

# IRON JOHN

*A Book About Men*

## *The Pillow and the Key*

We talk a great deal about “the American man,” as if there were some constant quality that remained stable over decades, or even within a single decade.

The men who live today have veered far away from the Saturnian, old-man-minded farmer, proud of his introversion, who arrived in New England in 1630, willing to sit through three services in and unheated church. In the South, an expansive, motherbound cavalier developed, and neither of these two “American men” resembled the greedy railroad entrepreneur that later developed in the Northeast, not the reckless I-will-do-without culture settlers of the West.

Even in our era the agreed-on model has changed drastically. During the fifties, for example, an American character appeared with some consistency that became a model of manhood adopted by many men: the Fifties male.

He got to work early, labored responsibly, supported his wife and children, and admired discipline. Reagan is a sort of mummified version of this dogged type. This sort of man didn’t see women’s souls well, but he appreciated their bodies; and his view of culture and America’s part in it was boyish and optimistic. Many of his qualities were strong and positive, but underneath the charm and bluff there was, and there remains, much isolation, deprivation, and passivity. Unless he has an enemy, he isn’t sure that he is alive.

ROBERT BLY  
1990

The Fifties man was supposed to like football, be aggressive, stick up for the United States, never cry, and always provide. But receptive space or intimate space was missing in this image of a man. The personality lacked some sense of flow. The psyche lacked compassion in a way that encouraged the unbalanced pursuit of the Vietnam war, just as, later, the lack of what we might call “garden” space inside Reagan’s head led to his callousness and brutality toward the powerless in El Salvador, toward old people here, the unemployed, schoolchildren, and poor people in general.

The Fifties male had a clear vision of what a man was, and what male responsibilities were, but the isolation and one-sidedness of his vision were dangerous.

During the sixties, another sort of man appeared. The waste and violence of the Vietnam war made men question whether they knew what an adult male really was. If manhood included Vietnam, did they want any part of it? Meanwhile, the feminist movement encouraged men to actually look at women, forcing them to become conscious of concerns and sufferings that the Fifties male labored to avoid. As men began to examine women’s history and women’s sensibility, some men began to notice what was called their *feminine* side and pay attention to it. This process continues to this day, and I would say that most contemporary men are involved in it in some way.

There’s something wonderful about this development – I mean the practice of men welcoming their own “feminine” consciousness and nurturing it – this is important - and yet I have the sense that there is something wrong. The male in the past twenty years has become more thoughtful, more gentle. But by this process he has not become more free. He’s a nice boy who pleases not only his mother but also the young woman he is living with.

In the seventies I began to see all over the country a phenomenon that we might call the “soft male.” Sometimes even today when I look out at an audience, perhaps half the young males are what I’d call soft. They’re lovely, valuable people – I like them – they’re not interested in harming the earth or starting wars. There’s a gentle attitude toward life in their whole being and style of living.

But many of these men are not happy. You quickly notice the lack of energy in them. They are life-preserving but not exactly

life-giving. Ironically, you often see these men with strong women who positively radiate energy.

Here we have a finely tuned young man, ecologically superior to his father, sympathetic to the whole harmony of the universe, yet he himself has little vitality to offer.

The strong or life-giving women who graduated from the sixties, so to speak, or who have inherited an older spirit, played an important part in producing the life-preserving, but not life-giving man.

I remember a bumper sticker during the sixties that read “WOMEN SAY YES TO MEN WHO SAY NO.” We recognize that it took a lot of courage to resist the draft, go to jail, or move to Canada, just as it took courage to accept the draft and go to Vietnam. But the women of twenty years ago were definitely saying that they preferred the softer receptive male.

So the development of men was affected a little in this preference. Nonreceptive maleness was equated with violence, and receptive maleness was rewarded.

Some energetic women, at that time and now in the nineties, chose and still choose soft men to be their lovers and, in a way, perhaps, to be their sons. The new distribution of “yang” energy among couples didn’t happen by accident. Young men for various reasons wanted their harder women, and women began to desire softer men. It seemed like a nice arrangement for a while, but we’ve lived with it long enough now to see that it isn’t working out.

I first learned about the anguish of “soft” men when they told their stories in early men’s gatherings. In 1980, the Lama Community in New Mexico asked me to teach a conference for men only, their first, in which about forty men participated. Each day we concentrated on one Greek god and one old story, and then late in the afternoons we gathered to talk. When the younger men spoke it was not uncommon for them to be weeping within five minutes. The amount of grief and anguish in these younger men was astounding to me.

Part of their grief rose out of remoteness from their fathers, which they felt keenly--but partly, too, grief flowed from trouble in their marriages or relationships. They had learned to be receptive, but receptivity wasn’t enough to carry their marriages through troubled times. In every relationship something *fierce* is needed

once in a while: both the man and the woman need to have it. But at the point when it was needed, often the young man came up short. He was nurturing, but something else was required – for his relationship and for his life.

The “soft” male was able to say, “I can feel your pain, and I consider your life as important as mine, and I will take care of you and comfort you.” But he could not say what he wanted, and stick by it. *Resolve* of that kind was a different matter.

In *The Odyssey*, Hermes instructs Odysseus that when he approaches Circe, who stands for a certain kind of matriarchal energy, he is to lift or show his sword. In these early sessions it was difficult for many of the younger men to distinguish between showing the sword and hurting someone. One man, a kind of incarnation of certain spiritual attitudes of the sixties, a man who had actually lived in a tree for a year outside Santa Cruz, found himself unable to extend his arm when it held a sword. He had learned so well not to hurt anyone that he couldn’t lift the steel, even to catch the light of the sun on it. But showing a sword doesn’t necessarily mean fighting. It can also suggest a joyful decisiveness.

The journey many American men have taken into softness, or receptivity, or “development of the feminine side,” has been an immensely valuable journey, but more travel lies ahead. No stage is the final stop.

## *Finding Iron John*

One of the fairy tales that speak of a third possibility for men, a third mode, is a story called “Iron John” or “Iron Hans.” Though it was first set down by the Grimm brothers around 1820, this story could be ten or twenty thousand years old.

As the story starts, we find out that something strange has been happening in a remote area of the forest near the king’s castle. When hunters go into this area, they disappear and never come back. Twenty others go after the first group and do not come back. In time, people begin to get the feeling that there’s something weird in that part of the forest, and they “don’t go there anymore.”

One day an unknown hunter shows up at the castle and says, “What can I do? Anything dangerous to do around here?”

The King says: “Well, I could mention the forest, but there’s a problem. The people who go there don’t come back. The return rate is not good.

“That’s just the sort of thing I like,” the young man says. So he goes into the forest and, interestingly, he goes there *alone*, taking only his dog. The young man and his dog wander about in the forest and they go past a pond. Suddenly a hand reaches up from the water, grabs the dog, and pulls it down.

The young man doesn’t respond by becoming hysterical. He merely says, “This must be the place.”

Fond as he is of his dog and reluctant as he is to abandon him, the hunter goes back to the castle, rounds up three more men with buckets, and then comes back to the pond to bucket out the water. Anyone who’s ever tried it will quickly note that such bucketing is very slow work.

In time, what they find, lying on the bottom of the pond, is a large man covered with hair from head to foot. The hair is reddish – it looks a little like rusty iron. They take the man back to the castle, and imprison him. The King puts him in an iron cage in the courtyard, calls him “Iron John,” and gives the key into the keeping of the Queen.

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Let’s stop the story here for a second.

When a contemporary man looks down into his psyche, he may, if conditions are right, find under the water of his soul, lying in an area no one has visited for a long time, an ancient hairy man.

The mythological systems associate hair with the instinctive and the sexual and the primitive. What I’m suggesting, then, is that every modern male has, lying at the bottom of his psyche, a large, primitive being covered with hair down to his feet. Making contact with this Wild Man is the step the Eighties male or the Nineties male has yet to take. That bucketing-out process has yet to begin in our contemporary culture.

As the story suggests very delicately, there’s more than a little fear around this hairy man, as there is around all change. When a man begins to develop the receptive side of himself and gets over his initial skittishness, he usually finds the experience to be wonderful. He gets to write poetry and go out and sit by the ocean,

he doesn't have to be top all the time in sex anymore, he becomes empathetic – it's a new, humming, surprising world.

But going down through water to touch the Wild Man at the bottom of the pond is quite a different matter. The being who stands up is frightening, and seems even more so now, when the corporations do so much work to produce the sanitized, hairless, shallow man. When a man welcomes his responsiveness, or what we sometimes call his internal woman, he often feels warmer, more companionable, more alive. But when he approaches what I'll call the "deep male," he feels risk. Welcoming the Hairy Man *is* scary and risky, and it requires a different sort of courage. Contact with Iron John requires a willingness to descend into the male psyche and accept what's dark down there, including the *nourishing* dark.

For generations now, the industrial community has warned young businessmen to keep away from Iron John, and the Christian church is not too fond of him either.

Freud, Jung, and Wilhelm Reich are three investigators who had the courage to go down into the pond and to accept what they found there. The job of contemporary men is to follow them down.

Some men have already done this work, and the Hairy Man has been brought up from the pond in their psyches, and lives in the courtyard. "In the courtyard" suggests that the individual or the culture has brought him into a sunlit place where all can see him. That is itself some advance over keeping the Hairy Man in a cellar, where many elements in every culture want him to be. But, of course, in either place, he's still in a cage.

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## ***The Loss of the Golden Ball***

Now back to the story.

One day the King's eight-year-old son is playing in the courtyard with the golden ball he loves, and it rolls into the Wild Man's cage. If the young boy wants the ball back, he's going to have to approach the Hairy Man and ask him for it. But this is going to be a problem.

The golden ball reminds us of that unity of personality we had as children – a kind of radiance, or wholeness, before we split into male and female, rich and poor, bad and good. The ball is

golden, as the sun is, and round. Like the sun, it gives off a radiant energy from the inside.

We notice that the boy is eight. All of us, whether boys or girls, lose something around the age of eight. If we still have the golden ball in kindergarten, we lose it in grade school. Whatever is still left we lose in high school. In "The Frog Prince," the princess's ball fell into a well. Whether we are male or female, once the golden ball is gone, we spend the rest of our lives trying to get it back.

The first stage in retrieving the ball, I think, is to accept – firmly, definitely – that the ball has been lost. Freud said: "What a distressing contract there is between the radiant intelligence of the child and the feeble mentality of the average adult."

So where is the golden ball? Speaking metaphorically, we could say that the sixties culture told men they would find their golden ball in sensitivity, receptivity, cooperation, and nonaggressiveness. But many men gave up all aggressiveness and still did not find the golden ball.

The Iron John story says that a man can't expect to find the golden ball in the feminine realm, because that's not where the ball is. A bridegroom secretly asks his wife to give him back the golden ball. I think she'd give it to him if she could, because most women in my experience do not try to block men's growth. But she can't give it to him, because she doesn't have it. What's more, she's lost her own golden ball and can't find that either.

Oversimplifying, we could say that the Fifties male always wants a woman to return his golden ball. The Sixties and Seventies man, with equal lack of success, asks his interior feminine to return it.

The Iron John story proposes that the golden ball lies within the magnetic field of the Wild Man, which is a very hard concept for us to grasp. We have to accept the possibility that the true radiant energy in the male does not hide in, reside in, or wait for us in the feminine realm, nor in the macho/John Wayne realm, but in the magnetic field of the deep masculine. It is protected by the *instinctive* one who's underwater and who has been there we don't know how long.

In "The Frog Prince" it's the frog, the un-nice one, the one that everyone says "Ick!" to, who brings the golden ball back. And

in the Grimm brothers version the frog himself turns into the prince only when a hand throws him against the wall.

Most men want some nice person to bring the ball back, but the story hints that we won't find the golden ball in the force field of an Asian guru or even the force field of gentle Jesus. Our story is not anti-Christian but pre-Christian by a thousand years or so, and its message is still true – getting the golden ball back is incompatible with certain kinds of conventional tameness and niceness.

The kind of wildness, or un-niceness, implied by the Wild Man image 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.

The Wild Man is not opposed to civilization; but he's not completely contained either. The ethical superstructure of popular Christianity does not support the Wild Man, though there is some suggestion that Christ himself did. At the beginning of his ministry, a hairy John, after all, baptized him.

When it comes times for a young male to talk with the Wild Man he will find the conversation quite distinct from a talk with a minister, a rabbi, or a guru. Conversing with the Wild Man is not talking about bliss or mind or spirit or "higher consciousness," but about something wet, dark, and low – what James Hillman would call "soul."

The first step amounts to approaching the cage and asking for the golden ball back. Some men are ready to take that step, while others haven't left the collective male identity and gone out into the unknown are alone, or gone with only their dog.

The story says that after the dog "goes down" one has to start to work with buckets. No giant is going to come along and suck out all the water for you: that magic stuff is not going to help. And a weekend at Esalen won't do it. Acid or cocaine won't do it. The man has to do it bucket by bucket. This resembles the slow discipline of art: it's the work that Rembrandt did, that Picasso and Yeats and Rilke and Bach did. Bucket work implies much more discipline than most men realize.

The Wild Man, as the writer Keith Thompson mentioned to me, is not simply going to hand over the golden ball either. What kind of story would it be if the Wild Man said: "Well, okay, here's your ball"?

Jung remarked that all successful requests to the psyche involve deals. The psyche likes to make deals. If part of you, for example, is immensely lazy and doesn't want to do any work a flat-out New Year's resolution won't do any good. The whole thing will go better if you say to the lazy part: "You let me work for an hour, then I'll let you be a slob for an hour – deal?" So in "Iron John," a deal is made: the Wild Man agrees to give the golden ball back if the boy opens the cage.

The boy, apparently frightened, runs off. He doesn't even answer. Isn't that what happens? We have been told so often by parents, ministers, grade-school teachers, and high-school principals that we should have nothing to do with the Wild Man that when he says "I'll return the ball if you let me out of the cage," we don't even reply.

Maybe ten years pass now. On "the second day" the man could be twenty-five. He goes back to the Wild Man and says, "Could I have my ball back?" The Wild Man says, "Yes, if you let me out of the cage."

Actually, just returning to the Wild Man a second time is a marvelous thing; some men never come back at all. The twenty-five-year-old man hears the sentence all right, but by now he has two Toyotas and a mortgage, maybe a wife and a child. How can he let the Wild Man out of the cage? A man usually walks away the second time also without saying a word.

Now ten more years pass. Let's say the man is now thirty-five . . . have you ever seen the look of dismay on the face of a thirty-five-year-old man? Feeling overworked, alienated, empty, he ask the Wild Man with full heart this time: "Could I have my golden ball back?"

"Yes," the Wild Man says, "If you let me out of the cage."

Now something marvelous happens in the story. The boy speaks to the Wild Man, and continues the conversation. He says, "Even if I wanted to let you out, I couldn't, because I don't know where the key is."

That's so good. By the time we are thirty-five we don't know where the key is. It isn't exactly that we have forgotten – we never knew where it was in the first place.

The story says that when the King locked up the Wild Man, "he gave the key into the keeping of the Queen," but we were only

about seven then, and in any case our father never told us what he had done with it. So where is the key?

I've heard audiences try to answer that one:

"It's around the boy's neck."

No.

"It's hidden in Iron John's cage."

No.

"It's inside the golden ball."

No.

"It's inside the castle...on a hook inside the Treasure Room."

No.

"It's in the Tower. It's on a hook high up on the wall!"

No.

The Wild Man replies, "The key is under your mother's pillow."

The key is not inside the ball, nor in the golden chest, not in the safe . . . 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. The mother's pillow, after all, lies in the bed near where she makes love to your father. Moreover, there's another implication attached to the pillow.

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' conversation with Jocasta never did much good, nor did Hamlet's shouting.

A friend of mentioned that it's wise to steal the key some day when your mother and father are gone. "My father and mother are away today" implies a day when the head is free of parental inhibitions. That's the day to steal the key. Gioia Timpanelli, the writer and storyteller, remarked that, mythologically, the theft of the key belongs to the world of Hermes.

And the Key has to be *stolen*. I recall talking to an audience of men and women once about this problem of stealing the key. A young man, obviously well trained in New Age modes of operation, said, "Robert, I'm disturbed by this idea of stealing the key. Stealing isn't right. Couldn't a group of us just go to the mother and say, 'Mom, could I have the key back?'"

His model was probably consensus, the way the staff at the health food store settles things. I felt the souls of all the women in the room rise up in the air to kill him. Men like that are as dangerous to women as they are to men.

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 – not to mention the possessiveness that fathers typically exercise on daughters – can never be underestimated.

The means of getting the key back varies with each man, but suffice it to say that democratic or nonlinear approaches will not carry the day.

One rather stiff young man danced one night for about six hours, vigorously, and in the morning remarked, "I got some of the key back last night."

Another man regained the key when he acted like a wholehearted Trickster for the first time in his life, remaining fully conscious of the tricksterism. Another man stole the key when he confronted his family and refused to carry any longer the shame for the whole family.

We could spend days talking of how to steal the key in a practical way. The story itself leaves everything open, and simply says, “One day he stole the key, brought it to the Wild Man’s cage, and opened the lock. As he did so, he pinched one of his fingers.” (That detail will become important in the next part of the story.) The Wild Man is then free at last, and it’s clear that he will go back to his own forest, far from “the castle.”

## *What Does the Boy Do?*

At this point a number of things could happen. If the Wild Man returns to his forest while the boy remains in the castle, the fundamental historical split in the psyche between primitive man and the civilized man would reestablish itself in the boy. The boy, on his side, could mourn the loss of the Wild Man forever. Or he could replace the key under the pillow before his parents got home, then say he knows nothing about the Wild Man’s escape. After that subterfuge, he could become a corporate executive, a fundamentalist minister, a tenured professor, someone his parents could be proud of, who “has never seen the Wild Man.”

We’ve all replaced the key many times and lied about it. Then the solitary hunter inside us has to enter into the woods once more with his body dog accompanying him, and then the dog gets pulled down again. We lose lots of “dogs” that way.

We could imagine a different scenario. The boy convinces, or imagines he could convince, the Wild Man to stay in the courtyard. If that happened, he and the Wild Man could carry on civilized conversations with each other in the tea garden, and this conversation would go on for years. But the story suggests that Iron John and the boy cannot be united – that is, cannot experience their initial union – in the castle courtyard. It’s probably too close to the mother’s pillow and the father’s book of rules.

We recall that the boy in our story, when he spoke to the Wild Man, told him he didn’t know where the key was. That’s brave. Some men never address a sentence to the Wild Man.

When the boy opened the cage, the Wild Man started back to his forest. The boy in our story, the thirty-five-year-old man in our mind – however you want to look at it – now does something

marvelous. He speaks to the Wild Man once more and says, “Wait a minute! If my parents come home and find you gone, they will beat me.” That sentence makes the heart sink, particularly if we know something about child-rearing practices that have prevailed for a long time in northern Europe.

As Alice Miller reminds us in her book *For Your Own Good*, child psychologists in nineteenth-century Germany warned parents especially about *exuberance*. Exuberance in a child is bad, and at the first sign of it, parents should be severe. Exuberance implies that the wild boy or girl is not longer locked up. Puritan parents in New England often punished children severely if they acted in a restless way during the long church services.

“If they come home and find you gone, they will beat me.”

The Wild Man says, in effect, “That’s good thinking. You’d better come with me.”

So the Wild Man lifts the boy up on his shoulders and together they go off into the woods. That’s decisive. We should all be so lucky.

As the boy leaves for the forest, he has to overcome, at least, for the moment, his fear of wildness, irrationality, hairiness, intuition, emotion, the body, and nature. Iron John is not as primitive as the boy imagines, but the boy – or the mind – doesn’t know that yet.

Still, the clean break with the mother and father, which the old initiators call for, now has taken place. Iron John says to the boy, “You’ll never see your mother and father again. But I have treasures, more than you’ll ever need.” So that is that.

## *Going Off on the Wild Man’s Shoulders*

The moment the boy leaves with Iron John is the moment in ancient Greek life when the priest of Dionysus accepted a young man as a student, or the moment in Eskimo life today when the shaman, sometimes entirely covered with the fur of wild animals, and wearing wolverine claws and snake vertebrae around his neck, and a bear-head cap, appears in the village and takes a boy away for spirit instruction.

In our culture there is no such moment. The boys in our culture have a continuing need for initiation into male spirit, but old men in general don't offer it. The priest sometimes tries, but he is too much a part of the corporate village these days.

Among the Hopis and other native Americans of the Southwest, the old men take the boy away at the age of twelve and bring him *down* into the all-male area of the kiva. He stays *down* there for six weeks, and does not see his mother again for a year and a half.

The fault of the nuclear family today isn't so much that it's crazy and full of double binds (that's true in communes and corporate offices too – in fact, in any group). The fault is that the old men outside the nuclear family no longer offer an effective way for the son to break his link with his parents without doing harm to himself.

The ancient societies believed that a boy becomes a man only through ritual and effort – only through the “active intervention of the older men.”

It's becoming clear to us that manhood doesn't happen by itself; it doesn't happen just because we eat Wheaties. The active intervention of the older men means that older men welcome the younger man into the ancient, mythologized, instinctive male world.

One of the best stories I've heard about this kind of welcoming is one that takes place each year among the Kikuyu in Africa. When a boy is old enough for initiation, he is taken away from his mother and brought to a special place the men have set up some distance from the village. He fasts for three days. The third night he finds himself sitting in a circle around the fire with the older men. He is hungry, thirsty, alert and terrified. One of the older men takes up a knife, opens a vein in his own arm, and lets a little of his blood flow into a gourd or bowl. Each older man in the circle opens his arm with the same knife, as the bowl goes around, and lets some blood flow in. When the bowl arrives at the young man, he is invited to take nourishment from it.

In this ritual the boy learns a number of things. He learns that nourishment does not come only from his mother, but also from men. And he learns that the knife can be used for many purposes besides wounding others. Can he have any doubt now that he is welcome among the other males?

Once that welcoming has been done, the older men teach him the myths, stories, and songs that embody distinctively male values: I mean not competitive values only, but spiritual values. Once these “moistening” myths are learned, the myths themselves lead the young male far beyond his personal father and into the moistness of the swampy fathers who stretch back century after century.

In the absence of old men's labor consciously done, what happens? Initiation of Western men has continued for some time in an altered form even after fanatics destroyed the Greek initiatory schools. During the nineteenth century, grandfathers and uncles lived in the house, and older men mingled a great deal. Through hunting parties, in work that men did together in farms and cottages, and through local sports, older men spent much time with younger men and brought knowledge of male spirit and soul to them.

Wordsworth, in the beginning of “The Excursion,” describes the old man who sat day after day under a tree and befriended Wordsworth when he was a boy:

*He loved me; from a swarm of rosy boys  
Singled me out, as he is sport would say,  
For my grave looks, too thoughtful for my years.  
As I grew up, it was my best delight  
To be his chosen comrade. Many a time  
On holidays, we wandered through the woods...*

Much of that chance or incidental mingling has ended. Men's clubs and societies have steadily disappeared. Grandfathers live in Phoenix or the old people's home, and many boys experience only the companionship of other boys their age who, from the point of view of the old initiators, know nothing at all.

During the sixties, some young men drew strength from women who in turn had received some of their strength from the women's movement. One could say that many young men in the sixties tried to accept initiation from women. But only men can initiate men, as only women can initiate women. Women can change the embryo to a boy, but only men can change the boy to a man. Initiators say that boys need a second birth, this time a birth from men.



Keith Thompson, in one of his essays, described himself at twenty as a typical young man “initiated” by women. His parents divorced when Keith was about twelve, and he lived with his mother while his father moved into an apartment nearby.

Throughout high school Keith was closer to women than to other men, and that situation continued into college years, when his main friends were feminists whom he described as marvelous, knowledgeable, and generous, and from whom he learned an enormous amount. He then took a job in Ohio state politics, working with women and alert to the concerns of women.

About that time he had a dream. He and a clan of she-wolves were running in the forest. Wolves suggested to him primarily independence and vigor. The clan of wolves moved fast through the forest, in formation, and eventually they all arrived at a riverbank. Each she-wolf looked into the water and saw her own face there. But when Keith looked into the water, he saw no face at all.

Dreams are subtle and complicated, and it is reckless to draw rapid conclusion. The last image, however, suggests a disturbing idea. When women, even women with the best intentions, bring up a boy alone, he may in some way have no male face, or he may have no face at all.

The old initiators, by contrast, conveyed to boys some assurance that is invisible and nonverbal; it helped the boys to see their genuine face or being.

So what can be done? Thousands and thousands of women, being single parents, are raising boys with no adult man in the house. The difficulties inherent in that situation came up one day in Evanston when I was giving a talk on initiation of men to a group made up mostly of women.

Women who were raising sons alone were extremely alert to the dangers of no male model. One woman declared that she realized about the time her son got to high-school age that she needed more hardness than she could naturally give. But, she said, if she made herself harder to meet that need, she would lose touch with her own femininity. I mentioned the classic solution in many traditional cultures, which is to send the boy to his father when he is twelve. Several women said flatly, “No, men aren’t nurturing; they wouldn’t take care of him.” Many men, however – and I am one of

them – have found inside an ability to nurture that didn’t appear until it was called for.

Even when a father is living in the house there still may be a strong covert bond between mother and son to evict the father, which amounts to a conspiracy, and conspiracies are difficult to break. One woman with two sons had enjoyed going each year to a convention in San Francisco with her husband, the boys being left at home. But one spring, having just returned from a women’s retreat, she felt like being private and said to her husband: “Why don’t you take the boys this year?” So the father did.

The boys, around ten and twelve, had never, as it turned out, experienced their father’s company without the mother’s presence. After that experience, they asked for more time with their dad.

When the convention time rolled around the following spring, the mother once more decided on privacy, and the boys once more went off with their father. The moment they arrived back home, the mother happened to be standing in the kitchen with her back to the door, and the older of the two boys walked over and put his arms around her from the back. Without even intending it, her body reacted explosively, and the boy flew across the room and bounced off the wall. When he picked himself up, she said, their relationship had changed. Something irrevocable had happened. She was glad about the change, and the boy seemed surprised and a little relieved that he apparently wasn’t needed by her in the old way.

This story suggests that the work of separation can be done even if the old man initiators do not create the break. The mother can make the break herself. We see that it requires a great deal of intensity, and we notice that it was the woman’s body somehow, not her mind, that accomplished the labor.

Another woman told a story in which the mother-son conspiracy was broken from the boy’s side. She was the single parent of a son and two daughters, and the girls were doing well but the boy was not. At fourteen, the boy went to live with his father, but he stayed only a month or so and then came back. When he returned, the mother realized that three women in the house amounted to an overbalance of feminine energy for the son, but what could she do? A week or two went by. One night she said to her son, “John, it’s time to come to dinner.” She touched him on the arm and *he* exploded and *she* flew against the wall – the same sort of

explosion as in the earlier story. We notice no intent of abuse either time, and no evidence that the event was repeated. In each case the psyche or body knew what the mind didn't. When the mother picked herself off the floor, she said, "It's time for you to go back to your father," and the boy said, "You're right."

The traditional initiation break clearly is preferable, and sidesteps the violence. But all over the country now one sees hulking sons acting ugly in the kitchen and talking rudely to their mothers, and I think it's an attempt to make themselves unattractive. If the old men haven't done their work to interrupt the mother-son unity, what else can the boys do to extricate themselves but to talk ugly? It's quite unconscious and there's no elegance in it at all.

A clean break from the mother is crucial, but it's simply not happening. This doesn't mean that the women are doing something wrong: I think the problem is more that the older men are not really doing their job.

The traditional way of raising sons, which lasted for thousands and thousands of years, amounted to fathers and sons living in close – murderously close – proximity, while the father taught the son a trade: perhaps farming or carpentry or blacksmithing or tailoring. As I've suggested elsewhere, the love unit most damaged by the Industrial Revolution has been the father-son bond.

There's no sense in idealizing the preindustrial culture, yet we know that today many fathers now work thirty or fifty miles from the house, and by the time they return at night the children are often in bed, and they themselves are too tired to do active fathering.

The Industrial Revolution, in its need for office and factory workers, pulled fathers away from their sons and, moreover, placed the sons in compulsory schools where the teachers are mostly women. D. H. Lawrence described what this was like in his essay "Men Must Work and Women as Well." His generation in the coal-mining areas of Britain felt the full force of that change, and the new attitude centered on one idea: that physical labor is bad.

Lawrence recalls that his father, who had never heard this theory, worked daily in the mines, enjoyed the camaraderie with the other men, came home in good spirits, and took his bath in the kitchen. But around that time the new schoolteachers arrived from London to teach Lawrence and his classmates that physical labor is

low and unworthy and that men and women should strive to move upward to a more "spiritual" level – higher work, mental work. The children of his generation deduced that their fathers had been doing something wrong all along, that men's physical work is wrong and that those sensitive mothers who prefer white curtains and an elevated life and right and always have been.

During Lawrence's teenage years, which he described in *Sons and Lovers*, he clearly believed the new teachers. He wanted the "higher" life, and took his mother's side. It wasn't until two years before he died, already ill with tuberculosis in Italy, that Lawrence began to notice the vitality of the the Italian workingman, and to feel an deep longing for his own father. He realized then that his mother's ascensionism had been wrong for him, and had encouraged him to separate from his father and from his body in an unfruitful way.

A single clear idea, well fed, moves like a contagious disease: "Physical work is wrong." Many people besides Lawrence took up the idea, and in the next generation that split between fathers and sons deepened. A man takes up desk work in an office, becomes a father himself, but has no work to share with his son and cannot explain to the son what he's doing. Lawrence's father was able to take his son down into the mines, just as my own father, who was a farmer, could take me out on the tractor, and show me around. I knew what he was doing all day and in all seasons of the year.

When the office work and the "information revolution" begin to dominate, the father-son bond disintegrates. If the father inhabits the house only for an hour or two in the evenings, then women's values, marvelous as they are, will be the only values in the house. One could say that the father now loses his son five minutes after birth.

When we walk into a contemporary house, it is often the mother who comes forward confidently. The father is somewhere else in the back, being inarticulate. This is a poem of mine called "Finding the Father":

*My friend, this body offers to carry us for nothing – as the ocean carries logs. So on some days the body wails with it's great energy; it smashes up the boulders, lifting small crabs, that float around the sides.*

*Someone knocks on the door. We do not have time to dress. He wants us to go with him through the blowing and rainy streets, to the dark house.*

*We will go there, the body says, and there find the father whom we have never met, who wandered out in a snowstorm the night we were born, and who then lost his memory, and has lived since longing for his child, whom he saw only once . . . while he worked as a shoemaker, as a cattle herder in Australia, as a restaurant cook who painted at night.*

*When you light the lamp you will see him. He sits there behind the door . . . the eyebrows so heavy, the forehead so light . . . lonely in his whole body, waiting for you.*

## ***The Remote Father***

The German psychologist Alexander Mitscherlich writes about this father-son crisis in his book called *Society Without the Father*. The gist of his idea is that if the son does not actually see what his father does during the day and through all the seasons of the year, a hole will appear in the son's psyche, and the hole will fill with demons who tell him that his father's work is evil and that the father is evil.

The son's fear that the absent father is evil contributed to student takeovers in the sixties. Rebellious students at Columbia University took over the president's office looking for evidence of CIA involvement with the university. The students' fear that their own fathers were evil was transferred to all male figures in authority. A university, like a father, looks upright and decent on the outside, but underneath, somewhere, you have the feeling that it and he are doing something demonic. That feeling becomes intolerable because the son's inner intuitions become incongruous with outer appearances. The unconscious intuitions come in, not because the father is wicked, but because the father is remote.

Young people go to the trouble of invading the president's office to bridge this incongruity. The country being what it is, occasionally they do find letters from the CIA, but this doesn't satisfy the deeper longing – the need of the son's body to be close to the father's body. "Where is my father . . . why doesn't he love me? What is going on?"

The movie called *The Marathon Man* concentrates on the young American male's suspicion of older men. The main character, played by Dustin Hoffman, loses his father, a leftist driven to suicide in the McCarthy era. The plot puts the young man in a dangerous contact with a former concentration camp doctor, whom Hoffman must confront and defeat before he can have any peace with his own dead father.

When the demons are so suspicious, how can the son later make any good connection with adult male energy, especially the energy of an adult man in a position of authority or leadership? As a musician he will smash handcrafted guitars made by old men, or as a teacher suspicious of older writers he will "deconstruct" them. As a citizen he will take part in therapy rather than politics. He will feel purer when not in authority. He will go to northern California and raise marijuana, or ride three-wheelers in Maine.

There's a general assumption now that every man in a position of power is or will soon be corrupt or oppressive. Yet the Greeks understood and praised a positive male energy that has accepted authority. They call it Zeus energy, which encompasses intelligent, robust health, compassionate decisiveness, good will, generous leadership. Zeus energy is male authority accepted for the sake of the community.

The native Americans believe in that healthful male power. Among the Senecas, the chief – a man, but chosen by the women – accepts power for the sake of the community. He himself owns virtually nothing. All the great cultures except ours preserve and have lived with images of this positive male energy.

Zeus energy has been steadily disintegrating decade after decade in the United States. Popular culture has determined to destroy respect for it, beginning with the "Maggie and Jiggs" and "Blondie and Dagwood" comics of the 1920s and 1930s, in which the man is always weak and foolish. From there the image of the weak adult man went into animated cartoons.

The father in contemporary TV ads never knows what cold medicine to take. And in situations comedies, "The Cosby Show" notwithstanding, men are devious, bumbling, or easy to outwit. It is the women who outwit them, and teach them a lesson, or hold the whole town together themselves. This is not exactly "what people want." Many young Hollywood writers, rather than confront their

fathers in Kansas, take revenge on the remote father by making all adult men look like fools.

They attack the respect for masculine integrity that every father, underneath, wants to pass on to his grandchildren and his great-grandchildren. By contrast, in traditional cultures, the older men and the older women often are the first to speak in public gatherings; younger men may say nothing but still aim to maintain contact with the older men. Now we have twenty-seven-year-olds engaged in hostile takeovers who will buy out a publishing house and dismantle in six months what an older man has created over thirty years.

I offered my help undermining Zeus energy during my twenties and thirties. I attacked every older man in the literary community who was within arrow range, and enjoyed seeing the arrows pass through his body, arrows impelled by the tense energy bottled in my psyche. I saw many parts of my father's daytime life, his work habits, and his generous attitude toward working men; but he was inaccessible in some other way, and the hole in me filled with demons, as Mitscherlich predicted. Older men whom I hardly knew received the anger.

When a son acts on that fear of demonism it makes him flat, stale, isolated, and dry. He doesn't know how to recover his wet and muddy portion. A few years ago, I began to feel my diminishment, not so much on my "feminine" side as on my masculine side. I found myself missing contact with men – or should I say my father?

I began to think of him not as someone who had deprived me of love or attention or companionship, but as someone who himself had been deprived, by his father and his mother and by the culture. This rethinking is still going on.

Every time I see my father I have new and complicated feelings about how much of the deprivation I felt with him came willingly and how much came against his will – how much he was aware of and unaware of.

Jung said something disturbing about this complication. He said that when the son is introduced primarily by the mother to feeling, he will learn the female attitude toward masculinity and take a female view of his own father and of his own masculinity. He will see his father through his mother's eyes. Since the father and the mother are in competition for the affection of the son, you're not

going to get a straight picture of your father out of your mother, nor will one get a straight picture of the mother out of the father.

Some mothers send out messages that civilization and culture and feeling and relationships are things which the mother and the daughter, or the mother and the sensitive son, share in common, whereas the father stands for and embodies what is stiff, maybe brutal, what is unfeeling, obsessed, rationalistic: money-mad, uncompassionate. "Your father can't help it." So the son often grows up with a wounded image of his father – not brought about necessarily by the father's actions, or words, but based on the mother's observations of these words and actions.

I know that in my own case I made my first connection with feeling through my mother. She provided me my first sense of discrimination of feeling. "Are you feeling sad?" But the connection entailed picking up a negative view of my father, who didn't talk very much about feelings.

It takes a while for a son to overcome these early negative views of the father. The psyche holds on tenaciously to these early perceptions. Idealization of the mother or obsession with her, liking her or hating her, may last until the son is thirty, or thirty-five, forty. Somewhere around forty or forty-five a movement toward the father takes place naturally – a desire to see him more clearly and to draw closer to him. This happens unexplainably, almost as if on a biological timetable.

A friend told me how that movement took place in his life. At about thirty-five, he began to wonder who his father really was. He hadn't seen his father in about ten years. He flew out to Seattle, where his father was living, knocked on the door, and when his father opened the door, said, "I want you to understand one thing. I don't accept my mother's view of you any longer."

"What happened?" I asked.

"My father broke into tears, and said 'Now I can die.'"

Fathers wait. What else can they do?

I am not saying that all fathers are good; mothers can be right about the father's negative side, but the woman also can be judgmental about masculine traits that are merely different or unexpected.

If the son learns feeling primarily from the mother, then he will probably see his own masculinity from the feminine point of

view as well. He may pity it and want to reform it, or he may be suspicious of it and want to kill it. He may admire it, but he will never feel at home with it.

Eventually a man needs to throw off all indoctrination and begin to discover for himself what the father is and what masculinity is. For that task, ancient stories are a good help, because they are free of modern psychological prejudices, because they have endured the scrutiny of generations of women and men, and because they give both the light and dark sides of manhood, the admirable and the dangerous. Their model is not a perfect man, nor an overly spiritual man.

In the Greek myths, Apollo is visualized as a golden man standing on an enormous accumulation of the dark, alert, dangerous energy called Dionysus. The Wild Man in our story includes some of both kinds of energy, both Apollo and Dionysus.

The Bhutanese make masks of a Bird-headed man with dog's teeth. That suggests a good double energy. We all know the temple guardians set before the Oriental temple doors. A guardian is a man with bulging brows and fierce will, foot raised as if to dance, who lifts a club made of flower. The Hindus offer as an image of masculinity Shiva, who is both an ascetic and a good lover, a madman and a husband. He has a fanged form called Bhairava, and in that aspect he is far from the niceness suggested by the conventional Jesus.

There's a hint of this Bhairava energy when Christ goes wild in the temple and starts whipping the moneychangers. The Celtic tradition offers as a male image Cuchulian – when he gets hot, his shin muscles switch around to the front and smoke comes out of the top of his head.

These powerful energies inside men are lying, like Iron John, in ponds we haven't walked past yet. It is good that the divine is associated with the Virgin Mary and a blissful Jesus, but we can sense how different it would be for young men if we lived in a culture where the divine also was associated with mad dancers, fierce fanged men, and a being entirely underwater, covered with hair.

All of us, men and women both, feel some fear as we approach these images. We have been trying for several decades, rightly, to understand the drawbacks of the destructive, macho

personality type, and in that regard I think it is helpful to keep in mind the distinctions between the Wild Man and the savage man.

When a man gets in touch with the Wild Man, a true strength may be added. He's able to shout and say what he wants in a way that the Sixties-Seventies man is not able to. The approach to, or embodying of, receptive space that the Sixties-Seventies man has achieved is infinitely valuable, and not to be given up. But as I wrote in a poem called "A Meditation on Philosophy":

*When you shout at them, they don't reply.  
They turn their face toward the crib wall, and die.*

The ability of a male to shout and to be fierce does not imply domination, treating people as if they were objects, demanding land or empire, holding on to the Cold War – the whole model of machismo.

Women in the 1970s needed to develop what is known in the Indian tradition as Kali energy – the ability really to say what they want, to dance with skulls around their neck, to cut relationships when they need to.

Men need to make a parallel connection with the harsh Dionysus energy that the Hindus call Kala. Our story says that the first step is to find the Wild Man lying at the bottom of the pond. Some men are able to descend to that place through accumulated grief. However, connecting with this Kala energy will have the effect also of meeting that same energy in women. If men don't do that, they won't survive.

Men are willing right now – young men especially. Now that so many men have gotten in touch with their grief, their longing for father and mentor connections, we are more ready to start seeing the Wild Man and to look again at initiation. But I feel very hopeful.

At this point, many things can happen.

A LITTLE BOOK  
ON THE  
HUMAN SHADOW

ROBERT BLY  
EDITED BY WILLIAM BOOTH

1988

Honoring the Shadow:  
*An Interview with William Booth*

*Booth:* The shadow by definition is that part of ourselves that is hidden from us. How do you answer a person who is not aware of having a shadow and asks you where to look for it?

*Bly:* I asked that question myself of an experienced Jungian analyst at a public talk, passing on a question asked of me. I said, "Suppose that a woman about thirty-five years old living in a small town in Minnesota knows no psychology. How would that woman begin that process of absorbing her shadow?" His answer was this: unless she meets a teacher who understands the concept of shadow, she doesn't have a chance. "That's a harsh answer!" I said. "Well," he added, "there might be another way." He observed that our psyche in daily life tries to give us a hint of where our shadow lies by picking out people to hate in an irrational way. Suppose there is a woman in the town who seems to her too loose and sexually active, and she finds herself thinking of this other woman a lot. In that case, the psyche is suggesting that part of her shadow, at least, lies in the sexual area. She has to notice precisely whom she hates. That is the path of attention. Suppose that she hates the current president of the PTA; and if you ask her, she'll say that the woman is fakey, can't be trusted, is too successful, and so forth. The psyche might be telling her that part of her shadow lies in the power area. She has unused and unrecognized power impulses, which she has put into the bag. Otherwise there wouldn't be such heavily emotional contact with that other person. So, following the path of attention, one

notices where the anger goes, and precisely whom we become obsessed with. We become entangled with people who are virtually strangers. That's odd. The metaphor is this: if we maintain eye contact with that person, we can damage him or her by our anger and hatred. If we break off eye contact and look down quickly to the right, we will see our own shadow. Hatred then is very helpful. The old tradition says that if a man loved God he can become holy in twenty years; but if he hates God he can do the same work in two years.

Paying attention to what one likes or hates in literature helps also. I've always been obsessed with certain eighteenth-century men, Pope and Johnson, for example. I grumble about them as neoclassical, haters of feeling, rationalistic sticks, followers of metrical rules, enemies of spontaneity, etc. I finally stopped attacking them, and looked down to the right: it's obvious that I've had in me for years and unused and unrecognized classical side, and I have to readjust my view of my own openness to feeling. It's possible I'm not romantic. Facing that had two effects: first, I wasn't able to sustain my hatred for Samuel Johnson. As a matter of fact, I find his essay on Milton absolutely magnificent. And second, I have to realize that other people see in me the very thing I saw in Johnson, and who is to say they are wrong?

*Booth:* So we are particularly sensitive to a quality in someone else that we have been burying in ourselves?

*Bly:* Yes. The peculiarity of our shadow lies in what we are burying. I for example have longed to think of myself as a nice person, that is, responsible, decent, thoughtful, etc. This is one of the major efforts I make. I have been told that I should be a nice person. As far as we know, this is not something the old Celts were told in the time of Cuchulian. They were told that you were to be a daring person, a brave person. You were never to whine; even at the moment of death you were to tell jokes. That would have quite different results. So their shadow probably lay in cowardice and in melancholy. Our shadow tends, because our parents urged unselfishness on us, to lie in being greedy or sneaky, wanting fame without deserving it, being an operator. Were you brought up to be nice?

*Booth:* Of course. It's still a big problem.

*Bly:* We bump into that problem in the men's groups. The Widow Douglas wanted Huck Finn to be nice. And after he has floated down the river with the black man, Aunt Sally wants to adopt him and "civilize" him. Huck says, "I can't stand it. I been there before."

Let me give you one more answer to the question, "How do I know I have a shadow?" The other day I was making coffee for Ruth and myself. I put a spoon and a half of ground coffee in her filter and the same in mine. Then something inside me reached back and took another half spoonful for mine. It wasn't me – I didn't do it. I just noticed it happen.

*Booth:* I once heard a man say about a certain placid young woman that she had no shadow. Is it possible for someone not to have a shadow?

*Bly:* Have you ever seen anyone walk in the sun and yet the shadow was missing?

*Booth:* It would have to be a very thin person.

*Bly:* Terribly thin. Perhaps transparent.

*Booth:* But transparency could imply either that a person is insubstantial or that he or she has nothing to hide.

*Bly:* It is said that some old Zen people have done so much work on their shadow that they will do greedy things right in front of you and laugh. By showing the greediness directly, in daylight, somehow they bring it out of the world of shadow and into the world of play. It is said that old Zen people stop dreaming. It is possible that one of the reasons that all of us dream so much is that the dreamer wants to remind us of the amount of shadow that we haven't absorbed. I would

think it possible that a sixty-five or seventy-year-old person could be transparent. But the woman was in her twenties?

*Booth:* Yes.

*Bly:* I'd say there's no chance. Such a woman might even say that she doesn't dream, but if you checked her rapid eye movements, you would see that she dreams quite a bit.

*Booth:* So such a person is not aware of the shadow, but it is there.

*Bly:* It is inconceivable that at twenty-eight we could have lived out everything. Our shadow includes a whole landscape. Some of our shadow, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, obviously hides in the sexual area, for example – in sexual greediness, sexual brutality – and pornography makes that clear. But I believe that there is also a hunter and hermit area of the shadow, containing various primitive impulses that have nothing to do with sexuality – maybe a desire to live in the woods, a desire to kill animals and smear their blood on our faces, a desire to get away from all profane life and live religiously like an Australian aborigine. There is no way we can live all that material. Then there is an abundant landscape where the emotions of hatred, fear, anger, jealousy live. We have a bigger store of those at birth than we are able to live out. Just think how angry and irritable we get if an airline clerk makes a mistake! At least I do. So I have been thinking of the shadow as threefold.

I read an article in *Psychology Today*, and the gist of it is that in China the children are not allowed to speak or act out their negative emotions. If a child expresses anger, the mother will put two fingers to cheek and say, "Shame!" She will respond similarly to competitiveness or greed. The child, then, is taught politeness towards parents, noncompetitiveness towards brothers and sisters; and if he has anger, he is taught not to express it. Jung said that when the shadow is successfully repressed, the person doing it finds it very difficult to talk to other people about feelings. The people who wrote this article report

that in a Chinese family very little discussion of feelings takes place. The child almost never talks with his parents about his or her feelings, never with brothers and sisters; the child sometimes talks about feelings with cousins. Luckily there are many cousins in the Chinese extended family. The shadow of the Chinese, then, would seem to have its foothold in the third area, the area of hatred, fear, anger, and jealousy.

In our culture, as a result of permissive theories of childrearing, kindergarten teachers, or some of them, still think it is good if the child expresses anger, gets the aggression "out of his system" – that's the phrase that is used often. With us, some children are urged to express their anger. So that part of their shadow becomes visible, appears in broad daylight.

*Booth:* This sounds like an antidote to the problem of stuffing things into the bag.

*Bly:* The planners intended it as an antidote. Yet the plan has not worked very well. I'm not sure that the expression of the sexual material in the young has worked out very well either. The problem is this: whenever a kindergarten child expresses violent anger and acts it out, it's as if the electrical impulse makes a path in the brain down which the anger can go even more easily next time. But explosive anger is often felt by the ego as a defeat. The ego is in charge of making a social being out of us. If the child's tantrum angers and adult, the child's ego may be damaged by what happens next. When the child brought up permissively becomes forty or fifty years old, he may still be acting out anger in the kindergarten way, as electricity passes along the old grooves in the brain. The person is not strengthened, but in fact is humiliated, by these explosions of anger.

*Booth:* So the child has to experience freedom of expression, but also experience a strengthening of the ego.

*Bly:* Well, it's as if there were some kind of game being played here between the ego and the shadow. When permissive educators come in and tell children to express their anger, it's like giving the



shadow side fifteen balls and the structure side none. Permissiveness is a misunderstanding of the seriousness of that game. George Leonard, in his book called *The End of Sex*, describes himself as having been enthusiastic about the complete expression of sexuality during the sixties. He now feels that such expression results eventually in some humiliation of the ego, and the psyche as a result loses some of its interest in sexuality; it loses some of its eros.

The culture has a longing for primitive modes of expression as an antidote to repression. Nazi youth groups emphasized a kind of back-to-nature primitivism. Obviously Nazism involved a state insanity, and not all back-to-nature movements involve insanity; most embody health. And yet we can understand through Kurtz's experience in *Heart of Darkness* that the Western longing for the primitive is dangerous to the psyche. The ego becomes unable to hold its own among the primitive impulses and dissolves in mass movements, vanishes like sugar in water.

*Booth:* I notice that most people who talk about a "personal shadow" or a "national shadow" have trouble keeping the term "shadow" neutral. "Shadow" and "dark side of the self" have negative connotations and associations with evil.

*Bly:* This tendency to associate the dark side with evil came up very interestingly in some responses to the interview that Keith Thompson and I did in *New Age* a couple of years ago about the wild man. You remember that we discussed a scene in the Grimm brothers' story "Iron John", in which after men bucket out a pond they find a man entirely covered with hair lying at the bottom. As we experienced the responses from men and women who wrote or spoke to us, it became clear that we failed to make one important distinction – the distinction between the wild man and the savage man. We're going to make it in the next interview. Our language includes in its spectrum the tame, obedient man, on one end, and the savage, represented by men who rape women on pool tables, on the other end. There is no place in the psyche for the wild man who is neither. A few men took the image of the wild man as permission for being savage, failing to make any distinction.

When the Los Angeles *Free Press* reprinted that interview, a woman psychoanalyst, German by birth, wrote to the newspaper and said something like this: "There is something we have to make very clear, and that is that this person under the water is a *killer!*" But Iron John throughout the story behaves in a gentle, even courtly way. She took her grasp of what happened in Germany and imposed it upon this particular story. To say it another way, she had no room in her mind in which the concept of the wild man could live; the walls between the rooms had been broken down by the savage man, who occupied the wild man's room as well as his own.

We could distinguish between the wild man and the savage man by looking at several details: the wild man's possession of spontaneity, the presence of the female side of him, and his embodiment of positive male sexuality. None of these implies violence toward or domination of others. I feel that the man under the water resembles a Zen priest more than a so-called primitive who in our view would only grunt. The image of the wild man describes a state of soul that allows shadow material to return slowly in such a way that it doesn't damage the ego. Apparently what we're hearing in "Iron John" is a narrative reminder of old initiation rituals in northern Europe. The older males would teach the younger males how to deal with shadow material in such a way that it doesn't overwhelm the ego or the personality. They taught the encounter more as a kind of play than as a fight.

When the shadow becomes absorbed the human being loses much of his darkness and becomes light and playful in a new way. The unabsorbed shadow can darken the air all around a human being. Pablo Casals is an example of the first type, and Cotton Mather of the second.

*Booth:* I'm confused by your use of the word "light" in this context – saying that a person who absorbs the shadow becomes not dark, but light and playful. You have sometimes used the word "light" in a negative sense. In your 1971 shadow reading you said Bertrand Russell had too much light in his personality. You wanted a political leader who was a crow, not a dove or a swallow.

*Bly:* OK – then I'll withdraw the term "light." Marie Louise von Franz says somewhere that a human being who has done work with

the shadow or absorbed the shadow gives a sense of being condensed. Other people willingly give a sense of authority in moral matters. If a teacher has worked with his own shadow, she says that students, no matter how young they are, sense it, and discipline in that room will not be difficult, because the students know that the teacher has his crow with him. Other teachers, she says, who have not worked with their shadow, can talk about discipline all day and never get it. I like the idea that the work a person does on his or her shadow results in a condensation, a thickening or a densening, of the psyche which is immediately apparent, and which results in a feeling of natural authority without the authority being demanded.

*Booth:* Do you see that quality in any of our political leaders?

*Bly:* Ronald Regan has certainly not absorbed his shadow. There is nothing condensed about him at all. We know that he is still projecting his shadow on Russia, which he calls an evil empire. And he insists that desperate farmers in El Salvador are all puppets of Russia. He's drawing on a fund of wise-father-longing which Americans project on him. Winston Churchill did absorb his shadow, and he exercised a natural authority. There was something extremely infantile in him – that's where his shadow lay – but he seems to have faced that and eaten it. Do you see anyone in politics who has a good condensed feeling about him?

*Booth:* My mind went back to Lincoln. I think he had a tremendous moral authority that went along with a lack of illusion about himself and his causes. He wasn't sanctimonious.

*Bly:* Another quality that comes in when a person absorbs his shadow is a certain kind of humor. Lincoln had it. Someone asked Lincoln if he would find him a good government job, and Lincoln said, "I have very little influence in this administration." When a woman he met on a train told him he was one of the ugliest men she'd seen in her entire life, he didn't become offended. "What should I do about that?"

he asked the woman. "Well," she said, "you could stay home." Lincoln told that story on himself – he liked her answer.

*Booth:* You gave a reading in the late sixties that I remember, and you seemed exhilarated then by the evidence of shadow in America – in long hair, new interest in art, the emergence of good poetry such as Gary Snyder's and Galway Kinnell's. You said, "It's a wonderful movement; we're all returning to the shadow." How does that movement look to you now.

*Bly:* If we had done any work in truly absorbing the shadow, some shift, however small, would have occurred in the whole American psyche in the direction of an ability to admit our dark side. It's clear that no such change has taken place.

It is said that inside our body there is a vast gap – perhaps thousands of miles across – between the power of charka in the stomach and the heart charka in the chest. I remember a scene once at Ojai. Some gentle Krishnamurti people asked Joseph Campbell, at one of his lectures, about the spiritual seed brought from India to California in the 1920s by Vivekananda and others. Didn't he think that this seed was already working, and that a new stage in world culture had already begun? Joseph said, "I can't assure you of that. As a matter of fact, it is my opinion that the popular culture never gets above the power of charka." That's a stark and fierce view. It coincides, by the way, with the theme of power over others that one always hears in the Nashville lyrics, and obsession of popular movies with power – the James Bond movies – as distinguished from love of spirit. If Campbell is right, mass culture will never teach absorption of the shadow. If a person is to absorb the shadow, he or she would have to move up to the heart area. Since popular culture did dominate in the sixties, I was wrong to imagine that the culture as a whole could move out of the power charka. Many of us were wrong about that.

Another way to put it is that people under thirty-five cannot teach themselves or others to eat the shadow. The initiation rituals hinted at in "Iron John" imply and suppose old men who teach younger men how to eat the shadow. That teaching did not appear in the sixties,

and it's not appearing now. Old men like Reagan, in fact, are teaching younger males how to project their shadow, not how to eat it. Reagan teaches a kind of genial commercial paranoia, so I don't think things look hopeful.

Let's go back again to this game that the ego plays with the un-lived material. Baker Roshi, during a little talk one day, remarked that ordinarily in our culture we have only two ideas: either we express or we repress. Either one represses anger or one expresses it. For example, it could be said that Richard Strauss is repressing certain negative emotions, whereas punk rock is expressing them. But expressing is not any more admirable than repressing. The Western man or woman lives in a typical pairing of opposites that destroys the soul. Either we defeat Communism or we are defeated by it. Either a man dominates women or he is dominated by them. Joseph Campbell describes the two opposites as two horns; and if we get hooked on either, we die. Baker Roshi remarked that in Zen the student tries to imagine a third possibility. It goes like this. In meditation, he said, one might allow the anger to come in, so that the whole body burns with anger. The anger is not repressed; your whole body *is* anger. One may want to feel that anger for three or four hours. During this time one is neither expressing it nor repressing it. Then, when the meditation ends, one has the choice to express the anger or not. The ego personality can make the choice later, to express it or not. Moreover, expressing it might not involve the kind of scarifying scene in which you scream at someone and wear tracks in your brain. In fact, the anger might be expressed by some witticism on the phone that would take twenty seconds, but the listener wouldn't forget it for five years. The personality would find an appropriate way to express anger which would support playfulness, give honor to the anger, and yet not contribute to the disintegration of its own organized psyche.

*Booth:* As usual, what you are saying requires growth. You're not talking about jumping back to childhood and pulling things out of a bag.

*Bly:* A woman told me a touching story about jumping back. She was a California woman, and had been invited to a women's conference in northern Minnesota, her first. On the opening night, she said, all of us were nervous, and we didn't say much the first time around. The second time around we said more. The third time around each of us said a lot. By the fourth round, which came the next day, much hurt feeling and anger appeared – the dry-eyed were taking care of the weeping women lying on the floor. In the fifth round even more came loose, and everyone was honest. It felt at the time like a tremendous victory. But, she said, a few days later I felt drained and defeated, and nothing had really changed.

The women, bravely, allowed rage, humiliation, jealousy, and anger to be *expressed*, but she concluded that expressing shadow material by itself doesn't help. The act is more savage than wild.

The last thing I want to say about the shadow is an idea I've been thinking about more and more: the matter of honoring the shadow material. If we don't live our animal side or our sexual side, that means we don't *honor* those parts. It has been said that the greatest harm the Christian church has done is to make people mistrust instincts, but who taught us to mistrust our anger? How can we honor our anger and still not express it routinely? And if we have anger and do not make proper clothing for it, but make it live in the closet or else let it run around naked screaming at everybody, that means that we are failing to honor our anger.

*Booth:* I wish you would say more about how one can honor those negative emotions, including anger.

*Bly:* Three honorings come to mind. First of all, anger can happen when listening to others talk. If someone tell you, say, of some abuse that he or she has suffered, and describes it in a flat voice, one may feel anger, a kind of sympathetic anger. One could capture and honor that anger, and instinctively trust it, allowing it to take shape in words. "I feel some anger listening to this story."

Secondly, Marie Louise suggests that we regard our anger as a person and talk to it. Rather than acting as a conduit for our own anger, and focusing it on another person, one turns one's face and body to the

anger itself, and asks, “What do you want from me? What do you want of me?” That is honoring the anger, just as we honor everyone whom we turn to face.

*Booth:* It seems to me that this would apply to anything in the shadow.

*Bly:* I think so. We can ask our sexuality: “What do you want from me?” We could ask our infantilism: “What do you want me to do?”

Thirdly, it’s possible that we keep in touch with our anger only enough to make a shady deal with it, not out in the open. We relate to our anger the way Mafia bosses in New Jersey relate to petty mobsters. A guy comes slinking in and bosses pay him fifty bucks to do a job for them. Then when he comes back they can’t even remember that they told him to do anything, and what’s worse, if anyone goes to the pen, he’s the one. I have, and we may all have, an underground, under-the-table, shady deal going with our anger, so that it does certain things for us. We ourselves look fine socially – we answer questions calmly, we adopt Robert’s rules of order – and yet all that time our anger is doing a lot of damage to people around us. I have mentioned that we lose energy whenever these shadow powers are allowed to operate under the table. But we would also have to say that the danger is not only the danger of losing energy; there is the question of the anger itself being angry at us. The anger is angry with us for not honoring it, for treating it shabbily, for getting out of it what we want without ever bringing it in and introducing it to our friends, saying, “This is my friend Anger here. He’s a lowly-paid assistant of mine.”

*Booth:* I try to keep him out of sight, but he does some damage to my friends once in a while.

*Bly:* The question is, what is the anger doing to you? When does he really plan to fix you? Now, what haven’t we said about the shadow?

*Booth:* We’ve talked about the relationship between shadow and evil. It is clear that the shadow is not to be identified with evil, but how does evil fit in?

*Bly:* Well, let’s try to make a distinction. The shadow energies seem to be a part of the human psyche, a part of its 360-degree nature, and the shadow energies become destructive only when they are ignored. The shadow energies remain a part of or belong to the human community. But our ancestors, some of them, had a sense that evil is something quite different. It comes from beyond the human community; it flows in from an archaic principle that still exists in the universe – many Gnostics believed that – or from the dead, who have passed out of the human community. And from that point of view evil can be dealt with or recognized, but not absorbed. We know it’s dangerous to imagine that we could have friendly relationships with all forms of destructive energy. Such humanistic confidence is too optimistic. There may be powers in the universe outside the human community and hostile to the human community. But our conversation has been about shadow primarily.

*Booth:* We come back then to the idea that the shadow is what is hidden from us, and it is not something destructive in its very essence. I recall your poem “The Moon,” written some years ago, that carries this sense of the shadow.

*Bly:* It goes like this.

After writing poems all day,  
I went off to see the moon on the piney hill.  
Far in the woods I sit down against a pine.  
The moon has her porches turned to face the light,  
But the deep part of her house is in darkness.