

All Men Are Brothers: A Chilling Prospect

by Theodore Plantinga

Where have all the men gone? This question is being asked by various pundits of our time. The poet Robert Bly has been thinking about it for a while. In his best-selling book *Iron John*, he tried to call them back from wherever they had disappeared to. In his latest book, entitled *The Sibling Society* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1996), he again searches for the men and sheds some fresh light on the problem. In brief, Bly has observed that people don't seem to grow up nowadays, and so the potential men remain boys.

Bly's book ranges over a fair amount of material and reflects his usual interest in fables and fairy tales. It also includes interesting observations on what it takes for a young female nowadays to become a mature and productive woman. In this brief article I will ignore the comments on females and offer a few observations (mainly passing along what Bly has written) on the plight of the male.

Some readers may expect that Bly's book is another attack on feminism as having abolished the male. The book certainly contains critical comments on feminism. For example, Bly blames feminists for "... encouraging stereotypes of masculinity that would be totally unacceptable if directed toward any other group." [p. 129] But the main thesis in his book is that the problem at hand affects *both* genders, even though it may turn out that the two genders are not equally affected by the dynamics which Bly sees at work.

What's the problem? "People don't bother to grow up, and we are all fish swimming in a tank of half-adults." [p. vii] Those who are physically full-grown wind up joining what Bly calls a "sibling society," a company of age-mates or peers in which there are no responsibilities to assume and no long-term commitments to undertake. Bly sounds an eloquent lament about this society, "... with its fatherlessness, its openness to junk culture, its encouragement of early and shallow sexuality, its destruction of courtesy, and its economic uncertainty" [p. 115] Our decline has taken us a long way in the wrong direction, for we are now "... standing in the rubble of a destroyed

literate society, looking at the ruins of education, family, and child protection. Technology has destroyed interrelations in the human community that have taken centuries to develop. The breaking of human beings' connection to land has harmed everyone. We are drowning in uncontrollable floods of information. We are living among dispirited and agonized teenagers who can't find any hope. Genuine work is disappearing, and we are becoming aware of a persistent infantilizing of men and women, a process already far advanced." [pp. 169-70]

Bly poses a question that is well worth considering: "How did we move from the optimistic, companionable, food-passing youngsters gathered on that field at Woodstock to the self-doubting, dark-hearted, turned-in, death-praising, indifferent, wised-up, deconstructionist audience that now attends a grunge-music concert?" [p. 7] Bly does not pretend to have all the answers; he is encouraging people to think along with him. But he certainly provides a great deal of food for thought.

He is well aware that to point the way is not yet to have provided a travel plan. Near the end of the book he tells us: "... the adult quality that has been hardest for me, as a greedy person, to understand is renunciation. The older I get, the more beautiful the word *renunciation* seems to me. We need to re-create the adult and to honor the elder. The hope lies in our longing to be adults, and the longing for our young ones, if they know what an honorable adulthood is, to become adults as well. It's as if all this had to be newly invented, and the adults then have to imagine as well what an elder is, what the elder's responsibilities are, what it takes for an adult to become a genuine elder. In this problem, the example of the Native American community will be of great help." [pp. 238-9]

It may also be worth noting what does *not* get discussed. Little is said about homosexuality, although there are a couple of points where some substantial discussion would seem warranted. Likewise, character is not a theme. Bly might argue that the appeal to character is too individualistic, as though making a plea for character-formation would break down the problem into tiny atomic bits, with the result that the big picture is lost from view.

Generally speaking, I do not like to see authors reproached for failing to bring this or that or the next thing into the discussion. There is a great deal worth pondering in Bly's book -- hence, *tolle lege*.

In conclusion, a word of my own about the male predicament. I agree with Bly that raising the coming generation is a labor-intensive task which, sad to say, has been neglected more and more of late. I also agree that it will not do to

blame feminism for all of our woes in this area. But if we as men are to roll up our sleeves and discharge our responsibilities toward our sons -- and in the case of teachers, toward our male students -- we will need to ask that certain feminists and egalitarians leave us alone. In the name of egalitarianism, programs and educational opportunities specifically designed to meet the needs of young males have often been struck down in the past. This idolatrous worship of gender sameness needs to stop.

How? Here's a suggestion. Let's campaign for the recognition of gender rights. People who campaign for equality are in effect asking that gender-specific needs be ignored -- perhaps even denied. If they are simply wrong on this score, why not demand the opposite? Why should I not say that I need to have the government guarantee my freedom of gender as a parallel to my freedom of religion? Perhaps we could regard it as a parallel to the freedom of assembly. I enjoy the freedom to get together with other Christians to do the things that Christians do. (In many countries such a freedom would not be recognized.) Should I not have a similar freedom as a male, that is, the freedom to get together with other males to take care of men's business?

Perhaps you are inclined to argue that I already enjoy such freedom. Maybe I do, in practice, to a considerable extent. But I'm not so sure. I have long defended the right of women to gather on their own (apart from men) in order to deal with issues and problems that arise from their gender. I believe that gender-specific educational opportunities for females can do a lot of good. Now I'm asking for the same consideration for males, so that we can get on with the job that needs to be done. *[END]*