

MEN OF THE URBAN UNDERCLASS AND GRIEF:
EXPLORING THE IMPLICATIONS FOR
PASTORAL THEOLOGY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

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Introduction and Overview:

As the field of pastoral theology continues to explore concerns rooted in issues surrounding gender, race, and class, there is a growing awareness of the constraints traditional paradigms of understanding grief have placed on marginalized persons and groups. This study attempts to highlight one such area that lifts up for consideration the unique needs of low-income, urban men in their experiences with grief.

This undertaking is structured in a manner that allows for several ideas to come to light. First, consideration is given to issues of both gender and class, paying particular attention to the field of literature that is emerging around men and especially men's grief, as well as that which is given to working-class and low-income persons.

From this, a second point of focus is aimed at developing a situational context that seeks to bring these issues to light by examining a composite sketch of experiences drawn from previously published field research and personal interviews. From the outset it is acknowledged that these sources of information have their limitations, not the least of which are the fact that they are contextually situated in urban areas representing only a small fraction of the low-income populations of those communities, much less those of a larger regional or national scale. However, any shortcomings that these restrictions yield are offset by their ability to open for us an avenue to consider some of the unique issues associated with men's grief experiences

in the urban underclass and how they might better inform the work of pastoral theologians sensitive to those on the margins of our contemporary culture.

Finally, implications for the discipline of pastoral theology will be addressed in an attempt to offer suggestions for further, more exhaustive studies in this particular portion of the larger pastoral theological field. The nature of this project is geared toward these pages providing a foundation that offers others opportunities to explore this particular area of the subject at greater length.

Thus, this paper begins with a treatment of the prevailing ideas associated with the study of masculinity, urban men on the margins, and grief. From there the effort is made to bridge the fields of study with the hope throughout being that our sensitivity to the needs of one particular portion of the human community will serve to advance heightened awareness of humanity's common connections.

Gender and Class in a Pastoral Theological Perspective:

Statements of Position

The field of pastoral theology has seen a dramatic increase in its expansiveness over the course of the past two decades, particularly with regard to the public component of its scope. Noting that *The Dictionary of Pastoral Care and Counseling* that was first published in 1990 included only one entry under the subject heading "public," Bonnie Miller-McLemore points out that "pastoral theologians and counselors today are more accountable in study and practice to the political and social factors that impinge on people's lives on local and global levels than previous

definitions of the field have acknowledged or allowed.”¹ A project such as this one necessarily depends on this broader view of the discipline, as it illustrates the movement beyond pastoral concern that is centered primarily on individual well-being. While individuals and their needs must be taken into account in the provision of care, it is also necessary that those who attempt to make such care available and effective be mindful of the wider social and political networks that influence individual wellness. Life does not exist in a vacuum. The boundaries of pastoral theology have been and continue to be stretched to take into account the interlocking systems of public and private life.

In much the same way that the term “pastoral” has come to include a public component in its application and therefore merits a word of explanation and definition, attention must also be given to how that influences the second word of the phrase “pastoral theology.” Again, looking to Miller-McLemore’s work on the recent revolutions in the field, we find an important and helpful distinction. “Different from civil religion’s generic universal appeal, public theology attempts to make a recognizably valid and self-critical claim for the relevance of specific religious beliefs and practices.”²

With this in mind, a statement regarding my own social position is appropriate. I, as a middle-class, educated, ordained Protestant minister, who is a

¹ Miller-McLemore, Bonnie J. “Pastoral Theology as Public Theology: Revolutions in the ‘Fourth Area,” in *Pastoral Care and Counseling: Redefining the Paradigms*. Nancy J. Ramsay, ed. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2004), 45.

² *Ibid.*, 46.

heterosexual white male, write from this perspective. I recognize that I represent a dominant culture that has traditionally enjoyed the privileges that stem from having our voices heard. It is inevitable that my own history, heritage, and worldview strongly influence my outlook and suggestions for a wider pastoral theological perspective on men in the urban underclass and how we might understand and care for them in their experiences with grief. Believing that an important concern both for gender and class issues has come to occupy a valuable place in the field of pastoral theology, I am well aware of the fact that I am prone to biases and overgeneralizations. My aim is to avoid this as much as is realistically possible and move beyond narrow paradigms of understanding.³

Gender as a Social Construct

Interest in the study of gender, particularly with regard to issues of identity and social relations, owes much of its place in the realm of scholarly pursuits and, consequently, to wider awareness, to the work of women who have brought to light their unique perspectives and experiences as women.⁴ These pioneering voices have served to pave the way for women and men to consider the particular contributions that they are able to make to fostering understanding and acceptance.

The field of gender studies is now able to highlight for us that there are confusing, and often damaging, messages that exist in our contemporary culture about

³ See Sue, Derald Wing and David Sue. *Counseling the Culturally Diverse: Theory and Practice*, 4th ed. (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2003), 98.

⁴ See Graham, Elaine L. *Making the Difference: Gender, Personhood, and Theology*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 26.

what it means to be a woman or a man. Given the focus of this project, attention is devoted only to the complexities associated with men's experiences with only a handful of these messages.

While social constructionists posit that “men are molded by cultural dynamics to think and behave in [particular] ways,”⁵ there are essentialists who maintain that sex and gender are somehow inextricably linked to one another. While the social constructionist position holds to a wider realm of influences that shape men's lives and how they live them, the essentialist outlook holds that the connection between sex and gender is therefore deterministic of behavior.

Masculinity, though, is not static, and the word itself may be misleading in a discussion such as this one. We are more likely to be attuned to this by speaking less of a singular “masculinity” and adapting our frame of reference and vocabulary to include “masculinities.” This shift assists in offsetting the tendency to think only in terms of what has been labeled as “hegemonic masculinity [that] denotes the ideals considered appropriate for Euro-American, educated, middle- and upper-class, heterosexual, culturally Christian males...”⁶ Judith Lorber contends that ‘neither sex nor gender are pure categories.’⁷ She goes on to say that “gendered people do not emerge from physiology or hormones but from the exigencies of the social order,

⁵ Boyd, Stephen B., W. Merle Longwood, and Mark W. Muesse, eds. *Redeeming Men: Religion and Masculinities*. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), xiv.

⁶ *Ibid.*, xv.

⁷ Lorber, Judith. “The Social Construction of Gender,” in *Race, Class, and Gender in the United States: An Integrated Study* 4th ed. Paula S. Rothenberg, ed. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 34.

mostly from the need for a reliable division of the work of food production and the social (not physical) reproduction of new members.”⁸

It is only in relatively recent times that the concept of “traditional masculinity” has emerged in Western societies. The Industrial Revolution managed to produce, among other things, divisions in labor as well as divisions in the location of labor. These schisms bisected gender roles. Thus, the idea of males fulfilling the role of being “good providers” emerged.⁹ And, while the good provider role was widely assumed to be the norm for which all men would aspire, other divisions along lines of race and class have made it difficult, if not impossible, for a large segment of the male population to attain such status. As a consequence, those men who were unable to fulfill the good provider role were thus categorized as “nongood providers.”¹⁰

Masculinity on the Margins

One of the challenges that confronts men who do not fit into the socially constructed category of “middle-class” – a term that is, admittedly, amorphous and vague in its definition as well as its application – is that the dominant culture’s pervasive influence plays a significant role in shaping the ideals associated with the “right” or “correct” way of expressing manhood. Notice that the word “way” in the preceding sentence is used in the singular form. Little room is given in our

⁸ Ibid., 41.

⁹ See Bernard, Jessie. “The Good-Provider Role: Its Rise and Fall,” in *Men’s Lives* 3rd ed. Michael S. Kimmel and Michael A. Messner, eds. (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1995), 150-151.

¹⁰ Ibid., 156.

contemporary culture for multiple manifestations of masculinities as Boyd, Longwood, and Muesse suggest. Consequently, those men who are on the margins of the socio-economic middle are then subject to the same pressures that depict “traditional masculinity” as the norm. However, they lack many of the means required that would ever afford them a chance to live up to those standards. These include, for example, access to education, employment, and social networks that wield a certain amount of power or influence.

Men who are culturally conditioned to expect to be in control (a patriarchal position), and yet find themselves in positions that afford them little access to such power often discover a sense of being conflicted. Many men in the United States have come to see the world through an ideological viewpoint that is heavily influenced by a prevalent myth of upward mobility that simply is not true. The effect is significant:

The main axis of power within culture aligns authority with masculinity. A second axis of power denies authority to *some* men. Hence, gender as well as race and class are formative constructions of a hierarchy among men resulting in hegemonic masculinity (white, heterosexual, professional class), marginalized/traditional masculinities (winner and respectable working class), and subordinated masculinities (poor and near-poor white men, racial minorities, and gay men).¹¹

Men situated in these sub-cultures who are denied authority within the wider masculine culture tend to be dismissed by the dominant culture as “asocial or

¹¹ Orr, Judith L. “Hard Work, Hard Lovin’, Hard Times, Hardly Worth It: Care of Working-Class Men,” in *The Care of Men*. Christie Cozad Neuger and James Newton Poling, eds. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997), 75.

antisocial.”¹² To compensate for this, many men will respond by acting in ways within their social group that will align with the socially constructed masculine expectations, but do so primarily within their bloc that is situated outside of the mainstream. Hegemonic masculinity functions as a means whereby those who do not fit its parameters violate its boundaries, and such a violation serves to provoke feelings of shame in those who come up lacking. These men, then, will often seek to “prove” their manhood by tangible, physical means. “Although white, middle-class American culture has generally moved away from considering physical aggression proof of manhood, this role remains salient in many working-class and ethnic minority subcultures.”¹³

One of the issues that pastoral theologians sensitive to the issues surrounding masculinities and marginalization will be facing as the twenty-first century progresses is that there is a growing division between the classes in the American labor pool. The economic influence in general, and in industrialized urban areas in particular, that working-class men provided in years gone by will continue to decrease. As blue-collar, skilled labor becomes less necessary, this segment of the society that has traditionally been dominated by men will decline in number. Orr, writing nearly a decade ago, made this poignant observation:

¹² Brooks, Gary R. and Louise B. Silverstein. “Understanding the Dark Side of Masculinity: An Interactive Systems Model,” in *A New Psychology of Men*. Ronald F. Levant and William S. Pollack, eds. (New York: BasicBooks, 1995), 292.

¹³ Brooks, Gary R. and Lucia Albino Gilbert. “Men in Families: Old Constraints, New Possibilities,” in *A New Psychology of Men*, 267.

The shift from a blue-collar industrial economy over the last twenty years will eventually dislocate 15 to 45 million workers in urban America. This makes workers more vulnerable due to the mobility of corporations (from core city suburb as well as around the globe), the weakening of trade unions, the demeaning division of tasks with new technology, a decline in income and home ownership, and an increase in family poverty.¹⁴

In the contemporary context, predictions such as these are proving themselves true. Where pastoral theology in another era may have focused its energies on the care of individuals in these transitional circumstances, it is equally important that the pastoral theological perspective today be informed by an awareness of, and understanding about, the social, political, and economic contexts in which persons live.

The landscape of men's lives has changed. Katherine Newman also points out that "the years of corporate buyouts, hostile takeovers, mergers, bankruptcies, and downsizing have left the average American with stagnant wages, increasing pressure to work greater hours, and the nagging sense that this scenario is no longer temporary."¹⁵ This serves to widen the gap between the "haves" and the "have-nots" and fewer people are moving upward than downward. "The middle class is shrinking in size, and most of those leaving the ranks of the middle class are falling to a lower socioeconomic standing."¹⁶

¹⁴ Ibid., 77.

¹⁵ Newman, Katherine S. "What Scholars Can Tell Politicians about the Poor," in *Race, Class, and Gender in the United States*, 249.

¹⁶ Mantsios, Gregory. "Class in America: Myths and Realities," in *Race, Class, and Gender in the United States*, 205.

The decreasing size of the American middle-class and the increasing number of low-income households exerts strain on everyone within a family or social network undergoing such a transition. Many caregivers and counselors are now coming to appreciate the fact that family patterns, networks of relationships, and role expectations are different between the impoverished and those in the social and cultural middle. “In poverty the roles, the multiple relationships, the nature of the male identity, the ever-changing allegiances, the favoritism, and the matriarchal structure result in a different pattern.”¹⁷

Masculine role requirements on the margins of society are indeed different from the expectations associated with masculine roles in the vast American middle. Where men in the middle-class are counted on to conform to the role of the “good provider,”¹⁸ for men who are products of poverty, “the primary role of a real man is to physically work hard, to be a fighter, and to be a lover.”¹⁹ It is imperative that we note here that these distinctions appear to be most well-defined when taking account of men in more urban settings than in rural communities. While the same general differences may be noted between the two economic groups in a less populated area, there are particular roles, rules, expectations, and definitions that are indeed different and that merit more extensive, focused treatment than that which is given here.

¹⁷ Payne, Ruby K. *A Framework for Understanding Poverty* 3rd ed. (Highlands, TX: aha! Process, Inc., 1996), 75.

¹⁸ See Bernard, 150-151.

¹⁹ Payne, 77. In her work, Payne distinguishes between generational and situational poverty. Whereas situational poverty is associated with a lack of resources as the upshot of a particular occurrence, generational poverty is considered to be present when a person has been impoverished for, at minimum, two generations. Though poverty is treated as a whole here it is important to be aware of these distinctions.

Men and Grief: Exploring the Experiences:

Contrasting Generalizations between Women and Men's Grief

Shifting our attention from the above discussion regarding gender as a socially constructed category fraught with diversity, it is useful now to focus on grief and the prevailing ideas associated with it in the field of pastoral theology. And, while the literature within the field is admittedly ambiguous in doing so, it is useful for the present conversation's purposes to make a distinction between grief and bereavement.

Using only one of many possibilities available, we may find David Switzer's delineation between the two adequate. He differentiates between the two in this way, with "bereavement being the actual state of deprivation or loss, and grief being the response of emotional pain...to the deprivation."²⁰ Thus, the focus of this discussion is on the collection of feelings that comprise grief as a series of experiences.

In the same way that the dominant culture has constructed the ideals of masculinity and femininity, so too has there been the development of a normative set of expressions of grief established along gender lines. Terry Martin and Kenneth Doka perceive particular characteristics associated with what they identify as instrumental and intuitive grievers.²¹ While they maintain that men are generally considered to be instrumental grievers and women intuitive, they are also quick to point out that such categorizations are not static or deterministic.

²⁰ Switzer, David K. *The Dynamics of Grief*. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1970), 12.

²¹ Martin, Terry L. and Kenneth J. Doka. *Men Don't Cry... Women Do: Transcending Gender Stereotypes of Grief*. (Philadelphia: Taylor & Francis, 2000).

Men and women, because of their socialization into sex roles, are likely to exhibit different grieving patterns. Men are more likely to be found on the instrumental end of the continuum, while women are more likely to exhibit an intuitive style. Yet gender role socialization is but *one* factor that influences a pattern of grief. This leads to a critical affirmation that *while patterns of grieving are certainly influenced by gender, they are not determined by gender.*²²

A reality that men across the spectrum of class categorizations experience is that there are limited culturally sanctioned means available for them to acceptably express their grief. Men have, as a general rule, been socialized in such a way that there is a significant weight laid on their shoulders when it comes to finding adequate avenues for the distillation of their grief. “Our society has saddled men with a heavy burden in its expectation of the masking of emotions of sorrow and affection and tenderness,” Switzer observes.²³ He goes on to point out that “the tendency to inhibit such emotions is built into many men on an unconscious level as a result of this cultural expectation and they struggle to control them and not give expression to them too openly when they are consciously felt.”²⁴

In the years since Switzer’s reflections regarding men and their available means of expressing emotion were first published, a variety of other scholars have also taken note of the discrepancies that exist between men’s and women’s experiences and expressions of grief. For example, Ellen Zimmer posits:

American men appear to be on the sidelines when it comes to being recognized as survivors following significant loss. To the extent that men are not culturally sanctioned to outwardly demonstrate their grief or to

²² Ibid., 99-100.

²³ Switzer, 184.

²⁴ Ibid.

share their emotional experience of grief, their style of bereavement will be open to misinterpretation and will elicit limited outward support.²⁵

Meanwhile, Herbert Anderson observes that “from childhood, men are encouraged to control their grief. ‘Big boys don’t cry,’ they are told. The mark of being a man is to suffer in silence: showing pain is a sign of vulnerability or weakness.”²⁶ And Elizabeth Levang holds that “men are conditioned to control life. They feel that they must go on in the face of tragedy, appearing unemotional and content to carry their own burdens... To be a man means you don’t cry, you don’t show weakness, you don’t need support.”²⁷

An Examination of Masculine-Style Grief

In the attempt to differentiate between the culturally sanctioned expressions of grief available to men, it is important to recognize that the observations cited above form the basis for what Zimmer identifies as “masculine-style grief.”²⁸ This is contrasted with what she labels as “conventional-style grievers.” While we must be quick to remind ourselves that such categorizations are not exclusively reserved for one sex or the other, we also must note that her categorizations are based on what her research has proven to generally be found among men.

Zimmer describes masculine-style grievers as ones who “focus actively on controlling emotional expression by purposely shelving thoughts and feelings to meet

²⁵ Zimmer, Ellen S. “Being a Man about It: The Marginalization of Men in Grief,” in *Illness, Crisis, & Loss* 8, no. 2 (April 2000): 181.

²⁶ Anderson, Herbert. “Men and Grief: The Hidden Sea of Tears Without Outlet,” in *The Care of Men*, 205.

²⁷ Levang, Elizabeth. *When Men Grieve: Why Men Grieve Differently & How You Can Help*. (Minneapolis: Fairview Press, 1998), 61.

²⁸ See Zimmer, 184-187.

work and personal obligations.”²⁹ For the masculine-style griever, one of the chief purposes of giving expression to his experience in this way is because his highest priorities center around “establishing a sense of control and taking on a restoration orientation...”³⁰

Given that males are regularly socialized to conform to certain specific gender roles, there are only a limited number of acceptable avenues available to explore in giving expression to emotion; chief among these is anger. “Anger is, in fact, one of the few emotions boys are encouraged to express, and as a consequence, the outlawed vulnerable emotions, such as hurt, disappointment, fear, and shame, get funneled into the anger channel.”³¹ That there are so few socially sanctioned options available to men for the expression of their grief is, as research in the field continues to suggest, of paramount importance in understanding the dynamics associated with men’s lives.

A Closer Look at Men and Anger

Caregivers who work with men of all social classes are well-served to be mindful of the fact that men are, on the whole, conditioned to control their emotions and have been allowed only limited means of expressing their feelings. The field of socially sanctioned expressions of emotion available to the majority of men is narrow indeed. Thus, when encountering men who are experiencing grief, we must be aware that outward demonstrations of their reaction to grief will generally be limited at best.

²⁹ Ibid., 187.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Levant, Ronald F. “Toward the Reconstruction of Masculinity,” in *A New Psychology of Men*. Ronald F. Levant and William S. Pollack, eds. (New York: BasicBooks, 1995), 240.

“One of the most far-reaching consequences of male gender role socialization is the high incidence among men of at least a mild form of alexithymia – the inability to identify and describe one’s feelings in words.”³²

Caregivers must be certain to take note of the fact that anger is a culturally sanctioned means readily available for men to express their grief. Given the absence of the capacity for describing emotions in words, many men find the implicit societal approval of anger as an accessible channel for conveying their feelings.

Society traditionally honors men’s anger and authorizes it by providing men ample justification for its use. Men are given permission to be angry and, for the most part, are issued a license to display their anger without fear of recrimination. For men, anger is an entitlement that is both necessary and legitimate.³³

As pastoral caregivers interact with and work alongside men who are grieving, one of the challenges that must be faced is recognizing that anger and the expression thereof is not always negative. A wholesale rejection of anger as an available avenue for the dissemination of feeling would be misguided. Rather, caregivers must be certain to be vigilant in keeping watch for and protecting against violence and destructive behaviors. “Anger works for men. It protects, it camouflages, and it gives men a dose of control. Anger is a start to healing, a mechanism for coping and externally releasing some of what is brewing inside.”³⁴ Of the options for emotional expression available to many men who are grieving, anger may be the most accessible. Sensitive caregivers will recognize the value of this and dedicate

³² Ibid., 238.

³³ Levang, 70-71.

³⁴ Ibid., 74.

themselves to cultivating a wider range of resources available for employment by those with whom they work.

Men of the Underclass and Grief

Multiple Manifestations of Disenfranchisement

If we accept the notion that persons who are categorized as not belonging to the middle- and upper-classes are marginalized and therefore not given the same rights and privileges as those who belong to the dominant culture, then we must also explore some of the ramifications of this disenfranchisement as it relates to men and their grief experiences. The limited culturally sanctioned means for expressing grief for men in general, coupled with the particular dynamics of social stratification among those in various cultural and ethnic groups, makes for a complex set of factors of which caregivers need to be aware. For instance, those who work with Italian-American men on the margins of an urban culture will likely encounter a different set of factors that influence their experiences and expressions of grief than those who may work with Latino immigrants in a similar social setting.

Doka and Martin, when speaking of masculine-style grievers use the term “double disenfranchisement” to describe the phenomenon in the dominant culture.

They employ the term because:

...the need to reject the help of others is perceived by the survivor as a show of strength, reinforced by cultural values that encourage stoicism and a stiff-upper-lip mentality consistent with a strong (male) image. Grief is not signaled outwardly; consequently, the wounded survivor is less recognizable. Others are not drawn by the show of grief to extend comforting words or deeds, all of which coincides with the masculine-

style griever's lower expectation of desire for his or her social network to offer support.³⁵

If Doka and Martin's assessment is applicable to the dominant culture, then it seems appropriate that we think of men in the underclass as being more than doubly disenfranchised. Taking into account socioeconomic status, along with gender and racial or ethnic class, adds a markedly different dynamic to some men's grief experiences. Seldom in the field of pastoral theology and similarly related disciplines have these differences been taken into account. "To date, the psychological community has not examined how male socialization may contribute to the problem of men's social alienation and familial estrangement or abandonment...A man may be more likely to leave his family if he cannot fulfill the provider role."³⁶

Masculinity in the Underclass

Given the prevalence of the idea that men are supposed to fill the "good provider" role and the myth that all persons have equal access to channels of upward mobility in the United States, it is important that we recognize the shortcomings of hegemonic masculinity. The demystification of the dominant cultural ethos is an important and worthy endeavor of the pastoral theological community.

Timothy Nonn has worked extensively with men of various racial and ethnic backgrounds and sexual orientations in the low-income Tenderloin district of San Francisco. He observes that these men are "stripped of everything that qualifies a

³⁵ Zinner, 185.

³⁶ Brooks and Silverstein, 292.

man for full participation in society [and] there is the shame of surviving as less than a man.”³⁷

From a pastoral theological perspective, it is vital that we engage in a critical study of poor men and their experiences because we currently seem to lack the tools necessary to care for this segment of our society. “Lacking a perspective on poor men that utilizes the category of gender, the church is incapable of fully affirming them as moral agents in their struggle for survival and justice.”³⁸

Therefore, as pastoral theologians and caregivers, we must be aware of the fact that a concept of masculinities, as opposed to masculinity as a singular term, is crucial here. Given the reality that low-income men are socially situated in contexts that find them in subordinate positions – the antithesis of traditional masculinity – they struggle mightily under the weight of what the dominant culture defines as being an acceptable expression of manhood. “Poverty peels away all traces of masculinity until a man’s soul is laid bare. Tenderloin men are afflicted by failure.”³⁹ It is this affliction of failure in contemporary urban American culture that sounds the alarm for heightened pastoral awareness.

Nonn recounts an incident where a 46-year-old heterosexual white man in a bank went to cash a check. His experience there yielded this response:

[I went] into the bank to cash a two-dollar check and had to deal with people’s feedback. I just want to be invisible. I’m real embarrassed about that. About my economic status...When I was stripped of all those

³⁷ Nonn, Timothy. “Hitting Bottom: Homelessness, Poverty, and Masculinity,” in *Men’s Lives*, 226.

³⁸ —, “I Took it Like a Man’: Survival and Hope Among Poor Men,” in *Redeeming Men*, 158.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 161.

*material things that I was taught were the measure of success, and everybody rejected me – even though as a person I hadn't changed – I saw the sort of shallowness. It was very painful and very hard.*⁴⁰

The failure of hegemonic masculinity to adequately incorporate the underclass and, in fact, its ability to stigmatize those who belong to this group, is met with the development of “counter-masculinities” which are “coping mechanisms that provide Tenderloin men a sense of self-worth.”⁴¹ Expressions of counter-masculinities may come in a variety of forms. In the Tenderloin district where Nonn has worked, he identifies two primary manifestations of this attempt to counteract the forces of hegemonic masculinity as “cool pose” and the “urban hermit.” Each of these, within that particular context, undermines the dominant forces dictating an acceptable, singular version of masculinity in exchange for an alternative more suitably adapted for that particular culture.

A Sketch of Underclass Men's Grief and their Responses

A common quest among all persons, regardless of gender, is for a sense of belonging. In the case of men, they generally tend to seek the security of belonging in the workplace. Historically, men have had a propensity to maintain networks of care and support through their shared experiences in the labor force.⁴² One of the leading pastoral needs of men that has been identified in the field's attempts to

⁴⁰ Nonn, “Hitting Bottom,” 226.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 227.

⁴² Several helpful articles have been published that offer an historical perspective on this claim. Among those are Vincent DiGirolamo's “Newsboy Funerals: Tales of Sorrow and Solidarity in Urban America;” Craig Heron's “The Boys and Their Booze: Masculinities and Public Drinking in Working-Class Hamilton, 1890-1946;” and Julie-Marie Strange's “‘She Cried a Very Little’: Death, Grief, and Mourning in Working-Class Culture, c. 1880-1914.”

address the diverse experiences of this group centers around issues of work. Though expressed with “different nuances, [this] was consistent across regional differences, class differences, and racial differences.”⁴³

For some men, namely those associated with the lower end of the socioeconomic and class spectrum, the absence of a place of belonging in the wider culture, particularly in the workplace, leads to the development of what Orr labels as “hardness.” This is “not only a way of acting but also a way of being, signifying a tough self-control,”⁴⁴ she notes. Such a disposition, when we consider the experiences of grief associated with men, makes it so they are “less focused on interiority (including fear, vulnerability, pain) and more focused on the concrete situation.”⁴⁵

Many men, especially those who are the products of generational poverty, have adopted a stance of hardness out of necessity; survival is key. As “they are stripped of or denied access to a masculine identity constructed around the role of ‘the good provider,’”⁴⁶ these men are not afforded the luxury of being able to grieve in ways that even the mainstream culture accepts as normative for men. Their capacity to continue living takes precedence over all other things. The realities of living in a disadvantaged position are exacerbated by grief and the orientation to endure and simply to continue even at a subsistence level takes ultimate priority. “After a man is

⁴³ Neuger, Christie Cozad. “Men’s Issues in the Local Church: What Clergymen have to Say,” in *The Care of Men*, 51.

⁴⁴ Orr, 76.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Nonn, “Hitting Bottom,” 226.

stripped of or denied access to symbols of masculinity that confer power and privilege – job, car, home, and family – life becomes a series of challenges to his existence.”⁴⁷

Much of the grief that resides in the communities of underclass men in urban America is rooted in the persistent presence of death, homelessness, job loss, divorce, addiction, mental illness, and violence. There exists in the metropolitan areas of this country a greater likelihood of traumatized death among young males than in other locales. Many of these aforementioned experiences are inter-related, and, when considering that each one alone has the potential to have an alienating effect on the person who experiences it, taken together these only serve to drive men further down in the midst of what are already difficult circumstances. In many cases, at least in the minds of the privileged middle- and upper-classes in this culture, the conditions under which the majority of people on the margins live are utterly unimaginable.

Scott Davis, Director of the Buckner/Broadway Baptist Community Center in Fort Worth, offers this assessment:

They have learned to live with whatever grief they have and to keep going. They live in a world that most of us in the middle-class never see. They speak a different language. How many of us are able to navigate the bus system, the hospitals, securing food stamps, obtaining sack lunches, and finding jobs? This is a world that we do not see. Many people in the middle-class would fall apart under the strain that these people live with every day. These people do not have the time to stop and grieve in traditional ways.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Ibid., 227.

⁴⁸ Scott Davis (director, Buckner/Broadway Baptist Community Center), in discussion with the author, July 13, 2006.

Masculinity among the underclass is consistently being redefined in ways that are not commonly incorporated, and certainly not articulated, in traditional hegemonic masculine definitions. “The daily choice between giving up or living with adversity leads to an interpretation of masculinity as the capacity to endure suffering.”⁴⁹ The need for a more expansive or fluid concept of masculinity is evident when such overlooked and taken-for-granted stances are taken into account.

Within and among the underclass culture of America’s urban centers there are networks of interdependence that have emerged between men. The networks serve to allow men who are engaged in the full-time work of survival to learn to work side-by-side in the quest to get by. Nonn notes: “Survival – more than physical prowess or even material success – is a badge of honor. A common expression heard on the streets, ‘It makes you or breaks you,’ encapsulates an identity that unites men across lines of race, class background, and sexual orientation.”⁵⁰

The prevalence of traumatic grief that resides in many urban communities, particularly among certain ethnic and racial groups, heightens the impact of this persistent attentiveness to survival. When, for example, we consider the experiences of African-Americans where the homicide rate among males between the ages of 18 and 24 is higher than any other age, race, or gender group,⁵¹ we find the evidence to be strong for incorporating survival into our awareness of masculinity. Payne points

⁴⁹ Nonn, “I Took it Like a Man,” 163.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ See “Homicide Trends in the U.S.: Age, Gender, and Race Trends.” U.S. Department of Justice Office of Justice Programs, Bureau of Justice Statistics, June 29, 2006: <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/homicide/ageracesex.htm>.

out that “because of the violence in poverty, death tends to be a prominent part of the family history. But it is also part of the family present...”⁵² Orr speaks of “hardness” as “not only a way of acting but also a way of being”⁵³ in this environment. Life for those who live on the margins is fraught with challenges and experiences unlike many, if any, known by those who populate the powerful middle.

A Proposal for a Pastoral Theological Caring Response

Moving Past Resentment

As the field of pastoral theology continues to explore the interlocking systems of advantage that serve to privilege some, while marginalizing others, and offer an alternative perspective that promotes a more just culture, it is critical that efforts be made to address some of the shortfalls that traditional pastoral approaches to care for men among the underclass have exposed.

Academic researchers who study poverty have spent relatively little time examining the lives and struggles of ghetto dwellers who participate in the mainstream economy at its bottom level. So it should not surprise us that policy makers and members of the public think of the poor as distinctly different from working people.⁵⁴

Pastoral theologians must be vigilant in our quest to foster understanding, constructive relationships, and space for poor men to develop a sense of dignity and self-esteem.

Low-income men live under the weight of cultural expectations surrounding both class and gender that persistently tell them that they are incapable of fitting the

⁵² Payne, 74.

⁵³ Orr, 76.

⁵⁴ Newman, 250.

mold of traditional hegemonic masculinity and that they are, therefore, failures.

Isolation from the larger social culture is a significant issue that men in the American urban underclass face. When members of the dominant culture do engage these persons, it is often only in the form of charitable relations. This serves to produce a double-bind that the men on the receiving end of the relationship face.

On the one hand, there is the very real need that exists for food, shelter, and clothing that many charities provide; such things are essential for survival. However, on the other hand, for the man who is suffering losses (understanding that there are usually multiple hurts interacting at once) that result in feelings of grief, there can develop a resistance to charitable handouts.

A man who is the beneficiary of care often, even without the caregiver intending this to be the case, will feel an abiding sense of resentment toward a system that makes real the fact that, sometimes, “making it requires more than hard work...”⁵⁵ This, of course, is contrary to, and even flies in the face of, the myth of upward mobility that permeates the dominant middle-class culture.

Pastoral theologians and caregivers should be persistently aware in our work that men, as a general rule, tend to be reluctant to grieve outwardly. The public faces of grieving allowed for men in an urban environment differ markedly from that which is allowed in private. However, even then, that which is acceptable in the confines of domestic life where the “good provider” role may be either implicitly or even explicitly demanded, the freedom for openly expressing emotion may be limited.

⁵⁵ Orr, 84.

This is especially exacerbated by the economic and social vulnerability that exists for members of the underclass. Anderson remarks that “even when the grief is hidden, the human need for solace is not eliminated. Men want to connect with those they love when they hurt or communicate their pain in order to be comforted, but they do not want to be exposed.”⁵⁶ He goes on to note that, as caregivers develop relationships with men, encouraging them to mourn “presupposes friends with whom to mourn. Fostering friendships is part of learning to grieve.”⁵⁷

The Quest for Solidarity

One of the resources that pastoral theologians can utilize and celebrate among men in the underclass are the networks of support that they are able to foster within their community of other marginalized individuals. Rather than attempting to mold these men’s experiences into more mainstream or accepted models of grief care, caregivers are wise to tap into the local wisdom that resides in these individuals. Utilizing the unique understandings of the individual man and recognizing that his self-identity is shaped and influenced by firsthand encounters with the wider cultural milieu in which he lives, the pastoral caregiver is well-suited to come alongside the person and foster a caring, supportive relationship to assist in the journey through grief. Rando offers this counsel:

The caregiver would do better to direct energy toward translating what is required in grief and mourning into terms acceptable to the male mourner (e.g. discover the methods by which the male mourner can release sorrow

⁵⁶ Anderson, 208-209.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 211.

that do not violate his upbringing as much as sitting in a support group and crying).⁵⁸

As an extension of this, Levang makes the observation that “men lack a *language for grief*. They have no ready phrases, terms, statements, or clichés. When trying to describe their experience of anguish, sorrow, or deep pain, many men simply come up empty-handed.”⁵⁹ The caregiver, then, is called to be alert to the language – both verbal and nonverbal – that men do have available to them and then serve as companions along the way toward fuller expression of their feelings in ways that are suitable to and congruent with their masculine identities.

Nonn proposes that part of what helps facilitate this sort of work comes about when caregivers make a shift in their thinking from a paradigm that embraces charity *for* the underclass to solidarity *with* them. He contends that “solidarity is a process of dialogue and mutual awareness by which both service-providers and the poor are transformed. Most importantly, solidarity represents a fundamental shift in social relations that undermines an unjust social order.”⁶⁰

An approach to our research in the field, as well as our care for those among the subject of our study, that embraces solidarity elicits action from both the underclass and those among the dominant culture. Such a style serves an empowering function for those who have little or no power. “The origin of solidarity is the point of engagement where the marginalized make their claim known and the

⁵⁸ Rando, Therese A. *Treatment of Complicated Mourning*. (Champaign, IL: Research Press, 1993), 352.

⁵⁹ Levang, 26.

⁶⁰ Nonn, “I Took it Like a Man,” 165.

privileged hear and respond. When poor men remove the mask of failure, privileged men are invited to remove the mask of success and stand with the poor as brothers.”⁶¹

An emphasis on shared humanity, as opposed to the cultural and class distinctions that serve as divisive barriers, promotes wellness for all those in a community. The traditional hierarchical relationships of care are transformed when the pastoral approach embraces solidarity over charity.

Trajectories of Future Studies

The material that is presented here is, admittedly, brief and offers only an entryway into further and more substantive conversations and study in the field. Members of the pastoral theological community who have an interest in this particular area of the discipline have the opportunity to contribute to the deconstruction of long held and, more importantly, harmful notions about men in general and those of the underclass in particular. Heightened awareness surrounding the issues of gender studies and class groups within the multiple interlocking dynamics of our contemporary culture have contributed immensely to fostering opportunities for the development of deeper knowledge and practice skills at this intersection.

The prospect of lifting up images of the Divine that can be held alongside traditional images of strength, power, and militarism must be explored in a society where there often seems to be an attempt by some in religious communities to monopolize the language employed to speak of God. In a culture where the dominant

⁶¹ Ibid.

images of material gain, social status, and forceful vigor tend to be highlighted most, a countering voice is needed now more than ever. “The idea that God suffers with us does not fit easily with the male desire to maximize power and minimize vulnerability.”⁶² And yet, in the Christian perspective, this suffering God is precisely the image that is most fully revealed to humanity.

Similarly, just as language used in conversation about God must be developed, so too should efforts be made to enhance the vocabulary of grieving men. Levang posits that “most men don’t own words to convey their grief.”⁶³ The dominant cultural lexicon of acceptable words, behaviors, and emotions available to men is distinctively diminutive. Thus, pastoral theologians and caregivers would be well-served to explore further what ways might exist for us to be able to cultivate awareness among men of the vocabulary that they do possess. From this point of beginning, our task then becomes one in which we work collaboratively toward discovering new and creative ways that allow men to express their grief that move beyond traditional and accepted versions of hegemonic masculinity. Broadening the scope of understanding about masculinity, namely that there is no singular definition that is appropriate and therefore thinking in terms of masculinities, underlies all of this work regarding our language.

Likewise, as pastoral theologians and caregivers are called to do their work which is inherently public in nature, efforts should also be undertaken to address

⁶² Anderson, 208.

⁶³ Levang, 27.

issues of injustice and exploitation that exist within social structures and political and economic establishments. Intentional efforts that are aimed at highlighting the strengths of the marginalized in our communities and calling the wider culture's attention to this segment of our society will serve a beneficial purpose for all persons. As Newman states, "policy makers, as well as scholars, must realize that, in addition to the persistently jobless population described in research literature on the underclass, the United States is blessed with a significant number of responsible poor people who want, above all, to participate in the mainstream economy."⁶⁴ Lifting up the experiences of these who are too often overlooked is among the most important tasks before us.

Pastoral theologians and caregivers who work in the field of gender and class studies must be mindful of the unique contextualities that surround us. Attempts to generalize the experiences of persons living with grief is challenging as it is. However, when considering that this discussion has focused only on the experiences associated with men of the underclass in urban environments, the need for future studies that focus on issues unique to rural and agrarian contexts is highlighted all the more. Added to this is a sense of need for work that focuses on regional distinctives, understanding that the racial or ethnic groups represented in New England, for instance, are likely to be influenced by drastically different cultural forces than those found in southern California. All of this is to say that the possibilities for discerning distinctive dynamics that merit more focused attention are virtually limitless.

⁶⁴ Newman, 252.

With this in mind, we should also be quick to remind ourselves that the pastoral theological task is most effective when consideration is given to strategies and approaches to care that highlight the individuality of persons who fall within the socially constructed groups and categories that serve as boundaries for our society. We must celebrate the strengths of those who are overlooked and relegated to the margins of our communities. We are compelled in our work by the common calling to work collaboratively in speaking truth to power, addressing systems of inequality and hierarchy that are unjust and debilitating.

An approach to pastoral care that is mindful of the suffering of those who are disenfranchised on multiple levels of our contemporary culture and that looks beyond charity to a stance that embraces the authentic relationships fostered through solidarity is ultimately desired. The concerned pastoral theologian and caregiver will stand with the marginalized in our communities. We do so knowing that “poor men are not better or worse than other men, but they live in extreme conditions that generate innovative responses.”⁶⁵ In the ever expanding field of pastoral theology, it is imperative that we energetically embrace the opportunity for creativity and collaboration that is required of us in order that we may assist in providing a more just and whole culture, as well as meaningful and sensitive care, for these among us who grieve.

⁶⁵ Nonn, “I Took it Like a Man,” 166.

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