

## How can men beyond 50 make a difference?

### Exploring being an elder and giving back



One of my New Year pledges for 2012 is to research how maturing men can fulfil their potential as elders and be of service. This blog posting is both a progress report and a request to all of you reading this to share your ideas and experience.

One role where older men are uniquely suited is the mentoring of younger men. Crime, drugs and education are just three of many areas where young men have far worse problems than young women, and it's clear that the lack of fathering and older male role models has been a major factor in this problem. So mentoring was an obvious priority for my research.

I have identified a few organisations already active in this sector, and earlier this month I had a promising meeting with the director of one of them, [A Band of Brothers](#). ABOB is a smallish, newish educational charity, but it has run enough programmes to show that its methods work, and to earn praise from a number of police and youth service teams. I am also trying to contact [Tomorrow's People](#), another impressive charity working in this sector.

Back in the 1990s, I was part of a team at [The Magdalen Project](#), the educational charity I founded, who tried to do mentoring for young men in trouble. We quickly found that well-intentioned but untrained amateurs get into problems very fast in this work. A good mentoring programme needs to engage the hearts and souls of those involved, but it also has to be well-organised, quality-controlled, and self-sustaining, to earn the confidence of the clients and the statutory bodies involved. The ABOB programme achieves this combination impressively.

The programmes which A Band of Brothers operates begin with recruiting a group of at least ten older men in one locality: this group receive their initial mentors training together, but also continue to meet as a group. This makes the whole approach much more durable, since they support each other, and could step in if one elder drops out. Next, a group of young men needing mentoring in that same locality is recruited: they go through an initiatory process supported by this group of elders, with the aim of forming ongoing mentoring pairs between the older and younger men.

One of the many impressive features of these programmes is that they recognise and fill the lack of rites of passages and initiation in our society, for both young men and elders. To do this in a way which is not manipulative or cultish, and which has been endorsed by the mainstream authorities, is an awesome and exciting achievement.

My meeting was with Michael Boyle, co-founder and Director of ABOB: he is an impressive and likeable man, who seems to be flourishing in the years beyond 50. He is a psychotherapist with many years' experience in men's work, including co-leading groups with Robert Bly, who seems equally at home exploring Jungian archetypes or engaging with the youth on a sink estate.

One of the tangible outcomes of our meeting was agreement that ABOB and MB50 would collaborate to set up a mentoring cluster in Bristol. This is a city where both groups know older men who are interested, and where there are many young men needing help. The venue for the initial training will be The Magdalen Project: this kind of programme fits with their charitable aims, and means that the training can use their beautiful 130-acre organic farm and woodlands. If you are interested in taking part, please contact [me](#), or [Nathan](#) at ABOB for details.

A Band of Brothers now have interest from many parts of the UK in setting up mentoring clusters, and they hope to expand their operations substantially to meet this need. The two main constraints are funding and the need for more outstanding facilitators who can guide these processes. If you can help on either count, please contact [ABOB](#) direct.