

# Radio National -The Spirit of Things – Boys to Men

December 2011

**Rachael Kohn:** After I get that sheriff's badge from the award winning filmmaker Frederick Marx, then I'll need a holster, and then a maybe horse. I just might ride off into the sunset.

But before I do, we have someone else to hear from, and that's Paul Henley. He's originally from the UK, and has worked in Australia for 20 years in housing, youth, and family issues relating especially to boys. He's worked in restorative justice for New South Wales Juvenile Justice. In my earlier conversation with Frederick Marx he mentioned an organisation called Pathways. So I called up Paul, who was the co-founder of the [Pathways Foundation](#) and who is now its National Training Manager.

Paul, when did Pathways Foundation begin? What was its origins?

**Paul Henley:** Its origins were back in the early '90s when a number of the men around the country independently were doing work with boys. And then we met together in '96 and decided that the coincidence was too strong and we felt as though it was a call by a spirit, if you like, to come together and to start this work.

**Rachael Kohn:** Why did you want to work with boys?

**Paul Henley:** Originally my passion was working with young people. My history comes from working with young people, both in Europe and in Australia. And at the time I was working with men, looking at emotional issues around men. And one of the things that come from those groups was a real need for men to support and work with their sons, and from that work really Pathways was created.

**Rachael Kohn:** Do you have a son? Were you working with a son?

**Paul Henley:** No, in actual fact I've got two daughters, but because I have worked with many boys, especially boys at risk, over the years, I feel as though I've got many sons out there.

**Rachael Kohn:** And from your experience, do you see a common trait in boys which is a warning signal to you?

**Paul Henley:** Absolutely. I think we can look at the statistics around youth suicide and many of the other issues facing our youth today. And maybe I've got a little quote here that relates to the sort of work that we have, from an African teacher who suggests that 'Civilisation that lacks rites of passage has a sick soul. You know it is sick for three reasons; there are no elders, the young are violent, and the adults are bewildered.' And to me that sums up the sort of experiences that I was having as a worker with youth when I was putting youth off the street, taking the needles out of their arm, going back the next week and the same people were there, and it was very frustrating to keep on in that cycle.

**Rachael Kohn:** And is it rites of passage that Pathways Foundation offers to young boys?

**Paul Henley:** Absolutely, and it's not just to young boys. The rites of passage is really a map, from my perspective, and it is a map that our ancestors knew very well, and it was one of the most important ceremonies for any society. And can I suggest that it's just not a one-off event in your life, it's an ongoing process, there are many rites of passage, but one of the most important ones is for our adolescents moving from boys to young men, and it's a threshold that has huge consequences if it's not done correctly.

**Rachael Kohn:** Indeed, how does one do it correctly? Where do you draw your blueprint from, as it were?

**Paul Henley:** When we all first met we were all quite inexperienced, and can I suggest that none of us were actually, if you like, initiated men, we all had to find this information and understanding from many of the writings of our ancestors. And we got a lot of information, and then we sat down and worked out what were the needs in a contemporary society and how can we change those real key elements in the rites of passage to support appropriately a modern society. And there were three elements when we started off, which were separation, challenge and return. And these were the concepts that our ancestors used in all their rites of passage. One of the things that we didn't really understand at the time is that there was a fourth element, and we took that fourth element for granted, and that was connection.

So now we have four elements that we recognise very strongly in any rites of passage. Separation, which is really leaving everything behind, and it needs to be the iPods and the iPhones, all that electronic gear, that all gets left behind, including maybe some of those business people's continuation of being connected to the outside world via telephone. We then have connection, so we create community inside of that camp. So the community itself starts to really form a support role.

And then there is challenge. In all of our lives we have challenges, and certainly moving from boy to young man in itself is a challenge, so we create safe but solid challenges throughout the camp. Then of course there's the return, and the return is about not just returning to community and returning to mother, it is also returning to self. And so there are a number of processes that we go through that allows that connection to happen about returning to self and returning to community.

**Rachael Kohn:** I understand you just had a camp this weekend. So did you journey through those four elements?

**Paul Henley:** Absolutely. The camp program itself has been written and we keep pretty well close to that. Of course when you've got participants, their needs and their wants and individualities change the program somewhat, but pretty well we keep to that program. And the thing about the program itself, it is laid down, like any rites of passage, like a map. So the ability to follow that program and of course the greater number of its parts creates something more. So we tap into those energetics, if you like, to make sure that those energetics advise us of where the program needs to go to support the individual people in that program.

**Rachael Kohn:** Paul, what sort of transitions have you seen happen in front of your eyes?

**Paul Henley:** The transitions sometimes are quite dramatic when people suddenly have an epiphany. I wonder if I could just read you a couple of testimonials, particularly from mothers who receive back the father and son, and this is from Marie. 'Bringing extended family was a very important part of this program for us. Grandmother never felt so special at the return day ceremony. I saw an immediate benefit for my husband and feel my son has changed. He even did his dirty washing when he got home from camp...'

**Rachael Kohn:** Well, that's an improvement, isn't it!

**Paul Henley:** Well, if that's just an indication of the sort of change that can happen...but it's not just those practical things, this journey is not just an external journey for boys and men, it is also an internal journey, and for many of the men and the boys that come, they get an opportunity to talk about stories that they may have never heard before.

**Rachael Kohn:** What are the sorts of problems that they are struggling with? What do you think are the character traits that you see in boys that really need to be worked on?

**Paul Henley:** I think it is not just an intellectual concept, it is a biological key. Each of our young people, whether they be boys or girls, have a biological key, and part of that biological key is separation. If we don't organise a separation and support that separation from family, then what we get is dysfunctional behaviour in order for that separation to be created.

And many of our parents coming along to the program are really at their wits end understanding why their son who a few years ago was a sweet angel has now turned into this six-foot hulk that demands a situation that requires them to discipline or requires them to push him away. In many ways what the boys are looking for is they are looking for an unconscious separation, and what we suggest is that unless this rite of passage comes, then that relationship between the boy and parents is going to get to a point where the boy forces separation.

So what we hope is that during this process that we go through a conscious way of that separation, allowing the boys to understand who they might be, to hear stories from men who have gone through that experience before, not just their father but many of the men in the camp, so they become in many ways uncles for those boys. They get to hear those stories and they get to understand what their own unconscious process really is.

**Rachael Kohn:** And what do the boys tell you or the young men tell you after they've been through one of these camps?

**Paul Henley:** Here's a thing from Tom who was a young boy on this particular camp we've just come from, and his realisation at the end of the camp was that this was a crucial experience for him and he says, 'It allowed me to realise how important the transition to manhood really is.'

So I suppose what we're doing, Rachael, is we're bringing up a consciousness about this transition. If this transition is done in a conscious and appropriate way, then the benefits are huge. It means that relationship is not something that young people move away from, it is actually something they walk towards.

**Rachael Kohn:** Paul, can I ask you more specifically what happens at the camp. For example, how does it differ from, say, an adventure weekend for boys?

**Paul Henley:** An adventure weekend really is an external experience, and it's normally for the boy to have and then he comes back to family. What this experience is is a whole family where the father is strongly involved or mentors or sometimes we have grandfathers coming with the boys, and so on the camp itself there are lots of experiences where those relationships get deeper. The difference between an internal or an external process is that the boys, unconsciously to begin with, are moving towards consciousness, start to have a realisation of what it is to be a man, because what they've got in front of them is 30 or 40 men willing to be there for them to go through this process. So there's a huge reflection.

And it's also part of the experience of the mother. Mother needs to learn how to let go of the boy, allowing him to walk towards young man. And the mothers really need support for that process to happen. There is no longer a tribe of other women around them giving them support around that process, and so our female leaders offer encouragement and work with the women while the father and son are on camp, so that when the boy returns there's a new parenting situation being created. Because in many ways rites of passage is the delivery tool, but in actual fact this is a parenting education program. So it's a whole family experience, and so when the boy comes back into family there is a range of knowledge that allows the whole family to move towards supporting that boy to walk towards manhood.

**Rachael Kohn:** So how long is someone involved in Pathways, in the program?

**Paul Henley:** The actual program itself, it really starts a few weeks beforehand when we have a meeting with the parents and we call this the first night, so it is really the first night of the program, and it's just for parents, and we talk about some of the issues they may be having, some of the problems that they are facing with their young people. And we prepare them for the camp. A couple of weeks later we have a leaving ceremony where the mothers and fathers are involved, and we take the fathers and the boys off, leaving the mothers at the hall with the female leaders supporting them.

We then go on camp, and of course there is a five-day camp, completed by a return at the end. Then there's a reunion at the end of that process, about two or three weeks afterwards, to bring that community which has been formed on camp...and sometimes the relationships formed on that camp are lifelong relationships. Then we offer for the boys, and also for the girls, but for the boys we offer them to come back within nine months, we use nine months as a gestation period for their maturity to start to develop, we bring them back and offer them to come on staff as a returning young man. They get involved in a team behind-the-scenes and really they are the stepping stone between the boys and the leaders, so that the boys feel more comfortable.

Then many of our returning young men have been through a number of camps, and we offer them an opportunity to come back and join our leadership team, the young leaders. And they are mentored and supported through that. So how wonderful these days to be able to say that a boy that went through his rites of passage when he was 13 is now 20 and he's coming back and he's leading other men and boys through the same process.

**Rachael Kohn:** Gosh, that sounds like a very good cycle to have got going. How many people have been through this workshop now?

**Paul Henley:** The workshop started back in '93, and we've probably gone through and had about 9,000 young people come through the program to this date, but it's a bit like a pebble into a pond, you know, if you throw a pebble into a pond what it creates is ripples and the effects go out. So, many of those 9,000 boys have created ripples with their siblings, with their friends, their families have been affected. We encourage grandfathers and grandmothers to be part of the process and honour them as elders. So that 9,000 multiplies out as the ripples from that initial pebble going into that pond.

**Rachael Kohn:** Finally, what sort of traditions do you draw on in your practices and rituals?

**Paul Henley:** We draw on many of the ancestors' rituals, many of the Aboriginal people of this land, with permission, we work with them. So, many of the ceremonies and parts of ceremonies they offer us allow us to ground into what is really an experience of the natural world. And if I can quote something from one of your books *Curious Obsessions*, 'The natural world as much as the human world is embedded with spiritual values.' Again, so we tap into those spiritual values in the natural environment, allowing all of those elements that maybe we know we don't know to support this wonderful experience of a boy moving from boy to young man.

**Rachael Kohn:** Paul Henley, thank you so much for being on *The Spirit of Things* and shining a light into this obviously burgeoning new tradition that is helping boys to become men, and I understand also girls to become young women.

**Paul Henley:** Absolutely, it's a program that is growing very quickly with women, Pathways into Womanhood. A slight difference because the journey for girls is different for boys, and so it's an inward journey for girls and more of an external journey for boys.

**Rachael Kohn:** Once again, thank you so much.

**Paul Henley:** Thank you very much, Rachael.

**Rachael Kohn:** Paul Henley is the National Training Manager of Pathways Foundation, and you can find a link to it on our website at [abc.net.au/rn/spiritofthings](http://abc.net.au/rn/spiritofthings). And while you're there you can see photos and links to websites of our guests today. And also check out the transcript for last week's program on Goddess.

I hope you're all enjoying the new look websites on Radio National.

December 20th begins the Jewish Festival of Lights, Hanukkah. [Next week](#), come with me and climb around the premier archaeological site in Jerusalem, the palace of David. And also hear from two women who took 11 years to compile the world's most interesting Jewish cookbook. That's Stones and Soup next week on *The Spirit of Things* with me, Rachael Kohn.