



Men—Women: People

Jan Hawkins

As I contemplate how I might make clear my feelings on the subject of men and women, or people, I realise how demanding a task it will be. This is a risky arena, and one I have struggled to make sense of for many years, in a variety of settings. Sometimes when I have tentatively tried to explain myself I have encountered hostility from women, and indifference from men. This has been I think largely because of my inability to articulate what is essentially for me a deep feeling or knowing. So deep in me that I can hardly comprehend it myself, except in a kind of transient, almost ethereal sense. But it is becoming a source of sadness for me, especially now when I am privileged to be

working with a group of people who are struggling with these very issues.

For me the struggle usually arises when I am with a group of men and women, and for whatever reason the suggestion arises from someone to have a women-only group. Usually at that point I am aware of a resistance in me, which I have never been able to articulate without alienating myself from the women. But I am a woman; I too want to understand myself more as a woman, and share with other women. My concern, though, is that something may be lost in the division of the sexes, yet I can never truly explain what that might be. By the time I have tried to chase the rainbow of that feeling,

Jan Hawkins is a psychotherapist and co-director of Person-Centred Workshops, who run workshops for survivors and their allies, as well as a diploma course in working with survivors.

groups have usually divided, and I have then found it difficult to get any further.

I value the shared-identity aspects of the divided sexes. Also the powerful shared consciousness, and possibilities for celebrating our womanhood or manhood in single sex groups. I see the opportunities in these exclusive groups for real open exploration of the issues facing men and women. I wholeheartedly support the concept of and need for this type of division. Somehow, though, I have never really fitted in. For many years I saw this as one of my failings, something I needed to 'get over', that there were still more issues to resolve around a possible ambivalence about my own gender. So most of my energy and attention was focused on that work, leaving very little left to explore the nagging feelings of something missing.

Why is it, I have often pondered, that I am so concerned about men? The deep affiliation that I feel, what is it actually about? It is a similar affiliation to the one I feel, and now understand more, with people who have severe learning difficulties. This glimpse or transient feeling I get with the division of sexes, or of abled/disabled, I can only describe as one of affiliation, and a sort of deep, deep knowing. What do I mean by 'knowing'? Trying to describe this is extremely frustrating. It's a kind of knowledge that is not about knowing anything — it's a kind of awareness or openness to that deep, deep core of myself and of the other. So that the sense is of wonder, of wanting to communicate, of awareness of the essential struggle to be, to become, that I feel is there in us all. It's almost as if I see my own existential struggle, my own flicker of humanity, and can also see it in others

— whether these 'others' are a different gender, race, colour, sexual orientation or ability. It's as if I have a glimpse of something so wonderful, of a potential so pure and vital, that I am afraid it will be obscured by separating into discrete groups. I hesitate to use the word because of the many assumptions surrounding it, but for me it is a spiritual depth and flow that is multifaceted. That may somehow get lost through separating into groups with a common identity.

This has all been thrown up again by working in a training setting, where the subject was working with survivors of childhood abuse. I was acutely aware of the possibility for men in such a group to feel a weight descending upon them, due in part to the statistical evidence showing that most abuse is perpetrated by men. In my own therapeutic journey, one therapist told me that when I referred to my abuse he felt guilty, because he is a man. This meant that I had to move on to another therapist who could work with me on the more painful issues in my healing. But I was sad that this man felt as he did. He was a warm, empathic man, who had offered me a completely safe relationship where there was never any threat. That I could feel this with a man was an enormous gift. It came as a shock to me at that time that he should feel as he did — as if there was some shared responsibility that men were obliged to assume. My soul (or the essence of me, or the core of me — the very depth of me) hurt in that knowledge. For if he felt that, where was I to go?

I had always believed in the potential for something better. I had clung throughout my life to the idea that there were people different from those I had had contact with. I just knew in my heart and my

soul that what was happening in my life did not need to happen. Somewhere there were women and men who were able to love tenderly, compassionately, strongly and with respect for themselves and me. These people, I felt sure, were to be found; I just had to keep looking. The essence here seems to be about tenderness for ourselves and each other. Brian Thorne points out that when tenderness is present 'there is the possibility of finding wholeness and of recognising the liberating paradox' This liberating paradox allows for the both/and in us all, rather than the either/or. It allows us to transcend the paralysis and stuckness of the tight divisions, and frees us to be both weak and strong, to have what might be described as masculine and feminine characteristics — to share our deepest selves and celebrate the similarities and differences.

What I had been looking for was what I already knew deeply, and wanted to know in reality. So now when I encounter men struggling with the weight of the perpetrator in society, and feel them drifting away from me into groups where they can feel safe to explore those issues, I am divided in my feelings. I feel: yes, that's clearly what is needed, what they need; who I am to cry 'come back'. Or when I am with women who want to exclude men, or who battle against the 'male as aggressor' in society, who am I to cry 'No, No, it's more complicated than that.'

But a tiny voice in me is now gathering energy, and I can see it will lead me into all kinds of trouble. For while I speak against that need for divided groups, I appear to lose empathy with or understanding for those who see those divisions as their only way forward. Carl Rogers' discussion with Irene in *Becoming Partners*

brought out a point that I feel is pertinent here. In talking about a 'real relationship' with another human being, Irene realised that the greater risk (greater than taking the risk of being in a relationship) was 'not to risk'. I guess that's really the bottom line for me, that I don't want to risk not risking being my whole self with others who are risking being their whole selves.

The core of me would like not to battle, yell or be as the sheepdog. That part of me would like to be with a group of people, just people, who want to struggle with the issues together, with compassion, with tenderness, and without judgement or blame. Just to share our essential spiritual, innocent selves, and to risk sharing the darker shadows of our selves. To be our wholeness together. To transcend the outer shell of gender, colour, race or physical appearance or ability. To be. I crave desperately for such a place, such a group.

The loneliness is intense at times. It's almost as if I can see a process which I value and respect, and play a part in — yet I am still waiting. It's as if I want to liberate those who become locked into the divisions, and then I am wrestling with the feelings which spring from this: such arrogance, such audacity. Still (whispers a tiny part of me when divisions are called for) let us have the courage to risk sharing what this need is all about.

Certainly, for the sake of developing clarity, and sometimes also for the initial tentative explorer, there are times when divisions will be necessary and helpful because they offer a degree of safety. Sharing commonalities can be strengthening and healing. Speaking a common language can release some of the most basic difficulties so that deeper communication is

possible. I am not here advocating integration at all times. But just sometimes, we may be able to take the risk of coming together as humans, as conscious, yet spiritual beings. We may be able to share with each other our wholeness and struggles. Together we may celebrate our shared and common feelings, as well as celebrating our differences. Truly to celebrate the strengths and joys of the differences could empower us all. What is truly unique about you? What is truly unique about me? What joy we could share in owning our woman-ness, our man-ness, our sexuality, our sensuality, our race, nationality, body images, our intellects.

Especially in the arena of healing from childhood abuse we must stand together, share our strengths, vulnerabilities, insights, compassion and commitment to changing. Oppression in whatever form is not unique to men, nor to any particular race. I feel strongly, passionately and with a compelling (yet still whispering and vulnerable) voice that we have to take the risk of being known to each other. We can own our own responsibility for our own actions. We do not need to take responsibility for others' actions, but be

responsible and response-able to and for each other and for humanity, without restricting ourselves by carrying guilt and blame for actions we ourselves have not committed.

My mother was sadistically abusive to me. I understand many of the reasons why this was almost predetermined; I am sad for her, and sad for me. I am a motherless child. But I celebrate motherhood, whenever and wherever I see it, and in my own mothering of my children. It was my mother who was unable to be a mother, not all women. It was some men who abused me, but not all men. It is a source of the utmost despairing, longing, craving for me that there will be a time when men and women (and all nations, abilities, races, sexual orientations) will come together, not to blame, shame or line up against each other, but to truly look forward, inward and fan the flickering tiny light within ourselves and others — to share what we know of our own group in an open inviting way that helps us see our membership of the wholeness of humanity.

In my idealistic, maybe naïve way I will hold onto that dream, and will weep with joy whenever I catch a glimpse of it in reality.

Further Reading

Jan Hawkins, 'Person-Centred or Self-Centred?' *Person-Centred Practice* Vol 1.1, pp 12-18, 1993
Carl Rogers, *Becoming Partners: Marriage and its Alternatives*, Constable, 1973

Brian Thorne, *Person-Centred Counselling: Therapeutic and Spiritual Dimensions*, Whurr, 1991