

Men's spirituality

Donald Bisson

MEN BLEED, TOO. Men grieve the loss of their children through divorce, separation, work assignments and illnesses. They seek out relationships to fill the hunger, pain and loneliness of life's struggles. They ponder upon the great mysteries of birth, death, ageing, love-making, creativity and nature. They pray. Often, they pray in secret, almost fearful of being shamed if the depths of their desires are discovered. Men struggle to have a spirituality. This reflection will attempt to articulate some of the issues in men's spirituality movements and to present concerns about how men's experiences are to be validated and understood. The Spirit is moving men to enter into possession of their spiritual life and to a greater awareness of their need for community.

There is enormous diversity in regard to the shapes and forms of male spiritualities. In an age of supermarket spirituality, the publications, workshops and availability of male spiritualities certainly offer variety but often with some very limited perspectives.

Teachers, movements and traditional institutions are all vying for the male soul. They suggest that they can give answers, provide a community, and structure meaning and change in men's lives. Unfortunately, the complexity of male issues is not so easily resolved as any one movement may indicate. I wish to name a few of the most identifiable types of male spiritualities in our culture, and discuss some of their strengths and limitations.

Five varieties of male spirituality

First, the mytho-poetic model, influenced by Robert Bly, is a model in which men begin to express the conscious search for meaning and self-expression. Through storytelling, poetry and the arts men are allowed to reflect on their experiences of fathering and relationships to the sacred and to creativity. Charles Upton, however, in *Hammering hot iron*, severely criticizes this model and its influence as a rejection of transcendence and Christianity.¹ The intention of this model is to open men up to their life journeys, but it seems to neglect dialogue with their religious traditions and the deeper roots of their journeys to God.

read more at www.theway.org.uk

Second, the traditional-institutional model still exists within organized religious institutions which support the development of male communities. Like the Knights of Columbus, they blend social, charitable and religious activities. Unfortunately, men in these organizations tend to spend most of their effort in volunteering services rather than actually developing spirituality. The traditional pieties of these groups no longer seem able to attract younger men. Being an arm of the institutional Church also puts off others who are struggling with this affiliation.

Third, the psycho-spiritual model, reflected in a growing body of literature written from a Jungian perspective, identifies men's spirituality from an archetypal viewpoint. Robert Moore and Douglas Gillette, in their now classic *King, warrior, magician, lover*, provide language for men to rediscover the deep masculine experience.² This soul perspective allows men to do inner work, reflect on their interior images and grow in self-knowledge. This model allows for healing from within, developing a personal symbol system from dreams and archetypal symbolism. The difficulty with this model is that it creates a whole new language, a framework which can be so vast as to lose most men. It limits the values of community-building. Men are drawn to these insights if there is proper guidance and support for the inner journey. There are, however, insufficient numbers of qualified, competent male spiritual directors to journey with men at this level.

Fourth, the neo-pagan model is represented by the stereotypical scene of men going off into the wilderness to discover their primitive male warrior energy. The gift of men coming together for drumming, dancing and sweat lodges builds community through a common experience of testing and ritual. These moments bond men into new levels of care and support. But how to bring all this back into normal experiences of everyday work, relationships and religious traditions? To place indigenous cultural and religious rituals on top of our western traditions does not create a sustainable spirituality.

Fifth, the mass movement model, as seen through the experience of Promise Keepers, can draw hundreds of thousands of men together to share prayer and open some critical issues surrounding men's behaviours and problems. Such mass movements, though often challenging and potentially transformative, are mass movements dependent on charismatic leaders and the 'highs' created by mass assemblies. The other problem with such large gatherings is

that they support a more or less stereotypical mainstream definition of who a man is and how he should behave. This model may prove to be too much identified with forms of cultural and religious fundamentalism.

An integrative-reflective model

All five of the previous models hold some values and supports for male spiritual development. Yet I believe the vast majority of ordinary men cannot identify with or be attracted to any of them. I sense a need for an environment of trust, where men can share their experiences of God in a context without blame or judgement or evaluation. Most men also struggle with their religious traditions and desire a bridge to a new and inspiring connection. It is for this reason that I propose a sixth model which I shall call the integrative-reflective model. This draws upon community, tradition, inner work and self-knowledge, and a passion for healthy community. There are, however, some major obstacles to this kind of integration. As I listen to men in spiritual direction, workshops and retreats, I sense that they are trapped in a split between spirituality and organized religion.

Feminine spirituality and patriarchal religion

Both men and women seem to think that men should be more connected to organized religion, given the patriarchal structures of these institutions. Yet the irony is that most men seem alienated from participating in organized religion. They do not find the rituals or organizations meaningful, in spite of the use of male language or imagery for God. For instance, we are somewhat naïve to think men can relate better to traditional male and 'father' images than women. With abusive, absent or emotionally withdrawn fathers, how can this image be any more positive for men than for women? Men are not free simply to move to feminine or 'mother' imagery. Many men experience emotionally absent fathers in conjunction with emotionally dependent and devouring mothers. With the male psychic need to separate from mother, to return to God as the Great Mother could feel negative. A man then feels abandoned by a God seen only through parental images. Men are suffering from a desire for God without there being an obvious way into new images which correspond to their interior desires and passions. Organized religion leaves many without enthusiasm or roots.

Spirituality today has a feminine mode of expression which leaves many men uninterested or threatened by the processes. Having networked in many spirituality centres, I am conscious that 90 per cent of participants are women. The rituals, methods and topics reflect the clientele which utilizes these facilities. There are few deliberate attempts to integrate men into programming and to articulate their needs or spiritual search.

Men are caught, therefore, between a patriarchal system which seems powerless and meaningless and a spirituality which has become so feminized that it can seem foreign and shadowy to their experiences as men. Some men join various men's movements but with varying levels of potential and success for integrating their experience into family and tradition. There is an emerging spiritual crisis, as seen in dysfunctional relationships, violence, suicide and pain for men – and obviously, as a consequence, for women.

Spiritual direction and the masculine process

I believe spiritual direction could be a powerful way for men to develop a more intimate relationship with God. The integrative-reflective model of men's spirituality would be enhanced by a corresponding conscious spiritual path facilitated by competent male spiritual directors. However, there are some major obstacles to be overcome before this can occur. First, the vast majority of spiritual directors and trainers are women. Because of the lack of male presence and the clear verbalization of male spirituality issues, a significant number of women directors have difficulty creating bridges with men's experiences. They either sense a frustration on the men's part, or they themselves feel inadequate to the task. Second, there is a lack of appreciation of the depths of religious experience which men carry but have difficulty verbalizing to another person. Men live with many secrets, and the depths of their experiences with God are some of the most profound. There is a more masculine process of doing spiritual direction and spirituality which is not taught or recognized in the programmes in which directors are trained. Even qualified supervisors seem oblivious to the fact that a masculine mode of spirituality and doing spiritual direction is both appropriate and acceptable. There is a sense of shame in many men who have attempted a spiritual life, as though somehow they are doing something wrong.

The man usually spends a great deal of time pondering, thinking over an issue, trying to make sense of his life, his relationships and his connection with God. He begins the direction process with a presenting *insight* which has both heart and meaning for him. He may have mulled over these thoughts for weeks and wants to share with the director what has been fermenting within him. I have seen too many directors jump in at this point and make immediate assumptions of his 'being in his head', 'sharing some other's experiences', or 'being in resistance' – all of these judgements even before the man is engaged in the conversation. The director has been trained to seek the presenting emotion immediately. My experience suggests that men do not work in this way. The director wonders: what have I done wrong? Why is he/she avoiding what has heart and meaning for me? Am I invisible to my director? He wrestles over emotions which cannot surface at this point and feels isolated from his own spirituality.

Allowing the cycle of insights to begin again

The alternative to this frustrating dead end is for the director to journey with the man into his insights and thinking. Pondering aloud with him provides an opportunity to travel to his depths, sharing the landscapes of his sacred thinking. Within these soul reflections the man begins to reveal some of his most profound concerns, worries and issues. He is not turning away. He is pointing directly to the core of his wonder and fears. Then the director gently assists him to personalize and give flesh and blood to his meandering thoughts. How does this reflect your life right now, the struggles, pains and joys which are the essence of your life? The thoughts become symbolic interpretations of life events, struggling to come to consciousness and to be recognized and felt. At this point there is usually an exclamation, 'Aha!', a sense of energy, meaning and connection. The pondering and distractions have had a purpose and now, and only now, the emotions emerge to connect with the thinking. The 'Aha!' reminds the man of the deep stirrings of feelings which have heart and meaning. The sacredness of the journey is not in the feelings, but in the whole process. The feelings confirm the sacred dimensions of the thinking and the pondering.

The man is invited to carry the whole of his personality and to extend his capacity for life experiences. If the director respects his process and does not subtly and in unspoken ways reflect that he

should do it another way, the emotions will emerge. The man will often ask at the end of the session, 'Is there something I can read?' This again is not an avoidance of the process, but simply an attempt to begin the whole cycle of insights again. He desires to know himself better and to share this with the director. Feelings are not holier than thoughts: both make us human and whole. As John O'Donohue says in *Anam Cara*, 'For too long we have been blind to the cognitive riches of feeling and the affective depths of ideas'.³

Obviously, the feminine model tends to be the reverse of the one just described. The woman often brings a presenting *emotion*, with a journey towards an integrative insight to bring power for transformation and relationship at the end of the cycle. One is not better than the other – they are simply different modes of entering into the mystery of life and God. If spirituality is too biased in its range of feeling, men will avoid the invitation to go more deeply into their relationship with God. Feelings are the key to healing, wholeness and relationships, but men take a different route to bring these elements together. As a directee, director and trainer, I have often sensed confusion and harsh judgements on both sides of this issue about feelings and thinking. We often speak in holistic language without really believing that both must be held non-judgementally and with respect. Both masculine and feminine modes make us fully human if we respect each of them.

Feelings of grief, loss and sadness

For many men who seek spirituality, there are unconscious issues which must be addressed if they are going to be authentically present before God. God will not protect them from their lives; men must learn that God desires to enter into their experiences, even when they are filled with ambiguity, pain and struggle. The following areas seem to be common to many men, and necessary in the process of their spirituality becoming real. These issues have affected men's capacities to hold their lives with God. If the man cannot be present to his own experience, God cannot be felt as a companion.

Men feel deeply. They feel so deeply that they fear to let any of these feelings out; they fear they will be engulfed by them. The most profound feelings are associated with grief. Our cultures have repressed men's abilities to let go of sad feelings. Since the time of childhood, boys have been shamed into a stoic, silent rage. Is it any

wonder that boys are committing more and more violent crimes at an earlier age? Many contain within them a lifetime of what should have been let go: losses, deaths, separations and failures. Each event compounds the previous losses into hopeless, dull interiority. When men begin their spiritual search, they begin right here in the midst of an undifferentiated deep sense of loss. They often begin on the spiritual journey with the loss of a spouse, job or health. Since loss cannot be denied any longer, it becomes a choice of either interior death or the confrontation with deep grief.⁴

Men have consistently apologized in my presence when their feelings of sadness are shared. This sacred moment is viewed and judged as shameful. Conversion begins when a man allows the depths of his grief to emerge. His humanness is then embraced by a loving God. In dream work, a common image in men's psyches is a frozen landscape. The frozen curse of blocked emotion begins to melt into a grace-filled spring when the man courageously shares the locked grief of the past. The joys of the present moment and future celebrations are at risk until the secrets are witnessed, blessed and healed by human-divine presence.

To protect themselves from these experiences, men obsessively value work and productivity. Being and doing are at war in the soul. Doing becomes manic at the expense of simple presence and participation in ordinary human events. Men have been conditioned into performance, success, competition and busyness. These expectations are diametrically opposed to basic spiritual values and disciplines. Quiet time without purpose becomes a waste, and aloneness becomes loneliness. Men must embrace a counter-cultural perspective to be able to be open, vulnerable and present for prayer and meditation. This is a difficult period of transition for them as they work towards being comfortable with themselves and with God. This new discipline makes them feel awkward and fearful. Commitment is necessary to stay alone and not to run, but to be in silence with oneself.

The challenge of entering into relationship

Relationships are a challenge to all human beings. Men have some unique hurdles. They seek relationships but have difficulty over time in sustaining and nurturing them, and growing in intimacy through them. Too many simplistic assumptions are made about the complexities of commitment and relating. Relationships demand tending

and time, whether they are with spouse, children, partners or friends. Men seem to expect relationships to remain the same, so that they fail to discover that they are dynamic and organic. It is impossible for relationships to remain static; either they are growing or they begin to go stale and die. Too many men do not grasp this basic fact. Therefore they are shocked when a spouse says they 'cannot take it any more'. They have been in a fog of denial, assuming that everything is normal, while the relationship has actually withered into a desert.

The same can happen in men's relationship with God. They had a relationship at some point in their early history, but have not invested in prayer or any communication with God since they were boys. When men begin their spiritual quest later in life, they may have very immature concepts of and relationships with God, even if they are mid-life professionals. They have not invested energy in intimacy and self-disclosure. Men have often left behind their capacities for friendship, sharing and play, with tragic consequences for their spirituality. Connecting with God then evolves into a laborious task, lacking the passion and desire for relationship.

Given the consequences of repressed emotions, obsessive doing, and underdeveloped relationships, healing is a prime avenue into the spiritual journey. Men entering recovery from addictions are opened to the 'higher power' of a divine presence. Through painful divorces and losses, men seek therapy or support groups to break out of limited imprisoned identities. A growing number of men are recovering from childhood sexual abuses: from incest, or from trusted adult relationships in which they were sexually objectified as young boys. The impact of these events has devastated these men's sense of self-worth and their trust of God and others. They might say, 'If God could allow this to happen to me, I do not know if I want to be in relationship with this Being'. We are beginning to break out of the stereotypes of men being the victimizers and never the victims. Healing these male wounds opens up the experiences of rebirth and gratitude which naturally move us into spiritual issues.

In touch with the body: a sacred path

Men are notoriously out of touch with their bodies. Conditioned to feel pain and just move on, men do not pay attention to the signals of stress, illness, ageing, limits and fatigue. They utilize the body as if it were a separate entity to be used at the will of the ego. By

being shut down, men suffer not only premature death, and severe stress-related illnesses, but they also suffer from dysfunctional aspects of their sexuality. We are our bodies. Our masculine identities, our human neediness and our terminal selves all coexist in our bodies. The essence of human wisdom and humility is cloaked in the simplicity of our bodies. We have all suffered from the effects of a disembodied spirituality, where sexuality and the body are seen as liabilities rather than as a sacred path. Men have bought into this dualism with a particular intensity, advocating conquest rather than care. When men continue to rule over their bodies, they are not attentive to the messages from God, which may open them to profound experiences of grace. God's love is expressed through our embodied lives, in nature, relationships, the senses and sexuality. For men, the reconnection to body, even in illness, can be an avenue to a spiritual awakening.

Challenges for the future

If male spirituality is going to be a powerful force, it must be able to touch ordinary men in ordinary ways. As models of male spirituality continue to proliferate, there is a need to connect the experience of individual men with faith communities which can feed and be fed with the renewed energy of men alive in God. I believe this is just beginning to happen, but most religious traditions are not in dialogue with men.

Profound collective changes can happen when individuals embrace and courageously live their lives with integrity. I have witnessed men facing incredible pain and challenges and beginning to speak their own truth in their relationship with God. Applying the gospel metaphor, each man must enter 'the narrow gate' of individuation and relationship with God.

It is, however, not good enough for men to renew their isolated lives privately, apart from the great needs of our society and churches. Younger men need good mentors before they are deformed by our cultural pathologies. Men must learn to share – really and profoundly share – stories, wounds, hopes and dreams. The isolation and the frozen wastelands must be transformed into fertile territory of renewed friendships, camaraderie and mission for others. Male spirituality can create renewed community.

Both organized religion and schools of spirituality are obliged to ask serious questions as to why so many men avoid being present

there. Particular attention needs to be invested in masculine modes of processing religious experience, and supporting training programmes for spiritual directors for men.

The Roman, Anglican and Orthodox traditions have supported religious orders of men. Many of these groups have undergone renewal and change since Vatican II. They have the potential to be centres of spirituality and support for men on their paths. We are too fearful and cautious in sharing our resources, talents, education – and even monasteries. Organized religious structures need to reach out in humility and compassion to listen to men's experiences, to create a safe container for process and sharing. These men can then be empowered to return to their communities of faith, and the society we are called to transform in Christ.

Donald Bisson is a Marist Brother who is currently serving as Novice Director for the American Provinces. He has a D Min from the Pacific School of Religion in Berkeley in the area of spiritual direction and Jungian analytical psychology. His interests are spiritual direction and men's issues, spirituality and Jungian psychology, formation and the renewal of religious life.

NOTES

1 Charles Upton, *Hammering hot iron* (Wheaton IL: Quest, 1993).

2 Robert Moore and Douglas Gillette, *King, warrior, magician, lover* (San Francisco: Harper, 1991).

3 John O'Donohue, *Anam Cara* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997), pp 16–17.

4 The issue of men's grief is discussed in a helpful manner by Carol Staudacher, *Men and grief* (Oakland CA: Harbinger Publications, 1991).