

Mankind Project Experience Reports

**ONE MAN'S SEARCH—
AN EXPERIENCE REPORT OF THE MANKIND PROJECT**

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In January of 2006, I was fired from a well-paying job. Following the termination, I spent days, weeks, and months brooding about my loss. Once the dust began to settle—no work and receiving unemployment—I found myself somewhat relieved. The job had been weighing me down for sometime and I was unable to acknowledge that I was over-my-head with the job responsibilities.

As far as employment goes, I had a history as a “runner.” When one job got hard or I started to get bored with it, I’d take off running to the next gig. I also ran if I felt inferior or incompetent with regard to my own personal skills and education. No matter the job or organization, this feeling would always permeate my experience and I’d fulfill the self-made prophecy by quitting or “running.” I had wanted this job to be different, to last for more than a few years, to retire on a high note. I wasn’t inferior or incompetent, just over my head in terms of what I was able to do.

My first job was an attempt to make a living (financial). In addition, I was attempting to find some validation, something that informed me that I was useful. Throughout my job history, I continued to want to contribute something significant to the community and to the world based on my skills and experience. However, time after time, I found that some of my feelings lying just below the surface of my life were preventing me from embracing the opportunities that came my way.

I now understand that these feelings of doubt, fear, boredom, and shame made it impossible for me to affirm my greatness, my wholeness as a man in the community. I was beginning (in my mid 50s) to realize some things about myself

and desired to know more; I needed to reshape what the balance of my life was going to look like. I needed to embrace and trust the qualities that I possess as well as my weaknesses. I needed to affirm my greatness as a man.

I was introduced to the Mankind Project through conversations with a friend. I had known this man for some years, and I began to observe some notable changes in his behavior and life. Not only did he look better, his attitudes and perspective seemed to have broadened. But mostly, he appeared to be making great strides in his life. He spoke about challenging himself—in his health, intimate relationships and becoming aware of his personal flaws—“stretching” as musicians might say. There were flaws that he wanted to change and others he was learning to accept. He spoke about his life of recovery and his ability to remain clean for a number of years. One day he informed me he was training for a marathon. This was significant; this required changes in the way he ate, slept. And, it allowed him access to a group of people who had committed to the same goal and who would later become friends. It seemed that he had developed ways to meet people and to be genuinely present with them. This was something I could only aspire to. I had recently discovered that although I have a great personality and had no problem meeting people, I am often aloof and don’t really share much of myself. I was untrusting. My friend didn’t have to tell me about the changes in his life; I only had to look at him, listen to him. I could recognize that he was fully engaged and onto something that I wanted, too.

Shortly after, I started investigating MKP. Not long afterward I was contacted and met with some men who were very open about how MKP was enabling them to show up in the lives that they wanted to live and how the association with MKP had helped them deal with crises. They invited me to visit their I-group so that I could see how the circle operated. What was important to me was their willingness to walk me step-by-step through an introduction to the group. They were warm and projected the same energy that my friend did—in each situation, they projected a presence and awareness of themselves that I wanted to achieve. Not long after, I joined the MKP men’s circle and I signed up for the NWTAs (New Warrior Training Adventures). I took part in one of the first “urban” New Warrior Training Adventures aimed at recruiting more men of color into the organization. At that time, MKP Windsor-Detroit had few men of color and to become more attractive to men of color they created a NWTAs weekend in an urban setting—a university campus—rather than in a rural wooded area. It was an experience that I won’t forget but which I could not remember well because my “mask” was firmly in place. The “mask” is a tool that I use to navigate unfamiliar terrain. The practice of creating and constructing my “mask” is a process that’s tried, tested, and perfected. It allows me to be involved, but safely at the margins of participation. It is a place where I keep my true self and feelings hid. It is the dimming of my true “internal” light. Because of the mask, I was unable to fully participate in the exercises but I picked up enough that I wanted to continue participation in the I-Group. But the weekend and the

follow-up that continued after the training was paramount in keeping me connected and rewinding in my head and heart the experience I had gone through. And, fortunately, I would have another training, in a different role, with a significantly different outcome.

In the Fall of 2012, the friend who had initially sparked my interest in MKP, was returning to Michigan in September and would be staffing an NWTAs scheduled then. He also indicated that it was “his want” that we staff the weekend together and that there might be some growth in it for both of us. With a bit of persuasion on his part, I reluctantly agreed to do the staffing of the Windsor/Detroit NWTAs weekend. Despite my previous attendance at a NWTAs weekend and my I-Group experiences, I realized that I still was holding onto insecurity and fear so far as being around large groups of unknown men; I would be exposed to men of accomplishment which often makes me insecure about myself, my participation, and the gifts that I bring to the table. All these feelings remained at the forefront of my thoughts regarding staffing the NWTAs. MKP would define my decision to staff despite these fears and doubts as a “Stretch.” A “Stretch” is an opportunity to step outside of one’s comfort zone to attain some goal that one might otherwise be resistant to attempt; the resistance is often attributable to unresolved issues within oneself.

In conversations with my friend on the way to the retreat grounds, he expressed a desire for us both to “get out of our heads” during the weekend and be more about how we were feeling. But, I am programmed to express what I am thinking, not what I am feeling. My feelings of fear and insecurity remained within me until the time that I entered the “gate” of the retreat grounds. My resistance still loomed as the facilitators begin building “the container” in which we would operate during the weekend. This container allows us to get to know the other men on staff. My tentativeness during this point in the weekend was welcomed by the facilitators. And, I became aware that “my mask” was an obstacle, not a protection. We are given several opportunities to express how we are feeling.

I believe the process of “confession” of how one is feeling is a cornerstone of MKP. MKP (and the NWTAs) provides men with a safe-space to express many of our bottled up thoughts and feelings. The opportunity is also available during our I-Group circles. There are times when I personally decline to voice my feelings in open circle, but through my experience with MKP, I am able to acknowledge those feelings, and eventually I am able to talk about these feelings. I acquired the ability to “confess” during my weekend NWTAs staffing experience and it has been supported in circles with my brothers. I finally was able to achieve a willingness to speak about how I really feel. That willingness came about from observing several men risking the exposure of their feelings. It is powerful because the exposure of feelings is sometimes a very emotional process.

Some of the issues that arose during the building of the container were my basic mistrust of other men, particularly heterosexual men. Other feelings of mine associated with mistrust have to do with racial identity, lack of education,

and not being enough of the things that the community associates with being masculine or manly. I've always felt that I never met the role expectations and qualities. I often felt that other men recognized my shortcomings and judged me at a distance. Throughout the weekend I paid attention to my thoughts and feelings rising and falling, rising and falling. Each and every time these feelings would arise, I acknowledged them and kept on moving. I was determined not to let chameleonic behavior of my past and immediate present have sway over me during this weekend. There became a point when I decided I would not morph into a camouflage of color in order to fit in or to go unnoticed during the weekend.

Enter, a warrior brother. This man approached me quietly and indicated that he had some things bothering him and he needed to check in with someone about how he was feeling; and, he chose me. He was not feeling well about his participation in the staffing and the role he was required to fulfill. I was surprised that he approached me regarding his conflict, but more surprised about the sharing of his feelings. After a break in the programming, he pulled me aside and made clear his unease and discomfort at that point in the weekend. I listened and was humbled by his honesty and integrity regarding his fear and insecurity. He was mostly concerned about his competency to perform his assigned task. After listening and giving him a chance to vent his concerns, he turned around and asked me how I was feeling, if there was anything I needed to share. (He was interested enough to ask me, to check-in with how I was feeling—an MKP practice for sure.)

My first instinct was to smile and say everything was fine. I did this with the avid skill of a chameleon. I didn't even take the time to think or weigh how I was feeling at that point. I superficially made some small talk about being out of my "urban" element, but nothing heartfelt. There certainly was more that I could have shared with him about how I was really feeling. It wasn't until the evening of the second day that I admitted to myself that I had been hiding. I recognized that this was how I tended to show-up in many areas of my own life (then and, still, at times.)

The following day I was involved in an exercise that occurs as the weekend starts to wind down. This particular exercise, probably the most poignant and positive aspect of staffing for me, because my participation was to help create this experience for the initiates. What followed was major, because I was able to connect with the exercise and find what I had forgotten during my warrior training adventure. It was the opportunity to stand back and see my good, my assets, my strengths, and my potential. This time I was able to connect with that process and really acknowledge the potential of what it could do for me.

During the course of the exercise, I was questioning my ability to just jump in and claim my part in the process. It seemed as though I was waiting for authorization, direction from the team leader on when and what I should be doing when the guidelines were already set up. I knew what needed to be done; I didn't trust my instincts. I was afraid I might get it wrong if I acted without permission. There it was; I felt it. Self-deprivation, not shining by being the best

man I could be, not seeing my gold. I began slowly merging more into the process in order to help create the atmosphere needed. I stopped worrying that I might step out of bounds. I also started listening to the team leader and surrendered mind and heart to the process. I remained as staff, but I also became a man embracing the process for himself. When the exercise was complete, I felt more confident in my participation. The revelation allowed me to bring together several fragmented parts of myself together as one.

I can now see that all the conflicts, fears, insecurities, and untruths unacknowledged about myself had prevented me from being successful in any number of the jobs that I had occupied. These issues and concerns were impacting many other areas of my life as well: my associates, my immediate family, and intimate relationships. These assorted issues were affecting who I intrinsically was, Black and homosexual. There was so much fear and conflict that I was unable to express who I was—even to myself. All these fears were overshadowing every area of my life, and I mean every area. It was the observation of the changes in my friend, Magnum, after he had done the NWT weekend that caused me to consider doing the NWT. In a short period of time, based on my own personal observations, he was morphing into a new man. A new man, not without issues and challenges, but a man who had and was moving through and beyond his many personal obstacles. I wanted to be that man. I wanted to move through and beyond all the obstacles that were preventing me from “getting on with my life.” I also desired to make a significant contribution to the community in which I lived.

After staffing this NWT weekend, I was able to observe other men like myself unfolding in this experience that we call the ManKind Project. It has been a great gift to myself, other staff members, and to my community. I say “my community” because this is where I return as a “new man” shaped by this experience. I have returned “new,” and as such a better man in and for my I-Group and the community. By staffing, I was able to return to my own weekend experience and see and listen to myself in the experiences of other men. In my experience as a black man who is homosexual, I have often felt outside of the experiences of what I always thought of as “real men.” Through staffing I find that being black and homosexual notwithstanding, I really haven’t ever been outside the experience of “real men.” I am only one small fragment of that tribe. My fears, insecurity, and conflicts are not unlike that of my brothers . . . all my brothers. And it really didn’t matter whether they were white, black, gay, straight, or “other.” It all looked pretty much the same—the issues, the concerns of men, and manhood.

The ManKind Project and New Warrior Training Adventure weekend is a powerful tool for personal change for me and other men. It exists to help men connect with suppressed feelings and fears, which are swirling endlessly inside our heads where they become woven into our story as false truths. These thoughts and experiences cripple and incapacitate our development as men.

There are few spaces where men can feel free to give voice to their fears, concerns, and challenges. The ManKind Project is one of a few organizations that provides such a space through the NWTA and in its men's I-Groups. The New Warrior Training Adventure was the beginning of that process for me. It has created opportunities for me to connect with other men and their experiences, but it has also given me a toolbox to reshape and create a better world, by starting with myself.

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