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***Boys and violence.
Time to change the script.
A role for workers with youth.***

**A paper by Peter Slattery,
for the Youth Action and Policy Association New South Wales.
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I was working with boys and men in 1997 in relation to the troubles that beset them and the dreams they dreamed, and I continue to do this work in 2006. I am also aware that many of the boys I knew then I know now as fine young men. So it seemed timely to review what I wrote and see if what I thought then I still think now. The short answer is, yes I do. It seems as relevant now as it did then. If we would like boys to grow up to be good men, we need to look for the best in them and help it emerge. And yes I continue to say that we must acknowledge the horrors that some men have visited upon the world and that some men continue to, and yet not be stopped by this reality from seeking the best in our young men and seeing them as fine, compassionate, communicative human beings. Perhaps one difference between 1997 and 2006, is that we now have more research that tells us that having high and realistic expectations of young people is one of the ingredients that helps build resilience; that is, growing strong and bouncing back from the hard times of life. So here is this paper with the occasional changed word and added comment.

What's in a name?

'All things are defined by names. Change the name, and you change the thing'¹. Or so says Terry Pratchett. But perhaps a fantasy writer isn't the most reliable of sources to quote? Then again, perhaps a fantasy world is just where we need to look. To a place where all manner of things is possible; where things only imagined, take on substance. Violence and maleness have been linked across history. Is the link inevitable?

I choose to believe that men are not inevitably violent. I choose also to believe, that even if it is the case that some, or even all, males, have some physiological predisposition to aggression, or violence; this tendency is open to choice and control. My choice of belief is based on the evidence of the significant number of men, past and present, who were not/are not, violent. It is also supported by my own experience of working with boys who have been violent, and who, when given the opportunity, are not only non-violent, but sensitive, caring, and compassionate.

My point is a simple one in its saying, though somewhat more difficult in implementation. And it is this. If we keep on describing boys to themselves as violent, out-of-touch with their feelings, unable to express emotion; then this is indeed what they will be. If we would like boys to be different, we need to present boys to themselves in new ways. Describing boys to themselves as rapists and murderers is unlikely to win their affection, nor is it likely to engage them into a process of exploration as to how men/boys are, and might be, in our society. There is some truth to the old idea of the 'self-fulfilling prophecy. And the research on resilience is telling us clearly now that having expectations which are positive, high and realistic tend to bring out the best in people. So expectations can work positively as well as negatively, and if we expect the best from boys we may just get it. Australia 1997 was a good time and place to be expecting this of boys. And so is today, 2006.

Trapping boys into a no-change mode

Let me tell you a brief story which I was told by a high school teacher. A school was holding a 'personal development' day for students. One of the adult speakers read some passages from a book written earlier this century. The book was about the role of women in society and was classically sexist, and demeaning to women. The speaker said to the boys: 'You probably agree with this.' (A great example of expecting the worst!) The boys were demeaned; trapped into being young sexists by this person's view of them. The teacher telling me the story, to their great credit, was outraged. In my experience, alienation and insult have never been useful educational techniques. They certainly do not lead to change. The world offers only too many opportunities for boys to be dominant and uncaring, even violent. We can respond by creating as many opportunities as possible for boys to be other than this.

New descriptions go hand-in-hand with acknowledging reality:

New descriptions of what it is to be male need to go hand in hand with a recognition of certain tragic and horrific realities. Throughout history, and so it is today, males have been the ones overwhelmingly responsible for the violence in the world. This reality has

¹Pratchett Terry. 1989. 'Pyramids' Corgi. 100

to be acknowledged without it becoming a prescription for the future. Nor can the tragedy of this weigh us down so that we are immobilised.

A story. Boys gone good

Here is a story of a group of young men. They are a class of Year 11 students in an all boys' school. They are 16 or 17 years old. There has been violence in the school. Teachers have been physically intimidated by groups of boys in the playground. Similar group tactics have been used against police in the area. A day has been organised at the school where police are speaking to the boys about domestic violence. I have been asked to run a group on 'masculinity' and I have invited a male colleague who has a theatre background to come and run the workshop with me. Early in the group a boy makes a joke about rape. Some boys laugh. I say that it is really important to have a sense of humour about such a horrific act. Humour helps us deal with dreadful realities. And I don't believe for a second that the boys think that rape is okay. They say, seriously, that they don't. It might have been tempting to 'smack' the boy for his comment but this would drive him out of the process. And I tell this story here not to demonstrate how clever I can be in a group process but to comment on the importance of keeping that boy and those who laughed, engaged with the group process while simultaneously creating a connection with the seriousness of the topic. Because it is here that beliefs can be discussed, ideas explored, new ways of being male suggested and considered.

A little into the group, we ask if there is anyone prepared to take a risk. We guarantee to look after them. We do some very physical activities. The activities are energetic and light-hearted. I ask if anyone is prepared to take a different sort of risk. I would like to interview someone. I promise not to intentionally ask anything embarrassing; and of course the person is in charge of how they respond. A boy steps forward. The first question is to ask if there is anyone present who the boy is friends with; someone who knows him well; someone he trusts, and who trusts him. He nominates a boy who I also invite to be interviewed. I ask if it's okay if I interview them about each other, and they agree that this would be fine. We then proceed to gently explore their relationship. I ask one boy to tell us about his friend. What are his qualities as a person. 'He's kind', is one of the replies. I check with the boy. He quietly and in a slightly bemused way, agrees that he is. I return to his friend with the question: 'If you were feeling bad, feeling upset; what is there about ...that you know you could rely on? What would he offer you?' The reply comes: 'I could talk to him.' I check with the friend. Yes, he could be relied on for this. We reverse the process and interview the other boy in a similar way. We thank the boys, ask if there is anything they would like to add. They sit down. There is a strange moment here, a moment of almost surprised glee. The boys have been somewhere they don't usually go. They have said things usually left unsaid. And they have spoken in ways not often used. While the questions did not come from them, what was said, and how it was said, was indeed their's. And they felt this.

I have no doubt that the same boys are able to present many aspects of themselves. Some of these aspects may well be terrifying. Yet when given an opportunity other than this, they take it. And again, I tell this story not to say what fine workers my colleague and I are, but to comment on the capacity of boys to be different from the way they usually are, when given a chance.

Of course, everyone knows that a violent person can still be nice. But this didn't look like a case of the just showing their 'good side.' They actually experienced themselves, and each other, in an unusual, and perhaps even unexpected, way. Such experiences can start to create new possibilities for people, as to how they might travel through the world and interact with it. I don't become too misty-eyed and romantic about the significance of such an event. At the same time, I do regard it, as a small, and yet still meaningful experience for them, of what it's like to be different.

And this discussion of 'difference' brings me to the second reason I tell this story. Which is to comment on the importance and power of approaching boys in intriguing and unusual ways, and in ways which assume the best of them. In ways that assume boys do have feeling and they can articulate them if the opportunity is presented to them. Boys need to be an active part of processes, not punished and excluded from them. These boys had an experience of being 'not as they usually are', and such an experience, challenges the inevitability that things have to continue to be the way they are; it suggests that the future is open to influence. The more often boys have such experiences, the more likely they are to be able to consider multiple futures and multiple ways of being in the world.

An important moment-an opportunity

I cannot generalise these comments to the world, so I will confine my comments to the context within which I work and of which I have some knowledge; Australia 1997, and now also the year 2006. Still an imperfect place, and yet there have been some changes over the years. Girls and boys do not have the same views as they did 20 years ago.

We are at an important moment and need to be careful that the gains made are not corrupted. We do not need a society where women feel 'empowered' to be violent, and men are entitled to become sexual objects. I hear many more reports these days of young women being violent to each other and their parents; boys are increasingly starting to obsess over their appearances; more and more advertising images of men as sexual objects are appearing. Or am I misreading these signs? It would be comforting to think that I am. And yet I suspect I am not. I feel we have a moment of somewhat 'altered awareness' which provides an opportunity.

This opportunity is fragile. Now in the year 2006, there seems to be an increased awareness and fear of paedophilia. And this behaviour, which is the abuse of power, is sometimes quite wrongly and disturbingly mixed up in some people's minds with homosexuality, which is simply one form of sexuality and has nothing to do with paedophilia. Homosexuality is also associated with sensitivity and softness. So I am seeing in my work now a direct line in some people's minds: softness equals being gay equals being a paedophile. And this is very disturbing. Just when we seemed to be making some gains as a society in terms of considering alternative ways for men and boys to be, we have these messed up associations driving boys back into thinking they have to be tough and macho to be 'real men.'

At the same time and more encouragingly, my experience of working with adolescents, both female and male, is that there has been a change over the past decade or so, leading up to 2006. Girls assume they have rights, they assume they have choices.

This 'altered consciousness' is manifested quite differently within different cultures in Australia; and yet what is shared is a sense that females are not second-class citizens; that they are entitled to participate fully in their society.

I know that not all boys share these changes. Sexism is alive and well in many forms. This does not surprise me. What is so delightful, is that there have been advances in spite of this sexism. Many boys, have taken on board new perspectives. Many boys I speak with, feel it is not okay for physical power to play a part in a relationship. Many boys are aware of, and have respect for, forms of speech and action which girls find offensive. They believe, as young women do, that mutuality and a sense of democracy are valuable fundamentals in relationships.

Some boys too have been affected by descriptions of males as violent, out of touch with their feelings, and unable to express them. Many boys are also increasingly aware of the horrors men have perpetrated throughout history and across the modern world. An awareness of being held responsible for multiple horrors, past and present, can leave boys feeling hurt, despised, powerless, and angry. This is an extremely uncomfortable and volatile constellation of emotions. We need to work with these aspects of awareness, to create opportunities for new perceptions about themselves; about personal (even intimate) relationships, and about ways of relating to the wider world.

Creating a dangerous place for boys

We are at a time of possibility. One possibility is very disturbing. If boys are indeed connecting with a sense of the horror of the actions of some men; and if they are connecting with a sense that our society is not as fair and just as it might be; and if they are connecting with a sense that they are somehow to blame for this and this is coupled with an unclear sense of the place of youth in our society; one which for some, is confused and uncertain; and they are adolescent, still a time of challenge and exploration; and if they feel alienated and insulted; and there is a powerful and developing international youth culture, parts of which (and I stress 'parts'), have strong elements of an 'in-ya-face' aggression...then we create a place for young men which is very dangerous for them; and for everyone else.

Inadvertently getting it wrong

Sometimes it seems we also just inadvertently get it wrong. Sometimes, following the principle of 'starting where they are at', health promotional or educational approaches cast males and females in traditional roles. When I wrote this article in 1997 there was a poster aimed at encouraging boys to use condoms, and used an image of a male sporting hero, shaping up in a traditional fighting stance. Is there an inadvertent encouragement for males to 'be tough; or even to fight? There were billboards aimed at encouraging safer alcohol use, and showed boys fighting, and yet girls caring for each other. More recently I have seen Comic-type information intended by its style to attract young people, showing males and females in traditional uneven stereotypical roles. Clearly the intention is to appeal to young women and men, in terms of who they are, and encourage them to be more thoughtful about their drinking; and yet I sometimes wonder if such images support, rather than challenge, the gender status quo. It is 2006 and we need to be attending to what can be quiet and accidental maintenance of trapping us into undemocratic roles.

Responsibility or blame?

Young men need to be held accountable for those aspects of their lives over which they have some control. They have no control over the actions of men throughout history; they usually have no control over the actions of other men in the world today; nor do they have control over the existence of the wider social context in which they live their lives. They do have some control over their own actions; they do have some control over their responses to the actions of those close to them; and they do have some say about the extent to which they participate in, or challenge, the continuation of the wider society of which they are a part.

The difference between 'it's your responsibility' and 'it's your fault' can be as subtle as a tone of voice. Boys cannot be held responsible that they are born into a sexist discriminatory world; nor that they are exposed to conditioning which encourages aggression and dominance by males. I have no illusions about the 'wider frame' of our society; and the work that our institutions and structures need in terms of their effects on the development of all of us as humans. But it is not the scope of this paper to explore this wider change, but to comment on how we, as workers with youth, might proceed within it. And in so doing, it is important that we do not fit boys against formidable forces and leave them with 'it's your choice.' Our interventions, hopes and offers, need equal doses of optimism and realism. I believe there have been changes in our society. I believe also that boys, despite powerful forces to the contrary, can be gentle and noble. It is with both with a sense of optimistic realism that we can expect boys to take responsibility in their choices of action, both in relation to themselves and to the wider world.

Getting it right

I have made some comments about how we can get it wrong. I would also like to offer a comment on what might we might do, that could be useful.

A need for new language; description; images

Both in the wider context of society and in terms of the more personal contexts of youth work, education or counselling; we need to find and present language and images which challenge traditional associations of men and violence. This means a careful integration of the acknowledgment of the violence men have done and do, and yet which challenges the inevitability of the connection.

The term 'male violence' suggests that violence is somehow part of being male. The link between being male and being violent needs to be challenged as being inevitable. Changing language is part of this. Our language still needs to develop in this area, but as an alternative; the phrase 'the violence that men do', might be a start. It continues to locate responsibility with those who act violently, but does not accept the inevitable connection between violence and being male.

To quote again from fantasy: 'Everything that was magic was...a way of describing the world in words it couldn't ignore.'²

²Pratchett Terry. 1989 'Pyramids' Corgi. 269

Men working with boys

I feel no concern that women/girls are involved in working with boys. On the contrary. Dialogue and exchange across the sexes, is important. At the same time, it is particularly important that adult women do not become the ones to sort out what men have done. It is important that adult men are actively involved in shaping the future of 'maleness.' There is a men's movement, parts of which sometimes seem foolish, parts of which are sometimes resentful, parts of which are sometimes angry, and there are also parts of which are concerned and thoughtful. We need men taking action at all levels.

I mentioned earlier the confusing and mistaken blending of paedophilia and gayness. Men expressing interest in working with boys have in the past been called 'poofs.' The term 'paedophile' is now being used as an alternative insult. But this cannot be a deterrent. There has never been anything wrong with being a 'poof'; whereas paedophilia is abuse of another person, and there is certainly nothing wrong with good men working with boys. We now have an opportunity to draw an incredibly important distinction. We also have an opportunity in the current climate, to work with boys to explore the meanings of expressions of concern, compassion and affection between males. What can be seen as an impediment to the development of increasingly caring and affectionate relationships between males, can be greeted as an opportunity for exploration of such relationships.

Encouraging responsibility

We need to make sure we do not blame boys for things beyond their control, but we do need to invite them to be responsible for the things within their sphere of influence, both in relation to themselves and others. Asking boys to be responsible for themselves can sometimes look as if we are asking them to take on the world; to alienate themselves from family and friends. We need to acknowledge the powerful influences which shape the lives of boys and men. Males no less than females, are subject to conditioning. Our offers in this area need to be realistic and the boys well supported in their endeavours.

Do not ask boys to be what they are not

This should not be read as: 'boys will be boys', and all the terror which this might imply. But at times, some boys may well be boisterous and physical. They may need to make a lot of noise and bump into things. They may even need to be adversarial and competitive. It doesn't matter whether we like these characteristics or not. For some boys, they may simply be a reality. But we might need some inventive ways in which they can be present without the outcome necessarily being bloody or unpleasant.

Valuing boys and men

We need to value what men have done well and nobly throughout history, as well as acknowledging the nightmares. This does not mean aggrandising abominable acts, but seeking out and acknowledging, the things men have contributed to the world.

It is fundamental, but to work with boys, you must like boys. It is not enough to want to change them. Any process is going to be massively coloured by a thousand nuances of language; by the words chosen; a tone of voice; a raised eyebrow. Working with boys does not mean liking everything they do; nor who all of them are as individuals; but it does mean having a fundamental regard for their humanity.

Where to focus

The focus of work needs to be on creating opportunities for boys to be different, not focussing on their shortcomings and less attractive qualities. The focus needs to be on how things might be, and less on how they are. And with this focus, we need to ensure that when boys are sensitive, compassionate, emotional, we respond to them with respect and encouragement and acknowledge that these are reasonable ways for males to be in the world.

Creativity

With a focus more on how things might be, we need to come at things in new ways. Develop new images. Find descriptions which embrace realities while offering new possibilities. There are various forms of therapy which look for 'news of difference', a 'second description'; a 'new script'. This seems a useful lesson. A constant focus on newness and difference, and how to bring it about; may just result in a shift.

It would help considerably if we established images of males; in newspapers, on television, in films and advertisements, in our homes and everyday lives, which are more positive, and inventive, and which portray all the qualities of which this paper has spoken. Women brought about changes like these for females years ago, challenging the inevitability of the role of women in society. Men can learn from this.

A last word for now

All that I have said has implications for the big picture as well as the smaller one that most of us find ourselves dealing with. And I know that without shifts in the big picture, work in the smaller one is difficult. But I take hope firstly from the fact that despite some serious work ahead of us, the big picture seems to have improved over the past 20 years. Not in every way; not for all people; and certainly not in all places. The world abounds with unthinkable tragedy. And yet in the midst of all this...

Yes, this is a struggle. Yes, there are multiple examples in the world of the difficulty of bringing about such a change. Yes, it is a formidable challenge. Yes, the factors which invite males to be violent are powerful. But why should any of this, do anything other than encourage us to act quickly, energetically and creatively. My most favourite quote comes from an old friend in Melbourne: 'If you give people enough rope...they'll skip.'

Peter Slattery 21.1.97 Revised September 2006