

Men of Courage, Men of Love

by Peter Falkenberg Brown

This essay is excerpted from the book
*The Living Compass of Kindness and Compassionate Love:
Essays on Love, Beauty, and the Mystical Path.*
<https://www.amazon.com/gp/product/096357065X/>

~ Much of this essay applies to women as well because men and women share a divine source. Yet, since I am not a woman, and because I believe that men need to deeply explore this topic, I have addressed it to men.

When I sit on the rocks of the Maine coast, breathe in the fragrance of the ocean, and cast my gaze out to the horizon, I am reminded that I am part of something grander than myself. Life is more than toiling, hunched over one's work, with four walls and a roof pressing against one's soul.

With the magnificence of nature, I can rise above the muck of life and thrill in the revelation that my soul has no boundaries. My mind, my spirit, my soul, and my heart cannot be contained. The pain and brutality and meanness of life cannot stop the soaring freedom of our minds. When I commune with nature, I am convinced that we were created to become magnificent.

Jakob Böhme, the sixteenth-century German mystic, wrote, "In this light my spirit soon saw through all things, and in all creatures, in herb and grass, knew God—who He is, how He is, and what is His will."¹ Quoting from the *Upanishads*, Rabindranath Tagore, the twentieth-century Indian poet, wrote that "everything has sprung from immortal life and is vibrating with life, for life is immense."²

Life is immense, and we (both men and women) are meant to be immense and magnificent in our divinity. Yet, as Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote, "We but half express ourselves, and are ashamed of that divine idea which each of us represents."³ Too often, we find ourselves trapped by the strictures of society, by business rules that suffocate our souls. Men who seek to give flower to their innate divinity are brave creatures in a world that is usually too busy for such nonsense.

The magnificent divinity of men is not a popular topic. It has, however, an enthusiastic ally. Many women yearn for men to grow in their good-heartedness and internal character. I believe that women want their men to be strong, but to be strong in more than musculature. Being rescued by a



knight is most rewarding when the knight's armor is actually shining with the spiritual nobility of the man inside.

Men can relate to nobility. Who doesn't want to be noble—a man “of an exalted moral or mental character or excellence”?⁴ The dictionary offers synonyms for “noble,” such as “lofty, elevated, high-minded, virtuous, magnanimous, benevolent, honorable, humane, worthy, and meritorious.”⁵

Nobility will take us far. When I heard Legolas cry, “The horn of Gondor!” as he rushed to the aid of the embattled Boromir in the movie *The Fellowship of the Ring*,⁶ my eyes filled with tears that might have come from ancestral knights who lived and died in valor. Every one of us has ancestors who lived noble lives, who may indeed be hoping that we inherit their nobility.

In our efforts to defend our wives, our families, and our lands, we have sometimes forgotten that our divinity is shared by all men, even by the enemies who attack us. The third-century scholar Rabbi Johanan bar Nappaha wrote, “The ministering angels wanted to sing a hymn at the destruction of the Egyptians, but God said: ‘My children lie drowned in the sea, and you would sing?’”⁷

Treating a vanquished enemy with compassion requires empathy, defined by the *Collins English Dictionary* as: “the power of understanding and imaginatively entering into another person's feelings.”⁸ Charging a hill against an aggressor who threatens our homes may not be an action that lends itself to empathy. Yet, when the battle is over, extending the hand of friendship can turn enemies into friends, as was demonstrated by the heightened friendship between the United States, Germany, and Japan after World War II.

Empathy is often ignored by men, who sometimes content themselves with winning and an external life of success. Doing so is a risky enterprise. In *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, William James wrote that life without “an eternal moral order” and “an immortal significance” will not end well. He wrote that creating a life surrounded by “the curdling cold and gloom and absence of all permanent meaning” will mean that “old age has the last word: the purely naturalistic look at life, however enthusiastically it may begin, is sure to end in sadness.”⁹

Fortunately, our lives do not have to be swathed in curdling cold and gloom. My artist mother told me that she often flew in her dreams. Whether we explore the universe in our dreams or simply in our imagination, the invisible realms beckon to us with the promise of illumination. The seventeenth-century physician Sir Thomas Browne could have been talking about quantum physics when he wrote, “Live unto the Dignity of thy Nature, and leave it not disputable at last, whether thou hast been a Man . . . Desert not thy title to a Divine particle and union with invisibles.”¹⁰

Like a title to an acre of land, have we been given the title to a divine particle that represents our point of birth within the magnificence of God? Are we in union with invisible aspects of the Divine? I believe so. I love the term “incarnational spirituality,” based on the view that every individual is a unique incarnation of the Divine. Meister Eckhart wrote that “things are all the same in God: they are God himself.”¹¹ Whatever our theologies may be, if we believe that an Intelligence created the universe, does it not make sense to view everything in creation as an aspect of the Divine?

Holding the title to a divine particle implies that each of us is formed from a specific blueprint or part of God that is unlike any other. If we delve within ourselves, searching for all the virtues that we can find, we will eventually discover magnificence. I no longer believe that God is “somewhere

out there.” Instead, I believe that logic, intuition, and love all lead us to the inevitable conclusion that God not only lives inside us but also *is us*. My daily prayer contains the sentence, “Dear Beloved, You are all of me, and I am part of You.”

If God has no beginning, if God is omnipresent, if all energy is part of the fabric and body of God, then everything is God. I find it tremendously inspiring to look at nature and see the presence and manifestation of God. I have a deep love for trees for this reason. Even more inspiring is the thought that God is all of me, that God doesn’t just dwell in my heart but lives in every part of me. As we walk down the street, doesn’t God look through our eyes at the people in front of us? I have begun to feel like the driver of a car who suddenly realizes that he is a child, sitting in the lap of his parent, holding the steering wheel together with his parent. It is a thrilling, sobering, yet comforting realization that God is always present, even as He allows us to turn the wheel in the wrong direction.

When we turn the wheel toward darkness, we would do well to remember the words of the Hebrew Morning Service and whisper in our moments of despair, “O my God, the soul which Thou gavest me is pure.”¹²

Men today need to turn inward to the invisible realms to reclaim their magnificent divinity. Sir Thomas Browne advised men to “think of things long past, and long to come.”¹³ Men have been proud of their ability to act, to be “doers,” and to solve problems. They have often been impatient with the idea that they need to stop and sit and think. Thus, their ability to contemplate empathy and explore their feelings—and then talk about them with others—has sometimes atrophied like a withered limb. How can a man become divine if he is unable to sense and articulate resonance with the attributes of divinity?

Contemplation doesn’t need to be esoteric. Contemplation involves awareness and meditative thought that we can engage in at any time. We can contemplate the reality and feelings of a waiter placing a dish of food in front of us. Building our empathic sense of love toward others starts with noticing them, with sensing their presence and internal world. In the Father Brown story “The Invisible Man,” G. K. Chesterton wrote that “nobody ever notices postmen.”¹⁴ Why not? Both in the realm of quantum physics and incarnational spirituality, we and our postmen are connected. In the book *Anam Cara*, John O’Donohue wrote:

If we believe that the body is in the soul and the soul is divine ground, then the presence of the divine is completely here, close with us. ... Your senses link you intimately with the divine within you and around you. Attunement to the senses can limber up the stiffened belief and gentle the hardened outlook. It can warm and heal the atrophied feelings that are the barriers exiling us from ourselves and separating us from each other. Then we are no longer in exile from the wonderful harvest of divinity that is always secretly gathering within us.¹⁵

Our desire to become men of empathy and men of love will be more quickly fulfilled when we remember that the means to the end are the same as the end. We reclaim our divinity as we progress along the path of love. It’s not a short path, and it’s often difficult, especially when we look in the mirror and realize how undivine we may have been. It is important to state that becoming a man of empathy and love requires *courage and emotional strength*. It requires indefatigable guts and fighting

spirit, especially when we are challenged to love those with whom we emotionally struggle. Expressing love, over and over again, is not for the weak or faint of heart. To put it plainly, a “strong, masculine man” should add the quality of *strong, compassionate love* to his list of strengths so that he can tell himself: “I may be able to lift heavy weights, and I can fight the good fight, but I can *also* love people with compassion and kindness.”

When we are faced with the impact of our misdeeds, however small or large, we can once again find hope when we remember that our core, our golden core, is incorruptible. We can trust the deepest part of our heart, the part that bursts with an uncontrollable cry to the God who made us.

A most wonderful result of contemplating incarnational spirituality is that we can affirm that God’s incarnation as each of us allows us to say that “we”—meaning “God and I”—are love. We are transmitters of love together. We are sharing feelings of empathy together. God is always with us and is constantly encouraging the growth of every virtue, welling up from within our being. God is also leading our creativity, our uniqueness, and our brilliance.

With God as our ally and deepest soul mate, we can have confidence that our divinity will grow, fueled by our desire to give more and love more. As Emerson wrote, we can become “redeemers and benefactors.”¹⁶ We can become purveyors of joy and manifest the prayer, “The God in me greets the God in you.” The women in our lives will be overjoyed to watch us flower.

As men of magnificent divinity, we will be able to resonate with and fulfill the words of Jan van Ruusbroec, the fourteenth-century Dutch mystic who wrote, “God in the depths of us receives God who comes to us: it is God contemplating God.”¹⁷



Notes

1. Jakob Böhme, quoted in the “Introduction,” by Joseph Bernhart, Translated by Willard R. Trask, in *Theologia Germanica*, possibly authored by Johannes de Francfordia. (New York, Pantheon, 1949), 28

Quote is from Jakob Böhme’s unfinished manuscript, *Aurora*. A slightly different translation is in: Jakob Böhme, *Aurora*, Translated by John Sparrow. (London, Printed by John Streater for Giles Calvert, 1656), Chapter 19, Item 13.

2. Rabindranath Tagore, “The Relation of the Individual to the Universe,” in *Sadhana: The Realization of Life*. (New York, Three Leaves Press, Doubleday, 2004), 17.

3. Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Self Reliance,” in *Essays, First and Second Series*. (Boston and New York, The Houghton Mifflin Company, 1876), 48-49.

4. Random House Unabridged Dictionary, s.v. “noble (n.),” accessed June 5, 2022, <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/noble>.

5. Random House Unabridged Dictionary / Thesaurus, s.v. “noble (adj.),” accessed June 5, 2022, <https://www.thesaurus.com/browse/noble>.

6. *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring*, directed by Peter Jackson. (New Line Cinema / Wingnut Films, 2001), DVD (New Line Home Entertainment, 2002), 2:37:51-2:37:55
7. Rabbi Johanan, quoted in "The Nature and Character of God and His Relations with Man," in *A Rabbinic Anthology*, ed. C. G. Montefiore and H. Loewe. (New York, Schocken Books, 1974), 52.
8. Collins English Dictionary, s.v. "empathy (n.)," in British English, accessed June 5, 2022, <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/empathy>.
9. William James, "The Sick Soul," in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. (New York, University Books, 1963), 140-141.
10. Sir Thomas Browne, *Christian Morals*. (London, University Press, 1716), 77.
11. Meister Eckhart, "Riddance," in *Meister Eckhart, Vol. 1*, ed. Franz Pfeiffer, Translated by C. de B. Evans. (London, John M. Watkins, 1924), 240.
12. "Morning Service," in *Abridged Prayer Book for Jews in the Army and Navy of the United States*. (Philadelphia, The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1917), 3.
13. Browne, *Christian Morals*, 78.
14. G. K. Chesterton, "The Invisible Man," in *The Complete Father Brown*. (New York, Dodd, Mead & Company, 1951), 99.
15. John O'Donohue, "Toward a Spirituality of the Senses," in *Anam Cara: A Book of Celtic Wisdom*. (New York, Harper Perennial, 2004), 59.
16. Emerson, *Essays, First and Second Series*, 49.
17. Jan van Ruusbroec, in *An Anthology of Mysticism and Mystical Philosophy*, ed. William Kingsland. (London, Methuen and Company Limited, 1927), 94.

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"Saved." Painting by Charles Vigor, 1891–1892
Oil on canvas, Height: 195.58 cm, Width: 134.62 cm.
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