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Here be Dragons: *being among men*

A workshop for Year 12 and 13 | 90 minutes

Before Anyone Arrives

Arrange chairs in a circle. No desks. Have a ball, or something soft and easy to catch, visible in the middle of the room. Don't explain anything yet.

The facilitator's job throughout is not to teach but to follow. Don't be mechanical. If you as facilitator feel nervous or awkward, show it, and carry on. Show how to do something when you feel uncomfortable. Keep it real.

Notice what's alive in the room and go with it. If something unexpected happens, that's the material. Everybody notice it. After the workshop maybe it can be discussed at another time or in a specific form.

Opening: The Ball (15 minutes)

Don't introduce yourself with a list of credentials. Sit down with them. Pick up the ball.

"Before we do anything else, I want us to throw this around. There are no rules. Just throw it to someone."

Let it run for two or three minutes. Watch what happens. Who throws to whom? Who doesn't get it? Who's showing off? Who shrinks? Who makes it safe for others? Then stop and ask, without any preamble:

"What just happened here?"

Take whatever they give you. Don't interpret. Listen – model how to listen. Clarify the odd point so you know exactly what has been said. Then:

"When you threw the ball, you had to believe someone was going to catch it. You had to believe the next few seconds existed and were going to go okay."

"That's quite a specific thing. We're going to spend the next hour and a half thinking about what that is."

Section 1: What We're Told (20 minutes)

No PowerPoint. Talk to them.

“What does it mean, to be among men, according to the world you grew up in? How are you supposed to be? What are you supposed to be?”

Throw the ball to someone. They answer. They throw it on. Keep it moving. You’re not looking for correct answers, you’re mapping the room. Write key words on a whiteboard as they come up, without comment, whatever they are.

When the ball has gone round enough, put it down and look at the list.

“Where did all of this come from?”

Let them think. Then:

“None of you invented this. You inherited it. Like you all inherited a language. You didn’t choose it. At some point you just noticed it was already inside you, telling you how things were.”

Pause.

“The question isn’t whether you believe it. The question is what does it do?”

Don’t push them to answer that yet. Leave it open.

Section 2: Stuck (20 minutes)

“Has anyone ever felt completely stuck? Like something in you just couldn’t move?”

Throw the ball. Let a few people respond. Don’t fix or reassure anything they say. Then:

“There’s a reason for that. When we’re frightened, or ashamed, or feel like we’re going to be humiliated, something happens: you find it very hard to imagine the future. Everything collapses into right now, and right now feels like it’s going to last forever.”

“That’s not weakness. Your brain is doing exactly what it developed to do when something feels like a threat.”

“The problem is that sometimes the thing triggering it isn’t really dangerous. It’s just a situation that reminds your body of something that was dangerous once – or you were told was dangerous. And your body – which is you – can’t tell the difference.”

Pause here. What follows is the most important thing in the workshop, and the facilitator needs to put it into words that fit the group in front of them. Don’t read it out. Translate it.

A feeling of movement is the feeling of resolution. It is not the same as satisfaction. It carries hope, a sense that the future exists and that something is possible. Some things – dilemmas, disagreements, situations between people – cannot be resolved, ever.

When we get stuck in these, we fight. Instead, we can keep going physically, emotionally, and in our thoughts. Find a different way of sitting. A walk. Sport, yoga, pilates. Rearranging yourself

while you're listening to someone. Looking at a painting. Listening to music. Finding a question you have never asked before. These are moments when something feels lighter, and that feeling of lightness comes from movement: from change.

It takes the heat out of anger, because something has changed without anyone having to force it. Anger is the justice emotion: it shows up when people feel stuck, because anger is always a force for change. The movement is what lets the anger settle, because the change it was demanding has begun.

Then throw the ball to someone.

"Think about a moment when you froze. It doesn't have to be dramatic. It could have been in a conversation, in a lesson, or with someone you liked. Describe it in the present tense, starting with I. As if it's happening now."

Take two or three responses.

"Now: how does it feel, saying it like that? Not the memory. Right now, in your body, saying those words."

Take a few responses. Listen without interpreting.

"When you're in it, it isn't the past. It is right now."

Then:

"Now throw the ball to someone."

They do.

"What did you just have to believe to do that?"

Let them arrive at it themselves: that the other person would most likely catch it if they throw it *so* someone could catch it, and if the other person made an effort to catch it. Something positive could happen – and then *something else* could happen.

"That's the opposite of stuck. Your brain just did something that required it to believe the future was real and okay. You can't throw a ball well unless it feels true that you can."

Section 3: Other People (20 minutes)

"Look at the list. What does it say about other people?"

Let them look at the list: pick out thoughts about not needing anyone. About being in control. Or the opposite.

"There's a problem with that. You can't catch a ball you throw yourself." Or *"what do you think of that?"* if the list implies we are interdependent (unlikely!)

Leave that sitting.

“Everything that makes us who we are, the way we think, the way we feel, even the voice in our heads, has involved other people. Your parents. Your mates. Teachers. People you’ve never met who made the films you watch and the music you listen to. You didn’t build yourself on your own. Nobody does.”

“So the idea that being sorted means not needing isn’t just hard to live up to [or something else that came up – think about what is likely to before the session]. It’s wrong. Factually wrong. You are already made of other people. Your nervous system, your brain, your mind, may process things differently from the person next to you. But nobody builds themselves alone.”

Throw the ball.

“Who made you? Not who you’re grateful to. Just, who’s in you? Who do you carry around?”

Take a few responses. Don’t sentimentalise. If someone’s answer is uncomfortable, stay with it.

“The people who are hardest to carry are usually the ones who taught us that needing people was dangerous. They were usually taught the same thing.”

Pause.

“It goes back a long way. That’s not an excuse. But it is an explanation.”

Section 4: Becoming (15 minutes)

“Nobody is a finished thing. Not at seventeen. Not at fifty. The idea that you’re supposed to arrive at some fixed version of yourself and just be that, that’s the trap.”

“You keep becoming. And you can only do that through other people. You need someone to throw the ball to. You need someone who’ll throw it back. And sometimes it goes wrong and you have to figure out what to do next. That’s it. That’s the whole thing.”

Throw the ball. No prompt. Just see what happens. Let them throw it wherever they want for a minute.

Stop.

“What did you notice that time?”

They may notice it was freer. More comfortable. Less self-conscious. Take whatever they say.

“That’s what happens when you stop worrying about doing it right and just do it. The thinking gets in the way. The body usually knows before the mind does.”

Closing (10 minutes)

Put the ball down in the middle again.

“I’m going to ask you all a question. You don’t have to answer it out loud if you don’t want to. But think about it.”

“Who do you need, that you haven’t said?”

Sit with that for a moment. Don't fill the silence.

Then, quietly:

"The pressure you feel to have life worked out, to not need anyone, to already be the finished version of yourself: it's a pressure to be something impossible. Nobody manages to be like that. If they do, they're just performing it. The ones who look most sorted are usually the ones working hardest to keep the performance going."

"You don't have to perform it here. You don't have to perform it anywhere."

Close simply. No summary. No list of takeaways. If something real happened in the room, name it briefly and leave.

Facilitator Notes

The title: 'Here Be Dragons' borrows from James Baldwin, who used it for an essay about masculinity in 1985. The phrase also carries its own meaning. Old maps marked uncharted territory this way: dangerous places to one culture because that culture had not yet been there. It did not mean those places had not been seen.

That's the frame. Some groups will arrive primed to ask what the dragons are, or to challenge whether they exist. Let that become the opening. It's already the argument.

The workshop can run with any group regardless of gender identity. The content, inherited ideas about identity, the cost of performing self-sufficiency, the relational nature of selfhood, applies across the room.

To some people the norms list may sit differently. Don't single them out. The becoming argument holds. Be alert to a response that isn't resistance but something rawer.

If a non-binary student is present, the frame itself may feel like a constraint before the content begins. The ball exercise and the relational argument will work regardless.

The ball, or whatever you throw about: it can do several things simultaneously. It keeps affect regulated without suppressing it; movement lowers intensity and makes people more receptive. It can make the social dimension of the session physical and visible: you can see who connects with who, who gets left out. Make this safe. Some people may find the whole frame threatening.

And it enacts the argument: you cannot throw a ball without believing someone else will catch it, which is precisely the temporal extension the session is building toward. If the ball throwing becomes chaotic, stop it and begin again. Spend a minute describing giving and receiving: to give you need to deliver something in a way that is receivable, but you can't convey something to someone who doesn't want to receive; to receive, you need to make an effort but can't catch something that isn't given to receive.

Silence: resist filling it. Silence after a question is often the person thinking. Wait almost longer than feels comfortable, but don't let anxiety take over.

Disengagement: this is defensive. Don't challenge it. Go with it. Laugh if what is said is funny; behave appropriately if it's not, or it's clearly offensive or bullying.

The list of norms: don't critique it directly. Let it sit there.

Disclosure: some of what comes up may be heavy. Don't treat the session as therapy. Acknowledge what's said, stay present, and if something requires follow-up know who in the school to refer to. You don't need to resolve everything in the room.

Students who don't engage: don't push back. The ball means even a reluctant thrower has to make a choice and send something somewhere.

Timing: the ball exercises can expand or contract depending on what's alive. If section two generates real conversation, let it run by up to a minute. The closing ten minutes are non-negotiable. Section three will be weakened if section two greatly over-runs. Keep to time or this workshop will most likely lose direction.