

# MALE INTIMACY

## Men's Longing for Intimacy and Connection

"The deepest need of man, then, is the need to overcome his separateness, to leave the prison of his aloneness" (Erich Fromm, *The Art of Loving*, 1956)

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The above words of Erich Fromm, the eminent German psychoanalyst, poignantly points out the longing of the human heart for connection.

Despite the yearning for deeper connection, real intimacy often eludes many men. In my work with men as a psychologist, chaplain, and addictions counselor, I have come to believe that while men do long for deeper connections, they often feel lost as to how to go about enhancing their relational lives. When performing a task that requires clear goals and objectives, men feel on familiar ground, but intimacy, the kind that challenges us as men to reveal our inmost self to another, that is scary and uncharted territory.

I will explore the concept of intimacy and the unique ways in which men connect, highlight some major barriers men face in making more intimate connections, suggest some ways to overcome these obstacles and deepen existing relationships, and conclude with some questions for further reflection.

### Intimacy Defined

Just what do we mean when we speak of intimacy? According to Erik Erikson, author of the classic work, *Childhood and Society*, intimacy involves both a relationship commitment and the ethical strength to abide by those commitments. It involves the sharing of one's inner self in depth. Intimacy is the capacity to commit yourself to particular individuals in relationships that last over time, even though they may call for significant sacrifice and compromise. Intimacy also involves strengths of character that support such commitments. It involves being able to maintain one's personal integrity while being able to meet the

accompanying demands for change. Intimacy is a challenge to deeper personal growth. It calls us to our fears, such as the fear of ego loss, and gives us opportunities to confront those obstacles that keep us from opening up to love.

Pat Collins, an Irish Vincentian priest who has lectured extensively on spirituality explores intimacy in his book, *Intimacy and the Hungers of the Human Heart*. Collins aptly notes that intimacy can also be explored by examining what it is not. Intimacy is not the same as infatuation or the experience of falling in love. We may feel very close but adult intimacy is possible only when our sense of self is

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enhanced, rather than lost, in a relationship. Most of us fall in love with an ideal, a projected image of what we imagine priesthood, religious life, or marriage to be. When we encounter the reality, a necessary period of disillusionment begins. If mature intimacy develops, these false or more idealized images must give way to a deeper and more authentic relationship.

### How Men Connect

The forming of an intimate friendship

is a rare experience for many men. At best men are friendly, rather than intimate, in their relationships, especially with one another. In his book, *The Intimate Connection*, James Nelson explores male intimacy and sexuality and states that the nature of men's friendships is rooted in particular roles and tasks, e.g., my golf friend, my work friend. It seems much easier for men to share activities such as sports rather than their inner selves.

When men talk, they tend to use fewer words and often feel awkward expressing verbal affection. I can recall my own father struggling to explain to me what he was taught about men expressing feelings and genuine affection: "It just wasn't done back then. Guys just didn't talk about their feelings." It seems that men receive double messages in this modern era about what a man should be. There is a call to be more sensitive and nurturing yet still be strong and powerful and many men feel confused and conflicted about how to maneuver these ambiguities. In the *Hite Report: A Study of Male Sexuality*, Shere Hite reports that almost none of the 7,239 men she surveyed said they were close or had been close to their fathers.

Men and women differ in their expressions of intimacy. Carol Rhodes and Norman Goldner, in their book, *Why Women and Men Don't Get Along*, indicate that women are better at talking about feelings and relationships, their inner world, whereas men are more focused on sharing about sports and politics, their outer world. They note that women have a more expressive loving style that includes affection, emotion, tenderness, talkativeness, and empathy. Men have a more instrumental style, based on providing practical help, sharing physical activities,

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spending time together, providing security, being responsible for a partner's well being, and providing material things. Yale professor of psychiatry, Daniel Levinson, in his classic ten-year study of men's development, *The Seasons of a Man's Life*, notes that most men have not had an intimate non-sexual relationship with a woman. For men, intimacy with women is more often viewed in sexual terms, with sex being the supreme intimacy.

William Pollack, a clinical psychologist from Harvard Medical School, and author of *Real Boys*, highlights how boys play more physical games, are less verbal, more competitive, and connect through doing rather than being. His two decades of research reveals that many boys feel lonely, sad, and confused, but rather than being allowed to express these feelings, they are instead encouraged to appear tough, cheerful, and confident. In his research, Pollack sharply challenges the conventional expectations about manhood that encourage parents to treat boys as little men, raising them in a toughening process that drives their true emotions underground.

### Barriers to Male Intimacy

The price that we as men have paid for neglecting our relationships has been tremendous. The failure to look within and deepen our capacity for intimate connections has led to increased isolation, loneliness, and stress. In our effort to escape the discomfort and pain of our emotional world, many men have been drawn away from their true selves and into compulsive and addictive lifestyles. Unhealthy behaviors such as alcohol and drug abuse, workaholicism, sexual addictions and compulsions have often been used to fill the empty void. Our society continues to be plagued by domestic abuse and violence against women. Promiscuity and pornography, especially via the Internet, is clearly on the rise. For these reasons and many more it is crucial that we explore the barriers to genuine intimacy for men.

One major barrier to intimacy for us

men is a fear of trusting one another with our real selves. I have spoken with many men who can identify with feeling lonely and disconnected. Yet many of these same men acknowledge that it is hard to trust. To be more intimate in our relating sounds nice, but real integrity often brings us into conflict with others. If I tell this person who I am, will they turn away? Will they

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accept me or will I feel rejected? Will they honor my confidence in them?

It is not difficult to see the critical importance of self-esteem to developing greater intimacy. If we do not see ourselves as lovable and worthwhile human beings, we will seek sources and people outside of us to fill that empty void, and be left wanting. No one can supply what we lack. If we are alienated from ourselves, we will lack the capacity for mature and responsible loving. In other words, there needs to be a

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me to both love you and to be loved by you. I can't give what I don't have, or receive what I don't believe myself worthy of having.

Many of us men are out of touch with our deepest selves and find the emotional world threatening. To grow in self-awareness and self-esteem means an appreciation for emotional needs. Unfortunately, many men have developed their intellectual and cognitive capacities to the detriment of their emotional lives. Daniel Goldman, points this out so well in his book *Emotional Intelligence*, which points out how the head has received primacy over the heart in our understanding of what is the measure of a successful man. All rapport building, so crucial to intimacy, comes from our capacity for empathy.

Barriers in communication with women: Men often fail in emotional intimacy with women because they fail to really listen. We often miss the cues. When women approach men with emotional issues, men often connect by trying to solve their problems rather than just listening and offering empathic support, which is most often what women want. A woman wants us to hear and truly listen without judging, analyzing, evaluating, or problem solving. Men, on the other hand, genuinely feel that problem solving is helpful.

Men have a tough time grieving openly. We fear embracing emotional pain and often feel awkward when there are no answers, or when the answer is simply to be present and not to do anything. For years we were trained to handle our emotions, to take charge, to be in control, to solve problems. Then a significant loss or death hits us and we are confused and bewildered by our conflicting emotions.

Many men have unresolved issues with authority or have failed to establish their own sound self-identity. Whether in a marriage or as a priest or religious sister or brother, the person is left incapable of mature love because of his own unfinished developmental work at an earlier stage. This may be manifested in recurring problems with authority, commitment, and the ability to trust and work effectively with others. What is not worked through gets reenacted in the present relationship, family or religious community.

Some common obstacles to greater intimacy for men exist in family-of-origin

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issues. For example, many men who grow up in alcoholic homes learn that it's not okay to express how you feel. Having to be on guard against the unpredictable behavior of the alcoholic parent, they learn to not trust their feelings. A similar dynamic happens with men who have experienced significant emotional, physical, or sexual abuse. If not worked through in therapy, these issues can be major barriers to developing the necessary skills and commitment needed for mature adult intimacy. Many men who struggle with intimacy today have unresolved issues with a parent that gets reenacted in the present. For some it may come in the form of the "father wound," for many men who have failed to integrate their conflicting feelings toward their father into their lives. For other men, an issue may also be a failure to fully separate from one's mother.

Our models of perfection hinder male intimacy. Even today, I often feel that in an argument with my wife, I feel like less of a man when I am called to honestly admit I was wrong. While my rational mind says that apologizing is no sign of weakness, I still feel like I've been defeated. Being raised in a male world of winners and losers, vulnerability often feels quite unsettling, and at times a part of me would rather run than face the truth. The truth is often hidden under a wall of false pride and an ego that needs massaging. Deep in the male psyche is the need to be validated and affirmed. I have appreciated other men who have shared how they have grown to accept their limitations without shame. Real male mentors model strength through embracing vulnerability. Maturing in intimacy draws us deeper into the reality of our own imperfections.

One of the ways we deceive ourselves is through defenses. We all use defenses every day of our lives. In many ways these defenses can be quite useful and adaptive for us. They provide a natural way to manage stress and preserve the psyche in times of crisis. However, these same defenses can easily become maladaptive, especially when used consistently as a way to deny or

distort reality and avoid facing the honest truth about ourselves. Thomas Merton said that there was no spiritual life divorced from reality. I would add that there is no true intimacy divorced from

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reality. It calls us to do an honest self-appraisal, to look into the mirror and see how we allow fear, ego, dishonesty, pride, resentment, and lust to cloud our vision.

Noise, distractions, busyness, and activity of all sorts threaten to keep us from experiencing our deepest center. We men often run from our fears, resentments, sadness, and worry rather than take them to quiet times and allow for God's transforming power to intervene. While true intimacy demands work and honest self-awareness, it is also a fruit of the Spirit. To be in touch with that Spirit demands some commitment to prayer and solitude. Intimacy is a grace and a gift. In prayer we

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bring our whole selves—body, mind, and heart—asking for the courage to grow in honest self-awareness and to remove those obstacles and defects of character that inhibit our growth.

## Pathways to Greater Intimacy

### Developmental Opportunity—Mid-life Challenge:

Many priests and religious men have told me that as they transition through mid-life, the issues of intimacy and relationships have become more important for them. Martin Pable highlights this developmental window in his book, *The Quest for the Male Soul*. He notes that before age 40 men are too busy "conquering" in the workplace, the bedroom, the sports field, or wherever, to acknowledge that they are hurting in any way. It seems that when we as men have grown old enough to recognize periods of genuine limitation (such as the death of a parent) and realize that the "dream" of career or a particular ministry may not have been all it was cut out to be, we are still left feeling that something is missing. Levinson confirms that in the mid-life transition a man is more able to meet the relational challenge by looking within and dealing with illusions about himself. For example, in a marriage, if there are problems, the man may now look within for his responsibility in the marital tensions. In religious life, or priesthood men may be more concerned about how they can foster closer friendships in their communities and desire to look more deeply at their relationships.

### The Path of Sacred Sexuality—Reclaiming Sexuality in its Fullness:

I have counseled many men who had active sex lives and not a clue what genuine intimacy was all about. The overemphasis on sexuality as synonymous with genital sex has distorted for men the fullness of what it means to be sexual beings. When sexuality is divorced from its intimate connection with spirituality, we as men and women suffer. We need to reclaim sexuality in its fullness, not the narrow version that Madison Avenue and Playboy have tried to sell us, but a sexuality rooted in a creative loving that sees our connections to all of life. It is time to embrace the awe and wonder of sexuality

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as a creative gift of God to be cherished. Only then will we as men find the courage to feel our feelings, face our fears, share our tears, and risk being more vulnerable in relationships.

This sexuality calls us to a love that nourishes and gives life to all our relationships. As men we are most fully passionate and intimate when nourishing our bodies, minds, and spirits rather than just our minds. Many of us men are disconnected from our bodies. Consequently, many of our denied or repressed feelings end up being stored in our physical bodies. We as men will grow in intimacy when we are able to restore a sense of wholeness, harmony, and balance to our lives.

The path of acceptance of our own powerlessness and limitations can be a liberating message since we have lived in a world of expectations and competition where we may have never felt good enough. Embracing these wounds will free us to love more deeply. Ernest Kurtz and Katherine Ketchum, in their book, *The Spirituality of Imperfection*, beautifully capture how God's love comes through our weakness:

"Imperfection is rather the crack in the armor, the 'wound' that lets 'God' in. As Meister Eckhart wrote almost seven hundred years ago: 'To get at the core of God at his greatest, one must first get into the core of himself at his least.'"

Instead of viewing our wounds as barriers, we can see our embracing of vulnerability as the "wounds" that let "God" in and let intimacy begin to flower.

### The Path of Surrender and Empitness:

In his book, *The Tao of Relationships*, Ray Grigg utilizes the ancient Chinese wisdom in LaoTzu's, *Tao Te Ching*, to remind us that intimacy in relationship is less about grasping and more about emptying oneself as he states:

"Fullness cannot receive so begin by emptying. There cannot be full growth without full room. To grow and fill, continue to empty so there can always be receiving."

Many men go to their graves never having been really known. This is tragic. There are people who can help teach us how to be more real and vulnerable but our pride keeps us from learning. A true friend or mentor can be a source of wisdom if we are able to empty ourselves and be open to receiving.

### Restoring A Sense of Balance and Passion for Life:

Capuchin psychologist Martin Pable notes that being a mature male means liv-

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ing a life that is in balance. Mature and intimate men have lives that reflect a rhythm of work, rest, labor, and leisure. When a man has a network of supportive relationships, gets physical exercise, nourishes his mind and spirit with reading and prayer, and takes time for friends and cultural interests his capacity for intimacy grows. When we as men are growing in intimacy, we are also growing in greater harmony with all of life. There is a reverence for ourselves, others, and God that respects our fundamental interconnectedness with all creation. Intimacy grows when there is a balance or harmony of the head, body, and heart.

Just as self-deception is a key barrier that can keep us as men from growing in our call to love, the pathway to healing comes through honest self-disclosure. When I am honest with myself, I have begun to water the seeds of intimacy. As a man I find it hard to admit that I'm sorry,

that I've made a mistake, or that I have hurt those that I profess to love. Healing comes through facing ourselves honestly and the grace to change follows that willingness. Intimacy is about being real and taking off the masks and personas that keep ourselves and others at a distance. Intimacy with others presupposes a level of intimacy and self-knowledge that provides the atmosphere for more authentic sharing of self. If I am not in touch with my thoughts, feelings, emotions, and behaviors, how am I to reveal my true self?

Intimacy, in its fullest expression, involves a commitment to growth in relationship whether one is single, married, or celibate. The commitment begins with oneself. It is a commitment to grow in self-awareness and self-acceptance. We discover that self not in isolation but in and through relationships that we commit to nurturing through time and mutual sharing. This commitment to growth will challenge us to expand our comfort zone and be willing to face the inevitable conflicts inherent in a growing relationship. Our commitment to growth will call us to embrace a healthy sense of self-sacrifice and discipline essential for deepening our intimate relationships.

## Concluding Reflections

As Christian men, priests and lay, we are called to grow in love by deepening our relational lives. The mark of psychosexual maturity for us is our openness to intimacy and overcoming our separateness. I would like to conclude with some final reflective questions that might help facilitate that journey of intimacy for us:

- What is the nature and quality of my relationships?
- Do I have at least one person with whom I can share my deeper feelings with?
- As a man do I have healthy friendships with both men and women?

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or those who asked him if he "knew" the Lord Jesus. Then, on a recent retreat, he had the sense of Jesus speaking to him: "So you want to know me, do you? Try spending time with me." My friend was startled at the clarity of the message but still wondered what it meant. As he stayed with the message, he said that he began to see that there were really multiple "presences" of Jesus: in Scripture, in the sacraments, in his own inner life AND in other people. It was this latter realization that hit home to him in a fresh and powerful way. Jesus is incarnate. Jesus is alive and well and living in our neighbor. For so many years he had heard that message, but now in his forties, he finally experienced its truth.

Time is meant for relationship. In light of this assertion, a relational approach to ministry would be that in which we come to draw on experiences as not merely draining but as a way that Christ and the people are trying to anoint us. In my last parish assignment, I had a chance encounter with an elderly woman of the parish. At times, when I would see her coming, my first impulse was to look for an escape route; she tended to go on. But she had me cornered and proceeded to launch into the conversation with: "Father, I want to talk to you because you have Christ in you." My response was: "But Aurora, you have Christ in you, too." (Was I saying: "Talk to Him, don't bother me?") She came back with: "I know that. I want the Christ in you to talk to the Christ in me." Ouch! I'll never forget that encounter. Nor will I forget the fact that if I had found an escape route, I never would have received that grace.

We work hard and so we should. We know we have to be decisive about "making time" for prayer and relationships with others. Yet there are those among us who remind us that time is for relationship. The recent national tragedy has awakened many to the realization of the fragility of life as well as its fleeting nature. Now is the time to show that we love one another. What is more, we should not ignore work's potential to be an act of intimacy. Insofar as work can be a true expression of who we are as priests and insofar as our work is "received" by people, it can truly be an act of intimacy.

What is the good life? The good life is just that, a life. It has sunk its roots deeply into the incarnate God. It is a moral life. It is a life marked by a responsible, loving relationship with God, others and self. The good life has near at hand a rich variety of emotions: laughing with those who laugh, weeping with those who weep and becoming angry at injustice are capacities which mark the good life. The good life is generative of life in others. It is a life that expresses God's goodness, power, beauty and self-giving love through work. The good life, for a Christian, is a human life ennobled by true relationship with Christ and with others.

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- How comfortable do I feel with my own body?
- Do I give thanks to God for my sexuality or do I see it as a burden?
- Does my life reflect a sense of balance between work, and play, labor and leisure activities?
- What stresses and demands of my work or ministry keep me from deepening my relationship with myself, God, and others?
- Am I honest with myself and accepting of my limitations?
- What barriers to intimacy exist in my life and ministry?
- Are there significant losses that I have failed to acknowledge or grieve?
- Where do I go for support?
- Do I belong to a priest's support group?
- How do I deal with loneliness, stress, anger, and conflict?
- Am I faithful to my primary commitments?
- How would I describe my personal relationship with God?

Finally, to grow in intimacy challenges us to recognize the ways in which the culture and society have presented us false images of true manhood and reclaim our God-given capacities for openness, compassion, and intimate connection. A new vision of what real men are all about is essential. Real men are vulnerable, able to ask for help, able to feel their feelings and express them tenderly without shame. Real men are faithful to their primary commitments and dedicated to the discipline inherent in mature and creative loving.

### Recommended Reading

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