



The Men's Movement, the Promise Keepers, & Other Forms of Male Backlash¹

by Paul Kivel

I ORIGINALLY WROTE THIS EPILOGUE when the men's movement (as it was labeled) was strong and visible and before the Promise Keepers had been organized. I have decided to leave the original section because it identifies some important questions we need to ask about any group of men organizing without women. I have added a brief section on the Promise Keepers and then some final words on men's movements in general.

The Men's Movement, Male Backlash?

It is with great reservation and concern that I read flyers, ads, and announcements such as the following:

Wingspan: Journal of the Male Spirit has emerged as the most comprehensive and widely circulated journal of male spirit and soul in the world. Inside this Issue ... "A Walk with the King," "Initiation of Free Will," "Warrior Images," "Balls," and "Men from the Boys."²

The Mythology of Gender, Conflicts, Truces and Harmonies Between Men and Women. Some themes for the workshop:

- What are the wounds of men?
- What are the feminine powers?
- What rituals arise from the myths of gendered gods?
- What does it mean to be rounded in one's own gender?³

The Male Journey: Workshops

A Day with Iron John. An experiential journey into the presence of the Wild Man ...

¹ Adapted from *Men's Work* by Paul Kivel. Revised 1998.

² From an ad for *Wingspan* in *Creation/Spirituality* July/Aug 1991

³ From a flyer for an event sponsored by dancing ground



Phallos: The Sacred Essence of Masculinity. A re-introduction to the long-neglected archetype of masculinity ...

Mythology Group. A men's group using male myths and fairy tales to illuminate the journey from boyhood into manhood ...⁴

... This is the eighth year that a group of men will go deep into the Mendocino redwoods to drum, build masks, hear stories and speculate on the mythology and psychology of what it is to be a contemporary man. ... Themes we will consider:

- Developing male beauty as a container for force, force without beauty being destructive.
- Joyful participation in the sorrows of the world.⁵

In the last few years there has been a movement among men to look at ways we have been hurt by gender roles, have lost our power, and have not been able to find strong male models with whom we can identify. Focusing on deep inner processes of individual growth in an all-male setting, movement leaders have been trying to help men shed some of the learning that has hurt us so that we can reclaim our male power. Leadership for this movement has come from Robert Bly and others through workshops, groups, articles, and gatherings.

Generally, the movement seems to attract middle-class white men who can afford to pay a fee for a workshop or gathering during which they can reclaim their maleness. These events use a variety of exercises, rituals, and group techniques to focus on images of masculinity, personal empowerment, unlearning gender-based training, and relearning the power of the male experience. The goal seems to be for men to achieve increased personal growth, self-awareness, and personal power.

Is this movement part of the struggle to end gender roles, inequality, and violence, or is it part of the backlash against that struggle? It is important to reflect on this process among men and to evaluate its effects. When one is working with groups of people who already have a measure of social power, such as the power white middle-class men have at work and in their families, the potential for abuse is great.

⁴ From a flyer advertising men's groups

⁵ From a flyer advertising the Mendocino Men's Gathering



The following seem to be some assumptions underlying this movement:

- Men have been hurt by the gender-based system we live in.
- Men have been disempowered by this system.
- Women have wielded power over men or have unwittingly contributed to teaching men disempowerment, particularly within the family.
- Individual men can regain their power.
- Men and women alike benefit from the men's movement.
- Men can do this work together because we share a common cultural training and our differences are not great.

Although these assumptions are not stated anywhere explicitly, or even acknowledged among the participants in men's movement events, they are implicit in the statements of the men who conduct these workshops. Since this movement is gaining media attention and public recognition, it is important that we look critically at its assumptions.

Men have been hurt by the gender-based system we live in.

I think few people would argue with this assumption. It seems crucial to acknowledge the hurt that happens to men in this society. We cannot deny the sexual assault, physical and emotional abuse, fights, and rigid, punitive gender-role training that boys as well as girls experience.

Men have been disempowered by this system.

More people would argue with this, citing male privilege as evidence of male power. Although there are frighteningly powerful men in our society, most of us do not qualify as powerful by the standard measures of power. Furthermore, is it a privilege to lead the dangerous, stunted lives that most men lead? Is it a privilege to be able to pass that pain and hurt on through violence to those we love?

Although most of us are not powerful, we do enjoy more privilege than women. We make more money than women, we are safer on the streets and especially in our homes. We have more respect, more importance, and more community standing than the women around us. We also have the courts, the media, the government, and history on our side when we are challenged by women.



Women fear men's violence daily in the forms of rape, battery, sexual harassment, and verbal abuse. As men, our lives are not threatened by women in this way.

Women have wielded power over men or have unwittingly contributed to teaching men disempowerment, particularly within the family.

This assumption that women are complicit in this process is not clearly stated within the movement and is even denied at times. But the evidence for this belief is abundant. The two main targets for the complicity are mothers and feminists—that is, strong women. “The male in the last twenty years has become more thoughtful, more gentle. But by this process he has not become more free. He’s a nice boy who now not only pleases his mother, but also the young woman he is living with.”⁶

Mothers are held accountable for raising us during our formative years, when fathers are not around, and providing us with female models for adulthood. They are seen as the primary force in our childhood. Our fathers are described as absent, missing, invisible, or unavailable. Our mothers, therefore, consciously or not, are said to disempower us and keep us from assuming powerful male roles.

This passage is excerpted from an interview with Robert Bly by Keith Thompson. Bly is relating the story of Iron John and the “wild man” energy.

Bly: Iron John says, “The key is under your mother’s pillow.” Did you get that shot? ... It’s under his mother’s pillow!

Thompson: Would it suggest that the young male has to take back the power he has given to his mother?

Bly: That’s right. ... There are very few mothers in the world who would release that key. ... The possessiveness that some mothers exercise on sons ... cannot be overestimated. ... The issue is that the son has a difficult time breaking away from his parents’ field of energy, especially the mother’s field.⁷

Contrary to this assumption, my experience working with men has been that our fathers’ presence is overwhelming in our childhood.

⁶ Robert Bly and Keith Thompson. “What Men Really Want” in *Challenges of the Heart*, 1985 ed. John Welwood (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1985), 101.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 106.



Fathers and other adult men sexually assault us, hit us, emotionally abuse us, and train us to be “real” men. They may not be present physically in the way we demand of our mothers, but the power and influence they have on our lives is strong and relentless. Their lives, including their emotional absence, provide the role models by which we reach toward manhood.

Because our mothers are seen as not having real social power, we generally reject them as role models. We distance ourselves from them as quickly as we can. We are not disempowered by our mothers. We are empowered by our fathers, and male-dominated society in general, to be aggressively strong. This calls for us to be alone, uncommunicative, wary, and abusive toward others. I don’t think this is a privilege, but it is one definition of power.

The other group of women seen as complicit in men’s disempowerment is feminists. The women’s movement demanded that male/female relationships be reestablished on the basis of equality and mutual respect. It has been stated by some that because of the women’s movement, many men gave up their power to women and became confused, passive, and unsure of their masculinity. A men’s movement is therefore needed to counterbalance this trend and to help men reassert their power to match that of women.

Thompson: Many young males step back from [masculine energy]. Perhaps it’s because back in the sixties, when we looked to the women’s movement for leads as to how we should be, the message we got was that the new strong woman wanted [emphasis in original] soft men.

Bly: I agree. That’s how it felt. The women did play a part in this.⁸

It is certainly true that the women’s movement has forced many of us to examine our previous actions and to acknowledge how abusive those were. This would seem cause for celebration! It is clearly self-destructive and dangerous for men to continue acting from the gender-based system of power and violence. If the articulation of and challenge to this system of power and violence denotes the increasing strength of women, then it seems it can only be beneficial for all of us.

Strong women and a strong women’s movement do not produce weak or passive men; they point out, with glaring painfulness, the

⁸ Ibid.



weakness and emptiness of our male models of power and intimacy. We don't need to be stronger as men to compete with women or protect ourselves from their strength. We do need to take responsibility for our actions and change the models of male power that make us unable to appreciate and cherish the power in others.

Individual men can regain their power.

This seems true, in a limited sense. Through many forms of counseling, the men's movement, and various spiritual trainings, people can become healthier and happier. There are serious limits to how far individual enhancement can go, however, in a society in which we are all vulnerable to various kinds of violence, exploitation, and inequality. Furthermore, this training is available only to those who can pay for it.

Men and women alike benefit from the men's movement.

It is not necessarily good for the rest of us when some people grow and obtain more personal power, especially if the imbalances of social power that make us all vulnerable to violence and abuse are left untouched. The men's movement has not evolved an articulated analysis of social power. With no political context, individual growth can as easily lead to abuse of power and more individual aggrandizement as it can to community development and change in power relationships. When men complete these trainings, they may or may not be more loving and sensitive to women or have better relationships with their families or be less self-serving or more community-oriented.

When the issues are defined as personal growth, personal power, and individual change, especially when issues surrounding men's personal change are juxtaposed with women's demands for social change, efforts to change the social structures that produce inequalities and institutionalize violence are seriously diminished.

Men can do this work together because we share a common cultural training and our differences are not great.

We do have similarities and common bonds as men. But we also share differences so deep that we have only begun to fathom how great they are. The men's movement has not yet even heard from



most men because the differences between us are based on power and violence.

There is the threat of danger from other men. Women know this in the core of their being; so do men, even if we deny it. The threat of danger is different for each of us, depending on our place in society and the amount of power we have to protect ourselves. There is the threat of physical danger from men we meet on the street, and there is the threat of danger from men we work for and with. There is the threat of danger to our children, to the women we relate to as family, friends, or lovers. There is the threat of danger from men who hold administrative power over us, from those who hold racial power over us, from those who have more money than we do—from any man who has power to affect our lives if we don't "act right."

The threat of danger that we fear is not abstract. All of us were yelled at, intimidated, teased, and put down by older men in our lives. Many of us were sexually assaulted. Even more of us were physically hit by fathers or stepfathers. Almost every one of us was in a fight as a child to protect ourselves.

Any men's movement that does not directly address male violence, racism, class issues, and homophobia can only remain exclusive and superficial. We are not all the same, and our differences matter—sometimes in life-threatening ways—in this society.

We shouldn't write this movement off as just another personal growth industry with limited accessibility and less social value. It is part of a male backlash to the social gains and political insights of the women's movement. It would have us believe that women are powerful, that men are weak and vulnerable, and that male violence, racism, and economic exploitation are no longer significant problems. These are clearly lies that attempt to shift our focus from eliminating inequality and violence to helping individual men become more powerful.

We do need each other as men. We need to trust each other and to work together to build a caring community. We need to stop violence among ourselves and those around us. I want to see more men involved in that work. We don't need a men's movement to achieve those goals. We do need many more men working with women in the feminist, gay and lesbian liberation, antiracism, environmental, and peace movements to develop alternatives to violence.



The Promise Keepers

Much has been written already about the Promise Keepers so I will keep my comments brief.

I am always deeply fearful whenever I see large male-only groups holding rallies or other large-scale events. In particular I am afraid of the Promise Keepers.

I fear their statements about men reclaiming their place at the head of the table because I believe in family and community structures which are democratic and in which everyone sits with authority at the table. There cannot be an equal partnership between men and women if the men are at the head of the table. Where does that leave women, to the side? At the foot? In the kitchen?

I fear the homophobic effects of statements by the leaders of the Promise Keepers that homosexuality is a sin and an abomination to God. These comments exclude many men from the community and makes not only gay and bisexual men, but every man vulnerable to harassment, discrimination and violence from others.

I fear statements by Promise Keepers that this is a Christian country because we are a multicultural and pluralistic country and we have a separation of church and state. Unfortunately, we have a long history of Christians feeling superior to and then organizing to kill Jews, Muslims, infidels, pagans, Native Americans, witches and other non-Christians.

I also fear their funding from right wing, conservative organizations like Focus on the Family, Campus Crusade for Christ, and the Christian coalition, and their funding from corporate sponsors. This funding has largely gone undisclosed. Why are large corporations, which have been cutting back jobs, moving factories overseas, and dumping toxic waste in our neighborhoods, funding the Promise Keepers?

I fear their lack of acknowledgment of the strength and leadership of the women's movement, and the gains in gender equality we have achieved in the last 30 years because I suspect it shows that they hope to undermine those gains.

We must also be wary of the language used by the Promise Keepers to describe the issues they address. One promise of a promise keeper is not to hit women. But, as we have seen in this book, the central issue for men is control, not violence. The Promise Keepers extols men not to hit their wives—but to remain



in control under all circumstances. The need to control is what leads men to abuse women. They may be telling men not to hit women, but they are not challenging the assumption of male control which leads men to justify all kinds of violence.

One of the promises talks about the need for racial reconciliation, but does not talk about racism. It is fine for men to come together across racial differences, but we need to address the systematic racism within our society, including the violence directed towards men of color. The Promise Keepers are notably silent on that.

Their language addresses certain issues of power and violence in a way which obscures the social roots of these problems. There is a rhetoric of progressive change hiding a reality of traditional thinking on these issues.

No More Men-Only Movements

The Promise Keepers will probably come and go just as the Men's movement and other, earlier such efforts did. Why do they keep reappearing and what should our response be to them?

As this book has demonstrated there is something deeply damaging about men's roles in our society. Any organization which allows men an opportunity to come together in safety to acknowledge the hurt and pain of being men will have a ready audience. This doesn't have to be at the expense of women, or of men of color, or of gay men, or recent immigrants, or any other group, but it often is. We cannot afford the advance of some at the expense of others. Unless men coming together deal with male power as well as male pain, with male privilege as well as male privation there will always be the danger that these groups will turn into or be fronts for patriarchal political agendas fueling further violence against others.

These groups might be enormously therapeutic, educational or stimulating for the individual men who become involved. However even the value such experiences have for individual men must be questioned when we live in a society which provides for such unequal distribution of these benefits. When those beneficial experiences are provided by exclusionary, discriminatory, or reactionary organizations, we must focus primarily on the politics of the group itself to judge its worth and potential dangerousness.

Below I have listed some of the questions I ask when evaluating such men's groups for possible endorsement or opposition. You



might want to keep them in mind to help you evaluate the next round of male-only organizing.

1. Who are the leaders of the organization and what are their histories?
2. Who funds the organization?
3. Who is allowed in, who comes to events, and who is excluded from them?
4. What real needs are being appealed to by this organization or movement?
5. What can we learn from this movement?
6. Are there subtle or overt ways that women are blamed in the ideology of the organization?
7. Is male power and privilege acknowledged and dealt with explicitly?
8. Is the organization accountable to women, women's advocates or women's organizations?
9. Is the organization exploitative of the cultures of people of color in its stories, rituals, and other practices? Does it acknowledge and challenge racism?
10. Are gay, bisexual and transgender men welcome and safe? Does the organization challenge homophobia?
11. Do the experiences provided to men lead them to become advocates for social justice or do their experiences lead them to try and reclaim traditional forms of male power and control?
12. How large, powerful and well connected is this organization? What might we have to fear from its success?
13. If this group is potentially dangerous, how might we be able to organize against it?

Please send comments, feedback, resources, and suggestions for distribution to paul@paulkivel.com. Further resources are available at www.paulkivel.com.