



From Boys to Young Men to Men: A thousand joys and a thousand sorrows

Noel Giblett

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What is this journey about - from boys to young men to men?

For many in our society, the journey to manhood can be summarised in what I call *The Six Point Plan*: find a girl, settle down, have a family, work hard, retire (if you can afford to), then die.

In addition, we acknowledge there may be more than one girl - and there will need to be houses, cars and holidays, and maybe the odd illness or injury - but success is pretty much defined as ticking those boxes in the right order.

While there may be nothing wrong with ticking those boxes, and a lot of men are still committed to 'doing the right thing' by their partners and families, there's an organism inside the machine, a *person* inside the body of that man. We may think that person is not very well formed during adolescence and the young adult years, but he is nevertheless a *person* (not just a replicated *individual* coming off the assembly line). He may remind you of others of the same gender, age and stage, but each one is significantly different, is he not? He is distinctive in his strengths and weaknesses, his *personality* and temperament.

Furthermore, I suggest to you that each *person* is made up of a unique combination of body, soul and spirit: a *physical body* made up of cells that are constantly evolving, until they can no longer do so; a *soul*, ie a set of constraints, longings, needs etc that define us as human; and a *spirit*, a set of aspirations, longings and callings that define us as uniquely put together.

So, if each boy, young man or man is uniquely put together, it follows that each one's journey through these stages is likely to have some variations in it – some hiccups, delays, leaps of faith, stumbles and successes that are unique to him as a person- it's going to be more complicated than just ticking off *The Six Point Plan*.

What do they need? ...these boys and young men who will hopefully one day become mature men?

I think boys and young men need at least three things:

1. Sound maps for the journey ahead, maps that chart the interior *and* the exterior journey;
2. The care and support of significant adults - don't *ever* underestimate your significance to the boys and young men you share your daily life with, particularly given the stresses they face and the breakdown of many of their family units; and
3. Some receptive and tolerant community settings that will provide a *container and a reference point* for their trials and tribulations - hopefully this will include family, school, college or university, their work place, sporting clubs, social networks, community groups and relevant social services.

Most families and schools and other settings are pretty good at celebrating *triumphs and successes*. But how well do we embrace and speak to the *necessary woundings and losses* that are part of the journey from boyhood to young manhood to manhood?

Some of you might be wondering what I mean by 'necessary woundings and losses.' Others will know exactly what I mean. Some of you may be thinking, 'It's all sounding a bit negative.' Others will be feeling some relief that I have named their experience or that of the young men they know and love.

Let me give you a quick cook's tour of some of these 'woundings and losses.'

What is life about for a boy, from the primary school years to the early high school years?

Well, hopefully he starts out life as the apple of his mother's and father's eye. He will have a sense of his own importance. He will be the centre of his own universe for several years, until something happens to shatter that (a younger sibling is born or someone else knocks him off his perch). He will discover his own penis. He will discover the politics of the playground and his peer group. He will realise that he's good at some things and not so good at other things.

Then something happens, around 13 or 14 years of age or thereabouts. He begins to 'turn' as some people put it. He becomes an *adolescent*, a word that strikes fear into the hearts of many adults.

What is life about for the adolescent male?

'Sex' did you say? Yes, it all starts with puberty and being attracted to girls, and/or boys. Then there is the politics of the playground, again, and sorting out the high achievers from the low achievers academically and in sport and there are the obligatory fights (even if you don't want to fight) and being bullied and picked on, and clashing with your parents.

It's what Steve Biddulph in *The New Manhood* calls *The Red Knight!* The angry young man is emerging, but it's not all bad (believe it or not). It is testosterone and adolescent energy breaking out, and it needs to break out. The problem is it often lacks discipline, focus and direction. And it typically gets channelled into a negative energy, being *against* certain things rather than *for* them.

Eventually, if he survives teenage experimentation and the surges of testosterone that kick in when he's behind the wheel of a car, the adolescent *starts to become* a young man. Maybe he even *starts to become* what Biddulph calls a *White Knight!* And doesn't every damsel long for a White Knight.

What is life about for the young man who is becoming a *White Knight?*

As the old Cat Stevens song says, 'Find a girl... settle down... if you want you can marry...' Hopefully he goes to uni or he gets a trade or a steady job. He takes his place in the community. Or, as some people put it, he 'does something useful with his life.'

However, I've noticed that more and more young men seem to be having trouble making that transition, they seem to need three or five or even more years after school to find their feet and, in some cases, to decide whether they want to go on with this life or not.

This should not come as a big surprise to us, for a couple of reasons.

Firstly, apparently the part of the brain that is about discernment, decision making and rationality is not fully formed until the young man is about twenty-five to thirty years of age. (Some of you may question whether it's that early!)

Secondly, we live in a society which has somehow managed to not only cast adrift those young men who don't fit conventional pathways, but has also multiplied the distractions and dangers that can be their undoing... it's as if we are intentionally applying the principles of natural selection.

Miraculously, most of those young men who were in danger of killing themselves in their late teens (intentionally or unintentionally) survive and go on to become - we hope - mature men. However, I would say that most men do not really begin to mature until they are well into their 30s – it's a long slow process for most of us.

What is life about for the maturing man?

Typically, it's about accomplishment and achievement in his twenties and thirties, and maybe forties and fifties, but sooner or later something changes:

- the body starts to decline,
- the psyche is not as resilient as it used to be,
- the marriage/s or relationship/s may have failed or be hanging by a thread,
- his kids might be telling him all too frequently that they 'hate' him (or something stronger),
- he may have been laid off (more than once), and
- he is starting to realise (if he hadn't already) that he's not invincible and life is an uncertain proposition.

How does he respond to this? In broad terms, he can respond in one of two ways.

Typically, and this is what most men do, he cranks up the effort. He 'goes big.' He cracks hardy and redoubles his efforts to make the *White Knight* script work. He denies his vulnerabilities, glosses over his struggles in life, and pushes on, desperate to prove that there is 'nothing wrong with me!'

Alternatively, he stops and listens – he listens to his body, his soul, his spirit and maybe even his wife! And if he listens, he's likely to hear good news and bad news, a thousand joys and a thousand sorrows. If he's fortunate, he'll hear that he's not the hero he once was, or once aspired to be, but he's still loved. Perhaps he'll hear that he's a grumpy old bastard, even though he's only forty, but he's still loved. And, if he's really listening, he'll realise that he needs to do life differently.

It's what Steve Biddulph calls the *Black Knight* – not black as in *evil* but black as in *darkness, not knowing, depth and difficulty*, the need to enter a new depth and a new way of being that meets life on life's own terms. This may include a painful awareness, a 'full and frank inventory' as they say in AA, of his shortcomings. It may include making some apologies or shedding some tears.

It's what Richard Rohr calls *The Crisis of Limitations*. It typically kicks in around the mid thirties. It is the *necessary rite of passage* before you can embark on the wisdom journey – see his book *From Wild Man to Wise Man*. However, unfortunately, the wisdom journey doesn't kick in, for most men, until their fifties. And even then, it's not automatic. It all depends whether they've learnt the lessons of the crisis of limitations or whether they persist in doing life as they have always done it.

So, hopefully you can see that there are some '*necessary woundings and losses*' that await boys and young men, and even mature age men.

I believe we do the male of the species a great disservice if we perpetuate the myth that life is meant to be perpetually 'onwards and upwards.' *Continuous Quality Improvement* for humans!

Life clearly has other lessons for us, particularly for the male of the species, and these lessons seem to be as much about failure, setback, illness and loss, as they are about success, accomplishment, and health and wellbeing.

Why is it so? I can only speculate. It seems to have something to do with learning some humility and realising that 'no man is an island.' Failure, setback, illness and loss are great teachers, *if* we are willing to open ourselves to the lessons. And the lessons seem to be about being human and being interdependent with others. It's often only when we hit the wall that we take stock, open ourselves to others and to our own deepest truths, and discover the important things in life.

Our boys, our adolescents, our young men, and our mature age men, need us to normalise and acknowledge their struggles, and resource them for life on life's own terms.

How can we do that? What can we offer?

What can we offer, one-to-one?

Firstly, you can offer your *attentiveness*. Unfortunately, the question 'How are you?' has become a standard greeting for which most people don't wait for an answer. And, unfortunately, the male of the species has realised this so he's stopped answering the question – the perfunctory grunt or 'OK' has become the standard reply. But don't give up. Ask the question and wait for a reply. Or, if you notice he seems down, you might even ask, 'Are you OK?' Even if he fobs you off the first time, he might respond the second time or you might get more persistent in your question (without getting in his face), 'You don't seem OK – I'm here if you want to talk.'

This brings me to the second thing you can offer, your *availability*. This is not just saying, 'I'm available,' but actually making yourself available. Most of us lead busy lives and it's so easy to rush on to the next thing, the next task, and not slow down enough to really make space for the other person.

The third thing you can offer is your *initiative*, specific suggestions such as 'Do you want to come for a walk... or throw a basketball? Do you want to have a beer?' Sometimes it's easier talking side by side whilst doing something active together. Build up your connection over time.

The fourth thing you can offer is your *understanding*. You can develop this by reading Biddulph and Rohr, and you might even offer these kinds of books (as appropriate) to the young men or men you know, or offer the occasional comment that normalises what they are going through. Unfortunately, many men are reluctant to read these kinds of books, and men tend to express emotions indirectly rather than directly – they tend to 'act out' aggressively or angrily when they're feeling hurt, afraid or vulnerable. But if you've informed yourself and developed your understanding, you won't be as intimidated by this and you might be able to acknowledge them and let them know that you can see something is going on for them, that they're struggling, and that they can be honest with you.

The fifth thing you can offer is your *trustworthiness*. If you tell a man that he can be honest with you, make sure you don't then judge or criticise him when he is honest. Be a safe haven for him, no matter how irrational or one-eyed you may think his perception is. Build the relationship over time.

Finally, you can suggest good resources - you can *make a good referral* if appropriate. You can't be everything he needs, but you can point him towards some resources that might be helpful and warm him up to

accessing them, eg practitioners who specialise in working with men, men's groups, men's gatherings, workshops on men's issues, articles or books about men's issues. You can give him a business card or a web address and leave it with him to think about for a while then follow up later.

With all of these suggestions, it's the quality of the relationship over time that matters.

What can we offer at the classroom or small group level?

Well, for starters, all of the above. If you are facilitating a small group or working with a group of young men, or adult men, find ways to *acknowledge* the different persons in the group, the variety of personalities in the group and their differing perspectives – don't let the squeaky wheels get all the grease.

Your classroom or small group can be a safe place where you model respectful and inclusive communication and discussion, where you normalise the joys and sorrows of life and encourage honesty as appropriate.

You might also pass on information about contemporary programs and resources for boys and young men, eg Pathways to Manhood or the Rock and Water course, or men's gatherings and groups (eg go to the Men's Advisory Service WA website for more information: www.man.org.au) .

What can we offer at the macro level – the school, college or university, or the organisation, or in our social service agencies?

Again, it all starts with the kinds of things listed above under the one-to-one and small group levels.

Be a receptive and tolerant community that provides a container and a reference point for the trials and tribulations of boys, adolescents, young men and men – a container that cares and guides as well as disciplines.

You might also consider 'importing' some programs relevant to your demographic –visiting speakers, resources and courses.

Finally, don't forget to acknowledge the struggles as well as celebrate the successes. Sometimes there's grieving to be done and hard truths to be faced, hopefully in a caring and supportive environment, and making that acknowledgement (and perhaps a referral) is a real gift.