

Ideas

JUNE 19, 2005

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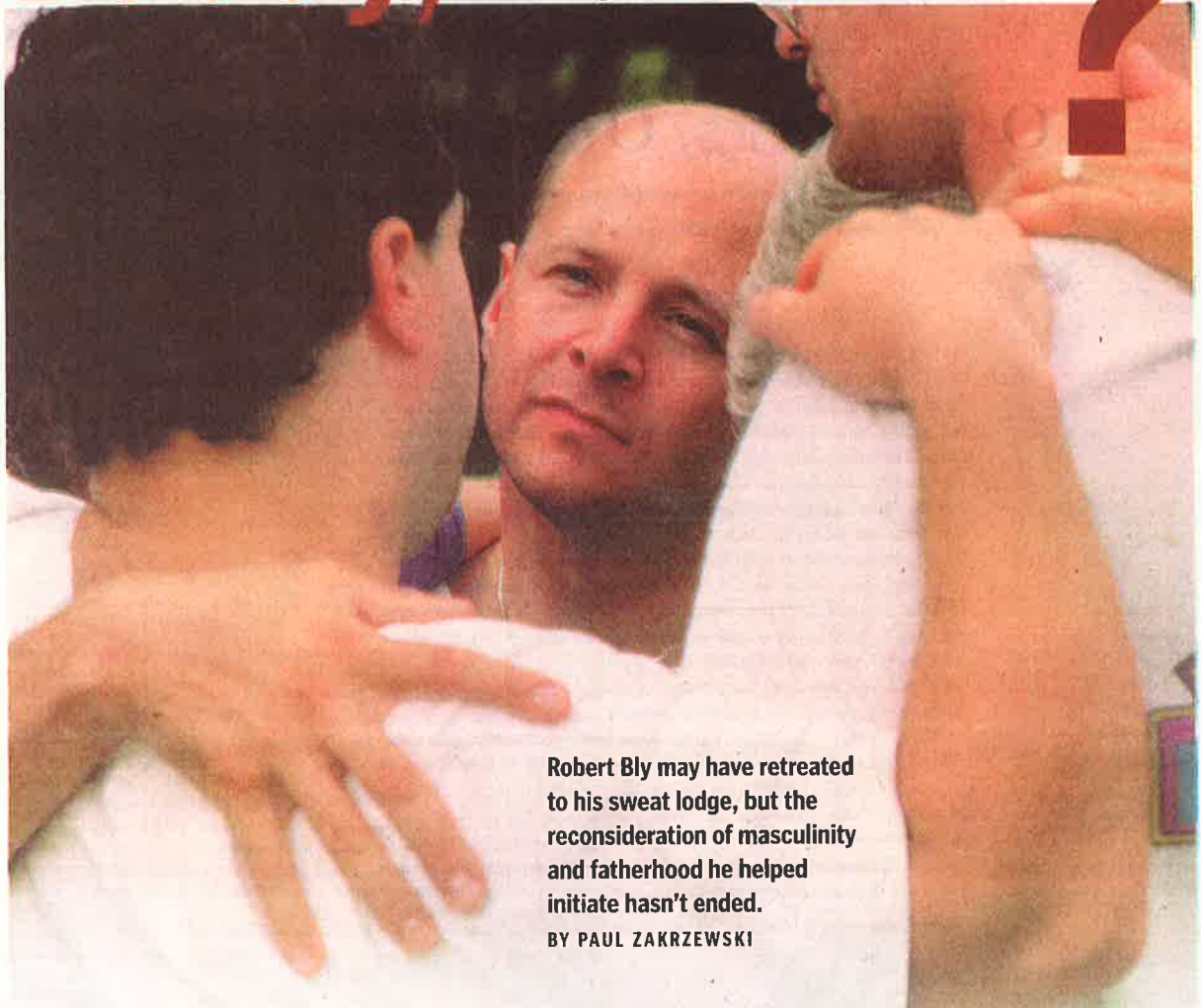
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Daddy, what did you do in the men's movement?



Robert Bly may have retreated to his sweat lodge, but the reconsideration of masculinity and fatherhood he helped initiate hasn't ended.

BY PAUL ZAKRZEWSKI

THE LAST TIME most of us heard a joke about grown men getting in touch with themselves by beating on drums or hunkering down in sweat lodges, the first Gulf War was in full swing, and Nirvana ruled the airwaves. But for a brief moment in the early 1990s, the "men's movement" was everywhere you looked, from Jay Leno to ABC's "20/20" to the pages of Esquire and Playboy.

And if the movement was never particularly large or diverse—according to Newsweek, about 100,000 mostly white, middle-aged men had attended a patchwork of weekend retreats, conferences, and workshops by 1991, when the movement peaked—it struck a chord with a country that appeared confused about contemporary manhood. Books by Sam Keen, Michael Meade, and other leading figures in the movement sold hundreds of thousands of copies, while Robert Bly's "Iron John," a cultural exegesis on wounded masculinity in the form of an obscure fairy tale, spent more than 60 weeks on the New York Times bestseller list.

Arguably, the Bly-style mythopoetic men's movement, as it was known, can be traced back to the late 1970s, to men's consciousness-raising groups and masculinity classes in places like **MEN'S MOVEMENT, D4**

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PHOTO: MARK PETERSON/CORBIS

Above, participants at a 1991 "Wildman Gathering" in the Adirondack mountains inspired in part by Robert Bly's best seller "Iron John."

Men's movement

Continued from page D1

Cambridge, Berkeley, and Ann Arbor. However, it was Bly's collaboration with Bill Moyers on the 1990 PBS documentary "A Gathering of Men" that turned the groundswell of retreats and gatherings into a national phenomenon.

With his lilting Minnesota brogue and occasional impish aside, the grandfatherly Bly talked about the Wild Man, avatar of a kind of inner masculine authenticity lost during the Industrial Revolution, when fathers left the homestead (and their sons) behind and went to work in factories. With the lore and lessons of manhood no longer passed on to younger generations, men lost a certain kind of male identity, even the sense of life as a quest. "Many of these men are not happy," Bly wrote of today's "soft males," as he called them. "You quickly notice the lack of energy in them. They are life-preserving, but not exactly life-giving."

Today, however, the drums have largely fallen silent. While there are still weekend retreats—for example, the ManKind Project, which boasts more than two-dozen centers worldwide, conducts "New Warrior Training Adventures" for some 3,000 men every year—these are mostly affairs for the already initiated.

"The men's movement as we knew it has gone underground," says Ken Byers, a San Francisco-based writer and therapist who attended dozens of retreats in the early 1990s. "Unless you're involved in that underground, there's very little way for the average American man to connect with it."

Of course, Bly's mythopoetic movement was only one of several, often contradictory men's movements. Since the 1970s, "men's rights" advocates have pushed for fathers' parental rights, while profeminist groups such as the National Organization of Men Against Sexism and the national network of Men's Resource Centers want men to become more accountable for sexism, homophobia, and violence. And in the wake of Bly, new mass men's movements seized the media spotlight. In 1995, Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan organized the Million Man March, to inspire African-American men to rebuild their lives and neighborhoods. Meanwhile, by the mid-1990s, the Christian evangelical Promise Keepers were packing hundreds of thousands of men into football stadiums each year for rallies that, like the "muscular Christianity" movement a century before, encouraged them to reclaim their masculinity by retaking control of their families with the help of Jesus Christ.

So what happened to Bly's mythopoetic movement? The negative media coverage, such as Esquire's "Wild Men and Wimps" spoof issue in

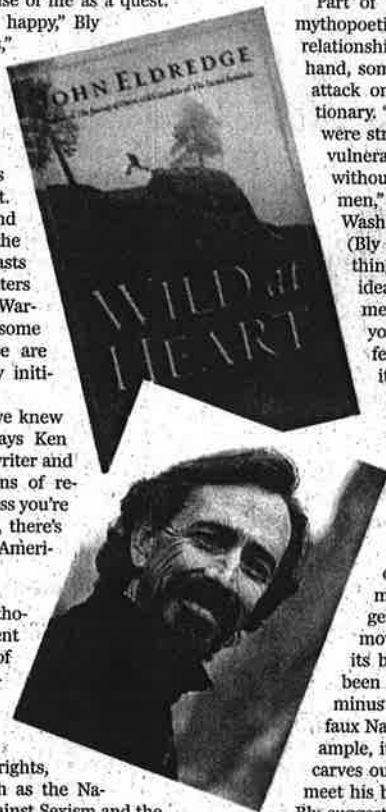
1992, didn't exactly help. But there were other factors, too. For one thing, even many of the men not inclined to dismiss Bly-style gatherings as silly found themselves mystified by the rarefied Jungian concepts tossed around the campfires like so many marshmallows. "Many of the men I saw worked really hard at trying to figure out the mythology, but they just weren't getting it in the belly," says Byers, echoing the title of Sam Keen's bestselling book.

Unlike the Promise Keepers, which held weekly check-in sessions, there was no follow-up work done once participants left their weekend retreats. "It was an event, a spectacle," says Michael Kimmel, professor of sociology at SUNY Stony Brook and the author of "Manhood in America," a 1997 cultural history of masculinity. "You were supposed to be changed by it and then go home."

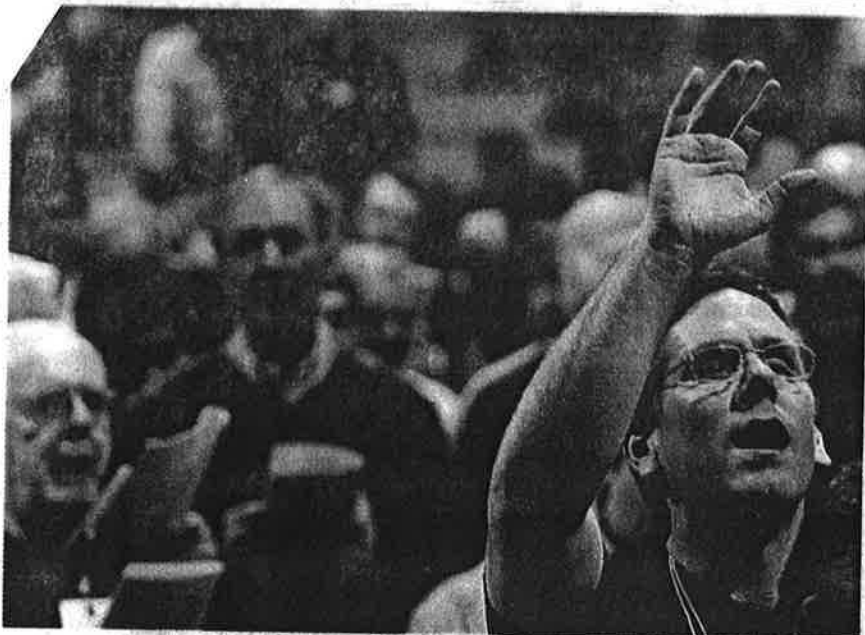
Part of the problem, too, was the mythopoetic movement's complex relationship to feminism. On the one hand, some feminists construed Bly's attack on feminized males as reactionary. "I'd hoped by now that men were strong enough to accept their vulnerability and to be authentic without aping Neanderthal cave-men," Betty Friedan told The Washington Post back in 1991. (Bly denied that there was anything anti-woman about his ideas.) What's more, the movement itself could never get beyond the fact that unlike the feminist movement—which itself had lost steam by the 1990s, as women achieved more economic and financial power—Bly and his followers never had any clear political agenda to drive them forward.

Then again, perhaps the death of the men's movement has been greatly exaggerated. Like the women's movement, it may just be that its biggest lessons have simply been absorbed into the culture, minus the pagan fairy tales and faux Native American rites. For example, it's evident to any man who carves out time in his busy week to meet his buddies for a drink that, as Bly suggested, men benefit from time spent in "ritual space"—that is, with other men. (Full disclosure: For the last year I've met with other men in their 30s and 40s for a weekly discussion group in Jamaica Plain, where we talk about everything from career issues to complicated relationships with our fathers.)

And whether or not they can tell their Wild Man from their King (another figure in Bly's complex mythological scheme), many younger men want to be more engaged in family life than their own fathers were. In 1992, about 68 percent of college-educated men said they wanted to move into jobs with more responsibility, according to a recent study by the Families and Work Institute. A decade later, the number fell to 52 percent. Meanwhile, a 2000 study by the Radcliffe Public Policy Center found that the job characteristic most



HOLY WARRIORS. In his best seller "Wild at Heart," John Eldredge urges Christian men to stop being "really nice guys" and let Jesus help them get in touch with their inner adventurer.



GLOBE STAFF PHOTO/WENDY MAEDA

GOD AND MAN. At the first annual Catholic Men's Conference, held in Boston in March, the 2,200 attendees were urged to be "the spiritual leaders" of their homes.

often ranked as very important by men ages 21 to 39 was a work schedule that allowed them to spend more time with their families. Seventy percent said they were willing to sacrifice pay and lose promotions to do so.

Still, the reality of being a good father often poses more of a challenge for these young men than they expect, often in ways that Bly himself might have explained. "One of the central problems is that the image that men have of immersing themselves in families is a very maternal one," says Mark O'Connell, a Boston-based psychologist and the author of the recent book "The Good Father: On Men, Masculinity, and Life in the Family" (Scribner). "They are trying to follow something that isn't altogether authentic and reflective of the different strengths that men bring to the table."

America, of course, is a different place than it was when Bly wrote his best seller. Today, when men get together in organized men's groups, they are more likely to talk about Jesus Christ than Iron John.

Nevertheless, there's more than a touch of Bly in John Eldredge's "Wild at Heart: Discovering the Secret of a Man's Soul," an evangelical call-to-arms that has sold 1.5 million copies since it was published in 2001 and that has helped launch a series of weekend workshops. Men still go into the woods, but instead of wrestling with the Wild Man, they meet Jesus, described as a kind of fierce, unfettered energy that transforms "really nice guys" (a version of Bly's "soft males") into passionate beings ready to tackle life's adventures, including romantic rela-

tionships. "Not every woman wants a battle to fight, but every woman wants to be fought *for*," Eldredge observes in a passage that might have been written before Betty Friedan was born.

Meanwhile, after years of dwindling attendance due to financial problems, the Promise Keepers are staging a comeback this summer, hoping to fill 20 stadium rallies across the country. And in March,

the first annual Catholic Men's Conference, inspired by the Promise Keepers, attracted 2,200 men to Boston, who came to listen to speakers ranging from Archbishop Sean P. O'Malley to "Passion of the Christ" star Jim Caviezel to Bush administration official James Towey. (According to organizer Scot Landry, the event's success was fueled by the growing number of men's fellowship groups in the Boston Archdiocese, which have spread from a handful of parishes 5 years ago to between 30 and 50 today.) The emphasis was on the importance of traditional Catholic teachings on sexuality and the family, under which men—not

their wives—are called to be "the spiritual leaders of your home," as one speaker put it.

Even if we're not likely to see maverick poets and Jungian therapists on television specials and magazine covers again any time soon, one thing is clear. The Bly-style men's movement highlighted a powerful urge for men to commune with each other that persists today, even among those who wouldn't be caught dead within miles of a drumming circle.

"There was something about Bly's language and approach that was easy to caricature," says O'Connell. "But he was on to something really important, and a lot of what he was talking about got lost in translation."

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