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THE MANKIND PROJECT: REPACKAGING *EST* FOR A NEW GENERATION OF MEN?

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The ManKind Project aims for “Changing the world one man at a time,” and it is roughly 36,000 men closer to that goal through its New Warrior Training Adventure. Werner Erhard, creator of *est* (Erhard Seminars Training), the most popular and controversial human potential seminar of the 1970s, had no hand in founding the ManKind Project, but one Christian critic sees in it a message that is compatible with *est*.

Mark Roggeman, a thirty-year veteran of the Denver Police Department, evaluated the ManKind Project for Midwest Christian Outreach’s *Journal* in the winter of 2006. He told the CHRISTIAN RESEARCH JOURNAL that his article led to roughly thirty calls from across the country from people whose families had been disrupted by a man’s participation in New Warrior Training Adventure. In one case, he said, a young man returned from the weekend blaming his mother for his problems. Another man’s marriage ultimately ended in divorce.

Roggeman interviewed three alumni of the training, all of whom spoke on condition of anonymity, to gain a sense of what happens during the training, which begins on a Friday evening and ends on a Sunday afternoon. Roggeman’s article described the men as having been yelled at, told to sit in a dark room while awaiting other initiates (new participants), ordered to hand over their wristwatches and cell phones, and sleep-deprived for much of the weekend. The three men also referred to initiates dancing naked amid frenetic drumming.

What Roggeman heard in the testimony of his three anonymous informants was a pattern of breaking people down in order to rebuild them. That reminded him of *est*, which he had studied in the 1970s. Roggeman also was troubled by the ManKind Project’s policy of not discussing what occurs during its weekend training sessions. “That’s always a red flag,” he told the JOURNAL.

Much of Roggeman’s 3,000-word article—“Oh, Man, What Kind of Project Is This?”—describes ties of influence between the ManKind Project and *est*. For instance, the three founders of the ManKind Project (ex-Marine and ex-corporate executive Rich Tosi, therapist Bill Kauth, and educator Ron Hering) attended a men’s seminar by Justin Sterling, who is an alumnus of *est*. Roggeman believes Sterling’s seminar, which was the subject of several different critical reports by journalists, helped shape what became the ManKind Project’s New Warrior Training Adventure.

Les Sinclair, media relations director for The ManKind Project, confirmed that the group’s founders attended Sterling seminars. “One difference is that Justin Sterling runs his seminars for a profit and we’re a not-for-profit organization. I do know that the Sterling Group emphasizes that men are in control” in their relationships with women, Sinclair said. “We don’t do that.”

Sinclair said he attended an *est* session in the 1970s when he was a television producer. “It was very harsh and very self-promoting,” he told the JOURNAL. The primary similarity between what *est* offered then and what The ManKind Project offers today, Sinclair said, is the importance of taking responsibility for your life and for the choices you make.

Emptying Your Pockets. Sinclair defended The ManKind Project’s policy of not discussing the details of New Warrior Training Adventure. He compared that policy to the practice of not ruining a person’s experience of a film by disclosing every plot twist in advance. “If we divulge all the key elements of what happens, it spoils the experience for men,” he said.

Sinclair alluded to men divesting themselves of wristwatches and cell phones and emptying their pockets. “You’d be surprised. Some men bring weapons, some men bring drugs,” Sinclair said. “They’re not awake yet.” (In fairness, it’s also worth noting that many Christian retreats, such as Cursillo, also require participants to hand over the trappings of everyday modern life.)

Sinclair agreed that the weekend experience can be too intense for some men. “We say very clearly that the training is not for every man,” he said. “We tell potential initiates that there will be times in the weekend when they will want to run away and hide. You will be tested—physically, emotionally, and spiritually.”

The ManKind Project recognizes that boys and young men no longer have initiation rites that mark their passage into adulthood, Sinclair said. For modern people, this void began with the Industrial Revolution, which disrupted the traditional pattern of a boy learning a trade from his father and going through an apprenticeship.

“You still need a masculine hand for boys to see what it means to be a man,” Sinclair said. The weekend offers initiates “a vortex of masculine power that is so powerful.”

The ManKind Project stresses being conscious, helping men become awake to their choices, and the consequences of those choices. “What we are doing is letting men look at their emotional wounds,” Sinclair said. “Men typically do not talk about their emotional issues with other men. They talk about the money they make, about cars, and about women. They look past one another.”

Sinclair said he first became involved with The ManKind Project when he was going through a divorce and a battle for custody of his children. “I felt like a wounded bird,” he said, and the New Warrior Training Adventure helped him discover his inner strength. “One of the proudest things I’ve ever done in my life was to be a good father.”

The ManKind Project is interested in spirituality, and encourages its participants to serve others, often by taking New Warrior Training Adventure to fatherless children or into prisons. Sinclair believes every man has within himself the four archetypes of king, warrior, lover, and magician. “Standing in the center of those four quadrants,” he said, “is the citizen.”

The ManKind Project has encountered enough criticisms that its Frequently Asked Questions document directly addresses the question of whether the group is a cult: “Cults ask their members to devote their lives, and often their material possessions, to a single leader or doctrine. The Mankind Project’s broad leadership base takes a very different approach, challenging each man to define the life that works best for him, and to live that life fully with the support of other men.”

“We don’t espouse any religion, although any man is welcome to attend,” Sinclair said.

— Douglas LeBlanc