

## Robert Bly on Male Violence

[Note: The following is a transcript of an interview with Bly from the PBS program "No Safe Place: Violence Against Women" which aired March 27, 1998. Click [here](#) [1] to visit PBS's companion web site for the program]

**Q: What are the roots of male violence? Is it just a part of men's nature? A desire to maintain control? The absence of the father role model? Is it rooted in the patriarchy?**

The roots of male violence. I'll give you three answers that almost any sensible person gives, and I'll give another one that we've learned lately. The roots of male violence obviously go back to maybe four hundred thousand years of killing animals. And, so in the beginning, men were asked to be violent. And after that, as you know, after the hunter time, then people went into agriculture and the cities began to form. Then there was a surplus of grain and then neighboring people come to steal their grain. And they think there was no real warfare in the hunter-gatherer groups. But once the cities were formed, there was violence. So we have that in our bodies.

Another reason I would give as to the roots of male violence is the amount of shame that men take in. Women take in tremendous amount of shame too, but women have talked about that for a long time. They discuss it, even in high school, that they went out on a date and they felt ashamed of this and the men simply say they, they lie -- "Buddy, I scored this, and I did... -- you understand what I'm saying. So it takes a long time for men to learn to be able to talk about their shame. And sometimes what happens in the family is that a woman will say a criticism to a man, perfectly ordinary criticism, and it goes into some shame place in the heart, and he can't get it back out. And the only thing then he'll do, you understand me.

So when people talk to me about violence, I say we have to think about shame. We have to think about the man being able to say at that moment, "I feel ashamed here by what you just said." And the woman says, "Well, I didn't intend that. I was just trying to point out that you said you were going to be, but you weren't." So we do a lot of work with that. To try to, there's a great book called *Shame* by Gershin Kaufman that talks about that. And I'm a shamed person, so I know something about that. Violence is not in the way that I went and my father didn't go that way, but I think he treated his shame with alcohol.

The third thing and a fourth is this: you know the movement that we do (no matter what is said in television) about running naked in the woods and beating drums and all that stuff is really an effort to make men more expressive. This would be expressive. Many men numb themselves so they're not expressive. If you're too expressive in IBM, you get fired. And, so the reason we tell stories and when we have groups we recite poetry, read poetry to them for an hour before we go on to anything, that's expressiveness being able to do that. So I want to now relate that to violence, shall we?

A John Lee is here and he is the one whose done the most work in the country on anger. So one of the things he's worked out is that there's three stages in this violence. First of all,

there's the experiencing of anger which is felt inside, then there's the expression of anger verbally, and then there's the attempt to expel the anger from the body. They're quite different. What happens is that we find that when we get many men, younger or older, they will experience the anger that they have and the when you ask them to express it, they can't do it. They're not expressive in poetry or in anger. So he'll put two people together and he'll say to one man, "I want you to be this man's father." Then you'll have them hold their finger so they can't hit it or anything and say, "Now I want you to tell your father exactly how you feel about what he did." and then the second man encourages him more. "Oh, you sound like a wimp." And suddenly you have 40 men shouting at the top of their voice and expressing anger that they never expressed in their life, and then when that's over, John says, "Now were you hurt by what he said?" "No." Because it was played. And he turns to the audience, where you hurt? No. You must learn how to express anger in a way that no one will be hurt by it. And you practice doing this with your friends, you do not do this at home. The purpose of a man's group is that they can express this anger and get wild, they and men. No one's hurt by it, and then they'll say, "You are not to do this at home."

So another way we can say that is until they learn this expressiveness being able to verbally do it with metaphors and so on. What happens is that we have men who go from the experience of the violence to the attempt to expel it -- wham -- in 20 seconds. Expelling it means you want to hit something or somebody, do you hear me? It's as if the anger is in your body and you think you can get it out by doing that. And John say never expel the anger with the same person with whom you express it. If you express your anger to men in a men's group and after you've done it fifteen times, as to how you're angry with your wife because she looks like your mother or whatever all that is, then condense it and go to your wife and say, "By the way, I want to say this to you, without the anger." The anger should be done with the men, you understand what I'm saying? And then if you still have anger in your body, you go out and take a stick and start hitting the ground because the ground doesn't mind receiving the anger. The Indians in India say all anger comes in the vegetable world and it doesn't mind, the earth doesn't mind to receive it again. You know, incredible idea. But that's very, very helpful.

**Q: Why should a man's anger be shared with other men?**

It's good, because men have to learn to express those emotions over and over quietly, a little bit every day, not wait until suddenly the wife throws something at them and -- wham -- it all comes out. Women are very different that way and one of the things you notice is that a woman will wake up in the morning and this will happen, and then she'll call her friends and she'll say, "You know, I kicked the garbage can this morning. I think maybe I must be angry about something." And they'll talk for a half-an-hour and she'll figure out what she's angry about. You understand? Men don't do that. They don't kick the garbage can. They don't even think of it until 2:00 or 3:00 in the afternoon when they get home and suddenly -- bam -- it comes out, towards the wife, or towards the son, or something like that. You understand me? Expressiveness means that you continue to do it, you don't wait until 2:00 in the afternoon.

**Q: You've talked a lot about the looming cultural crisis, in which society is absent of authority and adolescence rules. How is violence tied into that?**

So you're asking about the amount of disrespect that's happening in the book I'm doing called *The Sibling Society*. I say it's one of the worst qualities of the sibling society that the disrespect towards women, towards adults, towards parents, toward teachers and it's increasing. There are third graders now that say to their teachers, "You're nothing but a

teacher and I don't have to obey you.? I met, or I've heard of a man recently, his name was Ryke, it isn't one of the well-known ones who says that a culture is defined by what it says no to. Not by what it says yes to. So, what's happening in the sibling society is we say no to almost nothing. We say yes to pre-teen sexuality, we say yes to watching television forty hours a day, we say yes to pot and smoking and drinking and spending your life, and we say yes to all those things. What do we say no to? So, one of the important things would be to learn to say no to disrespect. And when your child says something disrespectful you say, ?Sorry, but that's not allowed.? We can't do that. It has got to start early. I don't know if that's an answer to you but...It's amazing that we as parents, who lost some kind of integrity in the 60s, started becoming perils of their children instead of someone who says no.

Well, the question is from whom does the child receive its knowledge of what's proper to do? In talking with the parents. The old tradition is that you cannot change a child into a grown up without a lot of conversation with adults. In America, the typical time a man spends in conversation with the son or daughter is ten minutes a day. In Russia, the old Russia, it was two hours a day. Now the saddest thing the *New York Times* reported is that with women their time of conversation with the children is falling rapidly. It's approaching that of men now. And the women who stay home do not spend any more time in conversation with their children than the women who work. That's incredible. They'll talk with a daughter or the son a few minutes and then they'd all sit down and watch television. So the question then is, who teaches the child how things get done in the world? Well, the answer is the television. And capitalism has come in between the parent and the child. And for capitalism and action movies, the violence is obviously the way you make money. And they're understanding it more and more. So, therefore, this poison is coming in all the time. It's a pro-violence poison. And the idea of making someone like a Schwarzneger the head of the fitness movement in the United States -- I mean Reagan did that and it was a totally insane idea. He stands for that kind of violence and, you know, it's getting worse now because the video games within six months are going to have such clean definition that you can hardly tell the difference between a living person, and so far they're just cartoons. But what if it looks like it's actually a person there, and then you kill that person in the same way you kill little puppets.

I think that it's a primary job of parents now to realize what Neal Postman says that television is making childhood disappear. It's giving children too much knowledge too quickly of all the corrupt sides of adult material. No one wants to become an adult, and it's tying all that behavior into violence. So in my book, I'm going to say something like, if parents allow their children to watch television of that sort before they can read, they go to jail. I feel that it's a real crisis. And that to allow that, if a person came into your house and started killing your cats and your dogs and throwing things against the wall, you tell them to get out. But we allow the television to remain. It's as if we're in a trance. We don't understand. It's an invader in the livingroom.

### **Q: How should we deal with male batterers?**

There's a friend, a black man from New Jersey, who has been working with the largest program for male batterers in the United States in Rhode Island. It's been going on ten or twenty years. But he was profoundly disturbed by what he found there. He was the only male on the staff, all of the patients were males who had been sent there by the courts, and the way they were treated was by shaming them, to make the men feel ashamed that they were batterers. And that makes sense on the surface and yet the reason they are batterers is because they are already ashamed in the way we were talking about. And what's more, this kind of shaming people out of things does not have any resonance psychologically. The

Russians tried to do that with alcoholism. They would get the people in and shame them and say you're a terrible person, you're an alcoholic, you should never be so bad. They go back out and drink immediately. So, what is necessary I think is for many more men to be allowed to talk to the men or to discuss with them. One day the video broke down, and so it didn't work, and so he asked a certain man why are you here? And the man said his wife four years ago was going out to get some cigarettes and she was killed by random gunfire: "So my girl friend last week started out of the house, and I took her arm like this, and I was put in prison for that act of violence..." But no one had asked him why he took her arm. He was terrified that the same thing would happen to her. No one had asked him this question because they thought they could solve this just by shaming him.

We know now you can't get children to behave by shaming them. You have to ask them, "Why did you actually steal that money? Did you want, were you really stealing love? Is that what you were doing?" So what I'm saying is that the women who are dealing with batterers, my suggestion is first of all that they listen much more to the story and don't make up their mind immediately that the person was always a batterer by nature. And secondly, we need men in there to do a lot more.

### **Q: Is prison a solution?**

Well, I'll just mention this to you and I know it isn't an answer, but it came through my wife's work. She worked for a long time with battered and abused children in Northern Minnesota and with sexually abused children. One of the things that happened there is that when they would charge a man with sexual abuse of a child, what would usually happen is that the sheriff would go to see him and say things like, you know, "You gotta straighten up, John." They found out that the only way to have any permanent affect in the child abuse was to send the man to prison would make him realize what he is and they'd have various names for him. And so therefore, the social workers in Northern Minnesota a few years ago were going around to the district attorneys and saying, "Please put these men in jail, even for six months." Because when a man tells a man something, they often hear it, I say anything to you, and there is that decency quality in men. We mustn't suppose it's gone and even those men in prison when they see a man come who has abused children. They will make it clear to him that man's a dog as far as they're concerned. It's not quite an answer to your question, but prison is a perfectly good solution for a lot of those men and for the rest I think we should set up programs where men have a lot to do with it.

### **Q: Some people feel your book *Iron John* encourages antipathy and anger toward women, that Iron John is the archetype of antagonistic masculinity. What's your response?**

Well, that depends on if they've gotten the idea from the media or if they read the book. Those who have read the book, I mean my daughter was at Yale at the time *Iron John* came up and she had a lot of trouble there. People would come up and say, "Your father is sexist," and Mary would say, "Well, have you read the book?" "No." And so the other day she said, "It's changed a lot now because a lot of the women have read your book now and they know that isn't so." But what happens also is that there's a story here and we're not very good in taking in mythological stories, and so some people don't hear that they hear only the word, like Iron John, means a man who has been under the water so long he has gotten rusty. But people would pick up the word iron and I was accused of wanting men to pump iron. There was a book called a parody of the book called Pumping Iron. In which we're not and I'm not an antagonistic to men, to women, or to men. I taught women for ten years before I began

teaching men, and the media doesn't even pay any attention to that, because they'd like to put you in the category. The most dangerous thing is to imagine that if a man likes and admires men that he thereby dislikes women. And that is elementary. Dualist thinking. And we have to say no. That's not where I am. That's not where Iron John is at all.

**Q: Margaret Mead has talked about the role of fathers. How can fathers play a more important role in modeling a more nurturing masculinity?**

You mentioned Margaret Mead. I admire her tremendously. One of the things that she said in her book is that a fatherhood somewhere in the past of the human race, they got the idea that men could be nurturing fathers. It doesn't happen among the primates often. With chimpanzees they don't do that. So, fatherhood for men is a learned behavior. And we need to realize that learned behavior is passing now. We have to say that's a precious behavior and we need to keep that. I said, 'It's easier to socialize a young man into being a warrior than to be a father.' You can do that in the marine corp. And men are geared for that in some way, but to socialize them into being fathers is a different matter. We should be honoring fathers instead of attacking them. I think all of the older men have to be one of the reasons we like young men to come. This weekend if we say if you want to bring your son, he comes free. Because it's important for the son to hear the fathers say how important fathering has been to them. How important it is in their life. How it's twice as important as anything they thought they were doing in business. Young men need to learn that. So I say it's as hard to socialize a young man into being a decent and responsible father as to socialize them into being a decent and responsible artist. In the sibling society you're supposed to have no training and become an artist in fifteen minutes, be a father in fifteen minutes. No, so we have to decide, do we want to allow the military to keep deciding what masculinity is. Or would we like to take some part in it ourselves? And I understand the amount of anger that women feel over the patriarchies demeaning of women, my wife and my mother feel tremendous anger about that. And yet all men are lumped together and we say all men are rapists or all men are patriarchal, that's not socializing men to be responsible fathers. It's shaming them again.

**Q: Why are women and the feminine so feared by men?**

Well, I've already mentioned, I'll just mention it again. They are afraid of being shamed. Why are men afraid of women? The answer that's being given now is a very strange one. That all fetuses in the womb are originally female, we know that. And when the baby's marked to be a boy at about the age of six weeks, changes begin to occur, two hundred fifty of them. This eventually changes the body from a female into male, changes the brain, changes all these things. So, when the boy comes out he's really not sure that he's a man. Men are an experimental species. And the boy's afraid he's going to slide back. This takes place below the level of consciousness. But you can still feel it in seventeen-year-old boys. That's why they go to military school. Because there will be no one around there that will be feminine male. And they see a feminine male, they feel terrified that somehow they will slip back again. That's the terror.

Male terror of homosexuality. They're afraid they are going to slip back again into the place in which they came. Now that was the purpose of initiation in the old days. That when the boy comes out of the womb his body is masculine but he isn't finished. The journey isn't finished at all, and the older men then would come in at the age of 8 or 10 or 12 and say, we'll finish this journey. We are going to try to teach you what adult masculinity really is like. And in places what they would do is take the boy away from the mother, bring him out in the woods and then the old men would dance for a night and a day-and-a-half, tell incredible stories and the boy's

eyes get big -- is this what being male is. And that is very beautiful. And then they'd tell him stories and all of that.

Women should not oppose the initiation processes of the boy, because the attempt is not to brutalize the boy, but to lead him forward into a kind of responsible and gentle masculinity that he'll never pick up out of television. So there are many initiatory practices that are cruel and brutal, but that doesn't mean that you throw away the possibility of initiation.

The thing that I have said that's had the most effect is that both men and women need mentors. They need older women and older men as mentors. And the other day I was at a funeral in a New Hampshire and a woman came up to me and said she wanted to thank me because she had three sons and her father and husband died and she read my book and understood about the male mentor. And she said she wanted to show me a picture of her youngest son. She wanted me to know he's got a mentor now in school, a coach, and the coach is very sweet to him and to see how the boy looks when he has a mentor. You understand what I'm saying? And women have to understand that about their sons. And you have to be careful in picking a mentor. There are a lot of wicked old men out there. Can't be sentimental about that. You have to check them out. But there are certain things that only a male mentor can do that the mother, no matter how great she is, won't be able to do. And I think it's true of women too. That no matter if the father is raising the daughter alone, no matter how good he is, they would still need an older woman as a mentor for her. In Minneapolis there is a wonderful old woman, MaryDella Sir, who's an old commie. She's about 88 years old now and they have women's meetings in Minneapolis so the young women can come and just look at her.

**Q: You've said that masculinity is denied in our culture. Some feminists have responded to your work saying that a men's movement encourages rigid gender roles and creates a sort of masculinist nationalism that further consolidates male power. What's your response?**

The purpose of having men's groups to which you invite younger men is that the younger men need teachers as to how to go into a gentle and responsible masculinity. And the mothers try to teach them, but the fathers and the older men need to also. They're never going to learn gentle responsible masculinity from the mass media or the television. So we have to say that.

**Q: If the mass media and popular culture condone or encourage violence, how can we curb violence when good parenting isn't present to counteract those pervasive forces? You've talked a lot about the importance of mentoring. Isn't that a solution?**

As for decreasing violence. If you have an unparented child, something will happen. When you're looking at gangs of young men, you're looking at young men who have no older man in their life at all. And when a young man feels unparented, he will try to burn your city down for you. When a young woman feels unparented, she may become depressed or have a teenage baby, but a boy will become violent. And we have to realize that the greatest danger to the culture is coming from these young unparented males all over the world. And if we want to do something about that, instead of pouring money in from Washington, one thing you would do is you would go to South Los Angeles and you would ask in the black communities who is a responsible older male here. And they would know. They only know that at the block level. Then you'd go to that older man and you'd say to him, ?Listen, I'm gonna give you eighteen thousand dollars and I want you to keep two young men out of prison in that time.. It costs thirty-five thousand to keep a young man in prison. It costs more to keep a young man in

prison than to send him to college.? And the older man then has something to do and the younger man has someone to talk to and be with. And it's astonishing the changes that come in young men when that happens. We do a lot of work in this group now with gangs. Sometimes we have fifty-percent black men and sometimes thirty-five percent of those are gang members. There was one in Los Angeles in which two young men came in who'd already killed over eight men and were there. And it's astonishing how they will change when they realize there's older men who are interested in them.

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