

An aim for men

John Rowan*

Independent practice, London, UK

It is getting harder and harder to know what a man is supposed to be like, but Aaron Kipnis made a great contribution with his notion of the ‘initiated man’ who has dared to go in for personal therapy. I want to expand on this idea, and to give some examples of how it works in practice.

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There are a lot of men today who are not sure what it is to be a man. There are so many mixed and confusing messages, all competing for attention in the media. Perhaps even now the most predominant message is still that men should be dominant, but this too has been so widely questioned that it seems quite shaky today.

Just to recall, the standard used to be this, which Robert Brannon (1976) discovered in his research:

NO SISSY STUFF – Anything feminine must be avoided. It is important not to be seen as feminine in any way. To do otherwise is to run the risk of being ridiculed or devalued by other men.

THE BIG WHEEL – There is a need to be seen to be high in status, or to be connected directly to people or organizations with high status. It is important to be important.

THE STURDY OAK – One must be independent and self-reliant, and be ready to support others. This support may be physical or material: if it is emotional, there is a risk of being seen as feminine.

GIVE 'EM HELL – Always be ready to respond to threat. Do not avoid violence if it is appropriate. Protect one’s image and one’s loved ones. Take risks and take the lead.

This is what used to be called ‘hegemonic masculinity’, and it is still to be found in many places. And wherever found, it is still intimidating and full of pressure to conform. In fact, the truth is that any prevalent image becomes full of pressure to conform.

One of the striking facts is that men and women have very different views on what makes men sexy. I discovered this in a workshop I ran with both men and women involved. Men and women agreed about what made women sexy and attractive – there was no problem about that. But when it came to men, there was a big difference: men thought that to be sexy and attractive he had to be strong, well built, with muscles that were quite prominent and visible, and vocally assertive. Women, on the other hand, actually preferred men who were quite slim and not particularly pushy. They

*Email: johnrowan@aol.com

might even wear glasses without much loss of attraction. Once stated, this is pretty obvious and not particularly controversial. But the old image does persist in the minds of many men, and they sometimes even agonize over their lack of features that are not even relevant.

But if the old image is wrong, what is the new image to be? In the search for an alternative, some men jumped to the conclusion that they had to cultivate their feminine side. They had to drop the exclusive devotion to sport and cars, they had to drink something other than real ale, they had to take more interest in clothes, and furniture, and houses. They had to take an interest in movies that were other than full of action and explosions. But this did not work very well. Not only did they not enjoy their new identity very much, but they discovered that women were not greatly impressed by their efforts. The new version of masculinity was even less impressive and successful than the old one. So this phase did not last very long, and we see little of it today.

The third model, which has been suggested by Aaron Kipnis (1991), is that of the initiated or authentic man, and I believe that this kind of man can only emerge from a course of therapy where the man has been able to meet himself and get to know himself better. The problem with this is that there is very often a strong resistance to any suggestion that a man might need therapy. As Ian Harris says, 'Most men respond to crises by being stoical' (Harris, 1995, p. 193). Sometimes this is just a question of admitting to weakness or vulnerability, which is anathema. Sometimes, in such cases as the man who has still not dealt with his father or mother, the therapist seems to them like a parent or other authority figure, and they are in the process of trying to become more independent of such figures in their lives. This is why this phase means burning away the falsities and mistakes of the past in a kind of fire. This fire is painful and may arouse feelings of wanting to escape from it.

In men generally, there is a reluctance to enter therapy. As we have seen, the main message of the culture to men is that they should be in control at all times. How can one be in control and at the same time explore the unknown corners of one's inner world?

But men are wounded. They need to recognize this if anything is going to change. Each man thinks he can hide his wound, and the trouble is that this can be so successful that he can kid himself there is no wound. Michael Meade puts it well:

If a man doesn't know he is wounded, he can deny the facts for ever. One fact about a man who doesn't know he is wounded is that he can't see that others are wounded. More than that, he'll put his wound into others because of his vague sense that there's a wound somewhere. He'll only see it when he puts it into someone else and will feel strangely better when he sees it there. Then he'll lose touch with it and have to stick it on someone again. (Meade, 1993, p. 50)

It is essential to own up to our wounds if we are to be healed, and to stop wounding others. However, men can be quite fascinated to discover that as well as having painful things, perhaps shameful things, to explore in the lower unconscious, they may also have exciting things, wonderful things, even perhaps ecstatic things, to discover in the higher unconscious. And they may be able to enter into much better relationships with women. So anything that gives men permission to explore their higher self, their soul, will be welcome. And this is of course very much the case in initiation, which can be a major theme.

Fred Hanna and his colleagues (1995) have researched the way in which transcendence is crucial in the big breaks-through in therapy. There has to be a moment of going beyond the existing perceived limitations of the man involved. From a new perspective, the whole problem looks different. This then affects the person at every level, which as we have seen is one of the key characteristics of initiation.

Something that often gets in the way of this is an intense suspicion of organized religion. This can often be overcome by pointing out that what is being suggested is not a belief system imposed from outside which has to be accepted as it stands, but a personal experience which the man has for himself.

One exercise I often do is to suggest that the client lays out four cushions (could be chairs) to provide locations for his body, his heart, his head and his soul. He takes up each position in turn, and says how things look from there – perhaps addressing a current problem or a problematic person. It is a curious fact that even men who have never mentioned such a thing before find it quite possible to take up a position on the soul cushion, and generally to produce some extremely wise comments.

Men tend to have a rather cavalier attitude to their bodies: they are there to be used as instruments, but instruments that are not really cared for or treated properly. It is almost regarded as un-masculine to think about one's body as something to be treated well. But Kenny Klein (1993) has reminded us that the body is not only masculine but sacred.

Men have a complex relationship with their own bodies, often regarding parts of the body as having an independent existence. It is quite common, for example, for the penis to be given a name – Henry Miller called his John Thursday, or in French Jean Jeudi, which sounds better.

The point of drawing attention to this is that men pay so little heed to their own bodies, and male therapists very often ignore the many cues and clues that are offered by body language. When men do pay attention to their bodies, it is most often in an instrumental way, to discipline it for some purpose or other. What is being attempted here is some encouragement for men to really consider the basic movements of their bodies, and the basic information their bodies are trying to give them. Loving our own bodies and understanding them better go hand in hand.

What I believe is that the inner and the outer, the personal and the political, are basically one and the same. My own personal changes and the changes in other people and in the wider scene are not widely distant. This is why I feel my own personal history may be highly relevant to what other people are going through. We all have to make changes if the patriarchal world is going to change, at the personal level and the institutional level too. I like what Terry Kupers says about this:

The challenge that confronts men is to find ways to be powerful without oppressing anyone, and in the process to redefine power, heroism and masculinity. This is an immense challenge. And men will never meet it in isolation. We need new kinds of bonds among men and between men and women, straight and gay, if we are to construct, collectively, new forms of masculinity and new and better gender relations. (Kupers, 1993, p. 183)

None of this is easy to do – we all have our various hang-ups that get in the way. But if the theory is of any use, it can help us to see what directions to look in.

A therapist must walk carefully in this area, because it is such a sensitive one. But it is a very central area for male identity, and cannot be ignored. An account that I have

found very valuable in my work is the approach of Aaron Kipnis, which has already been mentioned. He says that men need to be initiated into new ways of being a man, and I have argued (Rowan, 1997) that this initiation can be achieved most readily through counselling or psychotherapy. He offers a number of adjectives to describe the initiated man, and I think it is worthwhile to examine a few of them, as I think they offer a vision of a possible goal that men can aim at, and achieve through therapy:

FLEXIBLE – This is a feature that is contrasted with ‘hard’ and ‘soft’, and illustrates the way in which the initiated man does not get stuck with fixed categories.

CAPABLE – This is contrasted with being either dominant or submissive. This man does not go to either extreme, and does not get stuck between the two; a new category emerges.

STRONG – This is neither tough nor gentle, but capable of both.

FIRM – This man is neither coercive nor pliant, but something different from either. He can be relied on not to wobble. These four categories are on the physical side, and Kipnis also refers to ‘warrior’, ‘hunter’, ‘vigilant’ and ‘generative’ as physical qualities for the new man. But let us now look at the emotional side.

RECEPTIVE – Here we are neither closed nor unprotected, and this means a man who is approachable and open, able to relate to anyone freely.

NURTURING – This contrasted with being either demanding or smothering, and means a man who can be approached freely with no likelihood of being rejected.

ASSERTIVE – This man is neither passive nor aggressive, but can speak up for himself when necessary, and refuse to be ignored or put down.

DIRECT – This man is neither a bastard nor a nice guy, but available and present, so that someone can get to know him without pretence or façade. In this category Kipnis also refers to such qualities as ‘feeling’, ‘interdependent’, ‘fresh/humorous’, ‘lover’, ‘vulnerable’, ‘wild/playful’ and ‘responsible’. Moving on now to what Kipnis calls the mental side, we get some more suggestive categories, which give us a fuller picture of the man in action.

DISCRIMINATING – Here we meet a man who is not always analytic, taking everything apart to see how it ticks, and not always synthetic, trying to see everything as a whole which is not to be analysed or taken apart, but always seen as complete and unstructured. This man can be trusted to discriminate fairly between alternatives.

COMMUNITY – This is a man who does not fall for hierarchy on the one hand, or anarchy on the other, but is able to hold fast to the ideal of community, where everyone has a voice and everybody is entitled to be heard.

RESOURCEFUL – The idea here is to avoid the extremes of being exploitative or being conservative, but rather to be continually aware of the possibilities within each situation, and the ability to choose well between them.

HEALER – What Kipnis means by this is a person who is neither a doctor, with a bag of remedies and a fixed set of beliefs, nor a magical thinker who is all over the place and quite unpredictable. This is a man who approaches each situation afresh, with helping hands. In this category, Kipnis also refers to qualities such as ‘choosing’, ‘insightful’, ‘holds paradox’, ‘holonomic’ and ‘personal ethics’. The fourth category Kipnis brings in is one that is often neglected by men: the spiritual. But if this is part of being human, which I believe it is, then it has to be given due weight.

POLYTHEISTIC – Interestingly, this reference to the polytheistic is also to be found in the work of James Hillman (1989), who seems to be a good guide to the realm of spirituality as found in psychotherapy.

DIRECT EXPERIENCE – Here the man is seen as avoiding dogma on the one hand, and other people’s beliefs on the other, steering a course that takes into account what is real and present at the moment. The man sees through his own eyes, rather than relying on other people or fixed beliefs of some kind.

SELECTIVE – This man is neither exclusive nor inclusive, but able to choose freely within the realm of experience. This man can trust himself to see clearly.

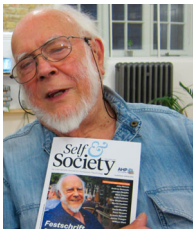
INITIATED – Here we are beyond being uninitiated, but neither are we still seeing ourselves as seekers. We have arrived. This does of course lay us open to accusations of being self-satisfied and smug, but it is not really like that; it is more like having reached a plateau. There may be more heights to scale, but at this point we have reached a point of rest. In this category, Kipnis also refers to ‘paradoxical’, ‘grounded’, ‘embodied’ and ‘mentor/elder’.

I feel that Kipnis has given us here something worthwhile to consider. To me, the idea of the initiated man has real resonance. And as I have said, I believe that therapy is the royal road to this kind of initiation; in fact, I do not know of any other way of getting to such a point. The whole point of therapy, in this context, is to get to know oneself, one’s past and one’s potential – it is a genuine voyage of discovery, where new things can be met and faced and dealt with. To do this in an unafraid way is the path to the type of man we can defend and believe in.

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Notes on contributor



John Rowan has been working in the field of Humanistic Psychology since 1970, and his book *Ordinary Ecstasy: The Dialectics of Humanistic Psychology* is now in its third edition. He is at present working on a third edition of his book *The Reality Game*, which contains much new material. His work and publications in the fields of gender, men’s issues and the transpersonal are well known in the therapy world. John is Honorary Life President of the Association for Humanistic Psychology in Britain.

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