

MENAGE A TRIOS

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The title perhaps provokes a number of interesting thoughts and is not to be confused with three people eating a cheese: 'fromage a trios'. As I did very poorly in my High School French I can, with some measure of ignorance, flirt with this title. Perhaps it could mean 'Men age three times faster', or it is the French version of a Tennessee Williams play about a "Glass Managerie". Its inspiration, in fact, comes from the French film "Trios Homme et L'enfant". A rather gaudy American named 'Holly Wood' borrowed the idea and literally and figuratively produced, so to speak, "Three Men and a Baby".

It strikes me that the underpinning, the whole basis of the movie, its 'raison d'être' to again offer my insult to the French language, is the plot that it takes three men who are qualified or achieving in their professional lives to collectively care for one baby. The competencies these men have in their other life roles do not translate to competencies in a fathering or parenting role. The whole basis of the gag is lost if the movie were to have been called "Three Women and a Baby". It would be assumed that three women would not only be enough for one baby but that three women might be too much mothering and parenting for one baby.

The "Wizard of Oz" movie classic provides a very similar plot and parallels many of the gender assumptions and traditions portrayed in "Three Men and a Baby". Dorothy, in her quest to find the 'wonderful wizard of Oz' collects, as her traveling companions, a Scarecrow, a Tinman and a 'cowardly Lion'. One in search of brains, one in search of a heart and the other in search of courage. These three males are all less than adequate. All feel less than complete. Even the wizard, we and Dorothy discover, is not so wonderful. Not so powerful, nor heroic.

Tony Bradman in his book "The Essential Father" states that, for him,

Mary Poppins summed up almost everything I wanted to say ...about fatherhood (1985, p.6)

According to Bradman, Mr. Banks, the father in the story had,

A road to Damascus insight which transformed him from a distant Victorian father to one who decides he doesn't care about his job... and rather, dedicates himself to having fun with his children and being happy (1985, p.6)

Mary Poppins, by personality and modelling of relationships is responsible for the marked changes in values, priorities and performance as a parent, in Mr. Banks. She provokes, in him, a need to re-appraise his roles, responsibilities and relationships.

In the Counselling section of the Family Court it is, in the overwhelming majority of cases the fact that wives leave husbands; girlfriends leave boyfriends; women leave men. The script, as I have heard it a thousand times, is-

(Eileen)

Woman: "Darling this is a problem. Can we talk about it? Sort it out?"

(Rod)

Man: "It will sort itself out. It will be alright. Don't worry about it".

Going

(Eileen)

Woman: "This really concern me. We need to get some help. Talk to someone. Please?"

(Rod)

Man: "There's no need to go on about it. It's not that bad. Leave it alone"

Going

(Noleene)

Woman: "I can't take this anymore. I've had enough. I'm leaving!".

(Russell)

Man: "Wait. Let's talk about it. This is so sudden. Why didn't you tell me that's how you felt. Let's get some help. Go somewhere".

Gone

(Noleene)

Woman: "It's too late".

(Neil)

Man: "No. I can change. Just give me a chance".

Often, for the scarecrows, tinmen and lions that I have seen the problem is, and commenced, because of separation. For them the problem is being separated. Rejected. Cast adrift. For the Dorothies it, the problem, has been in existence long before the physical separation. It occurred during the emotional, psychological and sexual separations. It, the problem, was the relationship. From this we might extrapolate that not only do three men not manage a baby, or that Dorothy is encumbered with less than adequate or whole traveling companions, but that many women cannot rely on the man in their lives to jointly be aware of and maintain their relationships.

Many women complain that their husband or partner is more like another child to whom they provide care rather than an equal contributing partner. That he lacks emotional warmth (tinman), the awareness of and insights into the relationship dynamics (scarecrow) and or the courage to face their connectedness to relationship problems and hence empower themselves to contribute to solutions (lion).

A comparatively recent movie called “Groundhog Day” illustrates some of the stuckness of men and why it might be that women mourn a lost relationship and men replace a lost relationship. Men remarry more often than do women. In “Groundhog Day” the lead character is condemned, by an act of nature, to relive the same day of his life over and over again. He has the same interactions with the same people, dealing with the same issues. The change is in how the main character behaves and how that impacts upon other people and shapes their responses. After numerous miscommunications and conflicts the ‘hero’ develops some insights, makes adjustments to his behaviour which are congruent with his genuine feelings and, at last, has a meaningful relationship develop with the movie’s love interest. His scarecrow has insights, his tinman follows genuine feelings and he follows through with the courage of his convictions. Unlike Mr. Banks in “Mary Poppins” the character in “Groundhog Day” is self taught and self changed.

In a counselling session with one couple they were able to describe themselves in very graphic ways. Or rather, she was able to articulate her criticisms and observations of him while he was able, on cue, to grunt agreement to her recounting of his criticisms of her. She described him as being cold, distant and hard to get close to. That she had to chip away at him and yet could never reach his centre. She offered his criticisms of her as being that she cries a lot, is all over him when he needs space, floods him with talk and feelings and is hard to contain. As I paraphrased

these descriptions a clear visual image formed in my head. Bravely, or stupidly, I shared with the couple the image of the 'ice cube and the puddle'. I explained that, in my view, while both were of the same core material they were of contrasting textures, forms and appearance.

Gray talks of the differences between men and women as being that "Men are from Mars and Women are from Venus" (1992). This populist book offers, in its title, a clear illustration of gender differences. The title, in imagery, is a postage stamp which cogently and quickly tells us where the letter, or in this case the book, is coming from.

I would offer an alternate metaphor because planets never, or only in extreme circumstances, have contact with each other. I propose that we return to the metaphor of the 'ice cube and the puddle' and to Earth. The Earth is, as we know, approximately 80% water and 20% land. The human body, likewise, is largely a 'body of water'. I suggest that women, like mother earth, cover the planet and that men, like ice-bergs, move through the waters. Also, like ice-bergs, only a small proportion of their mass is visible to the eye with most hidden 'neath the waves (or for some men hidden 'neath the waist). Through 'father time' and interaction with the waters some ice-bergs merge with the seas and oceans returning to their earlier forms.

The synchronicity of this proposition is that in human conception and gender assignment all fetuses are initially female. According to Money (1981) only through mullerian inhibiting substance (MIS) and androgen do some babies take on their maleness. Similarly, each male child must undertake a gender identity task which separates him from his mother in order to achieve a sense of maleness. It is an essential development task. The little puddle separates from the larger body of water and becomes an ice-cube.

Time, age, wisdom and insight will decide whether he becomes a separate iceberg. Perhaps we could christen him Thor. Drawing on Erikson's (1963) life stages it seems that as the man grows older he develops a greater capacity to look inward. To commence an internal journey. The pursuit of generativity rather than frozen stagnation. The ice-berg's journey.

Until the time that each man reaches the need to undertake an internal journey to the self it is often the case that he is energetically pursuing an external journey, often away from the self. That is a man defining himself by what he does rather than who he is. By the doing rather than the being.

Perhaps, the poem by Michael Leunig entitled, “A Dusty Little Swag” (1992, p.32) captures the poverty of internal life that many men condemn themselves and their sons to as they strive in the corporate, academic and sporting spheres.

All my father left me
Was a dusty little swag
And a pair of tiny booties
In a crumpled paper bag
And he left me in confusion
And he left me in despair
And he left the swag and booties
For the walk to God knows where.

This reference to swag and booties, or boots, reminds me of my participation in a panel on ‘Men’s issues’ with a colleague named Chris Lobsinger. Chris explained, in his North Dakota accent, that he had not previously participated in such functions as a ‘men’ but only as a ‘man’. He clarified this by recalling that he held boyhood visions of manly things as being like a John Wayne cowboy image. Independent, self sufficient. His own man. Alone. Walking and dying with his boots on. That many things about being a man scripted a separateness including separateness from others and from parts of the self.

Whilst Michael Leunig is a Melbourne Cartoonist and would be poet and Chris Lobsinger is a North Dakota Social Worker and could be cowboy I sensed that both men, or each man separately, had managed to describe something similar. Albeit that each man had used humour the levity of their articulations and imagery served to more clearly illuminate a sad insight into man and men.

So as to be perfectly clear however, I again borrow from Leunig (1992, .3),

LIFE

When life goes by so quickly
That you feel your just a blur
Then mumble vaguely to yourself
Sort of “umm...umm...errr...”

If life were to go by so quickly and to be just a blur then it may be sufficient for many men to be more articulate than “umm...ummm...err”. A Separation or divorce however impacts so forcibly in a life, or lives, that the stupor of “umm and err” may be lifted.

A research report on domestic homicide by Elizabeth Hore, Janne Gibson and Sophy Bordow of the Family Court (1996) examines the behaviour of some men at separation. It proposes certain findings and offers some case examples. This led me to construct Questionnaires by which I could hear from men, and their children, who had not engaged in such drastic behaviour but who had been through separation.

In brief, the report on domestic homicide found that there is a high risk of violence and spousal homicide where;

The relationship –

- Has large age disparity between partners and is a short duration relationship;
- Where step-children are present;
- Where there is conflict over children and/or property;
- Where the separation is initiated by the woman.

The man –

- Presents with low self esteem;
- Is emotionally dependent;
- Operates with jealousy;
- A sense of possession;
- Need for control.

Other variables are –

- Poverty - higher proportion of domestic violence amongst unemployed.
- Rural - higher rate of rural to city homicide, especially amongst aboriginal communities.

Weapons - 65% to 70% of spousal homicides involved guns – used by men.
Women tend to use knives.

Race - disproportionate representation of overseas born and aboriginal.

Durkheim in 1987 is said to have offered that ‘while family life has a moderating effect on suicide it stimulates murder’.

The study of domestic homicide is however a study of some men which postulates, albeit with, I’m sure, validity and reliability, what some men do. I was interested to hear from separating men of less extreme action and to gain receipt of their thoughts and feelings in relation to being fathers.

I was also interested in what their children’s thoughts and feelings were.

Listening if you will to a number of Bill Murrays on their Groundhog Days. Overall the results found that –

For men

1. They define themselves as role models, heads of families, leaders, protectors, providers. Themes of task specific functions rather than nurturers.
2. They describe their own fathers as being emotionally distant, authoritarian, punitive, disciplinarians. Similar to their own self-descriptions but with negative adjectives.
3. These men delineate between themselves and their wives as that they, the men, have the ultimate responsibility for the financial, safety and other needs of their children and families. This is the expectation that is either self or other imposed. A sense of being the vigilant, protective carer.
4. Many of the men acknowledge having undertaken a radical shift in values and lifestyles post separation with a de-emphasising of work and a discovery/rediscovery of parenthood.

The children give feedback of their experiences of their fathers as:

1. They concur with their father's view that he is protector, mentor, role model, guide.
2. As for the fathers, the children differentiate between mothers and fathers in terms that can be encapsulated in mothers are nurturers and fathers are protectors/providers.
3. The children also recognize the "born again father" shift post-separation. While younger children report positively on physically and emotionally available fathers some teens report that at the time they are trying to individuate their father is zealously keen to offer his availability.

It would seem that the traditional gender roles remain firmly fixed. Men on the yellow brick road in Oz are protector providers. In the journey they are corporate lions but at separation they make emotional connection (tinman) and form insight (the scarecrow). Nurturers rather than doers that, like Mr Banks in Mary Poppins, are transformed from "distant Victorian fathers to ones who care less about their jobs and more about being happy".

As Bordow et al in the report on domestic homicide propose the Family "Court ... is committed to protect victims of family violence who use the Court's services.." (1996: p46). Each man, or men collectively, must take responsibility for violence and for life choices which minimize personal and familial roles. No systems approach with relationship education, men's groups, separation groups and counselling can, in effect, change men. Counselling cannot be a Mary Poppins for men.

Ultimately, in order to protect children in separating families from the Samson reaction (if I'm going down I'm taking them – wife and children – with me) each man must examine his values, attitudes and relationships. Otherwise he condemns himself (and his sons) to endless repeats of Groundhog Day.

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ABSTRACT

For Mr Lawrie White

A/President QAFT

Menage a trois

Menage a trois is an examination of cultural and relationship hegemony regarding men and male competencies in the life roles of parenting and partnering using the raw material of film. Films such as 'Three Men & A Baby', 'Groundhog Day', 'Multiplicity', 'The Wizard of Oz' and 'Mary Poppins' are used to exemplify this hegemony.

The role that relationship breakdown and separation play in providing some men with a 'born again' experience in valuing their familial and other relationships is explored. The role of relationship breakdown and separation in other men who negatively act out their experience of separation and conflict by the use of violence and killing is also identified and described.

Some of the material shares common threads with a presentation to the 1998 National Family Therapy Conference, entitled 'Shylock is not Heartless' which was published in the Aust. & N.Z. Journal of Fam. Therapy Vol. 19 No.3 1998.

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