

VOICE MALE: THE SEARCH FOR MASCULINE IDENTITY

A Sermon by Rev. Dr. Ed Piper

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November 16, 2008

This past week I attended the fall retreat of UU ministers in our region. The topic for our program was trauma ministry, and the focus was on the shooting incident at the Knoxville UU church in July that claimed the lives of two adults and injured six others. In the span of just a few horrible minutes on a Sunday morning during a children's performance of the musical production, "Annie, Jr.," a man entered the church armed with a shotgun, shot and killed an usher who confronted him, and opened fire on the congregation. When he stopped to reload his weapon, he was wrestled to the floor and subdued by members of the congregation until police arrived. Meanwhile, the religious education director rounded up the terrified children and led them to safety in a nearby Presbyterian church.

All of the people I have mentioned in this true-life story are **men**. Their actions demonstrate the full spectrum of male behavior in our times, ranging from violent outrage **against** life to the heroic protection **of** life. They illustrate the chaos and confusion that surround what it means to be a man at this time and place in history. I expect that when future historians look back on the time we are living through right now, one of the most dramatic changes during the past half century will be the shift in gender roles. The women's movement has had a profound effect on men as well as women.

Sam Keen writes: "Ask most any man, 'How does it feel to be a man these days? Do you feel manhood is honored, respected, celebrated?' Those who pause long enough to consider their gut feelings will likely tell you they feel blamed, demeaned, and attacked. But their reactions may be pretty vague. Many men feel as if they are involved in a night battle in a jungle against an unseen foe. Voices from the surrounding darkness shout hostile challenges: 'Men are too aggressive. Too soft. Too insensitive. Too macho. Too power-mad. Too much like little boys. Too wimpy. Too violent. Too obsessed with sex. Too detached to care. Too busy. Too rational. Too lost to lead. Too dead to feel.' Exactly what we are supposed to become is not clear. Men have only recently begun to explore new visions and definitions of manhood. At no time in recent history have there been so many restless, questioning men." [p. 6]

Sam Keen's book titled *Fire in the Belly*, remains for me the best single resource for understanding the quest for male identity. He describes one of the lowest points in his life, when his life was coming apart at the seams. His seventeen-year marriage had recently ended in divorce. His children were living a thousand miles away. And he was hopelessly trapped in a doomed relationship with a beautiful but much younger woman. "One day," he says, "I went to talk with Howard Thurman, a friend for twenty-five years, true witness, grandson of a slave, mystic, philosopher, a man acquainted with darkness and the journey of the spirit. Through a long afternoon we talked and sipped bourbon. I told him about the pain of my divorce and my disintegrating romance. He asked about my children. And then he told me [a story]:

Once there was a man who loved a woman beyond all measure. He sailed away with her and one day came to an uninhabited island. Leaving her on the boat, he explored the interior, and deep in the forest he came upon a stone image of an unknown god. It radiated such a sense of power that he fell to his knees and prayed for his beloved: “May her life be full and happy. May our love develop in a way that will be fulfilling for her.” As he headed back he came to a hilltop, and as he looked out across the water, he saw his boat and his lover sailing away. His prayer had been answered.

Sam Keen writes, “The last thing [Howard] said before I left was probably the single most important bit of advice I ever got about being a man. ‘Sam,’ he said, ‘there are two questions a man must ask himself: The first is “Where am I going?” and the second is “Who will go with me?” *If you ever get these questions in the wrong order you are in trouble.*” [Keen, pp. 11-12]

The journey to authentic manhood is a spiritual as well as psychological journey—a pilgrimage that calls upon us to confront the myths and divine images that have guided us in the past—often at an unconscious level—and replace destructive or distorted forms of masculinity with more healthy forms of behavior. What I have noticed in my readings and reflections about male identity is how much of our behavior represents an exaggerated response to our **fears**: fear of being weak, fear of being dependent, fear of losing control. The traditional male response to external threat and internal fear is to achieve **dominance**. This morning I will explore how this pattern of fear-and-dominance has contaminated men’s experiences in three areas: our relationships with women, our relationships with other men, and our relationship with the natural environment. For each of these three arenas, I will suggest an alternative model of masculinity.

First, our relationships with **women**. From their early interactions with their mother all the way through their school years, most American men are influenced by powerful women. The mythic embodiment of this powerful woman is the **goddess**. Sam Keen says, “A man’s journey in relationship to WOMAN involves three stages. In the beginning he is sunk deep in an unconscious relationship with a falsely mystified figure who is composed of unreal opposites: virgin-whore, nurturer-devouring mother, goddess-demon. To grow from man-child into man, in the second stage, he must take leave of WOMAN and wander for a long time in the wild and sweet world of men. Finally, when he has learned to love his own manhood, he may return to the everyday world to love an ordinary woman.” [p. 16] Many men, myself included, did not experience that second crucial stage of extended separation from powerful women. As a result, some men respond to their fear of the powerful goddess with the destructive need to dominate women through abuse and violence.

The alternative model of male identity revolves around **partnership** rather than dominance-and-submission in relation to women. I suspect that men and women will always remain a mystery to one another. To quote Sam Keen: “Love increases the mystery of the self and the other. In love we learn to respect and adore what is beyond understanding, grasping, or explanation. Together we play our separate parts in the drama of creation. Strangers in the night, opposites joined in a passionate dance, keeping step to an echo of a distant harmony we must strain to hear.” [p. 220]

Let me now turn to **men's relationship with other men**. The mythic image we must confront is that of the **warrior**. The warrior demonstrates his masculinity by vanquishing his opponents through competition and if necessary warfare. The fear underlying the warrior mentality is that a man will be exposed as weak or helpless, and therefore he must compensate by demonstrating his physical strength and his willingness to endure pain. Think about the enormous popularity of the "Rocky" movies starring Sylvester Stallone and the "Die Hard" movies starring Bruce Willis. In order to succeed, the hero must distance himself emotionally from his own pain and suffering. Robert Bly, one of the pioneers in the men's movement, argues that many men are trapped by their grief over a father who was absent physically or emotionally during their childhood and adolescence. These "soft men," as Bly labels them, have learned to numb their pain by other means, such as substance abuse, immersion in work, or vicarious identification with aggressive sports. The next time you watch a professional football or basketball game, notice how often the commentators say that the key to winning is to **be more aggressive**. Regardless of whether the arena is sports or the workplace or warfare itself, other men are adversaries who must be vanquished and publicly humiliated.

What is the alternative to this image of the macho warrior? Let me suggest that we men must overcome two deep-seated instincts. The first instinct is to **deny our feelings**, especially our experience of pain. I recall an intense conversation with my former wife, who accused me of hiding my true emotions from her. "No," I replied, "it's even worse than that. I hide my emotions from even myself." The second instinct is to hide our emotions from other men, lest we appear weak and vulnerable. One of the benefits of the growing men's movement is the formation of men's groups, where the open expression of both positive and negative emotions is not just tolerated, but encouraged. I am hopeful that we can start a men's group here in our Fellowship.

Finally, I want to say a few words about redefining our relationship with the Earth. The old paradigm of man [sic] having dominion over the Earth and all its creatures has led us to the brink of environmental catastrophe. The cry of "Drill, baby, drill" rings hollow as a solution to our energy needs. As men (and women) we must view ourselves not as **exploiters** but as **protectors** of the Earth. To again quote Sam Keen, "Our common vocation now is to find a way to repent of our wasteful and consuming ways, and learn to love the limits that are necessary to respect the habitat of our neighbors. We need to discover how to nurture an ecological conscience that is sensitive and powerful enough to administer justice, and protect the hearth of all the creatures we are rapidly rendering homeless by our compulsive march toward affluence. . . . The great calling of our time that is worthy of men and women is to hold each other within our hearts, and to conspire to create a hearth within the earth household. [p. 231-32] Let me close with words of wisdom from the Ute Indians of North America:

Earth teach me stillness as the grasses are stilled with light.

Earth teach me suffering as old stones suffer with memory.

Earth teach me caring as parents who secure their young.

Earth teach me courage as the tree which stands all alone.

Earth teach me limitation as the ant which crawls on the ground.

Earth teach me freedom as the eagle which soars in the sky.

Earth teach me resignation as the leaves which die in the fall.

Earth teach me regeneration as the seed which rises in the spring.

Earth teach me to forget myself as melted snow forgets its life.

Earth teach me to remember kindness as dry fields weep with rain.

[Singing the Living Tradition # 551]