

# Return to the

Wild  
Side

If you go  
down to the  
woods, you'd  
better go in  
disguise...  
MICK COOPER  
tries on the  
Wild Man  
mask for size



Ya'Acov Darling Khan

We used to have a joke on *Achilles Heel*, the radical men's magazine that I work on. It's not a very funny joke, but then, we 'new men' have never been famed for our sense of humour. The joke went like this: every time someone said the word 'mythopoetic', everyone else would chorus the word 'bollocks' after it. 'Mythopoetic/bollocks' — after a while the words went together like 'new man' and 'smug hypocritical git.'

Of course, the joke is even less funny if you don't know what 'mythopoetic' means. And I would explain it to you — except that I don't know myself. Or rather I don't know in the strict sense, but I do know what it's come to mean. Ever heard of Robert Bly, *Iron John* or the 'Wild Man'? Ever seen programmes about half-naked men running through the woods, banging on drums, and sitting in sweat-lodges? That's the mythopoetic men's movement, started in America in the late eighties by Robert Bly — poet, writer, political activist and workshop facilitator.

A few years ago, Robert Bly wrote *Iron John*, a book that has become the mythopoetic bible. *Iron John* contains a number of different strands of thought, but its central thesis is that men have become 'soft', that they've spent too much time looking for their passive, caring, 'feminine' side. Bly argues that men now need to tap into a stronger, wilder, more 'masculine' energy — what he calls the inner 'Wild Man.' The mythopoetic men's movement believes men can do this in various ways: by working with

ancient myths and legends, by spending time in communion with nature, and by participating in traditional male rituals and ceremonies.

In the autumn of 1991, Bly came to England to promote *Iron John*. It was not a great success. The British may disagree on most things, but the idea that men should run around the woods beating drums brought an almost unanimous 'bollocks' from every corner of the country — from *Daily Telegraph* reviewers to radical feminists. Bly was virtually drowned beneath the waves of British cynicism. I loved it. And I joined in.

*The Wild Man: Gospel or Gobshite* I wrote for the autumn 1991 issue of *Achilles Heel*. It didn't take me long to decide. 'Tapping the "Wild Man" may balance out the assertiveness of a few "New Men",' I wrote, 'but for most it will simply reinforce pre-existing behaviours.' What's more, I argued, Bly's notion of an instinctual, 'inner' masculinity suggests that there are innate differences between the sexes and could ultimately hail a return to 'the heady days of wild men and mothering women.'

And, of course, I took the piss. To open my article I quoted a review of a men's weekend that to me sounded patently absurd: 'Inside the small womb-like structure of the sweat-lodge we huddle naked in the darkness and heat,' it went, 'sweating, chanting and praying together for purification and guidance ... One by one, on hands and knees, our bodies streaked with sweat and earth, we emerge from the lodge, and with shouts of delight plunge into the cold pond water.'

That was funny. What wasn't so funny, however, was actually being in a sweat-lodge. Having suspended my cynicism about the mythopoetic men's movement for long enough actually to find out something about it, I began to realise that it was more than just 'insubstantial neuro-biological mumbo-jumbo,' as I'd described it in *Achilles Heel*. I read Sam Keen's *Fire in the Belly*, John Lee's *At My Father's Wedding*, and then I decide to take things further. Last autumn I went off for 'A Long Weekend of Shamanic Dance, Theatrical Release Work and Ceremony,' at Ashton Lodge, Dorset, led by Ya'Acov Darling-Khan of 'Five to Midnight' and Malcolm Sterne of the Alternatives Programme at St. James's, Piccadilly.

Now I should say straight away that this was not intended as a mythopoetic men's weekend. As Ya'Acov put it: 'I'm not associated with it. I've never been part of it. I don't even know what

"mythopoetic" means.' But compared with the sorts of anti-sexist men's workshops that I've participated in previously, the similarities between Ya'Acov's work and Bly's were a lot more salient for me than the differences. Anti-sexist men's work is based on the idea that men are conditioned to behave in 'masculine' ways: aggressive, unemotional, active, controlling, misogynistic. So by talking about this socialisation, men can learn to develop a more sensitive, passive, and emotional self. Both Bly and Ya'Acov, on the other hand, place an emphasis on the need for men to also find their strength and power. The weekend was about being active and energetic, using our bodies instead of just talking. There was dance, story-telling and ritual to facilitate this process. And, of course, there was a sweat-lodge — one of the key activities of the American mythopoetic men's movement.


But what is a sweat-lodge? Structurally it's a dome shape lattice of branches, maybe three yards in diameter and a yard high, over which are thrown blankets and a tarpaulin. At the centre of the lodge there's a pit about a foot deep. Into it are placed red-hot

rocks. When the sweat-lodge gets going, water is poured onto the rocks to produce a steam-bath effect. The sweat-lodge is a traditional Native American ritual, used for purification and to communicate with the spirits.

On Saturday evening, we lined up outside the sweat-lodge. It was an eerie sight: 25 men, naked except for face paints and towels clutched to their groins, lit up by the flickering orange light of the nearby camp fire. As I walked towards the sweat-lodge I could feel my bare feet squidge into the muddy brown earth.

Crawling on my hands and knees inside the lodge, the first thing that struck me was the darkness. I don't know what I'd been expecting (neon lights?), but the near-blackness gave the inside of the sweat-lodge a distinctly dream-like quality. I found my place in the north-east of the lodge — the seat of the wise

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ancestors — and watched as the just-perceivable shadows of the other men flitted against the tarpaulin. When everyone had entered, hot rocks were placed in the pit. Ya'Acov thanked them for their heat and rubbed each one with a sage-branch so that they sparkled in the blackness like fairy lights. The sweat-lodge filled with the aroma of burning sage. It was beautiful. I loved it.

Then it started.

I'm not one for heat. I have a reputation for walking around in the middle of the winter in a T-shirt. And when Ya'Acov scooped the first few handfuls of water onto the rocks it occurred to me for the first time why this was called a sweat-lodge — because you sweat, and sweat in a way that I had never done before. Within a few minutes, I found the heat unbearably suffocating.

Now if this was one of my anti-sexist men's weekends, I'd be standing up at this point and saying, 'I'm feeling perspirationally-challenged. I'm going to sit this one out.' The anti-sexist men's movement seems to have this ethos that any form of endurance is a display of machismo and therefore wrong. The mythopoetic men's movement, on the other hand, talks a lot about the 'warrior' — the side of us that is wilful and enduring, the part which doesn't just give up when things get difficult. Ya'Acov had said that the sweat-lodge was a place for the warrior, and I was beginning to see what he meant. But it felt good to grit my teeth again. If I'd learnt at my anti-sexist men's weekends that it was OK to give up, here I was learning that it was also OK to keep on pushing.

Back at the sweat-lodge, Ya'Acov was inviting in the spirits. 'Oh Grandfather Eagle,' he called out, 'bless us with your wisdom and far-sightedness. Oh spirits of the East Winds, come and visit your little brothers who await you.' Despite the heat I closed my eyes and tried to imagine all the different ethereal forms sweeping into the lodge. No chance! The only spirit I could think about was a freezing cold vodka and orange. Refusing to give in, I decided to do what Ya'Acov had suggested earlier in the day and send out some invitations of my own.

'Oh great spirit of the gerbil,' I shouted out, 'come to our humble lodging. Spirit of the Banana Nesquik,' I continued, 'I'm dying of thirst. Please come and relieve your little brother of his parchement.'

Samuel, one of the warmest men on the weekend (emotionally as well as bodily by now), was sitting next to me in the lodge (I've changed the names of the workshop participants). Before long, he began crying out to the spirits as well. Soon, the two of us were virtually drowning out Ya'Acov, inviting in anything that came into our heads: animals, rocks, learned rabbis. Despite the intense heat, my will-power had carried me past the pain barrier and I was beginning to enjoy myself — no doubt in the way that a masochist enjoys being tied up. The hotter the lodge, the

more I called out, and the more I whipped myself up into some sort of ecstatic frenzy.

I began to invite in my ancestral spirits: my grandfather, my great-grandfather, my relatives who were slaughtered at Auschwitz. As I invited in the last of these, the atmosphere in the lodge suddenly changed. I began to feel suffocated, oppressed by the heat and darkness. As dreams silently snake into nightmares, so the sweat-lodge momentarily transformed into a place of fear. For one brief, terrifying moment, I felt myself in the crushing blackness of a gas chamber, violently squeezed against panicking, screaming bodies. I burst out into tears and held onto Samuel's hand. He held onto me.

The sweat-lodge was a very physical affair, and much of Ya'Acov's work is on the physical plane. 'Five to Midnight' work mainly with dance, and for the greater part of the weekend that's what we did. But *Strictly Ballroom* it was not. Ya'Acov's work is based on the 'five rhythm system' of dancing, shaman, Gabrielle Roth. The basic idea is that through dancing five different rhythms — flowing, staccato, chaos, lyrical, stillness — we can get in touch with our bodies and our psyches. We can become raw, impulsive and alive. It's about finding our energy, a process very different to the anti-sexist men's struggle to relinquish power.

Back at the sweat lodge, we were in the process of cutting the ties with our parents. Ya'Acov asked us to visualise a cord that held us to our mother and father, and then to cut it with a knife, if we were ready. Like Ya'Acov, much of Bly's work focuses on the relationships between boys and their parents — particularly the father. Bly argues that because fathers are so often absent, boys have no-one to teach them what it means to be a man. When they grow up, then, they are unable to be mature and responsible men and instead continue to look to their fathers as someone to parent them. Cutting the ties with the mother and father is an essential part of men finally owning their own manhood.

But it's not easy. And a story that one of the men on the

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weekend, Jake, told to us, demonstrated how painful cutting those ties can be. The story, one of Bly's, begins with a father and son out hunting. The father catches a rat and gives it to the son, but because the son thinks it's of no consequence, he throws it away. When the father asks for the rat back to roast, the son tells him what happened and the father, in his rage, attacks the son and leaves him for dead. But the son is still alive, and that night he goes to a neighbouring village. He is taken in by the king and looked after for many years. The king treats him well, but when the son is much older, the original father comes to the village and asks for his son back. The son is offered a choice: either he can kill the father and stay with the king, or kill the king and stay with the father.

Jake asked us what we would do if we were the son. Most of us said we'd kill the king. But why? The reason for me was that I felt guilty. However much my father had hurt me, however much returning to him would stop me from getting what I wanted, I couldn't possibly 'kill' him. And it's a symbolic choice. It reflects the fact that I'm too scared to pull away from my own father — to assert myself as a man in my own right —

because I don't want to hurt my dad. I want to be nice, to care for him, to ensure that he's happy. But in doing so, a lot of the time I'm forgetting about my own needs, my own power and my own pleasure.

Such a realisation is an important part of the mythopoetic process. The anti-sexist perspective tends to start from the position that men are basically selfish and they need to learn to think about others. Bly's perspective

is that men are often afraid to ask for what they want and that they need to learn to say 'no'. I can certainly identify with that. For years I went round thinking, 'All men are bastards... all men are bastards... all men are bastards...'

I'm a bastard... I'm a bastard,' until one day I suddenly thought to myself, 'Hold on, I'm not!' I *didn't* just think about myself when I made

decisions. I was very concerned how my actions would affect others. Sure, I did often end up hurting people around me, but it was rarely a conscious decision — often I hurt people through trying *not* to hurt them.

And maybe now we come to one of the key criticisms of Bly's work — the issue of male power. As many feminists and anti-sexist men have put it, 'Why in hell should we be encouraging men to find their power and strength when they're so bloody

powerful and strong anyway?' It's a point that I use to argue myself but I think today my perspective is different. It's true that in contemporary society men are more powerful than women — particularly in the economic sphere — but that doesn't mean that men *feel* more powerful than women. I think some feminists have made the mistake of assuming that because *they* see men as powerful, men therefore see *themselves* as powerful. But the truth is that most men I know feel powerless. They feel powerless in their jobs, they feel powerless to other men, and often they feel powerless to women.

And I think that men's sexist behaviour often comes out of feeling powerless and threatened, rather than powerful and arrogant. If you look at history, oppression generally arises from seeing the enemy as strong rather than weak. The Nazis believed the Elders Of Zion were plotting to take over the world. The National Front see the blacks as 'invading Britain'. It's a fear of one's own weaknesses that often lies behind prejudice and oppression.

So maybe by discovering an inner power, by getting a greater sense of their own strength, men will actually behave less oppressively towards women. When we know we're OK, we don't need to treat other people like dirt to prove it. We're more responsive and accepting of others, and we've got more time to look to their needs instead of always feeling that we're not getting our own needs met. What's more, being powerful doesn't necessarily mean we oppress others. To me it means that we're clear about what we want, but we're also ready to negotiate.

As the sweat-lodge neared its end, a strange thing happened. Staring into the darkness, I had a dream-like vision of a heron walking into the centre of the sweat-lodge, and then from the other side a hedgehog. They stood in the centre facing each other, and then the heron opened up its beak and the hedgehog crawled inside. I thought about the image for a long time afterwards, and maybe what it's telling me is that it's possible to combine the soft, anti-sexist, not-wanting-to-hurt side of me — the heron, with the tougher, wilder, more powerful side — the hedgehog. And if all my anti-sexist weekends have brought out the heron in me, my time with Ya'Acov helped me dig down in to the hedgehog. One of the last things we did on the workshop was to write a short poem to sum up the weekend. I wrote this:

Vision of lyrical grace —  
Heron. Inside... a hedgehog,  
Just in case.

Ya'Acov and Malcolm will be running a men's workshop in June. For further details about this weekend or other 'Five to Midnight' work please contact: The Administrator, Nappers Crossing, Staverton, South Devon TQ9 6PD (080426 655).

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tards... all men  
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