



Nick Duffell argues that if sufficient men take the steps necessary to awaken their own hearts, and learn to become relationally receptive rather than defensively aggressive, then the world could change for the better

Illustration by Jason Ford

One day early last November I received emails from two men concerning something that had just appeared on the internet: *A Manifesto For Conscious Men*. The first correspondent, a member of one of our facilitated men's groups, suggested this might be a misguided initiative, while the other, a trainee couple therapist, thought it might represent a key for evolving men, but was concerned about a consequent (mainly critical) blog which was rapidly gathering momentum.¹ This began to raise many questions for me. Beginning with the more mundane issues, blogging clearly provides a previously unavailable platform for democratic expression, but does it enrich us, or does the voice of protest and discussion simply disappear in an endless wave of contradictory opinions? I don't find the blogosphere a very attractive destination and it eats time.

And then what does 'conscious' actually mean? Therapy could be called an enterprise devoted to becoming conscious – or even conscious becoming. Its original goal was the penetration of the unconscious in order to make conscious repressed memories and complexes to heal various chronic symptoms. Today therapy seems to have two distinct but interlinked tracks. On the one hand there is a reparative element or post-trauma rehabilitation, where insight, relationship making and attuned feedback can help with problematic defensive internal tensions and behaviour. The other stream prioritises new growth: development of healthier self-concepts, better relationships, a greater capacity for intimacy and (as Heidegger might have said) 'being in the world'. And yet this just raises even more questions. Into which category would the consciousness-raising of men fit?

The very notion of a conscious man begs the question of what his opposite is? And if conscious man's opposites are the more numerous, then what kind of generalisations should we be making about men? Does the existence of this debate imply that men are suffering a kind of trauma from which they should awake – that men are generally unconscious and need to embrace growth work? Or, more attractively, that some men might choose an evolutionary path towards becoming conscious and thereby more evolved beings?

There must be a case for arguing that masculinity may be trauma driven, for it seems, not unfailingly, but universally to promote disturbing acts. The tally of non-relational behaviour, short-termist resource exploitation, war and other forms of violence is not exclusively down to men – but it's got to be close. And yet this does not account for the astonishing acts of bravery and creativity that men can make, nor the fact that some men can and do change themselves, develop their consciousness and thereby change their attitude to the world and inspire others. In fact, at this point of time, it is arguably the most crucial step for humanity that men engage in such a process. Could now be the time for men to 'step up to the plate', and could this manifesto be a step in this direction?

A letter to Womankind

The manifesto's creators, Gay Hendricks and Arjuna Ardagh, authors of several books in the spirituality/self-help field, propose that the history of men's domination and mistreatment of women, of the earth and of their own emotional nature, is something that men should take personal and collective responsibility for, apologise for and make amends for. They urge readers

Manifesting men

to tick boxes to show their sympathy or not with their initiative. The manifesto takes the form of a letter to Womankind, which begins 'Dear Woman', and continues thus: 'As a man, I feel sorrow that women and feminine energy have been suppressed for so many thousands of years on our planet. Everywhere we look, women have been disenfranchised. Throughout history, we have raped and abused you, burned you at the stake, bought and sold your bodies for sexual pleasure, barred you from religious and political office, relegated you to subservient chores, forced you to hide your faces and even cut off your organs of sexual pleasure.'

'Although I may not have done these things personally, I am aware of the forces in the masculine psyche that are responsible for dishonouring the feminine. I take responsibility for those forces and choose no longer to be run by them. I do this on behalf of all men, in order to usher in a new era of co-creation. I vow to treat your heart as the sacred temple it is, and I commit to celebrating the feminine in my relationships as well as in my relationship to all life. As a man, I honour your intuition and your ability to feel. As men, we have often devalued feeling and intuition in favour of a view dominated by data and logic. I commit to respecting the arts of feeling, intuition and wisdom of the feminine heart, so that together we can integrate them into a balanced view of life.'

How should we respond to this?

The domestic implications of what was being described surface all too regularly in couple therapy. Every week my couple work supervisees report struggling to maintain neutrality in the face of defensive, relationship-avoidant male partners. Some theorists in the field of

marital therapy have even suggested regularly abandoning neutrality in favour of first addressing the issues of withdrawal and covert depression in men.² In terms of what I am beginning to call 'problematic masculinity', some writers go further: American Lundy Bancroft³ says couple therapy is counter indicated in cases of men bullying their partners, while British psychoanalyst, Adam Jukes, author of *Why Men Hate Women*,⁴ warns of the failure of a straightforward psychodynamic approach with misogynistic men, preferring frequent analysis and dedicated groupwork. In his latest enthralling book, *Is there a cure for masculinity?*,⁵ Jukes proposes what he calls 'the Mad Hypothesis': that hyper-masculine men must take 100 per cent responsibility for everything that is wrong with their relationships.

The economic aspect of the manifesto's stance clearly has validity too. In our centre's nascent adventures into gender issues within organisations, we have discovered that things still have not yet changed very much. In terms of the basics, such as equal pay and gender balance in leadership roles, women are still not equal partners. Progress achieved in recruiting women onto the board of FTSE 100 companies has ground to a halt – only 12.5 per cent of companies in this group have a woman on the board. Lord Davies of Abersoch recently led a review addressing this issue.⁶ At the other end of the spectrum, some NGOs founded on more feminist principles fail to maintain male staff. So I could agree mostly with the spirit of what was proposed, and yet it left a bad taste in my mouth, and I didn't feel inclined to sign it. There was something over sweet – too 'Californian' in the style – that did not feel right. I decided to see what others thought.

Men and women

My wife had no qualms in expressing her counter reaction. Identifying women with an idealised abstract notion of 'the feminine' or 'the goddess' is not actually, she maintains, what women want. It is another form of objectification, almost like pornography. Women say they want to be *real* people to men, to have their men become curious about them as unique persons. They long to be 'met' by their men, for men to be less 'in their heads', and to move over a bit in society, so that women can take their valuable place in partnership.

This made sense. I could concur with the manifesto's wish to honour women, but perhaps the two most important traps would be idealising or looking for approval from women. Both run regressive psychological risks of becoming the 'nice boy for mummy', developing skills in appeasement, rather than relating, which ends up being manipulative. Another (male) colleague, picking up on its apologetic tone, said it reminded him of the 'placato-feminism' of 30 years ago, which just doesn't work, however sincere the intentions. I doubt that the world will ever have much use for guilty men, since guilt is finally self-referring. I suspect instead that women rather long for men who can actually make a difference in daily small acts that arise out of staying consciously present in relationship.

A more realistic statement of the task for men seemed to me to be first to learn to manage our own emotions, get curious about the *other*, develop empathy, and then to get other men onside. I feared the document wouldn't have the right tone to achieve this, and I had further difficulties with it. The use of the conceptual term 'the feminine' is particularly ridden with obstacles

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and begs the question whether it is anyway a useful word. The manifesto was coming to feel a bit like a first draft; if it actually was, what a pity they did not send it out for feedback first. Personally, I particularly disliked the way the heart was called feminine.

Heart of the matter

Physiologically, the heart, of all organs, has a unique level of autonomy, even outside the body. Surgically, it is interchangeable between the sexes, and even between mammal species. Functionally, the heart is not just a pump: its role in regulating body states and maintaining psychological equilibrium, particularly in counteracting the flight/fight mechanism of the autonomic nervous system, is only recently being recognised through the new science of neurocardiology.⁷ The human heart, regardless of the sex of the owner, has an electromagnetic field which is measurable several meters outside the owner's physical body. It becomes increasingly clear that the crucial role of the heart has long been neglected and relegated to the realms of metaphor and poetry. I suspect it will have a central role in any new psycho-medical paradigm of the future.

The underlying point here, however, is that our culture has neither encouraged nor trained men to be in contact with (let alone develop) the emotional aspects of their hearts. So the male heart remains shrouded in fear, mystery, longing and potential vulnerability – strangely reminiscent of the qualities men tend to project onto women. However, if sufficient men do take the steps necessary to 'awaken' their own hearts, and learn thereby how powerful it can be to become relationally receptive rather than defensively aggressive, then

our whole world could change for the better. This would be much stronger than projecting the ability to feel and the sense of justice out onto women – as in a later passage of the manifesto – yet another conceptual form of idealisation.

What therapy for men?

So if we can establish a case that there are specific areas in which men might profitably engage in psychological work in order to become more conscious for reparative and growth purposes, what are they, how are they to be achieved, and do men require different solutions to those for women?

Previously in these pages,⁸ I have proffered the notion that men in general – and not just men exhibiting what I call 'problematic masculinity' and Jukes calls 'hyper-masculinity' – may benefit less from one-to-one therapy than women, but instead derive more learning from groupwork with other males. This idea in turn is based on the following hypothesis: the intimate one-to-one setting of therapy is an unfamiliar and not necessarily reliable learning vehicle for men. Masculinity is learned from other males, beginning with father, including, but not exclusively, the problematic, distancing style of relating to the world. The fear of shame and the longing for mutual respect seem to be universal values in interaction between men. If men routinely learn 'negative' aspects from other males then they can in turn learn 'positive' aspects from them, in environments where sufficient support and challenge are choreographed.

Furthermore, masculinity, as Jukes so neatly reminds us, consists of what men *do*, not what they *are*. Despite the elegant simplicity of this idea, we could add that it is what men *tend* to do, or better even

how they *tend to imagine* the world – and frequently act out. The 'normal' starting point is an imaginative base affected by having to separate from mother to find their male identity and take on the cultural heritage of masculinity. Apart from the addiction to economic competition and war, problematic masculinity tends to be acted out chiefly in relation to female partners, as well as children. But countless 'normal' men fail their partners by trying to avoid trouble: when men treat their women as problematic things to be avoided, appeased, or managed, it drives them totally crazy.⁹ Women seem to feel utterly depersonalised by this and respond with anger, distance or despair, depending on their personalities.¹⁰ The author of *Sex, Spirit and Community*, Mark Josephs-Serra,¹¹ says there is a societal epidemic of angry women caused by relationship avoidance from their male partners; he calls it 'the Row of our Times'. If Jukes' 'mad hypothesis' is worth listening to, can men do something about these problems?

One of our own solutions has been to back up relationship and personal therapy work with facilitated men's groups, where men can learn to evolve together. Some of our ongoing groups, for instance, *Searching for My Father I Find My Self*, meet only one day per quarter but have been running, with mostly founder participants, for over a decade.¹² One of the main elements of the work has been practising, within a safe environment, to receive supportive challenges, developing the ability to take feedback from other males. Our experience is that this process is enormously helpful practice for times when female partners are sharing their feelings and woes. At this point, the unpractised man frequently feels

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attacked and criticised. He then immediately shuts down his heart, withdraws empathy, and uses strategic behaviour – either withdrawal or counter-attack – that is precisely the opposite of what is required of him.

It is not surprising that women frequently report missing being ‘met’ by their men, for mostly we as men have to learn, like a job of work, to manage our own emotions, to be interested in others, and to practise empathy. Intimacy is dependent on the normalisation and integration of these skills. The problems of facing deep intimacy rarely come up in one-to-one counselling sessions, unless the therapist is prepared to make herself profoundly vulnerable in the setting, which can happen. But all too often men presenting in therapy can ‘get away’ without addressing it. Actually, in groupwork with other males, they cannot escape, except by leaving. Since the experience of connection at this depth is so rare in male society, belonging to such a group is cherished and the leaving option is a drastic one.

Men and the divided brain

Moreover, whilst it is still too early to fully evaluate the data coming from neuroscience concerning any brain hemispheric difference between the genders, ex-Maudsley consultant psychiatrist Iain McGilchrist, in his remarkable book that took 20 years to complete, presents reams of experimental evidence and allows us to think much more cogently on these issues.¹³ Learning by example and imitation is the basis of all learning, he says, and it encourages right hemisphere participation, and thereby the perception of context and the big picture. This is a further reason why group modalities may be useful for men. As McGilchrist

shows in the second half of his book, Western culture since Plato – with various interruptions of rebalance – has consistently ended up favouring the left hemispherical preponderance towards detail, control and power. McGilchrist himself deliberately refuses to enter the arena of debate concerning gender and the brain, and sidesteps any comment on Simon Baron-Cohen’s notion that masculinity is a form of autism, which he sees as an expression of what he calls the ‘extreme male brain’.¹⁴

It is nevertheless pretty clear that the dominant culture has encouraged males to rely too heavily on over-controlling left-brain activity, with its tendency to compartmentalise, at the expense of their ability to connect. And what strikes us immediately from beginning to work with organisations is that in order to succeed there, women are having to play the same game. Groupwork, engaging the right hemisphere, as it seems to, may well turn out to be an antidote; it is not surprising that both Bancroft and Jukes recommend it for extreme males.

In conclusion

The cliché of the male’s frequent lack of emotional intelligence, relationship avoidance and intimacy resistance, over a wide spectrum from the left-brain dominated withdrawing ‘gentleman’¹⁵ to the culture of street and domestic violence,¹⁶ has to be faced and acknowledged by men themselves. It is probably best regarded as a wound that urgently needs to be recognised and healed, otherwise it causes acting out. In this regard the process of owning up is crucial and one cannot blame the owners of the manifesto for the sense of needing to move in this direction. What lies behind this woundedness is well outside the scope of this article, but my

suspicion is it has to do with very deep unconscious, unrecognised and therefore unmourned, loss amongst males of all they have had to separate from. Suffering from loss may explain, but does not excuse, behaviours that arise from it. The way to make amends for how men have treated women in general starts by learning to befriend their own emotions, and to love and relate to their particular partners. As men, our work is in our own intimate relationships – only one woman needs convincing you’re not her enemy – and to help other men awake. The very first steps of such an approach involve doing and thinking less, and feeling more. A good way for men to begin practising this is in group therapeutic settings with other men.

Postscript

Since writing this article, *A Manifesto For Conscious Men* has been updated online and reads somewhat better, although, frustratingly, the original has disappeared.¹⁷ The earlier piece is a valuable document in that it illustrates the struggle with the issues that arise when men try to face the future with honesty and goodwill. Both the original document and the revised version can be had from us, if interested readers wish to make contact. ■

An International Symposium for Men – ‘Men and the future: sex, authenticity and power’ – takes place near Frankfurt, Germany (31 May to 3 June 2012). See www.men-maenner.net

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