MEN'S ISSUES: TRUTH, MYTHS, AND PAIN AVOIDANCE

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I WOULD LIKE to offer some unsystematic observations and reflections on my experience with men and being male.

Some of the issues facing men today arise out of or are provoked by feminism, and many of those involve work and the workplace. One such issue is the conflict between domestic and vocational duties. Earlier in this century, many men worked at back-breaking jobs for many hours to provide a minimum family standard of living. Coal miners, for example, worked twelve hours a day, six days a week. It is not surprising that a man burdened with such a job would have few additional responsibilities, domestic or otherwise. In those social conditions, the man's valuable and privileged place in the home and family is easy to understand.

Jobs for most men are today less physically demanding. Life at the desk may be stressful, but it doesn't stunt or even kill you as quickly as life in the coal mine could before protective labor legislation. Still, even well-paying jobs today can be extremely demanding. Consequently, many men continue to expect treatment as a privileged member of the family insofar as domestic chores and responsibilities are concerned. Indeed, a recent sociological study concluded that even in households where both parents earn paychecks, women spend fifteen fewer hours per week at leisure activities than do their husbands. That amounts to an additional month of twenty-four hour days each year of extra household work for the women.

The temptation for the sole or even the co-breadwinner to demand or expect favored treatment at home may be especially strong for Mormon men, who are often reminded that they should "preside" in the home. I expect that for some men the inspired translation of "preside" is "to get my own way—if not immediately, then at least inevitably." Further, I suspect that men are sometimes not so much exhausted when they return from work as they are indifferent. Having been both exhausted and indifferent, I know how hard it can be to distinguish where one leaves off and the other begins. But it is a happy development that both in and outside the Church the sharing of domestic tasks among both partners on a more equal basis is at least a topic for serious discussion and change.

WORKPLACE ISSUES

A SECOND related issue for many Mormon men is dealing with the mixed signals and hypocrisy over the importance of money, status, and worldly success on the one hand, and family, work, and relationships on the other. Many men are consumed by their jobs, perhaps in part because they hear conflicting messages from the culture (including from the pulpit and, sometimes, from their own families) about the relative importance of money, career success, and the psychological and spiritual well-being of their families. In the silent competition between love and power, men choose power because it guarantees survival. And perhaps because, milligram for milligram, it also provides a bigger jolt.

Another issue for men that is related to the workplace is the widespread use of performance drugs like caffeine and alcohol. The use of these drugs often eases stress. Some Mormon men use these drugs to help them deal with work. Then they don't go to church because they know Mormons aren't supposed to do that. In particular, drinking alcohol after work and on weekends is one of the principal ways American men deal with the stress and pressure of their jobs. Getting an alcoholic buzz with other men is also one of the few ways that American men seem to be able to be relaxed, friendly, and carefree with each other. It's a great fuel for male camaraderie and what passes for male intimacy. In contrast, Mormon men who do go to church are left with the poor substitutes of food abuse or spectator sports consumption. Neither non-Mormon or Mormon men have learned successfully how to ease work-related stress.

Another issue men face, and sometimes turn away from, is the presence and rights of women in the workplace. Sex discrimination in the workplace, including sexual stereo-
titying, is not just a legal but a social issue. The forms of stereotyping often underscore how complicated the issue is. In a meeting I once attended, the head of a large corporate employer boasted over drinks how his organization had been the first in Utah to employ a woman in a certain high level position. Then he proceeded to comment at length and with some gusto about the size of her breasts, as if that were the most noteworthy manner in which she filled the position. Such anecdotes illustrate the subtle and sometimes not-so-subtle connections between gender bias and cultural norms. Until the norms change, the law is at best an imperfect instrument of change.

MALE SEXUALITY

MOVING away from the workplace to a more general subject, I believe that one of the major and perennial issue men face is dealing with their own sexuality. By and large, it seems to me that men are more driven and burdened by their sexual desire than women. I will focus on a couple of sexual issues for Mormon men. But first note that strong connection in current American culture between a man's sexual identity and his value as a human being. That connection can be illustrated by Pat Oliphant's cartoons of George Bush during the presidential election. Oliphant often drew Bush with a purse and then added to the humor by making the purse-carrying Bush skinny and awkward-looking, a schoolboy in ill-fitting clothes. After we finish laughing, though, the role of the feminine purse is instructive and troubling. Slung on the gangly figure's arm, it plainly is intended to signal a disability. That Bush is "wimpy," meaning both feminine and ineffectual. Of course, with the Persian Gulf War Bush overcame that label. Equating the feminine with being soft-headed and ineffectual is pervasive. Perhaps it isn't surprising that men are reluctant to risk being labeled feminine. The message is succinct and urgent: feminine today, feckless tomorrow.

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Let me return to one of the sexual issues confronting Mormon men. It has been said that the best form of birth control for people over forty is nudity. In our highly promiscuous society, however, one of the toughest challenges for many Mormon men, whether over or under forty, is simply not to become promiscuous—to be chaste. Apart from the tug of the hormones, this is difficult for many men because the American male is taught that having sexual relations often is an important part of demonstrating and preserving his sexual identity. The culture of sexual consumerism has many voices, most of them loud. Of one thing they are certain. Life is like a beer commercial. "And when a real Nautilus-perfected man has found his temporary sexual partner, hey, it just doesn't get any better than that."

I am struck by how individual and private is the struggle to become or remain chaste. For some men, illicit sexual desire is like lint; they can brush it off their clothing without a thought. For others, this desire is like a grievous wound in their flesh that will not heal. And sometimes men with impeccable, lint-free clothing are suddenly wounded. In my experience, Mormon men for whom sexual fidelity is difficult don't discuss it much with women or men. Like most males, they live out their pain in silence and secrecy.

But there is another, institutional angle on this subject. Levi Peterson has remarked, somewhat playfully, that there is nothing wrong with sexual desire. In fact, it has kept him awake during many a boring sacrament meeting. Such remarks serve the useful purpose of subverting the well-intentioned efforts of clerics to control sexuality and sexual desire by turning it into something shameful. Or unspreakable. Perhaps feeling they are poorly matched with a powerful foe, when they can talk about sex at all, Mormon men often lie to each other about their sexual desires in order to encourage themselves and others to be chaste. A friend of mine was once told by an earnest priesthood leader that if he would serve faithfully on his mission he would not have a wet dream for two years. Such fanciful and twisted thinking is also apparent in the pamphlets which tell young men that the sexual urges they act on before marriage are something essentially ugly and shameful, while sexual desires and their satisfaction in marriage are lovely and something entirely different.

I don't think men are very good at recognizing or talking about how their sexual needs are connected to their other distinct needs for romance, respect, esteem, and friendship. For all their power, sexual needs are not mere hormonal epiphenomena. Mormon men might be aided in that recognition if they were encouraged to speak more openly about their emotional as well as their sexual needs with their spouses and friends and in the Church.

FEMINISM

FINALLY, a few comments on Mormon men and feminism. In his recent book, Vital Lies, Simple Truths, Daniel Goleman sets out a comprehensive theory of self-deception. He begins by exploring the physiological tradeoff between pain and attention. When humans initially feel pain or find themselves in a dangerous or stressful situation, attention increases dramatically. Quickly, however, the brain releases a group of chemicals known as endorphins, neurotransmitters that act like opiates. Endorphins mask pain so that the endangered creature can better respond to the crisis situation it faces.

Goleman then traces a similar psychological tradeoff between perception and denial. Faced with an unpleasant fact or a stressful situation, human beings commonly use denial as an endorphin-like palliative to mask the pain connected with the experience. When the facts are unpleasant, denial soothes the pain like an analgesic. Denial often occurs automatically, without any awareness, much less acknowledgment, that a tradeoff has occurred.

For example, when a group of professional people on their way back from lunch are confronted with a drunken panhandler, their first reaction is to look away, to act as though he is not there. Denial quickly prevents us even from witnessing the moral scene we are part of. Indeed, the last thing we want is a fuller or sharper view of the moral situation and our responsibility. We don't want to see ourselves through the panhandler's eyes as we walk jauntily by, having spent more on lunch than he will eat on for a week. Through the anesthetic of denial, we avoid the painful perception of his need. Goleman says that this use of denial or selective recognition to avoid mental pain is one of the central mechanisms of self-deception. In short, our ability to see moral or normative truth often is limited by our unwillingness to endure mental pain.

What does this sort of self-deception have to do with men's issues? I think this account of self-deception as a pain-avoidance technique helps explain why many men, including Mormon men, are so ill-informed about, and sometimes hostile to, feminist criticism and theory. Not that feminists are always right. In fact, I expect that feminists are often
wrong about important things, particularly where religion is concerned. But feminism calls a man's attention to very painful human stories in which the villain with a thousand faces is someone whose body, reflexes, and desires look a lot like himself. These stories are actually painful social facts; they include the widespread violence toward, and sexual abuse of, women and their children by men, the wholesale abandonment or neglect of women with children by the men who have fathered them, and the culture's necrophilic worship of male violence and domination roles. Like the inconvenient panhandler, feminism and the facts to which it calls attention are ignored by many men because the pain of acknowledging their existence is too great. It would require too much reflection, too much recognition, and maybe too much change.

The same is true, I think, of Mormon men and the issues of women's standing and rights in the Church and its priesthood. In a recent public debate on women and the priesthood, it seemed to me that the principal difference between University of Utah law professor Ed Firmage and BYU political science professor Ralph C. Hancock was that Hancock did not feel, or at least did not acknowledge feeling, the slightest pain or discomfort over the current Church policy.

That stoic response to the issue is widespread among men in the Church and should not surprise us. After all, men are good at denying pain by suffering it in silence. Or perhaps the explanation for this silence is more complicated, but just as familiar: a steely, aggressive orthodoxy has always been the refuge of comfortable men challenged by new ideas—especially when those ideas involve new and painful ways of seeing ourselves. Hence, just as it was to the pious and resolute men whom Jesus criticized, our orthodoxy can become an end in itself. And if it is grasped primarily to avoid pain, when the truth becomes painful, it becomes a dead end.

In any event, I think our current policies and attitudes toward women will never change until men are willing to acknowledge that they have some responsibility for them. Given our profound institutional arrogance, even such a small step will likely prove a long and painful process.

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