

London Calling!

I am watching TV and what I look at hits me in the depths of my soul. What is happening in the world? I wonder. And how did it come to be that we get to see those kind of images broadcasted from a civilized country like England? From Croydon to Hackney, from Tottenham to Clapham, everywhere there are groups of people - especially men - on a looting rampage. Shops are being attacked and plundered. Windows are smashed. Buildings are on fire. Large parts of the city are ablaze. Respect for the police is minimal. Officers are challenged and provoked. It seems that the rioters persist in confronting the law.

This is London today. And it's as if I am watching a Hollywood disaster movie. I seem to await the resurrection of the hero, as so often happens in these movies. A Brad Pitt-, Harrison Ford- or Denzel Washington-kind of character who, if all hopes are lost, gets up from his apparent death and does what needs to be done. Someone who calls people to order, respectfully appeals to their sense of responsibility, encourages them to share the task at hand and, in the end, ensures that the Kingdom is miraculously restored. But the hero does not show up, nor is he like a phoenix that emerges from its ashes. There are plenty of ashes on TV, but no hero, and I realize it's just the BBC news that I am watching. To me, it's all bizarre, frightening and very disturbing.

I remember the time when I lived in London for a year. Old dusty, but emotional memories come up. I recognize all the places that pass by on the TV screen. I have walked along those streets. I have done my shopping there. Visited friends. Hung out in the local pubs. My special relationship with London makes me realize that all that is happening in the world is coming closer and closer to home. And I think to myself, if this can happen in London, then it can just as easily spread to other countries. To Ireland, France, Belgium, Germany, and yes, even our very tolerant and liberal Netherlands.

Meanwhile on TV, the news reporters are discussing how this all could have happened. Preliminary analyses are made. The riots occur mostly in disadvantaged districts, where there is much dissatisfaction among the population. High unemployment levels, large social unrest, a high percentage of broken families, a relatively high use of drugs mostly characterize these poor neighbourhoods, and many people have an extensive mistrust of the local government. There is talk about pent-up frustrations among the local population now suddenly exploding like powder kegs. The neighbourhoods seem to have been areas where suppressed aggression has been slumbering for years already. *It was about to happen anyway*, says a BBC reporter slightly defeated. The question is asked why no measures had been taken so far. Nobody knows the answer. Prime Minister Cameron will have to come up with an answer.

On the TV screen, the images keep me in shock and awe. How, in God's name, could this happen in London? When I see the pictures and would have to locate them without knowing the actual place, I would place them in countries like Somalia, Iraq, the countries in the Middle East, some African cities, certain neighbourhoods in American cities, somewhere in South America perhaps, but certainly not on the European continent. We are, after all, the cradle of civilization, are we not?

I take another good look at the pictures. It strikes me again that it is mostly men who are kicking, beating, robbing, stealing, plundering, shouting, swearing and provoking. Women are present, but they mostly run away from the scenes of disaster. And then, all of sudden, the words of men's work guru Robert Bly¹ come to mind: *An uninitiated man is a danger to society*. And yes, I think, this could easily be one example of that. But what does Bly mean with his words? What is an uninitiated man and how can such a man be a danger to society?

Well, in the old days, boys – when they were old enough to truly become a man – were always initiated into their manhood by, and within their community. This process was a sort of unwritten rule within a tribal culture. And apparently it was a ritual to which we attached great value in ancient times, for it occurred in nearly every tribal community worldwide. The reason for the initiation of boys lay in the fact that boys, once they started puberty, their budding sexuality, and the associated elevated testosterone levels, had to be carefully dealt with. The mastery of the boy's vital energy was needed, so that his fire in the belly would not transform into aggression but into wisdom and love. In this way, boys learnt how they could put their unique and individual strength at the service of the community.

It all may sound a little like hocus-pocus, and that's probably why, over time, we lost contact with these rites. In the end we dismissed them as outmoded, inhuman and certainly not conducive to the development of the male psyche. But the fact remains that our ancestors found it all very important. Can we learn anything from this? In order to get an answer, we return to London and the words of Robert Bly. Bly states that an uninitiated man is a danger to society. What he means is that a man who is not initiated, is most likely to struggle in mastering his testosterone and aggression levels. An uninitiated man is therefore only capable of deploying his life energy in an unhealthy way (aggression and violence) or not at all (depression and apathy).

What is happening in London is terrible, and it could well be related to uninitiated men. Because let's face it, how many men have been initiated nowadays? Well not many, I have to admit. Not even in England. As a result, most Western men are in fact all slumbering powder kegs with fuses that can be lit by the slightest of sparks. Some men just need a light spark to turn it into an explosion, and some other men only need a spark to turn into an implosion. And then there's yet another group of men who have concealed their fuses so neatly that they only want to put everything into perspective and observe all from a distance. Not a very healthy climate for constructive community building.

As men we want to live the life we want. The life that we deserve. The life that is intended for us. A life that gives us fulfilment. David Deida², a renowned men's worker from the U.S., claims: *A man without a vision is a man without a purpose. A man without a conscious life-purpose is totally lost, drifting, adapting to events rather than creating them*. If, as men, we do not succeed in living our purpose, either due to our genetic background, upbringing, culture or other life conditions, we become miserable and want to free ourselves from this condition. If we fail, we get stuck in aggression, depression or somewhere in between. And this is exactly what is currently happening in London.

The London man evidently feels lost, without a purpose. He sees life as bleak and hopeless and wants to free himself. Remove his so-called shackles. Lead his life. And perhaps even be of service to his community. And yes, the reason for all the aggression is the poor social and economic conditions. And yes, all that pent-up aggression must be released at first. And it is also true that the aggression must be contained in some way. And yes, all this has consequences, but when the powder kegs do not explode, when the fuses are not lit, they will keep slumbering under the surface until a new opportunity comes around. How terrible and inhumane it all looks, maybe now is the time that all this aggressive energy has to be released. And if so, then we as a society and as individuals have to take up our responsibility as well, and listen to what these men really have to say.

If we only look at the aggressive behaviour, judge it, and then answer it with other repressive behaviour, the violence might be nipped in the bud, but the underlying anger and frustration will remain. This won't be removed by a large police force, but will continue to smoulder under the skin. Is it not about time that in this kind of situation we start listening to what is happening beneath the visible surface? To what motivates and drives these men deep down? Listening to what they truly want to say?

It seems that from the dark heart of London, a primal scream is heard from the Englishman. A cry for help. A cry for recognition. A cry for respect and recognition. Deep inside, the Londoner wants to liberate himself from his social and economic yoke, from his aimless existence. He is seeking direction and fulfilment in life. As a men's worker I hear the call for initiation. What would happen if we gave these men a platform on which they could express all their frustration and anger? And what would happen after the storm? Once the rage has subsided? What will surface then? Are we willing and able to listen to their deepest desires? Do we want to hear it? Can we handle it? Isn't it about time that we start to facilitate these kinds of processes? I believe that, in view of all this, there lies a powerful challenge for men's workers in London, and probably in many other Western cities, to contribute.

Edwin Holwerda, 10 August 2011

e-mail: edwin@kaora.org

Sources

- 1 Robert Bly, *Iron John, A Book About Men*, 1st Edition, 2004, Da Capo Press, Cambridge, MA, USA
- 2 David Deida, *Way of the Superior Man, A Guide to Mastering the Challenges Spiritual of Women, Work, and Sexual Desire*, 2004, 2nd Edition, Sounds True, Boulder, CO, USA

About the author

drs. Edwin Holwerda (MA) is an independent trainer, coach and consultant (see www.kaora.org). He is co-founder of *MannenWerk* (see www.mannenwerk.org); an organization which aims to support the development of conscious and authentic masculine identity amongst Dutch men. He is also *Synnergator* and *SDi Lead* at the Dutch Center for Human Emergence (see www.humanemergence.nl).