

Mankind Project Experience Reports

**BECOMING ACCOUNTABLE IN MY LIFE—
AN EXPERIENCE REPORT OF THE MANKIND PROJECT**

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I don't always get what I want. In fact, I seldom get what I think I want. That was certainly the case with the New Warrior Training Adventure (NWTA). I decided to attend because I wanted to connect with men. Up until that time my experience of connecting with men was that the topics of conversation were either job related or were about women, hunting, cars, and/or sports. At the NWTA I wanted to connect in some way that was more meaningful for me. I expected to have very cerebral and dignified discussions about important matters. My experience on that weekend was definitely not what I thought I wanted . . . but it was exactly what I needed. I began a journey of self-discovery around what it means to be a man and what it really means to accept responsibility for my actions and my judgments.

Following the weekend I was encouraged to join a ManKind Project (MKP) peer mutual support Group called an I-Group (Integration-Group), what is commonly called a self-help group. After my weekend experience I was not sure what that group would be like and entered into the process with some fear.

The weekend had been difficult. Most of the excuses I had previously used to deal with life did not work on the weekend. Over those 3 days I discovered that I was good at making excuses that were honest enough, but which actually were only excuses. Acknowledging I could use honesty as a way of avoiding taking responsibility for my actions was not pleasant. I was afraid that if the I-Group was going to be more of the same that I didn't think I would be up to that.

The group met weekly and the first few meetings confirmed the worst of my fears. My excuses for being late for a meeting did not work. It was true that I hit

unexpected traffic delays, but that did not change the fact that I was late and that I could have chosen to leave earlier in order to avoid problems with traffic, thereby getting to the group on time. I discovered that my struggle with taking responsibility was a struggle shared by others. The men in the I-Group, those who were new along with me and those who had been involved for some time, were also struggling with how they lived in this world and how they could live more honestly in this world.

Before long I realized I had found a group of men I could trust, really trust. They listened and actually heard what I said. They also did not let me off the hook when I was trying to avoid my own responsibility for my actions. Somehow their refusal to let me avoid taking responsibility for my actions increased my level of trust. Over the course of months, I found I could cry in front of these men and they would not make fun of me. I found that the only thing that was ever disapproved of me was being dishonest about who I was. To my surprise, I came to understand that the dishonesty was with myself.

The I-Group meeting began with certain rituals. I had had trouble following rituals. I had grown up disdaining rituals that were clearly identified as ritual. At the time I was not fully aware that there were many “rituals” that did not appear “ritualistic.” I was okay with rituals I had grown up with because they didn’t look like rituals to me. But, I discovered that my life abounded in unrecognized rituals. I did things in certain ways that were in effect ritualistic. Internally, I struggled with taking part in the rituals. Over many weeks, I came to understand that those rituals were an important aspect of my connecting with the men. What the I-Group called on me to do was acknowledge the rituals for what they were, make me conscious and live my life with an awareness of the rituals I unconsciously followed.

There were many times when I felt like I did not belong. I didn’t believe I was strong enough. I experienced the men in my I-Group as strong and powerful men. They epitomized the best of what it meant to be a man. I was sure there was no way I could live up to their example. None of those men ever accused me of being weak or demanded that I be different than who I was (other than challenging me to be honest with myself about who I was). It was I, myself, who was making the comparisons that were very critical of me.

One of the values of sticking with the I-Group was the realization that I was not the only man who was afraid he did not measure up. Even the strongest of those men had times when they were more aware of their weakness than their strengths. Plus, I found that my weaknesses were as welcome as my strengths. I discovered these men were strong in areas that were weaknesses for me. And ways in which I was strong were areas of weakness for some of them.

Being aware of other men’s weaknesses led me to be judgmental. I could easily identify ways in which they were not living in integrity. As I became aware of how I was dishonest with myself, I also saw how they were being dishonest with themselves. Yet, even in being judgmental, there was a major

learning for me. I learned that my judgments were just that, “MY” judgments. They may or may not have been factually true. What really mattered was that I recognize and owned my judgments as my own judgments.

There was a lot of learning and self discovery that happened to me those first 10 years in an I-Group. In addition to those learnings, I discovered what I call “masculine energy.” I have often sought to define what that energy is and, in the end, I have still not found a definition that totally fits. There was something in that group of men which said they were men at the core of their being and that I was a man who walked among men. I find that I still cannot exactly describe what that “something” is.

Outside of the I-Group, I saw this masculine energy in some men and not in others. Even without understanding what it was. When I came in contact with a man I began to sense whether or not that energy was present. When I found that energy in a man, I could usually trust what that man was saying or doing.

This “masculine energy” was something very different from the energy of men who were “macho.” The macho behavior which focused on women (mostly as objects) on cars and sports was what I had been trying to get away from. The men in my I-Group were rarely into being macho. All of us could get into that way of acting from time to time, and I believe we were usually able to recognize what we were doing and were able to laugh at ourselves.

I became more aware of macho behaviors in men in general. I saw behaviors in men that were not readily seen as macho. The man who puffs out his chest and makes it clear he is ready to fight is acting as macho as the man who uses his wealth to let other men know he is better than they are. The man who uses his education or intelligence to put others down is being as macho as the man who brags about his conquests in the bedroom, the barroom, or the boardroom.

In many ways I had grown up being inundated with the idea that a real man was macho. It was never said directly to me, yet it was said by example, by the culture I grew up in, and by the type of men who became cultural heroes (John Wayne was one of those for me.) At the same time I got the message that a real man was someone who was boorish, domineering, and who ran roughshod over anyone in his path. It was not really okay to own being anything but a macho man.

My experience in the I-Group was that there was not a lot of room for machoism. Sure, there were times when all of us fell into the training we had grown up with as to what it means to be a man. But those times usually resulted in more self-awareness for me as to how I was acting and in seeing the humor as well as the tragedy of machismo in myself and others.

I learned to differentiate between being masculine and living with masculine energy and being macho and denying true masculinity. It was slow, but I discovered that it was actually okay to be this different kind of man. I didn’t have to prove anything; not to others and not to myself.

In discovering “sacred masculine energy” I discovered that there were women who also carried masculine energy. There were women who were women in

every sense of the word but in whom I saw clear masculine energy. When I met these women with true masculine energy I discovered most of them also had a strong feminine energy.

In I-Group we would sometimes talk about our feminine energy, but for me it was never as important as the masculine. My experience was that as my masculine energy developed, my feminine energy also developed. However, it just did not develop as fully as the masculine. My masculine and feminine energies were out of balance. After almost 10 years of I-Group experience in three different I-Groups, I had an experience which brought those energies back into more balance.

I found that people sometimes picked up on my masculine energy and misinterpreted what was happening. Following such an experience, I began to explore writing and the more creative side of myself. My wife had been part of a group which had worked together using the Julia Cameron book, *The Artist's Way* (1992). She heard that another such group was being organized by the same person. The leader was a woman that I had known and respected for some time. For my own self-care, and with some hesitation, I joined the group. The expectation was that I would commit to the group for 9 months. The group would consist of six women and one man—me. I had a lot of fear about how I could possibly fit in. Yet, I found these women to be as accepting of me as the men in my I-Group. There was a difference in how they expressed themselves and in how the group functioned, but it was still a group which provided support in a self-help context that I believed called me to more honestly account for how I lived in the world.

I have remained in the “Artist Way” group for more than 6 years. (I have also stayed with my I-Group.) The “Artists Way” group would meet from September through May of each year. One woman left the group after the first year and another one joined the group the second year. This year another woman left the group. Her departure has left a hole in my connections with the group.

Over the years of my being a part of the “Artists Way” group I have discovered the presence of a strong feminine energy. Sometimes I was very comfortable surrounded by that feminine energy. At other times I was less comfortable. The result was that feminine part of me, which had not been given the same opportunity to grow as the masculine, developed more fully.

The first time I really knew there had been a change in me was when something of a female nature was being discussed and no one took note of me, a man, sitting in their midst. I was, however, very aware of it and wondered if I should leave. At the same time, I also felt I was a part of what they were discussing. One of the women finally noticed that I was there. However, the women dealt with my presence with matter-of-fact comments. They commented something on the order that “I was one of them.”

It was not that my masculinity was denied. From time to time one or another of the women would comment on my strong masculine energy and how it brought something helpful to the group. I believe what was happening was that the two

energies, masculine and feminine, were finding balance in me. I was able to be in either the all male I-Group and be immersed in that masculine energy or to be just as comfortable being in the all (other than me) female artists group and be immersed in the feminine energy.

I feel particularly blessed to have been a part of both groups. I still attend both groups and am comfortable in either a group suffused with masculine energy or a group suffused with feminine energy. The two experiences have worked together to bring me more into balance.

I would not want to leave the impression that I have obtained perfection in the balance of the masculine and feminine energy in myself. Every day, and I do mean "every day," there are battles I have to face in order to remain aware of those two energies at work in myself; to accept both as being a good part of me and to continue the journey of growth I am on.

Some day I may reach perfection (though I doubt it) and not need to continue in those groups. I expect that if that happens, life will be boring. It is an exciting experience for me to explore who I am and discover parts of myself that I have not been fully aware of.

REFERENCE

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