

## **Hold Another Man's Hand? Lessons from Adamu, Shashingo and Vincent**

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Our culture has so much to learn from other cultures. **I'm beginning to see that my life has been forever changed by the influence of African men.** My wife, Janell, and I were invited to go to Africa in 1990-91 to spend a year doing counseling and hospitality work with missionaries. So we took leaves of absence from our careers, packed up our little girls (then ages 8 and 5) and spent the year living on a compound in the town of Miango, Nigeria. We now recall it as our "severe and wonderful year." Though there were some really difficult times, there were by far many more wonderful ones. At our goodbye party, Adamu, who had become my trusted right hand man, said, "When you go, you will leave behind a son, only he is black." Shashingo, the singing man who worked in the laundry, later wrote, "Our love between you and me is like burning fire..." And Vincent, the Ibo trader who said of my bartering skills in the market place, "You have some kind of magic (meaning amazing courage for a white man)" implored me to come back to Nigeria to stay. These three men and several others became deep, lasting friends. **Before our coming to Africa, I had never once thought I would fall in love with a Nigerian.** Yet, I fell in love with several men and women and left a big part of my heart there.

This year, I was asked to come back to Nigeria, to co-lead a workshop for missionaries called Sharpening Your Interpersonal Skills. So, as a family, we returned for 20 days this past July. In anticipation of the trip, I began to reminisce about the many Nigerian men I had bonded with. As I thought of them, **I wondered if I had perhaps over-romanticized the experience.** Had we really grown as close as I remembered? The trip was a great family event. Each of us contributed in some way to the success of the conference. It was wonderful to be back, to smell the smells of women cooking along the roadside, to again hear the sounds of exotic birds, to remember bits of the Hausa language and to greet dear friends. It was also fascinating to be with our girls as they saw the people and places from 12 years ago through the eyes of the young adults they have become. But the greatest joy for me was the confirmation that I hadn't over-estimated the depth of my friendships with these men. We were given a hero's welcome. Warm, hard hugs were common. Shashingo literally danced when he saw us. Adamu beamed ear to ear. When we finally caught up with Vincent in the market place, he grabbed me, hugged the stuffing out of me, then put his cheek next to mine and just stayed there. I was overwhelmed.

**The men I fell in love with in Nigeria are different from most of us here in U.S. For instance, heterosexual males hold hands.** I had always considered myself to be a pretty androgynous, sensitive male. But I can still remember just cringing inside the first few times Adamu or Shashingo took my hand to walk together. Ew! I held on, so as not to be culturally offensive; yet it was so uncomfortable. Then I remembered my friend Peter Fitch had mentioned that he'd held hands with men from Cameroon when he visited there as a college student. He said he eventually got used to it - so I kept it up. It didn't take long before the discomfort dissipated and I found myself behaving as one of them - holding hands with other men (though I never could

get the other white guys to do it with me), walking arm in arm in the market, sitting with arms around each other when traveling in the van - it felt great.

But this difference in Nigerian men is more than physical. **These men held hands with one another's souls.** They would hang around together. They had a sense of connection with each other I hadn't seen in men before. They'd ask each other how life is, how their work is, how their health is, how their family is - and really mean it. In fact, it's a cultural insult to not take the time to answer each of those questions honestly each time they greet one another. Being that emotionally intimate was simply part of every day life for them - and they made time to do it.

**They wanted to peer into my soul, too.** It was so natural to them, they didn't seem to understand what an encroachment it was to a man like me from the West. In fact, I didn't know myself how threatened I would feel. They wanted me to share my life with them: my joys, my sorrows, my successes, my failures, my fears - all of it. They wanted to know me intimately. While feeling attracted to this, I was also initially suspicious. Maybe they were just ingratiating themselves to me in order to get some financial help from the "rich American". But after a while, my suspicions and my discomfort with this deeper expectation of emotional intimacy dissipated as well. I left Africa with a new sense of the kind of relationships men can have with one another. I envied my African brothers. Though they wouldn't say so, it turns out they had much more to give me than I could ever have given them.

Not long after returning to the U.S. in 1991, I went to a workshop titled "Men in Psychotherapy", by William Dougherty. After my experience with the men of Nigeria, I resonated with many of his observations of men in our American society. "The average American male still feels not understood." "Men don't feel connected." "When a man can tell - and live with - his story, he becomes a true man. He finds himself." "**American men experience aloneness as a primary way of relating to the world.**" "It has been socially sanctioned for men to grieve alone." In his book *The Friendless American Male*, David Smith says, "We get together with other males to compete, we hug there only and are the most lonely men in the world." At another workshop, Rob Boyd, an executive minister with the Minnesota Baptist Conference, said, "All of us are just standing around waiting, hoping for someone to say 'I love you'. As men we never say 'I like you... I just want to be with you'." He also called for American men to establish ceremonies and traditions that foster male friendship rather than reinforce male stereotypes. For the past decade, these thoughts have stirred in me. I want to be understood, especially by other men. I want to tell my story and have it matter to someone. Marlboro man be damned, I don't want to grieve my failures alone. I want permission to cry with another man without having to go to therapy to get it. I want those things to be socially sanctioned.

Thanks to Adamu, Shashingo, Vincent and a host of others, **I can see that a change has happened in me.** Though holding hands with other men still isn't quite in my repertoire, I feel more comfortable being demonstrative about my affection. Early in my career, a colleague once declared, "the eighth wonder of the world is a Pat Repp hug!" Somewhere in the process of becoming a "mature adult" and "a mental health professional", I had lost that reputation.

Now it's coming back. I hug men. I hug women. **I touch the people I care about.** I even kiss some of them. Every now and then, I kiss my close buddy David on the cheek. I don't know why - he just seems to need it. It seems to bless him. I especially like hugging my friend Maurice. When we hug, we touch cheeks and I like the feel of his wiry African American beard against my skin. That blesses me. I think it reminds me of when my dad used to "rub whiskers" with his little boy. That, of course, ended when it was time to "become a man."

I've come to believe that male alienation is not gender specific so much as it is culture specific. We need to change this culture, one man to another, one man at a time. But, in truth, the touching souls part has come slower for me than touching persons. Though I have a handful of dear male friends whom I've known for years, it still feels like a risk to be as emotionally open to them as my African friends are naturally. I'm getting there, though. I ask questions about how my friends are doing and I really want to know the answers. I make the effort to see beneath the masks we've all been taught to wear. Once in awhile, I even take off my mask and share my self-doubts, my fears, my sorrows, my failures, my pain and my shame. Revealing those things to other men somehow makes them easier to bear.

Nearly two years ago, a wonderful thing began. Hans, an old friend of mine from college, wrote to me and also to two other long-time friends, Al and Roger. He wrote something like, **"You three have been the best men of my life and I want to stay in closer contact with you."** From his initiation, we began to call ourselves "The Bestmen". We now have a private Internet chat room we get into with each other from time to time and we write frequent e-mails that go out to all of us. We have made a pact to "encroach on one another's souls." I don't always live up to the pact, but I keep at it. It's not always easy and sometimes there are misunderstandings that need to be sorted out. But it's wonderful to be frequently told by three other grown men that I am loved.

Every few months, we meet together for a Bestmen Retreat. We go to a cabin somewhere; we laugh, play music, tell guy jokes, discuss world affairs, debate about postmodern thought and narrative therapy, compare anti-depressants and marriages, and tell each other things we've never told anyone else. Then we return to our lives knowing we have been loved. **I hope we're starting some new traditions that will pass on to the next generation.** I hope our sons are better at taking this kind of risk than we are. Meanwhile, watch out guys; who knows, maybe next time we're together I'll try holding hands!

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