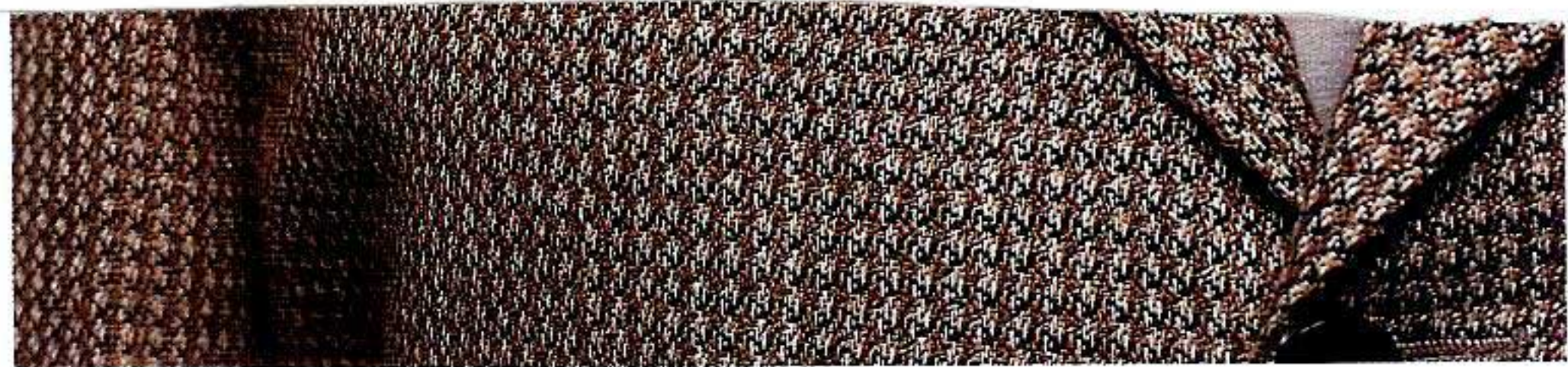


IN THE COMPANY OF MEN

Hanging out with the guys – a simple, ancient pleasure. Or so we thought, till we sent three *Toro* writers – Timothy Taylor, Craig Silverman, and Christopher Shulgan – across the country to find out what passes for male bonding these days. What they unearthed were some pretty unusual rituals that shed new light on why we do what we do when the women aren't around

PHOTOGRAPHS BY FINN O'HARA



Montreal: The ManKind Project

All he tried to do was bring her flowers, and then the cops showed up. Now she calls him late at night while she is screwing other guys. Puts the phone up close so he can hear everything.

Damian, all two hundred pounds of his New Zealand-born rugby-playing form, turns and spits on the frozen ground. "What does she want me to do, come over there and bash both their heads?"

Ryan understands. His ex is also threatening to get the cops involved. Yeah, she was his fiancée and, yeah, he slept with her sister

while she was in the next room, but he just needs to talk with her and get some closure. Ryan, clean-cut and in his twenties, lights another cigarette off the one not yet finished. "Smoking was something we did together," he says, holding the fire in front of his face.

The three of us are taking a break from the men's group meeting we're attending in Montreal. But clearly, for men like Damian and Ryan, there is no break from their situation. Once a week, they come here to a circle of men in a church basement and sit on large, loudly upholstered '70s furniture usually found in teachers lounges. They come from failed relationships, abusive pasts, and because something inside them screams unhappiness.

Nine of us are in the circle: fat, skinny, old, young, Jewish, born-again, married, single, divorced. The only things we have in common are our genitals and our pain, which are

the prerequisites for joining The ManKind Project, an international men's group. Its stated goal is to help men reclaim the "sacred masculine," enabling them to "live lives of integrity, accountability, and connection to feeling."

"Hi, I'm John and I'm checking in with a lot of joy," says one man.

"I'm Damian and I'm feeling anger and some shame," says another. When he reaches the word "shame," he hangs his large, bald head.

Each of us "checks in" with our name, and a feeling.

I say I'm feeling curiosity and a bit of trepidation. When we're all introduced, we move on to the next ritual: the "clearing." Lawrence, a dead ringer for Gabe Kaplan from *Welcome Back, Kotter*, is supposedly the man directing us tonight, but he is already deferring to John. John looks like an urban lumberjack, wearing hiking boots, a flannel shirt with rolled-up sleeves, and a short, shaggy beard.

"The clearing is a ceremony where anyone in the room who has an issue with anyone here or outside of the circle can confront their emotions," explains John. Then he asks where the clearing stick is.

Ryan, who checked in with a bit of shame, gets up and returns with a large wooden walking stick adorned with a Native dream catcher, a small shamrock, and a tiny seahorse hanging from a key chain.

Lawrence proceeds to "clear" with his boss, a role he has selected Damian to play. Damian rises, grips the stick with one hand, and stands in front of Lawrence.

"Begin with the facts," says John.

"At work today I sold something and then my boss called me and told me I sold the wrong thing and he isn't happy," says Lawrence. "I said, 'You're not happy when I sell, you're not happy when I don't sell. I don't know what the fuck you want.' And then I hung up."

"Now make a judgment," John tells Lawrence.

"You're a little shit who doesn't know what the fuck you want," Lawrence tells Damian, his voice rising. "You take your shit out on everyone else and I'm fucking tired of it!"

"You've had this problem before," says John, now standing. "You know I'm big on the 'when.' You say you're fucking fed up, so when are you going to set boundaries?"

"I've already applied at another shop," says Lawrence. "So by the end of March I want to have something new."

With a 'when' established, Lawrence and Damian have to "de-role."

"You are not my boss, you are Damian," says Lawrence.

"I am not your boss, I am Damian," says Damian.

And then they hug.

It's a natural reaction to want to sit and smirk during this process. I've already fought off a few laughing fits; but if it all helps broken men become better people, then who cares if the terminology sucks and we're all gathered around a seahorse on a key chain?

We move to the next exercise and Lawrence asks if someone will stand up to represent the "golden child" — that perfect, innocent thing we are at birth. Terry, who claims to have done time, volunteers. One by one, Lawrence calls upon the others to represent different men: the fearful man, the savage warrior, the rational man. Each of us stands and strikes a pose that relates to our chosen role.

I deem myself the fearful man and stand up. Lawrence lists my fears in life, love, work, and relationships, and asks me to show where

Fridays, this circle, and the language of self-help. "It's like palm trees," he says at one point. "The harder the wind blows them, the stronger their roots get."

Our time in the circle nears its two-and-a-half-hour mark and the subject of women makes its first and only appearance. Damian, gripping his coffee cup with both hands, says women can never really understand a man the way that other men can, and that's why he's here.

Terry seems to disagree but relents, saying, "The more I am around women, the more I know they are all stupid."

"That might be going a bit too far," says John. "But I know that we could never do this with women in the room."

And then he burps.

— Craig Silverman

An ex-con with kids, Terry, 48, has found not just Jesus but folk dancing

the fear resides. My eyes closed, I instinctively raise both my hands and press my palms hard against my forehead. It's such a natural reaction that only after Lawrence softly says "thank you" do I realize what I have done.

At the end of the exercise we sit and share our thoughts. Terry describes how it felt to be the golden child, and how he realized that everyone who he had ever tried to give love disappointed or abused him.

"My father abused me as a child. I used to be chased by gangs of kids and beaten up. One day I decided to fight and I became good at what I did," he says. "People used to say I was cute and I'd say, 'Cute? My puppy is cute!' I couldn't handle it. I used to smash my face through car windows to make myself uglier."

As he speaks, he lifts up his glasses and uses a single finger to wipe away his tears. After collecting each tear he turns his finger and looks at it, as if surprised.

"We are all trying to be that golden man," says Terry, "and it takes time. But I know that the creator is within me and I can do it."

Terry, divorced at forty-eight, with kids and a criminal record, has not only found Jesus. He has found folk-dancing classes on