

Book Reviews



**Nick Theophilou, *10 Stories about What Men Are Doing Well*,
Amazon Digital Services, Inc. (2013)**

Chivalry has recently become a political football in popular culture. In its current manifestation as the New Chivalry it has been kicked around by those wishing to score points for agendas as various as angry gynocentrism (“Besides, shouldn't there be a few tradeoffs, or benefits, for the crap we have to put up with as women?” demands Tracie Egan Morrissey in *Jezebel*); skeptical conservatism (“If the metaphor for chivalry was the knight in shining armor, that of the new chivalry is the hen-pecked capon of a Western man,” asserts Selwyn Duke in *The American Thinker*); and progressive Christianity (“Chivalry is about the contents of our heart affecting how we treat people on a day-to-day basis—it’s about loving people in a way that makes us courageous and assuages others’ fears of being unlovable and unaccepted” suggests Zach Hunter in *Enlightened Magazine*). Although the goals of masculine chivalric conduct declined in the early twentieth century from those traditional core traits of bravery, honesty, and courtesy to little more than pleasing and placating women (evident in Morrissey’s and Duke’s commentaries); chivalry still seems topical; moreover, as Hunter’s comment suggests, there seems to be a new interest in chivalry’s positive aspirational goals.

Nick Theophilou’s *10 Stories about what Men are Doing Well* celebrates various Australian men’s courageous attempts at opening themselves up to caring for their whole selves (psyche and soma) and for supporting the men, women, and children in their communities.

Having founded more than fifty men's groups to date, Theophilou offers astute testimony on men's experience of these attempts. One admires his determination given the often-un-sympathetic responses he and other Australian male-positive activists encounter: he observes, for example, that a men's interest radio program he hosted "was seen as a strange indulgence since 'There's nothing wrong with them. They have got it all.'" His life work with men represents a refutation of such still-too-pervasive, dismissive misandric attitude concerning men's wellbeing.

The book consists of vignettes describing the personal-growth process of men of various identities and professions; among them are white-collar workers, Sam (an accountant by training), Jake (who works in IT), two Peters (a successful solicitor and a real-estate salesman) as well as blue-collar and home workers Walter (a rig contractor), David (a semi-retired business owner), stay-at-home dads Matt and Simon, and Desmond, a single dad; however, what they do for work is less important than what they do to live well. The collected stories affirm that men do not have to change to conform to the traditional expectations of others; they have the choice of celebrating their experience of themselves with others. Being a man may involve experiencing the "beautiful anguish" described by a member of one of Theophilou's groups; however, with the care and support of other men that experience can be edifying.

In the chapter, "Being there for other men," Theophilou observes that, "increasingly, men are a quiet, supportive presence," a trend deriving from the reassurance men discover they receive from one another in meetings and other contexts that enable respectful friendships. Theophilou notes that Sam, for example likes that "no one was trying to change" him, that "there was respect for one another's situations" which left the choice to change his life up to him—an attitude similar to courageous and accepting new chivalry described by Hunter.

Whether its philosophy be religious or secular, this support is central to the male-positive potential of the new chivalry for a new kind of man. Robert the therapist notes, "The new man knows that life is a journey." "He is psychologically 'held' through his trials by other men, whether it's through one-to-one coaching, a psychologist, a men's group, in specific purpose groups for cancer or anyone they trust to have a compassionate ear....He comes out the other side more peaceful, quieter." Men are once again valuing chivalric bravery, honesty, and chivalry and its scope for personal growth.

Given this brotherly support, Theophilou argues, men are learning to assert themselves in positive ways. As David discovers, "Men are finding that moments of reflection stabilize them and they can move on with life again." Robert, the veteran facilitator and mentor of men, notes that "Men are moving into a new realm of being....It's about being decisive, clear, and resolute, taking action as he needs to, and *still* wearing his heart on his sleeve." He encounters this new attitude "in the men who attend his courses, which teaches them how to speak more clearly and be assertive," in those many men who "have been affected by the call to action to be more adventurous with their inner life." This adventurousness is not recklessness. The chapter, "Realizing longevity is the name of the game," persuasively argues that "Men's lives mean more to them, so they are living better and longer." Permission to be an openly devoted father has men flocking." Men's collective encounters have enabled a masculine pursuit of wellbeing. Theophilou remarks that "It's important to give credit when it's due, and this is the case with men. Many have chosen to live well. It's being done with little

or no fanfare, with quiet resolution, and I see it on a daily basis.” These new choices that he sees men making are informed by an acute awareness of the parameters of their wellbeing—and how it positively impacts others.

Occasionally the experiences recounted in *10 Stories about What Men Are Doing Well* do register tacit complicity with traditional gynocentric pleasing—Walt’s experience with his partner, Sal, sometimes lapses into a dynamic informed by a man’s anxiety about pleasing a woman, and Matt’s support of Claudia seems one-sided— but most of what is recounted registers what might be understood as a rediscovery of male-positive chivalry and particularly its courage and care for comrades: Robert lauds men’s new willingness “not to be the tough guy 24/7 anymore. They can be up there, honest, and perform at an elite level *and* do the tough stuff.” Moreover he argues that this willingness is “also about men being mentors in the traditional sense of the word, to guide the boy along with the boy’s wishes and talents in mind rather than what the mentor believes is best for the boy.” Nick Theophilou is to be congratulated for describing the dawning of a new chivalry inherent in these men’s primary support of one another and its consequent impact on those men, women, and children whom men love and who love them.

-Dennis Gouws, Springfield College

References

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