

## HOW GROUPS WORK: Coming out of a gay identity, and becoming one of the guys

by Richard Rupp, M.Div., MFCC

*Richard Rupp is a Marriage and Family therapist in private practice in Pasadena, Ca., who specializes in men's issues. He leads two men's groups and is a frequent speaker at men's conferences. He also teaches on Psychotherapy with Men as an adjunct professor at Fuller Graduate School of Psychology in Pasadena.*



*Richard Rupp, MFCC*

I first became interested in gender-identity development and masculine sexuality eight years ago, at the beginning of the men's movement. At the same time, I began work with my first self-identified gay male patient. What immediately struck me about this patient was not so much his own self-image, but how his previous therapist had perceived him. Our views of this patient were so different, that I actually wondered if we were really seeing the same person.

### Different Therapist, Different View

When this man confided in his previous therapist that he had homosexual feelings, she had interpreted that he was "gay," and encouraged him to leave his wife of 24 years in order to find his *real* self and *real* happiness with a gay partner. When I saw this man, I had a very different impression. With the divorce from his wife then pending, he was deeply depressed. He told me that he missed his wife tremendously, and that he had never wanted to leave her. As I took his history, I saw a man whose masculine identity development had been so derailed as a child, that it was not surprising to me that he had homoerotic feelings.

Born to a borderline mother that would dress him up in dresses, he further suffered when his father died when he was four, and the only male left in his life was an uncle, who often told him that he should have been born a girl. Being sexually molested by a neighbor, a teacher, and a relative made the derailment of his masculine development complete.

While talking through these specific experiences and relationships, it became clear to him that he hadn't just been "born gay," as other people and his past therapist had suggested. He began to see that his masculine identity was seriously injured, and that he *needed* and really *wanted* help to heal his masculine self, instead of being reinforced in the belief that he was "gay."

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*"Victory on the Bow of a Ship"*

### Beliefs About Homosexuality

As one of my group members put it, "I think that a man and a woman are biologically *supposed* to go together, but my gay friends say that's all just propaganda. They say that I'm really gay, and that liking other men is just the same as liking women. I get so confused, I don't know how to even think about myself sometimes!" These kinds of confusing gay beliefs about sexuality can be now be openly discussed and examined with the other members of the group. It is not surprising that beliefs about homosexuality are one of the most frequently discussed issues in the group, as well as how the group members see and identify their own sexuality.

Gay-affirmative therapists like Richard Isay have influenced the belief that anyone with homoerotic feelings is *de facto* a homosexual, whether his fantasies are *consciously* homosexual or not. As Isay has stated, there are men "who may not even have conscious access to their homoerotic fantasies because they repress, suppress, or deny them... and I also consider them to be homosexual" (1).

### Seeing The Patient From A Position of Technical Neutrality

Taking a therapeutic position of technical neutrality allows the patient to speak for himself and better identify and define his own sexual and gender identity as it really is. In my own work from this position, I find that group members begin to question their old view of themselves as "gay" or "homosexual," and start to see their own masculine identity in clearer and deeper ways than ever before.

This way of seeing our patients is supported by the view of Otto Kernberg, President of the International Psychoanalytical Association. Three years ago I heard Dr. Kernberg give an address on homosexuality in Santa Monica, which he summarized by asking the following question: "Are there homosexuals who can be analyzed and who will change their sexual orientation? Yes, very definitely. Can we predict? I would say no, and on the contrary, we can only say that the prognosis for psychoanalysis improves, the better the personality structure; but that the final orientation has to be left open in the analyst's mind, and he has to proceed from a position of technical neutrality. Is the ego-syntonicity of the homosexuality an indication of whether the patient is going to remain a homosexual or not? No, because that ego-syntonicity may change throughout the analysis. The character structure is really the crucial prognostic element. I think that Isay's attack on psychoanalysis, saying that we... 'don't tolerate that our homosexual patients remain homosexual' is an ideological statement, and we should be able to stand up to politically correct thinking" (2).

### Patients are Men First, Not "Homosexuals"

Kernberg supports taking a position of technical neutrality

with our patients, from which they can then identify and work through their own core relational problems and conflicted identity. Men's groups offer a similar experience to their members, where the members are not seen as homosexuals, but as the unique individuals and men that they are. In the company of other men, they begin to see that masculine qualities which have been repressed or renounced—such as aggression, competitiveness, and autonomy—can now be experienced and integrated into their identity and way of relating.

### Welcoming "The Deep Male" Within

One of the overall tasks of an effective men's group is to help men deepen their connection with their masculine gender. I think that Robert Bly describes this process well in his book, *Iron John*, which I recommend to my male patients.

Iron John is a character that is all male, all hairy, and lives at the bottom of a lake. Bly says:

"In the seventies I began to see all over the country a phenomenon that we might call the 'Soft Male.' They're not interested in harming the earth or starting wars. There's a gentle attitude toward life in their whole being and style of living. But many of these men are not happy. You quickly notice the lack of energy in them. What I'm suggesting, then, is that every modern male has, lying at the bottom of his psyche, a large, primitive being covered with hair down to his feet. Making contact with this Wild Man is the step the Eighties male or the Nineties male has yet to take. When a man approaches what I'll call the "deep male," he feels risk. Welcoming the Hairy Man is scary and risky, and it requires a different sort of courage. Contact with Iron John requires a willingness to descend into the male psyche and accept what's dark down there, including the nourishing dark" (3).

The requirement that Iron John makes on the boy in this story is an essential part of this process. In order to set the Wild Man free, he must first steal the key out from under his mother's pillow. Bly's use of this story gives rich symbolism of the resolution of the oedipal stage.

Helping men to make contact with their "deep male" is one of the primary functions that a men's group can offer its members. Giving support to each other to "steal the key out from under their mother's pillow" is also a significant function of a group, which we will discuss later.

### The Emperor's New Clothes

While Iron John helps men to better identify with their masculine selves, I believe that the story, *The Emperor's New Clothes*, by Hans Christian Andersen, helps to illustrate how men's groups can help men take off their old, false identity of being "gay" and see their real masculine selves.

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While reading the story, I think you will see how the emperor's narcissism and need for group approval and idealization reflects a common experience in gay relationships. Following the story, I will discuss how my own group specifically addresses many of these problems. But first, to better illustrate my point, I am going to slightly change the title of the story to, "The Emperor's New Gay Clothes."

Here is the story:

Many years ago there was an emperor who was so fond of new clothes that he spent all his money on them. He had a costume for every hour in the day.

One day there came along two rascals who presented themselves as weavers and said that they knew how to weave the most exquisite stuff imaginable. Not only were the colors and patterns uncommonly beautiful, but the clothes had the peculiar property of becoming invisible to every person who was unfit for the office he held, or who was exceptionally stupid.

"Those must be valuable clothes," thought the emperor. "By wearing them I should be able to discover which of the men in my empire are not fit for their posts." So he paid the swindlers a handsome sum of money in advance, as they required.

As for them, they put up two looms and pretended to be weaving, though there was nothing whatever on their shuttles.

The emperor thought he should like to see it himself while it was still on the loom. So with a company of carefully selected men, he went to visit the crafty impostors.

"What!" thought the emperor. "I see nothing at all. This is terrible! Am I a fool? Am I not fit to be emperor? Why, nothing more dreadful could happen to me!" He said aloud, "Oh, it is very pretty! It has my highest approval."

At last, the weavers said, "Now the clothes are finished." The emperor took off his clothes, and the rogues pretended to put on first one garment, and then another of the new ones they had pretended to make. "How well the Majesty looks in his new clothes! How becoming they are!" cried all the courtiers in turn. "Well I am ready," replied the emperor. So the emperor went along in the procession, under the splendid canopy, and everyone in the streets said, "How beautiful the emperor's new clothes are! And how well they fit!"

"But he has nothing on!" exclaimed a little child.

And one person whispered to another what the child had

said: "He has nothing on! A child said he has nothing on!"

"But he has nothing on," cried all the people.

The emperor was startled by this, for he had a suspicion that they were right. But he thought, "I must face this out to the end, and go on with the procession." So he held himself more stiffly than ever, and the chamberlains held up the train that was not there at all.

### **Are Psychotherapists, Too, Pretending to See the Emperor's "New Gay Clothes"?**

Surely there are parallels between the weavers in this story, and gay activists who call anyone in political office or the

psychological profession unfit for office, or stupid, if they don't see the gay view of sexuality---the "new gay clothes." Slandering one's opponents in order to silence them is a very old---and desperate---tactic. And surely there are parallels between the emperor's peers and many of us in the psychotherapy profession. We feel shamed into pretending we see nothing problematic in our patients' homosexuality.

**The need to belong  
is so great, that  
many gay men  
refuse to see the truth  
about the gay community.**

### **"Fitting In" and the Attraction of the Gay Community**

But I want to focus here on the power of, and need for, group belonging and identification, as the emperor so clearly demonstrates. This is especially important for those with a narcissistic personality structure, and for those who have felt unaccepted by their peers. This need to belong and to be seen approvingly can be so strong that an individual will deliberately deny even his own view of reality in order to fit in.

Even when some gay men have a suspicion that NARTH is right about homosexuality, they will often (like the emperor) "follow their own procession out to the end," once they have committed themselves to their gay beliefs and the gay community. I think that they, also, believe that they could never find a sense of belonging elsewhere.

Men's groups can therefore provide a powerful place for men with ego-dystonic homoerotic feelings to find belonging, and to be seen and heard in ways that they often have never before experienced in their lives.

As one man put it, with the rest of the group in agreement, "This is the best group that I have ever belonged to in my life. I finally feel understood and accepted by this group. My gay friends don't accept me, and many churches don't either, because I don't believe in their view of homosexuality---which is that I should just accept that I am gay."

Family and friends may also be uncomfortable or upset about talking with them on the subject of homosexuality. So when these men come into a group of other men who also want to grow in their masculine sexuality and identity, they feel like they have finally *come home*. As one member expressed, "This group is the home I've never had. I've belonged to both gay support groups and church fellowship groups, but this is the first group where I feel that I can really be me."

### Call It A Men's Group

So what do we call this kind of men's group? I think this is a very meaningful question for the group to process in its beginning phase together.

When the group first began, one member related that he had seen another member of the group in a restaurant—but didn't approach him because he didn't want to tell the other person with him about the "kind of group" they were both in. My response was to ask him, as well as the whole group, to *define* what kind of group they thought we were in.

This discussion helped to clarify that this isn't a "gay" or "homosexual" group. It isn't a "reparative" group or a "non-gay homosexual" men's group, although these signifiers are in fact legitimate (I myself actually use the non-gay term to advertise my group). Men who came from Exodus-associated groups have used terms for themselves like "homosexual strugglers" or "sexually broken." But I think that all of the above signifiers distort or miss seeing these men as they really are. My view is that the primary signifier to use for these men is that *they are men*, and that the accurate term to describe the group is a "psychodynamic men's group."

I actually run two men's groups in my practice. While one group deals with homosexuality and the other does not, they both have the same goal of maturing in the real self, and deepening their relationships with others.

Of course, while homosexuality is unique to one group, the focus of that group is not and cannot be primarily on sex. When the group members process areas such as feelings of inferiority, fears, anger, and grief, then it becomes clear to the whole group that the focus of the group is not just about sex, but about *deeper and unresolved needs or conflicts* within each man's life. To focus on sexual behavior each week will only serve to reinforce the misconception that their primary issue is about sex. That sounds like something we've been hearing out of Washington D.C. lately...that it's "Just about sex!"

### Group Process

In order to better describe the process of my group, I will now discuss several of the major issues that have been significant in the group process. These include *fears of aggression;*

*separation conflicts with mother; fathers and manhood; and feelings of inferiority around men.*

### Facing Fears Of Masculine Aggression

Fears of aggression and power are not unusual for men with a poor sense of their masculine self, and a group is a great place to face these fears. Since aggression was often not allowed for them as boys, assertiveness and power have become both *desired* and *feared* at the same time. One member related how it was acceptable for his mother to always be angry, but his father demanded that he always be nice to her, always wear a smile, and never argue with her.

Another member said his mother never let him play with toy guns, or play on the monkey bars or climb trees, because she didn't want him to get hurt. Of course, the irony is that the boy was in fact hurt by her *not allowing him* to get hurt! Now even as men, they find conflictual and painful situations something to avoid at all costs, instead of something that they can confidently face.

One man talked about playing with his rubber knife when he was eight, only to have his dad get angry, take the knife from him, bend it in half, and tell him to never point that at anybody again. When another member related that other boys in school called him emasculating names like "faggot" and "fairy," all the other members said they had experienced the same thing as well.

While processing these emotional and physical childhood assaults on their lives in group, the men began to feel more powerful as they expressed their anger at their attackers, instead of re-living their old feeling of being afraid of them. Through the support of other group members, the men could now find empathy and respect from others that they didn't get when they were young.

Another effective way for the group to address these fears of confrontation is to confront one another, and me. One example of this happened when one group member had to quit the group because of financial problems, but he didn't want to tell me because he was afraid that he would be disrupting the group. As we addressed these feelings in group, he discovered that I didn't react the same rageful manner that his dad would always react, and he was now able to experience confrontation in a new and less threatening way.

### Coming Out From Under Mother's Skirt

Another issue where the group has been helpful to one another is in resolving their separation process with their mothers, or in "stealing the key out from under their mother's pillow." Mothers that are overly protective, possessive, and dependent on their sons to meet their own emotional needs make it difficult to separate from her and her gender without feelings of fear and guilt. All of the

men in the group related to this kind of difficulty.

As one man put it, "My mom had a very big skirt, and it wasn't easy to come out from under it." Another group member said his mother had moved her own bed into his bedroom when he was twelve, because she was unhappy with his father—and she *stayed* in his room until he moved out at the age of 21.

Another member then related with shame that his mother took baths with him until he was twelve. Still another talked about his mother telling him that he should not be interested in girls, because they would just cause problems in his life. One member summed up the exasperation he felt of being so smothered by mother that he yelled at her at the age of ten, "You have got to let me go!"

In many tribes and cultures around the world, boys don't have such a difficult time in separating from their mothers, because the men of the tribe physically took each boy away from his mother around the age of puberty. For boys without strong enough fathers or adult men around him, the ability to separate from mother can be virtually impossible. Now with the support and sense of belonging to other men in the group, the old fear of stealing the key out from under one's mother's pillow can be faced and overcome.

### Fathers And Manhood

Another important relationship for men to address is that with their fathers, because fathers hold a singular role in a boy's development into manhood. Fathers affect whether a boy will identify or dis-identify with manhood. The common problem the members relate is feeling ashamed that they had never measured up to dad's expectations. As the men talk about how their fathers shamed and failed them, the group can provide valuable feedback and empathy for each member.

One member related a story about his father, who was prone to rage; and while playing catch one day as a twelve-year-old, he threw the ball over his dad's head. In front of all the other neighbor kids, the dad yelled at him at the top of his lungs: "You play baseball so much like a sissy, that I wish you would have been born a girl, so then I wouldn't be so ashamed of you." Other men talked about being severely beaten by their fathers, or being ignored or resented by them. With the support from the other men in the group, these experiences of being shamed and rejected can now be worked through together.

Talking about fathers can lead the group into discussing their views and definitions of manhood. By discussing with each other their views of mature manhood, they can replace an older, negative view of their father's manhood with a new and positive definition of manhood that they can pattern their own lives after. The positive dynamic of a group is that the men are already doing something that

most of their fathers would have never done themselves. Sitting down with other men with such trust and vulnerability in order to intentionally grow in their manhood is something that they just didn't do with their fathers.

One of the guys said, "I always envied my dad playing golf with his same friends for 25 years, but it just dawned on me that while they had fun playing golf together, they really never talked about any personal issues with each other. Maybe Dad really wasn't that close to other men after all." Men's groups can especially help men discuss what it means to be a man, their ideals of manhood, and how they see themselves as men.

### Identification With Other Men, And Becoming One Of The Guys

The last issue that I want to address is how groups help men to feel more identified with other men. All of the men with homoerotic feelings that I have ever worked with have said that *they have never felt they were "one of the guys."* In fact, one member related that when he had recently been in a group of women friends, he started to leave when they began to talk about menstruation. Their response to him was, "You don't have to leave, you're one of the girls!" This statement only reinforced the old feelings experienced from boyhood to adolescence of not being completely male, and feeling different and inferior to other boys.

When a boy doesn't feel like he belongs with his male peers, the toll on his emerging masculine self can be devastating. One place where this has often happened is on the playing field, where you either compete, or feel you can't compete. One man said he had always hated to play basketball as an adolescent. During one game, the ball was passed to him at the very end of the game—and he dribbled down the court as fast as he could, and *made a basket!* The humiliating part of it was that *it was the wrong basket!*

To this guy's surprise, another member quickly related that he had done the very same thing when he played basketball also! Instead of feeling ostracized and inferior, these men could now feel empathy from other males, and now even laugh together about their past athletic hardships.

### How To Start A Group

For those interested in starting a group, I would like to offer some practical guidelines such as interviewing new members, and determining both group size, and type of group process.

I interview each new member for three or four 30-minute sessions, without a fee, in order to evaluate their readiness for a group experience, and their likely fit with the rest of the group. Members that are already in individual therapy tend to make the best members because they have already done work toward identifying their issues, talking about their issues, and knowing what they want

from a group.

I think that the best group size is five to seven members, with seven being preferable, because all of the members are not able to come to every session. The type of my group is psychodynamic, meaning that we process whatever issues the members bring with them, or that come up during the course of the session. Usually, one member will bring up an issue that resonates with other members, and then the whole group will process the issue further. Though groups are often not that easy to start, I encourage therapists to keep trying, because the experience for both the group members and the therapist can be very rewarding.

### Conclusion

When men have been seen as inferior, incompetent, unmasculine, gay, homosexual strugglers, or just ignored and not seen—then a men's group can help them to find and develop their real selves. Like the child in the story of the emperor's new clothes, the members of a men's group can *speak the truth to each other* about their sexuality and their real selves, and discover that the old gay beliefs about themselves can gradually disappear. Some men may decide to continue in the gay procession and identity, but others will eventually come out of this false construct because they find their masculine identity is growing from within.

Seeing our patients as the men they are, while addressing

the unresolved conflicts within them that first derailed their masculine identity, can help to bring real growth and change in their lives. For "what you see" is indeed "what you get" —and what our clients need is to be *accurately seen and mirrored* as the men they really are. ■

### Endnotes

- (1) Isay, Richard (1989). *Being Homosexual: Gay Men and their Development*. New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, p.11.
- (2) "Contemporary Controversies Regarding Psychotherapy of Homosexuals," sponsored by the Psychoanalytic Center of California, January 7, 1995.
- (3) Bly, Robert (1990). *Iron John*. New York: Addison Wesley, p 2-3, 6.