Published in *Fragility and Hope in a World of Uncertainty* in 2018 by Future Leaders (www.futureleaders.com.au)

Side by side: Masculinity, vulnerability and male friendship

Gavin Scott

Two years ago I went camping for the first time. A couple of close friends and I drove three hours north-west from Melbourne to the Grampians where, with a bit of difficulty, we pitched our oversized tent. We camped for only two nights — hiking along stone gorges during the days; chatting by the crackling campfire and eating sausages in bread in the evenings — but the trip was a perfect reprieve from the busy-ness and pressures of ordinary life. Along with the simplicity and slowness of camping, and the physicality of hiking each day, I enjoyed something else about the experience, something that surprised me. Our little trio was all male.

I spent my schooling, sporting and university days in co-educational institutions, making friends with both young women and young men. Naturally, I spent much of my free time in younger adolescence with other boys, but was happy to grow out of this phase by about sixteen.

Now that I am a little older, though, I relish the chance to spend time with just men, thought it's difficult to quite say why. Our trip to the Grampians was not a 'boys' night': an excuse to be rude, lewd and talk about sex ad nauseum (though gossip about girls was of course part of our long, meandering campfire discussions). We did not, as is the stereotype, hold back from discussing our feelings, though we revealed our

emotions quite differently to the ways I have done so with women. Male friendships can be intimate, though they rely on a different kind of vulnerability.

Faced with a climate in which masculinity is almost exclusively described as 'toxic', is there a way of understanding the positive, or at least different, traits of masculinity and male company without falling back on men's rights activists' crude clichés about strength, assertiveness, courage and six packs?

* * *

'The image of Australia,' wrote Donald Horne in his 1964 polemic *The Lucky Country*, 'is of a man in an open-necked shirt solemnly enjoying an ice cream.' Such was the identification of Australia with masculinity that Horne later explained that 'at the time it was usual to depict Australia as a man'. This has been the case for much of Australia's post-settlement, demographically male-dominated history. The images of the Australian hero attest to the power of masculinity over our nation's identity: the rough bushman sentimentalised in the writing of Banjo Paterson and Henry Lawson; the country shearer at the time of Federation; the ANZAC digger in 1915; and later, the lifesaver in the 1920s and 1930s.

These figures provided a vision of ideal manhood, a hypermasculinity that is reminiscent of the toxic masculinity we rightly condemn today. Horne wrote that before at least the 1960s, Australian masculinity centred on the 'assertion of toughness' in front of other men — Horne quipped that 'men stand around bars asserting their masculinity with such intensity that you half expect them to unzip their flies' — but also depended on the 'exclusion of women from [men's] social life.' 'Men stood at one end of the room' while women gathered at the other — a segregation borne less of patriarchy than mere 'social awkwardness'. Art critic Robert Hughes

quaintly described this attitude as the 'phallocracy of the tavern and ken'.

Gladly, much of this exclusionary macho-masculinity — at least in my own experience — has disappeared from Australian life. Men and women, particularly of my own age, have no problem socialising and forming friendships, though the angst-ridden bravado and casual sexism of toxic masculinity lives on in some teenage boys and other groups trying to assert their identities.

Yet the thankful passing of some of the more crude aspects of Australian masculinity does not mean all its ideals are irrelevant. Horne identified aspects of Australian masculinity — the significance of humour, obsessiveness with things like sport, money and cars, and the mateship of a 'brotherhood of particular men' — that give us clues about the nature of masculinity today. We should not return to the phallocracy of the tavern, but we need to recognise — against the tide of those who deny any embodied, fundamental differences between the sexes — what makes male companionship valuable, and different, from the female kind.

* * *

I was about fifteen when I started making close female friends. I remember sitting with a couple of girl classmates at the bottom of the steps of the school's decaying 'N corridor' during recess and lunchtime, where we would talk intensely about what we considered deep, serious things — mostly our own emotions. As a teenager coming to grips with my angst and identity, and as someone who had always been encouraged to be emotionally introspective, this was a great joy. Frankly and directly airing and examining my doubts and worries was a great way to self-understanding, and listening to the girls and

trying to help them (as they helped me) fostered compassion and closeness between us.

This style of open, emotion-centred communication is common among male-female relationships, and especially when women interact with other women. Yet this is not the way men generally relate to one another: we rarely discuss our emotions upfront or straightforwardly. Yet as psychologist Mark Greif has written, it would be a mistake to judge male-male interactions using 'a female paradigm for friendship'. Male friendships are different, but not necessarily worse, than female ones.

Greif provides a central insight into the difference between male and female companionship: women tend to prefer friendships that are 'face-to-face' — based on talking — whereas men often prefer friendships that are 'side-by-side' — based on doing. While a little crude, this characterisation captures something important about many male friendships. When men get together as friends, it is often centred on an activity, even if that activity happens only to be eating or drinking.

Aristotle thought that close friendships are forged by 'sharing salt' — going through a difficult experience, like combat, together — and psychologists today emphasise the importance of adventure in cementing strong male friendships. Physicality is often, though not always, an important element in male friendships, whether in the more overt 'rough and tumble' masculinity of sport and wrestling, or the more subtle physicality of doing things together in one another's spaces — something I value when spending time with my father.

G.K. Chesterton, in his characteristically bombastic style, reflected that this physicality often manifests itself among men as a 'hearty eagerness in eating, drinking, or smoking'. At the

heart of this 'uproarious materialism', writes Chesterton, is a 'mad modesty' in which, though there is an element of showing off, men enjoy the physical pleasures of life together and without pretension. Any person who has observed a group of men eat together in a casual setting will understand what Chesterton is getting at.

* * *

Men are both more serious and more jovial in their own company. We joke and tease, and we prefer to talk about 'things' (sport, politics, science, ideas) rather than feelings. Yet men often couch their humour in surprisingly serious talk about these 'things', and, contrary to the stereotypes, men discuss their own fears and vulnerabilities — it's just in a way that's different to women.

Humour is one of the chief ways in which men communicate. Teasing and ribbing are often common to male friendships, and when gentle and benign are key ingredients to healthy relationships between men. Germaine Greer noted that men seek to impress other men with humour, but male humour is more than light-hearted ribbing or bravado — it is couched in an awareness of more serious matters.

Christopher Hitchens, in his infamous essay 'Why Women Aren't Funny', wrote of the cynicism and fatalism that lies at the heart of men's recourse to humour, an attitude borne of the grim understanding 'that life is quite possibly a joke to begin with'. Hitchens argues that women tend not to share this inclination because they are made aware, socially or instinctually, of the seriousness of the task of childbirth: 'a higher calling that is no laughing matter'. What this existential anxiety underlying male humour means is that in conversation among men a sense of seriousness often lurks just beneath the surface. As Sarfraz Manzoor wrote in *The Guardian*, men often reveal

their vulnerabilities through the cover of humour: 'male friendship seems to necessitate couching raw emotions in a cocoon of benign abuse'. In my more intense male friendships, the conversation often oscillates from the grand to the comic to the tragic quite quickly.

Male sentimentality emerges spontaneously and sometimes surprisingly from boisterousness and jokes, but it also shows itself in the male preoccupation to talk about things: ideas, work, sport, and so on. Talking about these things can be a powerful way to explore your feelings because it anchors them in something external, making them easier to express and contextualise. It is usually easier for men to speak of their own vulnerability when it is compared with the footy player devastated by injury, the work mate suffering from depression or the Greek hero who has succumbed to tragedy.

As a social enterprise, The School of Life has written, 'two men are often circling around each other': discussing 'serious, impressive or large things' without revealing themselves to the other person. Yet this 'circling' is not merely a defence mechanism designed to ward off vulnerability — it is one of the strange but key ways in which men talk about emotion with other men. It just takes a little while to get there.

* * *

I took the second camping trip with my friends in high summer, twisting along the Great Ocean Road to our beachside camping ground. In the afternoon heat we jumped into the rough ocean, then rested under the shade of a covered picnic bench and the cool damp of our towels, reading poetry aloud to each other and relishing the chance to reflect after the 'silly season'. That night, we set out our camping chairs and our gin and tonics along the beach, and waxed lyrical on every sort of

sacred and profane topic until, finally, we circled in on our emotions, each of us opening up about recent heartbreaks.

Ernest Hemingway was, according to one critic, 'famous in his own time as the gold standard of American masculinity'. Yet for all his cultivated reputation as a macho man, Hemingway's best writing captured the kind of vulnerable masculinity I shared with my friends. In his moving short story 'In Another Country', the narrator, a wounded American soldier in the First World War, strikes up a friendship with an Italian major while they both receive treatment in a hospital in Milan. The major teaches the narrator Italian grammar while they sit in experimental 'machines' designed to heal their disfigured limbs. One day, when the narrator reveals his intention to marry when he returns to America, the major reacts bitterly and with anger before storming off: 'A man must not marry,' he says. 'If he is to lose everything, he should not place himself in a position to lose that.'

The major soon returns, puts a gentle hand on the narrator's shoulder and explains: his wife has just died. The major is unable to control his emotion:

> He looked straight past me and out through the window. Then he began to cry. 'I am utterly unable to resign myself,' he said and choked. And then crying, his heap up and looking at nothing, carrying himself straight and soldierly, with tears on both his cheeks and biting his lips, he walked past the machines and out the door.

Hemingway here captures a tender form of masculinity: the major, rather than being tight lipped, offers his vulnerability freely (if unexpectedly) to the narrator, yet maintains a staunch dignity in the face of his misfortune. The two men have not known each other for long, and despite having only 'circled' around each other in conversations about grammar, the major

was willing, heartbreakingly, to bare his soul to the narrator. Perhaps it helped that they talked about something external to themselves, and that they formed their friendship stuck in those machines, sitting side by side.