

A Men's Voice Movement Therapy (VMT) Group in Toronto

The original idea to work with a group consisting only of men came in my conference at the end of the final training module from Christine, an instructor on the 2008 VMT Training, and it almost immediately seized me as a good and somehow necessary project. The more I thought about it, the more I liked the idea. The idea had momentum to it, and the group ultimately took shape, with six men. Once the group was underway, it was clear that it was “right” – men working together, being strong together, being vulnerable together.

One of my goals for this group was to help the men get more grounded in their bodies, and give them the experience of sounding from this deeper, more integrated place. I thought, “who knows what could come in the moment?” I wished to help them embody archetypal characters, such as the “swamp creature” and the “falsetto-singing angel,” thereby providing them an opportunity to experience kinesthetic and expressive sounding from across this wide spectrum of what it is like to be a man. A final goal was to provide the venue to facilitate a safe space whereby they could become more aware of how they were feeling, both physically and emotionally, and where I could allow and encourage them to give voice to those feelings.

I began most sessions with a short warm-up, which often included dedicated breathwork, yawning, shoulder rolls, moving into full arm circles, neck rolls, massaging the head/scalp/face, teacup stretch¹, stretching hips, knees, ankles, reaching side to side, and/or the front diagonal planes. My intention in the warm-up was to slow everyone down (including me) and help our awareness come back to our bodies.

¹ The “Teacup Stretch” involves putting the hands behind the head, and very slowly curling the head and then upper body forward, and letting the upper body flop down, as it were, without pushing. In the “flopped over” position, the arms and head dangle freely. Once the stretch has had its action, the person through pushing their feet into the floor very gradually curl back up, visualizing the stacking of the vertebrae one on top of the next, as if stacking teacups.

I began one session without any formal demarcation, as Steve² and I walked around, stomping, tapping beats and rhythms, creating a song about the day. Soon Rick arrived and joined in, and then Jean-Phillippe came and brought a gush of life and rhythm, which further enlivened our song. We all really enjoyed this free-form singing to begin a session. In another session, we began with our eyes closed, shifting the weight in our feet on the floor in a circle, first clockwise, then counter-clockwise. This was followed by a 15-minute improvisatory exploration of voice and movement.

The first session began by introducing the men to part of the animal postural cycle, “homo erectus” to “primate”. I invited them into a full-body experience of “homo erectus,” which they found flat out exhausting: their butt cheeks were tensed; neck, shoulders and face were stiff; and, they talked to each other with “disembodied” voices. This was, in fact, the very first opportunity they had to interact. Then, I introduced them to “primate,” and invited them to move around the space. Although “primate” was unfamiliar and a bit awkward for them, it seemed to be more of a welcome relief from “homo erectus.” From there, I brought them back into “homo erectus,” and back into “primate” once more. My sense was that they experienced these as different worlds almost, and probably had little idea at this early stage how this all connected to vocal work.

Next, we worked with the breath configuration of “flute” for a while. One by one, I asked them to demonstrate “flute” in front of the group to see if they had understood what I had shown them. They had. Putting them on the spot made them a little nervous but it gave me so much helpful information. I was able to observe how they held their body and what kind of sound they produced, enabling me to collect tons of information with an attentiveness and kinesthetic sensitivity that only then I had realized had been sharpened on the training.

In the third session, we worked with prioritized breathing in a standing position, ultimately moving onto the ground, laying face down to explore abdominal breathing.

² All names have been changed to protect the men’s confidentiality

As they all seemed to settle into that, I asked them to gradually add sound that emerged naturally from the abdominal breath, very slowly bringing in more sound and coming up from an imaginary swamp as a four-legged swamp creature. Later, I asked them to bring movement into their pelvis in this position. This exercise seemed to stir up some emotions for one of the men. For two others, I performed abdominal compression to help them release their muscles and deepen their breath.

During a later group I invited them to engage in an exercise in which Person A urgently “tells” Person B a storm is coming without using words, only using body and sound. Afterwards, I asked them all to close their eyes and sense what was happening in their bodies. It appeared that, for the men playing Person A, they found it challenging and energizing because there was an urgency about the way they *used* their bodies to communicate, giving the impression that they needed to know that the message was received. And, for men playing Person B, it appeared that they *received* the energy of the communication, enlivening them as well.

Later, I asked them to come up onto their feet in a circle. They walked around the room, finding a tempo they liked, then gradually all joined in a common tempo. Then, coming into a circle, we sang a group song with each person having a little solo time in the center. Again, I believe all the breathing and being in this kind of singing circle was an invigorating experience for them.

They also performed mock operas in this session. In the first scenario, Bill and Rick played men whose adult children had eloped together. The next scenario involved Vladimir and Steve, in which one of them had cheated on their spouse with the other’s wife. Then, Jean-Phillippe came in as the wife. The “actors” were very funny!

This session had some great moments, as well as what was my strongest experience of countertransference. In general, I felt like I was kind of “flying by the seat of my pants”, and not really sure how these men were going to respond to the exercises I was bringing, which were different from anything I’d brought to date. I found that in my moments of greatest self-doubt, I was very aware of monitoring one particular

participant's responses, whose opinion I discovered I valued, to see if in his eyes I was making a fool of myself, or them. In my experience, he became my judge, and he was judging me harshly.

I had another similar experience of countertransference in the last few sessions working with some of the men individually, in front of the rest of the group. I was aware that part of my attention was wrapped up in my imaginings of how the rest of the group perceived me and the work I was doing with the individual at the time. Needless to say, this was quite a distraction and threatened my ability to bring all my attention to working with that individual. What helped was the individual's wish to really engage – their body and song, me, and the suggestions I brought. The strength of their wish outweighed my self-consciousness; this was also a lesson in grounding and staying present.

In another session, I taught them a song in three voices, and we all sang together. I invited them to try more than one vocal part if they felt drawn to do so.

Over the course of the eight sessions, in addition to the vocal work we did, I gave two written assignments. The first was entitled, *My Heart*, and was purely a written assignment. It was the sharing of the pieces they'd written for this assignment that had set the stage for the second assignment, which was a song called, *Being a Man in the World Today*. After each of them had presented their song in front of the rest of the group, I worked with them.

I hadn't known when I began the group whether I would work one-on-one, but it became evident after three or four sessions that, for this group, it would be the kind of work that could benefit both the individual and the group. And, I intended to do my best to meet the demands this presented.

In the end, it was interesting and exciting work. Bill brought a lovely little song with some really nice phrases, but as he sang I soon realized he wasn't breathing between phrases. I invited the group to back him up by singing a repeated "doo-wop" pattern during the rests in the song. I found myself wanting Bill to relax but still be engaged, so

asked him to face me as we held hands and both leaned back into a seated position, hanging off of each other, as it were. I don't know where the notion for assuming this position came from - it just felt right. I liked having eye contact with him as we worked, and felt like my attention and presence encouraged and supported him. By tweaking the position, I found more stability in my assuming a standing position and him sitting back. After maintaining this position for a short while, I asked Rick to help me support Bill's other arm in order to allow Bill to lean forward and make a "spread eagle" with his arms. I invited Bill to sing the phrases in legato fashion and to hold the sustained notes longer, to enjoy them. And then, when he was on his own, breathe between phrases! My sense was that his voice would be bigger and more natural if he could energetically sit back and relax into the song. I could hear it. There was a big change the last time he sang it, and he seemed to actually enjoy the process.

Another particularly powerful piece was Steve's song. On that day, I invited anyone who was ready to work individually in front of the group, and Steve volunteered. He said he felt like he had a bolt in his throat and that he needed to spit it out but wasn't sure how. I invited him to go first. He requested that men be in each corner of the space to sing his chorus. His song was about how much horrible, abusive maleness exists and is manifested in our world. When I approached him, he said he didn't *want* to feel his song, but *thought* he should. Rather than forcing anything, I invited him to take a gentler, more inclusive approach. He had not as yet put his piece to music so I chose the verse that seemed charged and invited him to sing it, allowing the melody to come up from his body, while having one hand clenching his throat. I said we'd take it slow and if he wanted to stop, we'd stop. And, he need not worry about making it pretty or musical. We dispensed with his notes and went with a spoken, "I don't want to feel this," which evolved into, "I want to fight," and then, "I want to fight fair." For a while, my hand acted as the bolt in his neck, but because I did not know how much he actually *felt* it, and I did not want to push him, I took my hand away. He wasn't ready to really drop into his material, and there also seemed to be something else emerging – something

about fighting. I invited the others to be around us in fighting stances, joining Steve in his chanted song.

When we verbally exchanged after the break, Steve shared how the fighting *fair* part was so important to him. I said that it felt important to me to include all of these parts of us: the fighters, the animals, and the falsetto-singing angels. There is power in all of them and they do not have to be *bad*.

Steve said that this group was the first occasion he had had where he did not feel ashamed to be a man, and then he thanked the group.

There are a couple of other relevant moments from this workshop series I wish to include. Carl said at one point that he enjoyed “making a fool of himself” with other people in an environment where it was totally welcome... during one improvisatory exploration of voice and movement, Jean-Phillippe became tribal: stomping, grunting, beating his chest. In another exercise, Rick was engaged right away, and after repeating the same motions a number of times, it looked as though he had pushed some boundaries for himself, making bigger, jerkier sounds, exploring his sphere. For Steve, this environment proved to be an ideal place for him to try out his big voice without having to worry about being on the right note, as it were.

I have a number of reflections on the experience of facilitating this group. Practically speaking, the biggest challenge was staying present, and trying to be open to what I was aware of inside myself, as well as what was happening with the others. Specifically, the biggest challenge was to be aware of what was I feeling in my body, or what my gut was telling me to do. I had to make an effort (as best I could, of course) to allow what was happening to happen, and ideally, include and incorporate their reactions to how I facilitated the sessions – choosing to go ahead with one or another exercise or leaving it out, based on where I gauged them to be, and what I felt would be most appropriate at the time. One of the things I tried to watch out for was the group energy, when it was the right time to do this or that exercise, and when it was the right time to take a break,

or gather the group to have an exchange, even in the middle of a session, as occurred in one of the first sessions.

There were a few surprises, too. I never really could have imagined the connections that were formed between some of the men. Also, I would not have imagined that by meeting in the physical space where we had our sessions, only after several weeks, this would have helped some of the men to immediately relax and begin breathing! But, it did. It was as if they crossed an inner threshold at the doorway – one that gave them permission to “take a load off.” Several group members would come early, to have time to stretch and settle in before we began the group.

It occurred to me that there is a lot of grace given when running a group. Something happens when you have people in a room who come together with an intention, an energy, and a wish. It is as though there is something already there that is working and helping. The leader is facilitating, and while it feels like there are an infinite number of paths we can travel, “mistakes,” in my estimation, aren’t really mistakes, they are just the path we’re following, and if I, and we, keep walking, more will be ahead.

In a certain respect, I served as the permission and guide for these men to explore their outer limits. Of course, this was not only a vocal level, but it also gave them the opportunity to explore and inhabit *this* part which sings so gently with other men, or *this* part, which regresses into a more primitive, territorial creature. And I, as facilitator, holding the space and witnessing the forays into these perhaps uncharted territories, felt a strong affirmation of the value of this work and my role in it.

I now know that I am capable of “running” a VMT group, and all that is involved: the planning, facilitating, and improvising. I also know that I need to “run” more groups in the future, and probably groups that are not just for men. I can say without reservation that these men indeed benefited from this experience. At the conclusion of our work, several of the group members expressed interest in continuing this group, but, as it turned out, conflicting schedules did not allow us to continue.

As a concluding remark: it was inspiring to do this work. There are simply not enough men working in the healing professions, and this world needs healthy men! We, as men, need a lot of help to recover from our emotionally and nutritionally deficient upbringings, and the general lack of male emotional support for what we needed then and need now. What does this mean? I have met very few healthy men: men who possess an inner strength that derives from a solid sense of self, an openness of heart, and an ability to make contact with others and experience life fully. I do not feel that I am one of those men yet, but I feel myself to be moving in that direction. And, being on the same healing path as my clients enables me to help them because that same vibration is alive in me.