

Sons of our fathers

Exploring masculinity in counselling means undoing masculinity, writes **Manu Bazzano**

Published in Therapy Today, November 2019, pp 24-27

Following the election of Donald Trump to the US presidency in 2016, photographer Richard Misrach went on a trip around the desert sands of Texas, California and New Mexico, taking pictures of graffiti on the walls of derelict homes. His 2017 exhibition, *The Writing on the Wall*,¹ featured a few swastikas – and several penises. The male organ in these depictions is lonely, disembodied, dejected. In one photo, it morphs into a skinhead man; in another, it wears a suit, as if ready to go to work; in another still, it's marked USAF (United States Air Force).¹ Its disembodiedness makes it pitiful, despondent. Its proximity with swastikas suggests hopelessness in its invocation of hatred and violence as mimicries of potency. It confirms the link between powerlessness in men and their embracing of neo-fascist ideologies.^{2,3}

A different version of powerlessness is found in privileged men whose nastiness against women is the justified target of feminist fury. Their views are unreconstructed, their understanding of intimacy non-existent; their involvement in politics presents a threat to democracy. At closer scrutiny, the 'strongman' model broadcast on the world stage is an insecure character, secretly plagued by a sense of inferiority – a 'straw man', hopeless at genuine conversation, unable to listen or show interest in others, especially if different to him. Whether chief executive officer or head of state, he feels entitled, given his status and wealth, to bypass 'pointless niceties'; he mistreats employees and brags about his sexual conquests in locker-room banter. It is a mistake, however, to see swagger as expression of power or prevarication as strength. For Hannah Arendt, dishonest and/or waning power is the power that readily turns to violence.⁴ Coarse masculine narratives still dominate.

Married to an insidious rhetoric of resilience,⁵ they blatantly misunderstand power. Rather than power *over* others (a sign of weakness), genuine power is cultivation of vulnerability⁶ – ability to sustain the intensity of the world, its beauty and its pain, without falling apart or resorting to conceit. Power is the power to be affected.

The posturing of strongmen across the globe is pathetic; their characteristics are so noxious as to resemble caricatures. Many see Donald Trump as the clearest example of toxic masculinity and threat to democracy. But there is another sort of man whose more nuanced traits escape current discourse. In my view, greater danger comes from seemingly benevolent figures.

Caring and sharing

Soft-spoken, sensitive, unassuming, Mark Zuckerberg is the creator of Facebook. Nothing about Zuckerberg suggests any resemblance to Trump. He has also spent most of the last five years publicly apologising for data breaches, privacy violations and the manipulations of Facebook users by everyone from Russian spies to Holocaust deniers to hate groups in Myanmar, the US, India and beyond. Yet the Facebook business model is, I believe, fuelled by the twin evils of surveillance and compulsion. Zuckerberg's apologies have been described as a mix of 'naiveté' and 'malignant obliviousness'.⁶ According to his critics, the naiveté comes from a belief that all the world needs is 'sharing'^{6, 7}. In one interview, he declared that Holocaust deniers don't contravene Facebook's policy because they truly believe what they say. Theirs is a case of 'faith error', he said; 'I don't think they are intentionally getting it wrong.'⁷

It was plausible in the days of the Arab Spring to believe that Facebook provided a platform for positive change. Now, with its increasing propagation of what has been dubbed 'misinformation, rumours, echo chambers, and hate speech',⁸ the toxification of its environment by trolls and haters, Facebook arguably constitutes a potential threat to democracy – all in the name of 'sharing'. Because of its wide echoes within contemporary culture and particularly in relation to men, it is worth exploring this avowedly soft and caring version of masculinity that Zuckerberg has, perhaps unwittingly, come to represent.

Jason and Medea

There are men (I count myself among them) who, in their struggle to respond to feminism, end up paying lip service to women, all the while displaying a peculiar blindness to their subjectivities. We mean well; we sincerely detest macho posturing. We bang our drums, sing our songs by the campfire and play tribal rituals with other men at weekend workshops. We are in therapy; some of us are therapists and menswork facilitators. Does any of this *affect* us to the point of transformation? I'm not sure. Are we to blame? Existing methodologies (therapy, self-help, spirituality) are uncritical of a thriving corporate technostucture built on rigid binary identity, chauvinism, and defensiveness. Is this why, despite worthy intentions, the majority of menswork sounds like a cry for patriarchy's golden years? True, our cry is disarmingly honest. But male naiveté is as toxic as the swagger of the unreconstructed bloke. Facebook – the brainchild of an enterprising naive male – is an example of this.

I have located the archetype for this misplaced male innocence in the mythical hero, Jason. The tragic tale of Medea's love for him⁹ typifies two recurring themes: (a) men's suppression of women; (b) reason's subjugation of passion. A native of Colchis, an island in the Black Sea (a land of 'barbarians', i.e., *strangers*), Medea is devoted to the deities of the Night. A magician who mastered the craft of obscure rituals, she's caught between reason and passion, eventually giving in to love – and being destroyed by it. Jason gets his hands on the Golden Fleece, symbol of natural authority and kingship, not thanks to his valour, but through Medea's magical arts. He is a fraudster, practised in deceiving others and himself, shutting down his own guilt, a man 'with neither core nor depth, a mere surface cloaked in seduction, in diplomatic and erotic charm, in beautiful heroic gestures'.¹⁰ Clearly, the ancestral fury and magic practices of Colchis are no alternative for the luminosity of Greek thought. But how distressing that the person who heralds 'civilization' is a vain, insecure young man! Even in her homicidal fury, Medea is so much greater than him; she remains loyal to her love and pain. In Jason's world of cool rationality, she is condemned to become the loneliest of strangers, a painful reminder of how difficult it is for foreigners to be accepted to this day by nations that pay lip service to fairness.

Jason's achievement is that his cruelty is cloaked in 'sensitive' language. Zuckerberg's feat is that the touchy-feely interface of Facebook hides what runs the show: algorithms. 'As the maths has become more and more sophisticated, the user no longer even experience it as

mathematical.¹¹ Paying lip service to ‘feelings’ goes hand in hand with paying lip service to feminism; for political scientist Nancy Bermeo,¹² paying lip service to feminism goes hand in hand with paying lip service to democracy while serving a corporate technostucture – one that is, in her view, dominant in contemporary conversation. This now exerts a malevolent influence on therapy, stating that what can’t be measured doesn’t exist, forgetting that, when it comes to the vagaries of experience, ‘not everything that counts can be counted, and not everything that can be counted counts’.¹³ Resistance to the corporate technostucture usually manifests as defense of the human. Appealing as this may be, it harks back to a fantasy of pre-industrial harmony. In menswork, love of ancient rituals offers picturesque diversion from the technocratic takeover. At times, it makes patriarchy look groovy. The men’s movement of the late 1980s/early 1990s¹⁴ had remarkable things to say about masculinity. Its mytho-poetic stances hold some appeal for many of us keen to reject dominant narratives. But its time has sadly expired. Its message has been incorporated, producing a new breed of men whose nuanced versions of masculinity are wholly complicit with the status quo.

Learning from difference

What is missing in contemporary menswork? We need to learn from queer theory, from transgender and non-binary stances that over the last few decades have mounted formidable challenges to static notions of identity. We need to explore masculinity with the same boldness. We need to update our understanding of feminism, whose resurgence in the 1970s and 1980s was the cause for the emergence of menswork in the first place. My identity as a man is bound up with manhood, but greater strength comes from accepting fluidity rather than from defending male identity. In short, exploring masculinity in counselling, as in menswork, means undoing masculinity. To traditionalists of all persuasions – those who dream of a place where ‘women are women and men are men’ – the above will sound like a wicked postmodernist ploy set to destroy the values of the patriarchy. And they would be right. We need to decide, as therapists or/and menswork facilitators, whether our response to a man’s identity crisis is to bolster gender stereotypes or nurture the ‘male crisis’ until it reaches the threshold of transformation.

The general consensus is that men who seek help have had absent or non-responsive fathers in childhood. Recent studies show how members or ex-members of hate groups in

many parts of the world, including the UK, were 'abused, physically or sexually, by stepfathers or mothers' boyfriends'.² Even physically present fathers were emotionally shut down... phantom presences in their own homes'.² While the 'absent fathers' explanation may be statistically true, it tends to shift responsibility towards individuals, overlooking, among other things, the impact of class and ethnicity that is evident, for instance, in the mass incarceration of Black men in the US. Moreover, it assumes that 'a father in attendance' within a conventional family unit is the best thing for a son's wellbeing. This view universalises the Oedipal family, overlooking the fact that, even though, as Judith Butler explains, 'the dependency of the child is not *political* subordination in any usual sense', it does make the child 'vulnerable to subordination and exploitation'.¹⁵ The ideological backdrop to the absent-father argument is the tenacious belief that the conventional family safeguards civil society, and that 'culture itself requires that a man and a woman produce a child, and that the child have this dual point of reference for its own initiation into the symbolic order'.¹⁶ This belief is hard to shake; it is canonical in modern anthropology,¹⁷ a discipline revered in psychotherapy circles.¹⁸

Naturally, given the ubiquitous fragmentation of the family, the therapy world's habitual response is reparative. It is, nevertheless, a mistake to respond to the crisis of fatherhood by bolstering masculinity and re-establishing the central role of the father within the family. The breaking up of tradition could be instead a stepping stone towards greater emancipation. A more fluid sense of self in a man in crisis makes space for listening to the concerns of others, for opening up to the hurt expressed by women, to the struggles of transgender, gay and non-binary people. Fluidity here means opening to organismic experiencing rather than being stuck in self-bound understanding. The former reveals the multiplicity of the body as the composite of natural forces. The latter confines us to the narrowness and reactivity of identity. Queer theory teaches us that fixed notions of heterosexual masculinity around which the conventional family is constructed imply the mourning of homosexual desire; that the price for having denied or neglected this loss translates into various degrees of rigidity in a man's sense of identity.¹⁵ If, conversely, masculinity is not turned into a 'solid thing' but understood as a facet of a multiple, changeable psychic landscape, its exploration in therapy can aspire to participate in a shared emancipatory project. If this does not happen, we merely end up soothing patriarchy's injuries.

We need to decide whether we work for reactive forces, whose scope is the preservation of existing structures (no matter how obsolete and dysfunctional), or whether we are willing to serve active forces of emancipation.⁶ To become emancipated (from *emancipare* – to be sent out) is to be freed from the control of parents/guardians. In the 17th century, it meant freeing a son, daughter or wife from *patria potestas*, the legal authority of, and possession by, the father or husband.

Sons of prodigal fathers

How does a man become emancipated? In what way does emancipation relate to the father? Great emphasis has been given in menswork literature to the ‘hands-on’ presence of the father, to the father-son psychic transmission,¹⁴ to the boy getting ‘the smell of the father embedded’¹⁹ in his psyche. While this is beneficial in promoting a closer affective bond (especially in emotionally constipated cultures), its view is one-sided. We need to ask: ‘Can the phenomenon of absent (or prodigal) fathers ever be a *blessing* in the life of their sons rather than the curse it is conventionally purported to be?’ It was certainly so in my case. My mother’s early death was devastating. It meant that my father could not be there for me. For a while, communication was difficult. I can now see that we were both lost, cast adrift by pain. I left my country of origin, and after a year I gradually started corresponding with him. From my newly-found autonomy, I constructed a link with his legacy – and his love. We found ways to accept one another. I found it in me to encourage what others in the family could not: his sense of spiritual renewal in finding a new love. For his part, he respected my need to reject the life he had wanted for me.

An example from my own clinical work comes to mind. I will call him ‘Adam’. When Adam’s long-term relationship ended, he was distraught. His partner admitted that his suspicions had been true; she was having an affair. What hurt most was that the picture of the other man that slowly emerged (partly from snippets of what she’d said, partly through his own imagining) was of someone who, in Adam’s view, was clearly everything he wasn’t: adventurous, athletic, sexually experienced, practical and unambiguously protective. He was older too. ‘She wants a man, not just a boy,’ Adam said, with a forced smile, trying to diffuse his anguish, knowing I’d recognise the line from the song.

A few months of difficult work followed, during which I thought I was supporting his avowed desire to become ‘more masculine’, hearing week after week of his fumbled attempts at

romance, of late-night tears over too much beer, of expensive rides in early morning cabs after missing the last train home. By early spring he had cracked the dating scene, had become rather good at navigating the undergrowth of apps and chats, the virtual shrubbery that on a good day leads to meeting face-to-face with someone with whom there is a momentary spark of shared anguish and joy. But soon we discovered that, in the back of Adam's mind, lying dormant all along, was the hope that his ex, on meeting him someday, would recognise from a look on his face and a casual gesture his hard-earned experience, his newly found shrewdness. The whole dating effort, we both realised, had been solely for her delectation and appreciation. What had he learned in those fleeting encounters? There had been tenderness and fun moments, he said. Best of all, one woman he dated had really liked his softness, even his clumsiness and shyness. We linked this to early sessions in our work together, two years before, when he had expressed anger towards his father for being so hopeless – for being, in Adam's words, 'weak', not a 'real man'. He had made a detailed list of all the things he didn't want to be: his father's occasional drunken rages, followed by deep sadness; his resentment; his badly disguised envy of people he saw as smarter, better educated and unperturbed by the chaos of the world. When Adam eventually left his native Australia for the UK, he deliberately fashioned himself against his father's model. What he was now beginning to remember was his father's well-hidden vulnerability, his open jocular, and his 'instinctive goodness'. 'Is physical distance playing tricks on me?' he wondered, 'or is it showing me something like my father's essence?'

Adam's reflections reminded me of James Joyce, who, in his writing, transubstantiated his father's drunken incoherence into charming wit, gregariousness and fundamental goodness of heart. I am reminded too of two other Irish writers, Oscar Wilde and WB Yeats. As Colm Tóibín has written,²⁰ all three had fathers who were absent; all three sons found ways to recreate their fathers in their work, but they needed solitude and distance from them to do so. This is counterintuitive in a therapy world currently smitten with attachment theory and, at times, disturbingly uncritical of the traditional family. Wilde 'stood alone as he suffered alone; Yeats stayed proudly aloof, as Joyce did in his exile'.²⁰ Their fathers too were alone, 'following no route that any community had charted'.²⁰

By their absence, these wayward, prodigal fathers allowed space for their children to fashion themselves, while paradoxically passing down to them the essence of their fathers' difficult legacies. The fathers may become ghosts, but their symbolic presence is allowed to thrive and nurture the sons, who in their flight carry them in their heart. Some may say: 'These were unusual, highly creative men.' For Otto Rank, 'neurosis' itself (or, in current parlance, incongruence, mental distress) originates as a failure in creativity;²¹ in this sense, a person's shift towards positive change can be understood as act of creative will – akin to the act of artistic creation.

Our task in therapy is, partly, to help clients create themselves – to find their autonomous voice. In a man, this must mean emancipation from the strictures of stereotypical masculine narratives learned in the family.

About the author

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