



Men, Relationships and Relationship Services:

Putting the Cart Before the Horse? Papering over the Cracks?

A paper by Noel Giblett. Published in *Psychotherapy in Australia*, Vol.5 No. 2, February 1999.

Abstract

*Many men genuinely want to improve their relationships. However, according to **Noel Giblett**, they first need to develop an intrinsic sense of self. Only then can fundamental assumptions about roles and expectations be truly overturned.*

Introduction

It hardly needs substantiating that this is a challenging time for many men in our society. The nature of manhood, the roles of men in marriage and the family, and the functioning of men in society generally, are all being questioned in our society to an unprecedented extent.

At the individual level, the picture is similar. Many men report that they are feeling under scrutiny, and are scrutinizing themselves, like never before. The male psyche is well and truly under the collective microscope.

While women apparently still outnumber men two-to-one in their use of relationship counselling services in this country, men seem to be presenting in increasing numbers and many are sincerely wanting, as they say, 'to make the marriage work'.

Men and Relationships

My first concern is that much of the current thinking about men in relationships may be 'putting the cart before the horse'. I think that the trend towards relationship counselling, and the preference in many relationship counselling agencies for a systemic approach, may have unwittingly endorsed a focus on relationship dynamics to the exclusion of adequately addressing the developmental needs of the individuals in the relationship, particularly the men and the extent to which they have developed a solid, authentic sense of self.

This concern is borne out by two observations. Firstly, many men seem to have difficulty developing an *intrinsic* sense of self, a sense of self based on who they are rather than on *extrinsic* attributes such as achievement, performance or status. I have lost count of how many of my male clients have said, in the first session, 'I don't know who I am'. It has become an almost predictable, and I think tragic, refrain. There seems to be, in many instances, an inverse correlation between their level of extrinsic achievement and their intrinsic sense of self, exemplified by the project manager who said, 'I can manage projects worth billions of dollars but I can't sort myself out.'

The second observation which confirms my concern is that many of those same men who do not have much of an intrinsic sense of self also seem to have difficulty dealing with their *partner's* emerging intrinsic sense of self. As many women grow in their ability to articulate and assert their needs and perspectives many men seem to reflexively feel threatened by this, even when the increased assertiveness is not necessarily directed at them. Assertiveness is often mistaken for aggressiveness or hostility and increased independence taken as an automatic threat to the relationship. 'She's changed... she used to be happy being a wife and mother but all those women's courses and books have driven us apart.'

If these two observations are representative of widespread changes, then it will follow that many men will have difficulty understanding their relationships: 'She' plus 'Me' will not add up to a clear sense of 'We' if the man is not sufficiently clear and comfortable with who each of these individuals are.

Most of the men I see report that they feel less competent than their partners in understanding relationship issues. Perhaps this is because they are! But, if that is true, it's not their fault. In most cases, men did not have the grounding or modelling in relationships that their partners had and competence in relationships is not acquired just by focusing on the relationship.

Basic relationship competence requires a sufficiently clear sense of Self, then an accurate sense of the Other, before you can address what happens, or could happen, in the relationship. Then the simplest of relationship maps can be a most welcome and timely tool, for example the intimacy-solitude-counterpoint triangle, which both maps their experience and helps them take stock of their areas of greatest difficulty.

For many men, a counsellor or therapist may be the first person to give them the maps and tips which help them turn around the decline of their relationship. The simplest insights, things that many women have known for years and take for granted, can be liberating revelations for their male partners, not least because the man is hearing it for the first time. A little can go a very long way.

Men and Relationship Counselling Services

My second concern is in many ways a consequence of the first and that is that many counsellors and clients seem to settle for what the literature calls 'first order change', or what I call 'papering over the cracks'. For example, if he'll just take out the garbage or bath the kids or stop swearing at her, then the problem will be solved. Needless to say, the behavioural symptom is often just the tip of the iceberg. For example, the couple whose presenting problem was conflict over the housework when this in fact masked deep tensions around whose house it is, whose children make the mess, and whether they really are a partnership or a single mother with two children and a live-in partner.

I could easily have skated over the surface of that one and missed the deeper issues they both wanted me to raise, which just confirms for me the conviction that the trend in recent years towards brief and so-called 'solution-focused' therapies may be collusion with a society inclined towards denial, minimisation and the quick fix.

Many men who enquire about my groups and retreats ask me if 'the course', as they call it, will 'fix the marriage' or 'sort out our problems', despite my publicity explicitly using the language of personal reflection and learning, personal and relationship journeys, and the clarification of values and priorities in life. They seem to be looking for a relationship chauffeur whereas my approach is more akin to that of a driver-training instructor. Conversely, those men who end up participating in the groups and retreats do so with a courage and candour that is inspiring and many go on to make substantial and lasting changes as a result of having done their own deep work. However, not before they have realised what is involved and surrendered to the process.

I am convinced that the fundamental problems for many men in relationships lie at the foundational level of *assumptions*, *expectations* and *perspectives* about relationships, not merely at the level of communication, negotiation and conflict-resolution skills. Just as many men do not have a well developed sense of who they are, intrinsically, many do not have a clear idea of what it means to *relate* to another autonomous human being with all that this entails. Just the etymology of the word 'relationship' is a revelation to many men (*re* - again; *lation* - connection; *ship* - vessel). From this they are able to accept that relating involves the process of two people connecting again and again and again, rather than wishing it could be made right once and for all time.

While I acknowledge the place of skills-coaching and the like, I believe that for many men a fundamental shift in *consciousness* is first needed if their functioning in relationships is to improve in a deep and lasting way. How can they address relationship skills when many carry a strong (albeit unconscious) sense of male privilege and see themselves as the centre of their family, or think that relationships are things which either 'work out' or don't?

This shift in consciousness may be different in the details for each man but on the basis of experience thus far it commonly seems to include the following movements:

- from romanticism or idealism about relationships to 'living and loving on life's own terms' (Schnarch), in other words facing what marriage is, and what family life is, rather than comparing their situation to some mythical ideal about 'how it should be' (Brown);
- from a desire to dominate to a preparedness to build partnership, i.e. a preparedness to negotiate decisions until both parties are happy with the outcome or agreement;
- from wanting to possess the other to a preparedness to let the other be separate and instead take possession of the self in an authentic 'I-Thou' relationship (Buber) - there is nothing much that is predictable or controllable about an authentic relationship and 'it is the impeded brook that sings' (Berry);
- from living like a 'single-man-married' to thinking and acting as a married man - a marriage cannot grow unless both parties honour clear understandings about boundaries and protocols regarding others and the primacy of the marriage;
- from habitual 'me-thinking' to at least some balance between 'me-thinking' and 'we-thinking'; and
- from a preoccupation with performance to an acquired familiarity with the processes of self-reflection, self-disclosure, trust and intimacy, including the attendant vulnerability and occasional anxiety, (Keen).

Once these kinds of shifts have begun, skills training and practical courses have a foundation on which to build. It is analogous to first preparing the cracked wall before trying to fill it and put up the new wallpaper. As any tradesman worth his salt will tell you it's the preparation that counts, and this can often be three-quarters of the job. It's also the hard part of the job and the least gratifying but short cuts are short lived. The quick fix is no fix at all.

In summary I am calling for a revision of how counsellors and therapists think about men, how men think about themselves and their relationships, and our starting point in relationship counselling. I am well aware that this may require us to bridge paradigms, to be good individual therapists and good relationship counsellors, perhaps even good mythologists or spiritual directors as we get to the heart of men's existential issues. I believe it was Jean Houston who said that if we have no *mythology*, all we'll have is *pathology*. In other words, if we have no guiding story, all we'll have is an endless series of 'problems to be fixed.' Or as Sam Keen says in *Fire In The Belly*, 'Our loss has been ontological not psychological. A deficiency in meaning and in being.' (I sometimes wonder whether this is why so many young men end their lives - the life many are inheriting lacks personal meaning and social purpose so they choose no-life.)

A Way Forward

It seems to me that the men who do substantial 'inner work' on themselves, and their relationship, have a number of things in common. They seem to follow a rough sequence of stages: for mnemonic purposes I'll call these stages the 'ilities' - humility, vulnerability, and, dare I say, virility. Without a baseline *humility* there is unlikely to be much self-reflection, awareness or desire to change. Without *vulnerability* there is unlikely to be much connection with one's partner. And without a new and gentle kind of *virility*, there is unlikely to be much intimacy, care or loving attention.

As an example of these qualities, I want to briefly quote Leonard Cohen who seems to have passed through something akin to these stages.

Firstly, the cocky, self-assured *I'm Your Man*:

*If you want a lover
I'll do anything you ask me to
If you want another kind of love
I'll wear a mask for you
If you want a partner take my hand, or
If you want to strike me down in anger
Here I stand
I'm your man*

*If you want a boxer
I will step inside the ring for you
If you want a doctor
I'll examine every inch of you
If you want a driver climb inside, or
If you want to take me for a ride
You know you can
I'm your man...*

Now to the searching humility and vulnerability of *Never Any Good*:

*I was never any good at loving you
I was never any good at coming through for you
You're going to feel much better
When you cut me loose forever
I was never any good
Never any good... at loving you...*

*I was pretty good at taking out the garbage
Pretty good at holding up the wall
Dealing with the fire and the earthquake
But that don't count
That don't count... for nothing much at all*

*I was never any good at loving you
I was just a tourist in your bed looking at the view
But I can't forget where my lips have been
Those holy hills, that deep ravine
I was never any good
Never any good... at loving you...*

And finally, from his *piece de resistance* of love songs, *Hallelujah* - something of both the vulnerability and the new kind of virility I referred to earlier:

*Baby I've been here before
I know this room, I've walked this floor.
I used to live alone before I knew you.
I've seen your flag on the marble arch,
But love is not a victory march,
It's a cold and it's a broken Hallelujah.*

*There was a time you let me know
What's really going on below
But now you never show it to me, do you?
I remember when I moved in you
And the holy dove was moving too
And every breath we drew was
Hallelujah!...*

*I did my best, it wasn't much
I couldn't feel so I learned to touch
I've told the truth, I didn't come to fool you
And even though it all went wrong
I'll stand before the Lord of Song
With nothing on my lips but Hallelujah...*

Conclusion

I began by expressing two concerns about men, their relationships and relationship counselling - that we may be 'putting the cart before the horse' and 'papering over the cracks' in our approach. If you share these concerns and you work with men, or women, at the level of identity, personal journey, and Being, you will know that this requires much more of you as a therapist than brief or so-called 'solution focused' therapies, or skills-focused interventions. It requires a preparedness to journey with your clients to the place where there are no easy answers, sometimes no words, just some time-honoured principles which take a lifetime of work to refine and fully appreciate. And you won't be able to take your clients any deeper than you yourself have been. Sometimes the driving instructor needs to have made a few mistakes of his or her own before we have anything to offer anyone else.

Once upon a time therapists believed in long-term therapy, not just tricky one-off interventions or the quickest fix in the shortest time, because they recognised that the best therapy, and the best psychological work, is like healing - an ongoing process of correction and growth that cannot be rushed, takes time and is not for the faint hearted.

This article is an expanded version of a paper presented at the *Men and Family Relationships Forum* in Canberra, June 1998, by Noel Giblett. Contact Noel through his website at www.noelgiblett.com.au.

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