Putting Theory to the Test: Is There Truth in *Iron John*?

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Robert Bly is one of many who are concerned about the state of men and masculinity in Western society. In his work, *Iron John*, he lays out what he finds to be the two main challenges men face: 1) that the current work model takes men away from the home and, more importantly, away from the observation of their sons, and 2) that the older men in society are failing to initiate the young men into adulthood. This paper will elaborate on both. Additionally, I will evaluate Bly's conjectures by applying his thoughts to two recent situations. First, I will consider the effects of growing up with neither a father-figure nor a male initiation upon the famous Dr. John Money as described by John Colapinto in his work *As Nature Made Him: The Boy Who Was Raised as a Girl*. Next, I will examine the ideas of Bly alongside the case of Pat Tillman as told through "Pat Tillman Story," "How They Lied when Pat Tillman Died," "Specialist Bryan O'Neal on Pat Tillman's Death," and "Pat Tillman's Family Insulted." I find that the behaviors of Dr. John Money, Pat and Kevin Tillman, and those who attempted to cover up the details surrounding the death of Pat Tillman all work together as convincing, real-world evidence to support the thoughts of the mythopoetic theorist, Robert Bly.

One of the challenges that Bly identifies for men today is that they no longer labor at home, but rather go to a remote workplace. Prior to industrialization, men would typically work in agriculture or in a family trade. In this work structure, the son is able to observe his father at work during the day, and can work alongside of him. Through this process, the son learns to "resonate to the masculine frequency," or in other words, learns to be a man (Bly, 94). Somewhere along the line, this kind of labor began to be seen as low. The workplace ceased to be the family shop or the farm and was transferred to factories and office buildings where the son can no longer follow and observe his father. As a result, the young man feels alienated from his parent and suspicious of the older man's daily activities. The only parent that the young man is around for extended periods of time is his mother. As a result, the son learns the "female attitude toward masculinity and take a female view of his own father and of his own masculinity" (Bly, 24). Essentially, this proves to be a skewed view of both masculinity and of his father, which results in the boy misunderstanding his own identity.

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The failure to initiate young boys into manhood is the second major challenge for men that Bly identifies in *Iron John*. The first step of this initiation process is that the young man must break from his mother, a step that is taken less frequently today than in the past. However, Bly does not blame women; rather, he finds that the older men are coming up short in fulfilling their duties to young men. The second part of the initiation process is for the mentor to "teach the young man how abundant, various, and many-sided his manhood is" (Bly, 55). This initiation goes deeper than a confirmation or Bar-Mitzvah ceremony. To complete this initiation into manhood, the young boy must "move from the mother's house to the father's house" (Bly, 87), thus cementing that break from his mother. Some groups of people literally do move the young boys away from their mothers, immersing them into manhood through an elaborate ceremony where the boys are told stories about manhood by their elders. As a part of some initiations, the young boys are intentionally wounded. Ultimately, Bly's point is that through this initiation process (and through extensive exposure to older members of the same gender), young men will learn how to be strong as well as how to deal with their wounds.

The ideas of Robert Bly are very abstract and it is useful to hold them up against a concrete situation; the case of David Reimer provides just such a situation. David was born a twin and christened Bruce Reimer. A fateful circumcision accident left his genitals mutilated, much to the dismay of his parents. Desperate, they sought medical advice from various institutions, but nothing they heard satisfied them. One day, they saw a doctor on television, Dr. John Money, who was talking about his achievements in gender reassignment operations which he had been performing on babies born as hermaphrodites. His claim was that a child's gender identification was based not solely on nature, but rather on nurture. In other words, Bruce could be reassigned to the opposite gender and would purportedly grow up to be a happy and healthy woman. The Reimers leaped at the chance for their child to live as close to a normal life as was possible, and Bruce Reimer became Brenda Reimer. To say the least, the procedure did not come close to living up to the promises of Dr. Money, and Brenda would ultimately decide to become a man, and chose the name David for himself.

In this very complex case, the individual who to me is most interesting to consider as evidence for Bly's argument about the need for male initiation is Dr. John Money. He never broke from his mother in the way that Bly suggests is vital. His father, whom Money did not admire, died when he was eight. Recalling what Bly stated about a skewed view of masculinity sometimes presented by women, Money's relationship with the adult women in his life exemplifies the results Bly predicted. His mother and aunts raised him, all of whom routinely expressed their disapproval of men and masculinity. As a result, Money said that he "suffered from the guilt of being male…[and] wondered if the world might really be a better place for women if not only farm animals but human males also were gelded at birth" (Colapinto, 27). As a child, Money was never properly initiated by an older man into the complexities of manhood, but rather remained in a solely feminine