

# CITY SLICKERS

Directed by Ron Underwood  
Produced by Irby Smith  
Distributed by Columbia Pictures  
Released in 1991

Since we can't see where all this is heading, it's hard to know what it really means. Life can be very difficult, and sometimes it is just as difficult for the privileged as for the disadvantaged. Because it seems only the privileged have the perverse luxury of a surfeit of time sufficient to dwell on the little that isn't going right, their struggles are less physical (clothing, food, etc.) than existential—problems of the mind, heart, and spirit that cannot be remedied with a job or the dole. The privileged, it seems, waste their days trying to manufacture answers to questions that should never be asked.

Wizened trail guide Curly, played expertly by Jack Palance, addresses this very issue in *City Slickers*, saying that burned-out, wandering workaholics hope that driving cattle for two weeks will solve their problems. But all they need is "just one thing."

Arguably, these questions, asked by many with too much time on their hands, are now asked with more desperation by men. Frustrated by the difficulty of finding a loyal woman (and routinely disfavored in divorce court on issues of alimony and custody); no longer secure in their role as sole (or even primary) breadwinner; their sex denounced as a brutish lot harboring a mania for environmental degradation; and faulted at every turn for betraying inclinations toward independent thinking, leadership, and physical courage...men don't know what to do. They are wired to protect and defend; and now they're told to shut up and sit down.

This process starts at a young age, in school, and carries forward. Colleges can't be just for men any more. Country clubs can't be just for men any more. Even the Boy Scouts can't be just for boys any more. This is not an issue of governments running amuck. It's a massive societal trend, launched with the best intentions, that now threatens the stability of society. Increasingly, men are isolated from each other (social media, with all its 'friend' substitutes, only magnifies the problem), and, turning to alcohol, drugs, pornography, and—finally—suicide, men seek to escape a world they had no hand in making and want no part of any more. And women, who desperately want the best for their children, soon realize that they've bitten off more than they can chew.

Thirty years ago, the problem was not this acute, but the pressure was building. In *City Slickers*, the three leads—Mitch (Billy Crystal), Ed (Bruno Kirby), and Phil (Daniel Stern) are facing crises of confidence. But at least they have each other as trusted friends who love each other and can be relied upon. (Note what Phil says about the cattle-drive birthday gift for Mitch: "I worked every weekend for a year to get you this.") They try to prove their manhood (and forget their troubles) with mindless macho-fests like the running of the bulls. At first, it seems the cattle drive will be just more of the same—a stupid, pointless escape from reality. Put-upon Phil says at one point in the film, referencing the demanding schedule he faces as a

supermarket manager, "No free rides, Philly-Boy, no free rides!" Ed declaims, "Everything's a competition; life's a competition." One is resigned to his fate, trying to cope by indulging in surreptitious adultery; the other refuses to stop and think, and simply charges ahead. But we understand Mitch's struggles best, having been immersed in them since the film began. "I just feel lost," Mitch admits to his wife, saying the problem isn't her, but him. Unlike his friends, he knows he has a problem, and—increasingly—he wants to fix it. "You ever reach a point in your life where you say, 'This is the best I'm ever going to look, the best I'm every going to feel, the best I'm ever going to do'...and it ain't that great?" Mitch is ultimately too wrapped up in his own concerns—feeling fulfilled, being respected, keeping his hair. "Go and find your smile," she encourages him.

"What if I can't?"

"We'll jump off that bridge when we come to it."

If he doesn't find some kind of purpose then he'll be out of a job, and his marriage will fail. Until his wife gives her quiet ultimatum he's simply treading water, wondering vaguely if a boat might happen by and pick him up. If he was going to be something more, if there was something more for him up ahead, wouldn't it have already happened? And if he tries to answer the question that is gnawing at him, will he be worse off when he—pessimist that he is—ultimately finds there is no answer?

When the cattle drive starts, Mitch is in the middle. On the surface, it seems that Phil has nothing, and that Ed has everything (his own business, plenty of money, a gorgeous wife). Through the narrative, particularly in the scene where the three men address their best- and worst days, several themes emerge. Being a man means getting married, having a real job, confronting evil, providing comfort and protection for women, and investing in the next generation. Mitch learns a lot about himself on the trail, and Norman (the calf he delivers, feeds, protects from the vengeful trail guides, and, later, rescues from drowning) serves as a focal point. Just like his father was an upholsterer and could point to something he did, Mitch can point to Norman ("I made a cow!") and take pride in contributing something useful, something beautiful, to the world.

In the end, they do bring in the herd against all odds, but for what? So it can be slaughtered. Cattle don't have much to live for; this herd is normally shuttled back and forth between New Mexico and Colorado for the benefit of tourists looking for a change of pace. And now, with the herd being sold, the whole exercise seems pointless—it's a bit anti-climactic (and disturbing for Mitch in particular). But this just emphasizes the real point. Being a man is not about being a cowboy. Sure, Curly was a man's man. But what Mitch admired about him was his willingness to go his own way, to make the hard choices (like leaving behind the possibility of a loving relationship with the most beautiful woman he ever saw) without brooding over his decisions, toying with regret. All three men benefit by this surreal fortnight, and each of the three seizes upon something he really needs, something that is intrinsic to being a man. Phil learns to be resilient; he will battle back after losing his job and his marriage, refusing to give up on the future. Ed will finally take responsibility, no longer worried that he will turn into his adulterous father—he will get his wife pregnant and stop looking back to his troubled childhood.

And Mitch finds focus. He finds the one thing that gives his life purpose. He doesn't need to be driving cattle in the rain in order to feel like a man. He needs to love his wife and kids, providing for them with joy as he works hard, recognizing, perhaps, that his job is only limiting because he will not push himself to do it better.

Completing the circle, he brings Norman home. Saved one last time from destruction, the calf is highly symbolic, the living incarnation of Mitch's promise to himself.

He has found his assurance. He has found his smile.

Should women want men to lead, to protect, to have purpose? Even if we ignore tradition, historical patterns, and the Bible, there's still reason to reject Irina Dunn's feminist mantra: "A woman needs a man like a fish needs a bicycle." Women long for men, just as men long for women. The problems come later, as the inherent selfishness each person brings to the relationship gradually emerges, problems long subsumed during the long introductory phase of mutual seduction/wooing. Men have behaved very poorly vis-a-vis women for a very long time. But that doesn't mean we can give up on them. That would be worse for all concerned. And if a man can get it together, a woman will compete—ruthlessly—to have a chance to let him lead her through life. Right or wrong, that's reality. We're all at fault. And it's long past time that men be dismissed as barbarians beyond redemption, unworthy of society's ministrations. *City Slickers* calls attention to the crisis of manhood, and offers—in an inspiring way—a possible solution.