



The Men's Movement of Choice

by **Kathleen Carlin, Founding Executive Director**

I work in an organization created to stop men from battering women. While it is a place where men work together in groups to stop their own and others' battering, the organization's primary mission is to end male violence against women. This mission, simple as it sounds, was the object of some debate during the early years of our organization. Why should the goal be to eliminate violence against women rather than to help the batterers, since that is the actual work that we do? After all, the argument went, if you help men stop battering, you're helping the victims.

I'm not sure why I was surprised at the intense resistance to putting victims' safety first. I know that to put women's interests ahead of men's so fundamentally violates the status quo that we all react with terror and confusion at the thought. Women know that to put women's interests ahead of men's makes women a more prominent target for men's rage. We, as women, feel safer with what Martin Dufresne calls the "trickle down" model for ending violence: We would prefer to treat the symptoms of that violence and hope for the best than to call attention to the deeply embedded ideology of male supremacy that sanctions it.

But just as trickle down economics is a strategy designed ultimately to keep money and control of it just where it is, so the strategies we use to challenge male violence against women, which enforces and maintains male supremacy, won't be effective without dismantling male supremacy and the oppression of women. And as long as men's relationships with others are held in place by the abuse of power and control, masculinity itself will of necessity be a hollow identity--a demon haunting men rather than the fulfillment of humanness.

The mythopoetic men's movement, if it has done nothing else, has thrown into public discourse a picture of the dis-ease among men with "masculinity"--at least among those men who have the privilege to be self-aware and to talk about it, and bring it into the mass culture. The spokesmen for this movement have captured the sense of this dis-ease, they have given it voice and a prescription for a catharsis of sensory relief, but they make no demands for change in the underlying structures causing their malaise. As a member of the class of people designated to be subordinate in a male supremacist society, I watch with curiosity and apprehension as these men approach the search for the "true masculine" as something denied them. I would like to say something about how that makes me nervous.

When speaking about male dominance and the oppression of women, it is not only tempting, it's easy, to see men as victims, too. In patriarchy, men have had to live as members of a group engaged in upholding a structure of dominance, whether any individual chose that or not. The same social order that organized itself around men owning women and children had to order men into hierarchies as well. These dominant-subordinate relationships among men have been based on class, race, religion, sexual orientation, or other factors. Therefore, most men have lived in positions of subordination to other men, often enforced by violence. And so, one can say, some men are victimized, not by women, as the right-wing men's movement says, but by other men. One can use this logic to justify focusing on defining and reworking those dominant-subordinate relationships between men, such as the mythopoetics' focus on the father-son relations and male bonding.

A basic problem with this approach, and with the mythopoetic men's movement as a whole, is that it moves within the aura of that guiding principle of patriarchy: that male nature characterizes full humanity, that men are central, the core around which all others revolve. Therefore, men getting together with men to struggle with feelings, identity, and relationship seems substantial, paramount, imminently worthwhile.

Within this world view, the problems and pain of women are infinitely less interesting, less compelling, less urgent, than those of men.

In patriarchy, men are located in such a way as to have virtually total and exclusive access to the entire range of resources available within society, resulting in what is operationally a male homosocial world--where men are attracted to, stimulated by, and interested in other men, even though may be characterized by fear and competition. In such a world, itself characterized by territoriality, dominance, resource acquisition, and loyalty, men can satisfy their needs from other men. In this world, women become resources men can use to further their own eminence. Women are excluded, not because they are competitors, but because they are deemed irrelevant.

As earlier focus of this men's movement encouraged men to develop their "feminine" side by cultivating such qualities as emotionality, gentleness, and nurturing. Yet attribution of these basic characteristics as "female" was an arbitrary nineteenth-century construction designed to emphasize women's difference from and inferiority to men. When a man espouses this view, I hear this: I think I can actually override my devaluing of women sufficiently to appropriate those "feminine" qualities that will make me a more complete person. I hear this as an attempt to appropriate some exotic artifact that will enhance, enlarge upon his image of himself--and, as a woman, I begin to feel like the witch doctor's mask hanging on his wall.

Surely one reason for the enthusiasm welcoming the current men's movement must be that its ideology not only gives men permission to abandon the attempts to develop their feminine sides, but more than that offers an ideology actually incorporating the irrelevancy of women. What a relief is must be to be able to think about, play with, and abound in "masculinity" without ever having to bother with the fact that its very existence relies solely on the construction of that to which it opposed: the other, the shadow, the inferior, to be warded off, to be better than, and superior to. This is only a recycled version of imperialism: man, standing above and apart from nature, who in solitude controls and dominates it while pursuing some ancient impulse to be rejoined with it. Women exist only to mirror back the centrality of men.

The solution is neither for men to develop their "feminine" sides, nor to fetishize the "masculine" with the calling forth of the inner "wild man." The solution is to deconstruct a masculinity that is founded on not-being-a-woman, on woman-hating. (By "woman-hating", I do not mean the Hustler magazine kind. I mean simply the attitude that male nature is held to be expressive of full humanity. And when men say to me, "That's not woman-hating," I say, "I rest my case.")

This solution means to give up, really give up, male dominance--there's no having it both ways. It means departing from that androcentric, homosocial world where men talk to men about men and come up with some variation of the old solutions that maintain male centrality and dominance. Instead, it will mean not only to engage in activities that cultivate growth and enhancement in others along with oneself, it will mean relating to women as peers whose basic worth and way of being in the world are recognized as fully as men's. It means that women enter the process of history making as themselves, as subjects, determining and directing an equal share of the human discourse.

How to do such a thing? How does one start? How do we step outside a history, a language, and a social order that inform our every decision? One place to begin is to listen to those who have been marginalized, who have been placed outside the center of history. Women's stories, told from our own subjective reality, reveal a context in which men might start to address the real source of their dis-ease with the experience of masculinity. But this process is easier said than done, for in telling our own stories, women stop functioning as mirrors of men's centrality. Men experience this act as life-threatening; they are driven back upon themselves. The ground on which they stand and have their being is shaken. They experience and existential not-knowing. It's no surprise that they react strongly, even violently. And in that moment, they have a choice.

To the men in our batterer's groups, it is then that someone says to him that he has a choice. He can either do more of what he's done--more threats, more pressure, more intimidation to put her "in her

place," or he can risk hearing her and sitting with it until he begins to understand what a new response would be. To sit in the midst of that not-knowing bespeaks fundamental uncertainty, an untenable position for men for whom a sense of control is essential. But the batterer who transverse that time of not-knowing begins the journey toward a new life. His own personal house of cards has fallen, but he now has access to the tools to build a new house, one founded on love instead of power, freedom instead of control, liberation instead of oppression.

For the men's movement, searching for a healthy experience of maleness, this moment of choice is no less dramatic or unsettling. The decision to give up male centrality, to listen to those who have been marginalized, to be willing to perceive a broader, richer reality than male supremacy offers, means giving up all forms of controlling and abusive behaviors and learning new skills with which to negotiate the intricate, demanding transition that lies ahead.

To imagine what is possible, I would like to call forth the famous Gestalt illustration of what is obviously a white vase on a black background. If we study it long enough, a shift in perception occurs and we find ourselves seeing, instead, two faces in profile facing each other. Suddenly the vase, so prominent in our first look, has become background for the faces. We find we can now see two pictures: the white vase, for which the black is ground, or two faces in profile, for which the white is ground. Each is figure, each is ground, but never at the same time. But now that we have recognized and given value to both images, we are able to move back and forth between them at will. In the same way, when men recognize and give value to women's experience, they gain the skill of seeing broader possibilities for human existence. They create the opportunity to make a choice.

Using the genre of fairy tales so important to the mythopoetic movement, this is a story where an evil monster casts a spell over the people, keeping everyone suspended until finally the hero dares to confront the monster and break the spell. We are all kept spellbound by the ideology of male supremacy as the natural order, ordained in creation. Exposing the monster's false power, thus breaking the spell, happens when a man dares to enter the realm of women's reality. A man breaks rank with other men when make women's reality their referent. All the power of the social order gathers itself to prevent his going there.

A man who dares this act defects from the homeland of patriarchy. The defector knows he can no longer live in this home, so he gives up position, status, and possessions, slipping off under cover of night for an unfamiliar destination. He betrays those who have trusted him to remain true to an idea, a place, a collective identification. Where he is going, he risks being regarded with suspicion, of not being readily accepted, because of what he has left. He makes his choice from the private knowledge that patriarchy is killing him, too, as it is killing others. He understands that to save himself means not grasping the patriarchy closer, but letting it die - even the part of it that resides within himself.

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