Men's work, mid-life and the call of the soul

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My first love was poetry though I spent many years writing theatre. In the 1990s, I started using poems to explore men's issues and I've since facilitated men's groups in rehab, organised large-scale men's gatherings, and led rites of passage. My writing includes the play *Bengal Lancer*, three collections of poetry, and the prose book, *Re-enchanting the Forest: Meaningful Ritual in a Secular World*. This year, I was commissioned by the Steelworkers Union of Port Talbot to write a poem commemorating their relationship with the burns unit at the Moriston Hospital. Working with these resigned yet defiant men, and seeing my words cut into a powerful steel sculpture was among the most moving experiences of my working life.

The growing sense of a gender in crisis is raising curiousity about men's groups and men's work and the men's movement. The unifying theme here is one of transformation: how to move forward at a point in life when the way you have come to understand your maleness no longer works. When Vietnam vets returned, often traumatised and dismembered and disfigured, they faced rejection and some self-hatred. It was in the 1980s that these men began gathering in groups to heal and embrace a new kind of masculinity.

Imagine a circle of men, mostly strangers. They've been together for about 24 hours now and, while they've come to accept that their life isn't actually in danger, they are still wary of each other. For the most part, their experience of other men is founded on their boyhood experience of constant competition, shaming and the ever-present threat of violence. For about an hour, they've been edging towards a truth that's been hanging in the air between them. One of the leaders of this men's work retreat – for that's what it is – picks up a book of poetry and begins to read…

Counting the marigolds

The fist came out of nowhere.

He was nine years old and running
up the garden path,
excited as only a boy can be
when he sees his father coming
home.

Daddy, Daddy. I scored a goal!

It caught him right on the button.
Something split and he could taste
the metal in his blood
before he hit the ground.

He was staring at a bed of
marigolds,
concentrating, counting leaves and
petals,
when his father picked him up and
looked him in the eye.

I must have told you a dozen
times, he slurred.
Never leave yourself open.

When such a poem is read to a group of men, a silence descends that speaks of generations of fathers and sons. The fathers, often desperate to armour-up their boys in a cruel world; the son's grieving the loss of their dad to a thousand kinds of absence, or nursing the age-old ache of betrayal. Such silences may stretch into a kind of timelessness – only to be broken by a sob, or a low growl that speaks of a vast web of masculine woundedness that has toxified the world for some hundreds of years. Sometimes, in moments like this, a man looks round the circle and sees the grief in other men's eyes. For the first time, he realises that he is not alone, and takes his first step on the lifelong journey to wholeness. After many years he can come to a place in his life where other men no longer threaten, irk or terrify him; where some of them have become closer than family, having helped him to cleanse his wounds, own his own darker side, and discover his lost potential. I know this is so. I wrote the poem. I led the workshop.

Men's work originally came out of work being done in the United States, during the 1980s, to support Vietnam vets, who at the time were still largely despised and rejected by the countrymen they had gone to war to 'defend'. Gathering together, reading poems, telling stories and evolving initiatory rituals that helped them to heal and come home, they opened the door to a genuinely new kind of masculinity. The work was fierce in its demand for authenticity and accountability, ground-breaking in its openness, sharing and expression, and ultimately a life-changing – not to mention life-saving – experience for men from Seattle to Sydney, Sidcup to South Africa.

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Among the early leaders of what came to be called the men's movement – and there were many – was the American poet Robert Bly. For some years he had been touring the US college circuit, reading his poems and probing the naïve underbelly of American masculinity. His conclusions shook a generation out of its 'nice', resentful torpor. He and his colleagues, including the archetypal psychologist James Hillman, mythologist Michael Meade and an expanding group of shamans, Jungians, and other specialists, challenged men on both sides of the Atlantic to look at themselves, their wounds, and their ways of relating to other men – and women.

Their imaginative use of myth, poetry and ritual, connected with men at a very deep level. There was drumming, chanting and intimate sharing; there were midnight rituals and walks in the woods; and the mytho-poetic men's movement (later the expressive men's movement) came into being. So too was the image of the touchy-feely, platitudinous, tree-hugger, of a thousand skits and disparaging articles. In the UK as elsewhere, men's natural reaction to this unwelcome ridicule and suspicion was to circle the wagons and withdraw – a mistake I believe, which led to a broad assumption that Bly and his friends were no more than right-wing reactionaries and anti-feminists, which couldn't have been further from the truth. In fact, Bly was perceived in America as a 'pinko', a virtual communist. He was among the first artists to hand back a prize in protest at the war in Vietnam, and happily espoused the thought and writings of feminists, female thinkers and artists, founding the Great Goddess Conference with the Jungian thinker Marion Woodman. But in the UK the damage was done, and the notion of men's work as foolish, self-indulgent and reactionary was firmly established.

So, in spite of all this, what was it that appealed to men in such numbers? And does it still have a place in a world that has changed so radically in the last 30 years?

The classic format of a men's work event at the outset, was to gather 100 or more men at some out-of-season camp or centre, which served as a place of learning, instant community, and liminal space (for rituals).[1] Usually things began with some ragged drumming before each session and settled into three days of intimate sharing and descent, held together by an archetypal story from the ancient word-hoard of world mythology. By the end of a long weekend, the drumming was tighter and packed with energy, while the story had evolved into a ritual that closely followed the journey of the myth's hero and the inner process begun in the imaginations of the participants. The last morning usually involved a period of assimilation, the confirmation of lifelong bonds and friendships forged during the events of the weekend. Men came away – as their women folk often attested – lighter, more open and better able to deal with the multiple stresses of relationship, family, work and society. It made their lives better. It worked.

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Bly's basic format gave birth to a hundred variants as men gathered all over the west, to meet, explore and in many cases do some genuine healing. Indigenous rituals, rites of passage, and vision quests were mounted. There were weekend workshops and seminars at camps and country retreats. Psychotherapists opened facilitated men's groups from Stroud to San Antonio, while, in other areas, men worked with gangs and troubled youth, or became activists and ecologists, helping others to return to the land. Many developed an inner life, or found a spiritual path that beckoned to them and deepened their existence. Still others saw an entire way of being; of learning and belonging, of ritualising and teaching, of finding an identity and redeeming something that had been tarnished and lost.

Perhaps the greatest and most lasting outcome of the men's work of the 1990s was the proliferation of ritual men's groups which Bly untiringly advocated. Groups of

seven or eight seemed to work the best, meeting every fortnight or so. With drumming (always the psycho-active drumming to open things up) and poems, and sharing at an ever-deepening level. Some of these groups have lasted for decades, and have seen men through devastating events such as divorce, the deaths of parents and children, even the deaths of members of the group. They have provided solace and support, abiding friendship, and a profound sense of belonging in an unpredictable world. The benefits to health and wellbeing were incalculable.

And then the tide went out...

Over time, the original teachers explored new ideas, or found their way back to their first loves of poetry, psychology and writing. Their 'disciples', those who had organised, supported and promoted the work, found themselves moving into careers where the skills they had developed in men's work were readily transferable – into public service, social activism, or corporate work (working in the belly of the beast, as more than one colleague put it). As for the participants, some men seemed to think that, having attended a few weekends, they had been initiated into manhood, and that they had effectively 'done their work'. Others, in their men's groups and bringing up families, worked conscientiously to instill their values into their sons and the boys they mentored or taught. The media sought other demons, and moved on.

There were still bands of men who gathered to do good work. The Mankind Project, for instance, ran initiatory programmes that sought to change the world 'one man at a time'. Mandorla, picking up the baton from Everyman, and Wild Dance Events ran residential weekends in Snowdonia, and brave individuals occasionally set up conferences to explore masculinity or various male-related issues. The work survived in rehab centres and youth programmes; and in public sector initiatives to support and challenge violent men, but as far as the general public were concerned, Bly's old dictum had seemingly come to pass – 'the energy had left the wine'.

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That said, the underlying need has not gone away. With the arrival of internet pornography, climate change, globalisation, and mass migration, not to mention the accompanying evils of social upheaval and authoritarian politics, men are under even more pressure than their fathers were 30 years ago. Not only are they carrying the age-old, if self-imposed, imperative to provide, in a world where fewer and fewer of us have access to the kind of wealth that cushions the top 1%; they are also forced into trying to square the new-age circle that demands they be caring, sharing modern men. In a way, it's no surprise that reaction has set in and that laddism, Trumpism, sexual dysfunction and male suicide are on the increase.

Even without these threats to wellbeing, there comes a point in a man's life when the world around him – the world of computers and work, of lawnmowers and power tools – loses its savour. Usually he's in his mid 40s, sometimes older, though it's increasingly happening to younger men these days. Firstly, he begins to think with his dick. He buys a Harley, or a Morgan, or a pair of leather trousers. Sometimes he starts an impossible love affair, or 'inexplicably' goes cruising in the park. Alternatively, he takes up bungie-jumping or the violin – or he walks out of his job, or ends his tired marriage.

Workmates, neighbours and abandoned wives tend to call this the mid-life crisis but it's something much older and much, much deeper. It's also a thing we might expect, given the proscribed and limited, even desperate lives that many men lead these days. Our natural tendency to pathologise anything in this area leaves us, I'm sure, with a choice of syndromes and psychological conditions – but the simple fact is, it's the man's soul that is calling.

The poets of the Middle East, and some of the 20th century west, were only too aware of the soul's erratic yet enticing ways. They knew for instance that the soul couldn't count, that it was wayward and demanding. Above all they understood that the soul – or the psyche if we must – was insatiably curious, that it just wanted to *experience* things.

Imagine you've come across a button, a bright red button with a little plaque screwed into the counter-top saying something like 'Don't press this button' or better yet, 'Under no circumstances whatsoever are you permitted to press this important, serious and potentially very destructive button'. Well, your soul, which, of course, never learned to read anyway, will be *fascinated* by such a bright and shiny button. I mean... it's *red* isn't it? No doubt your soul will hover over the button for a while, but you know what's going to happen. It's going to say, 'I wonder what happens if you do this!' It's going to put its mythic finger on the button, and... Kaboom!... Suddenly you're in the divorce court, or a genito-urinary medicine clinic (or maybe both), and you're wondering why you never had the balls to wear those Hawaiian shirts that you coveted way back when – and wouldn't it be fantastic to drive across America to see your old girlfriend, or paint the house turquoise and take up the mandolin...

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And this is where men's work is more necessary than ever – because it addresses alienation directly, and manages not to pathologise – because it deals with the soul.

In a world of increasing alienation, where more and more men – black, white, gay or straight – feel detached and unhappy, where suicide is now the biggest killer of men under fifty (see www.mentalhealth.org.uk/a-to-z/s/suicide), men's work provides a way of getting present and becoming whole again. Alienation makes men restless and prone to distraction. It feeds our addictions and magnifies our need to compete. We yearn to be successful, to have the money that makes us feel like we belong, that we have arrived, that we are okay. And, of course, it never works, we can never quite shake off the fundamental malaise. Plenty is no shield and distraction can't keep it at bay. We are fragmented, apart. We are cast out. We are alone – and on a lonely Friday night with your wife denying you access to the kids – it can kill you.

Just when the soul is prompting a man to press the red button, men's work, by speaking the language of the soul – using poetry, story and ritual – brings him to a place where his wildness is acknowledged, where his grief and rage are embraced, and where his shadow – the deep black bag that holds his darkest secrets – is not only acceptable but welcome.

And it works. You read an article or a book and you overcome your fear. You go to a workshop or a talk and you make a decision that changes your life for the better. Thereafter, of course, it can be hell. You spend weeks, howling at the moon or floundering around at the bottom of the well of grief. You lose friends and home and family, materially you can lose everything (I certainly did) but in time you get somewhere, and your life begins to pick up momentum. Surrounded by other men who are searching and striving like yourself, your soul gets fed and you sense the healing.

At its best, it is a time of immense enrichment and spiritual deepening, an opening to all the things that constitute the great mysteries of life. Towards the end there's an acceptance of oneself, one's failures and petty victories. And other people start to notice the difference. They seek you out and show you respect.

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Taken together, men's work in its various forms offers a way for guys who've hit the wall – of alienation, depression, self-loathing, or simple failure – to 'unpack their stuff' in a safe yet exhilarating way. In a circle of men, you see yourself reflected. Your shadow – be it your grandiosity, your flakiness, or your nit-picking pedantry – can be challenged without recourse to rage or violence. And when the rage surfaces, you can be held, until the grief comes, and with it the healing.

As in the example above, one's first arrival at a men's conference or workshop – like a first day at school, or boot camp – is a time for acute nervousness. As the mythologist Michael Meade used to say, 'A man at his first men's conference asks himself two questions – is someone gonna get killed? And is it gonna be me?' What follows, however, is invariably an inspiring surprise, as the instinctive care and fundamental decency of the men around you becomes apparent. In a male world of mistrust and violence, men's work offers something reassuringly benign, wholesome and masculine.

And the tide is finally turning. Books are addressing the subject once again, and documentaries are highlighting the hidden successes of men's work (see The Work, an inspiring documentary following three men through a men's work intervention led by inmates at Folsom Prison, California). Most importantly, men are turning up at workshops like the one mentioned above. They are nervous and wary but open to new ideas and seeking the composure and self-assurance that they've seen in other men.

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Having been through that opening weekend of nerves and massive relief myself, I have reaped the benefits of men's work in a hundred ways. I've experienced life-changing rituals on a men's rites of passage retreat. I've been shepherded through vision quests, and taken part in workshops on a dozen aspects of the male experience. I no longer feel threatened in the presence of other men and I'm not afraid to speak my truth to a roomful of guys who don't agree with me. I've found my true path in life, and a very real sense of belonging. Above all, there are men all over the UK, and abroad, that I know I can call on in case of need. Men who know me in my frailty, who have seen me in the extremities of grief and anger, confusion and callousness. What's more, they know I'm there for them too – and short of going off to war with a man, or climbing Mount Everest, you can only get that from men's work.

Ayot, W (2013) Counting the marigolds. From *The Inheritance*. Glastonbury: P.S. Avalon.

1 Following anthropologist, Arnold Van Gennep's principals, laid down in his book *Rites of Passage*, men's work events usually involved three fundamental stages: Separation, Ordeal or Transformation, and Return.