

## ONE

# *The Wild Man*

*He's Wild, you know!*

—C.S. LEWIS on God

**P**erhaps my single greatest disappointment in most of the world's religions is that they succeeded, against all odds, in making most people *afraid* of God! Do you realize how absurd and horrible that is? It pretty much makes it an unsafe and scary universe at the core, where no one is at home and everyone is paranoid. It makes the mystical adventure impossible. It turns religion into a self-serving brokerage business, always picking up the pieces after a kind of "taught and learned helplessness." The result has been massive neuroses, nonstop aggression and a phenomenon unique to the West: atheism. Poor "pagan" India where they told me the first week, "You will not find any atheists in India—except perhaps among those people taught in religious schools."

Anyone who has any authentic inner experience knows that God is only beauty, mercy and total embrace, and nothing but beauty, mercy and total embrace. The Trinitarian nature of God makes that theologically certain.<sup>1</sup> The only people who don't know that are those who have never sought God's face. In my experience there is an almost complete correlation between the degree of emphasis one puts on obligations, moralities, ritual performance and one's lack of any real inner experience. Once you know for yourself, you will be plenty "moral," in fact, even more so, but it all

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proceeds from a free response, from the Trinitarian flow passing through you. It is a response, not a requirement, an effect of having known love, not a precondition for getting love. *God is always the initiator, always good, always available, and the flow is always free.* Yes, sin is real and common, but it merely means to stop, resist or deny this omnipresent flow of God's love.

Now, believe it or not, we are threatened by such a free God *because it takes away all of our ability to control or engineer the process.* It leaves us powerless, and changes the language from any language of performance or achievement to that of surrender, trust and vulnerability. This is not the preferred language of men! It makes God free and us not. That is the so-called "wildness" of God. We cannot control God by any means whatsoever, *not even by our good behavior*, which tends to be our first and natural instinct. As God said to Moses, "I show compassion on whomever I will, and show pity on whom I please" (Exodus 33:19). That utter and absolute freedom of God is fortunately used totally in our favor, even though we are still afraid of it. It is called providence, forgiveness, free election or mercy by the tradition. But to us, it feels like wildness—*precisely because we cannot control it, manipulate it, direct it, earn it or even lose it.* Anyone into controlling God by his or her actions will feel very useless, impotent and ineffective.

God in the Hebrew Scriptures comes off much wilder than he does in the New Testament (largely because we have civilized and domesticated Jesus from his Jewish roots!). Yahweh, the God of Israel, picks out a guy named Abraham and tells him to pack up his stuff and head out for some place across the desert that he's never seen before. He tells Abraham and his wife, who are both about a hundred years old, that they're going to have a baby—and they do! But then God blows Abraham's mind by ordering him to sacrifice that only son, and this after telling him he will be the father of a great nation! This has nothing to do with order, certitude, clarity, reason, logic, church authority or merit! This is an utterly free God

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trying to create spiritually free people. I am philosophically and theologically committed to keeping God absolutely free.<sup>2</sup> In general God has not been very free, either with Jews, Christians or Muslims, all of whom call themselves “children of Abraham.”

The Israelites, later on, think they’ve got it made because they’re God’s chosen people, but God continually undercuts them for not being as compassionate as the God they claim to love. God is not a “company man” and does not appear to be calling for company or tribal values. Yahweh is the God of “all the peoples” and forms his own “rainbow coalition.” Yahweh freely chooses his instruments apart from any preconditions of worthiness, sinlessness, racial purity, orthodoxy, group belonging or lineage. It is almost the theme of themes of the whole Bible. Why? Probably because perfect freedom is the very nature of true love. Without freedom there is no love—only duty, fear and obligation. God does not love us because God has to. God loves us because God wants to. God does not love us because we are good. God loves us because God is good. Why can’t we surrender to that? Because it initially feels like a loss of power and importance!

The prophets, too, were a wild bunch. They had to be because they were the spokespeople of a wild God, a God who didn’t care much about temples and offerings but who cared a lot about the way people were treated and the opening of the human heart. Read Hosea 6:6, Isaiah 1:11 or Psalm 51:16 if you doubt. We tend to think the prophets were fortune-tellers predicting the Christian future, but they were much more, naming the ever-present illusions and self-deceptions. They were non-clergy with a radical message from a God seeking intimacy, and for all their efforts they largely got persecution and death (see Matthew 23:29–36), down to the last of the prophets, John the Baptist. Nice religion is always threatened by the “glorious freedom of the children of God” (Romans 8:21). Suddenly God is in charge instead of my explanations of things. I love to remind people that the word “nice” is never found in the

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whole Bible. God is not nice, it seems; God is wild.

If God's people are, in fact, nice, it is because they are first of all wildly free to break the rules of tit for tat and quid pro quo, and love as God loves: "If you love those who love you, so what? Even the pagans do that!" says Jesus (Matthew 5:46–48). That is just first-stage morality, what Jesus calls "the virtue of the scribes and Pharisees"—which is a level of virtue! But John the Baptist, the son of a priest, yet the archetypal wild man, is the perfect patron saint for many men today because of the way that he moved beyond mere nice religion and created his own initiation ritual. Yet Jesus "submitted" to his whole offbeat, unorthodox show, something really quite amazing.<sup>3</sup> The full male journey is a risky journey where you can only trust God and not your own worthiness or rightness. It is a journey into the outer world, into the world of risk, uncertainty and almost certain failure. Find me a male myth, fairy tale or legend that does not follow that cycle. They are always about journeys into new lands and places, they are always in nature (where we are not in charge), and they always lead you back home "to know it for the first time." Yet many men prefer to remain safely in the world of ideas and opinions and roles of esteem and status. Jeremiah capitalized it as "the sanctuary, the sanctuary, the sanctuary! Put no trust in delusive words like these" (7:4). There is almost no energy stored there, until you have once left the sanctuary, and finally know what it really means.

Part of the difficulty, of course, is that in our western culture and even in our religious tradition we have few guides to lead us deeply into the full male journey and almost no mentors who have been there themselves and come back to guide us through. We are longing for believable mentors on every stage of the male journey. (Forgive me, but most of us who are attracted to the clergy role are largely "inner and idea" people and usually not risk takers or very broad in our experience.) Much of my hope in *From Wild Man to Wise Man* is that we can lead men through some new stages of

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their journey, maybe even to understand their wildness in a way that might be wisdom.

Interestingly enough, our word “mentor” comes from Greek mythology. Mentor was the wise and trusted counselor of Odysseus. When Odysseus went on his long journey, he put Mentor in charge of his son, Telemachus, as his teacher and the guardian of his soul. This illustrates that one’s biological father is seldom the initiator of the son. It is always another special man who must guide the boy into manhood, from wildness to wisdom. (Perhaps much of our problem today is that we have so few “god-fathers” and that we expect from our biological fathers far too much!)

In men’s work we speak of the uninitiated man as the *puer* (Latin for boy or child). If we have many *puers* today, it is not only because we have little knowledge of the rather universal initiation rites for young men<sup>4</sup> but also because we have so few mentors and guides on those journeys. Much of our work today in M.A.L.Es (Men as Learners and Elders) is trying to raise up a new first generation of men who can pass on the wisdom and create a new tradition of initiation. Part of our problem is that too many men confuse primal initiation (read “conversion” if you will) with being churchy, law abiding and nice. This largely misses the point.

Many bosses, ministers, coaches and teachers tell a young man how to get out of his problems and to be “normal” again. A true mentor or initiator guides a young man *into* his problems and *through* them, which will always feel a bit muddy and messy, but also wet and wild and wise. The mentor will lead a man to The Center, and to his own center, but by circuitous paths, using even his two steps backward to lead him three steps forward. It looks wild, but it is really the wisdom path of God.

## Notes

1. Richard Rohr, “The Divine Dance” (Center for Action and Contemplation, Box 12464, Albuquerque, NM 87195, 2004), four CDs on the revolutionary yet largely overlooked implications of the Christian doctrine of God as a Trinity.
2. Mary Beth Ingham, *Scotus for Dunces* (St. Bonaventure, N.Y.: Franciscan Institute, 2003), p. 49ff. Blessed John Duns Scotus (1266–1308), who has influenced my thinking profoundly, was a Franciscan philosopher and theologian. He insisted and taught on the absolute and total freedom of God, to act according to God’s own nature. God’s love is not determined by the object but by the subject. That freedom was then extended to all creatures, who each must act and live according to their “thisness,” as Scotus called it.
3. Richard Rohr, *Soul Brothers: Men in the Bible Speak to Men Today* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2004). Note especially the chapter on John the Baptist, “The First Necessary Freedom,” p. 43ff.
4. Richard Rohr, *Adam’s Return: The Five Promises of Male Initiation* (New York: Crossroad, 2004). This book is my attempt to communicate the core messages of male initiation and some of its history.

## Two

# *Is There Such a Thing as Masculine Spirituality?*

*Stillness is what creates love,  
Movement is what creates life,  
To be still,  
Yet still moving—  
That is everything!*

—Do HYUN CHOE, Japanese Master

**P**erhaps the term sounds new, strange, even wrong or unnecessary. Why would we bother speaking of a spirituality that is especially masculine or male? Is there anything to be learned here? Don't we all come to God the same way? I am convinced that there are different paths because men and women *pay attention to different things*. Moviemakers know that, book publishers know that, advertisers know that, salespersons know that, almost everybody knows that except the clergy. Fortunately, it is strongly validated in universal sacred stories, legends and myths, which are invariably written for men *or* women, and different patterns are found in the Judeo-Christian Scriptures, too. That will be evident by the end of this book.

First, I want to say that a masculine spirituality is not just for men, although it is men who are most likely going to have to rediscover and exemplify it. Strangely, it is an approach that many women are more in touch with today than men. Women have been

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encouraged and even forced to work on their inner lives more than men in our culture. They are more open to the whole terrain, for some reason.

In general, women are ahead of men in recognizing their feminist perspective, and also in integrating the *so-called* “feminine” and “masculine” parts of themselves. Their inner journeys and outer scholarship have left many of us men in the dust. Our sisters’ pursuit of the feminine voice has made men aware that there must be an authentic masculine somewhere. But what is it? We know instinctively that masculinity cannot be the same as patriarchy.

Quite simply, it is the other side of feminine energy. It is the other pole, the complement, the balance, the counterpoise. I know I am taking a great risk in saying this. Many believe that it is a unisex universe, and all gender distinctions are culturally and artificially created. Even if that were true, although I believe that is too easy closure on the subject, I think both men and women can immensely profit from learning by comparison and contrast, without denying that there are many degrees and stages in between any classic polarities. Think of it as a pedagogical tool, a way of learning.

In the Chinese view of the universe, for example, it is the yang, or masculine principle, that is always the necessary complement to yin, the feminine principle. For the Judeo-Christian tradition, it is half of the image of God: “God created man in his image...male and female he created them” (Genesis 1:27). Sexuality itself is the longing for wholeness between the two. The archetypal pattern is so deep that even many languages have masculine and feminine words.

I am not saying that males are characterized by exclusively masculine energy and that females hold only feminine. In fact, quite the contrary, although there has been a tendency in most cultures to stereotype, classify and hold the sexes in one predictable type of energy and behavior. Unfortunately this tendency

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has kept us immature, unwhole, compulsive and unready for living a life of love—human or divine.

Saint Paul says, “...there is not male and female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28). The new humanity that we are pointed toward is not neuter or unisex or even oversexed, all of which make love impossible. In Christ we are whole, one, in union, integrated, wholly holy. That is the final product of the Spirit’s work of making all things one. It is the consummate achievement of God in Christ who reconciles all things within himself (Colossians 1:20) and invites us into the ongoing reconciliation of all things (Ephesians 5:20).

As an unmarried male, I can make little sense of my state unless I find some way to awaken and love my own inner feminine soul. Without it, I am merely a self-centered bachelor, a dreamy creator, a dried-up root. A man without his feminine soul is easily described. His personality will move toward the outer world of things, and his head will be his control tower. He will build, explain, use, fix, manipulate, legislate, order and play with whatever he bothers to touch, but he will not really touch it at all—for he does not know the inside of things. He has no subtlety, imagination, ability to harmonize, or live with paradox or mystery. He engineers reality instead of living it.

In fact, he is afraid of real life, and that is why the control tower of reason and pseudo control works overtime. It is the only way he can give himself a sense of security and significance. He is trapped in part of the picture, which is dangerous precisely because he thinks it is the whole picture. “Because you say, ‘I see,’ you in fact remain blind,” as Jesus said (John 9:41). Corporately, this has become the myth of western civilization. It is largely written by men who have controlled the power, the money, the corporations, the church, the military, the morality books. What we call reality, and are almost totally addicted to, is largely a construct of men who have frankly not worked much on their inner lives. They have not

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gone inside, they have not learned trust, vulnerability, prayer or poetry. They, and the civilization we have inherited from them, are in great part unwhole and even sick. That should not need much defense.

Until males and cooperating females recognize this unwholeness, this anti-Incarnationalism posing as reality, we have no hope of loving or knowing God. We will, in fact, be threatened by wholeness and replace (as we generally have) any daring Biblical faith with little schemes of salvation. Thomas Merton called them “private holiness projects.” Psychologists call them ego agendas. In men’s work, we call it “building our tower.” Basically, this is a transfer of the business world of win...achieve...prove...succeed...control to the realm of the Spirit. And it just doesn’t work. It is the anti-gospel. There *is* a better way.

For starters, a masculine spirituality would emphasize movement over stillness, action over theory, service to the world over religious discussions, speaking the truth over social niceties and doing justice instead of any self-serving “charity.” Without a complementary masculine, spirituality becomes overly feminine (which is really a false feminine!) and is characterized by too much inwardness, preoccupation with relationships, a morass of unclarified feeling and religion itself as a security blanket. This prevents a journey to anyplace new, and fosters a constant protecting of the old. It is no-risk religion, just the opposite of Abraham, Moses, Paul and Jesus.

In my humble masculine opinion I believe much of the modern, sophisticated church is swirling in what I will describe as a kind of “neuter” religion. It is one of the main reasons that doers, movers, shakers and change agents have largely given up on church people and church groups. As one very effective woman said to me, “After a while you get tired of the in-house jargon that seems to go nowhere.” A neuter spirituality is the trap of those with lots of leisure, luxury and self-serving ideas. They have the option

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not to do, not to change, not to long and thirst for justice. It can take either a liberal or a conservative form, but in either case, it becomes an inoculation against any deep spiritual journey. That's why I call it "neuter." It generates no real sexual energy or life.

A masculine spirituality would be one that encourages men to take the radical gospel journey from their own unique beginning point, in their own unique style, with their own unique goals—which is what we end up doing anyway, but now with no doubt or apology or need to imitate our sisters or even our fathers, for that matter. That takes immense courage and self-possession. Such a man has life for others and knows it. He does not need to push, intimidate or play the power games common to other men because he possesses his power with surety and calm self-confidence. He is not opinionated or arrogant, but he *knows*. He is not needy of status symbols because he draws his identity from God and from within. He does not need monogrammed briefcases and underwear; his identity is settled and secure. He possesses his soul and does not give it lightly to corporations, armies, nation-states or the acceptable collective thinking. He is beyond red state and blue state thinking.

Male saints are, quite simply, people who are whole. They trust their masculine soul because they have met the good masculine side of God, whom we have called "The Father." The Father taught them about anger, passion, power and clarity. He told them to go all the way through and pay the price for it. He shared with them his own creative seed, his own decisive word, his own illuminating Spirit. They are comfortable knowing, and they are comfortable not knowing. They can care and not care—without guilt or shame. They can act without success because they have named their fear of failure. They do not need to affirm or deny, judge or ignore. But they are free to do all of them with impunity. A saint is invincible.

There are many reasons, I'm sure, why a healthy masculine spirituality has taken so long to emerge. The state needed

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conformists and unfeeling warriors to go about its business, and “holy Mother Church” seemed to want children more than what Jesus called “bridegrooms,” and I would call mystics. But I am convinced there is a more fundamental reason why men and women have failed to love and trust their masculine energy. It is this: The vast majority of people in western civilization suffer from what I will identify in this book as the “father wound.” Those who have this father wound have never been touched by their human father. Either he had no time, no freedom or no need, but the result is children who have no masculine energy. They will lack self-confidence and the ability to do, to carry through, to trust themselves—because they were never trusted by him. They fear and sometimes even hate the masculine side of God, for very understandable reasons. But the loss has been incalculable.

If there is one very good reason for God to reveal himself as the Father of Jesus, it is because that is where most people are wounded—unfeeling, unbelieving and unwhole. With Philip the Apostle, we all join in, “Master, show us the Father, and that will be enough for us” (John 14:8). Without facing, feeling and healing this wound, I am sure that most men will continue to live lives of pseudo-masculinity: business and bravado as usual, dishonest power instead of honest powerlessness. And the sons and daughters of the next generation will repeat the sad process all over again.

Today, too many of God’s sons are without dignity, self-confidence or true power. They have little inner authority, and predictably over-rely upon outer authority. *They look like the oppressors, but have no doubt they are really the oppressed.* We believed the false promises of the system even more than women and are now trapped at what is supposed to be the top. We need true friendship, male and female; we need our also-feminine-souls; we need fathers and brothers; we need a good and also-masculine-God to find our

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way back into the human circle. We need ourselves—from the inside. Yet we need to act—on the outside. It is a dance.

The spiritual man in mythology, in literature and in the great world religions has an *excess of life*, he *knows* he has it, makes no apology for it, and finally recognizes that he does not even need to protect or guard it. It is not for him. It is for others. His life is not his own. His life is not about him. It is about God.