

**The Disconnected Man's Path to Integration**

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**Abstract**

This paper will focus on how a large number of men in this culture are disconnected from who they are in their heart. The author explores the roots of this disconnection from infancy to adulthood and postulates that men are this way mostly because of the messages they receive from their environment as well as immature initiation practices that reinforce such messages and disconnection. The author will propose a transpersonal view for healing and reconnecting this fragmented man. A series of wilderness trips led by the author in the summer of 2004 illustrate how the therapist can work with men who are disconnected from themselves. The disconnected man, if willing, can reconnect to his heart by working on himself in psychotherapy and through a wilderness rites-of-passage experience.

## The Disconnected Man's Path to Integration

*"You dare anything, except being a man."  
---DH. Lawrence (p. 120)*

### Introduction

What does it mean to be a man? Many men in the United States culture live by a story of who they think they should be. "Millions of American men spend a lot more time trying to prove themselves than they do celebrating themselves" and these same men, "find themselves outside the loop in their own families, spending much of their lives trying to cope with soul wrenching isolation and loneliness" (Allen, 1995, p. 311). A great number of men are genuinely satisfied with their lives and how they are choosing to live, but many more are suffering, unfulfilled, lost and alone. Somehow, these men are missing their calling, lying to themselves, pretending, faking it, discounting their hearts in the midst of their so-called busy life. They are left with an aching sense that there must be more to life, more to themselves. These men live their waking hours in constant and steady inner turmoil, all the while searching outside themselves for an answer, a guide, a signpost, some glimmer of evidence that they are headed in the right direction. They have distanced themselves from their feelings and their inner experience in the service of working hard, accomplishing and succeeding at what they are supposed to do. In their feeble attempts to free themselves, find themselves and reconnect with themselves they often end up involved in activities that lead to more alienation from themselves, their family and their community; activities like drinking with their buddies, pornography, or trying to prove themselves. In other words, these men have put great distance between who they *think* they are and who they *really* are. Hence for the remainder of the paper this man will be called the Disconnected Man. The author will argue that not only is he

disconnected from his culture, his environment, but more importantly he is disconnected from his own heart.

How did this man become so disconnected from his heart? I will argue that male conditioning and socialization (the boy code and man code) coupled with how and where a man learned what it means to be in relationship to himself and others are detrimental to the development of men and thus facilitate disconnection in men. These men are disconnected from their true nature, their hearts, and this is the root of their suffering. True nature is a Buddhist term used by religious scholar and Acharya Reggie Ray (2003) to describe that which is always with us, never changing. It is the vast open space of our own heart. For many people this could be called intuition, the soul, the heart, and "inner authority" or deeper nature, as described and defined by Ray (2003). Mythopoetic men's movement author and poet Robert Bly (1990) calls this aspect of a man his "inner king."

Many men's writers agree that men need and long for initiation into manhood (Bly, 1990; Moore & Gillette, 1990; Kupers, 1993; Raphael, 1988; Pollack, 1998; Gurian, 1998). If not done properly, the informal, immature initiations that substitute for and attempt to fulfill a boy's longing for mature initiation into manhood can keep men stuck in a boyish manhood. The consequence is that these men remain disconnected from themselves and their community well into their adulthood.

To make grand generalizations about men is not fair, nor is it possible to be accurate. In order to speak about a population of men with whom I have experience, and feel justified making some generalizations, the Disconnected Man in this paper is represented by the typical 18-25-year-old college fraternity man seeking his initiation into manhood and male community. However, much of what is written here may apply to

many, many more men in this culture. Although fraternity men make up a small population in this culture, nearly half of this country's members of congress are fraternity men (North American Interfraternity Conference, 2005). Nearly fifty percent of all US presidents have been in a fraternity, including our current president. Forty percent of the Supreme Court justices have been in a fraternity, as well as one third of the Fortune 500 executives. (North American Interfraternity Conference, 2005). These men are leaders, making serious decisions about the political, cultural, legal and economic direction of this country and the welfare of its citizens. A strong case can be made for how important it is for these men to have an integrated and connected sense of self. Fraternity men are just one example of how men seek initiation into manhood. They join to make friends, meet girls, and be a part of a brotherhood of men. However, like many initiations that men seek out in this culture, it is an initiation that often leaves men disconnected.

The extent to which a man suffers is proportional to how disconnected he is. The more a man is disconnected from himself, the less connection he will be able to have with others and his environment. Beginning with a boy's development from infancy, boyhood to adolescence, I will discuss the various ways men disconnect from their internal and external environments, and explore the consequences of raising our boys and men consistent with society's expectations (the boy code and man code). Finally, I will introduce two specific methods to reconnect the disconnected man through psychotherapy and ritual.

It is pertinent to mention my bias and orientation with a simple introduction. I am a privileged, white, heterosexual male and will not attempt to speak for or write about the endless branches of culturally identified men, nor will the paper compare and contrast the

feminine or female psychology to the psychology of men. My own journey parallels the content of the paper and adds to its validity. I joined a fraternity in 1991, was hazed callously, hazed others in turn, and eventually became president of the fraternity. Upon graduation, I moved to Ohio for two years to work for the fraternity's international headquarters as an education consultant. With this job I traveled to over 75 college campuses in 35 states and worked with men individually, in small groups and in large groups. In 1999, I began to lead wilderness trips with fraternity men to help men reconnect to themselves through nature and ritual. The story of the Disconnected Man parallels my own story and my own experience greatly influences what I have written here.

### **Literature Review**

*"The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation."  
---Henry David Thoreau (Van Anglen, p. 97)*

#### ***Infancy, the beginning of disconnection***

The kind of man a boy grows into is laid down in early childhood development. His earliest relationships strongly dictate how a boy will be in relation to his world. If a boy's feelings and emotional needs for closeness and connection are not recognized and valued or they are neglected or abused, he will most likely begin to disconnect from himself and have significant issues with trust (Ewen, 1998).

William Pollack Ph.D. (1998), a leading researcher in male behavior, believes the conditioning of *acceptable* male behavior begins as early as infancy. He cites research at Rutgers University, which showed that mothers attempted to sooth their infant boy by responding with encouragement to happy emotions while "discouraging more unhappy emotions" (p. 40). This conditioning slowly stifles a boy's emotional expression and

gives him strong messages over time of how to be in the world: to be okay, he cannot trust his internal experience and he needs to behave in an *acceptable* way. The boy will mistrust his true self and begin to form a false self based upon what his environment and caregiver support. Herein lies the root of man's disconnection.

### ***The Boy Code and further disconnection***

The acceptable behavior a boy begins to live by is what Pollack (1998) calls the "boy code." The boy code "is a set of behaviors, rules of conduct, cultural shibboleths, and even a lexicon, that is inculcated into boys by our society—from the very beginning of a boy's life" (p. xxv). Within the boy code are countless introjects. Introjects are messages that a person takes in from their environment without a lot of thought or discernment. The boy code teaches boys several introjects: "Don't be like a girl," "don't be too tender or close with other boys," "act like a man," and "don't be a mama's boy." Adding to their confusion in a world of feminist thought, men also hear "don't be like most men," or, from a mother in a family with an absent or abusive father, "don't be like your father." Several of these introjects will be addressed in the pages that follow.

### ***The "Gender Straightjacket"***

James A. Doyle (1983), author of *The Male Experience* suggests that the first lesson in the boy code is "Don't be like a girl" (p. 161). Instead of being taught how to be, boys are taught how *NOT* to be, "what girls do, boys don't" (p. 150). Doyle (1983) believes this is the root of misogyny and sexism because boys believe that girls and women are, "unequal, bad and inferior" (p. 150). How many grown men in a patriarchal society hold this same childhood teaching? The boy code confuses the young boy because it splits off his inner experience of self (emotions and feelings) from an outer one



that is based on cultural norms and expectations (boy code), thus increasing the disconnection. He is bombarded with more messages such as “don't be a baby,” “don't be a wimp,” “don't be a sissy,” “don't feel your feelings.” The boy begins to take in these introjects all the while feeling ashamed of his authentic, internal experience. Over time, a boy will slowly shut down his inner world in the service of doing what's expected.

Pollack (1998) believes that by doing this, society is placing a boy into a “gender straightjacket” (p. 40). This gender straightjacket constrains boys and men to behave in socially accepted ways based upon their gender. Pollack (1998) and men's writer Loren Pedersen (1991) agree that this confusion ultimately wears a young man down and may later bring on depression, failed relationships, emotional staleness or even suicide. The confusing introjects a boy will receive do not stop there.

### ***Relationship with Mother***

Since most men are raised by their mothers (in the midst of absent, abusive or emotionally unavailable fathers), this relationship is paramount for how a boy will do relationship later in life (Doyle, 1983). Somewhere along the line, a boy will hear the message “don't be a mama's boy,” which implies that he is too close, affectionate or clingy with his mother. Pollack's research shows that a young boy actually does not want to be apart from his mother and that disrupting a boy's desire to stay connected to his mother is “devastating” and “traumatic” (1998, p. 27). Pollack adds, “If a boy had been allowed to separate at his own pace, that longing and sadness would not be there, or would be much less” (1998, p. 27). Pollack (1998) also believes that the roots of shame a man feels can be traced back to this premature separation. Doyle (1983) agrees and adds, “In our culture, boys are socialized earlier into their sex role and pushed away from

parental dependencies earlier than girls are” (p. 95). Unfortunately a nurturing father is often not available when the boy separates from his mother, so boys will seek the guidance and support of their peer group (Doyle, 1983). A boy's relationship with his mother is often his only emotional connection. What about his father and how does this relationship impact a boy's disconnection?

### ***Relationship with Father***

Whatever role his father plays will have a lasting impact on the boy. Most commonly, a boy's father is the person who turns away or shuts down the boy's emotions. If his father is around, he may make fun of his son if he is clinging to his mother. Fred R. Gustafson (1997), writing about father-son dynamics, believes that a young man will have a limited and warped sense of masculinity when the father-son relationship is unhealthy and the father is unavailable. Gustafson (1997) identifies this as having “terrible” consequences such as an ill-defined ego structure, a limited male identity, being controlled by women through guilt and feelings of inadequacy. Gustafson (1997) believes that the reason “there are so many angry men today...is not only because they have been discouraged from having or expressing feelings, but also because they have not felt a significant loving father presence in their lives” (p. 167).

### ***Male Friendships and Homophobia***

How emotionally close are male-male friendships? As stated earlier, often the only emotional connection a boy has is with his mother. Men have learned relationships from single mothers, female partners, sisters and women who are stereotypically more capable of sharing emotions, feelings and relating in general. Yet if a boy is not allowed to be close with his mother or his father, what makes him want to be close with his male

friends? Doyle (1983) writes that boys are simply not allowed to publicly express most emotions for fear of being seen as or labeled weak, feminine, too vulnerable, or gay. Not only are boys *not* supposed to be close and express feelings with their mother or father, boys are given a clear message that they should not be too close with another boy (Doyle, 1983). According to Doyle (1983), two of a boy's biggest fears are being labeled feminine or gay. This is not just an experience boys have; it is pervasive in the adult male population as well. Later in life Doyle adds, "men cannot allow themselves to get too close, to form deep and intimate friendships with other men because they may have to deal with the gnawing fear of homosexuality" (p. 160). When they grow older, men fear that their male peers will judge them as unmanly. Doyle (1983) cites Gregory Lehne who views the fear of homophobia as "a device of social control directed specifically against men to maintain male behavior appropriate to the social situation" (p. 159). A consequence of this fear is that few men end up having close male friends (Doyle, 1983). Furthermore, few men end up having a close relationship to themselves.

### ***Toward Manhood***

As a boy grows toward other developmental tasks, more messages are delivered about how to be in the world all too often with the result of more disconnection. "The primary tasks of adolescence, according to all contemporary notions, are self-definition, identity formation, differentiation" (Raphael, 1998, p. 197).

More confusing introjects of the boy code include, "suck it up and be a man," or conversely from a world of feminine upbringing, "don't be like most men," and from a mother estranged from an absent or abusive husband, "don't be like your father." Pollack (1998) writes that, "Without being aware of doing so, society is judging the behavior of

boys against outmoded ideas about masculinity and about what it takes for a boy to become a man” (p. xxiv). Writer of the need for men's rites-of-passage in this culture, Ray Raphael (1988) adds, “Contemporary society seems to give us differing and conflicting definitions of what manhood is and how it might be achieved” (p. 22). Adult men will often continue to grapple with their emotions and feelings throughout life.

Rarely do other men support each other's vulnerabilities and feelings. What do men do? They continue to wear a mask that states “everything's fine” (Pollack, 1998). Pollack (1998) also maintains that teenage boys become experts at masking their true selves because they feel ashamed of their vulnerability. Similarly, Sam Keen (1991), best selling author of *Fire in the Belly*, believes that man avoids his own inner world and all its darkness, hiding behind many masks all in the name of being accepted and being okay in relationship to his outside world. He continues *hiding* because society expects a teenage boy to be “hardened,” so he will put on a mask to become tough and *manly* [italics added] (Pollack, 1998). The hiding continues and so does the search for self as a teenager moves out of adolescence toward manhood. This is the most common time when a young man will unconsciously or consciously seek initiation toward manhood and attempt to find a sense of belonging.

### ***The need for initiation into Manhood***

So, what is a man to do, carrying around so many conflicting messages and views of how to be? Now that a man has been shaped by his environment and experiences and his heart so often has been ignored, what is the outcome? Men's writer Marvin Allen (1995) paints an accurate picture here, “To avoid or to cope with these painful and embarrassing emotions, millions of men have turned to such manly solutions as excess

work, alcohol, TV sports, food, sexual compulsions, and even aggression and violence” (p. 311). Men unconsciously yearn for some kind of transition or initiation as they stumble toward manhood. Outmoded ideas abound and as Raphael (1988) observes, many young men create their own challenges in attempts to grow up and be a man; they “join the army, compete in sports, get a job, graduate from college, climb mountains, pledge fraternities, screw girls, get drunk with the guys” (p. 23). These are not only attempts at becoming a man, but they are all done with an unconscious desire to belong, to be seen, to be accepted, to transition.

As an adult, if a man has deficits in his development and if he was informally initiated through immature means, he will react to the world from a younger place than he actually is; specifically he will react from the exact place of his developmental wound. For example, men's movement writers Robert Moore and Douglas Gillette (1990) write about *boy psychology* [italics added] which means that they are stuck in an “immature phase of development” and are behaving from the developmental place where they were wounded. Moore and Gillette (1990) go on, “[man] remains a boy—not because he wants to, but because no one has shown him the way to transform his boy energies into man energies.” (p. 3). The man who feels ashamed is disconnected, or as Moore and Gillette hypothesize, he is a *fragmented* [italics added] boy leading a chaotic life as a man (1990). These two authors add, “No one has led him into direct and healing experiences of the inner world of the masculine potentials” (p. 3). Poet and mythopoetic men's movement writer Robert Bly agrees and calls these men “half adults” (p. 45, 1996). Bly (1996) believes men have not taken on the role of an adult male because elders have not initiated them into manhood. Male fraternities, where pledges are required to withstand hazing and

intimidation as a symbol of masculine strength, are a good examples of immature initiation. Raphael (1988) sums it up here: "Fraternities, unlike primitive initiations, allow a youth to retain his childish ways while simultaneously laying claim to a more manly status" (p. 92).

### ***Reconnection***

The years between adolescence and manhood are when a young man will unconsciously or consciously seek initiation toward manhood and find a sense of belonging. Herein lies an honorable opportunity for reconnection. Two specific ways men can help reconnect to their inner nature are psychotherapy and wilderness rites-of-passage experiences. In order to heal, the bulk of the men's literature recommends that men enter meaningful rites-of-passage experiences facilitated by healthy, mature, elder men. These experiences can be very therapeutic for men and many other men may want to enter a one on one relationship with a therapist. Both are recommended here.

### ***Ritual & Initiation***

Through a wilderness rite-of-passage men are given the opportunity to not only prove themselves, but to receive a mature initiation experience and be witnessed and held by other men. For example, by being recognized, seen and supported by an elder male, men can often work toward healing wounds that conceivably were delivered by older men such as fathers. This can assist men in joining a community of men that support their vulnerabilities and it can help them overcome their homophobia by being in close contact with other men in an intimate way.

Some writers of the men's movement believe that the foundation of healing for a man is ritual (Moore & Gillette, 1990). Malidoma Some (1996) believes that "where

ritual is absent, the young ones are restless or violent, there are no real elders, and the grown-ups are bewildered" (p. 18). Raphael (1988) adds, "At a time in history when male insecurity is rampant, formal rites of passage seem to offer dramatic definitions of manhood that are otherwise lacking" (p. 12). The beauty of ritual is that it connects a man to spirit and his community. It helps a man mark and acknowledge a time of transition in a formal way while being seen, supported and honored. Raphael (1988) maintains that without these initiatory experiences, "it is harder for a youth to be sure that he has actually changed from one state to another" (p. 15). Moore and Gillette (1990) believe men "seek initiation into adulthood, into adult responsibilities and duties toward ourselves and others, into adult joys and adult rights, and into adult spirituality" (p. 5). What is initiation exactly? It is designed to "dramatize and facilitate change" from "the weakness and vulnerability of childhood to the strength and self-confident of manhood" (Raphael, 1988, p. 12).

If a man is willing and ready for this kind of initiatory experience, perhaps he may embark on mythologist Joseph Campbell's (1949) Hero's Journey or rite-of-passage author Arnold van Gennep's (Raphael, 1988) death/rebirth rite-of-passage. Campbell's Hero's Journey is an initiation or rite-of-passage that men and women have participated in since the beginning of time (1949). This traditional rite-of-passage has three specific parts: severance, initiation, and the return. Similarly, Van Gennep's death and rebirth has three parts: separation, transition, and incorporation (Raphael, 1988). In the severance stage a person will leave their community or family and begin a journey, often alone. In some cultures, the person is kidnapped, kicked out of the tribe or he may leave the community voluntarily. Initiation is when a man will go through a ritual of some

kind, which may involve death and rebirth of some part of themselves and the initiate might be taught something by a teacher or spirit (Raphael, 1998). This part is often followed by a test or an "ordeal" the initiate has to go through to test the waters of his newfound self (Hollis, 1993). The return symbolizes the man coming back to his community, his people, as a new person with new insights. Perhaps the boy leaves a child and returns a man. Essential to the return is being witnessed and received by community and or elders.

Men actually need to be taught (initiated) how to be a man by mature, wise male elders. Raphael (1988) defines an elder as "older men who are the purveyors of wisdom" (p. 195). If men are not led toward manhood by elders, men will be simply be *half-adults* [italics added] and remain stuck in adolescence. Campbell (1949) suggests that by looking at the hero's journey in myths throughout time, a man can find elucidation that ultimately points back to himself; that within our souls, or unconscious, or the "realm that is within," lay the answers (p. 16). Campbell (1949) states that a man must surrender in despair and darkness in order to grow or be born anew.

For example, a man may hit *rock bottom* after years of drug use and failed relationships and find that in his emptiness something new is beginning, and he has nothing more to lose. His old self dies and a new man is born, a more honest, contactful man whose strength lay in his self-honesty and vulnerability. Perhaps this man surrendered to a *higher power*. Other men may choose some variation of spirit, God, or religion to assist them. Often in the process of ritual and initiation a man will seek and find spirit or connection to Other. Spiritual guidance and support can facilitate the transition toward manhood.



### *Psychotherapy*

Another path for man to reconnect with himself is through psychotherapy.

Psychotherapy is a process by which a man can enter into an intimate relationship and be seen and supported free from judgment or shame. This does not mean he won't feel shamed or judged; it means if the therapist has done his work, the man can be free to elaborate and explore himself in relationship and in a safe environment. He can receive feedback and mirroring about his behavior in the here and now.

Most men resist the notion of therapy because that implies there is a problem, and they don't want to admit to having problems. Because therapy is about emotions and relationship to self and other (more like being a woman), therapy is foreign territory for most men and something they often reject as unmanly. However, for the brave disconnected man, therapy is a rich avenue wherein he can talk freely and openly. When he actually commits to therapy, it can be a slow process for the disconnected man. James Hollis (1993) cites Robert Hopeke who believes "it takes a man about a year in therapy before he is able to internalize and be present to his actual feelings—a year to reach where women are usually able to begin" (p. 54).

By engaging in a relationship with a psychotherapist, a man can begin to work on his developmental deficits, childhood wounding and sort out the myriad of introjects embedded in his personal man code. There are all types and styles of therapy for a man to explore his disconnection. The therapeutic environment can provide the disconnected man the holding and support he needs to heal. Therapy alone might be a tough sell for most men that want to feel in control, adequate, strong and who fear feeling unmanly. Therefore, men might need a more subtle, albeit equally potent, therapeutic intervention

such as a wilderness rite-of-passage, where group therapy process is integrated into the rite-of-passage.

### **Theoretical Perspective of Healing for the Disconnected Man**

In my context of therapy, I hold a transpersonal psychological view that combines Eastern “fruitional” psychology, gestalt therapy, and wilderness rites-of-passage experiences. As a meditator, gestalt student, practicing therapist, and someone who owns a small business taking fraternity men on wilderness rites-of-passage trips, my view stems from my own direct experience and journey toward reconnection as a man.

#### ***Holding an Eastern Fruitional View***

*“If we are going to relate with the sun, we must also relate with the clouds that obscure the sun”  
(Chogyam Trungpa, p. 104).*

A fruitional-based psychotherapist will encourage the client to ‘consciously participate’ in the very experience they claim is hurting them. According to the fruitional therapist, a man will often have to compartmentalize or dissociate from his core fear or core wound that happened at an early developmental age. For example, a man may have learned to distrust his emotions because his parents shut these emotions down. The fear and belief becomes, “if I feel my emotions, I am bad and wrong.” This fear is often unconscious and so significant that the disconnected man lives his life unaware that he is avoiding it. And, as soon as he protects himself from his worst fear, he wants a relationship with the part he cut off, which strengthens the struggle and disconnect (Bruce Tift, 2003).

The fruitional approach stems from Buddhist philosophy and is presented from a viewpoint of the awakened state or the enlightened state (Ray, 2005, live talk). The fruitional therapist believes a person is completely perfect and pure as they are, that there

is no problem, nothing to solve. In my work with men my intention is always to hold a view that men are whole, all the time, and that their fundamental nature is complete, which gives men *room* to be who they are. This notion of true nature is described here by the author of *The Power of Now*, Eckhart Tolle (1999),

Underneath your outer form, you are connected with something so vast, so immeasurable and sacred, that it cannot be conceived or spoken of—yet I am speaking of it now. I am speaking of it not to give you something to believe in but to show you how you can know it for yourself (p. 92).

If a client comes to me with their own perspective that they are *stuck* and I can hold the belief that they are more than their story, their struggle—that there is nothing to fix, perhaps I am helping them tolerate and accept themselves.

Additionally, my own practice of meditation allows me to be more present and aware of what is happening with a client, a group, or whatever therapeutic context I am in. The more I sit with my own suffering, the more I am able to sit with the suffering of others. Much like Buddhists use the sky as a metaphor for holding our thoughts in our level of awareness, the therapeutic office space or the wilderness become the container of holding all that is the individual.

A fruitional view is advantageous for the man who is on a mission to simply be *better*. These men may have developmental wounds and may want to improve their lives. They may want to work on themselves to be better lovers, bosses, workers, salesmen, or fathers. However, even when a man claims he is trying to be *better* or commits to some goal of improving himself, he has immediately disconnected from himself. This is a fundamental teaching in Buddhism regarding dualism, which is the split between his ego

and his inner nature (Trungpa, 1992; Ray, 2003; Chodron, 1991). Eckhart Tolle (1999) calls this the mind-body disconnect. The idea is as soon as we try to figure *it* out; we cut ourselves off from our inner nature. This continues the split and the chasm widens between true nature and ego.

Men in this culture are frequently conditioned to problem solve and fix things. When they approach themselves in this manner or relate to themselves as an object that they can fix, they will empower and reinforce a lifetime of struggle and disconnection. In other words, they objectify themselves rather than experience themselves. Within the fruitional view, men accept and embrace themselves fully, rather than fixing anything. So long as the disconnected man makes statements about being better or fixing, he will continue to move farther away from who he is. Tolle (1999) reminds us that our sense of who we are is a painting of the mind. Perhaps then, therapy becomes not fixing but instead becomes turning the light on. Tolle (1999) states that to become conscious of our whole being we need to reclaim it from the mind. Transformation does not take place externally by conjuring up in the mind a way to solve an issue. Instead, it is *through* the body where a man experiences the present moment and thus answers to his dilemmas (Tolle, 1999). Tolle (1999) and Ray (2003) claim that the truth is found within our body and nowhere else.

The fruitional therapy then, if man is willing, does not involve an annihilation of ego or this wounded part of self, but a “full acceptance” as Moore and Gillette suggest (p. 43, 1990). The Buddhist view speculates that most people want to move away from their suffering. Yet according to Buddhist scholar and teacher Ray (2003), to experience suffering directly is to experience the unborn awareness, the unborn nature. Through

direct experience of our own suffering we reconnect instead of fixing. Ray (2003) adds, “suffering is a profound teacher” (live track #5) and within suffering is the nature of freedom. If the disconnected man opens to and experiences his suffering, he will find that it is common, natural, part of being human. In other words, if men had the courage to experience themselves honestly in the moment, they may not only feel how much they are suffering and how forbidding and overwhelming it is, they will reconnect with themselves.

### ***Gestalt Therapy***

Gestalt therapy is essentially a view, a way of life (not a technique), to help a person be fully who they are. It too is a means to reconnect and is not about fixing anything. It is “a system built upon intuitive understanding rather than theory” (Naranjo, p. 5). In *The Gestalt Approach & Eye Witness to Therapy*, Fritz Perls (1973), the founder of gestalt therapy, defines gestalt therapy as that “which considers the individual as a function of the organism/environment field, and which considers his behavior as reflecting his relatedness within that field” (p 25). He maintains that a person is always changing to adapt and survive. When a person cannot change and adapt within their environment neurosis will set in. When a person is stuck in their way of being, they become less and less able to meet their own needs (Perls, 1973). Gestalt therapy then aims to help the client identify their own blocks to change and grow.

The gestalt view holds that through experience and experiments, the therapist can help the client through their unfinished business and stuckness. An experiment may be having a person dialogue with a disowned part of themselves or it may be something as simple as having them breath into tension they might be experiencing. The gestalt view to

therapy is about noticing how an individual is or is not in contact with himself in each moment. Contact is essentially presence to self in the moment. How a person does relationship in the here and now in each moment is most likely the way they do relationship in the world. If a person is not present, they are most likely breaking contact through one of many “contact boundary disturbances” (p. 16). According to Perls (1973), contact disturbances such as introjection occur when a person is unable or unwilling to meet their own needs. They may *break* contact and withdraw instead (Perls, 1973). Hence, there is a continuum between contact and withdraw. Contact disturbances are merely ways in which a person protects himself on a moment-to-moment basis and the therapist's job is to bring these processes of protection to the client's awareness.

Gestalt therapists believe there is “no such thing as resistance, only protection” (Freeman, 2003). In other words, instead of pathologizing a man's unwillingness to share something, gestalt therapists view this as the individual taking care of himself and protecting himself as a sign of health. Phrased differently, a man is doing the best he can to take care of himself in each moment. This is known as a concept called organismic self-regulation. The gestalt therapist trusts the client and believes harm cannot be caused to the client unless the therapist is out of contact with himself, or the therapist is not present. The job of the gestalt therapist is to disturb the homeostasis (or comfortable stuckness), which will heighten a person's anxiety just enough to help them bring awareness to how they keep themselves stuck or safe (Freeman, 2003).

Gestalt therapy is about working in the here and now. Gestaltists believe that a person brings their entire history, family, and all their relationships with them into each moment. So, it is not necessary to have those people present. The notion is that a person

will act out what has happened his or her whole life within the therapy relationship. For example, an introject of the disconnected man might be *I don't need anybody's help* or in the here and now of therapy, this could be mean, *I don't really need therapy nor do I need this therapist right now*. Of course this message comes from the past somewhere. It helps the man to defend against what might be another part of himself that really does need someone. It serves as a barrier to making contact with others in his present life. If he doesn't need anybody, no one can really get to know him and judge him, and therefore he stays safe in his own protected, isolated world.

Gestalt therapy focuses on more sensoric behavior. In other words, how we say something is just as important as what we say. Our *external-object-awareness* such as touching, hearing, seeing are vital to the therapeutic process (Stevens, 1975). For example, often when anger arises in a session, the therapist can bring awareness to what a man is doing to himself to express his anger. This man may be digging at himself, pulling his skin, biting his lip or displaying other non-verbal cues the therapist would then bring to his awareness.

I appreciate how Perls identifies the larger sociological problem that can affect an individual's needs. In this society men compete and strive for perfection and greatness. They do their best to control everything. Perls contends that within this framework, no therapy can be successful. The disconnected man has swallowed the introject of how he should exist in this society (adhering to the man code), all the while avoiding and repressing what, who and how he really is (Stevens, 1975). The therapist's job then, is to help the client identify these protectors and bring awareness to how he uses them to avoid

making contact with himself and his world. This style of therapy is about reconnection; helping a man make a relationship to all of himself.

***Ritual and rites-of-passage***

*Initiation, then, is equivalent to a revelation of the sacred, of death, of sexuality, and of the struggle for food. Only after having acquired these dimensions of human existence does one become truly a man."*  
Mircea Eliade (*Raphael*, p. 192-93)

In this culture, few rites-of-passage and initiatory experiences are available to help an adolescent male transition into adulthood and manhood. The grown man is no better off. In the ten years I have worked with adolescents I see few teachers guiding these young men toward adulthood, and specifically manhood. During this crucial time of identity formation, most teenagers are left to their own devices and they end up looking to each other for answers to their questions. What am I supposed to feel? What should I do? Who am I really? What is important to me? Who do I want to become? Since these adolescent men have few older men to guide and honor them and their transition into adulthood, these young teenagers flounder around attempting to be a man by immature, initiatory practices such as drugs, video games, proving themselves, extreme physical feats, acting out sexually, and engaging in risky, violent, or hurtful behaviors. More savvy teens will join something that on the outside looks like it answers their inner call: a college fraternity, the military, a gang, a commune, or some other "bandwagon," all of which often only support their disconnection by reinforcing the cultural messages of the boy code and man code. Still other young men, while remaining disconnected from their heart, do what they are *supposed to do* in mainstream middle class society: go to college, get a job, get married, and ultimately feel flat or empty.



A rite-of-passage is meant for a time of transition and usually marks something special or important such as puberty, graduation, obtaining a driver's license, becoming sexual, getting married, birth and death. These transition times can be incredibly meaningful, yet are all too often simply celebrated with alcohol or disregarded. To honor these events with more support, love, respect, and grieving, elders, healers and therapists can bring back the rite-of-passage to our culture. For men, and specifically teenage boys, it is an opportunity to acknowledge the transition to becoming men and becoming and being who they are in their hearts.

A wilderness rite-of-passage can be a traditional vision quest, or a vision fast wherein a man will spend four days and nights alone in the wilderness with no food. He may go out with the intention to mark something such as, "I mark that I am a man." He is instructed to listen to nature, listen to his heart and the call of his inner being. Upon return he can tell his story to others and be received as a man. Another example is to go on a meditation retreat. When a man sits with himself, be it in nature or during a retreat, long enough to hear the silence of his own being, to feel how scary it is, the opportunity for transformation is enormous. This is one way a man can begin to identify his own disconnectedness where he can begin to experience honestly what is happening for him in the moment and thereby reconnect to his deeper self.

Many men may participate in ritual experiences alone and without telling anyone. But a man cannot make this journey alone. He has been doing that his whole life. It is not enough for him to isolate and read books, working independently to heal. Many disconnected men spend their twenties saying "I'm lost, but I should know the answer, what's wrong with me? Nothing, I'm fine." With no one to formally guide him toward

manhood, he is left to his own devices and the cultural messages of what he should be doing and who he should be. How is a man supposed to know the answer when he has no guide? A man needs support through elders, teachers, male and female friends, intimate partners and a supportive community.

One of the reasons rites-of-passage experiences are so profound is the notion that the community is involved. During these experiences a man does not begin and end an initiatory experience alone. Group experiences provide a mirror wherein a man can see himself reflected in others and receive immediate feedback on how he is being. Ideally, a man has his people "holding space" for him while he is gone, praying for him and blessing him upon departure, receiving him upon return. Yet another rite may be to go on a meditation retreat wherein a man simply sits with himself in community.

### **Clinical Application**

*You cannot teach a man anything.  
You can only help him discover it within himself.  
--Galileo*

In the Encarta dictionary (2004), Fraternity means "a social society for men who are students at a college or university, with a name consisting of individually pronounced Greek letters. A group of people with something in common, for example, being in the same job or sharing the same pastime" (Section "e"). Most traditional college fraternities are around 170 years old and were originally secret literary societies. Eventually they became social institutions founded upon lofty values and ideals to promote good citizenship and academic excellence. The North American Interfraternity Conference reports that in 2005 there are 64 male fraternities and fraternal groups with over 400,000 student members.

Today, the state of the male fraternity is ever changing. Colleges and universities across North America are continually working with fraternity undergraduates and alumni to help members live by fraternity values. These groups consider their values essential to the fraternity man's moral compass. In the last decade, fraternities have been attempting to eradicate stereotypical inappropriate behavior often displayed in the media and re-direct fraternity life back to the founding values and principles. Fraternities must change if they want to stay connected to their host institutions. This is where I decided to get involved. Since I had been leading wilderness trips for years, I proposed taking fraternity men on wilderness trips to help with this re-focusing process. The original intention was to design a trip that would help these men learn about themselves, their leadership abilities, and educate the men on the core values, principles and obligations of the fraternity.

I did this work for three summers before my boredom informed me that something was missing. I was benefiting tremendously from my own personal work through therapy, meditation and solo wilderness trips and realized these men needed more. Was I doing all I could to help these fraternity men be vulnerable and real? Was I doing all I could to assist these men in opening the door to their hearts? I became inspired to make the trips more heartfelt and meaningful: less external adventure, more internal adventure. With the help of a friend and colleague Dan, I added the rite-of-passage element, and these trips became a part of my theoretical perspective. Dan has done intense rites-of-passage training and is completing his masters in Wilderness Therapy. This is what unfolded.

## The Disconnected Man's Path to Integration.

In the summer of 2004, we led 4 different 7-day wilderness trips, working with 45 fraternity men total. Each trip had 11 men, one had twelve. All of the men were between the ages of 18 and twenty-eight. Most of the men were Caucasian; few were Asian, East Indian, and Hispanic. I chose this setting to work with men keeping four aspects in mind: 1) an opportunity to work in the wilderness 2) to strengthen my group work and gestalt therapy skills 3) an opportunity to facilitate a rite-of-passage experience for men, and lastly 4) to work with and get closer to my friend Dan.

The structure of the trips was based on Joseph Campbell's Hero's Journey (1949). We divided the trip into three parts: severance, initiation and the return. This journey involved the larger picture of the men coming on this 7-day trip: leaving home (severance), initiation (the trip itself), and going home (the return). We also applied this framework to an aspect of the trip itself: leaving the community to go on the solo-fast (severance), the solo-fast (initiation), and coming back to their small group and telling their story (the return). Introducing the severance happened on the first night when the men arrived having traveled from all over the country. We introduced Campbell's vision and acknowledged men had left behind their families and loved ones for this trip.

During the introduction circle we asked the men two questions: When was the last time you spoke from your heart? When was the last time you allowed yourself to cry? We asked them this to invite their vulnerability. Each man answered in a genuine way, many connected to their heart and experience in the here and now and we helped point this out by saying, "Notice how you are feeling right now as you share this with this group of strangers." The questions were an invitation, to be real, to be alive, vulnerable

and to be seen by their new family, new peers that they had known for hours or some of them a few minutes.

The next aspect of the trip was to work toward the initiation, which we called the solo-fast. The solo-fast involved setting an "intention," spending a night alone in the wilderness for 24 hours, and fasting for 36 hours. The solo-fast was optional. The days progressed with men bonding with one another and working toward setting their intention for the solo fast experience. Helping the men clarify their intentions, Dan and I worked with them on identifying what was true for them in their life at present. We had two councils (groups) around this each lasting 2-4 hours. Many of the men were unclear and had never put deep thought into this type of process; they had certainly not expressed themselves from their hearts in this way. The men came up with very moving intentions. Each intention began with the phrase: "My intention is to" and some of their statements were, "find out what true love means to me," "find out who I am as a man," "seek the energy that will help me open my heart to the people I care about," "find inner peace and happiness with myself," "evaluate the selfishness in my motives," "love and respect myself completely for who I am," and "mark that I am a man of faith" (group journal from these trips, 2004). In working through this process, many of the men hit some very vulnerable spots in their process as they touched into their heart for the first time in a long time. Men spoke of their families, their relationships to their fathers, brothers, mothers. Men dropped into their feelings, many for the first time.

Upon leaving for the solo-fast, Dan and I, with the help of the men, created a 12 foot diameter compass on the ground symbolizing the four directions. The compass symbolized a portal beyond which they would be initiated. This was the boundary of

severance and the return, a portal to initiation. Once the men would leave the circle, they would be invisible to the community until their return the next day. While they were gone, Dan and I would hold the men and their intentions in our hearts. We prayed for them and asked the spirits watch over them. We did this by smudging the men with sage prior to them leaving. Sage represents a cleansing and the smoke offerings to whatever spirits were called to join us.

Upon the return the men ate and were invited to hold some of their experience until the elder council where they each had ten minutes to share their story and answer questions of the elders. The elders in this case were Dan and me. For many men, this was the most powerful aspect of the trip. The young man would sit before the elders, and the group would sit in a semi-circle behind each person telling his story. Many men grew very emotional having identified how they are, were or have been disconnected from themselves. Many men spoke of not wanting to be like their fathers, yet knowing no other way. After telling his story, each man would be adorned with a necklace by the elders. The necklace honored his rite-of-passage. It had four colors representing the stages a man goes through in his life, or it could reflect the stages of nature that each of us goes through on a moment to moment basis: Red for childhood innocence, black for adolescence, white for the adult responsibility, and yellow for spiritual and higher understandings.

***Case example: Brian***

Brian was a 19 year old man from Pennsylvania. He came on the trip to learn about himself and have fun. On day two of the trip, when the men were working on their solo-fast intentions, Brian began to cry. I asked Brian to stay with himself and “let the

tears come.” I had a sense Brian had not cried in years nor shown anyone his tears. I felt that Brian needed room. I invited him to take a breath and stay with himself, noticing the temptation to shut down. He cried for a few minutes and really let his feelings be there and soon stopped. Next, in attempting to keep Brian in the here and now, I asked him “what is it like to be so real and vulnerable in front of your peers right now?” Looking down, he responded that it was hard and that he felt scared. Brian explained that he felt confused, lost and pressured to be like his father. Both of Brian's parents were prominent doctors that were pressuring him to go to medical school. Brian spoke of his challenge of doing what his father told him to do and doing what was in his heart. Brian went out on solo to “find out my true self.” His whole life, Brian's father had told him how to be, who to be, and what to do. Brian realized in that moment that he had never questioned his parents' decision for him. He just went along, completely abandoning himself.

We explored this with Brian for some time in the group and I asked other group members who could relate with Brian. Many men felt similar to Brian. The temptation in group work is to have group members talk to each other through the group leader. Yet, going with the gestalt principle of contact, and wanting to build more trust and cohesion, I invited the men to talk to Brian, not Dan or me. This opened up other men who began to share their stories. Coming back to Brian, we encouraged him to find an intention that fit for him, and separate out the introjects he had taken on from his parents, mainly his father. We reminded Brian that his father was not here; that he, not his father, is in charge of deciding what is true for him. He was overwhelmed at the meaning of this. We asked Brian what kind of man he wanted to be. He had no response.

Eventually the solo-fast came and Brian's intention was "To find my true self." When Dan and I received him after solo, he was shaken and looked like a different person. His face had more color, his skin was dirty and he had received some sun. He looked up more and made more eye contact. Something had shifted for Brian. He began to tell his story and he kept it brief as if not wanting to take up too much space. We invited more from him and asked him questions about his own truth. I remember asking him, "Whom and what will you love?" He answered, "Myself more." Brian was clearly uncomfortable in this setting yet some part of him wanted it desperately. We spoke to that part. Later in the group journal, Brian would write,

I really valued the solo experience, not only for the uniqueness, but also for the things I learned about myself and others. It was really touching to sit and listen to the way that this experience changed the lives of the men I was with.

Dan leaned over to me and suggested we give Brian a hug, which we were not planning on doing for each person. Somehow it felt right and Dan asked Brian. He said "sure." We hugged him and held him for a few moments. His body was conflicted. It seemed to say "This is not okay but I want this closeness, this affection." We asked him, "What does it feel like to receive a hug from another man?" His replied quietly, "good, real good." Later he would tell us on the last day that that was the first time he had hugged another man in 19 years. He reported that he could not remember the last time his father hugged him. Contact scared Brian and it brought up all kinds of uncomfortable feelings that he previously had not allowed room for. It brought up the barrier of homophobia and challenged it by allowing tenderness with another man.



In working with Brian and the other 44 men, Dan and I began to realize that these men don't have real opportunities to share themselves with anyone. Most young men ages 18-25 have never been asked what kind of man they want to be. Of the 45 men on the trip, 45 responded earnestly about what being a man meant to them. Most of these men were surprised that they had never engaged in such discussion with their 20, 30, or 110 other fraternity brothers. Even in their own friendships and relationships back home they did not allow themselves to be vulnerable around the topic of manhood. Simply by inviting them to be themselves and to be real in a natural setting, these men were taking risks in a way that I had not previously seen when working with young men and boys. We were opening a door and these men were jumping through it. In addition, we invited these men to break through the barrier of homophobia and heal some wounds that most likely occurred in relationship to their fathers.

To work with men in this way requires that the facilitator, therapist, elder, or healer work on himself deeply, accepting all of his parts—deficiencies and shadow parts included. If I do not sit with myself in an honest and open way, how can I expect men to do the same? It is my belief that men cannot work with other men in a healing way, if those men have not done their personal work. We can take other men only as far as we have been as men.

In addition, my view of group work is that to be connected to the other group facilitator provides an additional layer of safety and trust that doesn't need to be spoken and instead is felt by group members. In fact, my relationship with my good friend Dan and our connection, and the work that each of us had done previously, proved to have the most impact on the men, more than the solo-work or even the depth of each group process.

Numerous times throughout each trip Dan and I would spontaneously and openly display our affection toward each other by hugging, holding and crying with one another. Later the young men would comment about how this moved them and showed them a new way to be a man.

**Discussion:**

*“So intense and final is the modern and white man's conviction, his internal conviction, that he is not a man, that he dares anything on earth except be a man.”*  
--DH Lawrence (p. 120)

The power of the group is often what impacts the men most. Being seen and supported by other men provides a necessary stepping-stone prior to a men being able to accept themselves as a *deeper* men. They seem to need validation and acceptance outside themselves before they can truly accept themselves on their own. The only definition of manhood these men were previously receiving was from other macho and adolescent men or from the women in their lives. Rather than relying on either of these models, these men were able to learn a different model from the trip leaders and their peers about what it means to be a connected, authentic man.

The limitation with a wilderness rite-of-passage is that the men return to their people and communities, often where there is no support system that *sees* them or validates their new self-discovery. These men are most likely going back to disconnected male peers and adolescent fraternity brothers.

One other interesting point to mention is the notion of hazing and initiation. Within the context of this rite-of-passage the men discussed their college experience in a fraternity. Sharing these experiences became a way to heal the same experiences. What came up consistently on each trip was a longing for initiation with more depth and

meaning than what they currently have when initiated into a fraternity. Many men spoke about the call to be “hazed” and initiated into something. Hazing is defined as “any activity expected of someone joining a group (or to maintain full status in a group) that humiliates, degrades or risks emotional and/or physical harm, regardless of the person's willingness to participate” (<http://www.stophazing.org/definition.html>, 2005). Hazing is illegal in almost every state.

What I learned is that out of 45 men; over half stated that they wanted to be hazed. What does this mean? Dan and I had the intuition to conclude that these men are hungry and asking to be initiated into something, perhaps manhood. We helped them define this as perhaps an inner call that is within all men at this age, which is the call to transition and to be a man. Since there is no formal rite, these men have sought out a fraternity to belong, to become a man and to enhance their college experience. They also want to go through something difficult and prove themselves in order to feel okay and *earn it*. And these men want to do this in a deep, meaningful way, not an adolescent, boyish way. Fraternities are missing something. These men are asking for a rite-of-passage, and now fraternities are providing inadequate alternatives. The elders of the fraternity, the alumni, owe these men a formal rite, a transition other than a ceremony wherein they accept a badge.

Upon writing this paper, I learned that the situation of the disconnected man in this culture is far more complex than is written about here. I do not wish to be simplistic with this approach and view. Being human is complicated and multifarious. Being a man in this culture is mystifying and uncertain. Raphael (1988) sums it up “the male experience is fraught with more uncertainty and conflict today than at any other time in

our recent history” (p. 17). Simply doing the aforementioned approaches does not mean it won't take a man a lifetime to heal. Moreover, a man may look like he is healing and doing all the right things but he could very well be *bypassing* his true self. An egoic man can say all the right things and deliver a convincing case to others that he is healthy and whole. Behind this, somewhere deep down he knows he's a fraud. If only he could admit he is afraid, lost and desperately trying to take care of himself in the best way he knows how, he could begin to connect more deeply with himself.

The fraternity man is only one small subgroup of men in the world. This paper may apply to you, your son, your father and they may not be in a fraternity. If something resonated for you within these pages, you know what I am talking about. Fraternity men are not the only subgroup of men that are suffering. Men are wounded and hurting. Our culture does not support a man being who he is, in fact it supports few people in being who they are. So then, how can we take responsibility for ourselves and invite the vast, genuine expression of a man's heart?

This paper is less about gender and sex role comparison and more about an invitation for men in particular to look deeply into who they are. As Raphael (1988) states so poignantly, “Rather than helping people to adjust to or fit into outmoded sex roles, clinical psychologists, counselors, and psychiatrists would do better to assist people in their strivings for self-actualizations (the development of a person's full capabilities and potentialities)” (p. 142). In other words, let's help a man become who he is in his heart, rather than pathologize and examine the nuances of male behavior.

### Conclusion

*"We tend to view manhood as the outcome of some external achievement, not as the development of inner strength."*

*--Ray Raphael, 1988*

Is it any wonder that heart disease is the number one killer of men in the United States (Center for Disease Control, 2005)? Men are disconnected from their hearts. The disconnected man is lost. Our grandfathers, fathers, husbands, our brothers, uncles, sons. Think of men you know that are disconnected, a bit confused, slightly empty, looking, longing, searching. What are they disconnected from? Family? Friends? Their partner? Job? Nature? Hobbies? Their passion? Their mission? How do parents, caregivers, the media, and teachers support man's disconnection? How do we enable his disconnection? How would a man be different if he was given permission, if he was seen, heard, held? What if he brought awareness to his whole experience, not just what he thinks but what he feels, what he feels in the dark recesses of his body? What kind of leader would he be? How would this man lead his community and this country if he were connected to himself, to his family, to nature and to a spiritual path?

Men are searching. They are attempting to transition into manhood, into marriage, into relationship. All too often their initiatory experiences are absent or misguided and as a result, men in this culture are often still adolescents. Perhaps what men are searching for is really not outside themselves, it is deep within their own essence and nature. What men long for is the love and vastness of their own heart. To touch this inner nature, a man needs help. A man who is willing to search for his essence and embrace his heart deserves consideration and guidance. Perhaps when men touch their own hearts, they can live fuller, more meaningful lives. A man's journey is less about being a better man, and more about being authentically himself.

For men that have walked off the path of who they are, in order to come back to their heart and soul, it can be very healing to explore a rite-of-passage experience. Since many men would consider it manly to prove themselves and be out in the wilderness with other men, and since many men are longing for and needing their initiation into manhood, a wilderness rite-of-passage can be a unique way to meet men where they are and a profound way for men to reconnect with their heart. By including a group therapy process where a man can make contact with himself and other men in the experience of the moment, he can sort out the duality of himself and become a whole, healthy man, freeing himself of the stereotypes that pervade the Disconnected American male.

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