



Leaving the Door to the Soul Ajar: Rethinking Masculinity

HERBERT ANDERSON¹

When my wife and I were married in 1964, I gave her a hymnal with “Mrs. Herbert Anderson” engraved on the cover. I am embarrassed about that gift now, but it was a loving act at the time, consistent with the prevailing expectations of being men who dominated and women who derived identity from their husband’s. As with my father before me, male headship was simply assumed without biblical documentation. When I decided to travel across the country to graduate school with no financial security, it was what we did. My dream was the family’s destiny.

Despite all the positive changes that have occurred over the last five decades, old patriarchal myths linger and male patterns of dominance and consequent violence persist. Real men, some still believe, hide feelings, talk tough, like football, keep distance, swallow tears, avoid dependence, ignore fear, and value action over thought. These patterns have endured so long that men still assume it is their nature to dominate. Rethinking masculinity is complicated.

The aim of this article is to encourage men to continue exploring new expressions of being a man that transcend old scripts of masculinity or presumptions of

¹This article is drawn from Herbert Anderson, *Jacob’s Shadow: Christian Perspectives on Masculinity* (Louisville, KY: Bridge Resources, 2002). It is available in its entirety on the author’s website: <http://herbertanderson.org>.

Men who seek to turn patriarchy inside out and who long to discover masculine humanness will find sustenance for the journey by regular participation in communities that faithfully practice dying.

privilege. At the same time, we should be cautious about judging men harshly for what they are not. Men are often criticized for behavior that often is the logical extension of actions for which they have been praised for some time. For example, the ability to express feelings is underdeveloped in men partly because they have been expected to be a steady, nonemotional, even stoic, presence in the midst of chaos. Not being collaborative is one result of expecting men to be the solitary figure against the enemy or the lone scout in search of new territory to conquer or the farmer who sat alone on a tractor for days on end.

In this time of transition, both women and men will need to develop qualities and skills previously assumed to be gender specific. Women are learning how to manage a corporation, engage in military combat, and bear the weight of being the breadwinner of a family, as men learn to cook, nurture children, settle sibling disputes, manage a household, and grieve more freely. In the October 2015 *Atlantic Monthly*, Andrew Moravcsik makes the following statement supporting these changes: “Most mothers cannot do more. Greater numbers of fathers must take on primary parenting roles—as I have. The well-being of children, the status of women, and the happiness of men all depend on it.”² His point is clear. What men need to do may be difficult but in the end, fostering more egalitarian relationships between women and men fosters a more diverse and fulfilling life for men.

DISCOVERING MASCULINE HUMANNESS

The task for men, as Susan Faludi has rightly put it, is *not* “to figure out how to be masculine—rather their masculinity lies in figuring out how to be human.”³ In this time, men have the freedom to discover qualities and practices common to being human that have been underdeveloped or overlooked more by omission than by intention. Men need not be determined by the stories of their fathers or ancient myths of masculinity. Their nature is neither fixed by testosterone nor confined by culture. This article is an invitation for men to reclaim their masculinity by developing their humanity more fully. Men in our time are free to reclaim overlooked qualities like nurturing, grieving, paying attention, being a friend, sharing power, and acknowledging vulnerability that are common to being human. The remainder of this essay will explore the last two themes— sharing power and acknowledging vulnerability—that need to be held together at the center of masculine humanness.

In May 1999, I was diagnosed with prostate cancer. Having prostate cancer was a tangible reminder for me that men are susceptible to being wounded at the locus of sexual power. I believe this close connection between power and vulnerability in the male anatomy is a metaphor for what men might learn about being human. The linkage is both social and physical. Power and vulnerability are unavoidably linked because human beings are social creatures whose personal

²Andrew Moravcsik, “Why I Put My Wife’s Career First,” *Atlantic Monthly*, October 2015, 15.

³Susan Faludi, *Stiffed: The Betrayal of the American Male* (New York: William Morrow, 1999) 607.

power to act is laced with vulnerability because power and autonomy depend on the recognition of others who cannot be manipulated.

Men and women are also vulnerable to external occurrences that cannot be controlled or prevented. When men perceive themselves to be threatened from without or feel small or in danger of being humiliated, they are likely to act, sometimes violently, to dominate or defend. When men presume to be invulnerable in the exercise of personal power, they are likely to treat with disdain what they believe cannot wound them. Having physical power has been a defining characteristic of being a man. We are grateful that men used that strength to plow fields, fight wars, build railroads, dig graves, and forge steel. Courage and stamina and perseverance were necessary, but emotional accessibility was optional. The desire to construct an invulnerable life is a dangerous myth not only because it induces violence but also because it isolates and impedes full living.

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In itself, power is good. When individuals have personal power, they make decisions, pursue dreams, negotiate complex dilemmas, and resist oppression. Power becomes a problem in life when it is used to control or dominate or abuse others. In the Western world in particular, to be masculine not only requires self-reliance and self-control but presumes control over other people and the resources of creation. For too long, hierarchy, wealth, domination, and winning have been connected to the exercise of male power. Respect for others, interdependence, humility, collaboration, and acknowledging vulnerability were regarded as outside the masculine norm. Although there are privileges that men no longer enjoy and positions of dominance that men can or should no longer assume, these old images of masculine power still hover.

A BIBLICAL ALTERNATIVE TO INVULNERABILITY

The biblical narrative is replete with examples of the struggle to embody masculine humanness not unlike the dilemmas that modern men face. We love underdogs like the young David who used bravery and ingenuity to kill Goliath. We are uncomfortable when we see ourselves in the elder David's trickery and seduction of Bathsheba. The deception of Joseph's brothers has enough modern parallel to justify widespread cynicism. I even wonder whether growing a beard at seventy-nine and the proliferation of facial hair among men generally has some connection to a longing for Samson's strength and power.

The Jacob story embodies modern masculine ambiguity and angst. It is an honest documentation of one man's effort to gain power through trickery and deceit only to be transformed by being wounded. Jacob's life of deception intensified his ordinary human vulnerability. Like Jacob, modern men are more susceptible to

wounding when they fabricate the truth. Jacob's fear of Esau that kept him from returning home is mirrored in the ways men hide when they are afraid of being found out. The Jacob story can be read as a lifelong struggle between power and vulnerability. In the end, it is a hopeful narrative of transformation.

Wrestling with "a stranger in the night," whom Jacob later understood to be God, is at the center of his remarkable journey. The night before he is to meet his brother Esau whom he fears, Jacob struggled with an angel of God in his desire to garner another blessing to solidify his interests. David Steele has captured this vulnerable moment in Jacob's life with these words:

It's quite a shock to see this new man
Limping into his tomorrow....
He limps now and will to his dying day.
And in that limp conveys to all
That he has shared the pain of our mortality.
(Never trust a patriarch without a limp.)
So, Jacob, master wheeler dealer
Is Israel, the wounded healer.
And we among the human throng
Are called to come and limp along.⁴

The story of Jacob wrestling through the night in anticipation of a feared meeting is a familiar story. For modern men, the anxious meeting may be an annual review with a boss, a reunion with an estranged son, or a long-postponed conversation about the future of a marriage. We may wrestle with an unnamed stranger in a dream or with fitful waking and sleeping through the night. If in the morning we have found resolution and peace from the struggle, it will usually mean that we have acknowledged vulnerability in a new way and are less afraid.

Hebrew scholars have suggested that Jacob was the first biblical man to pray in the night.⁵ Before Jacob, encounters with God occurred in daylight and in the fullness of selfhood. By contrast, darkness and sleep seem to be the basic conditions for God's revelation to Jacob. When he was most vulnerable and not manipulating his own destiny, God appeared to Jacob. Experiencing the light of God in the dark of night is like finding water in the wilderness, flowers in the desert, and resurrection in death. Perhaps the greatest challenge for men today, who do not wake up from such encounters with the mystery of God with a limp or some other obvious impediment, is to risk even more vulnerability by sharing their mysterious nocturnal struggles with others. To foster such risky self-disclosure, we need dependable friends and an environment safe enough to explore together the deep longings of the masculine soul for something more.

⁴David Steele, "The Jacob Cycle," *Theology Today* 37/4 (January 1981) 478–479.

⁵Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg, *The Beginning of Desire: Reflections on Genesis* (New York: Doubleday Image Books, 1995).

LIVING INTO VULNERABILITY THE JESUS WAY

Even though it is difficult to acknowledge, men are susceptible to being wounded from within and from without. Here are some examples:

Men experience vulnerability when they are unable to perform

Drug companies have made billions of dollars because the failure to perform sexually is a painful experience of vulnerability for most men. A performance review at work also generates anxiety. If it leads to dismissal, the inability to handle disappointment or failure may lead to rage over vulnerability and powerlessness.

Men feel vulnerable when their role or status is undermined

When status or roles are the source of power that a man wears as a cloak, being without a position seems too much like being naked and vulnerable. Working for gender equality at home or in the workplace challenges a masculine power source even when men know gender equality is both morally right or inevitable.

Men feel vulnerable when they are wrong or perceived to be weak or don't know the way

On this matter, perception is everything. What is most important is to give the impression of strength or competence. It is weakness for men to show grief and not know how to do something. Men may not use a car's GPS, get lost, or run out of gas rather than admit they do not know the way.

In order to live into a new awareness of humanness, men will benefit from practicing vulnerability in simple, daily behavior. We practice vulnerability when we take the initiative to tell a friend how much the friendship means. Particularly when being right determines our understanding of masculinity, admitting being wrong practices vulnerability. Sharing sadness with a trustworthy friend is a way to acknowledge that men are susceptible to wounding. It will also help, if we can, to grieve the loss of privilege we should never have had. If being independent is a significant part of masculinity, then acknowledging neediness is a challenging step toward greater wholeness. The culture does not make it easy.

The kingdom of Jesus has another vision. As theologian Arthur McGill once observed, human life is "resting-in-neediness."⁶ Because we are constantly receiving and never possessing life, interdependence best describes masculine humanness. We find life when we let it go. It should not be surprising, if we understand the desire for invulnerability and dominance, that men are not easily drawn to the picture of Jesus as the vulnerability of God. David Steele makes an engaging connection between Jacob's limp and Jesus.

Jacob limps into history.
And later on some folks will notice
A man, carrying a burden,

⁶Arthur McGill, *Death and Life: An American Theology*, ed. Charles A. Wilson and Per M. Anderson (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987) 83.

Toward a hill called Golgotha.
His walk will be distinctive.
And folks will say to one another;
“Say...that one limps...just like Israel.”⁷

The manly ideal of dominance, Dorothee Soelle has observed, is overcome by the Crucified Christ. “The masculine myth of the invulnerable hero is opposed to the unarmed carpenter’s son from Galilee: there is nothing here to harmonize.”⁸ If we are to live with Christ as God’s wound in the world, we need a window of vulnerability. There are popular approaches to the Christian faith that emphasize invulnerability and success as signs of God’s presence. When questions about theodicy are asked, power is central to the nature of the divine. To say that God is “susceptible to being wounded” is too much divine weakness for some believers. This perspective allows men to preserve their presumption of power and privilege and circumvent the world’s suffering or their personal vulnerability. It is a human temptation, when we feel powerless, to insist on a powerful God. If we are overwhelmed by uncertainty and terror and hopelessness in the world, it is easy either to become cynical or succumb to preachers who promise prosperity and success.

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At the beginning of this essay, I proposed that power and vulnerability were inextricably connected. It is not an either/or but rather a both/and. Having power does not eliminate vulnerability and being vulnerable does not mean men are not still powerful. This seeming contradiction is consistent with the notion of paradox that is at the center of Lutheran theology. It is often said that Lutheran theology is held together by one word: and. Keeping a paradox like *simul iustus et peccator* in full view for daily living requires constant attending. Taking this paradox seriously means that every work, every conversation with friend or stranger, every effort on behalf of justice begins with a word of grace. Nowhere is this truer than in marriage and intimate partnerships as men and women seek to embody the paradoxical connection between power and vulnerability.

POWER AND VULNERABILITY IN MARRIAGE

While it is clear that ending patriarchy is beneficial for both men and women, how to share both power and vulnerability is often sketchy. Because patriarchy has survived for so long, every step men and women take toward greater mutuality and equality is fraught with hidden complexities: every move men make beyond stereotypes is a risky adventure into uncharted territory. Moreover, even though roles

⁷Steele, “The Jacob Cycle,” 479.

⁸Dorothee Soelle, *Window of Vulnerability: A Political Spirituality*, trans. Linda M. Maloney (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990) xi.

have changed radically in some relationships, husbands and wives still struggle to find balance. Women and men perceive equality differently. Most men think they do more housework than they actually do. Male violence in intimate bonds persists at an alarming rate. In my own experience, nothing quiets a dinner party conversation like the acknowledgment that my wife was the primary wage-earner in our family for thirty years. Pew polls show that two-thirds of Americans believe that a married man should be able to support his family financially. In the present economic situation in America, this puts men in a demoralizing position of powerlessness. About forty years ago, after a decade of marriage, my wife Phyllis made the following comments about me and herself to a group of women.

After two years of marriage, I had a picture-book marriage and I was miserable. Herbert had taken the lead just as I had hoped he would and as my mother had hoped before me. He not only took power. I gave it away. I threw my power at him and I hated him for it. I thought men ran the world because they were smarter and better. I had given over all responsibility and power to Herbert and he wasn't perfect. I did not like the prospect of spending the rest of my life propping up a fallible human being.... When our children were eight and ten, I was gone for the summer for Clinical Pastoral Education. Instead of helping me, Herbert had full responsibility caring for the children and the house in a new town. Everything changed. We discovered that he was more willing to take over than I was ready to give up what had been my territory. Before long, Herbert had pretty well taken over the house and the kids. He became so enthusiastic about my career, he nearly took that over too. When I was finally ordained, Herbert was anxious. When he said that the next move was to where I got a job, I got scared. Roles had changed radically but in some ways we were the same.⁹

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Although most marriages today begin quite differently, I include these comments to highlight the radical changes that have occurred in the last five decades and to remind us of ancient myths about power that still linger. Gender roles are more flexible, expectations of marriage more realistic, financial responsibilities more equally distributed, women are less overpowered by men, and balancing power and vulnerability in intimate relationships continues to be a challenge. However, until workplace rules and expectations become more family-friendly, young couples who desire more egalitarian marriages will resort to "relatively traditional gender roles once they have children."¹⁰

⁹These comments are shared with Phyllis Anderson's permission.

¹⁰Moravcsik, "Why I Put My Wife's Career First," 17.

In the fifty-one years of marriage since I gave Phyllis a hymnal with *my* name on it, we have struggled through major career changes and subtle, but constant, household realignments. Nonetheless, writing this essay has made me aware that a kind of injustice has evolved in the distribution of roles as Phyllis cleans the toilets and I prepare the food. People do not heap praise for clean toilets as they do for elegant, homemade meals, particularly prepared by a man. I have transformed the more private role of househusband into a public activity. No matter how much we change, some things stay the same. Although I have gradually learned to share power and delight in role changes my father would not understand if he were alive, sometimes the old myths still whisper and I long for the time when men still had the last word.

TURNING PATRIARCHY INSIDE OUT

We are in a wonderfully creative time to fashion new patterns of sharing power and acknowledging vulnerability that will enhance the fullness of masculine humanness. It is not enough, however, to disrupt patriarchy and privilege. Some of the strategies for change have not been effective in diminishing male dominance or violence. Rita Nakashima Brock has proposed an evocative approach to transforming the abuse of power. “I am seeking to turn patriarchy inside out, to reveal its ravaged, faint, fearful, broken heart, and to illuminate the power that heals hearts.”¹¹ When we turn the patriarchal heart “inside out,” we acknowledge that brokenheartedness is within individuals (women as well as men), in relationships, and in social systems. Before hearts can be tutored, they must be healed. Before a heart can be healed, there must be a recognized need for healing. For men, this begins by admitting that the patriarchal heart is fearful and broken and probably always has been, at least since Jacob.

In addition to healing brokenheartedness, there are at least four other things men can do in marriage and other intimate relationships to enhance the possibility of sharing power.

First, practice accommodation and the art of compromise

This is a volatile issue. We have assumed for much too long that women sacrifice because it is their “nature.” We know better now, but that has not changed our gendered expectations. Men need to be very explicit about their commitment to compromise and sacrifice that are an inevitable dimension of sharing power.

Second, acknowledge your partner’s influence

The recognition that you have been influenced by your spouse or partner or friend not only implies that you have been paying attention but it empowers the other by admitting their influence. Recognition is the prelude to respect. When

¹¹Rita Nakashima Brock, *Journeys by Heart: A Christology of Erotic Power* (New York: Crossroad, 1988) xv.

men fail to pay attention to those they love, it is not so much a biological flaw but a consequence of overlooking what we do not value or respect. Influence takes respect a step further, however, and admits to diminishing dominance and inches toward shared power.

Third, put justice at the center of the bond with the one you love

One of the hardest lessons I have had to learn in fifty-one years of marriage is that love does not guarantee justice. It is too easy for husbands to declare their love for their wives while continuing to act as if the bond is not a relationship of equals. In order to promote justice in marriage, the covenant bond needs to be about justice as well as love. If the ideal of marriage were changed in this way, couples would treat one another according to the principles of justice as well as love.

Fourth, leave the door to the soul slightly ajar

The door ajar is another image of vulnerability. Leaving the door of the soul ajar is possible when we are no longer preoccupied with defending ourselves against unseen enemies. We are most likely to be surprised by God if we are able to leave a crack in our defenses. If there are no windows of vulnerability, if our door to the world is never ajar, we are not likely to be surprised by God. Like Jacob, men today are more likely to pray at night when no one can see our vulnerability. If we leave the door to the soul slightly ajar, we can never be sure who or what will come in. It is possible, however, that an encounter with a “mysterious stranger” will take us to the transforming presence of God.

One more paradox

For Christian living, the cross is a paradigm of dying to live. It is the crossing of power and vulnerability for the sake of freedom, compassion, and abundant living. Whenever we experience the contradictions of living like holding on and letting go, like being alone and being together, like the crossing moments of daily dying, like leaving the door to the soul ajar, we acknowledge vulnerability. No other community practices dying as Christians do when they come together to study and pray. Men who seek to turn patriarchy inside out and who long to discover masculine humanness will find sustenance for the journey by regular participation in communities that faithfully practice dying. ☩

HERBERT ANDERSON is an ELCA pastor, retired and living in Sonoma, California. He is professor emeritus of pastoral theology from Catholic Theological Union in Chicago. His most recent book, coauthored with Karen Speerstra, is The Divine Art of Dying: How to Live Well While Dying. He is still a member of the doctoral faculty of the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California.