
“Good Grief! It’s a Men’s Group, Charlie Brown” « Dieu du ciel! C’est un groupe d’hommes, Charlie Brown »

Peter Buitenbos
Calgary, Alberta

ABSTRACT

This article uses autoethnography as a methodological approach to explore practical issues for counselling men in a group setting. A narrative was constructed that engages the reader in my experience at a therapeutic workshop for men. The narrative is interwoven with analysis that draws on research about masculinity. I use reflexivity to disclose my motivation and decision to attend the workshop and examine steps taken to create a safe and inclusive environment for participants. The article explores the conditions under which men are likely to participate in a vulnerable dialogue with other men. I note that this approach of “men helping men” can have lasting value for participants, leading to the development of close personal bonds with other men.

RÉSUMÉ

Dans cet article, on utilise l’auto-ethnographie comme approche méthodologique pour explorer des problèmes pratiques du counseling en contexte de groupes d’hommes. Une narration a été conçue afin d’engager le lecteur à partager mon expérience au cours d’un atelier de thérapie mené auprès d’un groupe d’hommes. La narration est imbriquée dans une analyse fondée sur la recherche au sujet de la masculinité. J’utilise la réflexivité pour dévoiler ma motivation et ma décision de participer à l’atelier, et j’examine les moyens pris pour créer un environnement sûr et inclusif à l’égard des participants. L’article explore les conditions dans lesquelles les hommes sont susceptibles de participer à un dialogue vulnérable avec d’autres hommes. Je note que cette approche des « hommes qui aident des hommes » peut transmettre aux participants une valeur durable, qui débouche sur le développement de liens personnels serrés entre hommes.

*Well, I went to the doctor
I said, “I’m feeling kind of rough”
He said, “Let me break it to you, son
Your shit’s fucked up.”
I said, “My shit’s fucked up?”
Well, I don’t see how—
He said, “The shit that used to work—
It won’t work now.”*

Warren Zevon (1999)

“What the hell am I doing here?” I ponder this question after taking my seat in a circle of men on a wet spring day at a retreat centre outside a major city in Canada. I’m sitting pensively in a metal chair, legs stretched out, arms crossed, eyes

directed at the floor. There are 12 guys seated around me. We're a mixed bunch. Some of the men are old enough to be my father; others are in their thirties like me. Hometowns, professional backgrounds, and life experiences are varied and unknown to each other, but we are there for a single terrifying purpose: to sort out our shit. I have my share.

For me, this "men's workshop" is the culmination of events that began a year earlier. At the time, my life had all the traditional markings of male success. I had a respectable income and a career in the high-powered world of investment banking. I was physically fit, had three wonderful children, and my marriage looked healthy enough. Inwardly, however, I was in a state of severe psychological discomfort, the sort categorized by Erikson (1963) as stagnation. In layman's terms, I was a mess—in a dark place and acting out in ways that threatened to unravel my world.

Generations of men have been conditioned to be independent, be silent, and deal with their shit on their own. I did not seek help, because I learned at a young age to suppress my emotional truth. Eventually, however, I took a risk and disclosed my story to a trusted friend. It turned out I was not alone. My friend had gone through a process of healing and inner transformation. He talked about the questions each of us needs to explore at some stage of our existence—Who am I? What is the meaning of my life? What do I want?

My friend introduced me to a therapist who specializes in helping men. I was subsequently invited to participate in a men's group and then an intensive weekend workshop where men could speak their truth in a safe environment, a place we could do our "work" and discover who we are, individually and collectively. My friend and the therapist had established a strong rapport with me. I had a sense that they understood, at a gut level, what I was going through. Feelings of safety, trust, and inclusion gave me the courage to go deeper and eventually do significant repair work around old wounds that had played a key role in my decisions, behaviour, and psychological health for over two decades.

The evolution of that journey—from the initial encounter with my friend to my seat in the circle of men—is the focus of this article. Using autoethnography as a methodological approach, the article describes personal experiences in the style outlined by Ellis, Adams, and Bochner (2011), with data derived from field notes, memory, and interviews with other participants. I explore practical issues for counselling men in a group setting through a carefully crafted narrative that is designed to engage the reader in my personal journey (Adams, 2006; Lamott, 1994). The narrative is interwoven with analysis that draws on research on masculinity and male-male friendship, and uses reflexivity as described by Ellis and Ellingson (2000), and modelled by Brooks (2007), to identify the concerns that drove me and other participants to seek help and explore how we were drawn to that particular group.

I examine the steps taken to create a safe and inclusive environment for participants and reflect upon and convey the challenges and benefits of counselling men in a group setting. This meditation on deeply personal experience is an effort to move forward, partly by looking in my own rearview mirror, and debunk the

masculinity myth in the process, moving beyond stereotypical images of stoicism and strength (Osherson, 2001). The analysis shows how a “reflexive turn at level of self” (Brooks, 2007, p. iv) can generate the kind of self-knowledge that allows for vulnerable dialogue between men and “the redefinition of orthodox masculinity between men” (p. iv).

I observe that men are more likely to participate in a therapeutic dialogue with other men under certain conditions, notably an invitation from a trusted friend or therapist and testimonials from men who have participated in group work in the past. I further note that this approach of “men helping men” can have lasting value to participants. One potential outcome is the development of authentic friendships with other men. This may be expected when humans gather for intense and deeply personal dialogue, but for men it is especially important. Hollis (1994) observes that “men collude in a conspiracy of silence whose aim is to suppress their emotional truth” (p. 11). Men are less likely to live in isolation—and suffer the consequences—when they can turn to trusted friends for emotional support.

The title for the weekend gathering is “Repair and Rebalance: A Workshop for Men.” The weather seems scripted for the event. Low clouds envelop the retreat centre, which is situated on a ridge high above a wide, verdant valley. Rain flicks at the window panes. Looking through the streaked glass, what would otherwise be a spectacular view is a moist grey veil, as though the gods want us to look inward. The conditions for introspection, for repair and rebalance, are ideal.

I made the decision to attend the workshop after careful deliberation. The thought of sharing personal stories in a group setting was intimidating. Sure, I had been disclosing details of my life to a psychologist (I had started talk therapy 6 months earlier), but getting real with a bunch of strangers?

As I take my seat in the circle, I sense that I’m not alone. Several of the men around me look uncomfortable as they fidget in their chairs and avoid eye contact. What secrets do they carry? What pain lurks behind their faces? Are my wounds, fears, and failures more shameful or embarrassing? In that moment I could relate to Jack Nicholson’s character in *A Few Good Men*. “You want the truth?” he roared. “You can’t handle the truth.”

My suspicion about the general discomfort in the room is confirmed through interviews with participants after the workshop. The script is a familiar one for men, observes Hollis (1994). When shopping for cars or building houses, we ask for help, but when we have relationship concerns or struggle with psychological pain, we suffer in isolation. Admitting weakness violates an impulse deeply ingrained in our psyches. Our parents, especially our fathers, teach us at a young age not to cry when we fall down. We learn to suppress our feelings and shut down. This was certainly the case for me.

In some cases, we distill our complex emotions into anger, unleash our aggression in the boardroom, or numb our pain with alcohol, drugs, or sex (Corneau, 1991). We may know this is unhealthy, but the alternative of opening up is simply too strange to contemplate. It is totally foreign to us. These patterns of avoidance can even overtake our sense of judgement; we can become reckless and self-

destruct. Everyone knows about Charlie Sheen, Tiger Woods, and other troubled celebrities, but millions of other men around the world are in similar situations, living lives of quiet desperation. I was one of them.

My reasons for seeking professional help were complex, but the impulse to reach out could be summed up in a similar line from Zevon's (1999) song: "The shit that used to work, wasn't working any more." I was struggling under the weight of wounds suffered in my youth, most notably unresolved grief from the death of my mother. The fallout from that pivotal event was far-reaching. It affected my relationship with my father and later my then-wife. I struggled on and off with anxiety and depressive symptoms for over 20 years. I still managed to function at a high level. I made the right career moves, bought a large house, and devoted myself to my family. All the while, beneath the surface was an undercurrent of despair. Eventually my efforts to numb the pain led to unhealthy choices that became familiar patterns of behaviour. The old coping mechanisms were no longer working.

A deep discomfort with the direction my life was taking gave me the impetus to reach out to a trusted friend. That first meeting required only a small step across the threshold of my friend's office, but it was a giant leap forward for my psychological health and well-being. As I told my story, deep tremors of grief rose to the surface. He handed me a box of tissue and listened patiently. He was empathetic and supportive, and, when I was finished, he disclosed a bit of his own story. To my surprise, this man had himself gone through a process of healing and inner transformation, and through his willingness to be vulnerable he gave me a critical insight: I was not alone. Quite the opposite, in fact. My friend was involved in a support group of senior business executives, and he had been involved with other men's groups. He told me that the men he knew through these groups shared similar kinds of burdens: wounds from their childhood, dark bouts of depression, a desire to break free from restrictive role expectations, or a longing to find their life purpose.

When my friend mentioned the psychologist, he assured me that this professional was "a man's man," that he would understand and could help me. So once again I found myself doing something I didn't think "real" men did: I was going to therapy to talk about my problems. As I look back, I am struck by how deeply I subscribed to this social albatross—the idea that men who seek therapy are weak or somehow inferior. Why are we so afraid to consider what drives us? Because admitting mental anguish and showing vulnerability goes against our competitive reflexes. We choose instead to suffer in silence, and think ourselves better men for it.

Over the course of a few months of intensive therapy I came to understand for the first time how the wounds of my youth played a pivotal role in the choices I had made for half my life, including my decision to marry at a young age. It was an eye-opening exercise. In time, my therapist informed me that I had an opportunity to move deeper with my work by taking part in a retreat he was leading. After weeks of deliberation, I accepted his invitation to attend, once again stepping well beyond my comfort zone.

The word “men’s” paired up with “movement” or “group” carries all sorts of negative connotations, for the same reasons therapy is stigmatized. Normal guys do not worry about feelings and they sure as hell don’t get together to talk about them. The idea conjures up images of pathetic middle-aged guys beating drums in the bush. Not surprisingly, I was reluctant to tell anyone in my social circle about my decision to attend the workshop. I did tell one male friend (thinking he was safe, since he had been to therapy himself) and was met with derisive comments and a homophobic joke; he sought to shame me as my father might. A female friend reacted with a mixture of confusion and intrigue (“You guys will talk about feelings?”).

I attribute my willingness to attend the workshop to three key factors: first, comfort with my therapist, who would be leading the event; second, knowledge that a friend of mine would attend (he could also describe what to expect, having been to similar workshops in the past); and third, an opportunity to meet other potential participants at an informal gathering several weeks beforehand. The last piece was critical. At the meeting, I encountered other professionals my age: successful men with wounds and the courage to talk about them. The group included a lawyer, an advertising executive, a successful entrepreneur, a retired doctor, a minister, and an economist. They were struggling to come to terms with a variety of hurtful life experiences: family breakdown, suicide of a loved one, illness, abuse, and death of a spouse. The key learning at that pre-retreat gathering, for me and other men interviewed for this article, was that we could expect to meet men just like ourselves at the weekend workshop, in an atmosphere of caring, understanding, and mutual respect.

Inside the retreat centre, 13 men settle into the circle. There is an empty space of worn russet carpet in the centre. The chairs are comfortably and evenly spaced, striking a fine balance between respect for personal space and inclusivity. The two therapists leading the workshop—a psychologist and a physician with training in psychology from the University of British Columbia—invite us to make introductions. Their approach is straightforward, relaxed, and nonthreatening. We are invited to talk about where we come from. This is the first sign that we will be directed to relate differently as men. Our gender is accustomed to identify with what we “do” or possess in the world. Our social status defines our value as men. The irony, of course, is that many outwardly successful men feel worthless inside. Circumventing artificial barometers is critical to achieve meaningful dialogue between men in a group setting.

What we find, in that first hour of sharing, is the beginning of community. The men tell interesting tales about their hometowns and families of origin, salting their stories with humorous anecdotes about relationships, hobbies, and favourite haunts. The two leaders take part like the rest of us, modelling self-disclosure and building rapport. I feel a greater level of comfort and ease as we head to the dining room for dinner. We do not realize it at the time, but the relationships that are forming will grow and thrive long after the workshop ends and become, for some of us, one of the most important legacies of that weekend.

A slide presentation by the leaders after dinner provides a framework for the weekend's discussions. The leaders share insights from their decades of experience working with men, and reference authors who have written extensively on the subject, including James Hollis, Eugene Monick, Robert Bly, and Guy Corneau (the introduction to these authors was much appreciated—I later read many of their works). Several important themes emerge during this session. One is the role grief plays in the lives of men and how it can lead to anger, sadness, fatigue, or isolation; because we are not equipped to deal with grief, many of us self-medicate with work, sex, or drugs. Emotional trauma, if not confronted, determines our fate.

Grief arises from wounds that are not always obvious or acknowledged. For example, not receiving a father's unconditional love injures the soul. The son should hear from his father: "I love you simply because you exist." But instead the relationship is often tainted by the father's own wounds. A boy may grow up seeking to live out a parent's dreams instead of his own. The greatest burden the child must bear is the un-lived life of the parent, observed Jung (Hollis, 1994). The idea that we sacrifice our own dreams and ambitions in service to the expectations of others (families, colleagues, religion) resonates strongly with me. We learn how shame is used to control and drive us, and contributes to addiction, but then discover how talking about shame in a supportive environment robs it of its power. We discuss sexual wounds and our relationship to women, and the nurturing feminine part of the self from which many of us are estranged (an absence of women at the workshop gives men the freedom to express themselves without self-censoring). The introductory session is affirming and provides the impetus for me to do my own work over the course of the weekend.

Confronting emotional trauma is a daunting task. Specific aspects of the group's organization and function helped establish it as a safe environment. The group was composed equally of men my age and others old enough to be my father. The presence of "tribal fathers" who could listen to me without judgement or condemnation was novel for me and comforting. That is not to say the discussion did not head in that direction at times, but the leaders were diligent in guarding against criticism or other unhelpful feedback as we spoke our truth. The leaders made certain that each member of the group made a commitment to confidentiality and were careful to ensure that each participant was engaged. This gave us the message that every voice in the room mattered. The weekend included two therapeutic enactments in which members of the circle were invited to play roles and everyone provided feedback for the individuals receiving this treatment.

We formed small groups of three on the first night. I found this very helpful for building rapport and for enhancing my sense of safety, inclusion, and trust. My first group included a man with experiences and wounds from his childhood that were almost identical to my own; we developed an instant connection and he was a significant support to me for the duration of the weekend. During another session, I was paired up with a man slightly younger than me; we were able to connect in a number of areas and he remains one of my closest friends today. Another effective technique was a picture exercise, in which hundreds of photographs and

other images were scattered on a table. We were invited to select a couple of pictures and share what they meant to us—an imagery exercise well suited for men. In the final session, each of us received feedback from every other person in the circle; there was a significant outpouring of love and encouragement for every man there. Never before had I received such focused and meaningful support from so many people at one time. I left feeling affirmed, validated, and respected as a man.

In the end, the weekend served as a concentrated therapy session, a safe environment to work on recovery from specific wounds. I had completed almost six months of advance work with my analyst and was prepared, as a result, to participate in a therapeutic enactment that brought emotional release and psychological repair from past trauma. The outpouring of grief seemed to generate a physiological response. In the weeks that followed, I noticed a distinct change in how I felt, mentally and physically. I felt lighter, like a cloud had lifted from my frontal lobe. There was a marked reduction in generalized anxiety, a kind of mental white noise that had plagued me for years. I had a new sense of optimism about the future. It felt as though the wounded boy I was living in service to had finally found rest. A few days after the retreat, I met an old friend for coffee. He did not know about the work I had done but said almost immediately that I seemed different, that my facial expression seemed “softer” and I was more relaxed than usual. A member of my immediate family also observed changes, remarking that I seemed more present and emotionally available.

Of course, there is no panacea. While it is valuable for men to create a safe place and share life-deepening experiences, change ultimately comes through the individual, observes Hollis (1994). “Sharing has its place, but personal change is primary” (Hollis, 1994, p. 25). After the workshop, I spent several months in follow-up treatment and continue today to face my gremlins, as Hollis calls them, on a daily basis. However, just being aware of my wounds and how they affect me has been hugely beneficial. “In any relationship a man is largely at the mercy of what he does not know about himself” (Hollis, 1994, p. 42). And what is true for relationships is also true for life. When you are no longer driving with a blindfold, there is less chance of ending up in the ditch.

One of the key messages delivered in our sessions was the vital role fathers play in helping their sons become emotionally healthy men. Over the years, I had interacted with my son in ways that remind me of how my dad treated me when I was growing up. If my boy struggled with some task or seemed afraid to try something new, I would chide him in a sort of shame-based reverse psychology. If things didn’t go his way during a game at the park, he might fall and start crying. I would become frustrated, declare his injuries minor, and tell him to stop crying and start playing. I dismissed his feelings and demonstrated a love that was highly conditional. After the retreat, I was determined to change that. The night I returned home, I sat down with my then preteen son and told him how much I admired his character, that I was proud to be his dad. I then told him that my relationship with him is sacred, and that no matter what happens, I will always love him simply because he exists. I repeated it slowly so that it could sink in. Tears

welled up in his eyes. We cried together and hugged for a while. Later, we spent time wrestling (one of his favourite activities). He seemed to possess more vigour than usual. The next morning, another surprise: He cleaned his room before school and was unusually chipper. Perhaps it is too much to attribute these outcomes to a few carefully chosen words, but it seemed my son was fed in a powerful way by the loving attention of his father.

The message delivered to my son that evening must be repeated often and confirmed through actions. I am far from a model of consistency and mess up more than I would like, but I have tried to be consistent in being involved in his life. I tell him often that his sensitivity and emotional availability are aspects of his personality I am most proud of. The key is that I am aware of the dynamics at play and try my best to self-correct when I notice old scripts being activated. As a result, I am hopefully breaking a cycle of wounding that has played havoc with the emotions of male members of my family for generations. I have similarly worked hard to ensure my son and daughters know they will never be abandoned or rejected, as I was at a young age, for failing to measure up. Demonstrating how to be honest with my emotions and doing my best to show my children unconditional love is a new paradigm in the household of someone who grew up listening to the Ten Commandments every Sunday morning, and was told to “hold it together” when his mother succumbed to cancer.

The kind of evolution described above is made easier with support and encouragement from trusted friends. This brings us to one of the most important outcomes of group therapy for men, as experienced by myself and others at the workshop: It resulted in the development of safe and supportive relationships with other men. Three core friendships grew out of that weekend for me and a fourth developed at another workshop later that year. These relationships are different from the ones I was accustomed to and possess, to varying degrees, those attributes identified by Brooks (2007): openness, vulnerability, empathy, care, tenderness, emotionality, affection, intuition, and self-disclosure. Our conversations are not dominated by talk of sports or politics or finance (though we could go there if we wanted to). We do not engage in competitive banter designed to elevate our fragile sense of self at the expense of our friends. Instead, we meet regularly to talk about what is really going on. These are men with whom I can rage and cry and admit my fears, men I can go to when I feel vulnerable, in pain, or broken. These are men with whom I can share my frustration over role expectations and talk honestly about sex. They listen without judgement and accept me where I'm at.

“Having no soul union with other men can be the most damaging wound of all,” observed Robert Bly. In that sense, the workshop was reparative in an unexpected way: it led to the end of isolation. I learned that I am not alone, that my neuroses and methods of coping are not unique, and, critically, that soul union with other men can play a significant supporting role in my ongoing efforts to sort out my shit.

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About the Author

Peter Buitenbos is a pseudonym. The author works in the investment industry in a major city in Canada and was formerly an award-winning journalist. He sits on several corporate and nonprofit boards and is actively engaged as a volunteer crisis counsellor at a social agency. The author elected to shield his identity due to the degree of self-disclosure in the article.

Address correspondence to <pbuitenbos@gmail.com>