

## The Poet Robert Bly (1926–2021) Has Died

**Nick Duffell** remembers Robert Bly

The American poet Robert Bly has died. I feel grief and gratitude: Bly's work influenced me deeply, and he generously endorsed my first book, *The Making of Them*,<sup>1</sup> as did David Cornwell (John Le Carré), who has also just gone. The actor Mark Rylance wrote: 'The most profound thing that an elder man can do for a younger man is to mentor and encourage a particular gift.'<sup>2</sup>

Bly first properly articulated the notion of mentoring, which has now been gobbled up by the corporatocracy. But what he really valued was that the young should experience what he called 'the blessing of older men'. I did from him, but when I approached Cornwell with a similar sentiment, the spy-master was having none of that touchy-feely stuff, and rapidly cut off all contact with me.

So, it's an immense privilege to tell you some things I received from the great man. But first a word on grief: grief is not just when you lose someone. Besides, Bly was 94 when he died and had been through Alzheimer's for the last twelve years, so it may have been a blessed release. Grief is also an aspect of experience that takes us over at other times, for example when the world feels crazy and disappointing, as it seems to me currently.

Bly taught that *holding* grief, as opposed to indulging in self-pity, has value: it's a skill that demands commitment, whereas apathy or bitterness is a turning away. Bly once wrote that

bitterness can be avoided by holding what he called the 'grief pipe' between one's teeth, in an image recalling the Native American peace-pipe, hinting at the determination needed to come through the process towards acceptance.<sup>3</sup> If grieving is faced, without cycling back through the previous stages as elaborated by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, it can – poets like Bly and Seamus Heaney know – create transformative space within the psyche.

Love and joy join grief as Bly's main themes. If you have never heard him reading, you're in for a treat, still, because there is plenty online. Try to get beyond the squeaky Minnesota voice and feel the depth, such as this excerpt from one of his *ghazals*:

I don't mind you saying I'll die soon,  
Even in the sound of the word soon  
I hear the word you  
Which begins every sentence of joy  
... Ah, you're a thief the judge said,  
Let's see your hands  
I showed my calloused hands in court.  
My sentence is a thousand years of joy.<sup>4</sup>

Though not overtly political, Bly stridently denounced the Vietnam and Iraq wars, and championed the First Nations. A poet must engage with politics and war and 'cry over what is happening', he tells us, in Hayden Reiss' stunning biographic movie *A Thousand Years of Joy*,<sup>5</sup> for 'despair and reason live in the same house'. He did environmental work through the

Sierra Club while at the same time same offering a grounded literary mysticism, connecting the readers to the elemental – snow and dust as elements of his childhood, as words known by the body.

In the early 1990s, I had the privilege of learning from Bly along with James Hillman, Michael Meade, Martin Prechtel, Malidoma Somé and Marion Woodman. Later men's meetings featured Rylance, now an Oscar-winning Sir, and Dudley Young, author of *Origins of the Sacred* (Random House, 1994). The influence of these men and these meetings, where of course I met and interacted with dozens of other male seekers, was profound. His first prose book *Iron John* was an early attempt to give meaning to the male search for something intrinsically and instinctually male that wasn't *wrong*, but that needed some skill in mastering.

Unfortunately, the book was much misunderstood: the media hated it, and perhaps some male seekers took the pursuit of the 'Wild Man' too literally. To me, for passion and subtlety it wasn't a patch on his poetry. The Devon-based story-teller, Martin Shaw said: Bly 'has reintroduced the notion that language is wealth'. But I think he didn't quite pull it off in *Iron John*. It didn't do justice to his vision, and it was panned in Britain at its release. Film-maker Reiss quipped in an email to me: 'The unfortunate review of *Iron John* was by Martin Amis: a man with *no* father issues!'

I much preferred Bly's second book, *The Sibling Society* – a powerful critique of post-modern America, and incredibly relevant now, when the deconstruction of social roles and the signalling of virtue have become all but robotically meaningless. Perhaps 'too hard a slap in the face of an increasingly self-absorbed, fame-driven, and now tech-enhanced, culture', suggested Reiss.

I do recommend the latter's crowd-funded documentary on the Minnesota poet and founder of the Mythopoetic Men's Movement. It warrants more than one viewing. Witness his joy reading Rumi declare that the whole universe dangles on a swing hanging between conscious

and unconscious realms, which is of course where Bly's own work plays. Bly demonstrated that poetry – you know, that sombre stuff they forced us to learn at school and that radio poets recite like bishops – was all about *feeling*!

Through his vibrant translations of feeling from around the world, Bly beamed Neruda, Mirabai, Rilke, Machado, Hafez, Kabir, Basho and other masters into one's personal body. 'He gets it at the level of language, he gets it at the level of imagination', explains the drummer/ story-teller Michelle Meade. For Bly, translating the great ecstasies was as valuable as his own work, rooted in the spoken tradition of Yeats and his mentor, William Stafford. 'These poems needed to be released from their cages', says Coleman Barks, whom Bly encouraged to take on Rumi. Under his influence, I rediscovered D.H. Lawrence's later poetry, mostly omitted from anthologies. Several took my breath away with their subtleties towards love relations, especially the projected field between men and women and the balance between tenderness and violence.

Bly's work with men can be thought of as a grounded extension of his poetic breadth. The *Guardian* pays tribute to him, but typically misses the point by leading with irony – such a British mistake.<sup>6</sup> 'In later life, Bly was a leader of the "expressive men's movement",<sup>7</sup> a controversial effort to "reconnect" men with traditional ideas about masculinity.'

Really? *Traditional* masculinity? Did I miss something? The article continues:

In 2016, *New York* magazine described Bly as 'a media-friendly shaman for a strange, mythopoetic men's-liberation movement... [a] flowering of men's self-help workshops and books [that] managed to be both New Age and retrograde' and which 'emerged' genuinely out of feminism or at least claimed an alliance with it.

For Bly, menswork was never meant to antagonise women, nor was it against feminism, which rather inspired it. Plus, I have regularly heard how women enjoy men more when they return home from participating in menswork. In 1996, Bly told the *New York Times* that: 'The

biggest influence we've had is in younger men who are determined to be better fathers than their own fathers were.'<sup>8</sup>

Bly liked to generalise a bit too much for some people's tastes, but though he was never confessional, he also fed from his own story. Once upon a time ... in time ... then as now, as he might say ... a certain Norwegian American farmer liked his drink too much and his foppish intellectual son too little. Over time, the son chose to love the father and celebrate the hunger men have for their fathers, surprising feminists, who first couldn't believe that being *for* men meant not being *against* women. The move beyond oppositional thinking was something Bly boldly championed and people still fail to understand.

Perhaps the most important lesson I took from Bly at those men's conferences in the early 1990s was that the habitual men's anger with their fathers was actually their *longing* for his *presence*. For we have had an epidemic of absent fathers in the West in the hundred years that followed the First World War. Bly brilliantly re-framed men's anger towards the father as *hunger* for him. In this, he drew upon the work of the German psychoanalyst Mitscherlich,<sup>9</sup> who said that if a boy does not know who his father is, then a 'hole' will be created inside him; and because nature abhors a vacuum, into this hole rush 'demons', or fantasies. This hole, or absence, is created by the father being 'out' at work; but it can also occur when the father is at home, but emotionally withdrawn.

When I was a boy, my father's life was a mystery; on his return from the office, he was usually tired and irritable. Behind the paper he was like a god, never to be disturbed. *This* was the traditional masculinity. But I was still lucky, for when I was at home, I did have a father in residence, and that was an asset, for he was like a permanent backstop, and could be relied upon in times of trouble. Later on, in groupwork, I discovered that what men missed in their own fathers they might find in other men; and when this absence and longing is mined in facilitated groups, such men can get a chance to 're-

programme' their inner emptiness. In groupwork, following men's longing can often lead to resolution.

Finding his father used to be thought of as central to a boy's necessary identity quest. This was well expressed by the psychoanalytic theorist R.R. Greenson, who proposed that boys need both to separate from mother and *counter-identify* with father to establish identity.<sup>10</sup> This essential adventure seems to be trans-cultural, built into the many myths, like those of the hero's journey that Joseph Campbell introduced. But, of course, this is now all old-hat in today's fluid world where gender identity has become whatever we choose it to be.

Bly taught that fathers have particularly important tasks during the teenage years, especially to be what he called an 'Oedipal Wall'. By this he meant that a father should be like a wall for the youth to come up against, to argue with, to dispute with, in politics and ethics, to exercise his un-integrated but passionate nature. That way the boy will feel himself at a wall of *contact*. He gets a sense, from that clear contact, of what he himself is made of, in relation to another who cares about him. The father should be not so strong a wall that the boy is smashed when he comes up against it. But he must also not be so soft, or absent, or compliant or permissive that the boy has nothing to push against.

Bly never glossed over his own failings as a father or husband, but proposed that 'A good way to learn something is to start to teach it'. Well, yes, that's good news for many of us! This is psycho-spiritual psychology, to my mind: human love and limitations not differentiated from the elemental. Bly was never transcendent in his approach to spirit; he was immanent, like a true Sufi:

Every breath taken in by the man  
Who loves, and the woman who loves,  
Goes to fill the water tank  
Where the spirit-horses drink.<sup>11</sup>

He was also fiercely unsentimental. 'If anyone mentions the "higher self" again, I'm walking

out’, he bellowed late one evening session at a men’s gathering. Someone did, and Bly walked. Some were shocked, but I loved it, reeling from the over-conceptualising of the Psychosynthesis I had been involved with.

Beat poet Gary Snyder knew he was rooted in the real: ‘Robert was very hungry [when] young, spent some times in isolation and spiritual poverty looking for what would feed him.’ He was a brother, Snyder says, explaining why, even though not associated with the beat poets, his ‘poetry was married to politics’. Yes... and to the earth, and to love, and to women and to the woods.

I can still hear the thud of drums from inside some hall as we beat away the morning, waiting for the man with his weird nasal voice and colourful waistcoat to appear on the dais and read another poem to the 90 men rapt in attention. We weren’t being ‘wild men’, we were being regular men, learning to share and celebrate the ecstasies.

What a loss.

## Notes and References

- 1 Nick Duffell, *The Making of Them: The British Attitude to Children and the Boarding School System*, Lone Arrow Press, London, 2000.
- 2 Mark Rylance, ‘How Robert Bly changed my life’, *The Guardian*, 6 August 2016; available at <https://tinyurl.com/ms9e23h6> (accessed 26 January 2022).
- 3 See ‘Listening to Shahram Nazeri’, in Robert Bly, *Stealing Sugar from the Castle: Selected and New Poems, 1950–2013*, Norton, New York, 2013.
- 4 Robert Bly, *My Sentence Was a Thousand Years of Joy*, Harper Perennial, New York, 2004.
- 5 Haydn Reiss’s film on Robert Bly – ‘A Thousand Years of Joy’ (<http://robertblyfilm.com>) takes its title from the poet’s 2004 anthology, *My Sentence Was a Thousand Years of Joy* [note 4].
- 6 Martin Pengelly, ‘Award-winning American poet Robert Bly dies aged 94’, *The Guardian*, 22 November 2021; available at <https://tinyurl.com/mr3jvuft> (accessed 26 January 2022).
- 7 Christian Lorentzen, ‘How poet Robert Bly unleashed “Iron John” and started the drum-thumping men’s movement of the ’90s’, *New York* magazine, 8 June 2016; available at <https://tinyurl.com/27d48hk4> (accessed 26 January 2022).
- 8 Trip Gabriel, ‘At Home-Away-From-Home with: Robert Bly; Now Banging the Drum Slowly’, *New York Times*, 16 May 1996; available at <https://tinyurl.com/ycknj8u9> (accessed 26 January 2022).
- 9 Alexander Mitscherlich, *Society Without the Father*, Tavistock, London, 1969.
- 10 Ralph Greenson, ‘Dis-identifying from Mother: its special importance for the Boy’, *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis*, 49, 1968, pp. 370–4.
- 11 Robert Bly, *Loving a Woman in Two Worlds*, Dial/Doubleday, New York, 1985.

## About the contributor



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