

MY PERSONAL HISTORY IN MEN'S GROUPS

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In 1992, I responded to an advertisement in the personals column of our local newspaper, calling for the formation of a "men's support group." I met with Greg Anderson, who had previously participated in the New Warrior Network's (NWN) initiation training, and was attempting to form a local version of the NWN integration group.

Greg did two very smart things: he used Bill Kauth's (1992) book, *A Circle of Men*, as a training tool and required a three-month minimum commitment (once a week, for two hours). This attempt at a men's group eventually destabilized, but not before Greg had sponsored me to undergo my own NWN initiation in February 1993.

This had a profound affect on me, as I had already laid the groundwork for behavior change with counseling and 12-step work, in the wake of my divorce. I had made considerable progress already in changing my life, but Greg's group and the initiation stimulated me to take my growth to a new level.

At the time, I was paralyzed by decisions concerning parenting (post-divorce), Post Traumatic Stress Disorder that had been buried for 16 years, and other major issues that I hadn't yet reached the courage to deal with. The initiation enabled me to make several important decisions and galvanized me into taking action. My attorney was so impressed (and pleased) he remarked, "What the hell did those guys do to you in Milwaukee?"

In the wake of this, however, Greg's group disintegrated, and my work schedule changed to swing shift, essentially isolating me socially for the next three years. During that time, I had the opportunity to process what had happened, what mistakes were made (by Greg, others, and myself), and what was done right.

I also became determined to start a group of my own at the first opportunity. I came to several conclusions of which I was absolutely certain:

1. This could be done. I could form a men's group. It was successfully being done across the nation.

2. Kauth's (1992) book and the required three-month minimum commitment were useful tools.

3. Commitment was everything. I determined to stay with the group for a minimum of at least one-year (even if I wound up hating it) just to learn what mistakes had been made, and ten years of attempting groups, if necessary.

4. Modeling (by the group Founder) of the process was second in importance.

5. I had to trust the process and the group absolutely.

6. Initiation was not a requirement. At the time of my NWN experience, I felt over-initiated; I was trying to recover some of my innocence, instead. Also, I came to the conclusion that the initiation requirement forces NWN into a need for large amounts of money and manpower (you can't have an initiation without the real estate and men to perform it). This relegated NWN to major metropolitan areas, not the small towns like I was living in.

7. Also, NWN was bogged down (in my view) with the Jungian theory of Archetypal Psychology, which involved a lot of theory favored by Robert Bly, and other mythopoetic leaders and resulted in a lot of jargon within the NWN community. I knew that such a jargon requirement would kill any group I wanted to start in my hometown. Men there, even the professionals, would view it with great skepticism. Additionally, I had the intuitive feeling that understanding truth does not require a high IQ, a sophisticated understanding of psychology, nor intense intellectual effort. My personal experience is that insight is often obtained in a flash with extremely simple (but profound) understanding that had been previously overlooked.

8. The group must be no cost, both as a selling point and as an integrity issue. I would not make myself vulnerable to accusations of self-interest.

9. The group must be open to all men, but not juveniles. Juveniles mean liability and probable legal issues. The men should be from any socioeconomic group or race, not just a bunch of middle-aged, middle-class white guys.

10. Passion and determination on my part would go a long way toward making the group happen. People seldom support anything they feel is going to be a flash in the pan. People like supporting individuals who are going to be there. I resolved to tell everyone that I was in for the long haul.

When I finally finished with my swing shift, I immediately searched for ways to put my ideas in motion. Having previously gone through an anger management program at the local YWCA, I approached them for a place to meet, offering them a follow-up for their graduates, if desired. They agreed to let us meet there. During our initial discussions, I was asked hypothetically what I would do if our group membership was primarily white and middle-class and YWCA sent us a graduate of their anger management program who was a biker/ex-convict sporting jailhouse tattoos and jewelry. Would the group accept him, or would they be challenged by such a referral? I replied that I hoped that we would be challenged, that it would be

good for the group. The YWCA staff member agreed. Subsequently, we have had two Hispanics, two Native Americans, and one gay man attend the group for at least the minimum three months. All have left by now, but one of the Hispanic and one of the Native-American men who were in the group for over a year and participated with me in a sweat lodge that is supported by the group. All current members are white. The group attracts men from diverse economic backgrounds. One of our five-year members is low-income (forklift driver), another is just finding employment, and one is a bankrupt small farmer. Several of the men are blue-collar and middle-class. The rest of us are middle-class professionals. We range from the liberal to the conservative on the political spectrum. Altogether, we have not had the diversity that I hoped for, but I continue to work toward this goal.

I next sought to obtain money for advertising. A one-month ad in the personals column was more than I could afford at the time. On impulse, I approached John Colgan, the director of Sisters of Providence Hospital Foundation (the hospital's charity arm). I gave him an impassioned plea, and to my surprise he responded by supporting my request. He split the cost of the ad with me (about \$125 apiece). Eight men responded to the ad, and one man graduating from YWCA's Anger Management course also responded. Over the course of the next two years, Providence Foundation donated over \$1000 in advertising costs for recruitment.

At the first meeting I made a point of expressing to the men the history of previous attempts at establishing a men's group in Yakima, Washington and what mistakes I thought had been made, and why I felt this group was different. I also rather passionately expressed my determination to stay with the group whether I liked the way it went or not. I also impressed on the group the fact that I was the founder but not the Grand-Poobah, and that leadership would be diffused among the men. Thus, the men were aware of the uniqueness of this group and the sense of destiny in founding it.

The group was highly successful in the first year, despite errors on my part and some conflict (which is an important part of men's group). The group named itself the Sage Men's Circle (they didn't care for my title of the "1996 Yakima Men's Group," for some reason!) and established its own ground rules: the need for a facilitator, the use of a "talking stick," the right to decline an activity, etc.

The second year was a near disaster. We recruited many men and lost damn near all of them to serious conflict around one destructive individual. This man was extremely manipulative and damaging. I confronted him with his own behavior, as did some of the other men in the group. He eventually left on his own (we don't "kick" men out, but we do confront them). Along the way we lost twice as many men as were in the original group.

By the third year there were three of us originals, as well as another man who had joined later in the first year. We also had several relatively new men, and most of us were somewhat traumatized by the problems of the second year, but we were also stronger for having stayed. We underwent a great deal of consolidation at this time.

The fourth year has represented a time of deepening. Of the ten of us, almost all of us have been in the group for over two years. We also set ourselves up as a non-profit organization with the IRS. As our fifth anniversary approaches, I look forward to more time with these men.

Along the way, many things have happened. All of my original assumptions have proven valid, at least for this group. During the second year, I found the courage to tackle my PTSD, with the support of the group and a counselor, with wondrous results. I built a huge, deluxe sweat lodge and some of the men who used to be in the original group often join me there for spiritual ceremonies. I wound up getting past much of my bitterness and hostility toward women that resulted from the divorce and have since married a wonderful woman with whom I have a rewarding relationship. I have designed and hosted a Web page for our men's group (www.sagemenscircle.org) and the sweat lodge (www.sagesweatlodge.org), and have begun using them as a means to project myself into men's work on a larger scale. I now often counsel other men in founding their own groups.

All of this I do absolutely free of charge. Doing so is made possible by not requiring an initiation experience. Consequently, my expenses are limited to what I choose to give. The men have always been impressed that we charge no money, and the fact that I lose about \$1200/year on this has absolutely sealed any accusations that this might be some sort of scam or profit venture.

Our group's stated purpose is "mutual support, self-discovery, and personal growth." I find that the group started out at the safe end of the spectrum (mutual support), and has gradually grown closer to the riskier end of the spectrum (personal growth). It is a gradual process of developing trust, sharing with openness and honesty, and being willing to take criticism, if necessary. Most of the men who have been in the group for at least two to three years have developed a greater degree of autonomy (less enabling), integrity (fewer games), compassion (more acceptance of others' diversity), commitment (delivering on promises), and intimacy (inter-relatedness).

Our "process" is modeled on that espoused by Kauth's (1992) book and that of NWN (Mankind Project), with somewhat fewer rituals than NWN. We start with opening rounds, in which we express how we are at this moment, and how our week has been, and whether or not we have "work" to do. Work is any personal issue, of any kind, that a man is struggling with. The only requirement is that it be honest, non-trivial, and relates to how the man feels. No topics are taboo. We have discussed work, wives, children, incest, domestic violence, substance abuse, parents, death and disability, and other topics. The "Facilitator" role, which rotates among the group every two weeks, is used to monitor the group activity and keeps us on track and focused. If necessary (which is seldom), he acts as a referee. If the man doing work is willing to accept feedback (usually), the group responds with honesty. We have a bit of a reputation as a "brutally honest" group, but I don't

think that we are especially cruel or disrespectful to our members. The men have just gotten past the b.s. and have enough trust to shoot straight with each other. It does kinda scare the newcomers at first, but they adapt in time. Feedback is not just critical; it is often compassionate; but seldom enabling. On one occasion I got so carried away that I told a man that I thought he should carve the word "victim" in his forehead with a knife so that his persecutors could identify him more readily! I immediately felt a bit guilty for being so harsh, tempering it a little with the remark that I only said so out of affection for him; that I, too, had been in his place (to a lesser degree); and that I knew from experience what it was like. A year later this man was standing up for himself and "kicking butt" on those who would manipulate him.

The facilitator may also introduce a group activity if he chooses. At the conclusion of activities and "work," he leads us through closing rounds (how we feel now). Then, we have a "group growl" at the top of our lungs which is my favorite part. We also have social activities such as camp-outs, card games, etc., and I give each man a certificate of appreciation on his anniversary date (when he joined the group).

I received both ridicule and support from my co-workers when I set out on this venture. Ironically, most of my male co-workers found the concept "weird" and "homosexual," while most of the females were more or less supportive. Since I had learned in therapy to trust my instincts, and since I had three years to ponder it, I went ahead anyway. Along the way I have been frequently astonished by the degree of support I have received from unexpected quarters; the awesome power of the group to enable men to find their own path to self-empowerment, and the degree to which certain men have changed their lives as a result. Often they were the men who I would have predicted would quit, and others who I felt sure would make dramatic changes have left the group. So much for my guesswork!

Personally, the effect has been stunning. I now advertise the group as a "Self-Empowerment" group, because that is what it so often accomplishes. I entered the group riddled with insecurities, torn by unresolved conflicts, and overwhelmed with a need to connect with other men. I had lost an identical twin brother to suicide several years before and I consciously set out to replace his loss with the men of the group (which I told to the group). My PTSD has been resolved, as have many other serious issues. I feel vastly more confident, content, and safe. I have deepened my spirituality, balanced my bank accounts, eliminated my debts, and started saving for retirement.

I seem to have "arrived." The old issues are settled, most new ones are well within my capacity to deal with effectively, and I seem to have become an "elder" in my own family, despite being the youngest member still living. The men in the group are a great comfort to me, and I feel a great sense of satisfaction and meaning in watching them take control of their own lives. Life is "good," and I have confidence of overcoming any adversity that should befall me in the future. My

capacity to relate to others has deepened, and I feel a sense of mission in the world in doing men's work.

I look forward to this work for the rest of my life.

REFERENCE

Kauth, B. (1992). *A Circle of Men: The original manual for men's support groups*. New York: St. Martin's Press.

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