

DIMENSIONS OF MAN :

AN UNAUTHORIZED TAXONOMY

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Commencement Address
Holy Cross High School
New Orleans, Louisiana
May 15, 1992

Introduction

There are some things I want to tell you, and there are some things you need to know. Maybe, with a little luck, tonight's recipe, a series of short sketches, will congeal as thick gumbo providing "food for thought."

I've entitled this evening's effort, DIMENSIONS OF MAN : AN UNAUTHORIZED TAXONOMY. My purpose is to confront manhood, to chop it into quadrants, to address the black and the red, the silver and the gold of man, Perhaps the fusion of these quadrants will produce a full sphere, a kind of holistic view of man: that an organic or integrated whole has a reality independent of and greater than the sum of its parts.

Sketch One

Why would a guy cauterize the skin cancer on his face with the glowing, white-hot end of a cheap cigar? Why would another extract a decaying tooth from his mouth with a pair of rusty pliers? Displays of drunkenness? Most likely -- but that's only part of it. Performances of madness? Most probably not -- but then, we're all a little bit nuts, aren't we?

These two guys represent the Wild Man that Robert Bly depicts in his book about men, Iron John. This Wild Man is Iron John, a fairy-tale character first set down by the Grimm brothers in 1820. He's a big piece of man covered with hair from head to foot; his domain is the bottom of a pond. Seeking Iron John, imprisoning him, and then freeing him -- these three stages -- summarize the story, which, of course, is an allegory about "rites of passage."

This Wild Man -- whose vigor is associated with the glorification of trauma, grief, and nature -- is neither an animal nor a savage, although his impulses are rooted in his primordial past. He is a man whose manifestations of manhood, most probably prompted by both genetics and environment, are linked to roles and rituals which have evolved throughout history. There's something within him that wants risk, courts danger, and goes out to the edge,

Bly's Wild Man, his Iron John, is within all of us -- certainly to differing degrees -- but he's there. Contact with him requires a willingness to descend into the male psyche, into Iron John's pond, and accept what's dark down there. The aim is not to be the Wild Man but to be in touch with him -- and through such recognition and acknowledgment, to back him into a corner -- and to let him loose, as Bly implies, only in circumstances demanding energy which "leads to forceful action, not with cruelty, but with resolve." As General George Patton told his troops: "If you put your hand down into a pile of goo which used to be your best friend's face, you'll know what to do."

Sketch Two

"Leach, I'll tell you what a gentleman is," former Holy Cross head football coach, John Kalbacher, once told me. This faculty-lounge philosopher, a man fortified with many gentlemanly qualities (although he'd never admit it), continued, "A gentleman is an Ivy Leaguer -- a guy who'll get out of the shower in order to take a whiz." So the next time nature calls while you're in the shower -- and you even think about stepping out -- then you're a potential candidate.

Surely, a gentleman is much more; our school code tells us that. A gentleman is a reminder of what we should be, what we should strive for, because he is the best we can do.

A gentleman says "please" and "thank you" a lot. He calls a policeman "officer." He returns what he borrows. He keeps secrets. He uses his wit to amuse, not to abuse. He doesn't cheat. He yields the spotlight to others. He's punctual. He gives people a second chance. He cares about his appearance, He knows how to relax. He doesn't take himself too seriously. He praises in public but chides in private. He keeps his promises. He honors tradition. He keeps things simple.

He isn't rude. He knows when to shut up and when to speak up. He doesn't cut what can be untied. When playing games with kids, he lets them win. He's a sucker for little girls selling cookies and old ladies seeking someone to listen. He buys stuff from roadside vendors.

He doesn't cause scenes. He has trouble saying "no." He still opens doors for women. He feels guilty if he doesn't call his mama often enough. He doesn't bore people with his

problems. He feels good about who he is and what he stands for. He tries to leave everything just a little better than the way he found it.

Yes, these actions and dispositions identify the gentleman, according to his sense of propriety and prudence . . . But who is he? . . . What are the key ingredients which give him style and presence?

First, he is honest. And because he is, he is trustworthy. And trust is the greatest compliment one man can pay another.

Second, he has an unselfish heart. As John Holmer said, "There is no experience better for the heart than reaching down and lifting people up." Indeed, as Fr. Patrick Williams observed in a baccalaureate address at Holy Cross: "Sometimes the heart sees what is invisible to the eye."

Third, he possesses a tolerance which grows out of his humility. He has strong values and solid principles; he tries to conduct his life within the framework of these beliefs. However, what distinguishes him is that he refrains from crusading – from imposing his will on others whose standards are inconsistent with his.

Fourth and finally, he is respectful -- and consequently, he is respected. He understands the integrity of the Golden Rule. Manners, courtesy, patience, and grace emanate from this perception. As William Phelps observed, "This is the final test of a gentleman: his respect for those who can be of no possible value to him."

Sketch Three

John Cheever, the troubled yet talented writer, said that "life, like most gifts, is a paradox." Indeed, the central motif, the one stitch binding the entire fabric of life and its literature, is man's search for truth amidst opposing forces, ones which are often contradictory in nature -- "a heart, mind, or soul in conflict with itself," as William Faulkner described man's internal dilemma,

The contradictions are inevitable and inescapable: Should we "just do it," as Bo says, or should we think about it for a while? . . . Should we be flexible or firm, assertive or accepting, giving or taking? . . . Should we laugh, or should we cry? . . . Should we delight in life's delicious sweetness and stockpile its many trinkets, or should we forsake the flesh and materialism in anticipation of a perfect and perpetual deliverance, the theological promise of eternal ecstasy?

There's no easy answer. It becomes a matter of time and timing, of ebbs and flows, of place and purpose, of context and culture. But as the Mc Williams duo suggest in their book *Life 101*, it's a matter of balance, the point between the extremes -- a point which,

unfortunately, is rarely fixed, one which is usually moving, shifting, listing -- sometimes gently, sometimes violently forever demanding our vigilance.

When I was a kid, I learned about balance from Mr. Ollie -- Big O, as his friends call him. He is the father of one of my best friends. I became his "second son" and he my "second father" when my daddy died when I was eight. He told me that when he was a boy, his mother confined him to his room for a week because she had seen him fighting in the street. However, unbeknownst to his mother, his father sneaked in and gave him a silver dollar for winning the fight.

A contradiction? Most definitely. A paradox? Most assuredly -- because a paradox is a special kind of contradiction, one that somehow embodies truth. Right there between Big O's solitary confinement and his victory trophy lies the lesson the challenge to discover the truth, to strike the balance.

Sketch Four

Just before takeoff on an airplane flight, the stewardess reminded former world heavyweight champion, Muhammad Ali, to fasten his seat belt. "Superman don't need no seat belt," Ali replied. "Superman don't need no airplane, either," retorted the stewardess. Ali fastened his belt.

Ali's Superman is within us, too. We're all Superman "wanna-bes." That's what Beowulf is all about. That's what the epic tradition is all about. And that's what Holy Cross is all about: it's an experience of epic Proportions, a way of life, a philosophical orientation. It's an adventure anchored in hope (Crux Spes Unica), characterized by a certain Christian comitatus (loyalty, service, and charity), and devoted to the loftiest and grandest ideal: the mission of complete education (guts, brains, spirit, strength, character).

Therefore, if you're better acquainted with yourself today than you were yesterday, if you've learned that having some of the right questions is just as important as having most of the right answers, if you understand Bear Bryant's precept that "what matters is not the size of the dog in the fight but the size of the fight in the dog," if you've fallen asleep with a book on your chest, if you've bled a little, if you've cried a little, if your feet aren't quite yet planted firmly on the Ground, if you've wanted to quit but didn't, if you no longer look outside yourself for solutions to your problems, if you've stretched farther and reached higher than you or anybody else thought possible, then in that mode of overachievement, you are Superman; you are Beowulf. You are an epic hero of the finest order. You are a Holy Cross Man. Yes, the Holy Cross Man: he's the envy of kings, really quite a wonder; for he, and he alone, can "shake down the thunder!"