

Excerpt from Richard Rohr's talk, "The Men's Movement: Homoeroticism and Homophobia," New Ways Ministry Symposium IV, March 7-9, 1997. Tape by Chesapeake Audio

whole thing gets confusing for them? I think that might be part of it, but I think also the rituals themselves have become awfully churchy, maybe too pretty. The classic rites of initiation, rites of passage for young males are blood, semen, ashes, beatings, nakedness...they're real down there. There's nothing pretty about it. I'm not saying it's naughty or bad, but the male psyche responds to this gutsy-ness and you see it as soon as they get out in the woods - they create it...They want it, they need it, they desire it.

The nakedness thing, I must comment on is really uncanny to me. I could give a whole talk just on that. I never encourage nakedness, as such, but it always happens. I will normally have on the 4th day of a 5-day retreat a day where I send them out into the canyons or into the desert alone. I've prepared them for that day. A lot of men, and women too, I sure have never spent a day alone, in solitude. And then that night we come back and process: what happened? In the canyons alone. Well, there's always one who in that processing will raise his hand and sort of with embarrassment admit that when he got out there he took off all his clothes. And then there's chuckles all around the room - I can just predict it; it happens every time, there's chuckles all over the room - "Oh! I did too, I did too! I did too!" There's something about nakedness in the male psyche - and now I've studied initiation rites, it's universal. The boy always gets naked, as you see in the sweat lodges, too. And I think it's this desire to get rid of all this persona. All this stuff you have to live up to - you pay a big price for being a patriarch. And feminism has sometimes not been sympathetic enough with that. You pay a big price for having roles and titles and importance and power and significance and the male is just finding every way he can to take it off, to take it off. They always tell me they had to do it and it's amazing how often some wonderful things happen in this sitting there in the sunlight naked - exposed, as it were.

We often have campfires, and I know some of you have been at these where it happens, so you know what I'm talking about, and always, always, there's some guys - I mean, is it in their hard wiring? - they'll strip and have to leap over that fire, burning their balls...I don't know what it is. They're the real men, who can leap over the fire, naked.

I gave a giant one of these in Austria last summer and I mean, the German-speaking people are even much freer than we are. I mean half of the group was leaping over the fire. I didn't tell them to leap over the fire. This is not part of my agenda that they're supposed to...it's just that we have a fire, and then predictably men start doing the same old damn things, all again and again and again...but there's this deep desire to get naked...but to somehow, even risk nakedness in front of one another. To expose the self. That's really pretty archetypal. It shouldn't really surprise us at all should it? I mean, that's really what all love-making is of course - could you love me when you see me in my nakedness? Could I still be beautiful, could I still be attractive to you in my nakedness? Can you see it all and still be desirous of me?

But certainly the outsider - and this happened one time - would think it's a homoerotic or homosexual group, and it's just not really the character of the group as such in a formal or holistic way. Now, in this healing ritual, which I don't do during the new initiation rites, because the rituals are different, I give them a talk on the body and I tell them to go alone and do a compassionate meditation on their body from head to foot, and I give them all a foot and a half of red tape and wherever their body is holding a memory, a shame, a fear, a guilt, an anger -whatever - to wrap a little piece of that on their body. And then they come back and they sit in a big circle and I always say they look like a field of wounded soldiers. They're always very quiet when they come back. You can feel, like a self-massage almost. The pain came out when they touched each of those spots, I guess.

And then beginning with the elders I lead them through an extended meditation - it's printed on the back of that book, "Quest for the Grail," and I invite them to lie down in what is, for the male, the most vulnerable position - on his back. And then the other men surround them and cradle their bodies and especially touch and lay hands on and pray over those places where the man holds wounds...

[If the wounds are sexual, this is an interesting "therapy"!!!!]

Well, that sounds like a rather simple, innocuous ritual - well, it blows them out of the water. It usually goes on the whole night. They don't want to stop. The man becomes their Father that they never had; their Father that they could never touch; their Grandfather who died when they were a boy; their brother that they wanted to be friends with.

Then when the older men are doing it to the younger men, it all, of course, reverses. But the tears just astound me. This readiness to cry and the readiness and the tears seem not be evoked by my words but by the touch itself, by the laying on of hands, by the communion, the connection that seems to happen there. And again, without any unnecessary encouragement from me, many of the men will invariably take off their shirts to expose the red tape, maybe on their chests. In Germany, not so much in this country, the men would go down to their shorts.

As you probably know, the Europeans are much less embarrassed about nakedness than we are, much less. In fact they call us prudish. They say you're still Victorians in this regard - much freer. Same with the Austrians and the Swiss. The only place I was not able to do this exercise - and this will come as no surprise to many of you - was in Ireland. And believe me, the Irish men were with me - this was just last May in Dublin - with me! I mean, G-d! They had their drums; They were better drummers than we are - you know those Irish drums? And singing and together and drinking, of course! I sensed that this was going to be a little hard. So I got together the leaders of the team and I said now here's what I normally do on the last night. Even as I was describing it, I could see their faces whiten - I'm not exaggerating. "Oh, no, Richard...I don't think so! Don't do it. They'll walk out of the room. They cannot do that." And again, it's not that they were resisting the retreat. They really were with me. But the internalized homophobia - and it's not just homophobia. It's the body is this place of defilement, as Margaret was just saying. Our tremendous fear and shame seems to be carried...In the northern European body, ah, but - I don't know how the Irish absorb that.

But in fairness I should say, I had to talk another group into it and it was the black men of the Bahamas. They went along and they were blown away. But I had to explain it to them about 3x. "Now, do you think you can trust me on this?" "Well, OK, but we're not sure that we really want to do it." Well, the black bishop of the Bahamas had invited me down there. He'd read one of my books. And he says, "Is there any way you'll come down here? You talk about the Father-wound. None of us know our fathers and it's just an open, bleeding wound on all of the islands of the Caribbean, if you've ever been there. I will handpick 40 men who I think will turn the corner on this, if possible, if you'll just come down. As many days as you want. They'll all get off work. They'll be there."

I said, "I really don't think it's a white man's job to be coming and doing this. They need to hear it from a black man."

He said, "I do know that, but if you'll just get the pot stirred, the black man will emerge. Cause they don't even know this language yet. They've been given no freedom in this regard."

To make a long, wonderful story short, last Father's Day evening I got a conference call from the Bahamas, several of the islands. And for the first time, they said, in their known history, they had celebrated Father's Day. It was a non-existent day, in effect. It was on the books, but no one celebrated Father's Day, cause most did not know their Fathers. They said, on every island they had marches to the main plaza, and they had signs for weeks on the trees, "If you don't know your father, bring an older man. If you don't know your son, bring a younger man - just to give them a way to connect and couple up in these relationships. And they had marches in which there were, there certainly were some examples of families who knew grandfather, father, son were still together, and they said, we just put them up there on the stage, just to look at them, just to know it was possible. We asked them to talk, of what it's like to be a grandfather, to know your grandfather, your son, your brother, and to see those relationships that might not be there otherwise.