

A Message to Men

An excerpt from *The Hand That Rocks the World*, by David Shackleton

[“The truth is found when men are free to pursue it.” – Franklin D. Roosevelt](#)

[“All men who have turned out worth anything have had the chief hand in their own education.” – Walter Scott](#)

“This was not guilt: guilt is what you feel when you have done something wrong. What I felt was shame: I was what was wrong.” – [Atul Gawande](#)

“Shame corrodes the very part of us that believes we are capable of change.” – [Brené Brown](#)

“To be shame-bound means that whenever you feel any feeling, need or drive, you immediately feel ashamed. The dynamic core of your human life is grounded in your feelings, needs and drives. When these are bound by shame, you are shamed to the core.” – [John Bradshaw](#)

In the early 1990s I attended a gender conference in Toronto led by American poet Robert Bly and Canadian Jungian analyst Marion Woodman. These two offered the best work available on gender understanding and reconciliation at that time. There were about 150 women and 50 men, and it was an intense, three-day event.

At one point, the conference became mired in judgment and accusation between women and men. To address this energy, the conference leaders asked for three male and three female volunteers to speak to the conference participants, to express their thoughts and feelings about the issue. The men who spoke seemed confused or inarticulate; I don't remember anything they said. But the women were clear and passionate. They spoke of looking into history and society and seeing only men, only male leaders and male actors. As they spoke, I felt their pain, the pain of absence, of lack of visibility and agency. The following week, back in my home town of Ottawa, I happened to see in a store window a picture of the signatories to the American Declaration of Independence, and I wept there in the street at the absence of any women from this pivotal event. Women have articulated their grievances about historical gender imbalance in a dramatic way that society has been able to feel, to empathize with, and the result has been the many feminist programs and policies attempting to redress this problem. Men, who clearly have issues of equal gravity, have not yet articulated their perspectives in a way that society can appreciate, and none of their issues are yet being addressed. Why this imbalance?

We have looked at the moral power that women have used to shame men into silence, and how this power has been able to insist on a one-sided view of gender history; female victimization and male perpetration. But in this chapter, speaking specifically to men, I want to look at what it is in us that makes us unable to stand in the face of this attack. Why are men so weak when it comes to standing up to women, and what can we do about it?

A part of the answer is illustrated by another event at the same conference. We men went away with the male leaders for a couple of hours of single gender conversation, and the women with the female leaders. As the time came for us to come back together, we heard the women, somewhere else in the building, practicing a song that they clearly intended to sing to mark our return to a mixed conference. We considered what we might do to celebrate this same return. Robert Bly suggested a chant that he knew, and we practiced it for a few minutes. It was strong and fierce, a celebration of masculine warrior energy. Then we moved into the main hall where the women already were, chanting our chant as they sang their love song. It was a powerful moment, with two very different energies – the men's chant raucous, staccato and percussive, the women's song sweet and gentle and melodious. I looked at the women's

faces as they circled around, holding hands and singing. They were smiling and welcoming, there was no judgment there at that moment.

I remember wondering how we could reconcile these very different energies, what possible union might come from them. But almost immediately, the men began to falter. The male chant faded away, and my brothers began singing the women's song. I was appalled. Yet I felt what I am sure they did, some shame at our raucous, warrior chant which seemed so much less appropriate than the women's loving welcome. I felt the shame, but I knew that it, the shame was what was inappropriate, and I stayed with the chant as the men around me stopped. I think that I was the last man in that room still trying to keep the chant going. Then I too stopped; it was too much to carry, to be the last holdout against the capitulation of the men to the feminine energy. I couldn't fight both my inner shame and the outer dynamic as well. Rather than join in the song, I lapsed into a sullen silence, feeling the bitterness of lost opportunity. What might we have discovered if we had held both energies, searching for a creative resolution, honoring both the masculine and the feminine and holding the tension? The energies were very different, but that is the challenge of dualistic opposites, and the secret, as I have explained and as Marion Woodman herself emphasized at the conference and in her books, is to sustain and maintain the energy of difference until a natural accommodation is found; not to let one subsume the other.

It is noteworthy that this capitulation of the masculine to the feminine was not remarked upon by the conference leaders – it went completely undiscussed. It's just how things are for men and women these days, and how they have been for over fifty years now. Men are ashamed, and both men and women feel that they should be. Perhaps, after more than fifty years of living under a feminist worldview built on this notion of male guilt and female innocence, it is time for a new balance to emerge. If so, men will have a prime role to play in repudiating their shame, redeeming their male pride and asserting their equality to women.

How will we do this? As I see it, there are two stages. The first is to really get that our shame is inappropriate. This work begins with an intellectual analysis. Does it really make sense that one gender should be uniquely guilty and the other innocent? In your experience, does this black-and-white picture show up in the men and women that you know? Are the women *really* more innocent than the men, in general? In order to know the truth about gender, we have to ask real questions and examine them honestly. We have to put our feelings about the issue aside for a time, and think carefully about what is true and what is just spin, image, illusion. This takes courage, not least because our lives will surely change if we alter our understanding of gender. It is disquieting to see more deeply than the popular culture, for one becomes out of step with one's contemporaries. Relationships change when one party sees more clearly than the other.

At some point in this thinking process, we confront our shame explicitly. We realize that we have a wound in our psyche and that it is our responsibility to heal it. This is a hugely painful realization. We are tempted to turn away from it, deny it, and avoid dealing with it. This choice does nothing but waste time. Many men, probably most, turn away for a lifetime and so live lives of unconscious denial and self-deceit. But if we can find the courage to tolerate the pain, the key here is to tell the truth about our wound, our shame, to acknowledge that we have judged ourselves to be unworthy, guilty, bad. If we acknowledge our shame, then for the first time we can actually evaluate it, look at it with an eye to its accuracy. Maybe quickly, maybe slowly, we discover that it is in fact a mistake. We are not damaged, we are not broken, and we are not guilty and bad in our essence. We are actually what we have pretended to be, wanted to be all the time, but didn't really believe. We are actually good men, with nothing to be ashamed of. This discovery is our first inkling of stage 4 wisdom.

This shame recovery work begins in contemplation, but as we heal we move to action. Knowing more than our contemporaries about a particular issue calls us to leadership. If the current story about gender, the story of female innocence and male guilt is wrong, what can we do to correct this error and advance a

better understanding? What are the factors that have caused this error to become so widely believed? How do we speak of this issue in a way that is memorable, a way that can be received? The female story about historical powerlessness and invisibility is dramatic and memorable. What is the equivalent male story? What is the story that will touch the heart and the mind? How can we help our brothers to discover and then to heal their own shame?

We need to get creative about this. What the angry men of the Men's Human Rights Movement (MHRM) are doing may be dramatic but, for the most part, it is not memorable. It is too easily dismissed under the feminist cover story as just angry guys, unable to deal with loss of their privilege. The task of an advocate for social change is to be recognizably different than the stereotype that people hold about you. Some people, those open to the possibility that they could be mistaken, will notice that difference and will look more closely. When that happens, you have created an opportunity for a real dialog, one that can result in changed minds.

My personal attempt to answer these questions about how to connect with society about real gender equality is expressed in what I have written in this book – but I am aware that I could be missing the mark. My own journey to come to willingness to write and publish these words has been long and difficult. I feel ready now, but it is certainly possible that I am mistaken, that I am not as healed as I think, that there are shadow issues of which I remain unaware. I do not underestimate the challenge facing us as men in redeeming our masculinity.

Let me describe a part of my journey. The realization that feminism is evil came to me in 1998. I had been considering for months how to understand the fact that the foundational ideas of feminism – male oppression of women, gendered inequality of women and men – were false, and yet universally accepted as true. As I considered the consequences of the acceptance of that lie, I realized that there was a redistribution of resources going on, from men to women. Financial resources, emotional resources (both primarily through family court) and moral status were all flowing to women from men. I saw that this flow was seen as just compensation for past and present inequity, as female victims being compensated for longstanding disadvantage.

I realized, suddenly, just why certain aspects of feminist ideology were defended so vigorously – the idea of female disadvantage, of female innocence (never blame the victim), the idea of male patriarchal conspiracy (i.e., male essential guilt, a kind of 'original sin' uniquely for men), the idea that men had oppressed women throughout history. It was because these were essential premises in the argument to keep the compensation flowing. And one morning in 1998 I awoke at about 3am with the urge to write, and I went to my computer and wrote an essay entitled "Feminism is Evil." By 8am I had finished it, including my definition of evil ideology and an analysis of feminism as developed in Chapter eleven.

It was a scary idea. Frankly, it terrified me. I hadn't before considered that evil might be present in major form in the modern world. But it felt true, and I spent weeks examining every proposition, every logical deduction and inference for error. I found none, as I have found none in the years since that time. I published the essay in the January 1999 issue of *Everyman; A Men's Journal*, the gender magazine I was editing and publishing at the time. I considered what I wanted to do with this terrible insight.

I took it to my men's group and asked their advice. To a man, they told me that the idea was inappropriate, that it would be misunderstood and would do harm. They told me to find another word, that evil was too strong, too dark. None of them seemed very interested in the thinking behind it, in testing whether it could be true, though I didn't notice that immediately. I spoke to other friends about it. All had the same advice – don't suggest that feminism is evil. Find a different word. The idea itself seemed to be too much for people to contemplate.

It shook me. I was alone with my theory, and alone as well in the belief that what really mattered was whether it was *true*. If it was true, then I had a responsibility to share it, to publish it so that people would

at least have the chance to understand what was really happening in the world of gender politics. But I was totally alone with it; every friend I had, every person I knew opposed me on it. If it wasn't true, if it was my own stuff, my childhood wounds projected out into the world as my friends seemed to think, then clearly I should heal myself.

I entered a mild depression that lasted for about ten years. I researched and expanded my theory, and even wrote a book manuscript but I couldn't publish it. How could I be sure that it was true? I worried about it, in a background sort of way, for years, and during those years I suffered a chronic sense of loneliness.

In February 2013, something changed. It was time to stop worrying about whether I was right. By some deep unconscious process I had concluded that enough was enough. The theory checked out in every way and it was time to put it out into the world. I had decided to trust my own judgment over that of my friends. I had done enough self-doubting. The theory was true, and not a projection of my own woundedness onto women. I began writing this book.

I have told this story to illustrate that the personal process by which we put aside our shame, by which we discover what is true in the psychosocial realm, is still quite mysterious to me. The only thing that I can say about it for sure is that it hangs primarily on what we want. If we want to recover, if we want to know what is true in ourselves and in the world, then eventually we find it and recognize it as real, as something to be trusted. The journey can be long but it is not endless, and the destination is worth the difficulty of the process. We come at last to a degree of wisdom, and recognize that that is where we have arrived.

One of the ways that some men come to awareness of the truth about gender issues is through experiencing the gender bias in family court. During the years of 1994-2006, when I was involved in writing for and later editing and publishing a gender issues magazine in Canada, I got in touch with a lot of such men. Most were men who wanted to be good fathers but had been forced into a diminished if not absent role in the lives of their children by a family court judgment which gave primary custody of their children to their ex wife, and the lack of enforcement of court-ordered access.

They were hurting and they were looking for help. I studied them and I studied the court system, how it worked and how the gender bias operated. Unfortunately, not many such men were interested in my advice – it was too difficult. Their experience had opened their eyes to gender bias, but it had not grown them up and they remained in a stage 2, victim space. As far as I can see, little has changed today. My advice remains the same.

Here is a typical example of a conversation that I have with depressing regularity, either by email or phone. I receive a request for help from a distraught father who has had sole custody given to his ex wife, and she is denying his court-ordered access. He writes something like: "I have every intention to keep on fighting for my children. I am not whining; I am just frustrated. If you think I am crying foul then you are right. My children mean the world to me just as I am sure the children of other fathers mean the world to them. To say the system is unfair is an understatement. My ex wife knows that I am no threat to the children or to her; why she is not held accountable for her actions and I am is beyond comprehension. ... I intend to do whatever is necessary to regain access to my children. I am going to keep fighting regardless of the time spent doing it."

To this man, I responded, "As long as [what is done by our justice system] is 'beyond comprehension' to you, then you are fighting an enemy whom you do not begin to understand, and this is a recipe for failure. You will know that you understand when you cease to be outraged. As long as you are outraged, you are expecting the world to be different than it is, and that speaks to your own fantasies and misconceptions about the world – all of which compromise your ability to be effective in your fight. I am blunt because I am tired of seeing brave, determined, *naive* men waste their lifeblood fighting without studying the nature

of the enemy – and, of course, lose. They get to keep their outrage. I hope it comforts them in their bankrupt solitude.”

The basic issue is our relationship to power. If we feel we *must* fight against something, if we feel *compelled* to it, then we are making that thing more powerful than us and so at some level we *expect* to lose. A fighter who expects to lose is already beaten.

What is it about gender bias in family court that so knocks us for a loop? We men are used to the odds being against us. We know how to come back from three goals down in a hockey game, and even how to deal with an unfair referee without letting it get to us. We would know instantly that a general who said, “I am outraged that the enemy tricked us and occupied the high ground – he didn’t play fair, and it shouldn’t be allowed,” was not in touch with the realities of his job. “Deal with it,” we would say to him.

But in this issue of systemic gender bias against men, it is as if something sacred, something central to our worldview is threatened, and we lose our heads. We get angry, and we react from outrage – sometimes for years! Like flies attempting to escape through a window glass, we batter ourselves against the ‘justice system’ again and again, futilely hoping that maybe this time they’ll see their bias and be more fair.

The fly analogy is actually quite apt, though a little undignified. In the natural world of the fly, there is nothing resembling glass. Anything that a fly can see through, he can fly through. Flies just don’t ‘get it’ when they meet window glass. Their instincts, what ‘feels right’ to them, lead them to fly towards the light. In the few days of their life, they fly against every square inch of the window and die bravely, still trying to fly or crawl through it.

Can you imagine a kind of ‘super fly’ with perhaps the intelligence of a mouse? A fly like that might spend an hour checking out a single window and note that there didn’t seem to be a way through the glass anywhere. Then he might take a look at all the fly corpses littered on the windowsill and think to himself, “Hmm, if all those guys died here without finding a way through, then there probably isn’t one. I need to do something different if I hope to succeed.”

His difficulty then would be that to do that something different, he would have to go against what felt right to him. Millions of years of evolution have given him the instinct to fly towards the light if he is trying to escape. There is no glass in the natural world where this instinct evolved, so that strategy works pretty well. Doing something different involves turning away from the window and looking elsewhere for a way out. Can he do it? Can he overcome the power of his instincts and his illusion that glass ‘should’ be intangible? Can he get past his outrage that something that he can’t see or understand still has the power to defeat him?

If he can, he still hasn’t solved his problem. He still isn’t outside. He has to look elsewhere for a way out, and it may not even exist. But he *has* at least begun to look, rather than being fixated on what cannot work, and so he has a chance.

I imagine you see the relevance of the analogy. The ‘glass’ in the court system that just won’t let you through is chivalry; it’s thousands of years of biological and cultural evolution that has taught us that when the concerns of men and women come into conflict in a major way, men must sacrifice and women and children must be saved. This is why, when there aren’t enough lifeboats, men go down with the ship in order to save women and children. This was functional (it enhanced our survival) for all those years when men alone held social power roles.

That chivalrous duty is now virtually hard-wired, like an instinct. It goes much deeper than our new ideas of gender equality – after all, it goes deeper than the individual survival instinct. Almost all family court judges, lawyers, social workers and psychologists, male and female, still have those unconscious blinders on; they feel they are doing right by expecting and enforcing a provider role onto men and a dependent, child-care role onto women. When the court case doesn’t come out that way (for a mother who wants it)

they *feel bad*, they feel that something isn't right and they quickly close the loophole. In short, it's a rigged game. Don't keep playing it and expecting fairness as if it weren't rigged, and don't waste your time shouting that it shouldn't be that way. That just won't work. *It is* that way, that's reality, my friend! The glass is *there*, the window is *closed!* We men are able to deal with reality in sports, war or business. Can we extend ourselves to do so in this realm as well?

It's different in sports or business or war, of course, because there we are fighting other *men*, not women. When we fight women, we fight our own chivalrous instincts as well as those of everyone else. There are only two ways to do it. One is to get so angry that your outrage overcomes your chivalry. That's the way most of the fathers I talk to have gone, and it doesn't work. It doesn't work because the system is used to dealing with angry men; it stereotypes them instantly as a danger to women and children, and acts accordingly. There are the 'corpses' littering the windowsill, the 'deadbeat dads' you keep hearing about. The other way is to overcome your own chivalry through personal growth so that you don't need to be angry to fight; you fight then from choice, not compulsion. You become able to back away from the 'glass' of chivalry and find new and creative ways to fight for justice and for your children.

I am not saying this is easy; it is anything but. However, for each man who does his own grief work, his own recovery from his outrage, he becomes able to think with all cylinders firing. Here is the test: as long as you feel *compelled* to fight, that you *must* fight for the sake of your kids or for justice or for (fill in the blank), you are *reacting* rather than choosing. A man who fights because he must is a gladiator, not a warrior. He does not choose his battles or plan his strategy (though he may deceive himself that he does) and his life is one of continuous desperation. His status as a gladiator may not be his *fault*, but it *is* his responsibility.

In contrast, a man free of compulsion can pick his battles, and of course he picks battles where he has some chance of winning rather than being forced to fight where his enemy chooses, where his enemy controls the high ground and has all the superior weapons, as is undoubtedly the case in family court.

Are you still with me, men? Is this message too hard to hear? Most divorced fathers and MRAs didn't want to hear what I wrote in this and other essays, and they let their subscriptions lapse. *Everyman* failed for lack of subscribers in 2006.

I remember attempting to start a group for divorced dads. I invited several to my home for a first meeting. I said that they could do whatever they wanted for most of the evening, but that if I was going to be involved, I would insist that every meeting include a short process to help the men get past their anger. One man refused in no uncertain terms, telling me that he "needed his anger to fuel his advocacy work." That man was dead within a year from cancer. Coincidence? I don't know. But the group never met again, the men didn't want what I had to offer.

What is so fearful about looking inside at the source of our anger? Why do we need our anger "to fuel our advocacy work"? The answer is that anger can carry us past our shame. What comes up for us when we confront women about their behavior is shame. It doesn't feel right, we have been shaped by evolution to protect women, not to accuse and attack them. Anger can carry us past that feeling, can let us do it anyway. But it doesn't really work well, because anger is weak, it's about compulsion rather than choice. Not only that, but the system is well defended against angry men – they are readily dismissed and disregarded.

What is needed for us to become powerful is that we work through our shame; that we move from stage 2 through the grief of stage 3 to the empowerment of stage 4. From stage 4 we can speak truth to power, and it makes no difference whether that power is female or male. Here is an editorial I wrote for *Everyman* #40, Nov/Dec 1999, to highlight this issue in dramatic form.

Taking Mothers off the Pedestal

Mothers! This is the big one, boys. The feminists may rail about male power and Patriarchy and men oppressing women, but let me tell you, no one has more moxie these days, more power in the psyche (public and private) than Momma. Poppa has been dethroned and humiliated, but Momma is still up there, and she ain't kidding around. Men may kill your body, but Momma – she can kill your soul!

In particular, the various aspects of the gender movement are all currently stuck on mother issues. The feminists and pro-feminists, who have the power today, don't *feel* like they have it because they are caught in *victim* – a shadow form of the feminine archetype. They want power but not accountability, and that's a real problem because the two belong together and are hard to separate. But, as Warren Farrell pointed out in the last issue, it's something that *mothers* – and *only* mothers – were granted in the past. “In the past, lack of permission for divorce kept the woman from being ‘fired’ from her role. If a child stole something, we did not fire the mother for failing in her role. In contrast, if a man coached a team that failed, he would expect to get fired.”

Feminism is following this same pattern, trying to get power for women while having only men held accountable. (Check it out for yourself: consider the implications of *any* modern feminist initiative.) This approach will fail in the long term, of course, but the moral and social harm that such distorted ideology, laws and policies cause to our psyches and our societies will have major consequences for years to come.

In contrast, the men's movement is split into two halves, each of which is currently blocked by the power of the mother. The men's (and fathers') rights movement [now the MHRM] has the political issues right – it really is about genuine equality between men and women (for the most part). However, it's not making much headway because it's filled with outrage, with angry men. What is the anger about? We are angry because *women* have betrayed us. We can't get over the fact that women, whom we trusted and married and loved, have turned out not to be the nurturing, gentle, longsuffering, *noble* creatures that we needed them to be. Rather, they have all of the dark, manipulative, hypocritical, destructive sides to them that men have. It's an outrage!

We must get over it. We must stop putting women on a pedestal and let them be fully human. Indeed, we must hold them accountable and *require* them to be fully human. It will take a lot of work. The grief underneath the anger is immense. In particular, we will have to discover how to redeem ourselves as men, rather than going to women for moral support. Guys, most women don't do that trick any more. In fact, many of them are doing the opposite, shaming and humiliating us. It's time we grew up and stopped needing *mother* to tell us we are good enough. We can learn to do that for ourselves.

The other half of the men's movement is focused, not on the outer world, but on men's inner lives, on men healing their wounds and recovering from gender stereotypes in their individual lives. The biggest visible group is the mythopoets. These men have done a lot of work on their father issues, and done it well for the most part. But having done that work, they now face the mother issues. Those wounds, being deeper and about ‘other’ rather than ‘self,’ are scarier. What's more, the techniques men have used to work with the masculine energies: men's groups, men's retreats, drumming and dancing and truth-speaking with other men don't get at the mother issues very well. Those energies tend to come up in men's relationships with women and in the wider society. Most men doing their inner work are currently avoiding the mother issues. ...

How will we work our way through the mother issues? To be honest, I don't really know. I tell of my own journey with these issues [in chapter five]. I think that we have to do it with women. Our defensiveness, our anger in the face of the modern attack on manhood or in the face of personal attacks by ex-wives or girlfriends is because, deep down, we don't *know* that we are ok – unless women approve of us. That is the heart of the mother wound, the last major, universal wound in our psyches. It is shame, and the only way forward is for us to recover from it.

One trap we must avoid. You may have noticed that I have not included organizations like the Promise Keepers in my descriptions of the men's movement. This is because these organizations are offering the false hope of a return to a form of traditional gender roles. They are regressive rather than progressive, nostalgic rather than visionary. They wish to avoid taking women off the pedestal, and instead to re-install men back on their own pedestal. We have much to learn about gender from our traditional patterns, but I do not believe we can return to them, and attempts to do so will not succeed in creating healthy relationships or a healthy society. The new can be avoided, for a time, but it cannot be denied without penalty. Ultimately, it must be discovered and embraced."

I still like that editorial, which is why I have included it here. Fifteen years after I wrote it, little has changed. The men's rights movement has gained an acronym, the MHRM; the mythopoetic movement has morphed into the ManKind Project and similar organizations, but the whole movement is still stuck on shame. It still falls to individual men, in therapy, personal growth workshops, retreats and men's groups, to do their emotional work and gain the strength to claim their own moral power. I hope that we will soon begin to step out of these protected spaces and acknowledge our gender truth in the public arena. When we do, we can expect to be shamed. We will be called backlash, misogynist; the privileged seeking to continue their oppression of others. To stand against such shame attacks, we will need to know, to *really* know, that they are not true. To know this, we will need to have examined our souls as deeply as we can.

The real gender revolution will involve breaking denial and doing this hard recovery work, one man and one woman at a time. This work is painful and fearful, which of course is why we avoid it. It involves acknowledging our wounds from the past and the dysfunctional, codependent ways we have used to avoid feeling and owning them. Most importantly, it involves grieving the loss in order to discover (recover) our intrinsic worthiness. This work takes different forms for men and for women. Women, in general, are in denial of their power, which they fear as guilt. Men, in general, are in denial of their powerlessness, which they fear as failure or weakness. We do not break denial patterns "because we should" (a shame attack) but only when we want to.

This issue can feel overwhelming. It is so massive, so universal, and so invisible. And how does one recover from loss of oneself? Once, because of shame, one has substituted a false self, an image that is more appropriate, more acceptable, more 'politically correct, then the road back to authenticity is so difficult. For, no matter how much approval I gain for my 'act', for my false self, I can never get enough, because approval of my false self, my image, isn't approval of me but just the opposite. No, filled with fear and trembling, I must risk showing my real self to the world, knowing that when I did that as a child, I was usually punished or shamed. What a task lies before us as we start to untangle this web!

I see this as the last great universal challenge facing us as adults and as parents. The archetypically masculine – overt, direct or physical – abuses are easy to recognize today, and universally known to be harmful. It is the indirect, the covert, the deceptive, the shaming, the manipulative abuse that is the great destroyer of our children's souls today. Can we, who were not loved for who we were as children ourselves, yet offer to our children that vital soul-food – respect and valuing of their essence, of their real nature – even as we help them shape their behaviors in ways that will work for them in society? If we can, it will be the greatest gift that can be given, the gift of authentic life itself.

To do that, we have to heal our own essential shame. The critical first step on that road is to break the cover story, the denial, and to begin instead to tell the truth about one's inner life, one's wounds and fears. That is an act of pure courage, for most will not understand and will be threatened by such truth telling. But until we accept responsibility and the pain of the shame that comes with it, we cannot forgive ourselves, for without responsibility there is nothing to forgive. The shame, projected out onto others, remains with us. I have lived that way. I don't recommend it.

Our essential shame keeps a part of us locked away in a kind of cage as long as it remains unhealed and unconscious. Robert Bly, in his book *Iron John* – that basically launched the mythopoetic men’s movement and that remained on the bestseller list for almost a year – suggests that it is our “Wild Man” that is locked up, the earthy, uncivilized but radiantly alive part of us, our soul as it were. “The kind of wildness, or un-niceness, implied by the Wild Man image,” writes Bly, “is not the same as macho energy, which men already know enough about. Wild Man energy, by contrast, leads to forceful action undertaken, not with cruelty, but with resolve.”ⁱ

The king’s son loses his golden ball into the Wild Man’s cage, and asks him for it back. The Wild Man says he will give the ball back if the prince sets him free from the cage. The key to the cage containing the Wild Man, it turns out, is under the boy’s mother’s pillow. Why? Because “when the King locked up the Wild Man, he gave the key into the keeping of the Queen.”

This speaks to me of the codependence I have been describing, of the way a man and a woman typically transact to cement their relationship, and of the hidden losses from this transaction: that something essentially masculine is locked up, and this affects the children as well.

Bly says,

“... the key is under our mother’s pillow – just where Freud said it would be.

“Getting the key back from under the mother’s pillow is a troublesome task. Freud, taking advice from a Greek play, says that a man should not skip over the mutual attraction between himself and his mother if he wants a long life. ... Michael Meade, the myth teller, once remarked to me that the pillow is also the place where the mother stores all her expectations for you. She dreams: ‘My son the doctor.’ ‘My son the Jungian analyst.’ ‘My son the Wall Street genius.’ But very few mothers dream: ‘My son the Wild Man.’

“On the son’s side, he isn’t sure he wants to take the key. Simply transferring the key from the mother’s to a guru’s pillow won’t help. Forgetting that the mother possesses it is a bad mistake. A mother’s job is, after all, to civilize the boy, and so it is natural for her to keep the key. All families behave alike: on this planet, ‘The King gives the key into the keeping of the Queen.’

Attacking the mother, confronting her, shouting at her, which some Freudians are prone to urge on us, probably does not accomplish much – she may just smile and talk to you with her elbow on the pillow. Oedipus’ conversations with Jocasta never did much good, nor did Hamlet’s shouting.

“A friend mentioned that it’s wise to steal the key some day when your mother and father are gone. ‘My mother and father are away today’ implies a day when the head is free of parental inhibitions. That’s the day to steal the key. ...

“And the key has to be *stolen*. ... No mother worth her salt would give the key anyway. If a son can’t steal it, he doesn’t deserve it.

‘I want to let the Wild Man out!’

‘Come over and give Mommy a kiss.’

“Mothers are intuitively aware of what would happen if he got the key: they would lose their boys. The possessiveness that mothers typically exercise on sons ... can never be underestimated.”ⁱⁱ

Later in the book, Bly uses a different metaphor:

“We know that more than one American man today needs a sword to cut his adult soul away from his mother-bound soul. Australian aboriginal initiators use that sword precisely to cut that psychic umbilical cord. The sword has the edge that cuts clinging away from love, cuts boyish bravado away from manly firmness, and cuts passive-aggression away from fierceness. The Tibetans refer to such a

sharp interior sword as ‘the Vajra sword.’ Without it, they say, no spiritual life is possible, and no adult life.”ⁱⁱⁱ

I don’t know to what extent what Bly is describing here corresponds to the shame wound that I describe. There is some degree of overlap, I am sure. Certainly my own experience of ‘killing my mother’ at the experiential workshop I described in chapter five was largely about repudiating my (internalized) mother’s expectations about what I ‘should’ be like, and setting myself free of her moral power over me. It was the start of healing my shame wound.

It is probably no coincidence that the men’s movement that feminists find of greatest concern is the mythopoetic movement. In *Women Respond to the Men’s Movement: A Feminist Collection*,^{iv} virtually none of the contributors can find a good thing to say about the men’s movement, (actually, their message throughout the book, in a thousand different forms of words, is “Shame on you, men, shame, shame, shame”), and the movement they are shaming is the mythopoetic, as seen through the lens of *Iron John*. What’s more, the part that seems to really burn them the most is this bit about the key and the mother’s pillow. I interpret this as an accurate fear on their part that if men actually do this shame wound work, if they really do steal the key, then they will become strong and independent men, no longer able to be controlled and silenced through the use of shame.

At the end of “The Maiden Tsar,” The Russian folk tale analyzed by Robert Bly and Marion Woodman in *The Maiden King; The Reunion of Masculine and Feminine*, the hero, Ivan, finds the love of his betrothed for him buried inside an egg inside a duck inside a hare inside a coffer inside an oak tree. That’s pretty deeply buried. This resonates mythologically with the state of the world today – the love of women for men and masculinity has indeed been deeply buried, and in its place we have a ubiquitous feminist shaming of men and all things male. Through long struggles leading to strength and wisdom, Ivan finds the egg and returns it to his beloved. She eats the egg, and thus re-assimilates and rediscovers her love for Ivan.^v

This suggests to me that men have a vital role to play in healing the loss of love for men that feminism represents. That role is for men to recover from their essential shame so that they can stand proudly as men, strong and independent and unashamed. Doesn’t this make sense – isn’t such a man much more admirable, more lovable than one wounded and crippled by self-doubt, by shame, no matter how well he hides that shame behind an image of assurance or respectability? We know that we are crippled because we cannot stand against the shame attack that feminism has put into the world. We have capitulated, we have faltered, we have not spoken up to point out the flaws of logic and the failures of empathy. Although it is built on lies, we have not been able to say so with power, and therein lays our indictment and proof of our codependent wounds.

Yet, as always, there is another side. It has not just been women’s moral power to shame us that has pushed women’s issues forward in society. Men have also supported them, just about universally, because it was right. Women’s issues are real, and deserve to be redressed. There is no good reason why women should not be politicians, corporate executives, indeed why they should not compete for any job they want. We have granted them equality in the workplace because it is right. We see the justice of their claims, and we have passed laws to support them. We can be proud of that.

Indeed, we are owed for it, and what we are owed is a corresponding equality in the homeplace. We are owed reproductive rights of the kind that women already have and parenting rights equal to those of women. But to seek those, we will have to ask for them – indeed, to demand them. Again, because it is right, it is just. To do this, to ask for what is owed to us under the other side of gender equality, the side that benefits men and asks women to share their traditional world as men have shared their own, we will need to recover from our shame and learn how to stand up proudly rather than angrily for our own gender, something we have never done before.

This is my ultimate message to men. There is a journey set before us, a journey that calls to us all, but each one of us must take that first step alone, in fear and trembling. It is the journey of freedom from the compulsion of evolutionary conditioning and until we begin it we are not fully alive. I hope that we may be on the verge of beginning that journey as a whole society, significant numbers of us moving into recovery, perhaps within a single generation. We will need leaders who have healed their own shame wound to point the way and welcome the journeyers. You have read this chapter through to the end. Are you ready to take the first step? Or a next step?

I offer you the question with which I challenge myself: “If not me, then who? If not now, when?”

ⁱ Robert Bly, *Iron John; A Book About Men*, Addison Wesley, 1990, p.8.

ⁱⁱ *ibid*, pp.11-12.

ⁱⁱⁱ *ibid*, p.165.

^{iv} Kay Leigh Hagan, Ed. *Women Respond to the Men's Movement: A Feminist Collection*, HarperCollins, NY, NY, 1992.

^v Robert Bly and Marion Woodman, *The Maiden King; The Reunion of Masculine and Feminine*, Henry Bolt & Co., NY, 1998, p.109, 218.