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Sexual Confusion and the End of Friendship

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Nominations for the 63rd annual Golden Globe Awards were announced Tuesday, and the movie identified as a “cowboy romance” has taken the lead with seven nominations. *Brokeback Mountain*, starring Heath Ledger and Jake Gyllenhaal as two cowboys linked in a homosexual romance, has been nominated for Best Motion Picture Drama, Best Actor in a Drama, Best Director, Best Supporting Actress, Best Screenplay, Best Score and Best Song. Already, critics are predicting that *Brokeback Mountain* is the leading candidate to be chosen as Best Picture at the upcoming Academy Awards ceremony.

Directed by Ang Lee, *Brokeback Mountain* is based on a short story of the same title by author Annie Proulx. The story is quite graphic, depicting an unexpected homosexual romance between two cowboys who find themselves alone in a tent. As the story unfolds, the homosexual relationship is continued even as the two men get married and establish families. The story—and the movie—includes explicit sex and depicts the hurt and turmoil experienced by the families of these two men as they periodically take what are described as “fishing trips in which there is no fishing.” Nevertheless, the movie presents the homosexual romance as a relationship to be admired—insinuating that if our society could be freed of its hang-ups about homosexuality, these two could have gone on to live together happily ever after.

The movie opened in only three cities across the nation, and it is not expected to be a big winner at the box office. But as an indicator of where Hollywood thinks the culture should be headed, *Brokeback Mountain* is one of the most celebrated movies among Hollywood critics, the media, and the cultural elites.

In one sense, the real significance of *Brokeback Mountain* doesn't have anything to do with cinematography. Instead, it has everything to do with our culture and the breakdown of sexual order. *Brokeback Mountain* represents something new in mainstream America—a celebration of homosexual romance on the big screen. The very fact that this movie stars two relatively well established young actors and has drawn the fawning attention of Hollywood critics indicates that something very serious is afoot. It really will not matter that most Americans are not likely to see this film. Now that this cultural barrier has been broken down, depictions of similar relationships and romances are sure to filter down into popular entertainment—and quickly.

Anthony Esolen, Professor of English at Providence College in Providence, Rhode Island, warns that this breakdown of the natural sexual order has led to the death of friendship—particularly to the death of male friendships.

In “A Requiem for Friendship: Why Boys Will Not Be Boys and Other Consequences of the Sexual Revolution,” published in the September 2005 issue of *Touchstone* magazine, Esolen begins by reminding readers of a scene from J. R. R. Tolkien's great work, *The Lord of the Rings*. Sam Gamgee, having followed his master Frodo into Mordor, the realm of death, finds him in a small filthy cell lying half-conscious. “Frodo! Mr. Frodo, my dear!” Sam cries. “It's Sam, I've come!” Frodo embraces his friend and Sam eventually cradles Frodo's head. As Esolen suggests, a reader or viewer of this scene is likely to jump to a rather perverse conclusion: “What, are they gay?”

Esolen suggests that this question is an “ignorant but inevitable response” to the context. He goes on to recall that

Shakespeare and many other great authors spoke of non-sexual love between men in strongest terms. Similarly, when David is told of the death of his friend Jonathan, he cries: “Your love to me was finer than the love of women.”

As Esolen understands, the corruption of language has contributed to this confusion. When words like *love*, *friend*, *male*, *female*, and *partner* are transformed in a new sexual context, what was once understood to be pure and undefiled is now subject to sniggering and disrespect.

Esolen insists that this linguistic shift was no accident. He accuses “pansexualists” of corrupting the language in order to normalize sexual confusion and anarchy. They have used language “as a tool for establishing their own order and imposing it on everyone else,” he argues.

As Esolen explains, “The pansexualists—they who believe in the libertarian dogma that what two consenting adults do with their privates in private is nobody’s business—understand that the language had to be changed to assist the realization of their dream, and also that the realization of their dream would change the world, because it would change the language for everyone else.”

What does all this have to do with the release of *Brokeback Mountain*? “Open homosexuality, loudly and defiantly celebrated, changes the language for everyone,” Esolen insists. “If a man throws his arm around another man’s waist, it is now a sign—whether he is on the political right or the left, whether he believes in biblical proscriptions of homosexuality or not.” Esolen offers a blunt and haunting assessment: “If a man cradles the head of his weeping friend, the shadow of suspicion must cross your mind.”

One of the words and realities most clearly corrupted for the sake of sexual anarchy is friendship—and male friendship in particular. “For modern American men, friendship is no longer forged in the heat of battle, or in the dust of the plains as they drive their herds across half a continent, or in the choking air of a coalmine, or even in the cigar smoke of a debating club,” Esolen notes. Most men no longer find themselves in situations that encourage and inculcate straightforward male friendships. As Esolen observes, “the sexual revolution has also nearly killed male friendship as devoted to anything beyond drinking and watching sports; and the homosexual movement, a logically inevitable result of forty years of heterosexual promiscuity and feminist folly, bids fair to finish it off and nail the coffin shut.”

What this means for grown men is bad enough, but Esolen is persuasive when he argues that the most vulnerable victims of friendship’s demise are boys. “The prominence of male homosexuality changes the language for teenage boys. It is absurd and cruel to say that the boy can ignore it. Even if he would, his classmates will not let him. All boys need to prove that they are not failures. They need to prove that they are on the way to becoming men—that they are not going to relapse into the need to be protected by, and therefore identified with, their mothers.” So? Esolen argues that boys, deprived of normal recognitions of masculinity and safe friendships with other boys and men, often turn to aggressive sexual promiscuity with girls in order to prove that they are not homosexual. Boys who refuse to play this game are tagged as homosexuals.

Esolen is on to something of incredible importance here. He reminds us all that boys need the uncomplicated camaraderie of other boys in order to negotiate their own path to manhood. The friendships shared among boys and young men allowed them to come together around common interests and activities and to channel their natural curiosity and energy into participation in shared activities. As young males band together, Esolen acknowledges that they “might do a thousand things fascinatingly creative and dangerously destructive.” This is where adults must step in to guide these energies in positive directions and to erect boundaries to prevent or discourage bad behavior. In any event, these boys would not, as Esolen argues many boys do now, stagnate. “They would be alive,” he asserts.

All this requires an uncomplicated heterosexual expectation. Esolen points to the fact that Abraham Lincoln, as a young man, had often shared a bed with his friend Joshua Speed. The two shared letters that spoke of their appreciation and love for each other. Modern readers have jumped to the conclusion that Lincoln must have been a homosexual. Esolen rightly argues that this “evidence” proves exactly the opposite. Lincoln and Speed were free to share a bed together, and to speak of their deep friendship, precisely because they did not fear any revelation of this fact or of their relationship to the public. Why? Because the nearly universal understanding of all homosexual behavior as immoral and deviant created a context in which *no one* would have had the expectation that Lincoln would be involved in homosexuality. As Esolen explains, “The stigma against sodomy cleared away ample space for an emotionally powerful friendship that did not involve sexual intercourse, exactly as the stigma against incest allows for the physical and

emotional freedom of a family.”

In a truly haunting section of his essay, Esolen asked us to imagine a society in which the taboo against incest has been removed. Under such circumstances, no uncle would be free to hug his young niece without an accusation of sexual interest. Relationships between parents and children, brothers and sisters, and relatives of all varieties would be corrupted and undermined by the imposition of sexual suspicion.

As Esolen understands, this is exactly what is happening as homosexuality is normalized in the culture. Normal, non-sexual, fraternal friendships among men now come under suspicion. This is especially true for teenage boys and young men, who are less secure about their manhood and more concerned about their own—and their peers’—sexual identity.

The normalization of homosexuality destroys the natural order of friendships among men. “Think about that friendship, the next time you see the perpetual adolescents and feather boas as they march down Main Street, making their sexual proclivities known to everybody whether everybody cares or not,” Esolen instructs. “With every chanted slogan and every blaring sign, they crowd out the words of friendship, they appropriate the healthy gestures of love between man and man. Confess—has it not left you uneasy even to read the words of that last sentence?”

Of course, we are told that those who hold such concerns are simply providing evidence of their innate homophobia and repressive sexual hang-ups. The critics will celebrate *Brokeback Mountain*, and we can now expect a flood of similar themes, stories, and depictions. Society at large is corrupted by the normalization of homosexuality and the bonds of normal male friendships are weakened, if not destroyed. Remember all this as Hollywood prepares to celebrate its latest cultural “achievement.”

