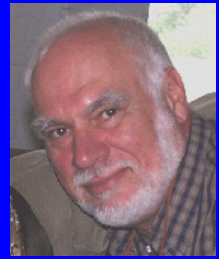


Bellicose Veins—the roots of violence in US culture

TALK ABOUT MEN & POLITICS BEFORE IT'S TOO LATE

October 2004



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With the election closing in on us, there seem to be only two kinds of people left in the country, those who have made up their minds and those who will vote their feelings on the day of the election. Statistically, those who vote their feelings will decide who will win. That a democratic country's fate be determined in this way would be preposterous if it were not true. We are told that this new "silent majority" will vote for whom they like, and will like whom they like because that candidate seems most like them. They will look for safety, and comfort and self-justification in the familiar.

Yet how much different are those who have already firmly decided on their candidates? Again, likeness is likely to have played a like or perhaps even a stronger role in their decision-making. Napoleon Bonaparte is quoted as saying, "In politics stupidity is not a handicap." I sometimes think that our political system is trying to turn it into a virtue.

In this election, we men are caught between two images of masculinity, and many of us will probably vote our identity rather than the issues. I will borrow some words of cognitive Scientist George Lakoff to contrast these two images*:

The PROGRESSIVE man/father "assumes that the world is basically good and can be made better and that one must work toward that. Children are born good; parents can make them better. Nurturing involves empathy, and the responsibility to take care of oneself and others for whom we are responsible."

The CONSERVATIVE man/father "assumes that the world is dangerous and difficult and that children are born bad and must be made good. The strict father is the moral authority who supports and defends the family, tells his wife what to do, and teaches his kids right from wrong. The only way to do that is through painful discipline — physical punishment that by adulthood will become internal discipline."

This cleavage, however we label it, has divided the nation into red and blue. It seems to have defined the choice and how it is made. I see it as a great threat to men. Why? A great deal of the men's movement, helping us define and design ourselves for the time we live in has been centered around two things:

- 1) **Using the positive power of our masculinity** in the face of the stereotypes of patriarchy and male aggression, which the women's movement reacted so strongly to. We learned from what happened to women in the past decades, but what we also learned most importantly was to define ourselves rather than letting others, present or past, to define us. Drums are a heartbeat for so many things besides marching off to war.
- 2) **Seeking a balanced masculinity, one that could be both nurturing and protective, both expressive and reflective.** We needed, as some have put it, to find our feminine side as women needed to find their masculine side. Doing so has meant a

lot of work in overcoming our fear and distrust of one another. As a result of the men's movement, male friendship, not just comradeship, has again become real and a delight in our lives. We also got our fathers back.

The problem with the current political choices lies in the fact that, despite all the progress we as men have made on this masculine agenda, the rhetoric of this election is aimed at driving us not to choose executives and legislators on their merits, but to choose which of the two kinds of men we see ourselves as or as wanting to be. This either-or choice then turns into the selections we will punch into the voting machine in November. Rather than demanding, before voting for them, that our candidates be well-rounded human beings capable of a range of behaviors that are appropriate for the world in which we live, we are offered primitive stereotypes, caricatures of ourselves to identify with. That is the choice.

Here is a suggestion that may sound at first a bit speculative or theoretical at first, but I feel will pay off. It is an alternative to shouting each other down when discussing candidates and issues. When we gather in our men's groups or just as buddies over a beer, it would benefit us enormously to discuss how our male identity is involved in the decision to be made in November. The questions that launch this discussion are along this line:

- How do we feel about ourselves as men right now given the national and world scene?
- How do we want to feel about ourselves in the future?
- How does the current choice of candidates, policies and initiatives on the ballot support or undermine our vision of life now and in the coming years?

Our maleness is what we have in common. Caring about how we live it out is what we have in common. Caring about how we model it for our sons and daughters (or if we are childless, nonetheless for the next generation), is what is important. Politics is about how diverse people can live together and forge a society that meets the needs of its stakeholders, majority and minority. If so, close to half the country's stakeholders are men's voices. We deserve to hear each other as men and be heard as such, on our own terms and with our own agenda, not driven by the stereotypes that further other interests' agendas. It is, after all, a matter of our life and death.

*http://www.berkeley.edu/news/media/releases/2003/10/27_lakoff.shtml