

# My Journey

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**by Jamey Bontrager-Singer**

I am fortunate to serve as the current and first Convener for Indiana-Michigan M.A.L.E.s, a chapter of Illuman established in March 2012. A critical mass of initiated men began to develop in our area around 2009. On our way back from the MROP (Male Rites of Passage) in Illinois that year four of us were inspired to offer a series of retreats focused around the male archetypes. We already had been gathering to celebrate with newly initiated men returning from their MROPs and had established an annual reunion gathering for initiated men, but we wanted to reach out to all males. We were hungry, and the men we gathered with, initiated or not, were just as much so.

## **How and when were you introduced to male spirituality?**

I have spent most of my life trying to figure out what it means to be a man, often drawn more to the ways women are in the world than the men I have known. In the early '90s when I first read Richard Rohr's book *The Wild Man's Journey* and *Iron John* by Robert Bly I was deeply moved, realizing it might actually be possible to embrace maleness, rather than just living in a reactionary stance to *machismo*. Not only that, I was intrigued by the concept of a uniquely male approach to spirituality, which I could then wholeheartedly embrace.

Interestingly, it still took me nearly 12 years to realize I wanted something different from the routine I had established. I guess those years of working 60–80 hours per week, striving for advancement, and all the while thinking I was providing what my family needed finally led me to go through the rites of passage. My wife's concurrent mid-life struggle around these issues also helped, and in the spring of 2007 I made my MROP at Triangle Y Ranch near Oracle, Arizona. There I experienced significant spiritual and personal transformation that energizes me to this day.

## **How has your participation in Illuman/M.A.L.E.s fostered the development and use of your gifts?**

As a participant and leader of M.A.L.E.s gatherings, I have developed a great appreciation for indirect spiritual experiences. By this I mean things like silence, poetry, and ritual that can have profound meaning, but require you to listen and pay attention. You have to notice what is happening rather than someone telling you directly. It's not easy though. It just sounds easy.

**Describe a recent Illuman/M.A.L.E.s event you attended. What was the impact on you?**

This past May our Elders offered another retreat, this one on sexuality. This time we were intentional about making it welcoming to all men regardless of sexual orientation. It opened me to a much broader compassion for brothers who experience their sexuality differently from me. In that retreat I believe we created an environment where all men were embraced for who they are. As each of us laid out our struggles and aspirations, we found that we are really not that different.

**What's one thing you'd recommend to a man starting on the spiritual journey?**

I would highly recommend getting in touch with those indirect experiences of truth like meditation or contemplation, poetry, and time alone, especially in nature. I'd also suggest finding or starting a group where men tell their own life stories, relate in confidentiality and speak from their hearts and not just their heads.

**What's the best thing about doing this work?**

The best thing is the simplicity of it. All we have to do is get men together and provide a safe setting. If we can create a container that allows us to get out of our heads and share vulnerably, transformation just comes. Sometimes I find myself doubting if this work is real, but over and over when we gather we sense that the Spirit is present.

Finally, I'll mention an irony in what I do during my work days versus what I often do in my time off. Most of my weekdays are spent working for the Utilities Department of a rather well known Catholic university in South Bend, Indiana. Paradoxically, my position there as an HVAC (Heating, Ventilation, & Air Conditioning) engineer compels me to do everything I can to keep people comfortable at all times.

In contrast, the work of male spirituality seeks to "Keep the edges hot." This journey leads us through many times when we are uncomfortable. And that's OK. I've heard that a key role of spiritual leaders is to "comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable." Richard and many other spiritual teachers tell us that there are really only two things that have the power to transform us: great love and great suffering.

I'm grateful to have passed through a number of significant sufferings in my life, but since I want to keep growing, I'm reasonably sure I'll have a few more such opportunities along the way. I hope you'll be there walking beside me!