

Unshackling my Heart: Masculinities becoming Equilinities a South African story

Imagine if you will, in your mind's eye, 1000's of men queuing to vote for the very first time. The dawn of democracy in South Africa and a chance to put years of oppression and horribleness behind us building equality and peace between our people. Flip the switch and travel forward with me to 2013 and feel the pain and groans of our nation suffering under a tsunami of interpersonal violence between men and women; men and children and men and men.

What we never understood in that moment of new power was that oppression overwhelms the emotional and physical resources of people and communities. Three-hundred and fifty years of conflict over resources, power and control had scarred the nature of our society. Brutality and violence, revenge and shame, loss and dispossession, repeated over and over again, across generations have ripped apart the psychological skin of individuals and communities leaving human bonds fragile and dislocated traumatising people and communities. The effects of this trauma linger on and on and on. We thought we could wash the history of brutal oppression away with the Truth and Reconciliation commission, Mandela magic and the 'miracle of the rainbow nation'. What we did not realise at that time was that the 1000s of men who queued that day to vote were carrying inside them hearts deeply scarred by this legacy. How naïve a newly free nation can be and how difficult is the transition from war to peace and democracy?

Traditionally indigenous men's role was to be the external link between family and community, the hunter, protector and provider. The material basis for this was nomadic and or pastoralist existence in which land was communally owned and thus access to land and, therefore, wealth open to all men. This conferred ranking and status, meaning and purpose, which were the foundation blocks of male identity. Colonial land theft, forced and migrant labour and influx control systems destroyed these social and economic relations separating men from their families and their land. Men learnt to live in societies of men where control was exercised through coercion normalising violence as a way of life and creating a new sense of masculinity. A scarred and wounded sense of identity.

This was true of those of slave heritage as well men of the oppressor group who emerged into the new South Africa with scarred and wounded identities from years of conflict.

The new democratic government did little to address war torn forms of masculine identity. There were no campaigns to help men scarred by generations of war and dispossession to rediscover new identities based on peace and democracy and find an equal place in their families. The lack of a national understanding of the impact of war on masculinity allowed for these skewed identities to become normalised,

legitimised and transferred inter-generationally. The unemployment visited on us by globalisation and the sense of betrayal of the promises by our liberation movements have extended these scars into deep feelings of rage and anger that seem to burn out of control.

However the story I want to share with you is not one of pain and loss, violence and control, of racism and mundane brutality. This story has been told many times. I want to share with you a story of hope and passion a story of men unshackling their hearts to overcome the legacies of oppression. A story in which a group of men found a key to the chains binding our hearts creating new masculine identities based on equality and peace. Equilinties a masculine identity based on equality.

The first part of the story begins in the late 1980's amidst the states of emergency and the struggle against apartheid. At that time I was working for the South African Domestic Workers union desperately seeking approaches to use in educating workers. I was given a photocopy of a book smuggled into the country and passed from hand to hand by a guy called Paulo Freire. The Pedagogy of the Oppressed. To be frank at that point I did not even understand what pedagogy was! And what a book! Difficult to read and make sense of but jam packed with ideas that exploded my heart and began to give me framework to work with. I struggled along trying to implement these ideas until in the early 1990's I came across Training for Transformation. At last a series which made Freire practical and understandable full of techniques we could immediately implement. The last strand came from discovering the work of Augusto Boal an application of Freirian theory to theatre and therapy. Boals work ensures that through the use of drama participants are actively engaged in deep learning using body, heart and soul. His use of theatre techniques in therapeutic processes provided me with practical ways of engaging people in being responsible for their own healing.

These philosophies and the experience of popular education transformed me. They soon become a way of life deepening my own consciousness and enabling me to develop a practice which is holistic, fun and transformative.

My work with men started in 2000 as part of group¹ of community development workers facilitating a program in a poor suburb of Cape Town. We began to realise quickly that the violence and dislocation plaguing the neighbourhood was caused by men and young boys while the renewal programs were driven by women. A scarred division of labour to say the least! The women often scoffed at men and felt that they were mostly a lazy bunch only interested in drinking and being violent. So we began a conversation with men on street corners in schools and in shebeens. We asked

¹ This group included: Des Van Niekerk, Nic Fine, Solly Marlowe, Nolan Abrahams, Anthony Daniels, Lionel Arnolds, Mariette Griessel. Thanks to all I hope the article reflects your amazing insights and companionship on this journey. The article also details the work of Hands On Collective and Hearts of Men

what was going on for them? Why were they resisting change and liberation? What would get them involved in reconstruction and development?

The answers shocked us. Men began telling stories of pain and anger. Stories of how unemployment and being unable to provide for their families was crushing their spirits. Stories of the hurt and rage caused by forced removals. Stories of how living under apartheid had robbed them of their dignity and ability to speak up and act. Stories of how alcohol and drugs helped to fill the inner emptiness and overcome the pain. Men told us of how they would like to have better relationships with the women in their family but somehow were unable to speak to them about what was going on inside of them skewing the meaning and purpose of life. Stories of men's hearts bound so tightly that the only emotions they could feel were anger, frustration and loneliness.

These stories began a journey that has lasted till the present as we have grappled with understanding how oppression and social trauma can overwhelm individual men and communities as a whole. It has also led us to develop tools for providing men with a space to debrief and rediscover who they are and in so doing create new masculine identities for themselves. Absolutely central too this was our understanding of popular education and the work of Paulo Freire and Training for Transformation.

Freire's work calls on us to develop a critical consciousness about who we are and how the world is and to engage in action to transform these realities. This philosophy also directs us to start with where people are and allow them to journey to where they need to be. What we felt was missing for the men to enable them to make this journey was an emotional literacy which would allow expression of their deeper feelings. A personal clearing of the emotional way and a releasing of new energies to discover a different self. In the first years of our work we developed two key tools to provide the platform for men to engage in a process of creating a new language and a new sense of power.

The first tool we developed we called circle talk. A chance for men to get together in their own communities regularly and engage in a process of consciousness raising. A space for movement in which individuals could relate to one another in a different way that would encourage a new level of communicating and thinking, a space within which participants could begin to see their potential. A common healing space, a thinking space, or a problem-solving space in which individuals could discover their passion and a new sense of purpose inspiring each other to break the chains around their hearts. Our belief was that inspiration creates hope, hope generates energy, and energy produces power. So the more inspired we are the more hopeful we are, the more energetic we are and the more power we produce. As we began to experiment with the characteristics of this circle space we learned that inspiration, hope, energy and power are inseparable – they flow from one to the other. This process embodies the mind, body and spirit. The work of Augusto Boal was also

helpful in that it assisted us to understand the phenomena of circle talk and how it allowed us to move between action and reflection in a simultaneous moment. A participant could stand up and act out a story from his past, we could discuss and understand it and provide him with an opportunity to 'rehearse for reality' by trying out new ways of being.



However for men to 'open up' and tell their stories it meant that we as facilitators had to find the right questions and themes. The learning's we had gained from the use of codes in training for transformation helped us to develop these themes. Over the first 3 years participants developed codes and questions that were relevant to their own situations. Topics such as: what message did you receive from your father about being a man? What is fathering? What is father hunger? How are these related to the history of your community? How can you fixit with your father? Your community? How are your relationships in your family? Community? Why do you always feel lonely? Competitive?

These themes were then tried out amongst men of different communities and cultures allowing us to begin to develop manuals and train facilitators to extend our reach beyond the initial group of 5 men. However codes and themes which lit the fire of discussion and reflection were not enough. Men wanted to come to our circles and de-stress, have fun and enjoy themselves. This lead us to introduce games and play as a way of reconnecting to our inner child and assisting with understanding the journey from childhood into manhood and what was lost in this process. We also used visual arts and music for men to discover their ability to be creative human doings.

Whenever I describe these circles my listener's become excited with the possibilities inherent in them for challenging and overcoming existing forms of power and woundedness. However we discovered that the circles were not enough for self-realisation. Men had been deeply wounded and the continuing unemployment and social dislocation were feeding this. Circles helped but did not allow us to go deep enough in the histories and stories of each man uncovering the sources of wounding and seeking new ways of going forward.

To circle talks we added the idea of a 'wild space'. A collective and personal space that would peel away the layers of emotional hurt experienced by men allowing a new consciousness to develop. This lead us to experiment with the indigenous

tradition of 'going to the mountain' to seek clarity and direction in one's life. Overtime the wild at heart wilderness experience was developed as a healing space. Participants are taken from towns and cities into a mountainous area that is free of houses, people and other forms of development. The wilderness is a un-boundaried / uncontained space and is very evocative; consequently in the process, staff and participants need to be carefully contained while allowing the elements / nature to engage the individual in a process of inner and outer exploration and healing. The wilderness component was designed as a form of interactive theatre in which the individual man and group are offered an opportunity to enter into the hearts of their lives, discover the source of their pain, release it and begin the journey of seeking new sources of their power. Facilitators play many roles in this process as participants are led on a journey which includes overnight solo time, storytelling, fire dances, rituals and cleansing ceremonies.

We found that the reconnecting of men to nature, to their essential state, was an extremely powerful tool for healing. To assist us with the design of this wild space we drew on drama therapy techniques of Augusto Boal and Freires philosophy of experiential learning. Having come through the wild at heart process men are more able to see their lives and social context more clearly enabling them to make the link between individual experience, oppression and social dislocation.



Over the last 10 years we have had many success stories of men who have engaged in circle and wild spaces and changed the nature of their relationships and engagement in the world. These range from drug merchants, youth in the juvenile justice system to couples and families developing healthier forms of relating to each other. We have developed manuals, trained facilitators and begun circles in towns and villages across the Western Cape region. One such example is from the district of Cape Agulhas situated on the southernmost tip of Africa. Over the last 5 years an circle of men has developed known as Boys2Men. This group of 9 male facilitators has a regular program of workshops, camps[wild spaces] events such as Father's day and indigenous games, offers counselling and engages in other social development activities in the community. The group is completely voluntary with support coming from the local municipality in the form of access to venues,

stationary and photocopying, transport and food for events and workshops. Recently the group has begun a series of dialogues between men and women in partnership with a local women's organisation. The dialogues are focused on men and women sharing understandings and perceptions of each other and to seek a common understanding of how to be and do together.

So the story sounds wonderful and yet here we are in 2013 midst a tsunami of male violence and a crisis of masculine identity which reminds us of how little we have achieved. While we have small victories on an individual and group level the situation has grown worse not better. In some respects our own failures lie at the heart of this. While we have changed lives we have failed to engage the wider society to generalise our understanding and learning's. Outside of funding proposals and the odd article we have not managed to write much about what we are doing or train nearly enough facilitators to reach a tipping point even with in our communities and province. The shortage of funds and support from men in leadership positions serves an enormous obstacle. In addition conflicts over approach and objectives continue to plague the wider grouping of organisations working in this area. As non-governmental organisations we are struggling with differences over our broader vision of creating spaces for men's healing as we are doing or initiating a men's movement. As men develop the emotional literacy to talk about their oppression trauma and experiences and we learn as a nation that men to can also be harassed and violated we are beginning to argue that men and women's experiences are equal. This has the unintended effect of masking the true nature of the patriarchal system through which men are always in an objective position of greater power.

Through our experiences we have also learnt that any intervention with men must contain 5 key elements which we call the spice of life:

- ♥ Social: how we relate to ourselves to people to groups and to the world
- ♥ Psychological: how we think about ourselves and other and situations
- ♥ Intellectual: How we engage with exploring, questioning, reasoning, reflecting
- ♥ Cultural: How we develop a sense of history, community, togetherness
- ♥ Emotional: How we feel about ourselves, our families, other people and how we nurture the spiritual inside of us.

Perhaps an even more fundamental learning has been that men need to work with men. If we want to travel deep into the heart of a man, provide confessional moments and create new sources of power this process must be facilitated by men. This seems to be because the presence of women facilitators inhibits men from making this deeper journey as they feel judged and found guilty before the journey begins. In addition we have learnt that the facilitators doing this work often need lots of support as they work through their own issues and develop the skills necessary to hold the spaces men need to overcome the chains binding their hearts. Leading healing journeys whether in communities or wild spaces requires skill and deep self-awareness and an individual 'toughness' of character than prevents the other

peoples pain from destabilising the facilitator. Leaders of these processes need constant debriefing and support to ensure their own emotional and psychological well-being.

The journey of unshackling our hearts has begun nurtured by the work Freire, Boal, Training for Transformation and the enormous spirit and desire for change show by unnamed South Africans from all parts of our province. The journey will continue despite the obstacles for a journey of a thousand kilometres always begins with the first step.

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