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Calgary, Spring 1992. Invocation for a Gathering. M.E.N.S. Network
Photograph Courtesy Michael Tacon

Ritual Drumming in the Men's Movement A Personal Experience Fred Holliss

I entered a room in a community hall. All the furniture had been pushed back against the walls or taken out of the room. There was a circle of men, perhaps sixteen or twenty of them, of all ages, seated in chairs or on the floor. Each had a percussion instrument of some sort in front of him, and there were some spares scattered across the circle.

An older, grizzled man with a giant drum that looked like it had been carved out of a tree stump was slowly pounding a steady beat with a carved branch that had its head bound in padded leather.

As I entered the circle, someone pushed over a shallow drum and someone else nudged a beater towards me. Feeling nervous, as I didn't know any of these men, I sat down cross-legged right where I was and picked them up.

The steady beat was nearly hypnotic, and as it continued other men around the circle picked it up. I could feel it soak into my body. Almost without volition, I started pounding my drum with the striker. As the beat developed, some of the drummers started putting in little frills and accenting it in various ways. I found myself following the lead of a man across the circle, and then a few others started following me, and before long the beat had doubled itself.

By now my heart was pounding in time with the rhythm, and I ceased all conscious thought. I was not analyzing my performance or criticizing anyone else's. I was not rehashing my day at work or worrying about what I had to go home to. I was not worrying about the repairs my car needed or keeping up my payments. I was not thinking of anything; I was only a part of a rhythm beast.

I don't know how long we kept up the beat, mutating it into various different forms, but eventually it faded out until there was, once again, only the older man pounding the same steady beat he had always kept while we swirled around him, and he slowly brought that to a close, striking more and more softly until the beat faded into silence.

We were all breathing together.

He spoke. "We are here to share our journeys, and to provide support to each other on those journeys. We are here to speak to each other from the heart with honesty and without fear. We will only speak of our own journeys outside this room, not each other's, and we will honour each other's needs. I will introduce myself and then we will go around the circle, speak our names and briefly say why we are here."

So begins a relatively typical, slightly fictionalized men's support group meeting. My first exposure to drumming in the context of the men's movements was at a symposium organized by the Calgary M.E.N.S. Network in 1989 at the Waldorf School. The Saturday morning began with a 7:30 AM meditation for the early risers and then drumming from 9 to 10 AM, which is where I came in. I had been warned to bring something percussive, and had borrowed a hand drum from a friend. I have no formal training in drumming; I usually just hit things in time with the music wherever I am. That drumming was a transcendent experience, in that it took me out of my body and into another place for a period of time.

Drums in the men's movements are used in a number of different contexts, one of the most powerful being bringing together into ritual space a number of disparate men with varying agendas. Joining together into rhythmic unity really does tend to reallocate the worries of daily life into the background and bring the mind, body, and soul together into one place and one time.

In our daily lives we often cannot afford to engage our hearts as we live—the stress, poverty, and injustice that are endemic to our society are so pervasive that if we let ourselves see them, we would become paralyzed with sorrow and indignation. Thus it is a necessary survival skill that we be able to disassociate ourselves, literally to sever internal connections in order to proceed. The trouble comes when we wish to reforge those links: we do not have the corollary skills. We also hardly ever live in the moment. We are either musing over past events or worrying about future ones. We are seldom present in the moment. Drumming in group is one way to bring together parts of ourselves not normally allowed to communicate with each other and to bring them together in the now.

In a lot of ways the men's movements are outgrowths of the recovery movements. In the USA especially, a lot of men involved in these movements are "graduates" of twelve-step programs. This does not seem to apply as much here in Canada, but the driving need is almost always the same: healing. In order to heal, passageways must be reopened and old wounds flushed from the psyche. One of the most effective ways of so doing is through the use of drums. The pounding and the rhythm seems to take us down to some primal level, usually deeper than our adult wounds, from whence we can carefully negotiate our way back into our skins, shedding some of our emotional scar tissue on the way.

The other place drums are usually encountered is in a more spiritual context. The men's movements can be inaccurately divided into five major streams: pro-feminist, recovery, men's issues, spirituality, and backlash. Many men who have found that traditional western religions fail them search for other options, not a few of which incorporate drumming. In the spirituality stream of the men's movement, much use is made of appropriated First Nations rituals such as smudging, chanting, drumming, and the sweat lodge. Drumming is one way to bring the body to a place where things are allowed to flow through it rather than clogging up within it. This is a preferred state before entering a sweat lodge, where part of the learning experience is allowing fears and phobias to pass through rather than overcome. It is also useful in helping internal issues to rise to the surface and leave us.

The drums used in the men's movements are usually hand drums rather than manufactured "rock" style drums. They are often hand-made in weekend workshops, in which case they are usually based on the First Nations flat drums that look a lot like the Irish bodhran. African drums like the *djembe* are also common. These are most often imported from Africa or made by local artisans, rather than made by their users. Besides, wood, materials used include clay and even cast aluminum. Then there are the larger ritual drums with a very loud, deep voice. These are made by a number of different techniques, including carving, laminating, and barrel-stave. Although congas are occasionally used, they do not seem to be very popular, probably due to a combination of price and unwieldiness. Whatever the size and style of drums, they are usually struck with either the hand or a small beater tipped with suede. Rock-style drumsticks are seldom used.

Other percussion instruments used include bongos, rattles, shakers, rain sticks, tambourines, claves, whistles, rocks, sticks, and logs. The power of the experience lies in the doing, not in the specific tool used. Drumming in the men's movements is an inclusive activity, something that everyone is encouraged to do, rather than an observer sport.

The feeling of power and community generated by a room, glade, or hillside full of men pounding to the same rhythm is something that must be experienced to be understood. Lodged within the struggle to achieve and maintain unified rhythms is an inkling of a true experience of brotherhood. The ritual use of drums within the men's movements is an intrinsic part of those movements and an important part of the healing those movements promote.

Fred Holliss is a performance poet and founding member of the M.E.N.S. Network in Calgary. He has also broadcast over 370 shows on CJSW-91 FM, runs a desktop publishing business, consults to the oil industry and still finds time to down the occasional beer at the Ship and Anchor while keeping the beat of the music with his feet.