

Psychoeducation: MENTal Health

To be a man
is not a given.



It never was.

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THE BIRTH OF MAN

WHAT IS THE HERO'S JOURNEY OF A MAN IN THE 21ST CENTURY?

The times of initiations for men are gone.
This is good news.

HEARING THE CALL

As a boy, I loved when my dad would open his arms to pick me up. I knew from a very young age that he did not like it when I touched his face. But in these moments being lifted up to his chest, I had the chance that my face would touch his jaw randomly. I could feel the piercing edges of his beard on my soft cheeks. I would inhale his after shave that smelled to me like a jungle with a field of flowers. He did not say a lot at these moments, and I did not need that. I could feel his heart anyway. All I needed was my weight in his arms, the piercing of his facial hair, and his scent.



"The Hero's Journey", Oil on Canvas, 2011, by J.C. Wehnelt

When he would wear a suit and a tie, I knew, this was not the time to carry me. I figured that he would go to work then, and his face often looked tense. He worked a lot. Sometimes he would wear a suit and a tie on a Sunday.

The times in his arms on the edge of the jungle were rare.

So I tried to connect with him in a different way. I made drawings and showed them to him. Many times he looked at them, maybe said a short „Good“ and then would turn away again.

One time, I saw a black-and-white photo of him on a shelf wearing a suit and a tie where he looked relaxed. I pointed to it when he was at home. „Dad, this is a nice picture of you“, I told him. He looked at himself and said: „Too soft. That’s not good. Too soft.“

Was this the way to be a man?, I wondered.

I needed to know. As a teenager, I knew the world asked me to become a man, as I was called a boy.

After my mum and my dad had divorced, I could only see my dad once a month. So I secretly looked at my peers if they knew how to become a man. But they seemed not to know either. When my mum moved to another city with me, I lost my friends. In one of the rare meetings with my dad, I told him that I was sad about it. „It is good to be alone“, he said. „Other people just distract you from your path.“



I sit in my Berlin office of my psychotherapeutic practice and feel a wave of sadness remembering this. I look outside the window to the city I was born in. I remember how I found new friends again in the new city, how I did my training in Gestalt Therapy, and how through all that time, the quest to know what it is to be a man kept coming back in a different way as I can feel the quest in the men that come to my practice now.

IS HELL IN HELLO?

In former times, tribes were ruling humanity, and boys would be initiated into masculinity by other men in a once-in-a-lifetime ritual overcoming a challenge fighting the inner dragons to find a healthy way of living masculinity.

Was this the way? Joseph Campbell writes in his seminal book *"The Hero with a Thousand Faces"*:

- "Initiation combines an introduction of the candidate into the techniques, duties, and prerogatives of his vocation with a radical readjustment of his emotional relationship to the parental images."

Campbell writes beautifully about how tribes around the world initiated boys into men in a magnificent hero's journey that works similar around the globe.

Today in the western world, tribes seem to not rule anymore. Their beauty is gone, and so are the hero's journeys with initiations for men.

Yet, when I watch the news, the down side of tribal culture survived. In so-called civilized societies around the world from Brasil to Hungary, national borders and interests are reinforced by their de facto tribal leaders who do not include the needs of the world in their politics. It seems to me, in the tribe-national world, boys don't become men anymore, boys become presidents.

Mythologist Joseph Campbell saw this coming: "The national idea, with the flag as totem, is today an aggrandizer of the nursery ego, not the annihilation of an infantile situation."

So what does the Hero's Journey look like for a 21st-century-boy becoming a man? Is there any, still?

I hear that question unspoken from men who come into my practice again and again.

I hear it from the **young man** who longs for a partnership and feels he is not good enough for it.

I hear it from the **60 year old man** who struggles because his uncle was in war and he feels the violence in him.

I hear it from the **40 year old man** who wants to find his vocation while working in a simple office job.

All these beautiful men have diverse topics, yet one single theme connects them: they struggle to find out how to be a man in the world because they have the idea they need to find out alone.



My good friend Robert once sent me a compilation of songs, and I was stunned when I heard the old tune „I was born under a wand’ring star“ sung by actor Lee Marvin. As I listened to his beautiful dark voice, I was struck by the lyrics:

“Do I know where hell is? Hell is in Hello!
I was born under a wand’ring star....”

This is the tune of many men in modern times. Being scared of contact and staying alone, in silence.

Some men try to save themselves from that by watching “How to“-tutorials on Youtube; “How to become a better lover“, “How to be successful“, “How to deal with trauma“.



Oklahoma, USA, by Campbell

Excellent tools can be found there to fix things. Yet this is what we men were taught to do for centuries; to fix things. So in its core, nothing changed.

Today we are just asked to fix ourselves.

And we shall do it alone.

So to really create a shift in paradigm, men need a new tune.

And through my work for many years now, I realized: Men don't need another hero.

Men need community.

Communities were the foundation we all have lost.

Only communities could send off their boys to become men through an initiation because when the young men would come back from their quest, they would be held in the community and given their place there.

As the communities are gone, so is the place men had naturally.

This is challenging for many men. Without being given a natural place in society anymore, a groundbreaking truth opens:

To be a man is not a given.

It never was.



FINDING HEAVEN

To be a man appeared to be steady and clear as the societies in former times were organized in a structure that put men, and women, into a rigid order.

Yet in the fast changing times of the 21st century, the social structure opens wide and shows a thousand faces each moment, and a hero needs an initiation into being with them as a man not just once in a lifetime to be able to be with it.

A man needs initiation from moment to moment.

This specific need of our times asks men for an initiation into relationships, with themselves and with the world. It may well be his biggest challenge.

For many men today, the dragon waits at the corner of his heart.

The dragon's names are fear, rage, shame, disgust.

I know through my work, we only can ride this dragon together; in a safe relationship. Relatedness is the journey of the hero in our days.

When a man takes his courage and dares to connect, an abundant boon is waiting for him. To be able to be real and share his true feelings, and being received with them, is a priceless treasure.

If this happens, this is the Birth of Man. Again and again. And it is an opening into a new truth:

Heaven can be in Hello.



To draw upon the treasure of community, the tribes have left us a beautiful tool for that; meeting in a circle and listening to each other.

Today, men can meet in a circle as the elders did—with a big difference. This time, there is not a set idea of what a man should be like as in tribal times. This is the good news.

Men today can stand with each other, listening, sharing, and feeling to what is real to them regardless of any concepts around being a man.

In a circle, men do not to be elders anymore to support each other. The young can support the old, the old can empower the young; the men **become elders for each other**, in an interplay of Brothers of Hearts.





Castlerigg Stone Circle in Cumbria, England, by Graham Richter

Not long ago, my father turned 80 years old. I wondered what I could give him. How could I connect with him and honor him at the same time? I took the old black-and-white picture of him wearing a suit and a tie and looking relaxed, bought a big wooden screen and I painted his face in colorful oil paint.

On his birthday, I felt fear. How would he react to my painting based on a picture of him he did not like?

After the party, I asked him to come into the empty dining room where the painting was waiting for him. He looked at it, nodded and smiled. "What a beautiful man!", he said.

We embraced. I felt his soft skin on my cheek and smelled his after shave and the long lost jungle. My dad had changed in his long life. And he hadn't even talked about it.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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