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Robert Bly
*What Men
Really Want*

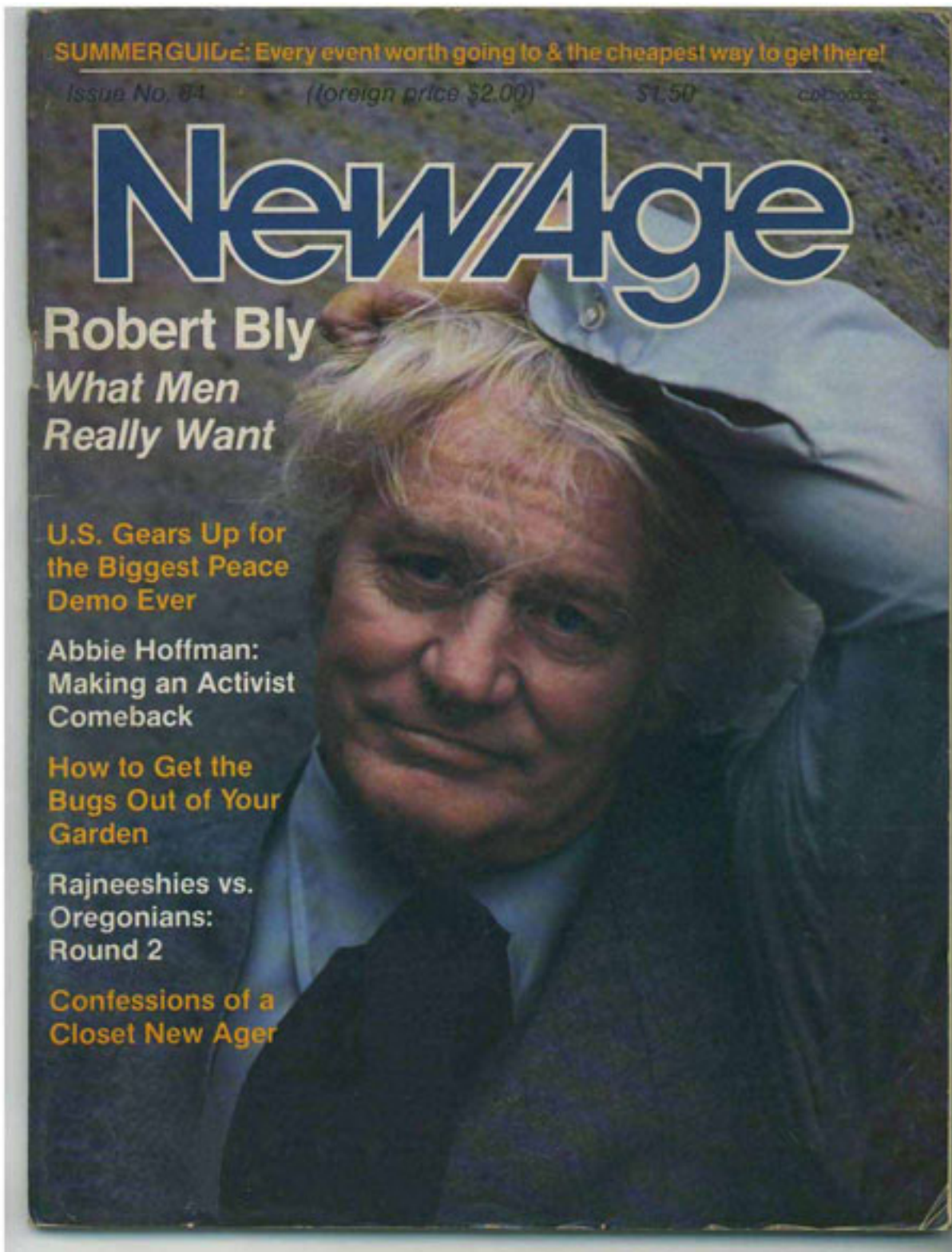
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*What
Men
Really
Want*



Photographs by Steve Beck

***A New Age
Interview with
Robert Bly***

By Keith Thompson

Note:

I first encountered Robert Bly's reflections on men in the May, 1982 New Age Journal interview by Keith Thompson, reproduced with Keith's gracious permission in the following pages. When I attended my first men's conference in 1983, I met men who, knowing nothing about Bly, had crossed the country to be there because of it.

Much of the content discussed in the interview exploded into national consciousness a few years later, and was largely distorted in the media. Regardless, the influence of this interview, and of Bly's 1990 book, *Iron John*, stimulated a cultural shift in thinking about men and fathering. The interview brims with an energy of discovery that still resonates after nearly 30 years.

Wolf Pascoe

The following biographical information appeared with the original interview:

At 55, Robert Bly is one of America's leading poets. Through his critically acclaimed poetry journal (called, successively, *The Fifties*, *The Sixties*, *The Seventies*, and now *The Eighties*), Bly has had an enormous impact on American letters. Co-founder in 1966 of the American Writers Against the War in Vietnam, he is also known for his willingness to make clear the connections between American political policy and the American psyche. Poet, storyteller, student of mythology, crafty joke teller, Bly continues to enchant and shake up audiences across the country with his lively readings, delivered with dulcimer self-accompaniment and often from behind an array of prepossessing mythological masks. Perhaps his revolutionary message is best summed up in a line of Rilke's that he loves to quote: "For there is no place at all that isn't looking at you--you must change your life."

Having followed and admired Bly's work for many years, California writer Keith Thompson became even more enthusiastic when Bly began to focus his lectures, essays, and poems specifically on the male experience. A veteran of the feminist/radical milieu of the '70s, Thompson, like Bly, was heartened by the strides taken by men in recent years but felt that "something was missing."

The two got together to look into just what that "something" was. Their dialogue--condensed here from conversations held at Esalen Institute, San Francisco's Red Victorian Hotel, and over the phone to Bly's farm in Moose Lake, Minnesota--turns up some very interesting possibilities.

Thompson: After exploring the way of the goddess and the patriarchy for many years, lately you've turned your attention to the pathways of male energy — the bond between fathers and sons, for example, and the initiation of young males. You're also writing a book relating some of the old fairy tales to men's growth. What's been going on with men?

Bly: No one knows! Historically, the male has changed considerably in the past thirty years. Back then there was a person we could call the "50s male," who was hard-working, responsible, fairly well disciplined: he didn't see women's souls very well, though he looked at their bodies a lot. Reagan has this personality. The '50's male was vulnerable to collective opinion: if you were a man, you were supposed to like football games, be aggressive, stick up for the United States, never cry, and always provide. But this image of the male lacked feminine space. It lacked some sense of flow; it lacked compassion in a way that led directly to the unbalanced pursuit of the Vietnam "war, just as the lack of feminine space inside Reagan's head has led to his callousness and brutality toward the poor in El Salvador, toward old people here, the unemployed, schoolchildren, and the poor in general. The '50's male had a

clear vision of what a male is, but the vision involved massive inadequacies and flaws.

Then during the '60s, another sort of male appeared the waste and anguish of the Vietnam war made men question what an adult male really is. And the women's movement encouraged men to actually look at women, forcing them to become conscious of certain things that the '80's male tended to avoid. As men began to look at women and their concerns, some men began to see their feminine side and pay attention to it. That process continues to this day, and I would say that most young males are involved in it to some extent.

Now, there's something wonderful about all this — the step of the male bringing forth his own feminine consciousness is an important one — and yet I have the sense there is something wrong. The male in the past twenty years has become more thoughtful, more gentle. But by this process has not become more free. He's a nice boy who now not only pleases his mother but also the woman he is living with.

I see the phenomenon of what I would call the "soft male" all over the country today. Sometimes when I look out at

my audiences, perhaps half the young males are what I'd call soft. They're lovely, valuable people - I like them - and they're not interested in harming the earth, or starting wars, or working for corporations. There's something favorable toward life in their whole general mood and style of living. But something's wrong. Many of these men are unhappy. There's not much energy in them. They are life preserving, but not exactly life-giving. And why is it 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 no energy to offer.

Thompson: It seems as if many of these soft young men have come to equate their own natural male energy with being macho. Even when masculine energy would clearly be life giving, productive, of service to the community, many young males step back from it. Perhaps it's because, back in the '60s, when we looked to the women's movement for leads as to how we should be, the new strong women wanted soft men.

Bly: I agree. That's how it felt. The women did play a part in this. I remember a bumper sticker at the time

that read: "Women Say YES to Men Who Say NO". We know it took a lot of courage to resist, or to go to Canada, just as it also took some courage to go to Vietnam. But the women were definitely saying that they preferred the softer receptive male, and they would reward him for being so: "We will sleep with you if you are not too aggressive and macho."

So the development of men was disturbed a little there: non-receptive maleness was equated with violence and receptivity was rewarded.

Also, as you mention, some energetic women chose soft men to be their lovers — and in a way, perhaps, their sons. These changes didn't happen by accident. Young men for various reasons wanted harder women, and women began to desire softer men. It seems like a nice arrangement, but it isn't working out.

Thompson: How so?

Bly: Recently I taught a conference for men only at the Lama Community in New Mexico. About forty men came and we were together ten days. Each morning I talked about certain fairy tales relating to men's growth, and about the Greek gods that embody what the Greeks considered different kinds of male energy. We spent the

afternoons being quiet or walking and doing body movement or dance, and then we'd come together in the late afternoon. Often the younger males would begin to talk and within five minutes they would be weeping. The amount of grief and anguish in the younger males was astounding! The river was deep.

Part of the grief was a remoteness from their fathers, which they felt keenly, but part, too, came from the trouble in their marriages or relationships. They had learned to be receptive, and it wasn't enough to carry their marriages. In every relationship, something fierce is needed once in a while: Both the man and the woman need to have it. He was nurturing but something else was required - for the relationship, for his life. The 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: that was a different matter.

In The Odyssey, Hermes instructs Odysseus, when he is approaching a kind of matriarchal figure, that he is to lift and show Circe his sword. It was difficult for many of the younger males to distinguish between showing the sword and hurting someone. Do you

understand me? They had learned so well not to hurt anyone that they couldn't even lift the sword, even to catch the light of the sun on it! Showing a sword doesn't mean fighting; there's something joyful in it.

Thompson: You seem to be suggesting that uniting with their feminine side has been an important stage for men on their path toward wholeness, but it's not the final one. What is required?

Bly: One of the fairy tales I'm working on for my Fairy Tales For Men collection is a story called "Iron John"? Though it was first set down by the Grimm Brothers around 1820, this story could be ten or twenty thousand years old. It talks about a different development for men, a further stage than we've seen so far in the U.S.

As the story starts, something strange has been happening in a remote area near the king's castle: when hunters go into this area, they disappear and never come back. Three hunters have gone out and disappeared. People are getting the feeling that there's something weird about that part of the forest and they don't go there any more.

Then one day an unknown hunter shows up at the castle and says, "What can I do around here? I need

something to do." And he is told,
"Well, there's a problem in the forest.
People go out there and they don't
come back. We've sent in groups of
men to see about it and they
disappear. Can you do something?"

Interestingly, this young man does not
ask for a group to go with him — he
goes into the forest alone, taking only
his dog. As they wander about the
forest, they come across a pond.
Suddenly a hand reaches up from the
pond, grabs the dog, and drags it
down. The hunter is fond of the dog,
and he's not willing to abandon it in
this way. His response is neither to
become hysterical, nor to abandon his
dog. Instead, he does something
sensible: he goes back to the castle,
rounds up some men with buckets,
and then they bucket out the pond.
Lying at the bottom of the pond is a
large man covered with hair all the
way down to his feet, kind of reddish;
he looks like rusty iron. So they
capture him and bring him back to the
castle, where the king puts him in an
iron cage in the courtyard.

Now, let's stop the story here for a
second. The implication is that when
the male looks into his psyche, not
being instructed what to look for, he
may see beyond his feminine side, to
the other side of the "deep pool."

What he finds at the bottom of his
psyche — in this area that no one has
visited in a long time — is an ancient
male covered with hair. Now, in all of
the mythologies, hair is heavily
connected with the instinctive, the
sexual, the primitive. What I'm
proposing is that every modern male
has, lying at the bottom of his psyche,
a large primitive man covered with
hair down to his feet. Making contact
with this wild-man is the step the '70s
male has not yet taken; this is the
process that still hasn't taken place in
contemporary culture. As the story
suggests very delicately, there's a little
fear around this ancient man. After a
man gets over his initial skittishness
about expressing his feminine side, he
finds it to be pretty wonderful. He gets
to write poetry and go out and sit by
the ocean, he doesn't have to be on top
in sex anymore, he becomes
empathetic — it's a beautiful new
world. But Iron John, the man at the
bottom of the lake, is quite a different
matter. This figure is even more
frightening than the interior female,
who is scary enough. When a man
succeeds in becoming conscious of his
interior woman, he often feels warmer,
more alive. But when he approaches
what I'll call the "deep male," that's a
totally different situation.

Contact with Iron John requires the

willingness to go down into the psyche and accept what's down there, including the sexual. For generations now the business community has warned men to keep away from Iron John, and the Christian Church is not to fond of him either. But it's possible that men once more are approaching the deep male.

Freud, Jung, and William Reich are three men who had the courage to go down into the pond and accept what is there, which includes the hair, the ancientness, the rustiness. The job of modern males is to follow them down. Some of that work has already been done, and in some psyches (or on some days in the whole culture) the Hairy Man or Iron John has been brought up and stands in a cage "in the courtyard"? This means he has been brought back into the civilized world, and to a place where young males can see him.

Now, lets get back to the story. One day the king's eight year old son is playing in the courtyard and he looses his golden ball. It rolls into the cage and the wild man grabs it. If the prince wants his ball back, he's going to have to go to this rusty, hairy man who's been lying at the bottom of the pond for a very long time, and ask for it. The plot begins to thicken.

Thompson: The golden ball is recurrent in many fairy stories. What does it symbolize in general and what is its significance here?

Bly: The golden ball suggests the unity of personality that we have as children, or a kind of radiance, a sense of unity with the universe. The ball is golden, representing wholeness; like the sun, it gives off a radiant energy from inside. Notice that in this story the boy is eight. We all lose something around the age of eight, whether we are boy or girl, male or female. We lose the golden ball in grade school if not before; high school finishes it. We spend the rest of our lives trying to get the ball back. The first stage of that process, I guess, would be accepting — firmly, definitively — that the ball has been lost. Remember Freud's words? "What a distressing contrast there is between the radiant intelligence of the child and the feeble mentality of the average adult'?"

So who's got the golden ball? In the '80's, males were told that the golden ball was the feminine, in their own feminine side. They found the feminine, and still did not find the golden ball. The step that both Freud and Jung urged of males, and the step that men are beginning to undertake now, is the realization that you can't

look to your own feminine side, because that's not where the ball was lost. You can't go to your wife and ask for the golden ball back: she'd give it if she could, because women are not hostile in this way to men's growth, but she doesn't have it anyway, and besides she has lost her own. And heaven knows you can't ask your mother! After looking for the golden ball in women and not finding it, then looking to his own feminine side, the young male is called upon to consider that the golden ball lies within the magnetic field of the wild man. Now, that's a very hard thing for us to conceive; the possibility that the deep nourishing and spiritually radiant energy lies not in the feminine side, but in the deep masculine. Not the shallow masculine, the macho masculine, the snowmobile masculine, but the deep masculine, the hairy instinctive one who's underwater and who has been there we don't know how long.

Now, the amazing thing about the "Iron John" story is that it doesn't say that the golden ball is being held by some benign Asian guru or by a kind young man named Jesus. There's something connected with getting the golden ball back that is incompatible with niceness. In the story of "The Frog Prince" it's the frog, the un-nice

one that everyone says, "Ick!" to, who brings the golden ball back. And the frog only turns into a prince when it is thrown against the wall in a fit of what New Age people might call a fit of "negative energy." New Age thought has taught young men to kiss frogs. That doesn't always work. You only get your mouth wet. The women's movement has helped women to learn to throw the frog against the wall, but men haven't had this kind of movement yet. The kind of energy I'm talking about is not the same as macho, brute strength, which men already know enough about; it's forceful action undertaken not without compassion, but with resolve.

Thompson: It sounds as if contacting the wild-man would involve in some sense a movement against the forces of "civilization."

Bly: It's true. When it comes time for a young male to have a conversation with the wild-man, it's not the same as a conversation with his minister or his guru. When a boy talks with the hairy man, he is not getting into a conversation about bliss or mind or spirit, or "higher consciousness," but about something wet, dark and low — what James Hillman would call "soul."

And I think that today's males are just

about ready to take that step; to go to the cage and ask for the golden ball back. Some are ready to do that. Others haven't got the water out of the pond yet — they haven't left the collective male identity and gone out into the wilderness alone, into the unconscious. You've got to take a bucket, several buckets. You can't wait for a giant to come along and suck out all the water for you: all that magic stuff isn't going to help you. A weekend at Esalen won't do it either! You have 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 all did. Bucket work implies much more discipline than many males have right now.

Thompson: And of course it's going to take some persistence and discipline, not only to uncover the deep male, but to get the golden ball back. It seems unlikely that this un-nice wild-man would just hand it over.

Bly: You're right: what kind of story would it be if the wild man answered: "Well, okay, here's your ball - go have your fun"? Jung said that in any case, if you're asking your psyche for something, don't use yes-or-no questions - the psyche likes to make deals. If part of you, for example, is

lazy and doesn't want to do any work, a flat out New Year's resolution won't do you any good: it will work better if you say to the lazy part of yourself, "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 ball back if the boy opens the cage.

At first the boy is frightened and runs off. Finally, the third time the wild man offers the same deal, the boy says, "I couldn't open it even if I wanted to, because I don't know where the key is"? The wild man now says something magnificent: he says, "The key is under your mother's pillow?"

Did you get this shot? The key to let the wild man out is lying not in the tool shed, not in the attic, not in the cellar — it's under his mother's pillow! What do you make of that?

Thompson: Would it suggest that the young male has to take back the power that he has given to his mother and get away from the force field of her bed? He must direct his energies away from pleasing Mommy and toward his search for his own instinctive roots.

Bly: That's right, and we see a lot of trouble here these days, particularly among spiritual devotees. A guru may help you skip over your troubled

relations with your mother, but one doesn't enter the soul by skipping one's personal history is also history in the larger sense. In the West our way has been to enter the soul by consciously exploring the relationship with the mother - even though it may grieve us to do it, even though it implies the incest issue, even though we can't seem to make any headway in talking with her.

Thompson: Which would explain why the boy turns away twice in fright before agreeing to get the key from his mother's bed. Some long-time work is involved in making this kind of break.

Bly: Yes. And it surely accounts for the fact that, in the story, the mother and father are away on the day that the boy finally obeys the wild man. Obviously, you've got to wait until your mother and father have gone away. This represents not being so dependent on the collective, on the approval of the community, on being a nice person, or essentially being dependent on your own mother. Because if you went up to your mother and said, "I want the key so I can let the wild man out;" she'd say, "Oh no you just get a job" or "Come over here and give mommy a kiss." There are very few mothers in the world who would release the key from under the

pillow, because they are intuitively aware of what would happen next: they would lose their nice boys. The possessiveness that some mothers exercise on sons — not to mention the possessiveness that fathers exercise toward their daughters — cannot be overestimated.

And then we have a lovely scene in which the boy succeeds in opening the cage and setting the wild man free. At this point one could imagine a number of things happening. The wild man could go back to his pond, so that the split happens all over again: by that time the parents come back, the wild man is gone and the boy has replaced the key. He could become a corporate executive, an ordained minister, a professor; he might be a typical twentieth-century male.

But in this case, what happens is that the wild man comes out of the cage and starts toward the forest, and the boy shouts after him, "Don't run away! my parents are going to be very angry when they come back!" And Iron John says, "I guess your right; you'd better come with me." He hoists the boy on to his shoulders and off they go.

Thompson: What does this mean, that they take off together?

Bly: There are several possible

arrangements in life that a male can make with the wild man. The male can be separated from the wild man in his consciousness by thousands of miles and never see him. Or the male and the wild man can exist together in a civilized place, like a courtyard, with the wild man in a cage, and they can carry on a conversation with one another which can go on for a long time. But apparently the two can never be united in the courtyard: the boy cannot bring the wild man into his home. When the wild man is freed a little, when the young man feels a little more trust in his instinctive part after going through some discipline, then he can let the wild man out of the cage. And since the wild man can't stay with him in civilization, he must go off with the wild man.

This is where the break with the parents finally comes. As they go off together, the wild man says, "You'll never see your mother and father again." The boy has to accept that the collective thing is over. He must leave his parents' force field.

Thompson: In the ancient Greek tradition a young man would leave his family to study with an older man the energy of Zeus, Apollo, or Dionysius. We seem to have lost the rite of initiation, and the young males have a

great need to be introduced to the male mysteries.

Bly: This is exactly what has been missing in our culture. Among the Hopis and other Native Americans of the South West, a boy is taken away at the age of twelve and led into the kiva (down!). He stays down there for six weeks, and a year and a half passes before he sees his mother. He enters completely into the instinctive male world, which means a sharp break with both parents. You see the fault of the nuclear family isn't so much that it's crazy and full of double binds (that's true in communities too; it's the human condition). The issue is that the son has a difficult time breaking away from his parents' field of energy, especially the mother's field. Our culture has made no provision for this initiation.

The ancient societies believed that the boy becomes man only through ritual and effort — that he must be into the world of men. It doesn't happen by itself; it doesn't happen just because he eats Wheaties. And only men can do the work of initiation.

Thompson: We tend to picture initiation as a series of tests that the young man goes through, but surely there's more to it.

Bly: We can also imagine initiation as that moment when the older men together welcome the younger males into the male world. One of the best stories I've heard about initiated this kind of welcoming is one which takes place each year among the Kikuyus in Africa. When a young man is about ready to be welcomed in, 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 males. He is hungry, thirsty, alert and frightened. One of the older males takes a knife and opens a vein in his arm, and lets a little of his blood flow into a gourd or bowl. Each 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 male, he is invited in tenderness to take nourishment from it.

The boy learns a number of things. He learns that there is a kind of nourishment that comes not from his mother only, but from males. 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 in the male world? Once that is done the males can teach him the myths, the stories, the songs

that carry the male values: not fighting only, but spirit values. Once these "moistening myths" are learned they lead the young male far beyond his personal father and into the moistness of the swampy fathers who stretch back century after century.

Thompson: If young men today have no access to initiation rites of the past, how are they to make the passage into their instinctive male energy?

Bly: Let me turn the question back to you; as a young male, how are you going to do it?

Thompson: Well I've heard so much of my own path described in your remarks about soft young men. When I was fourteen my parents were divorced, and my brothers and I stayed with our mom. My relationship with my dad had been remote and distant anyway, and now he wasn't even in the house. My mom had the help of a succession of maids over the years to help raise us, particularly a wonderful old country woman who did everything from changing our diapers to teaching us to pray. It came to pass that my best friends were women, including several older, energetic women who introduced me to politics, literature and feminism. These were platonic friendships on the order of a mentor-student bond. I was

particularly influenced by the energy of the women's movement, partially because I had been raised by strong yet nurturing women and partially my father's absence suggested to me that men couldn't be trusted. So for almost ten years, through about age twenty-four, my life was full of self-confident, experienced women friends and men friends who, like me, placed a premium on vulnerability, and gentleness and sensitivity. From the standpoint of the '80's-'70s male, I had it made! Yet a couple of years ago, I began to feel that something was missing.

Bly: What was missing for you?

Thompson: My father. I began to think about my father. He began to appear in my dreams, and when I looked in old family photos, seeing his picture brought up a lot of grief — grief that I didn't know him, that the distance between us seemed so great. As I began to let myself feel my loneliness for him, one night I had a powerful dream, a dream I had actually had before and forgotten. In the dream I was carried off into the woods by a pack of she-wolves who fed and nursed and raised me with love and wisdom, and I became one of them. And yet in some unspoken way, I was always slightly, separate,

different from the rest of the pack. One day after we had been running through the woods together in beautiful formation and with lightning speed, we came to a river and began to drink. When we put our faces to the water, I could see the reflection of all of them but I couldn't see my own! There was an empty space in the rippling water where I was supposed to be. My immediate response in the dream was panic. Was I really there, did I even exist? I knew the dream had to do in some way with the absent male, both within me and with respect to my absent father. I resolved to spend time with him, to see who we are in each other's lives now that we had both grown up little.

Bly: So the dream deepened the longing. Have you seen um?

Thompson: Yes. I went back to the Midwest a few months after to see him and my mom, who are both remarried and still live in our hometown. For the first time I spent as much, if not more time with my dad than with my mom. He and I took drives around the county to places we'd spent time during my childhood, seeing old barns and tractors and fields which seemed not to have changed at all. I would tell my mom, "I'm going over to see dad. We're going for a drive and then

having dinner together. See you in the morning." That would never have happened a few years earlier.

Bly: That dream is the whole story. What has happened since?

Thompson: Since reconnecting with my father I've been discovering that I have less need to make my women friends serve as my sole confidants and confessors. I'm turning more to my men friends in these ways, especially those who are working with similar themes in their lives. What's common to our experience is that not having known or connected with our fathers and not having older male mentors, we've tried to get strength second hand through women who got their strength from the women's movement. It's as if many of today's soft young males want these women, who are often older and wiser, to initiate them in some way.

Bly: I think that's true. And the problem is that, from the ancient point of view, women cannot initiate males: it's impossible.

When I was lecturing about the initiation of males, several women in the audience who were raising sons alone told me that they had come up against exactly that problem. They sensed that their sons needed some sort of toughness, or discipline, or

hardness — but they found that if they tried to provide it they would start to lose touch with their own femininity. They didn't know what to do. I said that the best thing to do when the boy is twelve is send him to his father. And several of the women just said flatly, "No, men aren't nourishing, they wouldn't take care of them?" I told them that I had experienced tremendous reserves of nourishment that hadn't been called upon until it was time for me to deal with my children. Also, I think a son has a kind of body-longing for the father which must be honored.

One woman told an interesting story: She was raising a son and two daughters. When the son was fourteen or so, he went off to live with his father, but stayed only a month or two and then came back. She said she knew that, with three women, there was too much feminine energy in the house for him - it was unbalanced, so to speak, but what could she do? One day she said gently, "John, it's time to come to dinner, and he knocked her across the room. She said, "I think it's time to go back to your father"? He said, "you're right"? The boy couldn't bring what he needed into his consciousness, but his body knew it. And his body acted. The mother didn't take it personally either: she

understood it was a message. In the U.S. there are so many big muscled high school boys hulking around the kitchen rudely, and I think in a way they're trying to make themselves less attractive to their mothers. Separation from the mother is crucial. I'm not saying that women have been doing the wrong thing, necessarily. I think the problem is more that the men are not really doing their job.

Thompson: Underneath most of the issues we've talked about is the father, or the absence of the father. I was moved by a statement you made in News of the Universe, that the love-unit most damaged by the Industrial Revolution has been the father and son bond.

Bly: I think it's important that we not idealize past times, and yet the Industrial Revolution does present a new situation, because as far as we know, in ancient times the boy and his father lived closely with each other, at least in the work world after age twelve.

The first thing that happened in the Industrial Revolution was that the boys were pulled away from their fathers and other men, and placed in schools. D H Lawrence described

what this was like in his essay "Men Must Work and Women as well." What happened to his generation, as he describes it, was the appearance of one idea; that physical labor is bad. Lawrence recalls how his father enjoyed working in the mines, enjoyed the camaraderie with the other men, enjoyed coming home and taking his bath in the kitchen. But in Lawrence's lifetime the schoolteachers arrived from London to teach him and his classmates that physical labor is a bad thing, that both boys and girls should strive to move upward 'into more spiritual work — higher work, mental work. With this came the concept that fathers have been doing something wrong, that men's physical work is low, that the women are right in preferring white curtains and a sensitive, elegant life.

When he wrote Sons and Lovers, Lawrence clearly believed the teachers; he took the side of "higher" life, his mother's side. It was not until two years before he died, when he had tuberculosis in Italy, that he began to notice the vitality of the Italian working men, and to feel a deep longing for his own father. He began to realize it was possible that his mother hadn't been right on this issue. A mental attitude catches like a plague: "Physical work is wrong." And

it follows from that that if father is wrong, if father is crude and unfeeling, then mother is right and I must advance upward, and leave my father behind. Then the separation between fathers and sons is further deepened when those sons themselves go to work in an office, and when they become fathers themselves, and no longer share their work with their sons. The strange thing about this is not only the physical separation, but the fact that the father is not able to explain to the son what he's doing. Lawrence's father could show his son what he did, take him down in 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 all seasons of the year.

In the world of offices, this breaks down. With the father only home in the evenings, and women's values so strong in the house, the father loses the son five minutes after birth. It's as if he had amnesia and can't remember who his children are. The father is remote; he's not in the house where we are, he's somewhere else. He might as well be in Australia. And the father is a little ashamed of his work, despite the "prestige" of working in an office. Even if he brings his son there, what can he show him? How he moves

papers? Children take things mentally. If you work in an office, how can you explain how what you're doing is important, or how it differs from what other males are doing?

The German psychologist Alexander Mitscherlich writes about this situation in a fine book called *Society Without The Father*. His main idea is that if the son does not understand clearly, physically, what his father is doing during the day, a hole will appear in the son's perception of his father, and into the hole will rush demons. That's a law of nature, demons rush in because nature hates a vacuum. The son's mind then fills with suspicion, doubt, and a nagging fear that the father is doing evil things.

This issue was dramatized touching in the '60s when rebellious students took over the president's office at Columbia, looking for evidence of CIA involvement with the university. It was a perfect example of taking the fear that your father is demonic and transferring the fear to some figure in authority. I give the students all the credit they deserve for their bravery, but on a deeper level they weren't just making a protest against the Vietnam war; they were looking for evidence of their fathers' demonism. A university, like a father, looks upright and decent

on the outside, but underneath, somewhere, you have the feeling that he's doing something evil. And it's an intolerable feeling, that the inner fears should be so incongruous with the appearances. So you go to all the trouble to invade the president's office to make the outer look like the inner, to find evidence of demonic activity. And then, naturally, given the interlocking relationships between establishments, you, do discover letters from the CIA, and demonic links are found!

But the discovery is never really satisfying, because the image of the demons inside wasn't real in the first place. These are mostly imagined fears; they come in because the father is remote, not because the father is wicked. Finding evidence doesn't answer the deep need we spoke to in the first place — the longing for the father, where is my father, doesn't he love me, what is going on?

Thompson: Once the father becomes a demonic figure in the son's eyes, in a sense the son is prevented from forming a fruitful association with any male energy, even positive male energy. Since the father serves as the son's earliest role model for male ways, the son's doubts will likely translate into doubts toward the

masculine in general.

Bly: It's true: the idea that male energy, when in authority, could be good has come to be considered impossible. Yet the Greeks understood and praised that energy. They called it Zeus energy, which encompasses intelligence, robust health, compassionate authority, healthy authority, good will; in sum, positive power accepted by the male in the service of the community. The native Americans understood this, too, that this power only becomes positive when exercised for the sake of the community, not for personal aggrandizement. All the great cultures since have lived with images of this energy, except ours.

Zeus energy has been disintegrating steadily in America. Popular culture has destroyed it mostly, beginning with the "Maggie and Jiggs" and "Dagwood" comics of the 1920s, in which the male is always foolish. From there the stereotype went into animated cartoons, and now it shows up in TV situation comedies. The young men in Hollywood writing these comedies have a strong and profound hatred for the Zeus image of male energy. They may believe that they are giving the audience what it wants, or simply that they're working

to make a buck, whereas in fact what they are actually doing is taking revenge on their fathers, in the most classic way possible. Instead of confronting their father in Kansas, these television writers attack him long distance from Hollywood. This kind of attack is particularly insidious because it's a way of destroying not only all the male energy that the father lives on, but the energy that he has tried to pass on. In the ancient tradition, the male who grows is able to contact the energy coming from older males — and from women as well — but especially male spiritual teachers who transmit positive male energy.

Thompson: I find in your translation of the poems of Rainer Maria Rilke, as well as in your most recent book of poems, *The Man in the Black Coat Turns*, a willingness to pay honor to the older males who have influenced you — your own father and your spiritual fathers. In fact, in the past few years, you seem to have deliberately focused on men and their masculine experience. What inspired that shift in emphasis away from the feminine?

Bly: After a man has done some work on recovering his wet and muddy feminine side, often he still doesn't feel complete. A few years ago I began to feel diminished by my lack of

embodiment in the fruitful male, or the "moist male." I found myself missing contact with the male. Or should I say my father?

For the first time, I began to think of my father in a different way. 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 mother or by the culture. This process is still going on. Every time I see my father I have different and complicated feelings about how much of the deprivation I felt with him came willfully and how much came against his will; how much he was aware and unaware of. I've begun to see him as a man in a complicated situation.

Jung made a very interesting observation; he said that if a male is brought up mainly with the mother, he will take a feminine attitude toward his father. He will see his father through his mother's eyes. Since the mother and the father 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. Instead, all the inadequacies of the father are well pointed out. The mother tends to give the tone that civilization and culture and feeling and relationship are things which the

mother and the son and the daughter have together, whereas the father has— is something inadequate, stiff, maybe brutal, unfeeling, obsessed, rationalistic, money-mad, uncompassionate. So, the young male grows up with a wounded image of his father — not necessarily caused by the father's actions, but based on the mother's viewing of these actions. I know that in my case I made my first connection with feeling through my mother, she gave me my first sense of human community. But the process also involved picking up a negative view of my father and his whole world. It takes a while for a man to overcome this. The absorption of the mother may last ten, fifteen or twenty years, and then, rather naturally, a man turns toward his father.

Eventually when the male begins to think it over, the mother's view just doesn't hold up.

Another way to put all there is to say that if the son accepts his mother's views of his father, he will look at his own masculinity from a feminine point of view. But eventually, the male must throw off this view and begin to discover for himself what the father is, what masculinity is.

Thompson: What can men do to get in touch with their male energy — their

instinctive male side? What kind of work is involved?

Bly: I think the next step for us is learning to visualize the wild-man. And to help that visualization, I feel we need to return to the mythologies that today we only teach children. If you go back to ancient mythology, you find that people, in ancient times have already done some work in helping us to visualize the wild-man. I think that we are just coming to the place where we can understand what the ancients were talking about.

In the Greek myths, for example, Apollo is visualized as a golden man standing on an enormous accumulation of dark, dangerous energy called Dionysus. The Bhutanese bird men with dogs teeth are another possible visualization. Another is the Chinese tomb guardian; a figure with enormous power in the music] and the will, and a couple of fangs sticking out of his mouth. In the Hindu tradition this fanged aspect of the Shiva is called the Bhairava; in this Bhairava aspect, Shiva is not a nice boy. There's a hint of this energy with Christ going wild in the temple and whipping everybody. The Celtic tradition gives us Cuchulain - smoke comes out of the top of his head when he gets hot.

These are all powerful energies lying in ponds we haven't found yet. All these traditions give us models to help us sense what it would be like for a young male to grow up in a culture in which the divine is associated not only with the Virgin Mary and the blissful Jesus, but with the wild-man covered with hair. We need to tap into these images. These mythological images are strong, almost frightening.

Thompson: How would you distinguish them from the strong but destructive male chauvinist personality that we've been trying to get away from?

Bly: The male in touch with the wild man has true strength; he's able to show and say what he wants in a way that the '60s - '70s male is not able to do. The approach to his own feminine space that the '60s-'70s male has made is infinitely valuable, and not to be given up. But as I say in my poem "A Meditation on Philosophy": "When you shout at them, they don't reply. They turn then face toward the crib wall, and die."

However, the ability of a male to shout and be fierce is not the same as treating people like objects, demanding land or empire, expressing aggression — the whole model of the '80's male. Getting in touch with the wild-man

means religious life in the broadest sense of the phrase. The '50s male was almost wholly secular, so we are not talking in any way of a movement bad.

Thompson: How would you envision a movement forward?

Bly: Just as women in the '70s needed to develop what is known in the Indian tradition as Kali energy — the ability to really say what they want, to dance with skulls around their neck, to cut relationships when they need to — what males need now is an energy that can face this energy in women, and meet it. They need to make a similar connection in their psyches to their Kali energy — which is just another way to describe the wild-man at the bottom of the pond. If they don't, they won't survive.

Thompson: Do you think they can?

Bly: I feel very hopeful. Men are suffering right now — young males especially. But now that so many men are getting in touch with their feminine side, we're ready to start seeing the wild-man and to put its powerful, dark energy to use. At this point, many things can happen.