



ON SKYROS, UNPREPARED, WITH MEN, AN ACHILLES HEEL, AND WOMEN

Nick Duffell

In the September of 1996 I arrived on Skyros to run a men's group. I was totally unprepared, in more ways than one.

I had forgotten how beautiful Greek islands could be, how the houses cling to the hillsides, how the whitewash polishes the slabs of masonry and carefully reveals dark stepping-stones on winding streets. And Skyros is deeply beautiful. There being no airport, you have to take the boat and several buses. By the time you get there you have been forced to slow down. But it is not exactly quiet. The main village itself, without cars because the streets are so narrow, is crowded with people of all ages sitting endlessly on doorsteps, watching the passing of pedestrians, participants, donkeys, and the bizarre motorcycle-trucks fashioned by the locals to overcome the limitations of their alleyways. You have to walk the last mile to the centre, and it is like walking back through time.

It wasn't just the beauty, I simply was not prepared to run this men's group. My head was filled with the problems of men in relationship with women, I had a piece to write for the magazine *Achilles Heel* and I was late on my deadline. This had conveniently prevented me either from writing or preparing my course. I was in a new location but in a familiar neurotic spot.

So, in my little whitewashed room, much too late at night, I sat at the pine table

and tried to get my head round it all. Why choose this moment to begin writing about relationships between men and women when I should be concentrating on men? Yes, I've a deadline to meet and I'm late. Yet in my life, nothing has taught me more about my own masculinity than attempting an intimate relationship with a woman. And on that extraordinary, if tiring, journey here, I was bombarded with impressions, at least one of which was laden with synchronicity.

The story I read in my guidebook just happened to be about Achilles. He was on the run and in hiding on Skyros, disguised as a woman. Odysseus, another hero who was after him, was displaying a wonderful sword in the marketplace. Achilles watched furtively until he got so excited to see this powerful thing that he inadvertently let slip the woman's robes he was wearing. Odysseus discovered him and dragged him out by his famous heel, to meet his grisly fate.

I started to think that, for men, our challenge is often our relationship with the Feminine, whatever her form: our wives and girlfriends, our mothers, our inner life, our receptive side, our Anima, Mother Earth, and how mankind has mistreated them all. However, so often our weak spot seems to be our identification with the Masculine - the bright sword that we long for? We can embark on a 'heroic' journey to become

self-aware, develop sensitivity, but have trouble in 'owning our power'. We may be so afraid of being overwhelmed by the strength of our anger that we repress it (and let it leak out). We find it hard to say 'No', at the right time. We may disguise ourselves, as it were, in 'women's robes, as 'nice guys, and hide at the inevitable appearance of conflict in our relationships. And this seems perversely to invite trouble. Myths often hint at the need for going on a journey, of one of self-discovery, in which we have to get to know our own weak spot, our Achilles heel, in order to complete ourselves, to make our fate into our destiny.

OK, this is more like it, I thought. But what about the wedding?

On the final leg through the village, the street had been completely filled by a wedding procession, and I had to stand back and watch. At the head of the train, the bride, looking young and vulnerable, was being escorted – or more like frog-marched – by two huge Greeks, their cheeks polished by the seemingly unfamiliarity of the razor blade, bulging out of dark suits that looked like they hadn't been worn since the seventies. These guys surely had no trouble identifying as masculine. What, however, was I doing here? And what did this escort mean? Had I witnessed some archetypal aspect of men, in their role of protecting the Feminine? Or was it that these men were treating the woman as a property, and I was seeing patriarchy at its most brutal? There really is a problem with men, I thought. But guilt is not the right way, and we also have our bright aspects. To develop these

men have to wake up. This is what the course is going to be about, I concluded, and promptly fell asleep.

In the morning, I was once more unprepared for what greeted me. I was here for a men's group - in fact I had signed up for a whole two-week stint, and recently I had begun to regret it. (Two weeks with just men! Oh no. I hate the idea. What an impostor!) But I had forgotten that Skyros runs several courses alongside, including this time, Shamanism, releasing creativity and creative writing (the course I should be on, I thought). And of course there were plenty of women. In fact, I had all the guys but one. This produced its own dilemma.

One of the delightful experiences for me of being at Skyros was the company of the other facilitators. These were all experienced people and determined to have some fun. We enjoyed each other's company and laughed ourselves to health during the fortnight. Every morning we met to consider holding the community as a whole. Both these things proved to be a good safety valve.

My unpreparedness continued. I was alarmed by the amount of retsina that flowed at mealtimes. This was Greece, after all, and the people here were English and on holiday. House rules dictated that the staff did some socialising and not keep themselves to themselves. I noticed that the male facilitators were much in demand at the end of meals, and I realised that with this holiday atmosphere you had to be really skilful in holding boundaries and not seeming too aloof.

I had introduced my course by describing three routes towards awakening that men can take. The first I called *The Way of One*, the path of introspection, the way of meditation or therapy. The second was *The Path of Relationship*, or Tantric, and the third *The Road of the Many*, of the village, of community, of men's groups. This fortnight was about the latter. But I was unprepared for the impact of our course on the current Skyros community. The other participants felt deprived of men, and, fired by the fact I had warned the guys not to talk about what we were up to in our group, what began as a grumble over the first week turned into a real furnace of curiosity, and finally of protest.

Eventually, the gender imbalance could no longer be ignored. The staff group decided to intervene. On the midway Sunday, we convened a whole-group meeting to process the issue of the lack of men. Warmed up by a Five Rhythms dance session, we all got stuck in. We couldn't alter the facts, but the process work worked. What emerged at the end of the week was quite astonishing.

As the culmination of my course I had arranged for the men to spend the penultimate night out alone in the wilderness, a kind of vision-quest, or night on the mountain-of-fear. As it I turned out, I was in plenty of fear myself throughout the night. I had undergone this process myself, but I had never facilitated it before. Worse, the countryside was wild, and completely unfamiliar to me. As I held my own night-vigil at the centre I descended into bottomless worry. Would they be slipping off rocks, getting

torn to bits by farm dogs, falling into the sea? Was this OK with the centre's insurance, and should I not have checked it out with them beforehand? Between three and four o'clock in the morning you can get pretty anxious if you let yourself. I let myself.

Gradually, I became aware that I was not the only one awake at base station. Some of the women had decided to celebrate the men for taking their self-awareness work so seriously. This was an act that benefited the whole community, they said. And so they themselves were staying up all night and to honour and hold the men in their endeavours. When I discovered this, my anxiety vanished. I was deeply touched and somehow was certain everything would be OK.

In the morning, as the guys came in one by one, their faces marked by inward struggles, and with their adventures of the night still to be told, they were met by a wonderful breakfast prepared by these women. Everyone wept to be honoured by the opposite gender in such a way.

We had come full circle. The sword was in its right sheath again. The Skyros community had worked.

