

Learning to Be Vulnerable: A Courage & Renewal Men's Retreat

By Jeff Creswell

Breitenbush Hot Springs is the ideal place for holding a Courage & Renewal retreat for men. Located deep in the ancient Cascade forests between Mt. Hood and Mt. Jefferson where for hundreds of years, Kalapuya, Wasco, and Molalla people used the springs for medicinal and spiritual purposes, Breitenbush offers a sheltering, safe space for men to come together to experience the land, the healing waters, and the fellowship of one another.

As a Courage & Renewal facilitator for the last sixteen years I have always been curious about the fact that our work is dominated by women. In a circle of twenty people it would be unusual to have more than two or three men beside myself.

- Was there something about the work that made men uncomfortable?
- Would a retreat designed specifically for men be any different?
- Could we create safe space for men to be vulnerable and to show up with their true selves?

These were some of the questions I was holding as I began planning with Dan Hines for our men's retreat.

We were happy to have fifteen men sign up for the retreat. It was a diverse group ranging in age from 24 to 74. We had two father and son pairs, three business partners, a climate scientist, and a sculptor. About two thirds of the men at the retreat had found us through the Breitenbush website, not through our traditional Courage & Renewal networks.

Our meeting space was a yurt down by the river, a lovely, warm, open space that felt comfortable and welcoming. Although we had arrived early in the afternoon, Breitenbush hosts many different groups so we would not meet our group until after dinner. As we set up our meeting space and formed our circle we imagined who would be sitting here with us for the next three days.

We went to a Breitenbush orientation meeting after dinner before our first session and Dan and I both looked around at the men present wondering who would be a part of our group? I made mental notes of the men I was sure would be in our circle and the ones that I was sure

would not be. I was wrong almost every time. So much for my stereotypes of men who would come to a Courage retreat.

A man needs to love and to hate at the same moment,
to laugh and cry with the same eyes,
with the same hands to throw stones and to gather them,
to make love in war and war in love.
And to hate and forgive and remember and forget,
to arrange and confuse, to eat and to digest
what history
takes years and years to do.
-Yehuda Amichai

Here we were, seventeen men sitting in a circle and reading these words as Dan spoke them aloud. The silence in the room was full. We looked at each other. We looked down. We closed our eyes. As for me, I took a deep breath and wondered if I could trust the process. Could we come together as a group of men to create a safe space where our souls would show up? Would I be able to hold this space with a group of men?

We passed around the Touchstones and read them out loud. Here were the agreements we were making with each other. I have learned over the years of facilitating Courage circles that these boundary markers are key to establishing safe space. But I wondered if they would work in a men's only retreat. Trust the process, I said to myself. I know that it works and I know that I can rest into this offering. But it's not easy.

I have grown to deeply appreciate the concept of paradox in my Courage & Renewal work. One of the paradoxes I always hold as I begin a retreat is that I am responsible for holding the safe space for participants at the same time that I am holding a space for me to do my own inner work. I have always struggled with an image of masculinity that I didn't fit into very well. Here I was in a group of men who collectively represented all the things that I saw as traditionally male and that I didn't live up to. I wanted to be able to rest into this paradox and allow the work of our circle to work on me just as I wanted it to work on the men present.

After our first session together Dan and I went to the hot springs for a soak before bed. We had so much anticipation, so much humility. We had already discovered that our preconceived ideas of who these men might be were completely wrong. This was a group of guys who were ready to show up. We were looking forward to the next morning when

we were going to spend our time together on a hike in this beautiful mountain wilderness.

The next morning we started the day with a soak while we watched the sunrise on a misty, drizzly morning. I was aware of the sheltering, softening presence of the hot springs waters which seemed to be literally holding us, nurturing us, caring for us. There is a vulnerability to sitting naked in a hot springs and relaxing back in the warm waters. I could see that this was an essential part of our retreat, even though we all weren't going to the springs together. Yet the healing waters, which have been cradling and healing people for hundreds of years, were supporting us as we came together in our circle of trust.

Our morning hike began in a light drizzle. We hiked up to a beautiful rock outcropping that overlooked a valley with a river below. Much of the walk was done in silence. Silence was literally the ground on which we all stood throughout our time together. Silence was the space where we met each other, man to man, face to face. We didn't have to prove anything. We didn't have to be anything other than ourselves. And best of all we didn't have to try and live up to some unrealistic image of what it means to be a man. We walked in silence. We sat in silence. And we were able to be ourselves.

Dust in our eyes our own boots kicked up
Heartsick we nursed along the way we picked up
You may not see it when it's sticking to your skin
But we're better off for all that we let in
-The Indigo Girls

As we gathered in the afternoon after lunch and a soak we listened to this song by the Indigo Girls. It seemed a fitting song following our morning walk. We had a time to journal and one of the prompts that we were offered proved powerful and transforming for me, personally, the paradox of doing my own work while holding the space for others to do their work.

Having spent the last day and a half with this group of men it was so clear to me what was sticking to my skin. It was my image of what it means to be a man, an image that I now knew so clearly was wrong, and no longer served me. It was time to let it go. In the safe space of this circle I knew I didn't have to live up to any image of what it means to be a man. I was already a man, fully, completely, beautifully a man just like all the rest of the men in our circle. I didn't have to prove anything to anyone because I was already accepted for who I was. It was time to let go of a struggle I had lived with since I was a teenager. It was time to live into my true self as a man.

We ended this session before dinner by reading "A Ritual to Read to Each Other, a poem by William Stafford. We read it out loud together. The final stanza spoke deeply to me of the transformation happening in this group of men, and in me.

For it is important that awake people be awake,
or a breaking line may discourage them back to
sleep;
the signals we give - yes or no, or maybe -
should be clear: the darkness around us is deep.

That evening we had a short session and then invited anyone who wanted to come and have a soak in the silent pool. Pitch dark with only the stars for light, there was a closeness that didn't need words for those of us who went. It was enough just to know we were there together. Words were unnecessary.

The next morning was sunny and we spent it outside, where we let the natural world speak to us in the silence. We each had an hour and a half to create something with the natural world around us, to let it speak to us, draw us out, inspire us. When we came back together we walked around on a gallery walk to see each other's creations. I was most impressed by the variety of expressions.

Each man had created something that uniquely expressed his personality, his strengths, and his passions. There were works that were large and required a lot of physical effort to create. Then there were works that were delicate, simple and spare. Some of the men took the entire time and barely finished. Others spent a lot of time in silence waiting to be inspired and finished early with time to just be and enjoy the sunshine. There was a great freedom in knowing that each of us could pay attention to our own inner teacher and do what was right for us.

The gallery walk was powerful. One of the men had a good camera and volunteered to photograph each work. Somehow this honored the work in a way that increased its stature. We walked through the forest, the meadow, down by the river and were startled, surprised, amazed, delighted, and quieted by the different expressions we saw.

In the afternoon we held clearness committees. At this point in the retreat the group was ready for this, the deepest and most powerful part of Courage & Renewal work. We had three committees. Again, spacious silence held each group and we sat with each other deeply listening. There was a sense of something profound in these clearness

committees. I believe that for most of us this was a completely new experience. Men do not show their vulnerability to each other easily, if at all. This felt like sacred time.

After dinner we paired up and sat facing each other. We looked into each other's eyes. I was startled to realize how rarely I had ever looked directly into another man's eyes. It felt right in this circle where we had come to trust one another. We had one partner ask the question, "Who are you?" Without thinking about it the other partner would answer and the question was repeated. This went on for five minutes. Then, after a time of silence the roles were switched. There were tears for many of us. For me, they were tears of gratitude and wonder. Being able to be myself in the company of men was so freeing. I felt great love for these men, my brothers, who had given me this gift.

On our last morning we had time to reflect on our experience together and share a walk and talk. It was good to listen to another man on the retreat and to hear his experience. I was able to talk about the transformation that had occurred in me. My partner shared a similarly profound transformation for him. We walked in the beautiful woods around Breitenbush and felt so held, by the place and by each other.

We allowed extra time at the end of the retreat before lunch, which was a good thing because the closing circle took two hours. Each man took the time to share from his heart about the retreat and how it had changed him. There was a lot of silence. There were silent tears. There was talk of change, of transformation. We had all been changed as men, as individuals, as fathers, sons, friends, brothers. Many of the men expressed the fact that they had never experienced this kind of vulnerability before and certainly never with other men.

I know that I left this retreat changed. I had helped to hold the space for this group of men and I had been able to do my own work. I left behind my old image of what it means to be a man, an image that had never served me well. I took with me a new sense of wholeness that came from the experience of being fully myself in a group of other men. Courage & Renewal work provides a safe space for men to encounter their own inner teachers, and in so doing to encounter other men. We were able to share our vulnerability, our dreams, as well as our strength and our passion. We were able to be tender with each other and powerful with each other.

One of the men in the group, the youngest at 24, shared a song with us, which he taught us on the second day and we sang together. We sang it often after that as it expressed so much of what we experienced together. I believe that our world needs men who can sing

these words with conviction, humility, and power.

“I am a strong man. I am a loving man. I am a peacemaker my soul will never die.

I am a strong man. I am a loving man. I am a peacemaker my soul will never die.

I honor you and empower you to be who you are.

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I honor you and empower you to be who you are.”

We decided that the song needed to be shared and so we organized a flash mob in the dining room. The man who taught us the song stood up and began to sing. We all joined him and the room was filled with the strong, loving voices of seventeen men singing their truth to the people present. We made a point to turn to someone near us and sing the line “I honor you and empower you to be who you are.” as we looked them in the eyes.

There were cheers and applause when we finished. Afterwards a woman came up to Dan in tears. She said that she had been in a workshop in the morning with women who had experienced sexual abuse. It had been a very emotionally painful morning for them.

“You have no idea how much we all needed to be sung to by a group of strong, loving, good men. That was so healing for us. It was just what we needed to hear.”

I came into this retreat holding three questions. Reflecting back on these questions helped me to glean some of what I learned from this experience.

- Was there something about the work that made men uncomfortable?

I don't think this work itself made men uncomfortable. I think that finding a space where it feels safe to be vulnerable, particularly with other men, is what makes men uncomfortable. We do not have much experience of being vulnerable with one another and so we don't know how to create that kind of space for each other. The Touchstones which we put in place at the start of the retreat offered that kind of safety and allowed the men to experience the safety of being vulnerable with one another in such a bounded space.

- Would a retreat designed specifically for men be any different?

Having now been involved in two different retreats for men I do think that there are some differences from mixed gender groups.

I believe that men need more spacious amounts of silence in order to settle into the space and show up with their whole selves. Men are used to being much more task oriented and taking charge so the silence provides a conscious way to slow down and disengage from the need to be in control.

I also think that men need to spend more time together in the natural world interacting with each other while interacting with nature. Both the hike we took and the morning we spent creating Andy Goldsworthy inspired creations allowed us to be together while doing something. This seemed to provide a kind of intimacy that felt safer and more secure.

- Could we create safe space for men to be vulnerable and to show up with their true selves?

Our long and heartfelt closing circle was evidence of the fact that men could be vulnerable with one another. It also showed that men are hungry for this kind of intimacy with one another. I think that men lack the skill to create the safe space.

Each man who spoke at the closing circle spoke from a deep, vulnerable place. Men spoke of never having experienced this kind of vulnerability with other men. They spoke of the power of being in the presence of other men who shared their desire to live a life of integrity and purpose. The men who were focus persons in the clearness committee were deeply moved by the opportunity to listen to themselves in such an intimate way, an experience they said they had never had before.

One man who was the last to speak shared his difficulty with speaking up in a group. He said that he was often paralyzed when he had to speak. But he couldn't keep silent because the experience of the retreat had been so powerful for him. He felt like our time together had given him the courage to claim and use his voice.

There are so many good men in the world. Courage & Renewal circles of trust provide a way for good men to come together to support one another, to share with one another, to grow together. I am grateful for the opportunity to offer these circles to men. I am grateful for the way these circles have changed me.