

My personal story

R: I suppose the thing that hits me most as a man that is coming to the end of his working life is the impact of how I saw my need to work and be successful very much driven by my understanding of what a man was. I had a very, very successful career in advertising up to 10 years ago. And rose to the top of Irish advertising and that was really about all I knew what to do, was to work and which is what I always assumed was the right thing to be doing. From a very early stage. As a young man, I married early - I'm in the same relationship since 1972 - and in early 72 we went travelling and married in 1972 while we were away, married in Jerusalem. I came home, got my hair cut - although it doesn't look like it (he has got long hair and a beard) - but I got my hair cut, bought a suit and got a job. And set about that whole utterly middle class thing of making a home and building a career. And my task was to provide. That was kind of the beginning and end of it. I have three children that are now grown and my experience with my grandchildren. And 2 of my daughters between them, have, have 5 children - my experience of how I experience my grandchildren now is very different from how I experienced my children, because I was working and I was working furiously, 60 to 70 hours a week to create a career. And not create a career ... in a planned fashion, but to work and to keep working and to earn well. So that sense of myself was really about work.

I: Your work was the central aspect of your identity?

R: Absolutely! If I was asked, that was it! Being a father was second hand. You know, second class and being a husband, whatever that meant then, being a husband and being a father was actually about working then and providing. I bought a home very early. In Ireland certainly middle class people bought homes and now it is much broader, home ownership is much broader, but ownership is a universal ambition here in Ireland, rather than renting.

I: It's exactly the same in Belgium.

R: Previously if you were a renter, you would probably be renting from the state or the local authority and you were less successful and you were more likely to be working or non-working, non-working class. So, all of those things. So, quite quickly I became quite successful because of you work really hard, if you work obsessively, you get really well rewarded for, you get paid more, you get promoted, you're head hunted and for 25 years I never applied for a job. I was always offered a job or head hunted. Because the industry I was in was quite small, I became known and understood to be. And I moved through a variety of specialities and I just acquired experience and expertise and a reputation by working very, very hard. That was very much driven and I never questioned it. I remembered I worked in advertising and advertising related businesses and I remember in the late '80 I went to work for Company A and I was responsible for the advertising of Company A, which is the kind of pinnacle of the best advertising job in Ireland. And the company was also a long traditional huge employer in Ireland and in Dublin, with a huge reputation for an extremely paternalistic approach in terms of taking care of its employees, all aspects of its employees. So, for the first time my mother was absolutely delighted that I had a respectable job rather than a 'fly by night' type of job or whatever. So, I had achieved some kind of sense of success in her head. I mean, I stayed less than 2 years because I could not live within the organisation, because it was highly structured and layered didn't allow very much independent thought - and I went back to advertising agencies - but that sense of ... yeah... success, yes, that was really around. Ok, I was providing, I had a nice home, you know, as my children grew and they took the secondary school, one of the things that... you're able to do in Ireland is pay for secondary education of a different level - whether it is better or not is an open question - basically private secondary education. I was able to pay for that and I was able to have holidays and all of that kind of things, two cars, etc. They were the outward bits of success. And I was doing everything that I should be doing.

I: How about your wife, did she work?

R: She worked at home, she raised the children and took care of the house.

I: But she didn't have a paid job?

R: No, she didn't have a paid job.

I: And did she appreciate the fact that you were working so hard or did it give tension in the relationship?

R: No, there wasn't tension in the relationship and that was to do with both of us I suppose. One is that I was doing this and she felt very secure and that was a very huge need of hers that I recognise now and so does she and... But, yes, and we both came from traditions that our families were - don't talk about it - that kind of [incomprehensible word] over the door if there was a [incomprehensible word] over the door. Don't mention it if it wasn't a problem, would have been the way and that's the way we were for a long time and so we've gone with it, it was the process. So, that was another stereotype that I just got on with it and...

I: It wasn't really questioned. That's the way things were?

R: It wasn't really questioned, that's the way things were! (Nodding approvingly) and the other stereotype: I've been stoic in dealing with this rather than talking about it, would have been the way of a man. I suppose I grew up in a household where there was persistent violence on behalf of my father and anything that I was doing that wasn't that - as I sat out to do NOT that - would have been, so therefore was good. That was the strong influence that was there.

I: A strong influence in what way?

R: To insure that I wasn't becoming that in any fashion. Yeah...

I: And so becoming professionally successfully was something else than what your father was?

R: Yeah, absolutely. I mean I grew up in a middle class household, he was a kind of accountant, auditor, in a large family, but there was this persistent violence so... and they... so, and that was never spoken about and that was the un-said thing, it was: 'get on with it'. And it was: don't say anything in case it causes anything, so the tradition was that: don't cause conflict!

I: Don't rock the boat!

R: Yeah, so those... and...

(...)

R: And I started working.

I: And then you felt you had to prove that you would be a different type of father?

R: Yes, yes, that was a journey! I became a father when I was 25 for the first time and so I didn't know how little I knew and my wife was 21 or 22, so a young woman. So here we were with 2 and the children are 5 years apart, so we got better at it!

I: Yes, learning by doing.

R: Yeah! And it was that time, not this time, that when I look back it is very different. Now there is a whole lot more information out there. You know, I watch my daughters and they're mothering and they are learning about mothering and it is very different from when we... we had 2 books: there was 'Dr. Spock' and there was a book called 'Every woman', which was a kind of handbook. But it was only, 'Spock' was about babies and 'Every woman' was about women and their bodies, substantially their bodies, there was nothing that might tell me about being a father and all I had was this model that I had conflict with and did not want to become.

I: So you knew what you did not want to be?

R: Yeah!

I: I think that's something that comes up very often nowadays with masculinity. Most men know what they don't want to be because there is such a negative picture on masculinity and so little positive role models.

R: Yes, and I think - I heard a lot of men talk about it - is that in fact in their needing to want NOT be something, they actually become a significant piece of that. I discovered - my youngest child is now 25 - and by the time he was 10 I had basically constructed a very similar relationship with him as I had had with my father, which was quite distant and harsh and stern and adult-to-adult. And it was what clicked me into changing, the way I lived and the way I thought and the way I was. You know, I set out to change that very directly in the mid-90.

I: Tell me about the change...

R: The change was really about: 'ok, what kind of a man do I want to be?' and: 'what do I want to do and how do I want to be in the world?' and 'How do I learn how to be the man that I want to be?' and I became involved in men's groups and men's development and just awareness, the way things were for me and ... it took me about 5 years to... I stopped working insanely in 2000, to slow down I work an awful less, and as you know I turned 60 this week. I looked around in 2000, I looked around at my colleagues where I was working and I realised that most of them are 10 years younger than me and suddenly I realised: 'I don't want to do this, work this way anymore. I don't want to work this hard, actually I don't need to earn as much money as I was then. I was earning about close to a quarter million Euros a year at that stage, right at the top of that business. To earn that you have to work really, really hard. And I couldn't do it, I lost interest, I couldn't care anymore. And I want to be as involved with other men in men's groups and in working with men and I was much more interested in that. That work certainly doesn't pay a quarter of a million Euros a year (laughs)!!

I: Otherwise, please give me a call! (both laughing)

R: So, yes, I learned to operate with smaller and less flashy cars, I no longer drove fancy Alpha Romeo's and big Jeeps and settled into a much slower pace of living. I didn't do it soon enough, I stopped having regrets about the earlier years, because it has left me now in a place where I can work as much as I want to and I can pick and choose my work. I work sometimes still as a marketing consultant and I choose my people that I want to work with and, on the other side, I work with men and with people that work with men. So, it is two sides and I work for things that I feel passionate about and that give me energy. And it is not so very good right now, the past two years, you know, all about the Irish economy and government spending is cut to ribbons, something like 40 to 60% of my income comes from government spending in one way or another so I'm going through a tight phase. Previously I would have blamed myself for that, about not being successful and not being able to get work and that's a big change for me. To accept that the world has changed and actually I don't have to be able to make it right, which is what I always did. And, you know, I think I constructed a career in making things right. Literally in managing brands and managing people's approach to brands and businesses and the way they thought. That's what I did, you know. I set out to understand people and right across the board, whether it was cars or alcohol or Guinness or politics or divorce, or whatever. That's what I did for a living, you know, making things right. So I realised that I constructed a really good job for men, but it was very, very nerve-racking. Now I work with small groups of men and small businesses. And I can do that on a basis where I can actually built a connection with individuals. And it's much more rewarding, it's easier on me.

(mobile phone of researcher is switched off because it gave signal)

R: So, I suppose that was a significant change and I suppose I have been towards that for 15 years.

I: A really big shift!

R: Yeah, a really big shift!

I: Now, when we talked earlier, you say you start out as a man knowing what you don't want to become, but you know, not really... being sort of lost in a vacuum of what would you want to become: something successful and an easy way is to go for a successful career. Because that is what a lot of men do. But then...

R: Well, that was the only picture I had of anything because I grew up in a middle class family that valued learning and success in a - not a hugely material way - but 'establishment respect' was, you know. When I got the job in company A, that was success as far as my mother was concerned. That meant I was part of 'the establishment'. It would have been like working for the civil service or the bank or... that level of. The place that company A has in Irish life is very significant and I was very successful with that company so that, so respectability was valued and as you can see. I had never a very big need to be that respectable but that was a family value if you like, I had absorbed that. Although I always kept enough... something - I've always kept a beard, since 1970 so I've always in some fashion I stepped out of it. And (points to his beard) this lot is now 10 years old so, and it is about to go as well. It is time. ... Sorry, you were saying something else...

I: No, I wanted to ask - since you are working now with a lot of men's groups - do you already have now, let's say, a positive type of masculinity? What would be the essence of a positive role model of masculinity?

R: Right... it really depends on the man. For me, it is about taking responsibility for myself and some sense of autonomy and something about accepting who I am. You know, because I work with a huge variety of groups of men, most of them living on the margins or older men, men coming back from homelessness, men in recovery from addiction, so the common theme for me is about responsibility and autonomy. And that, especially men who have been living in struggle, one of the things that happens is that they become dependent and kind of vaguely institutionalised with whatever care system they have been living with. And, holding a place that is: 'yes I will be with you, but no, I will not carry your load' is the stance that I take. I don't know who wrote that, I think it is an American poem that says: 'yes, I can see that huge burden you are carrying and no I will not help you carry it, but I will help you put it down so you can see what it is'. It's that, that's and I think that's the masculinity that I expose and I do it by doing rather than saying. Demonstrated mode list rather than anything else. And the other element is really about feeling and feelings that I want to create in groups. Safety so that feelings can be shown rather than swallowed. And that it is not the end of the world to be one of them, which is everything what we have been taught not to do as men.

I: And that is typically also for masculinity, also to swallow?

R: Yes, that is the default we were taught very early on: 'Big boys don't cry, stand up dry your tears, be quite, swallow!'. Those words: Swallow that vulnerability and you know we were also taught that our feelings don't matter. You know, if I am not allowed to show them... my learning is that well, they don't. So, we could push them down in one fashion or another. And as we grow older and have access to self-medication, we medicate them away, with alcohol or other substances. And so, acknowledging that and creating for me a powerful masculinity is creating this space where men together can express those and be safe and acknowledging each other's struggle and not be successful and not be competitive so that we can be together.

I: It is a very complex relationship isn't it between vulnerability and responsibility (respondent nods heavily) and really be able to stand on that edge of taking your own responsibility and yet not closing too much down so that you would lose your vulnerability?

R: Yes, that's right and it is this stance of and it is why I use autonomy. A really powerful word that says, well, you know, and defining it so that: 'yes, I stand here in everything that I am'.

I: And what about 'connectiveness'? Belonging? Because that is something that has been very developed in femininity and how ... ?

R: Yes, for me the 'connectiveness', because we are taught to compete and sometimes violently compete and we are taught to compete with other men. That's a kind of a default. That's, it creates distance, not connection and to break down that. And one of the first questions that I ask in the group is: 'how do we make it safe for you to be here?' So by talking about safety first of all, recognises that it feels not safe. That's the main thing. And maybe for the first time with some men they are allowed to say that out loud. You know, so you can then speak about confidentiality, you can speak about - there is an Irish habit which we call 'slagging', which is joking about difficulties. And I might be slagged for about my beard, I might be slagged about my hair, and it's gentle, but there is always a potentially hurtful thing in there. So, we then write a set of rules which are about. And I describe that as building community and creating community and belonging. And I do this work with big groups with 60 to 70 men and, you know, by being quite explicit, you can create safety in that kind of a community. And I have found, I can fly halfway across the world and find a group of similar minded men and feel safe with men that I have never met before. Because they ascribe to the same sense. And that is something that women have kind of automatically because they don't have to compete. That's my understanding. I have no academic research back up for it, but that is my understanding of how I grew to be the man I am and how I changed to be the man I am. And by explicitly doing it - there is also something in that explicitness - that works for men. It's about me asking the question: 'What do you need to feel safe here?' That's the autonomy, but it is also an invitation to say what I need and so is an invitation to vulnerability, so there's two sides to it. And that is not just: show my feelings. I had one man look me in the eye and point to a man across the circle and say: 'I need him to put his weapon in the car'. And the other man, stands up, leaves out and goes out to his van and comes back without his jacket. I have no idea what the weapon was, but this kind of thing... well, I have a good idea what the weapon was because this was a group that was involved in serious crime. But that was a really explicit physical safety issue. But it could be just I need people to say that they will hold what happens here confidentially. Whatever it is, but it actually says to you: 'What do you need? And it allows both of those extremes. A man might say: 'well, there are times when I'm not able to talk or I don't want to talk' and then I need that respected. So, whatever the... so that's the autonomy and that's asking the group to respect his need, which builds the connection, and builds the safety. That's how we, the way I see it, that's how we create community, by asking something of it. And then offering something to it.

I: I was wondering also, the big change that you went through with regards to your masculine identity, how did it influence your relationship with your wife?

R: Hugely, hugely! First of all, I was available more. I was there, significantly more. I was offering more and asking for more. And we separated and we went back together and in the past as the children grew and moved away, we became one. We were around each other more. We now both work from home. And as my wife said - she works as an aroma therapist and she works with another therapy called neurodevelopment which is working with children that are dyslexic or so - so we spend a lot of time in the same place together and as the children grew and left we were now at the stage where there is just the two of us. There was the two of us and the dog. Three years ago there was two of us, the dog and my son. And now we have more time which we work at spending together and, yeah... we are, now are conscious about the relationship rather than unconscious of it and working at it. And I suppose, I'm 60, I have another 20 years and that will be the span of the relationship. So that is another 20 years together and more and more of it will be together. And we have a house in the country and when the recession changes we'd sell the house in Dublin and live from the country. And yeah... we moved into a slower relationship and a closer relationship is my sense of it.

I: Nice, you gained quality!

R: Yes, yes, yes, and fortunately we have a house in the country because I did all that work. It did pay off. And it is on that kind of basis, I now drive a small old car. And she drives a small old car. We don't need huge big station wagons. It was lovely to have them and drive around Europe. That was great at the time but...

I: That is not what life is about...?

R: Not a lot, no, it was filling gaps! And, yeah, it was, I suppose, I now take a lot less responsibility in that relationship than I would have previously.

I: What sort of responsibility?

R: In all kinds of things: like solving problems. An awful lot I hear myself saying things like: 'I don't know'. Where previously I would work out an answer or find an answer. I'm not the one that sorts out where we buy our electricity anymore. You know, so I discovered that our electricity supplier has changed and I don't even have to know the why. And that was never the relationship. I was the one that lived in the business world if you like, and the world at large, and she took care of the house herself and took care of me to a significant degree and the children and it was, you know, a very traditional balance. I suspect the things that was, she managed all of the funds. I just earned all of the money, it went into the bank and she managed all of that. And there was always lots of money there, so it was never an issue. Our background is a large working class family and her habit would have been not to spend, so we always lived well but never hugely.

I: Ok, thank you very much!

Metadata

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TAGS: breadwinner, caring/carer/care giver, conflict, family life, fatherhood, housewife/houseman, marriage/co-habitation, responsibility, roles/role pattern, support, upbringing, prejudice, school, (not) questioning/(no) doubts, (un-)happiness, behaviour, fulfilment, masculinity, ownership, peer group, role model, weak(-ness), holidays, (un)-paid work, ambition, career path, occupation/job, salary/income/allowance, consumption, house/housing, urban context, physical violence, psychological violence, safety

Male, 60 Ireland

Gender did matter