

WALKING THROUGH FIRE: ANGER AND THE FATHER

Some years ago I gave a public talk as part of a series entitled *Psychology, Society and Revelation*. I called it *Walking through Fire-Birth, Love and Death*. In the context of speakers representing different psychotherapeutic modalities, I had been asked to talk about pre and perinatal psychology and the formative impact of prenatal life and birth. Since 1998 when my first book was published I have often been asked to speak about childbirth and the formative impact of life in the womb, so I explained that birth was an initiation¹ and that all initiations involve 'Walking through Fire'. Later on, when I was writing about the father², and also when I was asked to write this article on anger, I thought again of Fire. Somehow anger, fire, initiation, empowerment and the father all seem connected in a way which I hope to be able to make clear through the body of this article.

Anger is a universal human emotion. I have noted in my clinical work however, that not only do men and women deal with anger in different ways, but also that a person's ability or lack of ability to express and harness anger in a self affirming way is commonly associated with their primal relationship with their Father. I have also noticed that the father and son relationship in particular hugely influences the ability or lack of ability of the son to empower himself and consequently express anger in a positive or creative sense. Sons of 'absent fathers' tend to exhibit passive aggressive behaviour and be reactive rather than proactive in their lives and relationships.

Anger tells us that something is wrong. When we feel anger we know something is not right with us. In its positive form, anger empowers us; it urges us to change something we feel does not sit right with us. It is in this sense a creative force. When we express our anger (rather than merely venting it) we transform; we change something. Anger can spur us on and propel us into action. Similarly, fire has a transformative power and is traditionally associated with the spirit, metaphorically representing eternal life.

¹ Mauger, B. (1998) *Songs from the Womb-Healing the Wounded Mother*. Collins Press

² Mauger, B. (2004) *Reclaiming Father-The Search for Wholeness in Men, Women and Children*

In mythology, the Father Gods were generally the fire holders, thus ensuring their power over man. They were figures of authority and as we see in the myth of Chiron and Prometheus, whoever possessed fire possessed the secret of eternal life. Prometheus was a Titan who was punished by Zeus for having dared to steal fire from the Gods. His punishment was to be chained to a rock whilst his liver was pecked out every night by birds. There was no escape from this torture and of course his liver by day would regenerate itself only to be destroyed again by night, and so the cycle continued. Chiron, the Wounded Healer traded his immortal status in return for the freeing of Prometheus. Fire meant power and whoever possessed it also held the secrets of eternal life, the ability to metamorphose and transcend human life. Fire symbolised the life of the spirit.

The association of fire with father is also made in Jungian psychology where the Sun (Sol) is generally associated with the Father or the masculine principle, with the Moon (Luna) associated with the Mother and or the feminine principle. Every human being possesses both masculine and feminine energy. And it is the balance of these internal forces that bring us to a place of wholeness. Archetypal psychology can help us understand this fundamental and universal internal dynamic. In Jungian psychology we call this union the 'inner marriage'. In this respect, it should be remembered that archetypes are not gender related but rather energy forces that form part of us all. This union, the inner marriage is essential to the spiritual well being of every human being and underpins the universal drive for wholeness.

Myths are symbolic of the human journey and like all myths; the myth of Chiron can be interpreted symbolically to represent the need to embrace one's mortality in order to transcend one's wounds. According to Chinese medicine, the liver is the seat of the emotions and anger in particular. Interestingly, alternative health practitioners say that many people living in contemporary Western society suffer from problems associated with the liver perhaps indicating difficulties in processing emotions, notably anger.

Anger is also discussed in medical books of the Middle Ages, particularly in relation to alchemical imagery. The philosopher and physician Ficino said that anger helps you to 'arouse your feelings and to purge them'. 'Anger helps you confront your situation and stimulates you, it warms you and gives your

actions the firmness and sharpness they need'³. Jungian author Thomas Moore suggests that 'to be a person of presence requires the power, heat and force that come with anger'. Anger can draw out the warrior (Mars) energy in you and suppressing this potentially creative force can lead to depression. It is common knowledge that a great component of depression is anger turned inwards on the self.

In astrology, the fire energy is associated with the planet Mars (the God of War) and where our Mars falls on our birth chart indicates how comfortable we are with processing and expressing anger. I'm told that for example, I have Mars in Libra which means I am not comfortable expressing my Mars energy directly (Libra is an air sign ruled by Venus). In contrast, having Mars in Aries (a fire sign and natural home for Mars) is purported to facilitate the expression of one's anger and fire energy. Mars and Saturn represent the Father and the masculine principle with Venus and the Moon representing the Mother and the feminine principle.

Astrology aside, our archetypal heritage along with our family histories and the myths and culture of our time all inform us in how we live our lives. However, since our archetypal heritage and in particular the father and mother archetypes are humanised for us by our parents and our life experiences, the amount of activated fire energy in a person is, I believe, determined by factors which include one's relationship with one's father. How did father empower himself? Was he comfortable asserting himself, or was he emasculated and/or wounded? And if a son sees his father as weak or 'broken' in some way, this will define his own sense of himself as a male. In the break up of a home and a marriage for example, much is determined by the way the father leaves the marriage. I am reminded of the words of a well-known song. *'I remember the day my father walked out; He left with a whimper not with a shout...'* This son perceived his father as emasculated and it had a profound effect on him.

Father as Fire Centre

During the course of the last few years I have noted, particularly in my clinical practice with male clients, that a weak or absent father figure

³ Moore, T. (2004) *Dark Nights of the Soul*. Piatkus

results not only in a weakened masculine image, but also in a loss of power. I have worked and continue to work with many clients who have either lost their fathers in early life and/or experienced their fathers as absent and who feel this loss keenly. And even if fathers were not physically absent the sense that they were not adequately present or active during their childhood appears to be a common and often painful experience. I believe that this, together with such societal factors as increasing divorce rates and a growing number of children growing up without fathers in a time when men's traditional roles are being questioned, has resulted in what Robert Bly calls a universal Father Hunger. It was with this awareness and experience that I determined to further explore the impact of the father on the psyche and the effects of absent fathering. The result of my work is published in my book *Reclaiming Father*⁴. In this book I explore the role of the father in early life and through case studies reveal what happens when fathers are absent.

What is the father's birth gift? One of the father's main psychological functions is to help the child separate from mother and begin his or her journey into the world. Father helps us negotiate the world and get a sense of our own unique self. In boys furthermore, the presence of father activates in the boy his archetypal heritage. A boy needs his father to activate his innate and prospective masculinity. He will look at his father and see himself as a future man. Father brings many gifts to a child, and all these gifts are different to what a mother brings. One such is the ability to channel innate aggression. It is father who helps the child find purpose and focus. Studies show that children who have been adequately fathered exhibit more self-confidence and personal initiative than those whose fathers were absent. Some studies show that poorly fathered boys tend to be lacking in self-esteem or unsteady in their self-belief and that a warm, affectionate relationship between father and son results in a strong development of male identity⁵.

What does this have to do with anger? If empowerment and a good sense of self rest on the ability to harness this father energy, then it has a lot to do with it. Father is the archetypal fire holder, to grow and become whole we

⁴ Mager, B. (2004), *Reclaiming Father-The Search for Wholeness in Men, Women and Children* (Soul Connections)

⁵ *ibid.*p100

need to claim and harness this fire energy. What is it that pushes us forward in the world? Curiosity, but also, I believe the need to surpass and overcome obstacles. Anger can make us push the boundaries. In terms of initiation, it was generally the father who provided the necessary tools for the initiate. Boys were taken away from their mothers at a certain age and taken to male enclosures, there to undergo certain 'tests'. These initiations marked the end of the Mummy's boy. (Girls on the other hand are initiated naturally through the archetypal mysteries of the feminine, menstruation, pregnancy and childbirth). All Hero mythology is based on the need to surpass father (representing the past), undergo an archetypal journey and claim one's prize, self-actualisation. We are all ultimately on a spiritual or psychological journey of empowerment. How we meet or refuse to meet the challenges presented to us along that journey is up to our individual histories and us.

Search for the Hero inside Yourself⁶

I said earlier that father is responsible for helping us emotionally separate from mother and ultimately, claim our own power outside in the world. The presence of the father helps the child break out of the maternal shell from which he has emerged and gradually build a sense of himself and his individuality. What happens though when a boy experiences his father as weak or disempowered? Peter's story shows us how having a weak father (and strong mother) made it hard for him to empower himself. The main thing I remember about Peter was his ANGER. Week after week, year after year I endured his anger. We both endured it. He was angry at life, at his mother, at me, at what he perceived as the uselessness of the process involved in psychotherapy. 'I can be angry at home and not have to pay for it!' was his stock response to my (probably feeble) attempts to explain how important expressing his anger in the sessions was. In fact, as I look back now I can see that his anger and how we dealt with it was the main ingredient of his therapy. It was anger with his mother and with the fact that he found it hard to form mature relationships with women that brought him to my consulting room after some years of work with a male analyst. It was some considerable time and many sessions later that he was able to feel angry against his father for what he perceived as his weakness. And it was

⁶ *ibid.*, p.97

this that ultimately restored his inner father (his masculinity) and liberated him.

Peter's mother had dominated his father and at the same time emasculated him. Peter experienced this as extremely painful and it led to great inner confusion. He grew up despising his father's weakness whilst at the same time being acutely aware of his vulnerabilities and seeking to protect him. His father's emasculation blocked his own innate and latent masculinity. His heart was filled with a complicated and inhibiting set of conflicting emotions. Love and hatred, fear and anger jostled for first place and confused him further. His mother had wanted girls and treated both her boys as such, forbidding rough play of any sort. Peter's father was a gentle natured man who wanted peace at all costs. He never intervened, and because he did not (in fact was prevented) from spending time alone with his sons, their mother claimed them. No match for his feisty controlling wife, he retreated into himself and lost his spirit. By doing so, he failed his sons.

When he came to me first Peter would tell me that he had lost his spirit, his driving force and his zest for life. He was incessantly angry and frustrated, he felt disempowered; he was only operating on three cylinders, not quite up to speed. Like a rusty engine, he was merely limping through life, he said. He remembers desperately wanting his father to stand up to his mother for the way she kept putting him down. In a strange mix of emotions he felt tied to his mother through his anger and tied to his father because he wanted to protect him. Thus he was paralysed and unable to 'leave home'. This complicated mix of emotions kept him bound and infantilised. It also kept him from fully inhabiting his masculinity, which in effect remained latent. This obviously affected his ability to relate in a mature way to women his own age. He felt not quite 'man' enough.

When I brought up the subject of his father, in stark contrast to the anger he expressed when we talked about his mother, Peter became weepy and emotional. In touch with his father's gentleness of spirit and his tender heart, Peter recalled his father with love and tenderness. He experienced his father as a wounded man. He felt sorry for him and longed for a closer relationship with him. He needed him in order to grow into a man. His boy's soul craved a connection with his father but he could not reach him in the place where you normally find father. This place was blocked by his over

intrusive and dominant mother. In essence, Peter was in Jungian terminology, mother-bound.

As a result of our work together, Peter became aware that he couldn't reach his own soul and his innate ability to love because the anger and resentment he felt about his childhood blocked it. He was moreover, still carrying his father's repressed anger. This repressed anger had also emasculated him. And since Peter's mother had further repressed all his natural male aggression, Peter had very little to call on in terms of guidance on how to be a strong male.⁷ In our sessions he frequently described his feeling of emasculation as 'being choked'. Over time and many, many angry sessions later as I said earlier, he learnt to find his voice, to restore and strengthen his inner father, and to claim and inhabit his male strength. He found father and he found himself.

In conclusion, I would like to add a caveat. It is important always to bear in mind that archetypes are not gender related and that therefore, it would be a mistake to categorise anger as purely a masculine force. What is important here is to bear in mind that father humanises the father archetype for his children and as so hands on his legacy. Absent fathering also affects girls. And in women this is given expression as a difficulty in reaching for and finding one's own voice and knowing one's own boundaries. Often this need in women is projected onto male partners. Girls who don't experience father as being an active presence in their lives also have issues around anger and the expression of it. When there is an experience of absent fathering, the girl may have a similar difficulty empowering herself. She may find it hard to negotiate the world and without a strong father to mitigate the power of the maternal, she may remain incarcerated in the feminine shadow (material for another article!). Father hunger is universal. We need a certain amount of activated fire energy to push past the boundaries of our childhood and forge our way in the world. Anger is by necessity a part of this.

©Benig Mauger www.soul-connections.com
(Based an article first published in Eisteach, Vol. 3 2005)

⁷ Reclaiming Father, pp.101-103