

THE INTENTIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF MEN

Prologue

There was once a country that was populated by male and female caterpillars. They all knew about the legend of becoming butterflies, but because of their own condition, could not see actual butterflies, nor understand how to become them.

The females gathered together and began learning how to become butterflies. They told the males to go away and figure it out for themselves.

Some of the males said immediately that the process was impossible and unnecessary, claiming to be butterflies already, or that they could become butterflies with no effort. They dismissed the females as strident and hostile.

Other males immediately met together and began earnestly complaining about their lives as caterpillars, and supported each other for years of protesting and embracing.

Some males studied the lives of many species of butterflies and adopted a variety of their methods, colorations, and rituals, to see if these actions might promote such changes in themselves.

One group of the males adopted various postures of 'butterfliness,' some of which were genuine, and some of which were arrogant. They studied various mythological butterflies, beat their wings like butterflies, made movements like butterflies, and even experienced flying once in a while.

And some of the male caterpillars imagined that the process of transformation had been experienced for thousands of years by previous members of their species, was inherent in their very makeup, and needed their cooperation. It was those bugs and that process that this group studied. They were never seen again.

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Introduction

This matter of how to encourage the 1990's adult American male to fully develop and mature is quite vexing. There are simply no consensus maps around that chart a direction and a method of travel from 'here' to 'there.' It seems a time when a lot of ships have been commissioned to sail off in all directions until someone discovers the trade route, or gets eaten by the dragons....

On one hand, the past twenty-five years have seen this exploration intensify. Six distinct forms of men's groups have been popularized, and various forms predominate at different times in different cities, or in different stages of a man's life. On the other hand, only a handful of men are fully engaged in this work: most of the American male population still probably assumes that full

adult male development is engendered by having a decent income, a home and family, enjoyable hobbies, and a good car.

Despite a limited core of participants, and a seeming lack of direction, this work of men in groups repeats a story several thousand years old, recorded in cultural histories, religious traditions, and sacred mythologies. These records suggest that the 'possible male' is much grander than current conventional definitions, or definitions that most social eras embraced. A brief glance at the major forms of American men's groups, and at a very old model for human development, may bring us a bit closer to those "lucrative trade routes." That glance might also illuminate the essential elements needed to guide a ship to a gifted foreign shore, to where the inside meets the outside....

Developmental Needs of Men: Moving Toward One's Destiny

Simple repeated observation of most living (and many dead) organisms indicates that they share a particular inclination to evolve, to develop, to mature, to move toward a destiny. We see it most commonly in plant and animal life, and over a much longer period, in the earth itself. We see a progression which appears to be an intrinsic part of the nature of things, from very simple, to much more complex. Without mistaking this history for causality, we can still witness such movement.

Psychological and spiritual disciplines have traced various schemes of human unfolding which describe the ripening of a man (or a woman) along certain lines of achievement. They begin with the most basic (language, thinking), move into an intermediate stage (of working, of recreating) and end with the most advanced: a union with some all-encompassing, transcendent force (God; the Void; a Higher Power; Brahma). These schemes suggest that human organisms have within them various drives toward (and away from) expansion and growth, in the direction of progressively more advanced, mature stages, which encompass all the previous stages and point toward others yet to come.

Sometimes these drives are explained as an attempt to gratify basic needs, or a search for meaning and purpose in life, or the manifestation of a destiny of sorts. Whatever the explanation, the process goes on or is constrained by various impulses. It may be that the gathering of men together to grapple with these issues of male maturity in some way speaks to this fundamental life process: how to promote or inhibit that tendency to ripen into men? Indeed, in the six common varieties of men's groups, one notes different styles of an effort to confront this question.

Feminist Men's Groups

Late in the 1960's, responding to the pressure of feminist lovers, wives, and sisters, men began meeting in male-only groups to study 'what it is like to be a man.' The theoretical models they began with were drawn largely from "consciousness raising" feminist groups, and from feminist literature. They considered such ideas as essential male behavior, heterosexuality, homosexuality, sex roles, emotional expression, intimate male-male support, and political action.

The groups were usually said to be "leaderless" in style, but were often dominated by charismatic individuals who were the most articulate and informed in feminist theory. The group format was generally one of discussion-study groups, social support, emotional disclosures, and some experimentation with sexual preference. Political action was also part of their goal: they carried out public protests, the formation of child-care centers, and public workshops on the liberation of men, women, and children from constricting cultural roles.

Their strengths involved their pioneering effort for men in the whole question of what men can possibly become. They emphasized emotional expression and capacity, connected personal behavior with political realities, allowed men to link-up with feminism, and educated many men about contemporary social-political-sexual issues. They were genuinely supportive, especially for gay men, for men with sexual preference confusion, or for heterosexual men who were resentful about cultural stereotypes that they found limiting and destructive.

New-Age Men's Groups

The next identifiable version of men's groups seemed to emerge about ten years later, when various gatherings began appearing that were much less political in nature, and were much more "new-age."

These groups offered an ad hoc mixture of new-age, psychological, and metaphysical ideas. They also involved Native American tradition and rituals drawn from an assortment of ancient cultures or shamanistic teaching. Some were set in challenging out-door settings for the conduct of 'vision or nature quests.'

The leadership style here centered around a powerful male who had studied with some Native-American or other teacher from an older culture. That leader offered various elements to the assembled men, who looked to him for guidance or teaching of various practices that would be of value 'in the quest.' Often a number of men, having trained with that leader, would then become teachers as well in that group's tradition.

The format of the groups involved various efforts: 'cleansing and honoring the soul or the ancestors or the spirit world' through rituals; learning about survival in the wilderness; employing methods of confrontation 'with the shadow' in the members; 'taking responsibility for the self and for Mother Earth;' and meditation exercises.

Such groups were an attempt to reach into older and hopefully more essential versions of maleness in traditional cultures. They acknowledged the legitimacy of various spiritual traditions, and gave men a sense of belonging to the present, as well as the past, historic challenges. They were an effort to bring spirituality, more than contemporary organized religion, into the search for maleness. If conducted by skilled leaders, they offered psychotherapeutic experiences for the participants who were capable of benefiting from such encounters.

Supportive Men's Groups

The next apparent iteration of men's work involved groups which seemed largely focused on fundamental social, emotional, and psychological support of the members. It may today be the most common form of all-male gatherings which are concerned with social and psychological maturation.

These groups employed rules of early encounter groups, and were influenced by the self-help psychotherapy movement, where those who had experienced various problems were to help those who were grappling with similar issues. They featured lots of supportive listening, with little confrontation among the members. Vietnam Veteran's Centers in the United States came up with "Rap Groups" as an example of this style. Most commonly, however, men who were friends or co-workers began these informal small groups in their own homes.

Some common features of these groups included genuine demonstrations of social affection (such as physically embracing), emotional encouragement for one another, and stories of the members' struggles, failures and successes in life. The group members would also interact by advising one-another, in the style of 'try this,' or, 'I did it like that.' In another variation of this form, Christian men's support groups added Biblical injunctions, evangelical fervor, and enthusiastic admonitions to the mix.

Often said to have a 'leaderless' style, they were usually formed and maintained by a charismatic male who maintained some quasi-leader status but played-down his role. Sometimes other informal leaders would emerge, but issues of control, direction, and purpose were to be worked out by the whole group.

Their format was a recurring, weekly meeting, and they might last for several years, often with a strong core-group of members. In generic form, they would appeal to men who were having difficulties in careers, or in relationships, and who saw that various cultural standards or practices thwarted their progress toward full human development. Commonly they featured lengthy periods when members 'tried to figure out what the real purpose of the group should be.' Group attendance might be under ten men, or it might ebb and flow as fed by a larger number of participants from a sponsoring church or larger organization.

The positive contributions of this style of men's group involved the offering of legitimate social and emotional support for men, by other men who had experienced similar problems in living. The groups educated the participants in various interpersonal skills which were positive and not as constricted by shallow social norms regarding 'what men were allowed to do' in the presence of other men. They helped men practice the open disclosure of emotionally-laden material, and met social needs of some of the members.

Men's Addiction-Cessation Groups

Apparently in the late 1980's, but perhaps before, the issue of 'men's groups' touched the world of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), or at least the world of psycho-social treatment for what is now called chemical dependence.

The theories that buttressed these groups were derived from the AA or Narcotics Anonymous (NA) tradition, and also from the early residential drug treatment Synanon-style confrontational groups. The fundamental emphasis was on abstention from drugs, alcohol, or the compulsive acting-out of other behaviors that were labeled potential "addictions" (sexuality; gambling; shopping; eating).

They were of two opposing styles: in the AA model, interpersonal confrontation was always indirect, where men just 'told their stories.' In the Synanon model, confrontation was dramatic and face-to-face. In both groups, senior "sober" members would lead junior members through various "steps" as outlined in main-stream AA/NA literature. Telling one's story, or drawing strength from the sobriety and resolve of the group, helped members formulate inner resolve to combat various habitual, conditioned behaviors.

The groups were often conducted free to members in the delightful anarchy that AA is proud of, but were later adopted as one of several treatment methods of hospital-based chemical-dependency programs, where significant fees for services were charged.

The strength of these groups was well known: they offered a structured, peer-group environment in which genuine personal problems could surface, be discussed directly or indirectly, and be solved in group-acceptable ways. Very simplified directives, supported by the

most vocal group members, could be recommended to the participants and could be actually carried-out, in support of the disruption of chemical dependencies. And their track-record of success in the sobriety of many of the participants is well known. They could emphasize the destructive role of alcoholism, drug dependence, and addictive behaviors in the lives of men, and in the lives of the families of those men.

Indeed, the "Twelve-Step" model of group work influenced a substantial number of men in the groups cited above, offering them a model of self-development, various methods of executing this, and even a sense of 'auxiliary ego,' an organized list of steps that could be internalized psychologically and be brought to combat personal, familial, and organizational dysfunction.

Psychiatric Hospital Men's Groups

Late in the 1980's, large commercial psychiatric hospitals noticed that their specialized women's programs were successful at marketing inpatient psychotherapeutic services to women. Other entrepreneurial male psychotherapists noticed this as well, and proposed that some complementary "men's programs" be constructed in the hospitals.

The men's groups that emerged from this commercialization effort seemed a blend of inpatient group psychotherapy theory, psycho-educational efforts, journal or work-book writing, and short-term behavior modification work.

They were led by experienced male psychotherapists who used their training in group process to focus attention on the relationships among the members and the dynamics of the group as a whole. The agendas of the groups were intentionally limited to the addressing immediate personal needs of the men who were hospitalized for issues usually involving violence, suicide, major depression, loss, or substance abuse. The goal was to move the men back to pre-hospitalized functioning as soon as possible. Men with psychotic ideation were excluded from participation. Medical insurance companies, who pay for most psychiatric inpatient treatment in this country, indirectly could dictate how long men would participate in these types of groups, usually from a few days to a few weeks, until the insurance payment limits for inpatient psychotherapy treatment were exhausted.

Some of these programs primarily employed a "work book" that the members would complete. The book featured topics, such as: fathers; sexuality; addiction; working; relationships; emotions. Members were asked to comment on their knowledge of these topics, or their histories with these issues, etc.

Discussions would ensue, and members would disclose information, inform one-another, be compassionate (or shocked, and rejecting) about their fellow client's commentaries. Occasionally these programs would add a component drawn from the mytho-poetic men's groups (see below) or would sponsor lectures to the community by local psychotherapists who were specializing in men's issues.

The power in such commercial programs was that they brought the whole issue of 'men's issues' into the psychiatric industry, face-to-face with significant "mental disorders" that had existed over time. It became legitimate for certain psychiatric professionals to consider a client's treatment from a 'masculine-ist' (not only a feminist) point of view. These groups addressed tangible personal and interpersonal issues that these particular men had never considered: these group members were not the usual men's group participants from the past two decades. And they helped in the process of the codification of some of the methods of dealing with generic issues about maleness in this culture.

Mythopoetic Men's Groups

In the early 1980's, but emerging into prominence some eight or nine years later, poet Robert Bly was said to have sparked yet another version of the search for maleness. He, Jungian analyst James Hillman, and several other men formulated what came to be known as "mythopoetic" men's groups.

They gathered together contemporary poetry, older traditional myths from several cultures, and stories about men. To this was added some of Hillman's particular brand of Jungian psychology and elements of addiction theory. They offered primitive tribal traditions about the initiation of boys, and emphasized the use of a man's imagination (rather than logic or psychology) to explore the maleness question.

These groups were initially led only by the small group of charismatic men who began them, as well as a few of their cohorts. (Later versions involved co-leadership by psychotherapists, ministers, and musicians.) The group format involved the leaders' various presentations to the assembled audience of men, who would occasionally have the opportunity to comment on what was being done. There were also brief confrontations with audience members, especially if they differed with what the leaders were suggesting.

The content of the groups involved first the creation of a sacred area in which the meetings could proceed, sacred in the sense of invoking the ancestors, in the sense of separate from the daily, mundane world, in the sense of initiating a dialogue with the divine.

There would then be presentations by the leaders of poetry about male archetypes, of ancient myths about becoming a man, of admonitions about the same topic. Interspersed with these presentations would be

'participation' phases where the audience would engage in several activities: small group discussions; hand drumming; dancing in tribal fashion to hand drums; mask-making; or learning to maintain attention during in the tracking of animals.

Some participants reported heightened states of awareness after long hours of these efforts. It was said that 'men are helped to lose themselves, to get beyond ego....'

The groups usually lasted for five or six days, conducted in some isolated area, a camp or retreat center. Other issues addressed included: initiation themes in other cultures; mentors who are available to men in their lives; the generic shame that many men feel; 'mourning the absence of the father;' criticizing some behavior as being 'weak male,' or 'mother stuff' (i.e. too linked with the mother's needs); and the creating of a different context for various traumas in a man's life, now seen as 'initiations, wounds.'

The strengths of these types of groups is that they helped to include and legitimize much of the long history of positive male behavior that had been ignored by many previous men's group agendas. They drew on poetry and mythology, and as such, were able to contact men in a unique way, provoking and employing imagination to inform and enliven the assembled participants.

They employed much more active doing and movement and rhythm to 'get men operating outside of their cognitive-analytic experiencing styles,' and provided a framework to provoke heightened and sustained attention by participants. Unlike most previous men's work, they also attracted the attention of national popular media. But despite the embracing of male behavior in history and myth, this format oddly disclaimed association with the recent history of the work of men in groups.

Five Essential Elements

Turning one's attention to the longer history of efforts to discover the limitations and possibilities of maleness, we find a well-developed tradition, with elaborate descriptions of some elements in group work that are necessary for the fruitful pursuit of the question.

The use of the single gender small group as a study-unit has precedence in spiritual training with religious teachers -- in tribal units among many primitive cultures -- in academic studies of all kinds -- in psychological groups, to activate issues of male-male relationships -- in the development of crafts and trades -- and in community efforts to better or defend one's general welfare. While separating the genders may be a particular technique, specific to the developmental state of those involved, the use of stories, specific

teachers, and methods of training are common to many efforts of training and learning. In other words, these explorations do not "just happen," and are rarely the result of one person working in isolation. A number of key elements are usually present for genuine progress to occur.

It is most illuminating to outline the key elements that are described in the Sufi tradition, an esoteric, Moslem effort of several thousand years' duration. It is work designed to study and promote the full capacity of the human being. This tradition cites five specific elements necessary for the process of any learning to effectively take place: the teaching information to be imparted; the people who are assembled to learn; the teacher who is working with the group; the place in which the members are assembled; and the times in which they are gathered.

Attention to these five elements is said to be crucial in order to obtain the desired results in any educational endeavor. Perhaps an application of these five components would be of value to the process of discerning 'what it is to be a man.'

The Teaching

It appears that this category would include two broad elements: the instructional material being presented, and the methods used in that presentation.

Regarding the instructional material itself: the question of maleness has a very long life, and thousands of years of commentary exist. There are ancient myths about male behavior; teaching stories about men in spiritual traditions; a continuum of dysfunctional, functional, and supra-functional men; current scientific research about the results of male behavior; poetry and art about men and men, men and women, men and children, men and animals, men and the earth; current essays about maleness; great books about real or imagined men; and the personal experience of the men who are willing to tell their own stories.

A study of this history demonstrates also that admonitions about maleness change and shift over time, over culture, over unique moments in the same culture. It may be that different qualities of maleness are called for and are called forth at different times and places. It may also be that what appears efficient and adaptive male behavior at one time becomes later pathological in its impact. Or it may be that various pathological male behaviors have within them the essence of necessary, vital, productive male activity.

Contemporary men with unique issues of ethnicity, personality, or culture do have unique issues in their ripening to be addressed. Some gross stereotypes may offer examples. For young impoverished African-

American men in an inner-city ghetto, 'being a man' includes taking responsibility for the children they father, and for the way they earn an income in the world. For young wealthy Iranian-American men at a university, being a man includes not imposing their sexual wills on their female college peers, and understanding the impact of their economic status on their fellow countrymen. For young middle-class European-American men, being a man includes decreasing one's abuse of the world's natural resources, or of female employees, or of one's own family members via massive professional goals and tangible personal neglect.

Such teaching about maturing as a male would also take into account the sexual preference of the members, the age-appropriate issues of the members, and the exclusion of certain men whose difficulties in life are so profound as to need professional assistance. It would have the capacity to be specific to this man here who is on this quest: to meet him where he is now and to help him along the way.

The teaching process itself is likely to be conducted using a variety of teaching methods, probably in small group settings, meeting once a week for several hours. Many of these methods may be common-sense educational skills, spiritual or psychological techniques, or intuitive abilities. They can be observed in previous or current educational systems that promote 'learning how to learn,' that is, not learning to memorize facts, or to take tests, but rather, how to master, to grasp, to discover what is true about life. 'You have to allow the madness, and look for both beauty and danger,' some say. This admonition does not embrace 'the right way,' but rather, finding one's own unique way.

The creating and sustaining of heightened states of attention in the group members is one of the most common teaching methods. Exercises to get and sustain the attention of the members include: meditation instruction and practice; working with awareness on some small task; drumming or specific rhythmic dancing; intently listening to or watching presentations; various movements in complex repetitious form.

Another method involves the presentation of teaching stories, poems, myths and parables that relate to being a man in the world, and to the characteristics of that being. This method uses such material as an exploratory psychological device, noting that the characters can represent aspects of the self, the way one responds in crisis, etc. Men can identify with the characters in a story, see parts of themselves, and disrupt or promote their own behaviors. Stories can shock the listener/reader into attention -- they can be allegories for less-tangible realities -- they can describe analogous events that increase understanding of difficult ideas -- or give literal, obvious directives. And, just as a whole event, they can have a measurable impact on the willing listener.

Other methods designed for specific purposes and individuals might include:

- the disclosure, by the members or the teacher, of current personal emotional states and experiences, of one's own story, for the specific purpose of the advancement of the group;

- a grappling with one's early family experiences, which includes the mourning of one's absent father, or the celebrating of one's available father, or the raging about one's consuming mother, or the appreciating of one's capable mother;

- a grappling with one's own death, fantasies and hopes and feelings and fears about that;

- the study of the reactions of members of the group to any material presented, seeking various 'conditioned' reactions by those individuals which may be understood, watched, exaggerated, fully owned, or disrupted (it is important also to note that not all reactions are conditioned reactions);

- the sincere questioning of the teacher by the members, with responses that offer illumination or insight into the question and the one who is asking the question;

- the exploration of 'male attributes' as observed in many plant, animal, human, and cosmic species;

- the use of art, music, cooperative work efforts or deliberate exercises to induce specific experiences in the assembled men that the teacher assesses to be of value;

- the observation that unique male activities are pertinent to particular men in certain times in specific cultures;

- the intentional inclusion, or exclusion, of men of various natures, to whom the assembled members will react, for the purpose of further informing them about their own 'conditioned' behaviors as males, as well as informing them about various 'mad companions' that may be available to assist them; (these 'companions' are seen in fairy tales, older myths about male adventures, and are usually a collection of paradoxical collection of unique males who are remarkably strong, weak, ugly, fast, slow, hungry, large, crippled, handsome, etc. -- they represent various aspects of the collective male psyche)

- the capable and on-going attention to the dynamics of the group itself, to be employed as a measure of the group's development, the needs of the group, and to access the synergistic capacity of the particular assembly;

- the consideration of an appropriate birth, maturing, and death

of an assembly, guarding against the ossification that can occur, where various rituals or interchanges or fixed ways of meeting together become dogmatic and deadening in their effect, rather than bringing the assembled men into a more awakened state of consciousness;

- the guarding against the cults of personality that can form to idolize various teachers, meeting an unexamined need in most of us (to worship celebrities and authorities) but missing out totally on the material, the perennial wisdom, that is truly important;

- the linking of internal experience to personal behavior to political reality: making these connections to help affirm the genuine impact of our behavior, the ripples that we create in this pond that we (jump, fall, are thrown into);

- the employment of personal intuition or the practiced perception of the group guide, which may provide for group work, or individual instruction completely outside the scope of this article.

Most importantly, these methods would be tailored to the people who are assembled in the particular group, and imply a capacity on the part of the teacher to assess the individual members, and to offer directives that are genuinely instructive to the men who are present.

This cannot be overemphasized: the mere random selection of various methods of teaching would be somewhat equivalent of trying to train one's pet goldfish to 'go out and pickup the newspaper,' as it were. Most of us critters in fact have unique styles and actions and need to be considered in our ripening efforts....

The Teacher

As in any learning endeavor, it seems obvious that various teachers are necessary: some members of the developing body of men who can be recognized as 'guides' or 'leaders' or 'having more capacity' to assist in the work than others. Although an occasional student does train himself in higher mathematics, most get there faster with aid from one who has done the work first.

These genuine leaders may or may not be those who step forth declaring themselves as leaders in the learning project. Perhaps some caution would be best here, to be alert for various self-appointed leaders who are found at the head of any parade, or whose self-aggrandizing tendencies are not consistent with the core nature of this work. Those with unresolved shame issues (who tend to shame their students), or those with abusive tendencies (who seek only compliant students) might also be avoided, as well as those who see no higher authority in the lineage of their school than they themselves.

But genuine leaders have unconventional ways about them, and those expecting calm, collected, pristine guides might best reconsider how

difficult it is for an untutored student to identify a genuine teacher.

Indeed, some of these leaders themselves will have no knowledge of this particular process of 'exploring maleness:' rather, they would be simply obvious demonstrations, embodiments, of essential male conduct, and would have obtained the skills necessary to conduct the work.

It may likely be the case, however, that these leaders will have been grappling in their own ways with the question of 'ripening men' for some time, and will have resolved some of their personal considerations of the issue. They may have been doing work in some other traditions, or would be recognized by leaders in those traditions. It is also likely that they could 'recognize' one-another, that there would be some consensus among them about who these men were. And it is not out of the question that some women could be the bearers of much necessary information about 'what it is to be a man,' especially when one considers the yin, intuitive, softer sides of manhood.

There do appear to be various notions that these teachers would be 'finished,' completely perfect males. This may be more of the culture's idealized distortions regarding heroes and teachers, rather than being authentic descriptions of people who are able to assist in this effort. In the Sufi tradition, the teachers are said to have indeed achieved something solid and tangible, and are no longer 'seekers on the path.' In conventional terms, this may mean that you can best work on your maturation as a man under the guidance of a male who has himself matured significantly.

In a more immediate sense, the most important qualification of the teacher is that he has the capacity to supply the student with what is currently necessary for the student to progress.

In the absence of such a teacher, the student is usually urged to study what material he can find himself about becoming a man -- to discuss the topic with other men -- to develop an artistic or a musical skill -- to apply to himself what he is learning.

The Men Assembled to be Taught

These men who care about their intentional development at all, or are suffering, or even simply curious, are a necessary part of the formula for the process of 'men's work' to proceed.

It is interesting to contemplate 'what type of man' is interested in the whole notion of men's issues. But again, it is apparent that particular types of men gravitate toward participation in the military, in law, the arts, sports, business, etc. It must hold true in this work as well. Some would argue that 'softer' males are attracted to this work.

In recent feminist critique of mytho-poetic men's work, which proposes that many men have become too much the 'soft male,' the feminist author suggested that 'we looked over the Fortune 500 CEO's and couldn't find any of these so-called 'soft males' among them!' (This is a little like looking for a needle on the beach, instead of in a haystack, where it really lives.) But some portion of this men's work does appeal to men who are not attracted to the roles, opportunities, values, and goals of conventional males.

In any case, these are specific, unique people who are assembled to be taught, and the methods used to reach and educate and expand their perception may be different than the methods used to reach those Fortune 500 CEO's. (Imagine an unpublished monograph for those CEO's: "In Smirch of Excellence: Male Behavior that Inhibits Business Productivity, With Apologies to Tom Peters").

The least one might say is that this work attracts men who have the capacity to reflect on their own behavior, to observe even minimally their being in the world, its impact on other people, and on that world itself. Without that much cognizance of themselves, men are much less likely to consider the reality of 'being a man.' The question also attracts men who are psychologically minded, can give credence to the existence of mythology in world cultures, and can see the scope of possible male behavior, in contrast with their own. And it draws men who have or seek a life which includes the spiritual world, in its many forms.

Some fish know that they live in water, on occasion coming to the surface of it; other fish believe that there is no such thing as water, being so much a part of it, enjoying so much the benefits, unable to conceive that their view of existence might be any other way. And some fish do indeed fly...

The Place in Which the Men are Assembled

This may refer to on the surface the culture in which the men currently live.

Consider that being a man in 13th century Iraq may have called for different responses than being a man in 20th century Iraq. Even within one culture, there are various 'places' which make very different demands on the male inhabitants. Being a man in 20th century corporate America may call for different responses than being a man in that same moment in a small town, or in a ghetto, or in a wilderness setting.

The issue is further illuminated when considering such a slang phrase as 'where are you at these days?' In the realm of 'place,' a man can learn to describe himself first professionally, then in his

family/ friends world, then physically, and then emotionally, then in his imagination, and in his relationship with God. The answers to such questions are to be considered in the effective exploring 'what place' these men occupying, here and now, and what specifically do they notice about being a man at this moment?

Indeed, part of the work might be to help a man to ascertain, repeatedly, his 'place,' in a multitude of ways, and to generate responses that are called for in and by that place. Some places call for hard work, some for contemplation, some for wildness, some for lethargy, some for sorrow, and some for dance.

In some of the outdoor men's work, various extended attention exercises have to do with getting into more thorough contact with this place here. One is trained in alternative ways of using one's vision, hearing, smell, taste, and intuition, in order to form a much more encompassing relationship with the physical surroundings. In this way, a man begins to consider that his existence is not limited to the conventional boundaries of his home, his career, his family, and his own skin. He begins to develop a sense of himself as having an impact on the surrounding environment, and it on him, and what his responsibilities and opportunities are in that regard.

The possibilities that exist in this particular type of expanded world include: being in more complete contact with other people in one's place, thus more perceptive about one's impact on them; forming a legitimate connection with the surrounding natural elements of a place, including earth, sky, animals, and water; seeing technological tools as being a part of a place, the manifestation of earth and human intellect; and having a genuine sense of belonging to one's physical setting, as well as one's place in the ancestry of all humankind, and in a place that is part of the existence of all the sacred and profane elements in life.

In the mythopoetic tradition, the word 'container' is used in this sense, but it has more to do there with the mutual sense of agreement, of consensus, of community that constitutes the specific place in which this work is being conducted. Various efforts are made at constructing, sanctifying, reinforcing, and defending this place, being an important element in the full experience of the study process. This is good training for working with 'the place in which these men are assembled.'

The Times in Which the Men are Assembled

Another key element to consider in the ripening of men has to do with the times of the ripening, and doing what is appropriate for the times.

Being a man in 1971 might have meant to some American men that the most authentic way to respond to the culture was to not

participate in dehumanizing institutions, to experiment with altered states of consciousness, and to create alternative styles of marriage, work and family. To other men at that time, their maleness suggested they should join in with the dominant culture and have the cultural institutions direct and support their progress in life.

Being a man in 1991 might have meant to some men that the most 'male' way to respond was to try to restructure dysfunctional institutions, to practice the maintaining of consciousness, and to nurture social relationships now formed. To other men, 1991 meant that their decades of work in conventional businesses had resulted in a sense of betrayal and disappointment. And likely to others: that it was time to follow the corporate and nuclear family structure still further.

Being a man in 2011 might mean that the most 'male' responses to these institutions will be to simply create new organizations, using previously established and newly generated practices of business, psychology, and imagination. It may involve adapting to the changes that aging will provoke. For other men, it may mean a retirement from active participation in the advancement of culture, family, and self.

One thing might be concluded from these speculations: the men assembled for the purpose of self-development in 1971 likely had different needs for those different times. Indeed the overview of the many styles of men's groups above demonstrates that the fundamental question receives a variety of answers, some as a function of 'the times in which the question is asked.'

This is being written in 1991 in Tucson, Arizona, when the mythopoetic men's work is in fashion for week-long conferences, and when very supportive, but mired-in-psychological-issues weekly groups are popular. It is likely that other styles of men's work will continue to emerge, especially as the effort reaches out into other cultures, or to men in other settings.

Seen in yet another way, an emphasis on 'the times in which the group occurs' promotes specific attention to the present moment, to what is occurring within that arena of the group, and those members present. This is quite a different message of group work than that which would promote a man talking at length about his concerns of job, family, and finances, none of which are in fact happening to him at the very moment. It is also a different message than the study of mythological or historical forms of being a man. It suggests a shift from seeking problem solutions, or invoking archetypes with the imagination, into an attentive posture that is alert and participating in the immediate world.

An Example of a Group Employing These Elements

The men arrive at the appointed time for the group to begin: they are not really late, nor early. The meeting is being held at the home of the group leader, and occurs every Thursday evening. There is some minor social conversation as people arrive. The atmosphere is casual, but very intentional, as they are there with a common purpose which is very clear in their minds. They have agreed to meet regularly to participate in the mutual development of the members of their group.

They are men who are meeting their major needs for social, occupational, and psychological health in other settings. They know that the purpose of this group is not to help them get gainful employment, manage a depressive episode, or recuperate from a divorce: they understand that these goals can be met elsewhere. In this setting, they are present to identify various capacities of behavior, perception, and action that can be increased in one another, to promote becoming fully human men.

The members each learned about the group independently and applied to the leader to join: some were accepted, others were not. The leader is working to construct a group which balances various archetypal male characteristics. He himself recruited some members to meet this need. He understands that the composition of the group will have a significant impact on the results of the group work.

The leader calls the group to begin. Some form of opening commentary or ceremony or ritual is used: it embodies the qualities of acknowledging that the men are moving into 'sacred' time together, meaning, that various personal and transpersonal ideas will be considered, and experienced. The opening events would be designed to bring people to attention, to alert them to the beginning of something, to remind them of the very long ancestry that preceded their meeting here, to create a shared psychic setting in which their work could take place.

On this occasion, a round of drumming begins. The drumming is not some monolithic beat, but is several layers of discrete rhythms, in which various group members play parts. It is not a spontaneous jam session, and there is one group of senior drummers who are directing the effort. This lasts about 20 minutes and brings the participants into an experience of harmonious participation with one another. The group members experience a sense of entrainment, being pulled along by a force (their rhythm) which is larger than the individual members of the group. They are laughing and playfully enjoying the activity.

On other occasions the meeting might begin with series of physical movements. Some of the movements mimic the postures of men with strong emotions displayed; others mimic the movements of animals; some movements might be a kind dancing which is reminiscent of men

dancing in tribal fashion in many parts of the world. The dance is not a social, disco scene, since it is instead designed to evoke an experience in the participants that is associated with being various aspects of being male in the world.

After the movements, there might be some group discussion: 'what role have animals played in the live of men, historically? what role today? what animal activity was hard/easy for you to mimic? why? do you have any animals in your dreams? do you have any animals in your life today? how to modern and primitive men differ in their relationship with animals? how does your profession impact on the world of animals?' Perhaps a story about men and animals would be read.

The next phase involves individual members describing the results of various efforts they have been making. These efforts are specific to various behaviors which have been assessed as inhibiting their development as a male. One man talks about his wrestling with a need to always be in control. Another talks about his loss of his trust in his lover. A third mentions his success or failure in his attempts to maintain an awareness of his posture at different times of the day. The last one details his destructive arguments with his partners in their corporation. These are reports, not long-winded stories: there may be some comments by the teacher about the work the men are doing, but there is little interaction among the members. If there is advice to be given, it comes from the teacher, not the members.

It is noticed that men in the group can assess that individuals are 'making progress' on their various issues, though there are long periods of time during which this is not obvious. The group exists to produce results in the members, and those members who would dramatically diminish that goal will be asked by the leader to leave the group.

The group leader is facilitating this group. He is clearly keeping people moving along a continuum of progress in the meeting. It is not a leaderless setting, nor is it a setting in which group consensus is the highest denominator.

After these reports and teacher-participant interactions, a teaching story is read, and the group has a lengthy discussion about the meaning of the story, about various elements which stand out for various people, about how they see themselves in the context of this story. It may be some Celtic myth, a Sufi story, a Biblical chapter, an African chant, an English fairy tale. Some 'assignments' are given by the leader for participants to carry out, based on their observations or reactions to this material.

Perhaps there has been a dramatic social/political event in the community. The members now discuss their reactions to this, and observe that their attitudes about what is occurring have a predictable flavor, being based in who they are as characters. They

have a chance to discuss various males that are involved in the event, and notice what behavior seems to have a mechanistic quality and what seems spontaneous and alive. The group comes up with a response to the situation and commits to a form of action about it.

A member of the group is troubled about various issue of his children. He is encouraged to take time here to work on the problem. He is discouraged from spending much time telling his story, and is encountered by the leader and another senior member regarding his participation in the matter. Various interventions common to 'interactional group psychotherapy' are employed by the leader.

Some of these group interventions include: drawing the members attention to the group process that is occurring; encouraging dialogues among the group members; making interpretations which attribute problems in functioning to historic or present influences that condition a man to act in a predictable way. The a group member might tell a story which is a metaphor for the dilemma being discussed. The man may be here challenged express how this commentary makes him feel emotionally, to model alternative styles of responding, or to provide his own assignment for further work on the topic. Complaining, whining, and gossipy explanations are discouraged. Accepting responsibility for one's life, and the conditions encountered there, is encouraged.

The group is winding down, and some poetry is read. It has been chosen by the leader, and is a commentary on various issues of the group itself, men there, or men at large. There is no discussion about the poetry.

A closing of the group occurs. The leader makes some summary comments regarding the 'retiring' of the sacred arena which the men have created, as well as a request for confidentiality regarding what has taken place. People leave rather promptly, since they are not there to meet social needs.

Concluding Remarks

Whether employing political analysis and action, poetry-drumming-imagination, interpersonal psychology, or awareness exercises, there should be evidence that the sincere participants of this type of work experience some development in their attributes as men, and especially in their perception of the world, their ability to see what is happening and have an impact on that. These men would progressively experience themselves as being a part of the physical and the metaphysical world, linked to the ancestors and to the future.

It's a bit like effective baking: if we combine salt and flour and water and butter in the proper portions, and add appropriate heat, we have bread, a tangibly more nutritious food than any of the

separate elements themselves. Much of the contemporary men's work appears to lack some of the essential ingredients, where people 'work hard, but produce nothing,' as the poet Rumi lamented.

Men within the tradition of men's work in these ways, when asked for evidence of 'higher' or 'more essentially male' individuals, point to men OUTSIDE of the tradition of the 'men's work way.' This suggests (with some significance) that the process of male human development can proceed without a man participating in the above cited gatherings. Whether those men 'are just born that way' or work on themselves is a good question: it has been said that 'not even Eric Clapton could teach Eric Clapton to play guitar like Eric Clapton....'

Teachers in the history of human flowering, in any case, point more consistently to progress that moves beyond the consideration of issues that are solely genetic or gender-based, to progress that comes from the awareness of the debilitating effect of conditioning, the routinizing of behavior and perception, on the human form.

They observe that while one's gender does figure in the contracting and limiting of behavior, so also does one's history, culture, capacities from birth, life traumas, patterns of thinking, teachers, experiences of all sorts, and the collective conscious and unconscious forces that precede a man's arrival on the earth.

These teachers focus their efforts on the identification of behavior that is "conditioned and unfree," and on the disruption of that conditioning, which is the essential and repeated goal. And they understand that 'experience' is the major teacher in this work, that results do not arrive by some academic form of 'acquired knowledge,' and that one cannot do it efficiently alone. They state, rather that the expanding of human capacity comes to a person who has indeed suffered through his or her own version of the problem.

This is often done, for many of us, by learning to make shoes from a cobbler whose own soul was full of holes. But it is said that learning the craft is well-worth the toil.

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Carlton F. "Perk" Clark
Tucson, Arizona