

THE SECRETS MEN KEEP

What happens when you bring men together for a weekend and they commit to keeping all conversations private and speak only from the heart?

An Interview with Len Worley, Ph.D. on the power of

MEN'S WORK

By Delia Willson

When I first learned about men's retreats I was 17 years old. The way it was described to me, the groups consisted of a bunch of men getting together to beat drums, (and yes, their chests,) in a forest so that they could get in touch with their masculine prowess. Needless to say, I was rather skeptical. I remember thinking, "Why on earth is this a good thing? Don't we already have enough dominating masculinity in this world? Is this just an opportunity for men to feel sorry for themselves and to justify a backlash of anger towards women's fight for equality?"

Well, I've learned a lot more about men since then. I've learned how hard it is to balance the demands we place on them for sensitivity with the demands for strength. And let's not kid ourselves; we demand both in equal amounts. Frankly, it's hard for women, too, but for men, maintaining access to their feelings is particularly hard. They are trained against it. In many cases, it is literally beaten out of them. Masculinity does not necessitate insensitivity or brutality, and yet, many of us think that. So, how does a man get a grasp of his "true" inner strength? I mean real strength, which is not self-indulgent, not cruel or crass. I mean the kind that listens and knows what is needed and is forgiving when mistakes are made. It's a tall order.

It is unfortunate that there are so few places in the world that are safe for men to learn and to practice how to love generously and strongly, but after my conversations with Len Worley, I am convinced he creates a place which is very different from the one I imagined as a teenager. It's not about the drums. In fact, it's hard work. During these gatherings, held just outside Charlottesville, Virginia, the men develop very deep friendships. They learn how to trust and to communicate with rigorous honesty. They grieve together, dance together, and yes, celebrate together the best that the masculine spirit has to offer.

Q: You have been hosting male gatherings for many years. How did it all get started?

A: Twenty years ago I was a young psychotherapist looking for ways to better work with men. It seemed they were having such a hard time of it in relationships with women. Many didn't have a clue about why their partners were angry with them or did not want to be sexual. A number of men had been left by their wives, and they were enraged and heartbroken and seemed completely caught by surprise. Quite frankly the women were tired of not being related to in a deep and personal way. It was as if the men were lagging behind women in emotional development.

In this period of pondering men's dilemmas, I attended a gathering expressly for men. To my surprise there were 125 present. It was held at a retreat center and was hosted by the now famous poet Robert Bly, who put men's work on the map. This event lasted five days, and so things heated up after a time, and because we were at a retreat center you couldn't just walk away from it all. This was very different for me, because as a therapist I was accustomed to working in convenient one-hour increments. The first thing I noticed was how intimidated I felt just by being in the presence of men. Of course, I had been around men a lot; I played sports throughout my early life, but I had never been in the presence of men who spoke so fully and freely from the heart. I was both fascinated by the power of pure masculine energy expressed through African drumming, dance, and personal revelations of betrayal and heartache, and I was I was also frightened. There were a number of Vietnam Vets there who spoke with great earnestness about the lingering effects the war had on them. I realized (and this was quite a surprise to me) that I did not feel that it was safe to reveal myself emotionally with other men. I felt safe with women, but not with men. In retrospect I see that I feared being

shamed for showing vulnerability and revealing my struggles in a man's presence. This I had learned in part through osmosis, by the way the men in my early life had kept themselves invulnerable to feelings. I wanted to leave the retreat several times, the pressure felt so great inside me, but I stayed. Afterwards, when I got back to my home, I felt myself to be stronger and more open than I had ever been. This surprised me. It was as if I had been initiated into some strange energy within myself, something that I could not have gotten to any other way than by being with men.

Q: So, that was when you first started hosting men's groups?

A: Yes, I pulled together a number of my male clients, and we started talking. Initially, almost every man who came to the group was very ambivalent about being there. Often some would not even show up for their first meeting. There was considerable anxiety about coming into a group of men expressly for the purpose of speaking from the heart. But after finally coming for a couple of sessions the change was dramatic – you couldn't pull those same men away from the meetings; many preferred it over individual counseling sessions. They had found a connection that, without even knowing it, they had been hungering for their whole lives – the desire to share openly and honestly about the struggles they were having as males.

Q: What issues were talked about?

A: Almost without exception everyone had something to tell about his father. Think of it, it is the norm that a boy grows up around THE most important man in his life and never has a personal, emotional exchange of compassionate listening with him. And yet that is how most of us have grown up. Criticized, yes; beaten, yes; ignored and left alone, yes; but never really spoken to in a deeply personal way.

Q: So there were a lot of wounds that men could finally bring out into the open?

A: Yes, and frankly that is what has made the encounters with one another so powerful – men finally having their emotional lives witnessed with respect and honor by other men, without fear of being shamed and humiliated for showing strong emotion. There is something that only a man can give another man, a confirmation for his masculinity.

Q: How has your work changed over the years, given what you have discovered?

A: First of all, there is something that hasn't changed;

that is, just bringing men together for sincere conversation about important issues. This is no small thing for a man to experience. I don't mean simply having heady discussions about opinions that men share. This happens all the time. In our meetings we structure the process so that we get to feelings and stay with feelings, because without that it is just another visit with men as usual. This brings about a depth of friendship that most men simply haven't known possible.

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But what has changed since my early days? The most important aspect is how I bring the unconscious into the work in a far more direct way. We work with dreams. This is new for most men, telling their dreams out loud and opening themselves up to their meaning. It's a fascinating experience, for in a moment of telling what seems to be an innocuous dream you realize that you are revealing your inner self, things you never thought about telling, but we all in the group love it, because it keeps us on the edge of our seats, mesmerized with the power of the unconscious to bring us to issues and solutions that we would have not gotten to otherwise. So, dream telling is a big part of the work.

As a result of my training in Jungian dreamwork, I have developed a sense of how to approach the issues of a man's life at two levels. One is the literal level, the relationship struggles, trouble with addictions, yearning for other women; but at a deeper level I listen to what is trying to come into light within a man, within his soul you might say. For example, an affair or the dream of a lover may signal the longing to connect with a much deeper part of the self than needs to be lived.

Q: Is this the feminine part of a man?

A: Yes, but we usually don't talk about it that way, because we try to avoid convenient labels and tags that do injustice to the feelings. For instance, if a man is drawn towards pornography I want to ask what is it about this particular woman that fascinates him. Is it her breasts? Her eyes? What's in those eyes? One man told me it was the courage in the face of the woman's picture that turned him on. Well, that is an expression of the deeper part of the man that is

trying to come to light. How courageously is he living his life? And can he take this longing he has for the woman, and especially her courageous eyes, and let that inspire him to bring directness and fierceness to how he goes about living his life? Sexual energy draws us because it wants to merge with something; it's not just that a man wants to physically penetrate or just have pleasure; at a deeper level of the personality it's about qualities in himself that he is trying to touch. For this man it was courage, a quality that called for more development. For most men the deeper attraction towards women has to do with developing receptivity, tenderness, vulnerability.

I once knew a man who loved a woman's legs because they were sturdy. It was her strength that drew him, though at first he had never even thought about the particular qualities of the women he would masturbate to. So, I use this as an example to illustrate how I first try to validate the underlying urge that is trying to come to light, even if it seems only remotely related to human growth and goodness. Cocaine appeals to many because it helps as an antidote to a sense of powerlessness. Smoking marijuana softens anxiety and enables some men to feel feelings. I want to make conscious the underlying motives, and thus learn to cooperate with the unconscious intent of behavior that may not at first glance seem very helpful. Doing so can dissolve the terrible conflict within the self.

Q: This sounds like therapy, yet the setting seems very different?

A: There are things traditional one on one therapy cannot provide; community, for example, unless you are doing group therapy. But even still, people usually aren't eating together, dancing together, and sharing silence around an open fire. And certainly you are not participating in ritual together. This is not an exclusively psychological approach. We maintain a strong connection to the yearning for meaning and the symbolic life. Ritual and ceremony may be just as important as talking through things in a psychological way.

Q: Like?

A: We have sometimes done sweat lodges; not Native American style, since we are not Native Americans. We have developed our own approach that is less structured and allows for the spontaneous expression of feelings. We may tell stories, cry, laugh loudly and have a good holler. Often we sit in silence, no words spoken. Quite simply, we heat rocks over an open fire for a couple of hours then bring them into a round, tent-like structure, pour water over them and sweat. There is a deep listening in a darkened room like this, and in such an

environment feelings are amplified and intensified. The heat, the darkness, the close proximity to other bodies - all this helps to clarify what has been neglected and what wants to be expressed.

But dancing can be just as important of a ritual. By this I mean spontaneous movement made up in a moment that expresses the tension or delight in the room. Most men don't know what it is like to dance in a group with other men to express their strength, joy, masculine strength and playfulness. Sometime we may gather around a fire and tell stories.

Ultimately, we want to see a man feel the power of being true to all that he is, hiding nothing, embracing especially his primal nature.

Our meetings are very open, in the sense of not having a strict agenda. We often start with silence, giving enough time for everyone to check in with themselves to see what feels pertinent to talk about. Then someone tells a dream or describes a situation in their life, and it all begins. Often one man will discuss a poignant issue he is facing, and we will guide the conversation so that a man taps into unrealized strengths in himself. Ultimately, we want to see a man feel the power of being true to all that he is, hiding nothing, embracing especially his primal nature.

Q: What do you mean by primal?

A: This is what gets cut off for modern, civilized men in our attempts to be conforming, social creatures: we lose our connection to raw instincts - the capacity to act spontaneously, to grieve over the losses of one's life (not stuff it and pretend that you aren't affected), to set boundaries and not succumb to pleasing in such a way that it takes the fire out of you, to know when to rest - as animals do - and not get lost in work and performance, to open the heart and create close, meaningful friendships, to live your deepest longing.

Seeing a man take risks and engage himself openly and honestly in front of others is inspiring and moves us all to the primal man. The man working on his issues before others is a brave leader; he is working for everyone as others silently resonate and benefit with what he is going through.

I have a co-facilitator⁷ who joins me from New York, one of my dearest friends. We have led many groups together, and so we have a comfort with one another, and we both love working with dreams, and also believe in the importance of bringing discussions into feelings and to some kind of decision point, a place where an emotional commitment is made, like having a conversation with your father that a man has never had in his life. This can happen whether or not the father is actually in the room. For example, we sometimes set up imagined role-plays that simulate an actual encounter with the father. This may be as evocative as having a father present. This will often involve other men participating in a re-enactment of an incident that happened many years ago.

Q: But do fathers ever join their sons?

A: Indeed, and this is one of the more moving experiences, seeing an aging father with his 40 or 50 year old son; the two of them getting to face each other honestly in a group of men who allow for everything, especially the grief and expression of love to flow that has been blocked for decades. It is very inspiring, and usually in these moments we all have tears in our eyes and are somewhat envious of the man in the room who has his father with him. It is quite wonderful for the father, too, since that generation has been even less connected to an inner life. They get lots of support and acknowledgement from all the men, congratulations about taking the emotional risk.

Q: What about the women? Do you ever interface with them?

A: I have ideas about this. Once I created a setting for men to encounter a deep sense of feminine beauty and mystery. This was several years ago. The men prepared for several months in the meantime, a group of women designed a ceremony to help us connect with that which is sacred in the feminine. I remember the culminating night of the ritual very well. There was some trepidation among the men as we waited outside the meeting-house for the ritual to commence; we knew that the roles were being reversed – it was not to be a man's world anymore. We were venturing into the world of women without our protective roles and games. One by one each man was blindfolded and taken individually from our group into a room that was specially prepared by the women. The atmosphere was hushed silence and the women initiated a cleansing ceremony to stimulate the memory of the birth experience and help us remember how our lives depend upon a relationship with the feminine. I can't give all the

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details of the ritual itself, because these things must be held secret to maintain their power, but I will say that this event was one of the memorable ones of my life.

Q: Say more about secrets.

A: Initiation rituals have always been guarded with utmost secrecy. It gives an experience a sacred quality. When we meet together as men we begin by expressing a commitment to keep everything which happens completely private. We go around the circle and each man speaks eye-to-eye, man-to-man, making a vow to keep all things spoken confidential. What is said in the group remains in the group. Of course, a man can reveal later what he talks about if he wants, but not about the other men. This provides an under girding of safety that is absolutely necessary to assure deep and risky revelations. Without this it's just another men's club socializing and giving opinions. With it you get to the heart of things where no one is bored.

This cross-generational work is extremely important. Younger men need the confirmation that can only come through acceptance by an older man.

In this atmosphere confessions may pour out –related to past injuries, humiliations, betrayals and betraying; things that have been kept secret. The inner isolation that someone has carried for years can be vanished in a few minutes. These things would not happen without a core belief that you can trust your neighbor to guard your privacy and your vulnerability. It's a place that very few men know, and when it is known there is enormous relief.

From this we see friendships form that have a level of closeness, support and depth that is simply unknown to most men. Someone once said to me, "Good company is more important than will power." Having a quality friendship can help one be accountable to being one's best, to stay balanced between love, work and play, to celebrate and laugh. Without this a man can easily become a work mule or live a superficial life.

Q: Do you have young men as well as older?

A: Most men are around mid-life, mid to late thirties into their 50's, though our youngest is 17 years old. We have had men as old as 80. I hope to see more college age men learn about our work.

The cross-generational contact is quite stimulating. The older men get to see themselves as youths and this enlivens them; the younger men learn from the older men, especially how to live through failures, defeats, and heartaches. This cross-generational work is extremely important. Younger men need the confirmation that can only come through acceptance by an older man. Older men need the vibrant energy of the younger. It keeps us dancing.

Q: And what about gay men?

A: Research shows us that most men have the capacity to be attracted to other men whether they are gay or straight. You can't go very far in masculine development without coming to terms with this. Straight men encounter their fear of being gay, as they open to a more tender side of themselves and realize that sexual energy exists in all kinds of relationship. Of course, it doesn't mean that one is necessarily gay. Because of the oppression and prejudice against homosexuality that exists in our culture straight men rarely have a setting in which they can talk about their experiences and feelings openly. Having a mixed group encourages everyone to come to terms with this mix of feelings around this subject. There is deep, internalized self-hatred regarding attraction to other men, so deep that many men fear getting close to other men. A lot of vital energy gets locked away as a result and an unnecessary emotional distance is lived out for fear of being gay.

Whether straight or gay a great deal of vitality can be activated when men come together to celebrate the beauty of the masculine spirit. There is a great deal of shame that we men carry for the atrocities and violence done by men in the world. We often fear this violence in ourselves and keep away from our deep primal fantasies and desires for fear of being out of control and destructive. Men's Work provides an evocative and safe container where these issues (anger, rage, sexual desire) can be respectfully addressed with wisdom. Like the alchemists who sought to turn common metals into gold, our gatherings provide the container where all the complexity of being a man can be held, stirred and cooked into a most nourishing soup.

Delia Willson: I asked if I could speak with some of the men who have participated in the men's retreats. Here is what three had to say.

ANONYMOUS, 36, FATHER OF 2

Q: You have been participating in the men's retreats for a couple of years now. What has led you to continue?

A: I am the type of person who really wants to explore

my emotional depths. The process of the men's group builds upon itself over time; trust develops. One or two meetings wouldn't be enough.

Q: To what sort of depths have you been opened?

A: To the depths of my true desires, which I felt cut off from before.

Q: Would you say more about these desires?

A: All desires. Like, "What do I want to do with my life?" My deep purpose. But even more specifically, sexual desire. Before the men's work I couldn't access any of my true desires. I did what I expected myself to do, based on only a partial picture of who I was. I could "do" things in the world, but I never felt as if I was strongly directing those things. Now I "do" with a purpose that comes deep from within. I also was not what I would have considered a sexual person. For the most part it wasn't that important for me. Now for me sexual desire is a strong part of who I am. I not only feel the desire more, but I also specifically desire (and love) my wife more as a result. I have the drive, the confidence to ask her to join me in greater intimacy both through eye contact and sex. As I see it, a rising tide raises all ships.

Q: What was it about being in a men's group that raised your sexual desire for your wife?

A: Sexuality as a topic of conversation was introduced early within the group. Then a movie on sacred sexuality was shown. Seeing this together in the presence of other men had an impact on me, perhaps because it was very explicit, the expressions of sexuality, and it was watched and discussed with frankness and great respect. And then there was exposure to readings on the topic. But the film was the primary catalyst, as it clearly showed the depth of physical and spiritual intimacy that could be shared between me and my wife. I had never realized how great the potential is. It took me over a year to show my wife the film – I was still overcoming my fear and reserve – but when I did she was very open to the idea of pursuing those depths with me.

Q: Has the opening of your sexuality facilitated an opening of your creativity in other parts of your life?

A: Yes. At the same time that I have greater access to my sexual desires, I feel that I now know what I desire in my work, spirituality, and family life. I have found a deep purpose in a social justice project in the world. I have developed a regular and ever deepening meditation practice, thanks to the introduction of skills and methods in the group. I have come to experience how

these simple practices of relaxation and concentration give me deeply satisfying feelings. And lastly I have stopped my use of anti-depressants that I started after the birth of my first son. When I first became a father I was shocked at how the demands of caring for my son brought up great rage within me, and so I started using medication to quell it, but it also dampened my feelings and creativity. The men's work led me to pursue my deeper desires, those underneath the anger and rage. A lot of this had to do with releasing grief and being able to explore my anger in a safe setting.

ANONYMOUS, 42, FATHER OF FOUR

Q: You have been involved in the men's work for two years. What keeps you coming?

A: There are two reasons I find myself continually drawn back into the men's group. One is that there is no other place or setting where I am so stimulated on so many levels and brought to such awareness of myself than in these group retreats. To watch and listen to another man express and display his raw emotions so freely in a circle of other supportive men is quite astounding to witness; it never gets old and certainly is not boring. The second thing that keeps me coming back is the relationships that I have formed inside the group. Nowhere in my life, not on the baseball field, where I played through college, the golf course, where I spent countless hours with other men including my father, or even in the church growing up as a child and as a young adult, have I ever come into relationship with other men on such an intimate level. I simply wasn't aware that it was something I'd ever want or enjoy and now I see that I can't really live without it.

Q: Would you describe one of your most memorable experiences in the group?

A: I remember sitting in the first group listening to another man share his story of physical violence that had been perpetrated against him as a child and also violence that he had committed against his own children. Something inside of me just about exploded upon listening to this story. I was almost at a point of not being able to contain myself when finally I was asked to come to the center of the circle and to show the group what I was feeling inside of me in that moment. I was scared and relieved at the same time. I came forward and just exploded from the center by yelling and screaming and swinging my arms about to the point of almost complete exhaustion. All of this was done inside the circle of men who at some point stood to provide what seemed to be a container for my violent outburst. As the anger began to diminish and I was exhausted and down on the floor, I noticed Len had come inside

of the circle and was seated on the floor with his eyes firmly planted on me, holding me in a gentle way and he said, "Whatever you want David" and at that I collapsed into his arms and cried the deepest tears I have ever known and without knowledge as to what I was crying about and without fear and loving that this man could hold me so strongly and tenderly. I'll never forget that moment.

Q: How do you take this back with you, to your home, your work, your wife, your children? What effect does it have on you later?

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A: I think it depends on your way of working with what you get. It's different for everybody; in that some might only have an experience that affects them for a short period of time, others might have an opening that causes them to really begin to explore things in their lives they had never considered. I generally take in as much as I possibly can and find myself going back to it in my mind almost daily. It might be an attitude that I saw in another man over the weekend that shows up for me in someone in the office, and in knowing the background of the man from the retreat this knowledge helps me to see that there is something behind the attitude other than what is showing up in the moment. I take qualities of the men I admire in the group, their courage, kindness, consideration, saviness and really try to live those attitudes and use them to guide me when I get frustrated, lost, confused, or become over demanding of myself. I also am always in a better state of mind, seem to have much more to offer those I love, and find it much easier to open up to and share myself with them after returning from a men's group. Overall, I just feel more open, loving, and real.

Q: What's the hardest part about this way of working, with other men?

A: For me one of the hardest parts is not knowing just how to be. That is, this type of “work” is not something that is modeled for boys and men in our culture. In no place do we get any sort of initiation into this type of honest communication. Outwardly, I am a successful man, but a lot of the time, especially in this group, I feel like an awkward teenager who is trying to figure out what to do with my hands while standing next to a beautiful girl – “Should I put them in my pockets? Behind my back? Or just hold them together?” When I finally decide “what the hell!” and just go for it and embrace the “work” everything just sort of flows. This “jumping” is the hardest part for me.

Q: And what has been the most fun?

A: Without a doubt the most fun has been watching the other men grow into themselves. That is, we are all awkward in our own ways and yet we are also so refined in our own special ways. Witnessing and being a part of another man coming into the realization of his own unique beauty is really something to behold, really there’s not much I’ve experienced, besides the birth of my own children that matches this. And what’s so damn neat about it is that it’s happening for you at the same time.

ANONYMOUS, 50, FATHER OF THREE

Q: What was one of the strongest experiences you have had in men’s group?

A: By far it was when I had my father, who’s 81, and my son, 19; attend one of our weekend retreats.

Q: What happened that made this experience so strong for you?

A: I felt safe within the group to speak to my father about hurtful experiences, the violence I had experienced at his hand, and having my son witness this exchange, along with other men; this was terribly powerful, for my father as well.

Q: So, being in the presence of other men somehow made it easier for you to approach your father?

A: It also made it feel more authentic – being witnessed by a group of men. And I believe it was powerful for many of the men watching.

Q: Some of the other men I have spoken with have mentioned how tearful and moved all of you were by this exchange. How do you think your father was affected?

A: I don’t know for certain. He surely was present in every word I spoke that day, and throughout the weekend.

Q: What led you to invite your father and son? What had gone on in your early life, for example, that still felt unresolved between you?

A: My expression was incomplete. I had not faced him directly enough about the physical abuse. But not only that, also the oppressive atmosphere we lived under; not being able to speak openly; undue restraint and fear. He had never heard from me as an adult just how hard it all was.

Witnessing and being a part of another man coming into the realization of his own unique beauty is really something to behold, really there’s not much I’ve experienced, besides the birth of my own children that matches this.

Q: Was this the first time you had spoken to him about these things?

A: No, I had finally broken my silence eight months prior, at age 49. Then I had a family meeting with my three sisters, father and mother some time after that.

Q: But some how you wanted more?

A: I wanted my father and son to experience just how authentic conversation could be, like we have in the men’s group. And I felt a greater level of completion having other men witness my complaints as well as my expression of love to my father.

Q: Was this difficult to do?

A: Very. I was shaking with fear.

Q: What made you press on? I’m sure your father must have been shaking as well, whether he showed it or not...

A: I wanted to tear off the veil and finally open the wound so that it could heal for both of us.

Q: What were you most afraid of?

A: Seeming foolish and hurting my father.

Q: Hurting your father?

A: Yes. Embarrassing him.

Q: And did that happen?

A: I don't believe so.

Q: How did your father respond?

A: He spoke of what it was like in his life during those early days, and he said that he knew that an apology was not enough. He restated his love for me. Clearly. This was important; he didn't shirk away from the experience. It seemed helpful and relieving to him. It seemed to unburden him; it did unburden him; to see how other men responded to us that day.

My hopes have been that this will help break the cycle; that I have done something to change what has been handed down for many generations before me.

Q: And for you? You did what was extremely difficult; facing the man you had probably feared the most in your life. What has been the effect? Are you as afraid?

A: No. My relationship now is more settled and honest. In the meeting I wept, and I asked my father to hold me.

Q: Did he?

A: Yes. He really held me. And then the other men gathered around the two of us, my son, too. It was very healing.

Q: So, this is what you meant by having witnesses?

A: Yes. And each of the men had their own take on what happened. Some of the fathers of men in the group had already passed, and others had difficult relationships such that they couldn't conceive of their fathers being present like this.

Q: But they all wanted it?

A: Yes. And one man started bringing his father from out of state to the group shortly thereafter.

Q: Anything else you want to say?

A: It was very important to have my son there, the three generations of us. He could see what had happened to me in some way, and how it was that I passed some of this violence on towards him. I think more happened than what was even spoken that day, just feeling and seeing this open demonstration of honesty, love. My hopes have been that this will help break the cycle; that I have done something to change what has been handed down for many generations before me.

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You can learn more about men's work through Len Worley at his web site: www.VisionaryQuest.org or by calling 434 953-5399.