

## The Meaning of a Man

Surely humans all are lucky to be living in this time,  
Surely never were there beings who could live a life so fine.  
But with three hundred million crowding all of just our land,  
We may wonder what we've learned about the meaning of a man.

We can all attend the schools these days until we're old and gray,  
Gather elegant degrees and clever thoughts to while away,  
Consider all the universe except the one within,  
And wonder why we've never learned the meaning of a man.

Across the lives of unknown throngs, from caves to caviars,  
Stone axes, bows, and arrows, city streets slam-jammed with cars,  
We've practiced ways to slaughter men that stand our hair on end.  
Is this what we have learned about the meaning of a man?

More than seven billion people now are packed around the globe,  
With folks of different nations ever at each other's throats:  
We identify our enemies and kill them if we can,  
Is this all we have learned about the meaning of a man?

If some of us grow up and everything is on our side,  
We're never hungry, never cold, and always satisfied;  
If we share the world of riches and lead a life that's grand,  
Perhaps we're not the kind to ask the meaning of a man.

But for anyone who wrestles with the riddles people pose,  
There's a thought I'll freely offer, and here's the way it goes:  
Start by finding someone singing, just as boldly as he can,  
The song he sings may be about the meaning of a man

Or a woman. . .

The above verse was put together 60 years ago, adjusted across the decades. As the youngster who constructed it, I had absorbed the idea that only the most important of questions should be considered in a poem, because only then could the poem be important. No one would be surprised to learn

that I got this idea from the poems I was charged to memorize and contemplate in my school. Nor that most of those poems were written by men, and a good many chosen for the grandiosity of their topics. It would not be surprising if the aspiring poet that I was then thought (briefly) that only men had the responsibility to search for the answers to sumptuous questions like the one I tried so long ago to deal with in this verse.

After all, women in the United States – poets or otherwise -- were not being allowed (by men. . .) to vote -- *not allowed to vote!* -- until three decades before the poem was written. . .

\* \* \*

“You sing until the song is singin’ **you**  
And that’s what you’re **supposed** to do!”

Overheard in a radio sermon  
by an unidentified, eloquent  
African-American Preacher in  
Ann Arbor, Michigan,  
1962