

Jody Grose...Return to the Fire

by Nancy Cohen

Fire, one of nature's primal elements, is often considered sacred. It can purify, destroy, renew, warm, illuminate, and transform. Fire is also a metaphor for passion. For centuries, men have gathered around fires to share stories and community, experience nature, and discover their authentic self. However, with modern culture's hectic pace, this ancient tradition honoring men's wisdom, inner truths, and connections, often falls by the wayside. Men's group leader Jody Grose offers opportunities for men to, as his company is aptly named, Return to the Fire. Return to the Fire is an organization committed to providing a safe place for men to explore and access their full masculine spirit, power, and love in order to integrate these attributes into their relationships and communities.

As Jody describes it, boys learn early on to show anger (though don't show too much anger...) but not weakness or vulnerability. These concepts extend to men's responsibility,

Father & Son Allagash River trip



achievement and competition in work and life. He suggests such messages breed a Lone Ranger identity, a paradigm that encourages isolation and suffering rather than community and reinforcement. Men may care for and protect others before themselves, often avoiding asking for help or support. Yet, self care is necessary for finding the wherewithal to care for others.

In response to such concerns, his invitation is for men to explore all aspects of self in a supportive community. He "consciously provides the intentional community for each man to feel safe, while having an adventure of a lifetime." His experience has repeatedly shown that when walls of isolation break down, ones energy, clarity and strength emerge, enabling them to be more loving, generative, and free.

Asked when he began this work, Jody responded "I've probably been training for this my whole life." He enjoyed nature and instinctively created ceremonies to mark life's passages. His first foray into men's groups in 1984 became the springboard that catapulted him fully into this work. Among that weekend's discoveries was the recognition of "men's power and fierceness, which can be used constructively but can be terrifying." Complementary to that was a deep camaraderie offering a sense of family and community, which helped him break through the idea that men only hurt or compete. Additionally, it inspired the discovery of heretofore shielded emotions, including sorrow, grief, and love. Formerly believing love was finite and once you gave it away it was gone, he learned, instead, that there is an endless supply.

After that weekend, Jody was at the library and Doug Boyd's book "Rolling Thunder" fell nearby. The Native American subject matter piqued his curiosity and resonated

with his natural instinct for ritual. He spent time at a reservation, learning more about Native earth-honoring traditions, including participating in a sweat lodge and vision quest. This experience crystallized for him the concept that "we can't separate who we are from the earth and from each other."

Nature was the realm where he and his dad connected, whether walking, building things, or canoeing. Jody says his father was not in touch with his feelings, which, despite their time together, created a rift when he wanted to connect in ways his father "couldn't." Yearning to be seen and supported, he wished for deeper relationship. He calls this desire "father hunger," something he has heard about from hundreds of men. Despite any difficulties, he saw his father as an inspiration and says time shared solidified the relationship for the divisive moments. He recommends that other fathers create similar anchors through time together (being "shoulder to shoulder" as in Robert Bly's "Iron John").

Jody suggests that what men often have in common is what they've kept hidden. He sees men's groups as beneficial since they offer men space to hear other's truths and challenges and realize they are not alone. A cornerstone of this work is creating safe space based upon participants' intentions, concerns, and needs. Together, the group identifies their agreements and how to move through physical, emotional, spiritual, and "shadow" issues that surface. Finding ways through conflicts can deepen connections. Key to the groups are empathic listening and using a talking stick so each participant can speak from their heart, be heard and witnessed in a nonjudgmental, compassionate way.

Upcoming trips include Men in the Wilderness Canoe Adventure (July 16-23) and a Father and Son Adventure (July 23-30), both in Maine, and customized journeys for families, groups, and businesses. A Return to the Fire Weekend for Men is another option for those seeking new personal possibilities. Trips include facilitating environmental awareness, wilderness skills, and community. Twice a year, Jody creates a weekly men's group, which meets for nine weeks. He also provides counseling or ceremonies for transitions/rites-of-passage. Return to the Fire's island retreat center on the Housatonic River serves as the site for many

Father & Son Penobscot River trip



Jody & Tucker Grose on Penobscot River trip

local programs.

Because there's no silver bullet for sustaining breakthroughs discovered during these journeys, Jody advocates joining an ongoing men's group for support. He recommends men identify how committed they are to their soul work and advises once parts of yourself awaken, as the poet Rumi stated, "Don't go back to sleep." Men's groups are not band-aids for those who are broken. Rather, they are a way to deepen and enrich who you are, hence his advice to keep doing, sharing and supporting.

A friend of Jody's says whoever chooses a spiritual journey must accept that "it's mysterious, insecure and unpredictable." Like the match sparking a flame, Jody invites you to tap into your sense of courage and adventure and access your power, creativity, and love, thereby providing the impetus for lighting your inner fire.

A middle school teacher, Jody enhances his work through mentoring, sharing his authentic truth, listening to (and validating) student's feelings. He resides in Newtown, CT, with his wife, Kathy, and has two grown children. His involvements include Connecticut Men's Gathering (COMEGA) workshops, and a current book project about fathers and sons. Jody invites anyone wanting to find out more to contact him at 203.426.2156, healingbear@charter.net, or www.returntothefire.com.

