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FROM A TRUSTEE

# MALES, MORMONS, AND MYTHS: ISSUES MEN FACE



By Glen Lambert

**M**ANY MEN LIVE in cages—however gilded—at great costs to themselves and others. While women have grown in their awareness and asserted their freedom to leave restrictive sex roles, many men have lagged behind. This is illustrated by statements I heard recently from two friends. The first was a woman who spent twenty minutes criticizing her successful but unemotional husband. Then later she shared with me the object of her fantasy male—Sylvester Stallone as Rambo. The second was a depressed male in his thirties who, expressing his pain in appropriately masculine guarded terms (which meant he said very little), suddenly confessed: “I didn’t know males had issues.”

The first example shows the paradox for men trying to balance success, control, and societal images of manhood, which they are pushed toward with the personal tug of human needs in which they receive little training. The second illustrates the pervasive lack of awareness regarding the stifling nature of the harness men wear, as well as the lack of attention paid by both men and society to men’s emotional lives. Women are made sex objects, men success objects. This game

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of role definition has hurtful consequences, and men as well as women are losers.

Awareness is the first step in dealing with this problem. What do we as men, after all, have to lose? We tend to be repressed emotionally, terrorized by fear of failure, isolated from intimate relationships, and afraid to ask for help. When something goes wrong, we discover that we are shadows to ourselves and others. We hide behind facades as we spend a lifetime playing out the roles of manhood. What makes the future seem fearful, too, is that society reaffirms our self-definitions of maleness, and we fear losing our manhood. What is at stake, of course, is not our biological manhood but our socially constructed notion of masculinity. We confuse maleness with masculinity. It is possible to free ourselves, to condemn some negative masculine qualities while celebrating the positive qualities, and to realize that they are indeed within the range of possibility.

Men have been taught to conform to certain images of masculine behavior in order to be loved, to gain salvation, to be successful, or to be sexually appealing. As long as we only play our roles instead of pursuing our collective and personal journeys, we never fully know ourselves, feel loved for ourselves, truly connect with others, or know the freedom and growth that comes from exploring our possibilities.

What does it mean to be a man? The definitions vary and can be amazingly at odds

with each other. My drill sergeant once told me that men were killers to keep the peace. In my first priesthood interview, I was told that men were carnal and lustful and, by the way, had I done anything carnal and lustful? Despite these ambiguous role definitions, society does convey some constant rules. Psychologist Robert Brauman has classified four:

1. *No sissy stuff.* This means no behavior appearing even vaguely feminine. Skip the feelings and human connections that women feel. Never mind that in doing so you suppress a wide range of human needs and restrict your identity as a human being. Indeed, society seems to tolerate masculinity in females more than it tolerates femininity in males. Little girls can be tomboys, but being a tomgirl is suspect in males. Women can wear pants, men can’t wear dresses. A woman smoking a Marlboro can be sexy, but a man smoking Virginia Slims isn’t. I’ve seen numerous male patients who have either destroyed themselves or others by their need to become a man.

2. *Be a big wheel.* You must succeed and gain status which is given by society to those who earn big, win big, hold position, or show physical prowess. Male identity is tied to performance. Several years ago, I met an old girlfriend at a wedding. At a convenient time she came over to me and told me her husband was a bishop, a president of something, and they lived in a particular neighborhood which, I surmised, required a big house. A part of me wanted to respond by saying that I had been kicked out of the Church, that I was unemployed and supported by my Relief Society president wife. But still another part of me wanted to reassure her that I, too, was a success.

3. *Be a Sturdy Oak.* Exude a manly air of toughness, self-reliance, and confidence. Be a person people rely on. Suppress feelings that all humans have such as dependency, helplessness, and spontaneity. Be powerful and strong. Be superman. Of course, all of these postures have their flip side.

4. *Give ‘em hell.* Have an aura of aggression and daring. Be a man of action. Masculinity must be tested and proved in all arenas including society, nature, and sports. Win and be wild. This seems to be a combination of the American cowboy myth and the assumption that men are inherently evil. From pirates to cowboys to Clint Eastwood, the popular media relentlessly shows us our male role models. We even lament our modern situation and wish to bring back these heroes. An early Boy Scout manual states:

"The wilderness is gone, the Buckskin man is gone, the painted Indian has hit the trail over the Great Divide, the hardship and privations of pioneer life which did so much to develop sterling manhood are now but a legend in history, and we must depend upon the Boy Scout movement to produce men of the future."

The darker side of this issue is the underlying belief that men are constitutionally weak and bad. This belief both excuses men for misbehavior and denies their ability for transcendence and love. In some ways a seminary teacher of mine used this assumption when he told us the "real" reason for polygamy. He said that men were much more evil than women and that women were naturally more righteous and loving. Therefore, many more women than men would make the Celestial Kingdom. Sexism works both ways. This theme is also alluded to in Allen Bloom's *The Closing of The American Mind* in a way I find offensive to both men and women. He states that it is "indeed possible to soften men" but "to make them care is another thing and a project that must inevitably fail." Bloom further argues that an older wisdom encouraged a man to regard his family as property so that he could care for the former as he would instinctively care for the latter. Since that view has changed, the problem now comes when women and children, who no longer are considered property, desire the same care and concern as before. Bloom then argues that weak, dependent, and vulnerable females help make men be responsible. This suggestion lies at the very heart of destructive sexism. Women and children are not property, nor should women have to beguile and manipulate men to overcome their nature in order get support. This approach carries the insidious message that men are incapable of love, responsibility, growth, or equality: that they need to be forced or tricked into it. I resist and resent that belief. This soothe-the-wild-beast mentality holds everyone hostage. Tragically, it works as a self-fulfilling prophecy. Granted, much of today's male socialization works against it, but by their own initiative men can be caring and responsible and transcend their own problems.

THESE four rules of manhood are taught and reinforced constantly by our society, our families and friends, and even by our religious culture. Indeed, Mormon cultural socialization for men is powerful and includes segregated priesthood, Scouts, and sports. While many

of the results are positive, we rarely look at the less favorable consequences. Since spirituality is about growth, it behooves us to examine these issues. I am particularly concerned about several recurring issues of male socialization patterns that I feel create difficulties. I have repeatedly seen this conditioning among my patients, in myself, and in others, too.

First, males are expected to be aggressive, violent, and by extension the ones who kill or get killed by others in the name of country, justice, and manhood. Indeed, men have been rewarded for this. Society and mythology honor the best killers. We look to men to protect, to win honor, to conquer, and to be our warriors. We fail to recognize the politics of power inherent in the flip side: rage, hatred, and violence against others and one's self. Societies have institutionalized violence as a way of solving conflict, forcing ideology, and shaping men to do their bidding. Indeed, men killing other men for some cause is more acceptable than men loving other men. This conditioning around violence has cost us all.

Second, males are expected to be providers at all times and are rated on how well they do. This creates a condition in which one's self-concept is built on one's performance in relation to others. This can be illustrated by a conversation I had with my sister-in-law concerning my wife working. She asked me if I wouldn't feel terrible if she out-earned me. I answered that that would be great. She sternly responded that women could work for many reasons, but that the most important role any man has is to work hard enough to earn enough money so that his wife and children could enjoy life. I reacted by wondering aloud what if I wanted to be a good father first. The response was that earning comes first.

This stress on performance sets up status based on economics and position, thus breeding competition, workaholism, isolation, and images of failure. It colors everything. Women are discriminated against economically, but men are discriminated against emotionally. Performance outweighs any reinforcement for being a good mate, father, or friend. External rewards take precedence over the more intrinsic and personal rewards of learning and communication. Men are taught to win, and we often join the modern polygamy of being married to wife, job, church, and community. If men could give up the need and the societal pressure to be "better than," they could stop feeling that they have to prove themselves, and they could take time just to be.

Third, men's capacity to feel and know their emotional lives is systematically degraded and filtered. As stated earlier, masculinity requires suppression of a whole range of human feelings. Two of the Ten Commandments of masculinity are: "Thou shalt not cry or expose feelings of emotions such as fear or weakness before thy neighbor" and "Thou shalt not be vulnerable, but honor and respect the logical, practical, and intellectual." The internal lives of men are not socially reinforced, resulting in men being out of touch with themselves. This creates a bind: men are criticized for being distant, but emotional men are seen as unstable. Feeling hurt is a good example. Male ability to recognize and show hurt and, therefore, allow a healing process is devalued. Male and female infants cry equally when hurt but soon little boys are taught that "to be a man" they should not cry or seek as much nurturance as the girls. Women build supporting networks, allow emotion, give and receive support, accept and feel hurt. Men rigidly and quietly conceal hurt. They have not been given socially approved ways of grieving since they are to be strong. That is why so many men act out their hurt in destructive ways such as drinking, withdrawal, and sometimes violence.

Fourth, male ability in relationships often is not developed or encouraged. Men need intimacy as much as women, but often go around half-starved and don't understand what they are missing. Emotional communication is not modeled or taught and self-examination is feared. Required productive behavior stressing aggressiveness and competition might be great for performing and winning but are enormous barriers to developing and enriching intimate relationships. Love is replaced by the drive to accomplish and relationships, therefore, become relationships of power with others being potential competitors, allies, enemies, and humiliators. The rules of male friendships are rigidly and tightly controlled out of the need to preserve the rules of masculinity and the fear of male intimacy. Sadly, this lack of modeling often begins early when boys experience a loving and concerned mother and an absent and less emotional father. "Just wait till your father gets home" is a common tradition that sets the father up to be disciplinarian and judge rather than friend and support system. This continues as the adolescent male gets his priesthood interviews often consisting of a series of questions surrounding his worthiness or lack of it. One clear example of this deficit is society's lack of reinforcement for the role of fatherhood. This role

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needs to be valued more. The first Father's Day program at church I ever experienced was one I put on in my elder's quorum a couple of years ago to some teary-eyed fathers complete with children's presentations and cookies. We prepare men for jobs, not fatherhood. They are honored for worldly performance, not fatherhood. They are likewise hindered in the relationship with their spouses by a lack of emotional language and by a system that creates inequality. All people, including men, need love, friendship, and the modeling and permission to obtain them.

THESE issues cut two ways and both males and females are often hurt as a result of them. Recently, women have been more willing to look at their cultural confines, now men need to join the process. Both the traditional masculine and feminine qualities have much in them to honor and celebrate as well as much to discard. Why should half of each of us be cut off from the other positive half in order to be accepted in our societal role? Recently a male patient of mine was going on about his pain and self-loathing from his perceived inability to live up to the American Mormon male role expectations. I asked him to describe instead his humanness and what qualities that entailed. His demeanor changed to one of peace and acceptance as he described his own humanity which he treasured. I thought how many of us perceive the fact of our humanness—our inherent strengths and weaknesses—as freeing and caring, yet when we consider our gender roles we often feel disappointment, anger, conflict, and confinement. Surprisingly, the concept of humanness doesn't seem to carry the same confining baggage as gender roles. Maybe we should expend more energy in discovering and developing our humanity rather than fighting to reach our flawed conceptions of maleness and femaleness.

In Lisa Campbell Ernst's children's book *Sam Johnson and the Blue Ribbon Quilt* a man discovers a beautiful design. He asks some women if he can join their quilting group to develop his new found interest. They turn him down because men aren't supposed to quilt. Hurt, he goes to the men and appeals to their competitiveness and they form their own quilting group to compete with the women at the fair. Both groups work secretly and exclusively. Then, as fate would have it, the two groups literally run into each other in a mad rush to get to the fair. Both quilts blow into the mud and become soiled. After protestations, they work together combining

the unsoiled parts of both quilts. They later win the blue ribbon because the combined quilt was the most beautiful one of all. Maybe in real life we can also pool our efforts, allow for new possibilities, challenge limitations,

accept potentials, and honestly question and grow. Then maybe, too, both our individual and collective life quilts will become more beautiful. ☞

#### FOR MY DEAD

It's nights below the faceless, circling moon  
circling a necessity so driven it becomes me to listen  
in the salty light, when memories become  
golden quince, semblance of order;  
the moon's face as fingerprint of God.

And if he drinks, she's in the orchard  
picking apples as if they were fists; she's in church—  
O smooth hell rolling its way from the pulpit—  
but she understands damnation  
as a patience of the earth, of the birds  
that lift incessant from the flooded grey fields, over  
black earth falling into night.

—ELLEN KARTCHNER

#### DANCING IN THE FINITE SUN

The mountains are the motion of a soul  
and in the purple mountains  
an imprint of the sea—  
someone is keeping time—  
canyon walls as seamless, white-weave sheets  
and on them, the gloss of bodies,  
warp worn to a shine.  
When their surface is soul, all soul  
lives pass me through  
as the pueblos evolved, room from room  
from golden-lunged rooms of light. Distance  
poisons us to slow motion, and how many cars,  
how much motion to solve this problem,  
how much motion to move through our tourist bodies,  
planes overhead in the now-freighted skies.

—ELLEN KARTCHNER