

FIVE

From boy to man

*'Between childhood, boyhood, adolescence and manhood
there should be sharp lines drawn with tests, feats, rites,
stories, songs and judgements.'*

Jim Morrison

In the early 1990s I received a package in my mailbox with a US postage stamp on it, sent by my friend Robin Maslen. Since Rob lived in South Australia, I was naturally intrigued. Rob was one of my psychotherapy mentors, a remarkable man who had smashed himself up in his late teens on a motorcycle, abandoned plumbing as a trade, become a well-known social worker, the Commissioner of Scouts for South Australia, and one of the country's best-known teachers of therapists. When Rob sent you something, it was worth reading.

I walked up the half-kilometre driveway of my small farm in the hills behind Hobart, reading carefully as I went. The article was an interview with a 70-year-old American poet called Robert Bly, whom I had never heard of. Bly was pointing out something that should have

been blindingly obvious, but that I had never thought about before: for hundreds of thousands of years of prehistory, men always helped boys into manhood with concerted and focused attention, processes and specific teaching. The whole community helped to do this (in those days, men and women actually lived in a connected community). For 95 percent of human history, boys weren't launched out into adulthood, they were *welcomed into it*, into a lifelong support network that would work to ensure their contribution would be a good one. Their wellbeing would be a priority to everyone around them. Today we give our son the keys to the car, then go inside and pray he will be okay. In ancient times, they were more proactive than that.

For most of human history, the most important task facing the whole community was turning each generation of boys into capable men (and girls into capable women). They could not afford to leave this to chance: by the age of fourteen, every young man needed to be safe, skilful, integrated and responsible. Everyone's life depended on it; there was no place for hoons in a Neolithic clan.

I talked widely with friends and colleagues about this, and soon began writing about how we had to raise boys with more direct and clear involvement from good men. Men shouldn't stand at a distance, but should team up with women, and with each other, to do this. We had to increase the male role model component in schools, homes and families, and tackle boy energy in a way that embraced it but also directed it firmly in good ways.

For the next 20 years I toured the world, talking passionately about this to parents and schoolteachers. I was sowing these seeds – boys need men, and boys need help to become good men; it can't be left to chance. And gradually, smarter people than me, who knew the teaching of boys inside out, began to put this into practice. For most of us, schools are our closest thing to community, where we

have a sense of belonging, through our kids, and where they meet other adults of good calibre and shared goals. Schools are places that set out to make adults, but that have rarely taken up this challenge beyond the merely academic sense, and a few platitudes at Assembly. This is beginning to change. This chapter tells the delightful and moving story of some of the programs at the forefront of this change. I hope you will want these kinds of programs to be there for your children, too. May they spread wider and wider into education and the community.

It's 5 a.m. Looking down from the rim of the Adelaide Hills, the whole of the city is sleeping, peaceful in the pre-dawn light. Out beyond, the waters of St Vincent Gulf catch the moonlight, filtered through wispy clouds. It's an awesome sight, and it casts a silence over the families as they stumble from cars and gather at the lookout. A marquee is set up, lit with a single lantern; one of the teachers welcomes each family as they arrive. Then, from each family, a boy separates out and moves into their position. Forty or so Year 9 boys assemble in a line on the escarpment, each about a metre apart, dark shadows against the sky. Their parents gather in a knot at one side, rubbing arms and shivering a little in the chill.

The chaplain of the school the boys attend, a solidly-built man with a deep, calm voice, begins to speak. He walks slowly along the line of boys, and his voice carries in the still air.

'Look below you at this beautiful place, and this beautiful city. Down there in that city, or beyond, across the country, or for some of you across the globe – down there, out there – you have spent your boyhood. Fourteen or fifteen years ago,

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you were born, your parents excited and amazed, doctors and nurses helping you make a start. Down there you were a baby, a little toddler, loved and cared for, going to the park and the beach. You played with friends, perhaps had brothers or sisters who were your companions. You got older, went to kindergarten and school. You had relatives and family, friends, mates you played with. What you needed was provided. You had a place to live, clothes and a bed. You were taken care of. Down there you swam at the beach, had holidays, perhaps travelled to other places and returned. You played and learnt, and laughed and cried, you grew up, grew stronger and smarter.

‘You lived your boyhood. *Down there, out there, is your boyhood.* Think now of all the people who helped you. Who fed you and healed you and taught you and cared for you. The homes that sheltered you, the family that loved you. The enemies and the friends you made. The sun that warmed you, the cold that you shivered in, the rain that came down.

‘Think of your boyhood, and all that went into it.

‘Think of your parents, who may be here right now, or wherever they might be, and all their dreams and hopes for you.’

A teacher now steps from the shadows. His words ring out from a different direction, jolting the boys in the line a little; then they relax as they recognise his voice.

‘Your boyhood is ending. Soon you will start to become a man. The journey to manhood is more than just Year 9, it’s a long road, but you will begin that road today. Right now, you begin turning from boyhood to manhood. But first, this is a chance to say goodbye. Goodbye to being a boy. And goodbye begins with saying thank you. So just in your mind, send a thank-you for the people who down there in that city, or far away across the earth, wherever you lived and grew, who loved

you, and cared for you, in small ways and large, the places, the experiences, the films, books, games, music, all that the human tradition gave you, that made your boyhood rich and good. Even the painful times – the hurts, the betrayals, the disappointments that made you who you are.

‘Begin to say goodbye to boyhood. Say thank you for your boyhood. Breathe deeply, and carry with you all these gifts into the next, new stage of life, a man’s life. Welcome to the journey of becoming a man.’

There are more than a few tears among the listening parents, mothers and fathers who are realising that, for them too, a stage of life is ending. A simple ceremony has burned itself into the hearts of the families, marking a stage, imbuing the year to come with purpose and expectation. There will be more ceremonies, but there will also be an impressive learning and growing process in between. The Year 9 program that this school has developed is called The Rite Journey, and it’s a deliberate and intensive way of using a year of school to help boys turn into fine young men.

‘The Rite Journey’

Schoolteachers Graham Gallasch and Andrew Lines have taught children and young men for a total of 40 years, specialising in physical education and sport. They combine the Lutheran tradition – a hard-nosed Christianity with its roots in the Reformation – with Waldorf education – the more subtle and creative schooling based on Rudolph Steiner’s work, which emphasises myth and ritual as part of children’s needs.

Andrew told me, when we met for breakfast in an Adelaide cafe, that he had grown concerned about the boys he was teaching, noticing their behaviour in the school and in the streets, and

the attitudes in their written work. Their heroes were rock stars, sportsmen and others who showed poor treatment of women and girls, excessive drug and alcohol use, and self-destructive and stupid behaviour. The boys' attitudes, at least the ones they projected, were often racist, sexist, violent and stereotyped. Andrew suspected a root cause behind these boys' poor idea of manhood: *in most cases there was simply no respected male figure in their lives who could teach them to be fine men.* How could they be expected to turn out well?

He also noted another trend in the boys' lives: that much of their waking time was spent looking at screens. They were being educated about life by sources that *had no interest in their welfare.* Andrew was well aware of the research that showed today's young people to be the most troubled, anxious, lonely and disturbed of any generation of adolescents in history. He began to put two and two together.

As experienced teachers, Andrew and Graham had listened to many parents and fellow teachers who expressed total despair at how



to help their boys and girls make it through adolescence. Then, in 2004, they attended a seminar run by the renowned futurist, Peter Ellyard. Ellyard pointed out that the whole of Year 9 in secondary school is traditionally a wasted year, when kids just do not want to learn. He suggested a radical idea: Year 9 should be turned from a problem into a solution. It should be a year focused on ‘the mysteries of adulthood’, specifically teaching how to function as a successful grown-up. To study the very thing these young men were most concerned about – how to become a man.

The Rite Journey is overlaid onto Year 9 or 10 of secondary school. It is substantial and long term – the research indicates that programs for changing kids have little effect unless they create long-term relationships over a year or two, and are woven into the whole of their school experience.

The Rite Journey features ceremonies and retreat experiences, but at its core, for three lessons a week of around an hour each, *the boys study how to be a man*. Five C’s – consciousness, communication, celebration, connection and challenge – form the framework of this. The boys develop and strengthen relationships with the special teachers who spend this year with them. They are helped to connect more deeply to parents, mentors, their own spirit, and the outside world. They listen and learn about life as an adult. They use innovative and potent ways of learning, such as the use of drumming as a metaphor for managing anger. They pass through the seven steps of ‘the hero’s journey’ from boyhood to the start of manhood, facing tests and challenges, culminating in a solitary experience in the wild.

The first year-long Rite Journey programs were conducted in 2005. (A parallel program was also offered for girls.) Many students

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expressed profound gratitude for the experiences the course gave them. Parents, too, were deeply thankful for a program that helped their children grow, not just as academic learners, but towards becoming fine young men and women. Here are some of their comments.

I've noticed a lot of change in my sons. At the beginning they were still a bit immature, at that age of fourteen. By the end of the year I really noticed a new sense of self-confidence; they knew who they were and where they wanted to go in life.

The parent of a girl in the girls' program wrote:

She developed an honesty and earnestness that made her a human being to be reckoned with. The silence and inner anxieties which often accompany this age were left in the dust.