ARE MYTHOPOETIC MEN'S SUPPORT GROUPS REPACKAGED PATRIARCHY?*

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ABSTRACT

As a patriarchal society, the United States, along with much of the rest of the world, has established the male in a dominant role, with men socially conditioned to be providers, in control, and always to remain strong and manly. As a result of these socially constructed definitions of manhood, men have historically had to suppress their more tender feelings, leading sometimes to emotional isolation, alienation from their true feelings, and a feeling of powerlessness. Today men are finding the attributes of hegemonic, patriarchal masculinity untenable. Accordingly, men have begun to realize that they can take responsibility for their situations and change their lives if they so desire. Part of that change involves re-visioning, re-creating, and reconstructing healthier and less conflicted forms of masculine identity by making intentional choices to move out of the power and control cycle. As effective social remedies have been sought to help "men in crisis" (aside from therapeutic solutions), a highly, and increasingly successful intervention has proved to be participation in both self-help and mutual support groups. Mythopoetic men's peer mutual support groups are one setting where these reconstructions of masculine identity are occurring. This study focuses on the value of the mythopoetic branch of the contemporary men's movement as a rejection of patriarchal values, patriarchal masculinity, rather than just being another form of "repackaged" patriarchy.

John Rowan, a member of the pro-feminist Achilles Heal Collective in the United Kingdom, had worked with men in groups specifically on issues of male

consciousness in a patriarchal society for over 15 years and used the metaphor of four hills (Rowan, 1991) as the four main areas that men need to address or personally work on to raise their conscious awareness of themselves: their inner selves, their aculturalization and the way that their masculinity is socially constructed.

> The first is the *conscious position,* where we consider matters as how men treat women, how men relate to other men, how men talk about women with other men, and so on.

> The second is the *unconscious portion,* where we discover possibly surprising things about how men relate to their mothers or fathers, how internal conflicts arise and how they function, how the dominance model gets "into the bones."

> The third is the *trans-personal position,* where we explore the question of the anima, the shadow, and other archetypes, and also such things as rituals of death, rebirth, and initiation. What is our myth, our legend, our fairy story about men and women? The discoveries here may be often surprising and disturbing.

> The fourth is the *position of god-forms,* where we meet the Horned God and the Great Goddess. Actual experiences of wells, of standing stones, of tree circles and so forth upper. Here the surprise and the disturbance are likely to be greater, because these conditions are still more typically hidden from our daily lives (Rowan, 1991, p. 78, emphasis added).

These four levels of knowledge, conscious, unconscious, transpersonal, and spiritual, require work involving both external and internal introspection. Rowan further indicates that these four "hills" can be seen as each one being higher than the previous one, or, in the alternative, that they can be envisioned as four hills of equal height, each requiring equal engagement for personal involvement and personal work by men to create a new, balanced, even anti-patriarchal, life.

Regarding the first hill or position of *consciousness,* Rowan lists *male chauvinism, sexism,* and *patriarchy.* Under chauvinism, male chauvinist assumptions are challenged in the group setting. Secondly, Rowan indicates that sexism is more deeply ingrained and more difficult for men to recognize and understand. Sexism "often requires a real change in the whole attitudinal structure of the person before it can shift. So this is more long-term work. Sexism is often based on low self-esteem" (Rowan, 1991, p. 79). This may require psychotherapy because it may take longer to heal this lack of self-esteem than the duration of a support group. Rowan believes that group work is more effective in combating sexism because the social reinforcement of sexism is constantly present in everyday communications, relationships, and most aspects of media.

With regard to patriarchy, Rowan finds that this aspect is even more difficult to deal with effectively. He refers to the "dominator" model of society developed by Eisler (1990), with men as the dominators. Eisler "emphasized the common dominator model is deeply imbedded within each of us, and hard to reach because of the continued social reinforcement which it receives" (Rowan, 1991, p. 80).

This difficulty is clearly understandable when we consider the deep entrenchment of these processes. By noting Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977) it is possible to obtain an understanding of that depth of entrenchment as it is modeled for us daily. For most of us, our parents and/or primary caregivers from the time that we are born model patriarchy. This is a segue into Rowan's second position of the unconscious.

The second hill or position is the unconscious.

> One can only go so far by simply working on the conscious level. Ultimately it is necessary in order to change *dominance patterns,* to go to the unconscious level. One of the key elements here, of course, relates to the original family pattern from which the man emerged.
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> How the man related to his *father* as a child is crucial. What kind of model of masculinity did the father represent? All kinds of positive and negative messages come from this early relationship.
>
> Feeling about the father may often be closely related to sexuality. Perhaps the father was too sexual, or not sexual enough. Often the father's sexuality is quite mysterious, because of the absence (physical or mental) of the father from the family. Coming to terms with this may prove to be a very important step in discovering one's own sexuality.
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> Similarly, a man's relationships with women are very strongly influenced at an unconscious level by how he related to his *mother* as a child. Did he love her? Did she love him? These questions may carry a major [emotional] charge, and be salient in the man's development (Rowan, 1991, pp. 80-81, emphasis added).

The relationship with the father will impact the way that a man connects with the father archetype. On the other hand, looking at the man's relationship with his mother leads to his relationship to and the way he is impacted by the mother archetype, which is transpersonal.

Rowan's third hill or position is the transpersonal level.

> Another way of seeing the deeper relationship with women comes from [Jung's] *collective unconscious.* An archetype such as the anima is highly relevant to the whole way in which the man perceives women. The anima is the women inside the man. Very often the details of her appearance or character are derived from the mother, but this is not a mother complex, it is a deep archetype.
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> Also found in this area are the *rituals of initiation.* All real changes in the personality take the form of initiation into a different state. Very often this initiation takes the form of death and rebirth. Group work lends itself to ritual, and new rituals seem to arise quite spontaneously in many groups. But they can also be devised consciously (Rowan, 1991, p. 82, emphasis added).

The concept of initiatory death and rebirth takes us to the fourth hill or position of god-forms.

> But if we really want to understand death and rebirth, we have to be prepared to go into an even more difficult area, the *realm of the god-forms.* The Horned God is the consort of the Great Goddess and can form an ideal image of how the male can relate to the female.

> This goes beyond the archetype and into the area of religion proper. [And I would add the area of spirituality as opposed to organized religion.] It is only here, I believe, that men can realize that the question of female power is crucial to their own development. And this takes us back to politics. Politics is about power and we have to understand about *female power* before we can shift male power from its present dangerous position.

> Men are really afraid of female power, I have discovered, and find it very hard to come to terms with. But the way to come to terms with female power is to worship it (Rowan, 1991, p. 92, emphasis added).

This then sets out the four areas of Rowan's vision or model of the different levels of work, often deep emotional introspective work, which men need to undertake to heal themselves from the throes of patriarchy. I have included these long quotes from Rowan's vision of the four hills, or four levels, of consciousness, because if he were in the United States, he would be a member of National Organization for Men Against Sexism (NOMAS) and likely would be attending Men's Studies Task Force Pre-conference Workshops and NOMAS's annual Man & Masculinity Conference. Further, that there needs to be a balance in the United States between the sociological lens of NOMAS and the more psychological, transpersonal, and spiritual lenses that are more common in men's emotional work such as peer mutual support groups, operating from a mythopoetic perspective.

The term *essentialism* refers to the concept that men's actions are caused by innate or universal characteristics of men as a male sex. Those "universal" characteristics are heavily influenced by biology. Essentialist theories attribute sex-linked variation in behavior to biological, genetic, or other fixed causes as opposed to social influences that are relatively variable characteristics, socially constructed and vary over time by context and setting.

With the advent of the popularity of Robert Bly and his book, *Iron John* (1990), many feminists saw the mythopoetic branch of the contemporary men's movement as a return to essentialism and therefore a retreat from the gains of feminism (Hagen, 1992). They considered it a backlash, an undeclared war against American women (Faludi, 1991), and were fearful of the potential of the mythopoetic branch as fostering a return to patriarchy (Brod, 1992).

Many feminists perceived that Bly failed to discuss the power differences between men and women (Ellis, 1994). Some would say that this is very "essentialist." Ellis (1994) says that this "energy" of men doing emotional healing work and male initiation out in the woods away from women can be "conceptualized in essentialist terms," but doesn't necessarily need to be conceptualized as

such (p. 18). She states that "women cannot 'save' men from the terror, doubt, and division that anger, both male and female, creates" (Ellis, 1994, p. 12). This "saving" of men needs to be done by men for men, and that it is best done in a "men only" space, be it a men's support group, a retreat, or Ellis' term of "weekend warriors" (p. 17).

It is interesting that the type of weekend warrior found in an emotional healing setting of a mythopoetic men's retreat is compared to the more common use of the term weekend warrior for those who are in the military reserves or National Guard and "play" soldier on weekends? This military example more closely represents an essentialist, hyper masculinity, patriarchal perspective (Morgan, 1994).

Bly and the mythopoetic perspectives need not be essentialist. The mythopoetic perspectives (Barton, 2000a) of the kinds of activities of Bly and others that draw men together have "more to do with [men] accepting the limitations of power and the fact of their mortality" (Ellis, 1994, p. 20). Men need to take responsibility for their own change. They do not need to rely on women to shoulder this aspect of their emotionality as well. "They are . . . the ones who need to repair the damage—a much-needed detoxification [of men, their lack of emotionality, their socially constructed need for control, and the dominant culture] that women cannot, and should not perform, for them" (Ellis, 1994, p. 20).

Susan Faludi surely would not see the mythopoets as essentialist today. In 1991, Faludi wrote *Backlash* and in 1999 she wrote *Stiffed,* with the subtitle of "The Betrayal of the American Man." By 1999, Faludi, through her research, had concluded that the American culture had betrayed men because the provider role was no longer valid and many men were suffering from feeling that they still had to play that provider role. Pentz (2000) even asked the specific question of whether the New Warrior Training Adventure resulted in a new masculinity or whether it was simply a "repackaging of dominant patriarchy" (Pentz, 2000). This repackaging arguably could be a form of essentialism. Pentz found that there was a new masculinity through men's initiation by participating in the New Warrior Training Adventure (NWTA) and was not found to be essentialist, but that the men who participated in the NWTA found a new life's mission of service, healing themselves and their communities.

Feminist and pro-feminist men argue that women, too, are oppressed by patriarchy. There is no question that men are violent against women in areas such as rape and intimate partner violence (though these acts are also perpetrated against men and are as such under-reported. The current term is intimate partner violence). The Duluth Model of male power and control (Pence & Paymar, 1993) is a broadly copied model and intervention tool for male batterer groups. Although noted that patriarchy oppresses women, men's lives, too, are oppressed by the socially constructed system of patriarchy.

> In a world dominated by men, the world of men is, by definition, a world
> of power. That power is a structural part of the economies and systems of

> political and social organization. It forms part of the core of religion, family, forms of play, and intellectual life. On an individual level, much of what we associate with masculinity hinges on a man's capacity to exercise power and control. But men's lives speak of a different reality. Though men hold power and reap privileges that come with our sex, that power is *tainted.* . . . But the way we have set up the world of power causes immense pain, isolation, and alienation not only for women but also for men. . . . This is men's contradictory experience of power (Kaufman, 1994, p. 142, emphasis added).

This contradictory experience of power contributes to men's lives being violent because their souls have been violated (Hollis, 1994).

Patriarchy not only oppresses women. It also oppresses men. Under patriarchy, men are socially conditioned to be providers, to be in control, strong, and manly. On Brannon's Masculinity Scale (1985), a man is supposed to be a "big wheel," "no sissy stuff," "give 'em-hell," and a "sturdy oak" kind of guy (Irvine & Klocke, 2001). As a result of these socially constructed definitions of manhood and the dominant culture image of masculinity, sometimes called the John Wayne image, men have often been made to feel emotionally isolated, alienated, and powerless. "It is a strange situation when men's very real power and privilege in the world hinges not only on that power but also on an experience of alienation and powerlessness—rooted in childhood experiences but reinforced in different ways as adolescents and then adults" (Kaufman, 1994, p. 151).

At the same time, there is also a need for men to take responsibility, be accountable, recognize, and deal with their problems. The men do have agency. They can make intentional choices to change (Brandtstadter & Lerner, 1999). They can move through Prochaska et al.'s (1994) stages of change and make intentional choices to change and move out of the power and control cycle, out of the perpetrator-victim cycle, and beyond the blame game (Bilgere, 1997) of blaming women.

Most of the men in mythopoetic men's groups are men at mid-life and appear, by definition, to be men with agency who are ready to make changes in their respective lives. The question is why this is the case and why is it important? As effective interventions are sought, one aspect of study poses the question as to why a mythopoetic approach seems to attract and/or retain men at mid-life. It is submitted that there is something about that time in a man's life, that mid-life transition, sometimes as a mid-life crisis, when he sees that his life is just not working for him and/or he suffers a major loss which requires grieving. The "sturdy oak" man with "power" and "in control" does not grieve, does not show vulnerability. This may be the time when he finds that he needs to do something completely different (O'Hanlon, 1999) to change his life. To change and do something different is assisted by having people who support you in your changes—social support.

SOCIAL SUPPORTS

Wuthnow (1996) found that there were 75 million women and men in the United States who were in 12-step and other types of support groups and that these groups were in a quest for finding community.

Barton (2003) looked at mythopoetic and father's rights men's support groups as a form of social support. That support may be in the form of informational support, such as that found in father's rights groups, emotional support, as offered by mythopoetic support groups and/or instrumental social support, such as a loan or gift of money.

In the men's support groups, one of the main thrusts is to break down the dominant cultural stereotypes of hypermasculinity/hegemonic (Connell, 1987), patriarchal masculinity (Real, 1997). In this process the man is willing to ask for help, can share, emote, and offer emotional support to another man. The group provides a safe place for hugging, creating male friendships, and asking other men for support in fulfilling his emotional needs. These are mythopoetic perspectives.

MYTHOPOETIC PERSPECTIVE

Imagine you are at a camp and the weekend staff is gathering in a circle to start building a ritual contained for the initiation of men.

> At the opening staff meeting on Thursday of the New Warrior Training Adventure, each man was to share what he needed to learn for himself on this weekend. He was then to ask for a mentor to come forward to be his teacher. Some of the knowledge these 36 men asked for was on fathering, bringing their New Warrior energy home, leadership, and how to be connected with their children. Some wanted mentoring or were learning how to release and experience joy, openly dealing with grief, and learning to be of more service to the world. At the point where each man came forward with a need, another man would come forward with his willingness to teach what he has of this knowledge.

> One man came forward asking for a mentor to teach him about living and grieving. With his arms open and palms upward, as if to accept something, this man tearfully said, "I need to learn how to truly live within my grief." The man who came forward (who had lung cancer and died a month and a half after this weekend) stated, "I would be honored to teach you what I know about living and joy while you grieve" (Pentz, 2000, p. 204).

Many assert that the contemporary (mythopoetic) men's movement consists of men responding to the woman's movement (Ruther, 1992). Others state that it is "angry" white men wanting to take back their power (Brown, 1992). These reasons may be true for some men but from a mythopoetic perspective and for the staff and initiates on the New Warrior Training Adventure Weekend and follow up I-Groups studied by Pentz (2000), it appeared to be none of the above.

One man came "afraid and angry" and wanted to find his "truth." Another man was looking at life through a young boy's filter and wanted to grow up. One staff member originally came to this work because he could not control his rage; now he can face it, honor it, release it without hurting anyone, and use it's energy in a healthy manner. Other men came because of relationship problems, sexuality issues, abuse issues, and many other reasons. Many came just to be with other men. None of these were blaming mothers or women.

Some feminist writers (Ruther, 1992; Starhawk, 1992) have voiced a need for a "men's movement" but are frightened of its possible ramifications. Starhawk (1992) sums up the fears and the hope of many feminist writers: "Feminists long for men to heal . . . our fear is that the men's movement will do what men have always done, at least since the advent of patriarchy: blame women for their problems and defend their own privileges" (pp. 27-28). This quote is similar to the description in the New Warrior brochure (1996) describing the new warrior:

> The new warrior is a man who has confronted his destructive "shadow" form and has achieved hard won ownership of the highly focused, aggressive energy that empowers and shapes the inner masculine self. Sustained by this energy, the new warrior is at once tough and loving, wild and gentle, fierce and tolerant. He lives passionately and compassionately, because he has learned to face his own shadow and to live his mission with integrity, and without apology (p. 2).

In Pentz's research, five core themes developed. These core themes are fathering, relationships, rights of passage/masculinity, spirituality/God, and feelings. Most, if not all, of these fit into one of Rowan's hills described earlier. Pentz found that there were at least four contexts of fathering that emerged in his research. The contexts that Pentz found that men were working on in the area of fathering were:

> Fathering one's own children, the fathering one did or did not receive as a child, fathering received from one's own father as an adult, replacement fathering one might receive as an adult from another man. Five of the six men in the I-Group studied talked about having issues around fathering that they did not receive as a child (Pentz, 2000, p. 215).

Regarding relationships, the men in Pentz's study indicated that it was relationships with women and relationships with men that they were searching for. "What I ended up getting out of the weekend was I felt cared for by other men in a way I had never felt cared for by other men before. They cared about me as a man. Basically that I was okay, that I was a man." Another man said, "I went to the weekend and I just came back not needing a woman. I went from needing a woman to just wanting the companionship of a woman, that is very different perspective" (Pentz, 2000, p. 214), not a blaming women perspective. Also the men found an increased vocabulary of emotions. "This went from the struggle to express themselves emotionally to the willingness and courage, in spite of the fear, to share who they were with other people" (p. 214).

With respect to rites of passage, one of Pentz's men described the New Warrior Training Adventure as a rite of passage as follows:

> The group encompassed people from all walks of life, all colors and creeds and what-have-you, and it's just an enriching experience. Not only is it your own rite of passage, but working with other peoples [rites of passage]. It's a passage into manhood and into self. You learn to be accountable for your actions. I think that's the main thing. Learn to say our feelings, whatever they are and whatever that causes. Good, bad, or indifferent, then you have to accept the consequences of your actions (Pentz, 2000, p. 216).

With respect to feelings, it was the impact of the weekend which cracked the armor (Kaufman, 1993) of the men so that they could be knights without armor (Kipnis, 1991), able to access and share a full range of feelings such as mad, glad, sad, scared, and shame. The ability to share in this way and to do it in ritual space with a group of initiated men and to continue that transformation in an ongoing support group meeting context gave the men a place to feel those feelings, vent those feelings, release them from their body in a healthy way, so that they could be more loving in their relationships, with partners, with children, and with others.

In another project researching men in the Greater Washington Center of the ManKind Project, which studied gender role conflict, the men reported, after completing the New Warrior Training Adventure, significant reduction in gender role conflict including less restrictive affectionate behavior between men, less of a power and competition orientation, and less restrictive emotionality. With respect to psychological well being and self-development, the men reported that they experienced significantly lower levels of depression and significantly higher levels of life satisfaction, self-esteem, and sense of mastery, which can be viewed as "a direct result of the sharing, uncovering, catharsis, bonding, and positive formation of goals and perspectives that form the core of the weekend experience" (Mankowski, Maton, Burke, Hoover, & Anderson, 2000, p. 188).

Richards (2000) found benefits from the support group of improved relationships with men, improved relationships with women, increased emotional expressionality, increased spirituality, and a willingness, albeit through a struggle, to redefine their masculinity. As one man said,

> If I had to sum up masculinity, I would say, "able to cry in public." There's a lot more risk involved in public displays of emotion; be willing to face the risk means having a lot more strength than those who choose to hide it. A man that can do that is a "real man"; he is very masculine (Richards, 2000, p. 168).

As summarized by Richards, the common themes in the mythopoetic men included feelings of isolation and disconnection from themselves and others, a desire for male friendship, the grief experience from the lack of parental nurturance, and the desire to achieve a higher and more spiritual understanding of self and relationships.

Moyer (2004) interviewed men who were long-term participants in men's mythopoetic ritual groups (Liebman, 1991). In analyzing the data, Moyer deduced five major themes of communitas: interpersonal relationships, building community, spirituality, increased self-esteem, and open communication. Moyer found four minor themes of non-traditional masculinity: essential differences between man and women, removing competition, and social support.

Moyer (2004) used the theoretical lens of self-in-relation, a theory developed at the Stone Center through observations between mothers and daughters (Surrey, 1991). This approach found that connection between mothers and daughters motivates the development of the self. This development involves a woman who "experiences the world as a network of relationships and interpersonal connections rather than a collection of individuals bound by a set of rules" [citing Gilligan, 1993, p. 175]. Moyer, using this theory, was able to posit that the development of boys and men can be studied to see if there is a similar "lack of analogous self-in-relation process between fathers and their sons [which] comprises part of the father-son wound. . . . The father wound is not *only* the physical or emotional absence of the father or father figure in the boys life. . . . It is the psychological absence [in] the father son relationship" (Moyer, 2004, p. 67, emphasis in the original). As summarized by Moyer,

> The type of connection experienced by the participants in the mythopoetic [ritual] groups followed an analogous developmental path [of interconnected relationships and interpersonal connections]. Like the self-in-relations theories, the group's developmental path is not linear or stringently stage-based, but new evidence and expanding domain of relational connection. Also similarly, empathy for the other men, rather than fear of competition, leads to developmental progress.
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> Relationship begins with the man's entrance into the ritual group. Almost all of the men said that they entered the group without expectation of what they would find or what they would achieve, but simply with the notion that the experience would be good for them. Almost uniformly, they were all impressed with the level of emotional expression that they witnessed and with the level of safety that they felt in the group because they were allowed to say and express almost anything they wanted. That feeling of safety was also enhanced by reduction of competition among the men and the absence of women. After establishing a feeling of safety and getting past their own internal barriers to fully participate in the group, the men began to establish a fundamental emotional connection. Men who could not tolerate that level of closeness, who did not feel safe, or who did not value the ritual structure of the group often left.
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> Those who remained began to work in the relational milieu, both protected and sustained by ritual. As their level of personal disclosure and interpersonal sharing increased via their participation in the outer and inner check-ins, their level of interpersonal relatedness grew. Given that their commentary is directed to the center of the group in a nonconfrontational and sequential manner, the men became adept at hearing one another, reserving judgment,

and seriously evaluating their responses before speaking. They became acutely aware of how their words and actions affected the other men and the tone and feeling of the group. The combination of the realization of their impact on the relationship, and the feeling of safety fostered by their gendered sameness, cultivated sharing and understanding between the men and reinforced the initial emotional connection.

Also like the relationship described by self and relation authors, the group provided a mirroring function to the men. The [format of a ritual] counsel for men employed by the group is uniquely suited to that purpose. [As an example the ritual of [t]he men speak to the center of the group, one at a time, and the participants cannot help but to reflect on the comments of the proceeding men, sometimes mirroring it back to the man (Moyer, 2004, pp. 175-176).

Moyer found that the ritual mythopoetic men's groups provided the men with connection, emotional expressiveness, empathy, personal disclosure, and inter-personal relatedness, which was protected and sustained by ritual. In patriarchy there is competition, isolation, and fear of men. In the ritual groups, there was a lack of fear of other men, lack of fear of competition, lack of competition. The ritual groups development path was not linear nor "stringently stage based." It would appear that the mythopoetic men's ritual groups studied by Moyer were not repackaged dominantly controlling patriarchy.

At M&M in Portland, Oregon, Michael Kimmel and Robert Bly debated. Related to this debate was Kimmel's anthology (1995) *The Politics of Manhood: Pro-Feminist Men Respond to the Mythopoetic Men's Movement (and the Mytho-poetic Leaders Answer)*. In this author's view (Barton, 2000b, pp. 16-17), it would seem that Kimmel may have mellowed since his interaction with Bly in preparation for their debate in 1996 at the annual Men and Masculinity event in Portland. "I am surprised to find allies among [some of] the mythopoets . . . in the struggle for gender justice" (Kimmel, 1995, p. 362).

Another relevant M&M event involved Gloria Steinem's keynote at the 1998 M&M at Stony Brook, particularly considering her book, *Revolution from Within: A Book of Self-Esteem* (1993), her recovery through writing that book and the parallels (in this writer's view) with mythopoetic men's work. Steinem described aspects of her journey as authentic self, circle of true self, self-esteem and no need for a master, "hitting the wall," hitting bottom, radical empathy for self, ordinary men, paradigm shift, "my own authentic body," age and blessing, shadow, religion versus spirituality, inner awareness, stories as medicine, and a meditation guide (Barton, 2000c, p. 253). These aspects of Steinem's journey are similar to the language of the recovery movement and the mythopoetic branch of the contemporary men's movement.

Moyer (2004), in his study of mythopoetic men's ritual groups, found that self-esteem was one of the three major themes which emerged from his research. "Although none of the men spoke at length about the topic [of self-esteem], it was

mentioned by each. . . . The participants overwhelmingly felt that [their respective ritual] group had been beneficial in raising their self worth, esteem, and efficacy" (pp. 127-128).

AN EPILOGUE:
SOME SUPPORT GROUP RESEARCH

In the context of literature considered in prior sections, is qualitative research involved interviewing all members of an open men's peer mutual support group, all members of a closed men's peer mutual support group, and four men from the local Fathers for Equal Rights group (Barton, 2003).

Receipt of Support

Receipt of support was the most frequently-stated reason why men continued in their men's support group (MSG), though this took different forms of expression. Men in all three groups indicated that they received support from their participation in their respective groups. As David (all names are pseudonyms) said, "I got support from other men . . . and there was nowhere else in my life that I had really gotten that [before]." As Fred said, "I was able to talk about things that men don't generally talk about in casual conversation" in the dominant culture.

Fred went on to say that he continued attending because he was able to "hear other men's stories and their struggles and their triumphs, and on a level that doesn't usually happen in everyday life." Fred was in the open group and that language resonated with the comments from the two participants of the father's rights group going through divorces or having problems with access to their children for parenting time.

As Owen indicated, he continued attending because:

> [I]n part, trying to learn more about some of the precedents that had been established, what some of the people had been able to do with similar problems, listening to their stories, seeing if there was something that I heard that might help me in my pursuit of trying to have more visitation with my daughter, *and* also I guess the *sharing of my story* with them, to see if there's anything that my story could help those people with. . . . I guess the whole thing is it's a support group like many other support groups, where people are having a problem and it's a common problem and *it can help to talk* about it with other people with the same problem and support each other (emphasis added).

This naturally leads to the concept of reciprocity in response to the question of why men continued to participate. Owen's comment of supporting each other indicates that it was a two-way street and that, besides receiving support, there was also the aspect of providing support to each other. Ned's comment about

continuing to attend "because I believe that I can help individuals out who, again, cannot afford an attorney and possibly help turn the bias against men toward a favorable position." Ned is referring to his perception of the bias against men in custody, access (formerly visitation), and parenting-time matters.

In a follow up question, I asked Ned if he was a father himself. Ned's response was,

> Actually, I'm not, which is pretty ironic because you would expect somebody that would have a vested interest. But I believe my vested interest comes from being brought up in a broken home and seeing the conflict between having half of my siblings—stepsisters—go to a different household and the animosity between the two parents.

Accordingly, it was this childhood pain of being raised in a "broken home" that caused Ned to donate his legal talents to assist the men in the father's rights group. Ned's pain was the result of his feelings about his family's dissolution and reconfiguration and how those events had emotionally impacted him. Another aspect was that the social structures of marriage, divorce, remarriage, and the legal system in which he was involved as a child of divorce, all of which he had no control over, defined aspects of his life, and now gave value and meaning to his life.

Why Do Men Continue in Men's Support Groups?

A quick review indicates that a frequent single reason for the men continuing to attend the support groups relates to the aspect of finding connection, friendship, and camaraderie among the members. This was limited to the men in open and closed mythopoetic groups. None of the men in Group 3 (the Fathers Rights Group) indicated that there was any kind of development of camaraderie with other members. This camaraderie is what Schwalbe (1996) called *communitas,* feeling in community and building community (Putnam, 2000) as compared to the patriarchal isolation and lack of community of "men bowling alone." The most frequent response noted was that *receiving* of support from the group was the basis for continuing participation.

Carl found friendship, camaraderie, and the ability to emote about issues that were important to him, and to be heard. "That was very, very strong support, very important to me to be heard. And the men were very, very attentive when I did my talking. And vice-versa. I always felt good when I was able to help other men in the group." This resulted in a follow up probe.

> Q. You speak generally of issues. Would you be willing to share what some of the personal issues were that you were working on?
>
> A. Well, they varied from week to week, they were always different. So it might have been father issues, my dad was getting older. And there were issues along—issues with women that I had a difficult time with, some

> very assertive women. And just basically a difficult time with, with—it's been a long time here. My sexuality. It was important that I be accepted with the group. I'm a gay man and it was important that the combination of the men in the group, gay, bi, or straight, all accepted me for who I was. I wanted to be able to express my feelings about what it was like to be a gay man and to be accepted. And also to bring up issues of—oh, for instance, for being condemned for being gay by other people and still having it—having people support me within the group and let me know that I was okay and that they still cared for me.

Carl outlined some of the issues for which he received support from the other men in the group by listening to him and supporting him. These were issues about his relationship to his father and his father's aging, his issues with assertive women, and the very important issue that he was accepted as a gay man.

For Isaac, it was the development of a sense of trust in other men.

> I would say the predominant thing that occurred for me was to develop a sustaining sense of trust in other men, and to feel like I really was in the company of other men. . . . It was extremely important on the initiation weekend, to really feel that I was in the company of men and be a part of the heritage of men, as well.

The "masculine component" could be interpreted as a return to patriarchy. However, based on prior work (Moyer, 2004; Pentz, 2000), and my own research and personal experiences, what I believe Isaac meant was that he had a sense or feeling of touching his deep masculine side, his masculine archetype, and his warrior archetypal energy. Another way of describing this is that Isaac got in touch with his "deep longing for his tribal fathers" (Hollis, 1994, Secret 7). Jay indicated that, besides feeling a lot of support for himself as a man, it was also a great connection with other men "who were in their warrior energy. It helped me get into and stay [in my warrior energy]." Warrior energy would be defined as focused energy (in service to mission), accountability for one's own acts and actions, integrity, and the embracing of one's own inner feminine (Jesser, 1996). This clearly is not the dominating, aggressive, savage soldier image of warrior that seems to predominate in the dominant culture.

Finally, Mark continued to participate in the support group because it had changed his life: "The experience in my I-Group empowered me to change my life forever. Family, co-workers, colleagues noticed over this month's period changes in me. They noticed it every day." They asked Mark about his participation, they liked to hang around with him, and they gave him feedback without asking. "It was—it is, still an experience which evolves, even at the present time." This is another example of intentional action, which changed Mark's human development changing his life course trajectory and positively impacting those lives with whom he interacted.

Benefits of Participation

The main benefit that the men reported and described as resulting from their attendance in their MSG can be placed into categories as benefiting from receiving support from the men in the group, to be able to access deeper selves, to be able to express themselves, and to find interpersonal communication skills for dealing with others.

As example: Bob's experience had a definite impact on his relationship with his son, partially resulting from his reconnecting with his own feelings and seeing his participation as something larger than himself. Bob indicated that he benefited from:

> A deeper appreciation for the journey that males are on in our culture. My son was skeptical about this sort of thing and I felt that was an unfortunate situation. I know now that he has come to see it differently. But I felt that I was part of a larger movement, part of an awakening of men and our relationship to one another and the support we could be to one another. Getting better in touch with our feelings, expressing those. So it was, I felt, really very much part of a larger movement that was very important and needed in this culture.

Carl's benefit came from the perspective of being a gay man with difficulties relating to men, and feeling supported by the men in the group:

> Well, I [was] real excited to be a part of a men's group 'cause I always say, as a gay person, I have always felt I was on the outside and it was very difficult for me to relate to men in general. I had some issues there. That certainly helped me or helped me over the hurdle of being able to feel comfortable around a large group of men that aren't just talking sports or drinking beer or doing whatever they do or talking or berating women, in general. They genuinely cared for me and listened to me and it made me more comfortable to approach any type of male about issues and take risks as far as trusting intuitively—intuitively trust men to know that I can—that I'm their equal—that I'm equal with them even though I'm a gay man.

Carl found a group that genuinely cared for him as a gay man, listened, mutually took risks, and developed trust in an intuitive way. He found that men in the group did not berate women. Carl also found men to whom he could relate on an emotional level, again a finding of a way to fulfill a deep longing for "tribal fathers" (Hollis, 1994, Secret 8).

Ways in Which Men Were Supported

All but one of the participants interviewed felt that the members who attended those support groups supported each other through their participation in their respective support groups. In most instances, it was emotional support and in some instances, as in the father's rights group, it was primarily informational support.

Isaac in the closed group (a ManKind Project I-Group) came from a slightly different perspective. He indicated that,

> One of the things I discovered and had to re-discover almost every week I was there for the majority of the first year, was that what the men in the group were interested in seeing was anything [that was] true about me, whatever it was, and despite however I judged it. If I was putting out self-disclosure in a truthful way, then it really became apparent to me that I was appreciated. That was just a remarkably different kind of experience. I had previously known a lot of people who had said, "We really want to know you and what's going on with you," but when it came down to it, it never really seemed that way to me. But it always did seem to be that way in the I-Group.

Jay specifically mentioned the concept of the shadow. His response was that, "Men in that I-Group listened to me, cared about me, respected me, encouraged me to stand in my power as I explored shadow issues. They were very accepting of that. I was able to act out some of those things in ritual space, and that was quite beneficial to me [for my healing process]."

In the container of ritual space, using psychodrama and other experiential and support group techniques, facilitated by a peer facilitator, a man was able to work, for example, on his father wounds. The man would ask another man in the group to play the role of his father, or the part of his father that wounded him. The facilitator then would, based on the man's prior check-in for the evening and work statement of "what was up for him," facilitate a process in ritual space, as opposed to real time temporal space, to allow that man to work on his father wound. In ritual space, he would be able to bring out and look at that part of his father (or that part of his mother, partner, or other) which helped create the emotional wound and work on desired healing.

SUMMARY

This article began with a description of John Rowan's metaphor of the four hills as the four different perspectives of the kind of work that is necessary and which can be done in men's groups for the changing and reducing patriarchy. John Rowan provides an ecological perspective. The individual is a system. Elements of that system are the conscious, the unconscious, the transpersonal, and the spiritual, as defined by Rowan (1991).

For men to change, and to change the dominant culture, they must work on all four of Rowan's hills, all four levels for breaking down patriarchy, which harms women, men, children, and the planet. Additional parts of the system are biological and hormonal. All of these parts of the system are impacted by the man's relationship with his family of origin, the system of his current family of orientation (of whatever configuration), his work system, the natural system, as well as any other system with which he interacts or by which he is impacted.

After discussing Rowan's theoretical analysis of core perspectives of men in men's emotional healing work, the results of a number of studies were reported and discussed. This research has ranged from men's experiences from participating in the men's initiatory weekend of the New Warrior Training Adventure and its follow-up peer mutual support groups called an I-Groups, other weekends (Bliss, 1992) and mythopoetic support groups (Monkowski, 2000), a men's therapy group (Richards, 2000), and a men's ritual group. Virtually all of the interviewed men reported that their lives had been positively impacted through their mythopoetic activities and mythopoetic men's support group participation. Virtually all noted substantial movement away from the traditionally defined patriarchal hypermasculinity, and continued work on their emotional healing process. This research shows that men's participation in these mythopoetic groups and activities clearly is not anti-women, not anti-feminist, nor a repackaging of dominant, controlling patriarchy.

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