



## FESTIVAL REVIEW

### Celebrating Men: 12–15 August 2021

Reviewed by **Senan Clifford**

The third MenFest gathering took place this Summer in the Somerset hills just outside Wellington near Taunton on 12<sup>th</sup>–15<sup>th</sup> August. The first camp was in 2019, with a smaller ‘wild camp’ during lockdown in 2020, so it was exciting to be able to gather in a new venue, a full programme of over 40 workshops, morning and evening circles, body-work and deep sharing opportunities, and over 150 men for the weekend of connection and discovery.

It is billed as ‘an amazing meeting of conscious, intentional men – in all our flawed magnificence – holding space, exploring and celebrating each other and the work we do to become better men!’. And for many of the men there, it was and continues to be amazing; feeling it has had a lasting effect on their journey into self-awareness and personal development.

Offerings of exploration and of deeper processing included archetype-work, shadow-work, boarding-school syndrome, breathe-work, sexuality integration, challenging privilege, ceremonies and well-being sessions, as well as dance, poetry, sculpture and song.

This comes at a time of need, when men and masculinity are coming under scrutiny after yet more exposures of men’s violence, sexual abuse and widespread misogyny, within our institutions, schools and families, and which emphatically seems to be built into our model of being a man in this culture.

At last now there are moves to question what is it in men, in their socialisation and conditioning, that lies behind so much acting-out, imposing something toxic on to those to whom one would expect them to show care. And whatever this is, it is surely time that we strive to do whatever possible to undo, replace and negate such conditioning; a liberation into a healthier sense of manhood.

#### **Men’s Liberation – Freeing Men from Shame and Connection to Our Divine Masculine**

This was the topic of the opening workshop at this year’s MenFest. It is about the journey from boys to men, and what happens to us, such that we become the men we are – often somewhat immature, incomplete, lost and struggling. It explores how this happens, in order to foster a more empowered, mature and even divine masculine, and thereby liberates men.

Feminism isn’t about women, any more than patriarchy is about men; instead, it demands that men and women are both liberated, equally. Whereas we can say that women are becoming increasingly empowered and self-aware, men are stuck and struggling, still bogged down under the stereotypes of patriarchy.

If we consider what’s going on for men we see them behaving badly! Our personal relationships showing terrible incidences of domestic

violence, sexual assaults and emotional disconnection; our children are still suffering from absent, unavailable or critical and angry dads; and the ecological and climate breakdown can be laid at the door of male business models, profit-seeking and competitive self-interest in male-dominated businesses, and largely unchallenged by most men.

In their personal lives men are also seemingly doing badly! Men have higher rates of problems – from suicides to crime, addictions and loneliness, poor self-care... premature death; in all of these, men are suffering much higher levels of distress than women, and seem unable to alter this, and even to be unaware of how diminished their well-being is.

What's going on for men today is not positive – between behaving badly and doing badly, toxic masculinity is eating into the lives of many of us, young and old. But what is particularly concerning is that we never actually ask the question, 'What's going on for men?'. When we worry about increasing sexual violence, for instance, we acknowledge the awfulness; agree it must stop; but then fail to question why some men do this. In fact, societally we routinely do not consider the experiences of men, possibly assuming these are positive...; it's a man's world, after all... – male privilege and all that. Yet the facts suggest otherwise: men's behaviours and experiences confirm that it's certainly not all roses being a man today. And men are often the worst ones for failing to realise or consider their own needs. Get the job done, no fun, lonely, stressful, powerless... – terms that actually better describe the box many men find themselves living in.

Liberation means undoing this box. Liberation Theory describes it as 'both the undoing of the effects and the elimination of the causes of social oppression'.<sup>1</sup> The steps to men's liberation require that we first must name what it is we need liberating from, and into – and we are beginning to do this, whether it's called 'toxic masculinity' or 'patriarchy'; there is a growing awareness in our stories, in men's groups, even in the media that change is needed.

The second step involves recognising that something is causing this distress; it's asking the

'why are men doing this?' question. Men are not born bad, but it's somewhere in the gender expectations and how men carry these forward. It requires us examining and learning how men are conditioned, and what effects this has on us. It's certainly not about blaming women; there is no 'war of the sexes' – both are stereotyped according to our gender, oppressively and tragically. But while there has been lots of attention given to issues of male privilege and the effects this has on women, there is a lack of similar attention on the disadvantages men experience; these are neither acknowledged nor recognised; yet how many women, given the choice would choose to be men!

Recent research of brain development using new MRI scanning technologies<sup>2</sup> has been used to see that male and female infant brains are virtually identical at birth, yet start to develop differently from then onwards, soon becoming drastically different on every level. Brains at that age are like sponges, hugely adaptive, responding to the stimuli and behaviours they are shown, and boys and girls receive totally different experiences from day one. That first question, 'Boy or girl?', which seems so innocent, actually belies the absolute separation between how we treat babies, based on whether they are a boy or a girl. From the different connections mothers make with daughters or sons (and, to a lesser degree, fathers too, as they are usually less involved with close parenting), and the preset expectations we all harbour about boys and girls, the brains, behaviours and abilities of babies increasingly differ in relation to their gender. Boys become more physical, outgoing, independent, task orientated; girls more communicative, gentler, empathic. Before school starts, both genders know clearly what is expected, and how to meet those demands, and then in school, children rigorously reinforce these norms on their peers, shaming non-compliance. These norms are constantly and consistently reinforced in every aspect of our societies, from the clothes we dress in, the toys we choose, our films and TV programmes, and in every comment and compliment we make.

And it is in this process that boys learn the shape of the manhood they are expected to fill; tough, strong, heroic, self-sacrificing, willing to die, kill

or be killed; never crying or showing emotions with the exception of anger, which is permitted. Men must get the job done, know how to do stuff, drive machines, diggers and fast cars, take risks and be leaders... – in charge, voicing opinions. And men must win, be successful, and be able to provide for others/their families. And the biggest fear is that they fail, be seen as not manly, such as to be seen as girly or feminine, for that is to risk rejection. When so much of becoming a man involves being alone, not trusting others, especially not other men, we already feel a sense of rejection, and avoid risking further rejection.

This very strict and austere definition of masculinity is what oppresses men, and the wounding it entails is what men behaving badly are acting-out against. And trapped in this role, unable to express grief, cry or complain for fear of appearing weak, men carry on and ignore the pain and discomfort, and internalising the sense of rejection they hold it as shame.

To become liberated from this unhealthy socialisation requires that men grieve what they have lost, what hurts, and how hard it is staying true to the social expectations that being male demands. Men must start to tell the truth, end hiding our pain and shame, and learn and practise how to accept our feelings and express our grief. Without grief we cannot access joy, and we then remain unable to connect with ourselves, others and our beautiful world.

And men's liberation also requires that we start to explore ourselves, allowing softness, colour, joy, difference, love and self-acceptance, learning and practising how to empathise, to express and to share our feelings. We must open our eyes, see the beauty around us, smile; connect with our selves, our feelings, and become whatever we want to be. This is to connect with a sense of our divine masculine, and to become the men we were born to be.

## Notes and References

- 1 Erica Shereover-Marcuse (1938–88), 'Liberation theory: a working framework'; posthumously published as 'Liberation theory: axioms and working assumptions about the perpetuation of social oppression', in N. Gonzalez-Yuen (ed.), *The Politics of Liberation*, 4<sup>th</sup> edn, Kendall/Hunt, Dubuque, IA, 2003 (available at <https://tinyurl.com/4eba8scn> (accessed 10 October 2021)).
- 2 Gina Rippon, *The Gendered Brain: The New Neuroscience that Shatters the Myth of the Female*, Vintage, London, 2020.

## About the contributor



**Senan Clifford** has been interested and involved in men's work for 30 years; everything from men's groups to domestic-violence projects, 'rites of passage' events to social history. During this time, he has also been a

carpenter, and school teacher, a designer and craftsman; and now, having just turned 60 years old, is at last writing his book about patriarchy and men.

Contact: [senan.clifford@btinternet.com](mailto:senan.clifford@btinternet.com);  
see [www.mancelebrating.org.uk](http://www.mancelebrating.org.uk).