

Wild at Heart

Reviewed by William Gross April 2005

Here's a book that's well worth reading. The author, John Eldredge, is from Colorado Springs.

The theme is very simple: deep in his heart, every man longs for a battle to fight, an adventure to live, and a beauty to rescue. Deep in every woman's heart is a longing to be fought for, to be swept into an adventure, and to be the beauty that her man wants to rescue. A man is driven to conquer, to subdue, and to win --- or to die in the effort. He hates the trappings of conformity and office routine. He needs a challenge to overcome, and he delights in every successful test of his manhood. He wants to be part of an elite corps, one of a few good men who take on the odds and beat them.

Where do these fundamental needs come from? And what happens when they aren't met? Eldredge takes us back to the Garden of Eden. This is a painful episode in our history, and at least once in our life, we men repeat the mistake that Adam made. What did he do wrong? He didn't protect his beauty from the wiles of Satan. He stood there paralyzed while she was led astray. He failed to protect her from the circumstances she was in. In doing so, he denied his nature as a warrior and as a protector. He wouldn't risk, he wouldn't fight, and he didn't rescue Eve. And when he blamed her for the consequences, he lost her respect and her trust.

When we men are passive we can fail to rescue our wives, and we can fail to rescue our daughters as well. Our women are more than "helpmeets" as the Bible is often translated. The word is actually closer to the meaning of "life-saver" or "life-giver." Eldredge points out that the only other place in the Bible the word is used is to describe God himself. That's powerful! It means our wife is deserving of everything we've got, life itself if necessary, to preserve and protect her --- even protecting her from herself.

As a result of Adam's failure, and our own failures from time to time, a woman will feel compelled to protect herself, to exert control over her circumstances through manipulation. If necessary, she will even accept loneliness by shutting out her man. After all, he's the one who let her down. And so she doubts him, belittles him, challenges him, hoping all the time that he will rise to the occasion, sweep her off her feet, and assume the role he was born to exercise, which is to be the leader of the home. This isn't a call to domination by a man over a woman. It is a reminder that if a man fails to lead, a woman will do what is necessary protect herself and to ensure that leadership is exercised, even if she has to exercise it herself.

It's been said that the rise of the Women's Liberation Movement in America is the result of men abdicating their masculine responsibilities, and wearing their zippers on the side. The women have no alternative but to move their own zippers to the front.

And what do we men do after we fail our women? We hide. And where do we hide? "We hide in our office, at the gym, behind the newspaper and mostly behind our personality. Most of what you encounter when you meet a man is a facade, and elaborate fig leaf, a brilliant disguise." A man fears exposure as an impostor, a faker, an actor who's only pretending to be a man. He doubts his capacity to live up to his role as a man, and more importantly his role as a protector and provider for his woman. He's usually been wounded by his father or by his mother. There was some point in time when he needed desperately to know that he measured up, that he was independent and capable, and they let him down. Now he's scarred, and insecure.

Oh Great. Now I feel really good about myself. But there is something that can be done. It requires action by both the man and the woman. The man can stop being passive. He can start being honest about his fears, and then he can do something about them: he can take action. For better or worse, a man normally has to be forced to take action by another man. He has to pass muster. He has to be challenged by someone he respects. He has to be dared. He has to earn their respect. And he has to feel like he's a member of a team that's on the hunt. No woman can give these things to him. It's a guy

thing. Too often, however, the pack he wants to run with isn't filled with real men. He has to be careful who he's running with and whose advice he's taking. The woman can have a lot of influence on him when it comes to choosing his friends. If she wants to dominate him, then she'll be sure he hangs around other weak men. If she wants a hero, then she'll let him be influenced by men who carry the same flame of conquest in their heart that he carries.

For the woman, she has to become the beauty again, worthy to be fought for. If she has no care for her own appearance, it is a statement about her self-image. The man has a substantial impact when it comes to that self-image. This isn't a matter of physical beauty. It's a matter of respect, by the man for the woman, and by the woman for herself. To get that respect from her man, the woman has to be willing to allow her man to lead. More than that, she has to encourage her man to lead. She has to wipe away the doubt that plagues him - and you need to know that every man doubts himself. Only a woman can make a man feel like a man. He's incomplete without her. One thing he cannot abide and she must not do is castrate him emotionally or psychologically. She has to be careful to raise up her boys to be men as well, to be willing to let go of them and give them their independence when the time comes.

If she dominates him, competes with him, puts him down, breaks his spirit, lashes out at him, ignores him, manipulates him, reminds him of his every failure, plays his mother, makes his decisions for him, criticizes his choices, or makes constant demands of him, then she will breed doubt and self-contempt in his mind. She will have a weak, sniveling little boy tied to his mother's apron strings who can't go to the bathroom by himself. She will destroy the very hero she longs for. And if she succeeds in this self-destructive behavior, she will come to despise her man, and he will come to despise himself. She'll either drive him to another woman who can restore his proper self-image as a virile warrior, or she'll drive him out of the home, abandoning her to her self-made empire.

So who makes the first move? The man does. Why? Because he's the man. And what's the first move? To declare himself. To commit to change. To agree to become a hero. To stop being passive and domesticated. To gather the pack around him and make himself publicly accountable. The next move is to treat his wife with the respect and care that a beauty should have, someone who deserves to be loved and fought for. Words need to be followed by action. And then maybe she'll begin to trust him again. And if she trusts him again, then she'll become the beauty that he longs to rescue. She'll begin to give him the sincere respect that he craves. She'll dress differently, act differently, perhaps even flirt with him again. And in response he'll move heaven and earth for her. He'll follow the drumbeat of a new adventure. And she'll love and admire him for sweeping her up in that adventure.

I said that "only a woman can make a man *feel like* a man." I want to be sure you didn't miss the words "feel like" and leave them out of the sentence altogether. That would be a broken and distorted image, and far too heavy a burden for her to carry. Man is made in the image of God. He is not made in the image of Eve, nor is his image the one she beholds when she looks at him. His identity is not the image his father has of him, nor the image his mother has of him, nor the image other men have of him. He is made in the image of God. That image is a fact. It is unchanging. It is eternal. And it is wonderful to consider.

I was suggesting that if Eve fails to help Adam see himself in that true image, then he will become wrongfully dependent on her for his affirmation as a man. Only God can give a man his true name, his true identity, his true image, and his true purpose. It is up to him to seek out his identity in God, and to reject all other sources. His identity cannot be found in wealth or influence, a career or title, his family, his intellectual, sexual, or physical prowess, his fame, his physical appearance, or his possessions. The look in a woman's eyes, or the eyes of any other beholder, is a false image. A man desperately wants the *favor* of his wife, or his parents, but he cannot be dependent on them for his *identity*. The only beholder he needs to be concerned with to affirm his identity is his God.

I became a Christian in the Spring of 1980. It was when I first recognized my true identity as a child of God, someone who was chosen by God before time began. I had always been a child of God. I didn't suddenly change my identity. But up to that point, I didn't know about it, or understand it, or accept

it, or live it. Instead, I lived in a state of rebellion. I refused to acknowledge God as my only source of life and strength and meaning. I refused to acknowledge my absolute need for him, and I refused to acknowledge my relationship to him. But when I came to Christ, at last I understood that I am the creature and he is the Creator. That was impressive enough, but it was an incomplete image. I came to realize over time that God's love for me has no end. It is vast, infinite, passionate, and unwavering. There are no performance criteria in the Kingdom of God. I don't, in fact I *cannot*, win or earn his love. It is given to me freely, without reservation, and without a single word of condemnation. In God's language of love, constructive criticism is an oxymoron. "There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." I cannot change that love by what I do or don't do.

Now here is the kicker. The pressure is off. But my duty to God, country, and family has not been removed. That tension between release from guilt, and the call to arms, is what characterizes the Christian life --- and the obligations of a man. I am not liable, but I am responsible. It takes a lifetime to grasp the implications of that statement. It takes a lifetime to learn to lean on God when my needs are greatest, and when I am at my *strongest*. I am called to be dependent, not independent.

On my "recognition day" I began a journey of discovery. Let me share with you something I discovered just before Christmas of 1980. I was standing in a Hallmark store looking for a card for my wife, my beauty, the mother of my children. There was an array of sentiments expressing undying love, unlimited love, untempered love, unreserved love, and I was shocked by it. I said to myself, "I cannot say these things to my wife. I love her. I need her. I am incomplete without her. She is God's gift to me. But these absolute expressions of love belong only to my God, not to her. She is not my reason for being. He is." I love Lynn, but she is not the one who binds my wounds or sets this prisoner free.

Words matter. They declare the content of the heart. John Eldredge takes us into the Garden again to examine what happens when we forget who God really is to us. A man is not supposed to pursue a woman in hopes of finding the answer to the question of who he is, or whether he is a man. "A man does not go to a woman to get his strength; he goes to her to *offer* it... Something happened at the Fall; something *shifted*. Eve took the place of God in a man's heart... Adam did not fall because he was deceived... He did it with open eyes... There was a moment in Eden when Eve was fallen and Adam was not; she had eaten, but he yet had a choice. I believe something took place in his heart that went like this: I have lost my... soul mate, the most vital companion I've known. I do not know what life will be like, but I know I cannot live without her. **Adam chose Eve over God**... A man without his true love, his life, his God, will find another."

And we expend everything we've got in pursuit of this false god, this idol, this substitute for what we really need. Eve seeks it out in manipulation. Adam seeks it out in whatever affirms his value as a man, no matter how self-destructive that solution is, or how ill-defined that value is. The hole that the Fall left in our hearts can only be filled by God. Our parents, our spouse, our friends, will all let us down at some point. Our ability to forgive them is determined in large part by our dependence on God. The more we depend on others in place of God, the less able we are to forgive them. We teach in this business that the source of our power can be found in God alone. And that power grows in direct proportion to our dependence on him. That is contrary to everything the world teaches us. Yet here is the Truth: until we are willing to be led, we cannot lead. Until we are willing to submit our egos to another, we cannot counsel. Until we are dependent, no one can depend on us. And until we are willing to accept God's unconditional love for us, we cannot love our parents, our spouse, our children, or our friends the way they need to be loved. That's a life lesson.