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**THE INNER FATHER**  
**some thoughts about**  
**psychotherapy groups for men**

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by

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In the past 20 years or so, more and more males have begun, with some encouragement from the women's movement, to look at women and their concerns - and at the same time to start paying attention to their own feminine side. Men began to move away from the stereotype 'man', away from the 'thinker', away from the 'macho'. The softer male appeared, not interested in harming the earth or starting wars, approaching life in a different mood. A of men, including me, have hoped that by unifying with their feminine side, they would become free.

**But have we ?**

I do think that men have changed considerably in the past 20 years. Today men can allow themselves to feel deeply - at least when women are around. So has their relationship with their own femininity. Whether they are happier, and whether relationships with women have become more satisfying, I do not know. What has not changed, is their relationship with other men.

I do not think that contact with our own masculinity has deepened, nor

have the meaning and purpose of our lives become clearer. I think further step needs to be taken, not only by us men, but also by the male side of women. As Robert Bly expresses it: 'Many of today's males are life preserving, but not exactly life giving. There is not much energy in them. Many are unhappy.'

In my own life I feel something profound is missing. Something I cannot get hold of by being with women, or by focussing on my feminine side. Trying to contact this 'something', I feel a kind of emptiness, an empty silence. This often happens among men and it takes me back to how I felt when, very rarely, I was alone with my father.

Our industrial society tends to take fathers away from their children. Boys in particular find an empty space instead of a male role model. And whenever there is a vacuum, demons will rush in. So we fill our holes with nagging fears, suspicion, distrust of other people. No wonder our world has become such a dangerous place to live in.

In our western culture we do not have rituals to initiate boys into

the world of men - as for instance the Indians have. Most of us enter the world of men without being prepared for it: all we do is act as men, copy men's behaviour. But in order to find our individual uniqueness and purpose we must separate from the collective male identity and go out into the wilderness alone, into the unconscious.

We are western men: we cannot copy other peoples' rituals. We have to do it in our own way: we have to do it psychologically by consciously exploring the relationships we have with our father and with other men.

To do this is what I would describe as 'bucket work'. It is hard work, often frustrating work. In the fairy tale 'Iron John', the Brothers Grimm talk about men who have to empty a lake with buckets to capture Iron John the Wild Man, The Fiery Man, who lives deep on the bottom. It is interesting that in this myth men do not find their feminine counterparts at the bottom of their unconsciousness, but a man, a fiery, uncivilized man.) This bucket work a man cannot do alone. He cannot do it with women. The story suggests that he has to do it with his fellow men. (This is actually what we find in any other culture: the initiating of men into the world of men, has to be done by men, and amongst men.)

Therefore I think the first step men have to do together is to confront the fear, emptiness, suspicion, distrust, competition, disappointment and frustration which always arise when men are

together in any kind of group. In other words, the missing father demands to be confronted and recognised.

Acknowledging all this is an important step men can do together in a group. It helps them to get a deeper understanding of their relationship with other men and their inner masculinity. It also gives a feeling of being fed and gaining strength.

We know what being fed means in our relationship with women - at least we know what it means with mother. But to experience that and how men can provide it is of vital importance, and a first step to conquering the inner demon.

Father himself has been deprived by our culture and since we all are brought up mainly by our mothers, we obviously tend to take a feminine attitude towards father and therefore look from a feminine point of view at our masculinity. Our image of father has been wounded - sometimes by father's action: sometimes by mother's observations of these actions, leaving us with often negative views of our father and his whole world.

To look at father from a different perspective is one of the major tasks of men's psychotherapy groups. To understand him means to understand an important part of our roots, means to encounter feelings one probably does not like to acknowledge - especially amongst men. But focussing on father in a men's group can also help us to confront the demon, to

overcome the inner dragon and to experience a different kind of energy.

This is why in the men's group I run, group members will be their fathers for a period of time. They enter the room as their fathers; introduce themselves with their father's name: they share as their fathers; they talk as fathers about their sons, their wives and their lives in general. The more the group gets involved, the more the men feel how strongly their fathers are alive within themselves. Although they might feel very different 'playing' their fathers, they always encounter feelings they knew were there but never allowed themselves to acknowledge or to share.

What haunts me whenever I do a 'fathers' session is to see the deep grief in each of the father's faces. I believe that grief represents having failed: having failed in their relationship with their children, having failed in their job or in their marriage, having failed in the war, having failed by not developing their full strength and potential.

And with all that having lost the meaning and purpose of life - the 'fire' of life.

I see a lot of pain in older women. I see pain in the face of a mother giving birth. But it is grief I see in older men: it is grief we men hide from each other. Maybe the female mode of feeling is pain; and the male mode is that of grief ?

But looking at father only with mother's eyes means encountering

a lot of pain - mother's pain, or the pain of the woman inside, never being able to really feel protected, and safe and understood.

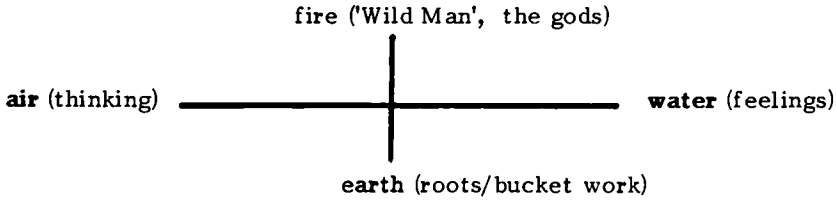
Looking at father with his eyes, means seeing the grief, the loss of purpose and direction, the loss of fire - but also our roots and the nourishment and strength we can get from and through him.

The lack of true fire is, I think, a common experience amongst men. It is also what we have in common with our fathers. The search for it is the motivation which actually binds the group members together.

To discover the fire, the cage in which the Wild Man is held captive needs to be opened. The key to it must be stolen from underneath mother's pillow.

To explore this stage of the group work we need to go into our inner world, usually by guided fantasy.

Often men think that exploring the fire means to fight with each other, to express anger etc. But the story suggests something very different. The story suggests that discovering the fire and exploring it is a lonely task, a task nobody can help with. The story also emphasises that the 'bucket work' - work so different to what we think 'fire' and the 'Wild Man' is about - needs to be done first. Otherwise if water (feelings) and earth (roots/bucket work) have not been previously integrated, the energy of 'fire' and that of the 'wild Man' might look like the uncontrolled and destructive force of a nuclear bomb



As father is often absent in our culture we rarely understand what positive male energy is about. Men often see authority as something which needs to be fought against, in form of rows with the tax office, with institutions, with society, with fellow men.

I think for men it is very difficult to get hold of their own positive male power and their inner authority - and actually live them. This is why I think we need fairy tales and mythology. Here we can find very old images most of us are carrying in our unconscious. They only need help to surface, to be made conscious.

I see a great 'danger' in the search for 'fire'. In my experience men's groups (whether they are run as psychotherapy or as peer groups) tend to get stuck in narcissistically looking at man's individual grief and pain thus going back where the men have actually come from; the exploration of their feminine side, of their feelings, their softer, their vulnerable side, of the inner 'water'. They can easily forget what they were actually after, because exploring 'water' seems more familiar and therefore less frightening. To explore the 'fire' means new doors have to be

opened - not only individually but also collectively. The 'water' energy implies a strong focus on one's own subjective feelings. The more we understand about our inner 'water', the fuller we feel. However, the life-giving energy of men, their excitement, their power cannot be found in 'water': it is - as the fairy tale suggests - underneath the water and can only be reached by emptying the lake. The purpose and meaning of our existence, the answers to questions like: what make me decide to enter this world? What is my uniqueness and where is the place where I have to use this unique quality of mine for the benefit of all? These questions can only be found by exploring the element of 'fire'.

I believe that getting in touch with 'fire' and the energy of the 'wild Man' is not a backward step. I think it means a religious life for a man in the broadest sense of the word: it means discovering the inner authority which is not merely used for one's own goals and realizations, but also for the family, society or the world in general: it means knowing and owning the place and the task in the world which one has come for.

I think here we are talking about a

dynamic process that we can also find in society as a whole. It is the process between the urge for self-realization, for satisfaction of one's own needs on the one hand and the needs of society on the other hand.

The exclusive focus on one's own needs might help one to become successful, to make a career and to earn good money - but this is often accompanied by the loss of meaning and purpose and hence the underlying grief I mentioned earlier.

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If the needs of society are too much in the foreground, one might lose one's personal uniqueness and become helplessly dependent on the moods of fate.

To explore this dynamic process by creating a space in which we can wait for the eruption of what C.G.Jung called the 'transcendental function', incorporating elements of both sides and showing us a new knowledge, is what I think men's groups could be about.

## Second Death

For Rini

He walked, naked, out of lapping sea. Behind him  
I saw no sail ravel the taut horizon  
And no turtle scuttle on the white sand.  
Clearly framed among still cliffs and boulders  
A corpse clung shell-like across his shoulders.

Sleeper, he shouted across the empty beach,  
Here is the second death. Now yours the burden.  
I dive again, reach deeper, far beyond  
Where those who have died once await the morning.  
Above, a single seagull screamed its warning.

He threw his burden at me. It coiled me in.  
He walked back under water. Then no sound.  
My shadow lengthens behind me in the evening.  
Under its load I stagger till I wake.  
What might hatch out should this thin vessel break?

Richard Burns

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