

Good Man Down: The Myth of Masculine Violence in American Society

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Abstract

It is a tough time to be a man in America. Young men drop out of high school in far greater numbers than young women. Men are less likely than women to go to college and pursue advanced degrees. Men are more likely to be incarcerated, commit acts of violence and abuse drugs and alcohol. During the current recession, men have been hit the hardest; trades traditionally dominated by men are the slowest to recover. Men have been systematically disenfranchised and isolated in America leaving many men without the support of family, positive male role models and increasingly limited career options. Such contemporary conditions leave one to wonder who benefits from a society where young men are un-mentored, isolated and without direction? This article examines the role that myth has played in helping young men answer enduring questions about what it means to be a man and what consequences emerge when such guidance is absent.

Keywords

masculinity, myth, violence, hero journey, mentor, American studies

It makes no difference what men think of war, said the judge. War endures. As well ask men what they think of stone. War was always here. Before man was, war waited for him. The ultimate trade awaiting its ultimate practitioner. That is the way it was and will be. That way and not some other way.

— McCarthy (*Blood Meridian* 248)

Myth addresses the eternal questions: What is the world really like? How can I truly be myself in this world? How am I to live my life in it? The answers offered to us by myths are definite and they are intended to reveal an understanding of life and human nature. In Raffaele Pettazzoni's essay "The Truth of Myth," he contends that myth is "not pure fiction; it is not fable, but history, a 'true story' and not a 'false' one. It is a true story because of its contents which are an account of events that really took place" (Pettazzoni 102). He further asserts that these true stories are sacred because they "belong to the beginnings of things, the origin of the world and of mankind" (102). Perhaps then, it is no

surprise that every human civilization has celebrated stories of men overcoming great odds through strength and courage. However, a problem arises when a society produces men who cannot distinguish the difference between courage and righteous anger and senseless violence and savagery.

The late child psychiatrist and writer Bruno Bettelheim defined a paradoxical but inescapable fact that ultimately speaks to our humanity: “Man and society are born out of both: violence and gentle cooperation” (102). In other words, how these two forces are balanced within an individual helps determine their behavior, their character and perhaps even their sanity. One can similarly argue that how these forces are balanced within society helps to determine its political organization, its economy and the overall disposition of its civilization. In the United States today, it seems too much that violence is far surpassing cooperation, chaos trumps order, and brutality eclipses reason. While the overall crime rate in the U.S. declines, the rate of mass murders committed continues to rise. Fear of the darkened urban street has become a maxim of inner-city life, while parents in suburban communities contemplate purchasing bulletproof backpacks in the wake of the massacre at Sandy Hook, Connecticut, where twenty-year-old Adam Lanza fatally shot twenty children and six adults at an elementary school shortly after he killed his own mother (Chumley). While the jarring effects of such senseless brutality may be enough to momentarily jolt Americans from their long nap and prompt parents to send their children to school adorned in body armor, it is doubtful that the events at Sandy Hook, or the 2012 mass shooting inside a movie theater in Aurora, Colorado, or the 2007 Virginia Tech massacre will burn into our collective consciousness in the same matter that the Kennedy assassination did for our parents and grandparents.

While the world may be ready to simply judge America as an excessively violent country in which brutal, irrational violence can erupt at any moment, the source of such brutality is complex and might even be nurtured by a degradation of the myths we retell and celebrate as a people. The American folklore of violence is well portrayed throughout the entertainment industry, manifesting itself in big screen cinema, television, children’s cartoons and video games. Such celebration of violence invites speculation as to whether there is a connection between violence embedded in American entertainment and a U.S. murder rate that far exceeds nearly every other developed country. The Federal Bureau of Investigation’s Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) Program reported that violent crime in the U.S. inched up 0.7 percent in 2012 from the previous year. There were 4.7 murders per 100,000 people. This compares with seven in England, 1.4 in Canada, 1.5 in France, and 0.5 in Japan. The leading violent nation is Mexico where 32 Mexicans were killed for every 100,000 in population.¹

The United States of America is arguably the most masculine nation on earth. It is not possible to fully comprehend our own history without first understanding masculinity. Even neophytes with a limited understanding of the past cannot fail to see the influence of the male in American culture. It is not surprising that characteristics such as dominance, authority, courage and control are viewed largely as manly virtues. Men believe (or ardently wish to believe) that the future depends on them; that within each man rests an inherent ability to sire

or mentor great men who will become the heroes of sons yet unborn. As men, it is our quiet longing that we (or even our own sons) might become, or at least associate with, such heroes. From where, then, do the seeds of violence originate? Sigmund Freud found a “powerful measure of desire for aggression” in human instincts. He added, “the very emphasis of the Commandment ‘Thou Shalt Not Kill’ makes it certain that we are descended from an endlessly long chain of generations of murderers, whose love of murder was in their blood, as it is perhaps also in ours” (Freud 60-61). Additionally Freud held that man possesses a death instinct, which, since it cannot be satisfied except in suicide, is instead turned outward as aggression against others. Even if one disagrees with this premise, the reality is that violence is crude and dangerous not only for the victims, but for those who use it.

Throughout every generation in America, manhood has been placed at the center of life and progress. This prestige creates a tension where men are called upon to uphold traditions associated with masculinity, while simultaneously trying to redefine what it means to be a man. Young men today find themselves in a complex world with few norms, sparse rituals and where gender roles are increasingly difficult to define. The very meaning of manhood is constantly under scrutiny by feminists, religious fundamentalists, and legislators, while popular media makes use of a political and gender stereotyping that promotes its own version of manhood. This effort to change our understanding of masculinity is not foreign for it is human nature to search for new frontiers, for sons to be different than their fathers. How we do this, while cultivating the virtues of manhood, is a significant task.

Perhaps the best ideal of manhood can be found embedded in the mythic motif of the hero’s journey. Man, in search of his own identity and self-realization, discovers the opposites within himself and sets out to reconcile them. Across every mythology the world has ever known, this is the story of the hero’s quest. It is the search for the Holy Grail. It is the courageous search for something lost. In his book *The Hero With A Thousand Faces*, Joseph Campbell describes the hero’s journey in the following manner: “A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man” (30). This hero’s adventure is carried out in a cycle consisting of three phases: *Departure*, where the hero courageously leaves his comfortable and familiar world and ventures into the darkness of the unknown; *Initiation*, where the hero is subjected to a series of tests in which he must prove his courage; and *Return*, in which the hero brings the boon of his quest back for the benefit of his people. In the Western tradition most discussions of courage have been dominated by the idea that courage “is a virtue that we summon out of ourselves when confronted by someone or something terrifying” (Newell 50) in order to achieve victory through force. However, is this brand of courage a character trait that we should really be cultivating in our young men? Is it, in fact, the same virtue that Homer, Aristotle, and the Bible consistently maintained? Or has the notion of manly courage been corrupted by the same media that celebrates it?

The last three decades have been marked with numerous examples of young men transformed into mass murderers, seemingly without warning. Whether one considers the Tucson shooter Jared Loughner, Oklahoma City bomber Timothy McVeigh or Columbine High School killers Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris, each tragic event leaves survivors as well as friends and family members of the perpetrator dumbfounded and wondering how they could miss the warning signs.

While it may be an oversimplification to say that young men who commit grave crimes are alienated, detached individuals with weak emotional bonds with their fathers or father figures, recent events seem to reveal a correlation between weak familial bonds, video game obsession and senseless violence. For example, Seung-Hui Cho, the Korean-American youth who killed thirty-two people and wounded seventeen others on April 16, 2007, at Virginia Polytechnic Institute in Blacksburg, Virginia, had a strong fascination with violent video games and mass killers in addition to having weak emotional ties to his family. Similarly in July 2012, James Eagan Holmes killed twelve and injured fifty-eight people in a shooting rampage in an Aurora, Colorado, movie theater. Holmes was described as intellectually gifted, talkative, friendly and an avid video game player. The reported motives for the Sandy Hook rampage have focused largely on Adam Lanza's mental health, his obsession with violent video games and a fascination with mass killers, however little has been said about his strained relationship with his mother and the breakdown in his relationship with his father. Adam's mother and father separated in 2001 and later divorced. While Adam and his father had regular interactions after the divorce, when Adam turned eighteen, he stopped communication with his father altogether.

In his essay "A Child's Need for Magic," Bruno Bettelheim reminds us that as soon as "a child begins to move about and explore, he begins to ponder the problem of his identity" (47). Just like the great philosophers, children are searching for the solutions to the first and enduring questions: Who am I? How ought I to deal with life's problems? What must I become? It is important that as children begin to explore and to test these questions that they have a template to follow. Throughout history, myth has served that purpose. What happens, then, when the narrative is altered, clouded or replaced with something cold, numb and fundamentally brutal?

As numerous studies demonstrate, young men are more prone than girls to spontaneous aggressive behavior.² The most notorious example of this can be found in Timothy McVeigh, the product of a broken home, who searched for something to blame for his terminal drift and rootlessness. The result was a warped fantasy that the American government is in fact the "Zionist occupying authority" suppressing individual liberties on behalf of a worldwide Jewish conspiracy. However, often there are no ideological or political motivations for such violent rampages. The killers at Columbine were simply young men who felt excluded from the "in crowd."

Lieutenant Colonel David Grossman, a retired infantry officer and an expert on the psychology of violence, has worked tirelessly to alert parents and educators to the corrosive effects of what he calls the "virus of violence"

(Grossman 303). He believes there is a direct link between *society's* glamorization of violence in video games, television and the movies and the search for recognition and acceptance by alienated young men through rampage killings of the kind that took place at Columbine High School and Virginia Tech. He describes the shocking similarity he sees between violence portrayed through a variety of media (i.e. television, first-person shooter video games, movies) and the techniques used by the Marines and other military organizations to desensitize soldiers to the moral impact of inflicting death in combat. However, killing loses its horror when it becomes repetitive and carried out against your enemies whom you are conditioned to regard as completely alien to yourself. It is important to note that the military uses these techniques only in the dire situation of war, the last resort of national self-defense. Television and other electronic media desensitize young men to the existence of their fellow citizens, classmates, and parents. While professional soldiers are taught to direct ability to kill beyond U.S. borders and restricted to those comparatively rare episodes when foreign combatants imperil Americans, the climate of violence fed by the entertainment industry spreads without such prejudice and without any military safeguards or support.

Of all the traditional virtues, none is more intimately connected with masculinity than courage in war. In fact, in both ancient Greek and Latin, the words for courage are synonyms of the words for manly virtue. *Andreia*, the Greek word for courage is derived from the word for a "manly man," *Aner*; similar to the Spanish word *hombre*. In Greek, a manly man is understood in contrast with *anthropos* ("mere human beings"), the undistinguished mass of mankind that includes women, children, slaves and others who did not own the privilege to bear arms. As for the Latin, the word associated with manly man is *vir*. This term is connected with virtue of any kind, or *virtus*, implying that all excellence of character can be summed up beneath the banner of manly courage. The full story of the traditional morality of manhood is a bit more complicated. Philosophers have argued that courage is a necessary but not sufficient condition for becoming a fully virtuous man.³ According to Western canon, every man needs to acquire courage in order to defend his country and family in war. Bravery in a just war is to be admired and is deserving of public honor and commemoration in art and literature. In the instance of a just war, violence is sanctified and is the story that the rulers told each other and their subordinates and is what we today might call the *myth of redemptive violence*. It enshrines the belief that violence can save, that war can bring peace, that "might makes right." It is one of the oldest stories in the world.

The idea that violence "saves" is so prevalent largely because, at first glance, it does not seem to be mythic in the least. Freud contends in his psychoanalytic theory that aggression is an innate personality characteristic common to all humans. Therefore, it is easy to adopt the belief that violence simply is the natural order of things. It is what works. It seems inevitable and serves as the last and, often, the first resort in resolving disputes. If a god is what you turn to when all else fails, arguably, in every human society, violence certainly functions as a god. This godliness reveals to us the religious character of

violence. It demands from its devotees an absolute obedience unto death, whether that end comes in the heat of conflict or, as often happens, by the young men who carry out massacres with their own hands.

Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* is unquestionably the most violent novel ever written. It is also one of the most powerful literary attempts to capture man's propensity toward violence. The carnage that rises so sharply from the pages exists seemingly only to break one's spirit as a reader. The mercenaries in the book and the narrative that follows present us with a nonstop onslaught of cruelty after cruelty as if to make our minds numb to the unspeakable inhumanity that McCarthy presents to us. For example, early in the book, we find the Glanton Gang are greeted with one grotesque act after another, from a mule impaled with a lance and left to die in the desert to a mesquite bush adorned with dead infants:

[...] these small victims, seven, eight of them, had holes punched in their underjaws and were hung so by their throats from the broken stobs of the mesquite to stare eyeless at the naked sky. Bald and pale and bloated, larval to some un-reckonable being. (McCarthy 57)

For the characters in this novel, the world is a violent place where war is not merely a conflict between men, but a god. With rare exception, the characters do not seem to be bound by any sort of morality, but adhere to what the Judge refers to as "historical law," which seems to grant permission for the strong to manipulate or prey on the weak, which the characters do without hesitation.

The inspiration for this novel comes from the autobiography of Civil War Commander Samuel Chamberlain, *My Confession*, where he recounts his youth with the notorious Glanton Gang, a group of American mercenaries hired by the Mexican government to slaughter Native Americans. Even though the characters repeatedly demonstrate courage in battle, the actions taken by these soldiers of fortune in no way approximate the criteria for a just war. They are violent because the environment they inhabit is violent and they are numb to it.

Similarly, Grossman believes that violence has been trivialized by its prevalence in the entertainment industry, to the point where the young people watching it are so desensitized that they cannot distinguish between the fantasy version and the real thing. Even when they confront it directly, children can confuse real-life violence with something they have seen on a screen and react as if they were detached spectators enjoying a completely fictitious act of carnage (Grossman 310). Dr. Paul Weigle, a child and adolescent psychiatrist at the Joshua Center in Enfield, Connecticut, cites cases where young men like Adam Lanza trained for their violent rampages through the use of first-person shooter video games like *Doom*, *Call of Duty* and *Grand Theft Auto*. Dr. Weigle also cited the case of Devin Moore, an Alabama teen with no prior convictions or history of violence when he was brought in by police on a minor traffic violation. Once inside the police station, Moore seized a gun from a police officer and shot three officers, then stole a police cruiser to make his escape. After his capture, Moore said he was inspired by the game *Grand Theft Auto*, explaining to the police,

“Life is a video game, everybody’s got to die sometime” (“Devine Moore”). What is missing from such logic is the recognition that violence is not power. In the end, it is an admission of failure and an act of cruelty. Violence is not the only narrative left in which to appeal for resolution or to call out for help.

In his thesis *Myth and Story*, Theodor Gaster effectively distinguishes myth from story. He informs us that the difference between the two is not simply semantics, but in the function and motivation for each. He clarifies the distinctions of the two by suggesting that all tales are not myths: “A myth is, or once was, used; a tale is, and always was, merely told” (Gaster 123). The efficacy of the myth lies in its ability to make meaning of and preserve the world. The authority of myth lies in the magic of the word, in its evocative power to call order out of chaos. The apparent rise in mass murder perpetrated by young men begs the question: Has the entertainment industry, with its glamorization of violence filled the void left by absentee parents and mentors and ultimately sequestered the sacred function of myth?

It is important to acknowledge the fact that most young men who play video games, such as the ones described in this paper, do not emerge from their bedrooms, arm themselves and engage in acts of carnage against the innocent. Unfortunately, however, there are a few that choose to exercise in the real world the violence that they engage in in their virtual domain. There was a time that young men might strive to imitate the courage and valor demonstrated by the heroes and gods celebrated in the *Homeric Hymns*, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. Therefore, it gives one reason to pause at the thought that now young men instead aspire to imitate car thieves and mass murderers portrayed in the entertainment culture. It is reminiscent of the heated exchange between President Andrew Shepherd and Lewis Rothschild, the Assistant to the President for Domestic Policy, in the 1995 film *The American President*, where Rothschild challenges Shepherd to take a stand and lead the nation:

ROTHSCHILD. The American people want leadership. And in the absence of genuine leadership, they will listen to anyone who steps up to the microphone. They’re so thirsty for it, they’ll crawl through the desert toward a mirage, and when they discover there’s no water, they’ll drink the sand.

SHEPHERD. Lewis, we’ve had presidents who were beloved, who couldn’t find a coherent sentence with two hands and a flashlight. People don’t drink the sand because they’re thirsty, Lewis. They drink it because they don’t know the difference.

Being a male in our contemporary society is difficult. What is happening throughout America today is a psychological, cultural and economic shift in how we understand masculinity. Statistically, young men drop out of high school in greater numbers than young women; they are less likely than women to pursue advanced degrees, and more likely to be incarcerated and commit acts of violence and abuse drugs and/or alcohol. Additionally, as a result of the Great Recession, the unemployment rate of men aged 18 to 30 far exceeds that of women, as the vocational trades currently dominated by men continue to be the slowest to

recover. These circumstances disenfranchise young men in America. Such conditions provoke inquiry regarding who in our society benefits when young men are left un-mentored and without a sense of purpose or direction? Are we raising men in America who truly cannot distinguish between courage and carnage? Are we cultivating multiple generations of young men who are “drinking the sand” because they do not know the difference?

NOTES

¹ All statistical data was acquired from a 2013 report published by the official Federal Bureau of Investigation’s website.

² There is a fairly extensive body of research that speaks to greater incidences of aggression and violence exercised by young men. Cf. N. Rappaort and C. Thomas. “Recent Research Findings on Aggressive and Violent Behavior in Youth: Implications for Clinical Assessment and Intervention.” *Journal of Adolescent Health* 35 (2004): 260-277.

³ In the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle and Socrates assert that virtues, such as courage, seem to require intellectual virtue.

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DAVID S. McCABE has been a professor of education and education program coordinator at Pasadena City College since 2005. He holds a BA in History from UC Riverside and a Masters in Public Administration from CSU San Bernardino, and is currently completing coursework in Pacifica Graduate Institute's PhD program in Mythological Studies. He has presented papers at more than two dozen conferences and has been published in numerous journals. His novel *Without Sin* was published by Sunstone Press in 2012. David's entire career has been dedicated to education and improving the lives of children. Issues of diversity and equity are at the heart of his pedagogy. His thirst for adventure and social justice have provided him with the opportunity to travel the world, even earning him the distinction of spending the night in jail with Tom Morello. Despite donning a suit and tie for his professional work as an educator, David is a country boy at heart, who is most comfortable in cowboy boots and jeans, and prefers dirt roads rather than paved streets and quiet starry nights to city lights.