when we will breed real women to match them, and we will have both when we shall have got rid of the obfuscatory infrastructure of an increasingly obscene syphilization whose unspoken intent is to castrate and humiliate every man, wild or soft, who dares to stand in its way.

Memo to a Men’s Movement Recruit

by Katherine McAlpine

Its escapades make women
giggle among our chums—
“Lester? Imagine *him* in
war paint and whacking drums!”—

then laugh ourselves half sick
at the peculiar notion
that you have to hold a stick
to talk about emotions.

Sure, sometimes feminism
has gone too far. But still, you’re
only extending the schism
by acting even sillier.

So put the breech-clout away
and leave those Levis on.
You’re sweet, but I may say
you ain’t no Iron John.