

Men cry bullets: reflections on the internal exile of men in South Africa

The background to our story

Hands on is a collective of trainers and community workers with a people centered, systemic and experiential approach to supporting individuals and their organizations to attain social justice. As a collective we work inside out through integrating personal and organizational learning to empower people, organizations and communities.

At the heart of our understanding of the context in which we work is a belief that South Africa is a multiply wounded nation carrying the emotional weight of the scarring of individuals, families, cultures and communities by violent forms of colonization and Apartheid. Over generations the physical and psychological brutality of colonization and the racial hatred of the apartheid state were institutionalised in all the structures of South African society. This has created a scarring of the sense of self and a ripping apart of the psychological skin of the community leaving human bonds fragile and dislocated.

As a nation we have spent little time, resources and effort on understanding how the past is impacting on the present levels of violence in our personal relationships with each other. The weight of the past is experienced in breakdown of relationships resulting in epidemics such as domestic violence or xenophobia. We are in complete denial about what the impact and legacy of trauma has on our daily lives. In the focus on creating the new South Africa we have developed total amnesia about the horrific impact of colonialism and racial capitalism on relationships and culture. But it sits hidden in our souls and the very fabric of our daily existence terrorizing us with the actions of rapists, murderers, perpetrators of family violence, in the trend of binge drinking, road rage, taxi conflicts, school violence and murders, deaths at initiation schools and the high rates of interpersonal violence which all prevent our self actualization and development as a nation. Rather than understand the wounds of the past and deal with them effectively, and lacking the emotional vocabulary to express our feelings, we have normalized the abnormal behavior that comes from these scars.

This culture of normalization has been unconsciously internalized as a homicidal impulse that is repeatedly directed towards self and family while creating a high

potential for fragmentation and violence. “Shoot to Kill”; “Women need a beating now and again”; “return the death penalty and corporal punishment” ideas that are prevalent in our society and reflect an internalization and normalization of violence. This impulse destroys the cement of relationships through a failure to reflect on and take responsibility for our actions.

The deep wounding of our nation is most clearly seen on a personal level in the behavior of men and on a social level in the dominant masculine identity we are socializing our sons into. We believe that it is the multiple wounds that are woven in to our masculine identity that propel individual men to psychological, physical and institutional violence.

What we have learnt. Men the walking scarred...

When a person does not or cannot work through a trauma right away, its social consequences, the most frequent of which are apathy, isolation and aggressiveness, are only revealed over time. .. When one has a lot of accumulated pain, one loses the capacity to communicate with others. The ability to communicate, to be flexible and tolerant is enormously reduced among people who have a number of unresolved personal traumas. The characteristics vital to a person's ability to function adequately become affected. ...

The only way they [men] found to express their pain was through violence and aggressiveness, because that's the only way men have learned to express their emotions and shake off their traumas.

Living and Surviving In a Multiply Wounded Country. Martha Cabrera

Over the last 10 years we have spent 100's of hours listening to boys and men of all ages recount their stories and reveal their pain and scarring as individuals. The telling of their stories has faced us with the need for deep introspection and analysis to try and get to the root causes of “why men cry bullets”. It has forced us to make emotional sense of, understand and analyze the trauma men have suffered.

As we have listened to this recounting of history of 3 sometimes 4 generations we have noted that the intent and role for men was to be a co-habiter of the living space, with the ability to create new things, find meaningful ways to provide and protect his family and engage on both an intimate and intelligent level with his partner.

However, the impact of colonization and apartheid has completely destroyed the

social and economic relations underlying this view of men. An example of this is the rapid change in the role of the father in the family structure due to expropriation of the land, migrant labor and urbanization. This in turn, has disfigured the form and content of the relationship between father and son /daughter. Fatherhood as a role and cultural identity has gone through a massive reconfiguration as we have moved from fathers being present and responsible in the family to the scourge of absent fathers. A refusal to acknowledge responsibility that characterize at least 64% our families today.

From our observations it seems that the relationship between father and son is a key determinate of how men behave toward themselves, other men and women.

If the relationship between father and son is not a healthy one then the resulting trauma and unprocessed pain seems to become a powerful determinant of the behavior of the son over many years. In fact until such time as the son begins to make sense of what happened and work at healing.

We have come to understand that a hunger for father love makes it difficult for many men to complete their socialization and move beyond childhood. Unresolved father issues seem also to act as a catalyst for further relationship breakdowns and trauma. The role of a father –whether physically or emotionally or both- seems to drive men’s sense of self and understanding of their role and function in society.

The rapid change and breakdown in the nature of Fatherhood has resulted in firstly, a confusion of identity and roles for many men and secondly, a masculine identity that normalizes the use of psychological and physical violence as a legitimate response to human interaction. The impact of the multiple wounds of our nation is most painfully experienced by children in their relationship with their absent fathers. The absent father epidemic is resulting in a generation of youth being socialized without positive male role models leading to further distortions of masculinity. As we have struggled with understanding the scarring that is driving our masculine identities into crises we have begun to name some of the scars and wounds:

1. Historical and collective emotional and psychological wounding coming from group [community, culture, race] experience of oppression.
2. Class experience of exploitation creating ever deepening conditions of poverty

and barbarism forcing people into a war of survival over resources

3. Disfiguring of cultural beliefs, practices, memory and identities
4. Identity blending of masculinities + violence
5. Internalized oppression - despair, confusion, anger, self hatred woven in the fibre of family leading to self and familial abuse
6. Relational: personal pain from relationships that remain unresolved e.g. father hunger father son; brother-brother
7. Intergenerational passing on the trauma's and their outcomes to multi generation

For many men the consequences of this culture of normalization of abnormal behavior resulting from multiple wounding have been disastrous leading to an existence where men are always in competition with each other, separated from their families and in a state of aloneness. This internal exile has lead many men to be trapped in repeated and vicious cycles of break down of relationships with no understanding or support to break these cycles.

Cooking up Community: Breaking the cycles of unexpressed pain and repairing the fabric of relationships

Personal change is key to organizational processes. There can be no social change without personal change, because one is forced to fight every day to achieve that change. ..

Reconstructing the sense of our national and personal histories is a path to understanding that there is meaning in what we are and what we have lived through despite everything, and this is what allows us to go forward in life. But going forward is only possible if people can find new energy...

We begin to reconstruct both the social fabric and ourselves insofar as we allow ourselves to work through our personal history and open ourselves up to this possibility. So many projects have the stated goal of "reconstructing the social fabric," but who reconstructs a society's fabric? People do. So first we have to reconstruct people. This recognition should lead us to analyze the development model we are proposing in our projects. Are they really people-centered projects?

In trying to answer the question of how we work as development workers in a traumatised nation we have come to understand that the healing of the scars and continuous personal development is a necessary part of the ability of our nation to meet the development challenges we face. Capacity building and Developmental interventions need to have personal healing and growth as a necessary part of their activities. We need to develop the capability to heal and develop individuals, communities and institutions simultaneously and holistically. Reduction in the levels of violence in South Africa will not come about simply because of additional policing, shoot to kill policies or the militarisation of the police force. To reduce violence and begin building peace we will need to heal our men and reconstruct our masculinities. This will require courageous leadership prepared to publicly challenge dominant forms of masculinity and lead a process of healing on 3 levels simultaneously:

- Individual – personal
- Relationships -family, community, work
- Institutions of socialisation of men that create gender identity-schools, sports clubs, media need to reflect and create new sense of masculinity

In a small way we have begun this work on individual and relational levels through a focus on the establishment of community based men's circles to provide men with a safe and inspiring space to understand and change the way they see themselves, their families, and their society. Part of this intervention has been the training of facilitators to hold men's circles. We have also been involved in community healing processes to facilitate rebuilding of individual, family, neighborhood and community relationships and networks.

In our work with young boys and men we have had to develop a range of different approaches and techniques to enable participants to create a space of safety, trust and care to allow for deep introspection. These include

- Active and Experiential learning processes
- Wilderness leadership camps
- Coaching, training and mentoring individuals and teams
- Ritual, drama, story telling, music and visual arts
- Straight talking weekly sessions focused on a theme

As we begin to heal and discover new identities as men we will begin to rebuild the social cohesion of our communities and recreate our culture. This will require men to develop and step into safe spaces of acknowledgement, witnessing, inspiration, hope and healing. This provides every man the opportunity to reflect on and repair the tears in his personal make up and actions. Our men's circles have taught us that key to this process of restoration is the support offered to men to fix it with their fathers, clean up the mess with their families, find new ways to relate to their children and shoulder a new responsibility in their communities.

It is important as men that we come to understand that as a result of our scarring the critical issues we face are to regain an identity of the true self through grieving over damage we have caused, working through guilt and responsibility for this and embracing forgiveness for those who have hurt us. This restoration will restore the capacity to think, embrace life and live again allowing the individual man to claim a new sense of Manhood.

However, we have also learnt that individual healing and restoration while a critical part of the process seems to have limited impact on healing the multiple wounds of our nation. For this to happen we need a far more complex national process that must equip our leaders and managers in all fields of endeavour to understand the notion of multiple woundedness and how we can deal with this. In addition, we need to undertake a thorough national introspection on the nature, form and content of the institutions which create identities and transform them so that the sense of masculinity they create allows men to reach their full potential in human relationships

Project Hope a way forward?

Over the last 2 years Hands On has acted as service providers to Project Hope. PH is a Department of Social Development {PGWC} early school leaving program. An NGO The Extra Mural Education Project are the implementing agency and Hands On has provided healing, training and mentoring services through EMEP to youth, families, parents, educators and youth organizations in 6 rural towns { Vredendal, Clanwilliam, Bredarsdorp, Arniston, Struisbay, Napier} PH is an integrated development project that is attempting to eradicate early school

leaving by working with all parts of the problem simultaneously. School “drop outs” as a phenomenon in the 6 towns is as a result of risk factors that originate in the individual, family, community, school settings. In taking the route of integrated development [personal, organizational, community] process we have chosen to work with community, school and family healing processes rather than with one sector of the community at a time e.g. youth. As the cause of the problem of school “drop outs” is complex we have designed a complex response that allows individuals reflect on and to alter behavior in wide range of settings.

The project is working with

Schools: in school programs for learners + educator personal and professional development

Community: out of school youth at risk programs, youth leadership, family and parenting interventions [learning circles, home visits,] Men’s circle’s

Dev Desks: Platforms for youth organizations, local business and provincial and local government to integrate and cohere strategy and program implementation for youth in the affected communities

One aspect of the project has been focused on community healing through assisting community leaders and families to understand and make sense of historical, cultural and multigenerational unprocessed trauma and how this impacts on high levels of personal and community violence, scarring and dislocation. Working with Cabrera’s concept of multiply wounded societies we have utilised story telling, learning through play, wilderness camps to provide members of the affected communities with an opportunity for their stories to be heard, witnessed and acknowledged. Through facilitated processes and spaces of inspiration and hope we also support participants to develop strategies for discovering and creating new forms of the self and community.

As part of this community healing strategy we have initiated men’s circles in 4 of the 6 communities. These circles are made up of men [16 and older] who volunteer to attend facilitated weekly/monthly gatherings and wilderness camps which provide them a chance to go through structured and facilitated conversations and activities aimed at understanding and healing personal and social multiple woundedness. Every aspect of our lives [fatherhood, relationships, community and work place] is discussed through the lens of changing masculinities. The men’s circles have

provided a rehabilitative space as well as an opportunity to understand more deeply historical and multi generational trauma. However over a time period of two years it has become clear to us that

1. The impact of Apartheid, Poverty and globalisation on the individual, family as a unit and on community cohesion has been extensive and to eradicate the resulting problem would require far more than we are able to offer in terms of emotional health support as well as socio economic rights[housing, jobs, healthcare, school]
2. It is impossible to talk of community healing if the community continues to experience high levels of unemployment, poor service delivery, high levels of crime and violence. We can provide rehabilitative spaces for individuals, families and communities but for this to be sustained there has to be a substantial change in the material conditions of the affected communities. This in return will require focused intervention at local and national levels of a wide range of government and Civil society structures from housing, clinics and police to churches and sports bodies.

Final thoughts

As we prepare for 2010 and showcasing ourselves to the world we must not hide the reality of our wounds and scars behind a façade of the rainbow nation, proudly South African and other marketing ploys which brand our nation. The TRC while an important first step in the process of healing has also been part of this superficial attempt to tidy up the brutality of the past and its psychological damage. It calms the soul but the underlying damage remains and it will resurface as deep patterns of behavior unless we are courageous enough to acknowledge the past damage and begin to heal from the roots of the problem.