

This is an interview conducted for Seattle MEN Magazine via email in 1997 with author James Taggart. At that time his wonderful book, The Bear and His Sons: Masculinity in Spanish and Mexican Folktales (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1997) was newly released.

The Bear's Son: An Interview With James Taggart

BY DANIEL DEARDORFF ©1997

To have imagination is to be able to see the world in its totality, for the power and the mission of the Images is to show all that remains refractory to the concept: hence the disfavour and failure of the man "without imagination"; he is cut off from the deeper reality of life and from his own soul.

Mircea Eliade

Mythopoeia, as it is relevant to our lives, must reside within the enactment and expression of mythological thinking and poetic imagination. The "concept" —which is the product of the rational-mind— is more narrow and constricted than the associative and inclusive "deep image"—which is the product of poetic imagination. What the "concept", as a container, is incapable of holding and will not include, the poetic image can. As Eliade told us: "without imagination we are cut off from the deeper reality"; if we are to truly appreciate the value of myth and poetry we must confirm that imagination is a valid and essential dimension of reality.

Because the primal images are so resonant with associations to origins and sources, they work in our lives as connective and associative triggers; the deep images activate our *relational capacities*.

The story teller and the hearer enter a kind of communion, where the heart of the hearer elicits the careful attention of the teller. The images then, are colored in the mind of the teller by the need, or hunger of the hearer; in this way they make a living exchange of value, wisdom, and love. Stories told through books, television, and movies, cannot respond to the audience —the communication is one-way— but when *we* tell a poem, or a fairytale, we invite the enthusiasm of the listener to inspire our telling, and thus the images grow inside us, making us deeper and enriching our relationships.

With *The Bear and His Sons* author James Taggart has given us an important view of the way men, fathers and sons, carry forward models of masculinity through their poetic imagination. In his book he has gathered folktales as told in Spain and in Mexico.

Using a comparative method he shows how the same story is used to model different and perhaps contrary values and images of what it means to be a man. In this effort Taggart is concerned with the unique experience and personal histories of two men from different but related cultures. For Taggart the importance of cultural difference is overshadowed by the individual experience of each man. In fact he remarks over and over that neither of his two storytellers is typical of his respective culture. In this way we begin to see how a man can plant the seeds of his own unique vision in the soil and the soul of the world.

With great compassion and regard James Taggart has given us more than a collection of fine folktales, he has painted a portrait of two fathers, Nacho and Florencio, two fathers who are also sons, two ordinary working men, handling the ancient images and weaving them through their own hearts, telling the stories to their children, families, and friends.

DD: In Florencio's version of The Bear's Son, one might say, we see the imperative to *individuate*—separation, transformation, identity—the movement toward a personal autonomy and destiny. While in Nacho's version we find the imperative to *integrate*—recognition, confirmation, membership—the movement into relationship and community. In this light both stories can be understood to describe initiatory stages that lead to a distinct state of “manhood.” It seems to me that, at a fundamental level, life requires both approaches; as Arthur Koestler has remarked: “Every holon [organism] has a dual tendency to preserve and assert its individuality... and to function as an integrated part of [a] larger whole.” Thus, assuming the self-assertive is cognate to Florencio's *autonomous masculinity*, and the integrative cognate to Nacho's *relational masculinity*, must we choose one way as better or right, or is it possible that holding the tension of both stories offers us the strength and wholeness of a richer masculinity?

JT: Arthur Koestler is probably right that we all need autonomy as well as connection. Florencio and Nacho are playing out their particular ways of being autonomous and connected men in their stories and their lives. The most striking difference between the two men is their relationship with their fathers. Florencio is like his father who valued very highly his economic autonomy or independence. Nacho, on the other hand, appears to have had a father who nurtured him just as Nacho's brothers nurture and care for their infant children. The men in Nacho's family provide a lot of physical comfort to their sons and daughters after they stop nursing (usually around eighteen months). Men in Florencio's culture do not have a clearly defined role caring for small children, whether sons or daughters. The implications are enormous when you think of the early life of a small boy. In both men's cultures, a boy begins life next to his mother who nurses him,

keeps him clean, holds him, and sleeps next to him. In both cultures, a boy becomes a man by moving from the world of his mother to that of his father. The way the boy makes this move is the difference between Florencio's and Nacho's ways of being men. In Florencio's culture, the boy is pushed or drawn away from the mother and enters the world of a distant and autonomous father. In Nacho's culture, the boy is pushed or drawn away from the mother and enters the world of an accessible father who provides him with a great deal of physical comfort when the boy really needs it. What this means is that boys in the two cultures take as normal different mixtures of autonomy and connection. Nacho's mixture looks like that expressed by women in Florencio's culture where girls have a continuously close relationship with the mother from infancy to old age. The comparison between Florencio and Nacho highlights the importance of fathering as well as mothering.

DD: Michael Meade has said: "the mother gives us a way into life, and the father gives us a way into the world." In other words, one might say, the mother brings us into community and the father brings us into the wide-world or wilderness. It seems to me that the Bear's Son embodies the betwixt and between of these worlds. He is what Victor Turner would call a transitional figure in a liminal phase. To make the initiatory transformation into a mature manhood, as you make clear, each man must find the proper "mixture" of autonomous and relational capacities.

In the modern world, like the Bear's Son, who is half animal and half human, we men must learn to embrace our ferocity and yet come to terms with society; we cannot turn our back on culture, but we must not throw away our instinctive nature, our connection to the wild. One possible key to this dichotomy may be in the polarity of the Trickster. You have devoted two chapters of your book to the image of the Trickster, which is perhaps an indication of the importance of "trickster-energy" in forming a mature masculinity. As Paul Radin wrote "the Trickster is at one and the same time creator and destroyer" and Stanley Diamond adds "the Trickster is the personification of human ambiguity", which leads me to the question: in your view how important is the image of the Trickster in bridging the gap between the oppositional worlds of autonomy and relationship?

JT: At first, I didn't realize just how important Florencio's and Nacho's images of the Trickster really are for understanding their ideas about being a man. I had to read Marx's theory of estranged labor, which is really a theory about exchange, before the meaning of their trickster tales became clear. Marx wrote about how one makes an exchange in capitalism, and tricksters carry out economic transactions. For Marx, the essence of

capitalism is an exchange in which a worker is severed from the product of his or her labor. The capitalist tries to acquire the product of labor by paying the lowest possible wage. As an economist friend of mine says, the goal is to become rich by buying low and selling high. Florencio's trickster is an excellent businessman because he buys human excrement for a small amount of money, mixes it with sugar, and sells the mixture at a high price, claiming it is honey water. This trickster is a hero of entrepreneurial capitalism and is exactly what Florencio thinks he has to be in order to be an autonomous man. But Florencio is ambivalent. I do not think he really wants his sons to be as disconnected from him as he was from his father. He said several times that he wished he and his sons could work more closely with each other. Yet he knew he lived in a culture where his sons have to be autonomous from him to be men. He tried to come up with a better mixture and told another story about a trickster who worked closely with his brother. Nacho had a very different idea about exchange which he expressed in his telling of the same trickster tales. His idea was very difficult for me to grasp. In fact, I thought he misspoke when he described one of his heroes winning a lot of money in a card game with the devil and then feeling obligated to repay the devil by working for him in his home deep down in the bowels of the earth. After all, why repay someone from whom you have won a substantial sum of money particularly if that someone embodies all that is evil. It turns out that Nacho and other Nahuatl have a totally different idea of exchange in which they value human connection over economic autonomy. It became clear why, the more I got to know Nacho and his family. When I met him, he was a young unmarried man who lived with his mother and married brothers in a big extended family household. He and his brothers pooled the products of their labor in a granary and purse from which anyone could draw according to need regardless of how much he or she contributed to the contents. Nacho was brought up to see himself as in a relationship with his brothers first and as an autonomous being second. While Florencio struggled with maintaining connections with his sons, Nacho struggled with gaining his autonomy. To win money in a card game or to make a shrewd bargain in an exchange went against everything Nacho was taught. His idea of being a man was based on giving rather than taking. The idea of making a shrewd bargain was antithetical to Nacho. He was not a shrewd businessman, although I thought he was one of the smartest people I have ever known. The trickster for Nacho is a horrible man who takes advantage of another man who loves him. No hero of entrepreneurial capitalism, his trickster is a rotten human being. I think the trickster represents what I think of as work in our society. Florencio and Nacho express their particular perspectives on the conflict between love and work in their trickster tales.

DD: In facing this task of bridging these worlds Nacho seems to offer a healthier mix, and yet I often find myself identifying more with Florencio, because of his isolation, and his struggle to maintain his feeling of connection, under circumstances that seem to parallel the dilemma faced by men in our society: the dilemma of cultivating heart despite the suppression of emotion and instinct, and the severity of ruthless economic competition.

JT: Your first point is your observation that the stories of “The Bear's Son” and the Trickster address the relationship between instinct and culture. You mention how the hero of “The Bear's Son” is half animal and his animal side, which comes from his father, represents his ferocity or instinctual nature. His human side, which comes from his mother, is his potential for taming the wildness in him so that he can live in human society. Your comments remind me of the Grimm story of “Iron Hans” which Robert Bly used to frame his argument about masculinity in *Iron John*. The Grimm story tells of a boy and the Wild Man who redeem each other. The Wild Man redeems the boy by teaching him humble occupations and enabling him to win in battle, earning the right to marry a princess. The boy redeems the Wild Man by removing him from his enchantment. Robert Bly used the tale as a point of departure to argue that American men, who are remote from their fathers, need a Wild Man who can teach them how to come to terms with their instinctual nature and love women. American men are estranged from themselves because they grow up in the world of women and, as boys, they need meaningful relationships with men to develop their masculine identity.

Florencio's version of “The Bear's Son” makes a similar point because the hero leaves the world of his mother, enters the world of men composed of his companions, defeats the devil and is ready for marriage. The animal side of the hero could refer to men's ferocious, instinctual nature. However, Florencio and Nacho expressed very different ideas about men's ferocity in their versions of this story. Florencio embraces Bly's vision of the maturation of man, identifying closely with the hero as if he represented his own process of becoming a man in Spain. Nacho, however, told a very different story about instinct and culture. Nacho's hero is never tamed and has to live in the periphery. Nacho used a narrative style by which he distanced himself from his hero who was no model for his masculinity. Nacho told “The Bear's Son” to say that unruly men are dangerous and threatening.

Let us say that men's ferocity, represented by the animal-side of the hero in “The Bear's Son,” is really aggression. Freud considered aggression the manifestation of the death instinct or Thanatos. Florencio and Nacho are telling stories to make different points about how aggression should be handled. Their tricksters contain the clue. For

Florencio, a man can channel his aggression into his work by making shrewd business transactions even though he may destroy the possibility of loving other men. For Nacho, a man has to send his aggression into the periphery because it has no place in his relations with others. For Nacho, a man has to love other men—specifically his father and his brothers—in order to work.

DD: Does Florencio's creative shaping of traditional stories to hold and pass on his unique mixture of masculine values give us a hopeful model of 'poetic imagination' as an intimate force of social change, of healing, and generativity?

JT: I think Florencio's stories do give us a hopeful model because his world is more like our world. Nacho's world is very foreign to those of us who work and love in North America. It is very difficult for us to place love first and work second, particularly when work requires that we be aggressive. Florencio is trying to tell us how we might combine love for other men—particularly brothers—with work in his version of “The Three Magic Objects and the Wonderful Fruits.” In this story, two brothers find two eggs with writing on them. One says that he who eats this egg will become Pope. The other says that he who eats it will become the King of Spain. The brothers eat the eggs and run away from home when their widowed mother remarries. They decide to split up so that it will be easier to beg for food, and one brother tricks some other brothers out of their inheritance which consists of three magic objects: a flying carpet, a flute and a purse. The hero then uses the objects to become Pope and help his brother become the King of Spain. Florencio described more brotherly love and interdependence than any other Spanish storyteller known to have told this tale. He was trying to go beyond the limitations of his culture that requires a man to be autonomous.

But we should not forget about Nacho who tells us what man can be if he can place love before work, as difficult as this is in our society. Because of his connections to his brothers, Nacho had a very different relationship with women.

DD: The most difficult part of Nacho's expression for me to accept is his fatalism, which, as you have said, is due to oppression. Interpreting his story as an expression of personal history gets jumbled-up with my own personal history, which has given me a passion for resistance to oppression; thus, on a personal level, Nacho's “ilihuiz” feels like the careful submission, ingratiation, and propriety the masterclass has always required of a tyrannized and marginalized people.

And yet in reading Nacho's stories I sense that deeper connective web that runs through many New World myths. Here we arrive at Jung's idea of the "collective unconscious" and the realm of "archetypes," ideas which have funded an extensive school of folklore and mythological interpretation—a school of thought that is entirely missing in your text and bibliography—the focus of which is that elemental, universal, or primary image? To this point Joseph Campbell declared: "the force of the mythological symbol... is, precisely, to render an experience of the ineffable through the local and concrete." With the word "ineffable" Campbell refers to the universal, or "elementary idea" differentiated from the local or "ethnic idea." Nacho's representation of the Trickster is transhuman—like Kokopelli, Coyote, or Raven—Nacho's Trickster has extraordinary abilities that go beyond mere trickery into the realm of miracle and sacred-power. We could say his Trickster is "dangerous and horrible" because *sacrality* is dangerous, because sacrality always inspires ambivalence. In this view then, the two different representations of "trickster-energy" stem from different views or experiences of the same universal mystery.

Looking underneath the immediate and psychosocial circumstances of their respective lives, where do you place the relevance of the "deep image" or archetypal symbol?

JT: I want the readers of BEAR to find their own deep meaning in Florencio's and Nacho's stories. Max Luthi, the great scholar who liked Jungian theory, wrote that the folktales have an abstract style designed to permit personal appropriation by those who hear (or read) them. He believed that interpretations impoverish the folktale. I agree with Luthi and disagree with those scholars who believe that they can produce an exhaustive and complete interpretation. I know of one famous scholar who has written and re-written the same manuscript many times in an attempt to come up with the perfect structural explication of the same South American myth. He has been working on his manuscript for years and has not published it. He is a brilliant but misguided man. He will never come up with the perfect interpretation because none exists. Readers of the BEAR will find the complete texts of the English translations of Florencio's and Nacho's words in the body of the book and the original language versions of "The Bear's Son," a key folktale, in the appendix. I want readers to have a personal experience listening to (reading) Florencio and Nacho's stories.

So instead of telling you what the deep symbolic meaning of their stories is, I invite you to find it for yourself. I can help you read Florencio's and Nacho's tales by placing them in their cultural context. As Joel Sherzer wrote, telling a story is a discursive act bringing together language, culture and personal experience. So I provide you with

information about these three dimensions of a story so you can take away what is relevant to you. I can imagine that you do not live in a large extended family, like Nacho did, and so some of his concerns about avoiding *ilihuiz* (the stress is over the first “i”) do not apply to you or to other readers who probably live in a world more like Florencio's. I certainly hope many do not experience the oppression Nacho has felt as a member of a rigidly stratified community. He has had a very difficult life. But I have learned a lot from Nacho. He is a kind and generous man who gave me the gift of his friendship, and he taught me that the world is an interconnected place.

DD: My last question is perhaps somewhat more personal: without violating your privacy, I would like to know something about how these stories have effected your relationships. In the same way that Nacho, Florencio, and the other speakers have added to and passed on models of masculinity, I would say that you have woven your own poetic images of the masculine into the integrative story of your book. But I wonder, do you “tell” the stories Jim? —I always encourage people to learn a poem or a story “by heart”, to take the images into the body, where they can unfold to their fullest blossom—Have you found the stories unfolding in your life? And, if so, would you say that is something important that others might consider incorporating story-telling into their lives?

JT: My wife and children love hearing me tell Florencio's and Nacho's stories. My daughter Marisela adored “The Bear's Son,” when she was in the second grade in Spain. She insisted that I tell her Florencio's version every night before she went to sleep, and she particularly liked the part where the hero splits the teacher in two. My oldest son Ben demanded that I tell him “Blancaflor” every night when he was three years old. “Blancaflor” is the story about the power of a woman's love for a man, and Ben needed to hear this wonderful folktale because he was going through a lot of anxiety as he separated from his mother, who in many ways is like the heroine. Right now Ben and Willie (my youngest) are into baseball heroes. Ben greatly admires Hank Aaron and Jackie Robinson, and Willie's hero is Mo Vaughn. Aaron, Robinson and Vaughn are men with big sticks like the hero of “The Bear's Son.” I think the hero with a big stick is some sort of Jungian archetype for my own sons, as well as for Florencio and Nacho.

I thought a lot about what Florencio and Nacho have in common with each other and with me and other men, including my sons and grandson. The one thing that occurs to me is that we are born of woman but live in a world of men. We have to make a transition as we move away from woman as mother. Perhaps the Jungian archetype of the hero is born of this experience. Many folktale heroes, like the one in “The Bear's Son,” go

on long journeys which mark crucial transitions in their lives. I went through a transition on my way to writing BEAR during which I think I developed a deeper understanding of Florencio and Nacho's masculinity. That transition involved coming to terms with feminism. Basically, I had to learn to listen to women and to the feminine side of myself. Jung and Freud said, in very different ways, that men have a feminine and a masculine side to their nature. Freud called it bisexuality and Jung said that men have the archetype of the anima.

Freud and Jung shared many ideas in the early days of the psychoanalytic movement, but they broke on the issue of infantile sexuality. Whatever language one uses, I like the idea, but it took a long time to accept it. My personal journey took me first to Mexico and then to Spain where I really listened to women. Spanish women tell wonderful folktales from which I learned what it means to be a woman in their culture. Before writing BEAR, I wrote *Enchanted Maidens* comparing the feminine and masculine versions of the same stories to see what men and women had in common as well as how they expressed their different perspectives on love and human relationships. One of the stories I heard from Spanish women was the famous folktale about “Blancaflor” which was so important to Ben, Willie, and my wife Carole who asks for stories every night to help her go to sleep. I originally heard “Blancaflor” from Nacho, but I could not understand why he told it as he did until I heard it from women in Spain. Nacho and Spanish women have something in common, but I could not see what it was until I was ready to hear women and accept my own feminine self. The link between Nacho and Spanish women is that both have complicated and intimate relationships with children. For Nacho, this means that he understands and empathizes with women to a much greater degree than do men who play only a minimal role caring for their children. The lesson for me is that men become estranged from themselves when they are alienated from their children and from the world of women. However, to avoid estrangement, we need fathers to help us make the transition from the world of women to the world of men without falling into an abyss. James Diego Vigil, in his great book *Barrio Gangs: Street Life And Identity In Southern California*, tells what that abyss looks like for Chicano boys who do not have a close and loving relationship with their fathers. Nacho, through his life and stories, tells us why fathers and fathering make a difference.