Articles

Contemplations on the Middle Man: Anima Rising

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Abstract

There are many social, cultural, and biological factors that contribute to the construction of masculine identity. These factors are investigated in this article from the personal perspective of a male practitioner and educator with 25 years of experience in a field that is predominantly composed of women. An amalgamation of attributes necessary for success as a male art therapist is discussed from a new paradigm, defined and explained as a middle man *perspective. A middle man is one who skillfully negotiates stereotypic androcentric notions of masculinity by incorporating into his self-structure a stance that confronts patriarchal oppression and cultural blind spots surrounding power and privilege so easily ignored by many western Caucasian men.*

Beginnings

This story is about the challenge of assimilating problematic androcentric messages from the culture at large which attempt to define masculine identity. It is also about the simultaneous holding of opposites within the space of a shadowed middle. Jung (1968) taught about the contrasexual male (anima) and female (animus) qualities that pulse throughout a body, signaling the call to transformation and integration of opposing biological and cultural forces. There are many men of contemporary western societies who skillfully work with these biological and cultural tensions. But, in my opinion, navigating these divisions has caused many men to live in a liminal realm between the stereotypes of masculinity and femininity. This amorphous central terrain represents a place of existence where traditional gender roles are redefined. In this paper, I call those who exist in this territory *middle men.*

Middle men are devoted to self-examination and the restructuring of masculine identity. The awareness that results from this self-reflection is turned outward toward acts of social engagement that confront various forms of

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oppression. Middle men resist collusion with their privilege and the "conspiracy of silence" that Mies (1986, p. 6) sees as a posture of dominating and minimizing gender, ethnicity, class, race, or any other divisive stance that subjugates or marginalizes people. This viewpoint can be widened to include a transpersonal systemic view of living systems that also deserve thoughtful advocacy (Capra, 1996). For example, vulnerable ecosystems require conscious stewardship and an ecoethical perspective (Capra, 1996, p. 11). In essence, silence and complacency must be answered with compassionate actions that reverse marginalization, respect ecological systemic ethics, and liberate people to pursue their potential. This article addresses this conspiracy of silence by defining the evolving social territory of the middle man. This terrain is discussed from the personal perspective of being a male practitioner in the field since 1980. It is my opinion that men in the profession of art therapy are evolving middle men. We are constantly confronting and integrating our unique voice around gender-based divisions of professional and personal identity. I suggest that this is a primary reason why many men in art therapy work productively with women colleagues.

Defining the characteristics of the middle man is elusive. The subject is too complex to attempt a complete definition at this time. However, I have enough information gathered from years of experience to articulate and define middle man qualities. As I try to describe these traits one central theme emerges: Middle men are working with a divided self that is split as a result of compounding circumstances. This fragmented existence, which is both culturally and psychologically constructed, emerges from mixed messages concerning the intricate construction of masculine identity (Gilligan, 2003; Pollack, 1998). These divisions result in androcentric, culturally influenced forms of internalized oppression and the resulting externalized projections that can contribute to a distorted formation of masculine identity. In order to transcend these divisions, middle men end up incorporating several solutions into their self structure.

To begin with, middle men, and boys in general, are faced with addressing multiple origins of self-censorship. Gilligan (2003), in her study of "voice" as it relates to identity and gender, locates different developmental times for boys and girls when voice is lost. She observed that mas-

culinity becomes identified with qualities of standing alone and relinquishing relationship. The onset of these messages is quite early for boys (age 4 or 5). Gilligan noticed that for girls, the dismantling of personal voice occurs later in adolescence when there is a developmentally advanced capacity to self reflect and therefore reorient oneself with the guidance of a trusted ally. Boys basically are indoctrinated into codes of masculinity (Pollack, 1998) well before formal operations.

This sort of early indoctrination into distorted messages of masculinity restricts the tender side of boys from full expression (Gilligan, 2003). Traversing this early shift from relationally engaged before age 4 to an emerging identity as separate and alone results in a long journey back to mutual relationship. Until this mending is accomplished, many boys and men will hide the secrets of their gentle nurturing tendencies and instead display the opposite. The middle man is one who emerges from this secret life by refusing to identify with the disengaged, distorted bravado men are frequently taught to display. Instead there is a willingness to cultivate an identity as a nurturer. To spend time with us lets one know that we are feminists (Halifax, 1997), even feminized in our embrace of our rising *anima* opposite and our commitment to confronting oppression (Talbott-Green, 1989).

Historical Context

It is important to mention that the idea of the middle in this context is not related to political orientations of left, right, or center. Instead, middle here is equated with elements of the Middle Way and middle school of Buddhist philosophy that denies any perceived certainty as absolute (Anagarika, 1976). Following his enlightenment, the Buddha offered a sermon in which he outlined the Middle Way of the *dharma* (truth). During his discourse, he delineated a path between extremes of sensory indulgence and renunciation (Epstein, 2005, p. 39). This consisted of the Eightfold Path of "right view, right thought, right speech, right action, right mode of living, right endeavor, right mindfulness, and right concentration" all of which, if practiced, would help form balanced perspectives that would avoid extremes and foster clear perception (Takeuchi, 1993, p. 11). These qualities, as I apply them to this discussion, define an ethical stance that fosters conscious relational engagement with the world. This practice of valuing "dynamic balance" that is integrative affirms the notion of systemic ethics (Capra, 1996, p. 9). The Eightfold Path, then, offers an outline of characteristics that inspires principled balance between extremes, especially the complications of working with matters of mind and action in relationship to race, class, gender, and planetary health.

Engaged Buddhism, which consists of these principles directed towards social action, expresses a practical application of this balanced perspective (Queen & King, 1996). Ultimately, it is the skillful working with distorted extremes that is needed. While the tenets of the Middle path in Buddhism are specific, I am blending them here to join with the metaphor of the middle man. Therefore, middle men as I am defining them are striving to cultivate perceptual equanimity while working to sort out and act upon plaguing questions concerning all forms of hegemony.

The term middle man also relates to a broker who connects separate parties and tries to initiate a contract and complete a transaction. Evolving the metaphor even further, the contract here is to confront the conspiracy of silence around forms of oppression that fuel alienation (Mies, 1986). The transaction is to carry out the daily tasks of change work by excavating and confronting stratifications of privilege, moving beyond self-censorship, and speaking personal truth to authoritarian structures.

Johnson's (2001) work investigates cultural blind spots surrounding power and privilege for western Caucasian men. Forms of patriarchal oppression can get framed in terms of gender-based abuses of class and privilege. But what about more subtle misuses of power that get played out against men and boys? What is called for, as Mies (1986) suggested, is an enlightened men's movement that directly confronts oppressive patriarchal systems. Men must meet and confront the injustices they have inherited. True, I am not responsible for the historical actions of my race or gender, but I am responsible for how I confront what I have inherited and how I use my gender and privilege not to continue the injustices of my ancestors (Johnson, 2001). Long before overt power and privilege manifest in various social settings, boys are indoctrinated into a way of being that perpetuates a confusion of male identity and, ultimately, shadowed forms of internalized patriarchal oppression (Pollack, 1998).

In defining and deconstructing the "boy code," Pollack (1998) examines how boys are seduced into a perplexing identity of mixed attributes. For Pollack, the emotional life of boys is often split among shamed-based messages of weakness, encouragement to separate early from their mothers, and internalized oppression that is masked by false bravado. Shame, as a power tactic of control, is pervasive for all genders in U.S. mainstream culture. It is crucial that attention be paid to how these processes play themselves out within the spectrum of gender. Of particular interest are the introjects of manhood that boys receive. According to the boy code, making boys into men by toughening them up and socializing them to censor their emotions, and to be independent at all costs, results in a fusion of mixed messages that can take decades to sort out.

For example, boys often are driven from their mothers as a way to consolidate a separate masculine self. For Pollack (1998), male identity is formed not so much by close identification with father but by a quick, sanctioned disconnection from mother. The result is that "becoming masculine is defined by avoiding the feminine" and thereby severely dividing identity into major internal splits (Pollack, 1998, p. 28). These splits merge into ideas of "virilization" that ultimately result in "defeminization" (Bourdieu, 2001, p. 26). These divisions contribute to patriarchal systems where the masculine rules the oppressed feminine. This feminine presence is marginalized internally for many boys and men as well as externally or relationally, economically, politically, and spiritually.

Bourdieu further states that as women are diminished and denied by patriarchal structures, men are also imprisoned by their dominant position. This internment exists as the sad separation from the feminine. Emancipation from this division is key to a full exchange between all genders.

The strategy for many boys, then, is to go silent and wear an armor that hides humiliation and exudes counterfeit self-assurance (Pollack, 1998). Perhaps this is where the early tracks for self-censorship are laid. As Gilligan (2003) points out, boys learn to reject patterns of relational contact in early childhood. Clearly this is only a partial illustration of the identity equation. Because so much of a boy's identity can be internalized and oppressed, what is outwardly shown is a masquerade of his true potential.

The concepts of maleness and femaleness are socially determined through historical progressions of shifting definitions (Mies, 1986). Bourdieu (2001) argues that masculine domination is deeply etched into our personal and social unconscious, causing a form of perpetuated symbolic violence. He discusses how entrenched sexual divisions surface in daily language, economic policies, and body-based politics, leaving an imprint of division. Although there are biological realities to gender, it is the social and ethical elements of choice as it relates to gender that are being addressed here. Therefore, the intention of the next section is to examine certain choices that have formed my life's work as an art therapist.

Navigating the Middle

My own clumsy childhood efforts to emerge from boyhood into a young man partially evolved out of a challenging relationship with a father who was physically ill throughout most of my youth. Eventually he died while I was in high school. As I revisit these events in my early life, there is sadness around missing out on the chance to cultivate a primary relationship with a reliable man. The absence of this connection has had significant consequences for me. Specifically, the major grief reaction was the loss of being consistently mentored by a loving man. My main response to this loss was to choose art, in many ways my surrogate parent throughout my adolescence. It was in the high school art room that I could attend to opposing inner forces within me and eventually negotiate the splits of loss and grief.

Throughout my youth and early adulthood before becoming an art therapist, I had experienced not fitting in with men or women who perpetuated the stereotypes of each gender. As a result of this separation, I felt a quality of living on the periphery, never quite a part of the men's circle or the women's circle. It has been a long journey from a separate periphery to a habitable middle.

For many of us, this territory of the middle man at once isolates us from those who feel threatened by our attempts to confront patriarchal systems and unifies us with those who feel committed to personal and social emancipation. Since we possess qualities seen by U.S. society as feminine, celebrate the arts along with our nurturing emotional intelligence (Kemp et al, 2005), and choose not to play the game of chauvinist or racist; we hybridized middle men often are labeled critically in ways that go straight to the heart of the problem. For example, we may be labeled gay when we do not embrace the usual stereotypic androcentric roles. Designating another man as gay for not conforming to a culturally-based gender stereotype implies a severe limitation in how those hurling the insult choose to not participate in a wider pluralistic viewpoint. This is the ultimate phobic response originating from the same hallmarks of western male constructions that we in the middle choose to confront. Phobic responses to homosexuality that exist within the collective shadow are poignant examples of how harm is done every day to innocent people.

The wider culture does its best to create identity from institutionalized, corporate beliefs that can be seen in advertising, consumerist trends, and even in adventures on the elementary school playground. A young boy who displays a predisposition toward books, relational sensitivity, curiosity about the male body, or heightened emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1995) can experience a rough go of it with other boys who are socialized in favor of opposing norms. We desperately need to construct a sensible hybridized middle where pluralism prevails—where people are educated to hold multiple perspectives, engage in the practice of tolerance for diverse viewpoints, and working successfully with conflict.

A Roundabout Way to Now

I began my work as a university professor in 1984. My colleagues were primarily women. Feminist thinking was prominent during this time and for good reason. Power structures in the United States were being examined, gender inequities corrected, and stifled potential realized. Many people were enthusiastic about the consciousness that was being created, celebrating the shift towards true equality. Simultaneously, I had several painful interactions with various female colleagues. As hierarchies were justifiably deconstructed (Franklin & Politsky, 1992), the very wisdom that guided this process seemed to disappear and manifest as a form of identification with the aggressor (Freud, 1966). Just walking in the room as a man often invited automatic gender assumptions that were sadly alienating. Again, the feeling of not fitting in with various men or women surfaced in me. Many of my male colleagues were appallingly sexist, holding their comments about our women colleagues for men only, as if there were some club that they assumed I joined. Right speech and right action were difficult to maintain during all of these interactions with my various colleagues. I easily recall wanting to choose silence as the best solution to these conflicted interactions. And yet this served as my training ground for asserting the voice of the middle man. Eventually I learned to speak up.

Some might say that this brief sketch of my own experience with colleagues, especially my female colleagues, is a privileged viewpoint. It is my voice alone speaking as I recall these exchanges. Those whom I am speaking of are absent from the discussion. Some might conceive that I have written them out of this narrative by claiming my

individual truth and potentially disavowing theirs. Also, the use of the analytic concept of identification with the aggressor is suspicious in that the psychoanalytic tradition originally favored a patriarchal lens. And yet, at what point is it politically correct to not self-censor and skillfully present personal convictions? There must be room in the public discourse to own personal experiences while also acknowledging larger perspectives beyond a personal viewpoint. It is essential to cultivate the capacity to hold multiple perspectives simultaneously. Precision and openness to the quality of experience along with the invitation for collegial critique are essential. These emerging values have made it possible for me to work successfully as an art therapist, particularly as a director of three different art therapy programs.

Since 1984, I have been in the classroom with a student body composed of mostly, if not all, women. My students have continued to ask me over the years how I came to direct three different programs in a profession dominated by women. They ask me what it is like to be in the classroom with so many women. In a few instances some have become angry with me for occupying my position, suggesting that I likely deprived a woman from her rightful place as program director, which is a vital point (Wadeson, 1989). It is also important to state that I was hired at each teaching post by search committees primarily composed of women professors who strongly identified as feminists. I would suggest that they hired me because they observed the qualities of the middle man that I am describing.

Receiving these questions requires skillful receptivity to the painful experience felt by women students who see yet another man in charge, no matter who hired me. Part of the skill needed to field these concerns lies in receiving these diverse questions and transferences with an open mind. This is not said to pathologize the dynamics of the student-teacher relationship. In my experience, it is a reality that male instructors will receive specific forms of transference from their students. These comments, like the students who espouse them, are stretched across the developmental spectrum. By receiving these projections and answering students' legitimate yet challenging questions as best I can, I hope to model the stance of the middle man. As a result of this presence that I try to hold, something happens.

For example, and this situation is indicative of many similar conversations, I recall one student who came from a difficult family background. Many of her struggles, as she later told me, originated from her relationship with her overly critical father. For the first 2.5 years of our 3 year program she also struggled with me as I set the professional bar high for assignments and internship requirements. When it was time for her to graduate, she told me of her quiet transformation that unfolded over our three years together. She was very articulate in disclosing how important it was for her to struggle with me and for me not to struggle back. My standards were high and she knew that my principles as an educator were in her best interest. Because of this consistent pattern of interaction, she felt her professional identity dissolve her previous paternal relational blueprint. She told me that this could not have happened if I were a female teacher.

There is also the matter of men in our program and the unique challenge of experiencing their gender minority for the first time. Some find themselves confronted with sorting out unanticipated experiences. At times they have described a need to speak with a man in the field to help clarify their thoughts around how to find their place within the classroom dynamics and the field at large. Some of these feelings can consist of how and when to speak up without alienating the women in the group. In such situations there is sensitivity not to monopolize the classroom discussion time. Or the converse can be true. Some male students participate by trying to direct the class discussion without awareness of their invasive style. During these encounters an ally was needed to help confront and guide the student without alienating him or the women present. On other occasions, male students have left the program due to their discomfort with their minority status, never quite arriving at a middle man position.

I interviewed some men from our program for this paper. This is hardly a reliable sample for formal research, however, important information was revealed that complements the points highlighted here. One student spoke of having little voice in his family, particularly with his father. Because he was the youngest in the birth order, his point of view was often minimized. Having other men in the program was important for this student, particularly because it offered him a way to exchange perspectives around male identity.

This student also mentioned that he experienced a lot of "father-based transference" with me. His father was critical of him, "pushing him down rather than lifting him up." He experienced vulnerability around grading, especially on assignments that I evaluated. According to him, when around me, he experienced a "rebellious streak" that caused him to "push up against me." He struggled with inner turmoil between wanting to do good work and therefore please me, and also feeling threatened when graded. Owning his projection, he said it reminded him of how he felt when his father would dismiss him, yet he was later able to differentiate these experiences, separating professional training from memories of parental criticism. Ultimately he said it was helpful to have a male role model who was an art therapist and different from his father.

Another student interviewed for this paper offered similar responses. He came to us as a Buddhist monastic from Singapore. His interview was important because it originated from a different cultural perspective and yet displayed similar features with the previous viewpoints. Like the preceding student, he came from a family where his father was unavailable due to his work. His primary relationships were with his mother and sisters, although his spiritual teacher was a man. During the interview, this student said that he came to graduate school "with an innate wisdom of how to be around women" as a result of his family experiences. His insight helped him to successfully "engage and disengage" with his female classmates during various interactions. He said that "because there was 'no blood relationship' with his classmates" he felt cautious about "what to say" in class. He felt that his respectful demeanor resulted in his classmates

seeing him as "sensitive and possessing feminine qualities" that made him more approachable. However, he did have a tendency to hold back in class. According to him, in general, women are subservient to men in Asia. Therefore he experienced a dual process of holding two positions—trying to be "more outspoken as a man from Asian culture and also being aware of a woman's emotions and not dominating the relationship" as ways to show respect. In terms of working with me, he said that "having a man directing the program modeled a way of working with women" that offered him an example of how to "hold a male perspective" and work successfully with his classmates.

The core of these stories accounts for one reason why middle men are successful in the field of art therapy. As these two students portray, there is a significant part of who we are that is cultivated out of being in relationship with so many diverse women. Like these men, I have learned to be a better man by being in relationship with women peers and colleagues in the field of art therapy. In terms of Jungian typology (Campbell, 1971; Jung, 1968), the inferior function is the underdeveloped aspect of the personality that is often shadowed. At the level of the collective shadow, men often are not seen as nurturers. I would suggest that many men in art therapy are committed to developing their nurturing reflexes. They are invested in integrating this aspect of the collective inferior function into their daily work and our female colleagues thankfully recognize our efforts in this direction. A culture that cultivates empathic men with safe boundaries is desperately needed, especially in mental health and teaching fields.

In addition to my students being mostly women, most of my colleagues and mentors have also been women. My first encounter with such a teacher was with M.C. Richards. I was 22 years old when we first met. In her reverent and irreverent way, M.C. modeled a curious way of being in the world. She was fierce and gentle, silent and vocal, activist and contemplative in her unique way of integrating opposites. I loved her authentic activist example of how to move about in various social venues, to create art, and to celebrate life. Her work ethic, aesthetic integrity, and playful process modeled an artistic attitude that helped me evolve the capacity to hold diverse perspectives in both personal artwork and social relationships.

I was also privileged to study with Elinor Ulman, Edith Kramer, and briefly with Hanna Kwiatkowska. Again, these accomplished women each represented a unique blending of emancipated potential that was not easy to cultivate during the conservative times in which they lived. As they contributed to the emergence of the field of art therapy, each one was confronted with various culture- and gender-bound barriers. The steady lesson that I learned from these women was the embrace of excellence even if the path traveled was fraught with such obstacles as patriarchal oppression.

This particular perspective was solidified during the many summers that I lived with Elinor Ulman on her Vermont farm. We spent many months together over the years; she tutored me in subtle ways to step into my adult professional self. She generously guided me to observe my own awkward patterns that surfaced during our daily inter-

actions. Using her own life examples, she would tell me stories about her personal barriers, her tenacity to overcome them, and her failures along the way. On several occasions we clashed. But she seemed to appreciate the conflict and see it as fodder for recasting personal identity. Though I was unaware of it at the time, she was mentoring me in the ways of the middle man: to fall in love with my mind, to become a quick study of oppression, and to skillfully debate charged topics; in short to try not to abandon myself and lose my voice should conflict arise.

Another essential moment in my development as a male art therapist occurred during my first teaching position. I was hired at a Catholic college for women where my colleagues were primarily women religious or nuns. This was a novel experience given my Jewish background and little contact with religious Catholic communities while growing up. As an academic community, these women were politically engaged in revisioning their participation and position within the church that they served. They also modeled for me how to stay open to diverse viewpoints and seek change while honoring commitment to historical roots of deep faith. In a roundabout way these women helped me to expand a faith- and gender-based pluralistic perspective.

Finally, over the years, many of my students have come to me with alarming health news. Dozens of them have had either breast or ovarian cancer. Together we would sit, listening to each other as the universal and personal story of mortality unfolded. Our conversations would meander, arriving at considerations of how everything in life is so fragile as well as resilient. On occasion, students would express their gratitude to me for listening and supporting them during such vulnerable times.

In July of 2003, it was my turn to receive difficult news. I learned that I had prostate cancer. Catching up to this reality meant long hours spent with numerous biological, cultural, gender, and spiritual challenges. As events progressed during this time of doctor's visits and eventual surgery, I noticed that I was negotiating significant elements of personal manhood. I was also cultivating a greater connection to life, especially with my previous students afflicted with cancer. I felt as if I were somehow connected to these women through the tangible, albeit private, struggle that I was attempting to traverse. My experience with cancer has allowed me to further refine the middle man perspective. For example, pain and tragedy, when managed and hopefully survived, create a desire to live with a reverence for life and relationship. My students, past teachers, and cancer have taught me to open and soften, recognizing the opportunities for meaningful exchange alive in any encounter.

Conclusion: Occupying the Middle with Empathic Discernment

In his book *Y: The Descent of Men,* Jones (2003) makes the point that males exist throughout the world of animals "but only *Homo sapiens* have manhood" (p. 8). Jones suggests that genes tell us a lot about sex and little about gender. He goes on to say later in the book that with the two main categories of male and female, sex is often simplified

and divided into opposing points of view. The overall topic addressed in this paper is not about a simple division of male and female cast into definable traits. There are cultural, sociological, and biological forces at work that are not easily quantified. My intent has been to examine polarizing perspectives and a construction of maleness that is balanced, hybridized, and synergistic.

The liberating potential inherent in the conceptualization of the middle man is the movement from complex forms of internalized subjugation to a new vision of masculine identity that is systemically aware (Capra, 1996). This identity moves from alienation to social engagement to ecological ethics, integrating a progressive self structure that is directed into diverse works as an art therapist. Middle men are activists, nurturers, emotionally astute and socially engaged artists and therapists. We willingly work to recognize the station of our privilege in the service of expanding consciousness towards inner emancipation and social action.

As artists and therapists, we have a method to examine, confront, and integrate opposites, especially splits inherent in power and oppression. For me, art is the primary unifying metaphor that leads the way in this pursuit of mending divisions. Art, in miniature, teaches us the miracle of creation. As a middle-aged, middle man without children, the closest I will come to experiencing the miracle of birth is through creating artwork. There is a rare opportunity for artists to honor the practice of creation. It is through our respect and commitment to the process of creating that we understand the myriad ways that art can be therapy. Our ethics, as art therapists, are closely formed out of this respectful commitment to systems thinking and creation itself (Capra, 1996). Male artists can cultivate the inner and outer feminine by honoring this creation process. Paul Klee saw art as a primary metaphor for the creation. For him, art demonstrated how the universal laws of nature live within the artist (Grohmann, 1987).

My colleagues in the field of art therapy have helped me to identify and cultivate my own sense of self as an artist, a therapist, and a man. My mentors in the field have instilled in me a thirst for quality that I hope to impart to my students. Most of all, I recognize that the process of becoming a middle man is ongoing. It is essential that we embrace the contract to face the "conspiracy of silence" that sanctions forms of oppression by cultivating a men's movement that confronts patriarchal domination (Mies, 1986). Although this is an old cry, it is far from becoming a reality. Therefore, the middle man guides this transaction by striving to implement humanistic ideals in the service of social remedies. By defining key aspects of a middle man, it is my hope that the liminal space that we inhabit will ultimately expand, allowing us to stand in our collective willingness to engage in change work where it is needed.

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