

Antoine Saint Exupery on How to Love a Man

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Speaking about choosing life from the perspective of a man who put his life in mortal peril every day, is the only appropriate way to speak about it, because it is only in contrast with death, that our reasons to live become clear. Saint Exupery writes from an era long ago that perhaps better understood men, because it did not punish them for not being women. It is no surprise then, that from this era should arise the most powerful ideas that can teach us about the male psyche.

And who cares about the male psyche? Why especially should *women* care? I cannot speak for everyone, but there are men in my life I love deeply. My father, my brother, and my husband, are people are so dear to me, that my love for them is edged with the bitterness of imagining the unthinkable realities of their mortality. Unlike the women in my life, they keep their hearts wrapped up their dignity. They steel themselves against the slings and arrows of the world to keep me safe. The ordinary vicissitudes of life touch men differently, because they must be strong. But I wonder what battles they fight under the surface.

There is one big mistake that modern women who love men make to protect the men they love: they treat them like their babies, because this is how we are programmed to look after others. Of course, a man

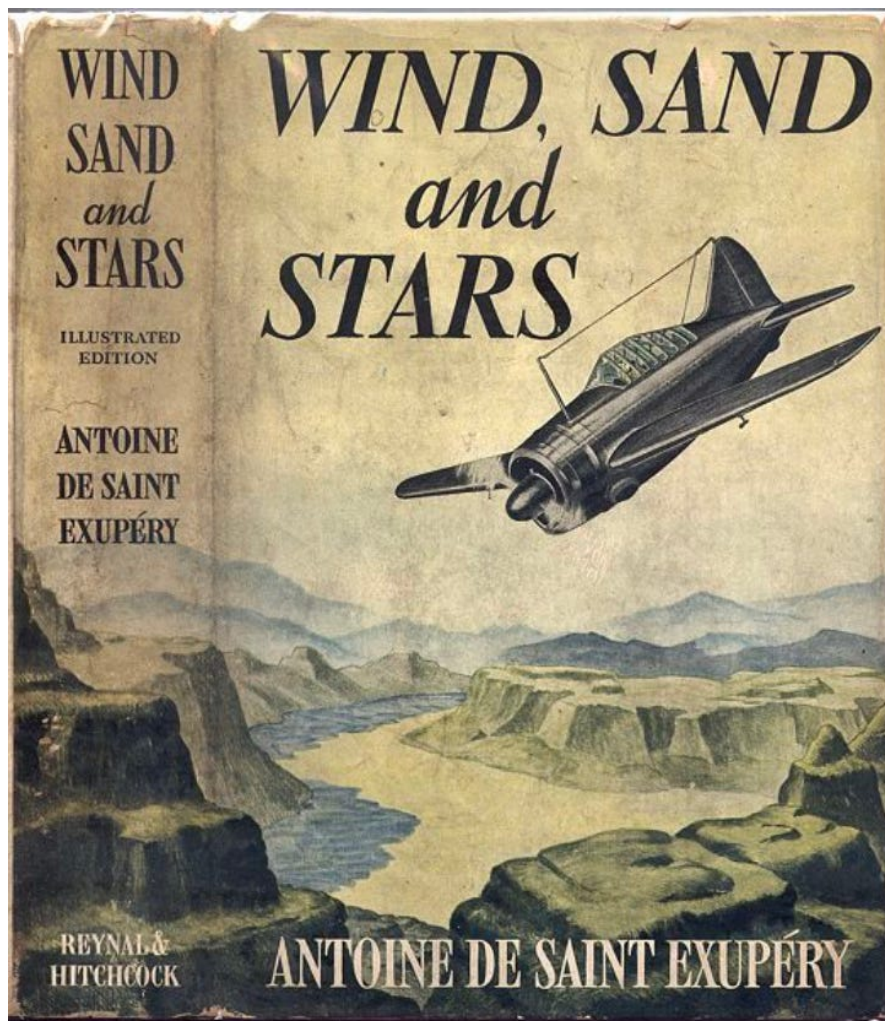
needs softness and delicacy, but what makes him keep going when the darkness seems to encroach from all sides, what makes a man choose *life* even in the face of the darkest foe, is dignity, respect and the feeling of being useful at protecting his loved ones.

How can I know this? I'm just a silly 27 year old girl, newly-wed, with no calluses on my hands and no memories of real hardship. What should *I* know about real darkness?

It's true, I don't.

And this is because the men who love me, have protected me from it all this time. My gratitude for them, has made me curious about what they go through that I don't. So that when they face that darkness which I cannot see, except reflected in their distant eyes, in the tightness of their voices, I can at least offer them understanding.

Antoine Saint Exupery's work is not a work of fiction. This you must understand. Saint Exupéry was born in 1900 and was not only a best selling writer, but also served in the French army in World War II. In 1944, he was shot to death between earth and sky and his charred body was found in Toulon. Saint Exupery died a hero, but not before writing some of the most profound and powerful pieces on the nature of the soul of man, and what inspires a man to live. Let us look at some of his writing.



Guillaumet

All animals have an impulse for survival, but even animals capitulate this impulse in the face of intense and overwhelming physical suffering. It is Man who can find something higher to look up to, up and beyond himself, and endure the suffering an animal would not.

In one passage from Saint Exupéry's book, "Wind Sand and Stars", he writes about his friend Guillaumet who narrowly survived a plane crash into snow covered mountains. After traversing miles in the snow without any equipment but a knife to cut his shoes to assuage his swollen feet, he slipped and fell. It would have been so easy for him to give in to death.

“You were like a boxer emptied of all passion by a single blow, lying and listening to the seconds drop one by one into a distant universe, until the tenth second fell and there was no appeal.

‘I’ve done my best and I can’t make it. Why go on?’

All that you had to do in the world to find peace was to shut your eyes. So little was needed to blot out that world of crags and ice and snow. Let drop those miraculous eyelids and there was an end of blows, of stumbling falls, of torn muscles and burning ice, of that burden of life you were dragging along like a worn-out ox, a weight heavier than any wain or cart.”

“What I went through, no animal could go through,” he repeats. This is because even an animal reaches the level of suffering that Guillaumet does, and gives in. There are forms of suffering that are worse than death. How many men ask themselves this question today? What if I just “let drop these miraculous eyelids and there is an end of blows” and what need have we really to drag along “that burden of life” like a worn out ox?

“Little by little your consciousness deserted the distant regions of your body, and your body, that beast now engorged with suffering, lay ready to participate in the indifference of marble. Your very scruples subsided. Our cries ceased to reach you, or, more accurately, changed for you into dream-cries. You were happy now, able to respond by long confident dream strides that carried you effortlessly towards the enchantment of the plains below. How smoothly you glided into this suddenly merciful world! Guillaumet, you miser! You had made up your mind to deny us

your return, to take your pleasures selfishly without us among your white angels in the snows.”

Yet there was something quite frustratingly ordinary that pulled him from what sounds like rest after a long day of burning muscles and aching feet. It was neither religion, nor creed, nor mystic enlightenment that lifted this man from his death bed to do the impossible thing and persevere. It was a humble thing: a responsibility toward those he protected.

“And then remorse floated up from the depths of your consciousness. The dream was spoilt by the irruption of bothersome details. ‘I thought of my wife. She would be penniless if she couldn’t collect the insurance.’

When a man vanishes, his legal death is postponed for four years. This awful detail was enough to blot out the other visions.” (55-56)

Guillaumet had suffered hypothermia, the betrayal of his own mind against his body, torture from frostbite and the excruciating pain of ripping himself away again and again from the sweet embrace of death. Yet it was a memory of his wife and his family that inspired him at the end. In particular, it was his desire to protect her at all costs. For a man, the ability and responsibility to protect those he cares about is what often convinces him to choose life even when an animal would not choose it. A man who chooses death, at some level, believes that he is more useful to his loved ones dead than he is alive. It is of utmost importance, therefore, to give a man the space to develop his skills and competency so *that* he can sincerely take on the responsibilities by which he not only builds the world,

but saves himself.

The Mail Pilot

When women love, they surrender and trust. When men love, they protect and sacrifice. This fundamental difference more or less captures the dance between the sexes. When the world trusts the man with anything important, therefore, he feels loved. Saint Exupery describes a mail pilot in his book, who is, of course, himself. As he strides through a cold winter night before his first flight, he reflects,

“I turned up my coat collar, and as I strode among the indifferent passers-by, I was escorting a fervor as tender as if I had just fallen in love. To be brushing past these strangers with that marvellous secret in my heart filled me with pride.”

The fervor is like a woman he escorts down the street on his arm, and she is the tender feeling of love. This line is a direct exposition of the male psyche. Do you remember when you first fell in love? It was a feeling of excitement and nervousness, desiring, and, miraculously, feeling desired in return. There is a delicious vertigo about falling in love as we transform so quickly from the *before* and the *after* of it. Once we were mortal, and now we float a few inches above the earth. But there is no heroine here for the pilot to love, except his first flight. What was filling his heart with pride? What was giving him this beautiful vertigo?

“I seemed to myself a sentinel standing guard over a sleeping camp. These passers by knew nothing about me, yet it was to me that, in their mail pouches, they

were about to confide the weightiest cares of their hearts and their trade. Into my hands were they about to entrust their hopes. And I, muffled up in my cloak, walked along them like a shepherd, though they were unaware of my solicitude.”

It is responsibility, that adult word, that makes him feel this way. When we look under this word that school masters and parents use to scold us when we don't do our homework, we find a different one underneath that builds it: *trust*. The pilot feels loved because he is *trusted*. He is a 'sentinel standing guard over a sleeping camp' meaning the people in the village trust him enough to fall asleep on his watch. Saint Exupery describes the letters as the “weightiest cares of their hearts and their trade”. Of course, letters weigh very little, but the significance of them carries a much greater weight for people. Imagine how much more a letter meant to someone who's love was miles away and a few lines on a piece of paper were the only way of feeling their presence somehow.

The sleeplessness of watching over these people he may not even know, is the sacrifice that features so strongly in Saint Exupery's version of a man's love. He feels loved because he is allowed to sacrifice in a meaningful way.

The Slave

Modern life sabotages a man's ability to live according to his nature in many ways. I will not say it sabotages their happiness—although this is a byproduct—because what makes a man desire to live is not the idle 'happiness' of hedonism, but rather the feeling of being

needed and being useful to others. If the worst thing you can say to a woman is that she's ugly, the worst thing you can say to a man is that he's useless. The atomization of modern people into individual, independent units, is not conducive to the kind of bonds that make men feel their lives are meaningful and worthwhile.

Saint Exupery describes the fate of a slave when he is freed, is misery and death, because he feels useless afterwards to others. He has no idea of his place in the world except as a slave.

“The man before me is not weighed down with chains. How little need he has of them! How faithful he is! How submissively he forswears the deposed King within him! Truly, the man is a mere contended slave.

And yet the day will come when he will be set free. When he has grown too old to be worth his food or his cloak, he will be inconceivably free. For three days he will offer himself in vain from tent to tent, growing each day weaker; until towards the end of the third day, still uncomplaining, he will lie down on the sand.

I have seen them die like this at Cape Juby. The Moors jostle their long death-struggle, though without ill intent; and the children play in the vicinity of the dark wreck, running with each dawn to see if it is still stirring, yet without mocking the old servitor. It is all in the nature of things.” (157)

We understand slaves today as men subjugated against their will into servitude and lack of dignity, but it was much more complicated than this. Many people would

prefer the surety of slavery to the burden of freedom. In the story, the slave dies voluntarily because he feels useless.

Freedom requires a man to consider and be responsible for his own destiny; it requires him to forge his own connections to other men, and if he cannot he will suffer immensely.

But how can a dignified man feel honour and nobility if he leads his life taking orders from another man? Not being the leader of his own destiny? Do men need to be slaves to be happy? Saint Exupery also speaks of the bureaucrat who, like the slave, rounds his life with meaning by crunching numbers and enforcing regulations. These men live half-lives because although they are needed, and they survive, they do not *live* because they have not chosen courage. It is only when men do courageous things that they can feel they are living.

Fear is the instinct that is fundamental to enslavement because a fear of death feels so inescapable. Enslavement allows a man to live, by giving him guaranteed food and shelter. To reject a fear of death is not the same thing as running toward death as a fear of living. A fear of living, can be understood as primarily a fear of living *as a failure*: to know that one could have done better but didn't.

Courage requires a man to conquer both fears: the fear of dying and the fear of living. Enslavement consoles a man from the fear of living because if he fails, he no longer needs to take responsibility for it. This is why enslavement is not a true, noble answer to a man's

desire to be useful and capable in his life. Every man who is enslaved, knows deep down, that he did not conquer his fear. If he did not conquer his fear, he did not exert his will upon the world, which is his spark of life.

Modern society offers slavery in what is most important and a false sense of freedom in what is not. “You may choose which corrupt pedophile runs the country” is not freedom. Modern man is at once subjugated to others when he must shut his mouth and not say the wrong thing, when he must pay his taxes and put his garbage in the correct bins. And he is also unmoored from connections toward other men and to society, so he has little opportunity to feel useful to them when everyone is “independent”. Through a facade of choices, we have been made to feel free. But how many men feel free to deliver justice to those who would violently attack their wives and children, their cities and their culture? How many men feel those invisible chains that hold down their arms when all they want to do is fight?

A Man and His Stories

“You cannot convey things to people by piling up adjectives, by stammering. You cannot convey anything because there is nothing to convey. My shoulders were aching. My insides felt as if they had been crushed in by a terrible weight. You cannot make a drama out of that, or out of the cone-shaped peak of Salamanca. That peak was charged like a powder magazine; but if I said so people would laugh. I would myself. I respected the peak of Salamaca. That is my story. And it is not a story...The man who fought tooth and nail against that cyclone had nothing in common

with the fortunate man alive the next day. He was far too busy...The physical drama itself cannot touch us until someone points out its spiritual sense.” (Saint-Exupery, 93-94)

The men who have gone through the most in life, tend to share the least. When men share what has happened to them, they tend to share them as if it happened to someone else, because it is likely that is how they feel about it. We tend to think of men as unemotional creatures because they don't speak endlessly about their “deep feelings” as women do. We may emasculate a man by forcing him to share his story in a certain way. Saint Exupery himself a pilot in the army, chooses to tell his story through characters in his novel, removed a certain distance from who he was and what he did. “The man who fought tooth and nail...had nothing in common with the fortunate man alive the next day”. Perhaps the best way to love a man, is to understand, without him having to explain, that what he does is difficult, and respect the “Peak of Salamanca” with him, side by side. To not make him explain himself like an interrogated witness, and make him prove that what he has done has been difficult or impressive.

Guillaumet, our comrade from the beginning of this essay, returns here. I will relay what he said when asked about the immense courage it must have taken him to persevere on the face of the snowy mountain, when all seemed lost.

“If we were to talk to him about his courage, Guillaumet would shrug his shoulders. But it would be just as false to extol his modesty. His place is far beyond that mediocre virtue. If he shrugs his

shoulders, it is because he is no fool. He knows that once men are caught in an event they cease to be afraid. Only the unknown frightens men. But once a man has faced the unknown, that terror becomes the known. Guillaumet's courage is in the main product of his honesty. His moral greatness consists in his sense of responsibility. He knew that he was responsible for himself, for the mails, for the fulfilment of the hopes of his comrades." (59)

To love a man is to give him the dignity of his courage, his responsibility, his capability and his stories. To love a man is to let him carry his cross and his burdens and to respect him for it. To allow him the comfort of his comrades and his hot meal and a peace that makes everything worth protecting.