



Review of James Houghton, Larry Bean & Tom Matlack (eds.), *The Good Men Project: Real Stories from the Front Lines of Modern Manhood* (Boston: The Good Men Foundation, 2009), 275 pp.

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The academic study of men and masculinities is often one of lamenting the constructions of masculinity in popular culture and then analyzing the negative implications these have on men. *The Good Men Project* provides a welcome alternative to this process offering, according to the blurb, “a groundbreaking anthology of thirty-one essays by a broad range of men—rich, poor, black, white, gay, straight, urban, rural, famous, ordinary—all writing about the challenges, obstacles, triumphs, failures, and defining moments they encounter.” The book is part of a larger initiative which includes an accompanying DVD documentary and The Good Men Foundation, which aims to promote positive ways of doing masculinity by encouraging dialogue around the subject and supporting projects such as Street Potential, The Boys and Girls Club of Boston, Big Brothers Big Sisters of Massachusetts Bay, and Dorchester Youth Alternative Academy. The book and the Foundation are the products of James Houghton and Tom Matlack, both of whom have a background in business and finance: an unusual start, but let’s read on.

The Good Men Project is divided into four sections: fathers, sons, husbands and workers. The “fathers” section includes: a single dad learning to live alone with his young daughter; the birth of a son for a man who worries about manliness; coming to terms with a son’s autism; coping with the death of a daughter; navigating the empty nest; the shock of new fatherhood; two sons’ battle with substance abuse; a father who goes busking with his daughter; suicide and birth; a gay father’s experiences overcoming depression; maintaining sobriety. The “sons” section includes: not wanting to fight as a boy; learning lessons from fathers; fathers’ decay and deaths. The “husbands” section includes: lessons learned from women generally, and in sexual relationships; a gay man’s search for a partner; the death of a wife; the breakdown of marriages and their repair. The “workers” section includes: a stay-at-home dad; the restlessness of a nomadic war photographer; a prisoner who learns how to live again in the wider community; a youth worker who takes troubled youths on wilderness trips; a Peace Corps worker in Mongolia; an athlete; an anonymous-feeling office worker.

It doesn’t sound like a lot of fun, does it? Indeed, the book is in many ways an unexpected return to existential ultimate concerns that seem to be rather out of fashion these days: death, meaninglessness, isolation, freedom. But that is the value of *The Good Men Project*: it largely ignores the feel-good factor and shows of success, silently acknowledging that it is precisely these which often contribute to problematic masculinities. Instead, we have meditations on failure, loss and brokenness. The redemptive lesson, of course, can be found in the Leonard Cohen lyric: “there is a crack in everything, that's where the light gets in.”

It is also what is *not* in the book that is interesting for a popular discussion of men and masculinities. With the possible exception of former NFL linebacker Andre Tippett's contribution (which speaks of the value of martial arts in focusing the spirit), there is a noticeable absence of normative signifiers of masculinity. Sure, there are references to men who have been in the military, or who have been a success in business; however, in most popular men's literature these would be used to demonstrate some form of "authentic" masculinity, rather than simply serving as background to the actual story. The second noticeable absence is animosity towards, or placing blame upon women: despite the book containing various experiences of divorce, there is none of the all-too-usual snipes against women and the bias of the divorce courts. Even when a moan looks on the cards, it does not come. Take, for example, Charlie LeDuff's contribution about being a stay-at-home-dad: when turned away from the Mommy and Me yoga class for being male, he's peeved, but writes, "I left without incident. Why shouldn't women have a club where they can be free from the stink of testosterone?"

In the context of *JMMS* there are various occasions when spiritual or religious themes are taken into consideration in the masculine performances portrayed, a few of which stand out among the most memorable stories in the anthology. Kent George looks back to his boyhood in a stereotypical-yet-real Irish Catholic family in Boston and his desire not to be a fighter. Bruce Ellman writes of how, over a number of years, he came to know both his father and Judaism. Julio Medina, while incarcerated in Sing Sing, undertakes a Masters degree through the New York Theological Seminary and is inspired on his release by his faith in God to work with other inmates. If these stories were contained within the pages of an academic journal, and framed by some references to Laurel Richardson, Carolyn Ellis and Norman Denzin, they would make some neat pieces of autoethnography.

The Good Men Project is a welcome contribution to popular conversations about men and masculinities. Within a teaching environment it could also be a useful resource for undergraduate gender courses as an example of non-fiction literature focused on men that runs counter to expectations of traditional masculinity. Hopefully, the wider hopes surrounding the book and Foundation will prove fruitful, and will not be compromised by various forms of men's movement (such as Father's Rights, Mythopoets, Pick-up-Artists, Men's Ministry, Men Going their Own Way) who will no doubt see a great advantage in appropriating the honor of being "good men."

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