

# Boy zone

Therapy Today December 2007

**The thorny and complex issue of how to be a man – never mind a therapist too – affects the I-Thou relationship and hence congruence itself**

by Manu Bazzano

## **Life before and after feminism**

I grew up in Southern Italy and, like every boy, have experienced the special bond of male friendship and brotherhood: the tussle and struggle, the playground's competition and nastiness, as well as camaraderie and warmth. That instinctive sense of companionship was later focused into the student movement of the 1970s, into the shared aspiration to change the world: street demonstrations, occasional clashes with the police, spurred by urgent feelings and sincere, if vague, aspirations.

Psychotherapy has often patronised the brotherhood of boys: gang behaviour, peer pressure, rites of passage – these are some of the condescending terms used in describing the phenomenon. A term that in my view does justice to the brotherhood of young men is Adler's *Gemeinschaftsgefühl*, or communal feeling<sup>1</sup>. He was not referring exclusively to boys but to the general, perhaps innate tendency within human beings to overcome rudimentary egoistic tendencies and find truer fulfilment in cooperation. In this context, 'gang behaviour' is a term often describing acts of misguided courage, of ill-directed aspirations to loyalty and daring.

The arrival of feminism – in Southern Italy as in many parts of the world – was a shock to some of us, as our then girlfriends suddenly 'turned against us'. Rivalry changed from manly bravado to wanting to act and look softer, more considerate, and 'feminine'. Some of us wore eyeliner, and I did too. But what happened at a deeper level was that many of us started to feel less comfortable with being a man. Some felt apologetic for somehow representing the 'oppressor', and deliberately started to mollify their natural masculinity. Suddenly, being a man was no longer OK.

## **Gentle mentorship**

Solace came from unexpected places. In my case, it came from my headmaster at high school. When one day he refused to give us the use of the main hall for our student assembly, I warned him that we would 'appropriate' it, and so I went off and broke the door to get in. He came by, saw the broken door, smiled mischievously and said: 'Come back this afternoon after class and fix it.' Teachers were furious with his leniency: anyone else in his place would have either suspended me or thrown me out of school. He was an unusual man, and I could feel his respect towards me, though he strongly disagreed with my views.

I suddenly remembered him in the middle of a session with a young and troubled client of mine, who had voiced his difficulty with 'not fitting in', with not getting along with both teachers and peers at school. The figure of an unloving, cold father emerged from his story, and the absence of an adult male that could be a mentor to him, of someone able to acknowledge his intelligence, to encourage him to trust his own sense of direction and insight. I remembered my old headmaster, how much his quiet unobtrusive encouragement meant to me at the time. He had never lectured me when each time I'd be reprimanded by teachers and sent to his room for disciplinary measures. He would engage with me sternly but respectfully, question my political naiveté while valuing me as a person. In the midst of the confusion and chaos of my late-teens, this form of gentle mentorship was invaluable.

## **Curse me, bless me**

Sometimes it takes a man to speak to another man, and in some fortunate cases, it is one's own father who takes on briefly the precious role of mentorship. His words might be 'un-pc', even harsh or challenging. He'd give us 'spiritual clarity', even though our 'bodily soul wants comforting' as Rumi says in his poem<sup>2</sup>. The father or the older male mentor might 'scold', but eventually leads [us] into the open<sup>2</sup>. Something is communicated that is distinctly male, a quality of energy that is sadly disappearing from our culture of lads and ladettes, a quality that is at odds with the contemporary world of psychotherapy. The things expressed in the unique exchange between men are complex and manifold and hard to put into words. One of these has to do with

resilience, with fierce willingness to engage with life's challenges, with saying no to resignation and blandness, with the refusal, as Dylan Thomas wrote, to 'go gentle into that good night':

And you, my father, there on the sad height,  
Curse, bless me now with your fierce tears, I pray.  
Do not go gentle into that good night.  
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.<sup>3</sup>

### **Lads and ladettes**

The brotherhood of men together is crucial in appeasing the existential anxiety of not knowing what 'being a man' means in the first place. I don't really know what being a man means. Do I fulfil society's criteria of what a man should be like? Let's see: I'm not crazy about football, don't understand rugby, find getting pissed on cheap ale pretty naff, don't know the words to any national anthem, don't think that going to war is just 'doing your job' or 'doing your duty', don't give a toss about Led Zep, Oasis or the Manics, don't buy Men's Health or Loaded, I am not dreaming of commuting to the City in an exec striped suit. Finally, I fail to perceive Nicole Kidman's sex appeal.

I believe that the first cultural shift of the 1970s was crucial; it marked a sea change whose effects are still with us today. Circumstances are now very different, but I still meet men who feel contrite and almost repentant of being who they are. This came home to me in stark clarity right in the middle of my intensive training as a person-centred counsellor and psychotherapist. At first, I thought the quandary might lie with the orientation, an arguably feminised 'school' of therapy where receptivity and non-directivity, empathy and unconditional positive regard – all the trappings of the mother archetype – are strongly emphasised and often interpreted one-sidedly and naively, an orientation seemingly exuding naiveté and stultifying niceness. Those were at any rate my thoughts at the time...

Will I be able to endure never-ending gracious tea parties when my favourite drink is a quick and energising shot of espresso drunk over the counter? is how I'd sum up those difficult first months. And will I be able to nod graciously at all times and pretend everything is hunky-dory when my own experience and an early, perhaps unsavoury diet of existentialism have taught me the inevitability of conflict in human exchange?

Now in the middle of my final year, and with many hours of training and client work behind me, my own thinking has shifted. I regard the perceived naiveté of the person-centred approach in a positive light, as the desirable outcome of years of painstaking training and self-discovery. I see it now as the naiveté of an assured artist who can afford to throw away technique and gimmicks in order to engage first hand with the anxiety of existence and the unpredictability of human relationships. I no longer see the modes of the person-centred approach as the clinical minimalism of those who want an easy ride and a trouble-free profession, but instead as the aspiration to be genuine. I have learned that it takes a good deal of courage to express that other essential ingredient of the approach: congruence. I now think that what I had perceived as the feminisation of therapy belongs to the wider sphere of culture.

### **Emasculation of men in contemporary psychotherapy**

And yet, the nagging sense that masculinity is still not accepted in our current psychotherapy milieu has not left me. I'll try to explain why.

Self-reliance was extremely important in responding to the challenges of growing up in Southern Italy. I identify this aspect, rightly or wrongly, with the man in me. It is an aspect of self that does not seem welcome in the contemporary therapy world. This is not anyone's fault in particular but reflects a general trend. In our current climate, self-reliance is being disparaged, its attributes caricatured and its proud, independent quality misinterpreted as rigidity.

Perhaps self-reliance needs to be belittled in the UK, a nation that has thrived on its stiff-upper-lip-ness, and that, to this day – thanks to the misadventures in Iraq – is perceived by the majority of non-UK public opinion as aggressive and belligerent. But for me, as a male therapist, self-reliance is not only desirable, but also essential. I gained this insight through untutored, instinctive experience that made me prone to mistakes, but affirmed itself as invaluable. And such quality is closely linked to another important aspect: masculinity. At times I have a sense that contemporary humanistic therapy is not only failing to provide a robust answer to what I perceive as the emasculation of men in our culture, but seems in fact to endorse it. I have seen and worked with many clients and colleagues who are at some deep level ashamed of being a man. Why is that? According to the dictionary, to emasculate is to make weaker and less effective; to deprive a man of his male

role and identity. Far from wishing to espouse dominance, authority, and patriarchy, I endeavour to understand this odd, inexplicable feeling I have; it's as if to be a therapist and to be a man in our culture is a contradiction in terms. Let me state it this way: can I be a man fully, without apologies, and still be a psychotherapist?

Robert Bly<sup>4</sup> addressed a similar issue, when he wrote of the ruinous effects that dubious interpretations of therapy were having in Western culture. If you'd asked a 'new man' of the times what he wanted to do, he'd reply, 'Wait a minute, I'll ask my girlfriend first.'

Another way of being?

I was involved with men's groups in the 1990s and one of the things I learnt is a distinctly masculine way of celebrating intimacy, silence and interaction; I've learned that there is room for both assertiveness and tenderness. I've learned that there is a time for silent reflection, for a journey into the wilderness, as well as for companionship, for healing, for song, poetry and the sharing of private and communal narratives. This also means, crucially, that men do not need to go to war in order to experience those deep feelings. We can experience Adler's 'communal feeling' without having to sacrifice our life as cannon fodder for the vested interest of corrupt and ambitious rulers.

Some of the responses I have found in contemporary therapeutic discourse to the subject of the men's movements of the late 1980s and early 1990s are disconcerting. Competent, innovative and inspiring male therapists and writers fall flat on their face when skirting around the thorny issue of masculinity.

They register with undisguised glee how, for example, the 'many traditionally male concepts had already been damaged by the person-centred approach'<sup>5</sup>, or else skip lucid discourse and go straight to mockery:

'To retreat into the forest and to live only on cereal and fruit, muesli and berries is not an attractive alternative at all, and so the "wild man" of the late 80s and early 90s did not really prevail.'<sup>5</sup>

### **Fear of thinking**

Partly as a result of the anti-intellectualism of the 1960s, humanistic psychotherapy has shunned theory in favour of experience, seeing the former as the domain of patriarchal, male-driven forces and their self-serving agendas. This has now become full-blown dread of theory, which is a shame, for theory and thinking are not only essential to practice-based therapy work but also constitute, in the words of Bertolt Brecht, 'a real sensuous pleasure'.<sup>6</sup>

Thinking, moreover, is not the exclusive domain of males, but I have often heard it portrayed as a typically male mode of escaping experience.

The current bias in psychotherapy in favour of the 'experiential' domain, perceived as more horizontal, receptive and positively resistant to the domination of 'grand theories' is an avoidance of the complexities of theory and the rewards of thinking, and a refusal to see that a lot of psychotherapy is – acknowledged or not – rooted in philosophy.

Such bias also does not do full justice to 'experience'. Experience is not merely everything that is not theoretical but instead what changes me, what impacts me in the encounter with another human being.<sup>7</sup>

### **Faithful to one's gender**

Being faithful to one's gender has far-reaching implications. To surrender my specificity is to give up my role as a therapist and my dignity as a human being and sell out to the grand narratives of potentially exploitative politics and self-styled 'spirituality'.

It is through the specificity of gender that Buber's 'I-Thou' formula acquires meaning and becomes grounded in reality. Without the owned definition of gender, 'I-Thou' is yet another spiritual cliché, another dull platitude, another example of numinous nonsense. It is only through the courageous, unapologetic affirmation of gender, and the recognition of gender diversity that we can bring so-called 'spirituality' back to the everyday reality of our lives.

Without this horizontal encounter, without the mutual acceptance of diversity, there is no true meeting with another.<sup>8</sup>

For this encounter to take place, men must first be able to feel and express without shame the beauty, grace and strength inherent in masculinity, and they must no longer be prepared to put up with the belittling of masculinity, both in the world of therapy and in society at large.

#### References

1. Ansbacher HL, Ansbacher R. The individual psychology of Alfred Adler. NY: Harper & Row; 1956/1964.
2. Rumi. The core of masculinity. In: Barks C (trans). Rumi. We are three. Maypop Books; 1988.
3. Thomas D. Do not go gentle into that good night. 1971.
4. Bly R. Iron John: a book about men. San Francisco, CA: Addison-Wesley Publishing; 1990.
5. Schmid P. New men? – A new image of man? Person-centred challenges to gender dialogue. In: Proctor G, Napier MB (eds). Encountering feminism. Ross-on-Wye: PCCS Books; 2004.
6. Brecht B. Quoted in Eagleton T. After theory. London: Basic Books; 2003.
7. Bazzano M. When Rogers met Adler: notes on power, masculinity and gender in Person-centred therapy. To be published in the Adlerian Year Book 2008.
8. Cfr Irigaray L. I love to you. NY: Routledge; 1996.