

The Righteous Stuff

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The Right Stuff is perhaps too innocuous of a title – conceivably *The Righteous Stuff* would be more apropos. Wolfe does title his exploration of the early US space program as the RIGHT Stuff; however he often refers to the ethereal RIGHTEOUS stuff that a pilot has to have in order to achieve aeronautical greatness. This nebulous quality or set of qualities is not defined for either the pilots or their dedicated wives in the book, but the spirit shines through. The Righteous Stuff is possibly that which drives people to greatness and has more to do with mindset and where that mindset comes from than with skill or physical prowess.

In the forward of *The Right Stuff* Wolfe clearly explains the impetus to the authoring of the book as well as the indefinable nature of the Right Stuff. The forward itself is telling, giving the author's point of view and background that is so important to the idea of the book itself. Throughout the body of the work, the author alludes to the quality of the persons who would push "the outside of the envelope" (Wolfe, 1979, p. 7). These men and women, who would in a different age still be heroes - would still strive for greatness. Wolfe invokes the spirit of the flying aces of World War I in the forward and continues to refer back to the knights of the Great War throughout. This reference is perhaps the cornerstone to an argument that the Righteous Stuff is far more than the simple application of physical skill (Wolfe, 1979, p. 16).

The idea of the Righteous Stuff is what creates the hero and drives those men and women to develop the physical skills that are necessary to the commission of greatness. However, the Righteous Stuff, while limited by the mortal confines of the human body is much less that which is physical and more the attitude, spirit and drive of those heroes that sustain them through the trials that stand in their way in their journey up the ziggurat of greatness. This climb, that at each level sieves the chaff from the wheat, mirrors the climb that men have been challenged by since the dawn of time, reflecting the origins of this Righteous Stuff.

The repeated reference in the book to the spirit of the pilots of World War I is on the surface a clear and appropriate tie to the world of early space exploration. However, the idea and culture that bred these Knights of the Air is a through back to a time past but still remembered, both in words and pictures, but perhaps also on a spiritual or even molecular level. The idea of manliness is not one exclusive to the realm of pilots and astronauts. The

pyramid is not the exclusive domain of these new Knights of the Air. This progression that sorts men into levels of greatness and fame exists in nearly every profession. However, this spirit of Righteous Stuff is perhaps more base and instinctual than most of the modern world would be willing to admit.

We can observe a hierarchy in nature that is defined by the Alpha Male. However, as human society has evolved the traditional place for the same Alpha Male has shrunk. There is no need in the modern world for a strong and cunning male that can hunt down and kill enough meat to provide protein for the family. There is precious little need for a skilled warrior to repel predatory animals that would threaten the propagation of the line. As we have become more civilized we have slowly and deliberately deleted the positions that these men filled. So these cunning, dexterous, strong and iron willed men instinctually sought out professions that would make them feel whole on a molecular level -professions that would assuage the emptiness that they all felt deep down.

Chuck Palahniuk's break out novel *Fight Club* addresses these issues in a bit more stark and obvious way – but the message is the same. "We are a generation raised by women. I'm wondering if another woman is the answer" (Palahniuk, 1996) In this statement, the schizophrenic antagonist/protagonist of *Fight Club* sums up the angst that many would be Alpha Males feel in the modern world. Similarly the heroes of Wolfe's book struggle to find their own limits, even driven to conquer the sacred feminine through affairs and flings, in spite of the love and support that most of them enjoy in the patient and equally strong women that have chosen to endure the bumpy ride that these Alpha Males have chosen to embark upon.

This base instinct to dominate surely drives the subconscious to develop a "Never Say Die" attitude that seems to be the basis for this ghostly Righteous Stuff. Studies have shown links between the testosterone level of men and their willingness to take risks and the subsequent likelihood of success (Concordia, 2010). Other studies have shown the strong link, again on a genetic and chemical level, of strong females to the Alpha Male and the symbiotic relationships that develop as a result (Calgary, 2007). This all points to an inherent attitude that may spawn that Righteous Stuff – an attitude that may well be genetic. However, this genetically driven attitude may indeed be righteous – as oppose to simply right.

It is easy to point out the pitfalls associated with testosterone laden posturing associated with the Alpha Male. While on the surface this may simply point to the "right" stuff needed to ride a rocket into space – the other half of the story is more telling. The "righteous" stuff that led to the desire to be the best, the force to succeed in spite of odds or tribulations and the development of the prototypical Alpha Male attitude also led to chivalric

behavior, living with honor, dedication to duty and protection of the family. While this applies to the pilots that made it to the pinnacle of flight in the Mercury and X-Plane projects, it also applies to the special breed of woman who chose to partner with these men.

The Righteous Stuff is so much more than the simple application of a skill set to a particular problem. As shown over and over in *The Right Stuff*, it is a total character summary that cannot be defined with tests and benchmarks. It can only be defined holistically and objectively. It is perhaps part of the human spirit, perhaps genetic encoding, but always a major factor in the success or failure of men and women. This Righteous Stuff is no less than the mortar between the bricks that build the modern hero.

Bibliography

University of Calgary. (2007, July 3). *Study says females who pick alpha males create new brain cells*. Retrieved May 12, 2011, from Canada.com: <http://www.canada.com/theprovince/news/story.html?id=b1aef7c3-4b65-4a94-a6de-2bac71497091>

The University of Calgary demonstrates a chemical link between Alpha males and female subjects and notes that the females actually grow brain cells when exposed to the pheromones of Alpha male subjects.

Concordia University. (2010, November 9). *Alpha males take greater risks: Study links finger length to behavior*. Retrieved May 12, 2011, from ScienceDaily: http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2010/11/101109133227.htm?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=feed&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+sciencedaily+%28ScienceDaily%3A+Latest+Science+News%29

Concordia University shows a statistical link between Alpha males and risk taking - often leading to greater success. Additional statistics show a link to longer "ring" fingers.

Palahniuk, C. (1996). *Fight Club*. New York: Henry Holt.

Palahniuk's book explores the psyche of the modern man in the light of a society that effectively hog ties those activities which the narrator sees as manly.

Wolfe, T. (1979). *The Right Stuff*. New York: Picador.

Wolfe narrates the early days of US space explorations through the stories of the pilots that were chosen to be the first into space.