

Monastic Scribe LVI: August 4, 2023

I NEED A PHONE BOOTH!

With all the fuss right now about the movie, “Barbie,” I thought I might say a few things about Ken. Men seem to be in tough shape these days and while it is hazardous to try to explain it all, I write as an insider who wants to understand myself! We males have always treasured being strong and courageous but we aren’t sure how to do that anymore. Since boyhood we have wanted to be Superman but there are no phone booths left.

There are many beautiful men. Young fathers today are usually much more attentive to their wives and caring for their children. Recently, in church, I watched a young father stand patiently and lovingly during Mass while three little children climbed all over him. He was there to protect them and love them but not suppress them. I know my father loved me but never gave me such attention.

I read a lot about “toxic masculinity” and “fragile masculinity.” I feel for many guys and especially for young men growing up in our sterile society. There are many analyses and possible solutions. Zachary Wagner, in a book this year, writes of “Non-toxic Masculinity: Recovering healthy male sexuality.” He decries sexual repression, shame for sexual thoughts, dehumanization of women. I think he is disagreeing with evangelical movements that wish to reinstate a patriarchal and male-dominant culture. He connects this latter culture to Christian nationalism and the prosperity gospel.

Manuel Betancourt writes “The Male Gazed” – on hunks, heartthrobs, and what pop culture taught him about desiring men.” He deals with many paradoxes in growing up as a man. There is a lot of analysis but no real solution.

Christine Emba wrote a twelve-page opinion essay in the Washington Post this past month on “Men are lost. Here’s a map out of the wilderness.” Again, more analysis than real help. I guess it helps to identify the issues.

Robert Bly, poet and author of “Iron John” began the Minnesota Men’s Conference in 1984. Following Bly, the group sees much help in poetry. An indication of where their thought is leading can be found in this year’s annual

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conference titled “Awaking the male emotional body.” This is in keeping with the much heralded accusation that men’s emotional life is underdeveloped.

There is much male posturing in developing perfect male physiques, waxing and all. And there is violent masculinity such as was displayed in the January 6 insurrection at the Capitol in 2021.

I don’t know what to make of all of this. What I find important is to consider the spiritual dimension of a man’s life. And I find a lot of direction in the work and teachings of Richard Rohr, OFM. He has been the teacher and prophet of the American Catholic Church for some fifty years. He has also preached in many areas of the globe. One of the things he discovered in his travels and teachings on other continents is the prevalence of male rites of passage in many cultures. He found that older men as mentors to young men showed by word and ritual that becoming a man means living as a man. Young men cannot initiate each other; they need wise elders. Rohr initiated a program of rites of passage for young men. This revolved around a four-day weekend of council meetings, instructions, fasting, time in the wilderness alone, prayer and other rituals. There are thousands of men, mostly Christian, who have made these weekends. A few years ago he handed over the program to a group that is now known as “Illuman.” They have a yearly conference in the Fall, in addition to Rites of Passage weekends in America and elsewhere. Some weekends are for fathers and sons. Richard Rohr continues to show up at the annual conference and provides inspiration and encouragement.

Richard believes the central problem for many men is that they have no interior life. They live completely in the outer world of business, competition, games. Good fathers begin this process for a boy but, as we know, fathers are in much demand in our society. Other men, such as coaches, bosses, teachers, can help. But men need each other to really know themselves and accept themselves. Women already know this.

Women usually have female friends, sometimes many of them, who gather regularly. Back in the nineties we had a men’s council here at the abbey. It was a great opening for many of us to be relaxed, open, vulnerable with other men. We also encountered some wives who were suspicious of our gatherings – were we talking about women? I think those times have passed. A therapist friend of mine

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tells me how many depressed men he deals with, often after they have retired from a job and don't know who they are.

Men don't go to church or practice Religion as much as women do. One writer believes we men are all dealing with shame. We are ashamed that we cannot live up to the call to strength and courage and bravery that we are supposed to show. Religion may play into this shame. And men in dresses may make some men feel they are being treated as children. I am not sure of this but it opens some consideration. What do you think? You can let me know at:

joycet@glastonburyabbey.org

Fr. Timothy Joyce, OSB, STL

Please note that I do not speak on behalf of Glastonbury Abbey, the Archdiocese of Boston or the Catholic Church, though I hope my faith is in harmony with all these. Any error in judgment should be credited to me and not anyone else.