Boys to Men: Rites of Passage for Guys

By Scott Francis

When did you first feel like you were a man? Was there a moment when you thought: I guess I'm grown up now? Are you still waiting for that moment? When did your father start thinking that you were a man?

I always get blank stares from fathers when I ask those questions. I never know what they're thinking. Their sons, on the other hand, are longing for the experience. Ask the same questions to them, and young guys swell with emotion. They identify with the need.

It's a shame we forget what it was like to be the son. We want them to grow up at the right time, but we fail to inform them when that time is. I remember when it happened for me—November 19, 1993.

My family hunts moose. For three generations we've tracked the black swamp donkeys through the snow. A pivotal moment in my life was the day I tracked and shot a bull moose all by myself.

It was a hard hunt, because the tracks interwove with older moose tracks. But my heart doubled its pace and volume when I found a fresh resting spot. Rounding a group of evergreens, I saw him waiting.

The 30-06 rifle announced to hunters within five miles that I was shooting.

It was surprising how sad I felt to kill the Moose. I remember thinking: I did that, and I can't fix it. It was like something inside of me died. Yet at the same time there was delight with the success. For years my legs had participated in the hunt, but never my gun. I was initiated.

Admittedly, while following his tracks I hadn't kept notice of my own. When the adrenalin stopped, I realized I was completely lost (and this was in the days before GPS). As I wondered if I'd need to spend the night out in the snow, my father thankfully followed my tracks. He whistled to get my attention, and I was never more excited to see him. "Dad, I thought I was going to have sleep out here...you have to see this...this is awesome...he's a good one...by the way, where are we?"

I didn't expect this moment to mean anything except that we'd be having moose instead of beef at Christmas. Yet when Dad looked at me, the nod of respect did something. I was proud to fill our freezer that year, and dad was proud of me. "Well done, my man!" he said while teaching me to field dress the animal.

A decade later, my father's attitude sticks with me. In my world, dad respected me after that, as a man. He'd said, "Well done, my man!" I think I grew an inch that day.

My experience isn't unique. One of my farmer friends remembers the day he drove the grain truck right beside the combine and took the grain while both vehicles were still moving. It's a
daunting task for a 14-year-old. His grandfather was riding with him and said, "well that's it…anyone who can take grain on the fly is a man in my books!"

There's no doubt that the father's opinion of the child makes all the difference to how the child ends up. The child inherits the father's values. The child needs to know that dad cares. The child needs to know that dad hopes and believes in him. And the child needs to know when he's ready to be a dad himself.

Of course, perfect parents sometimes see their children make terrible decisions. God knows how this feels, because God's children often have difficulty making the right choices. But it's helpful for the child to understand that it's his choice, not his parents'. If a child walks away from his faith, it's his responsibility.

Many of our 20-somethings live in a self-made Neverland. The life of the grown-up seems the nearest thing to death. They try to be teenagers forever. The fantasy is made all the more convincing by a pop culture that idolizes the beauty and wisdom of the 17-year-old. Our icons are superstars, not saints. Our heroes don't model behavior, decorum, and selfless living. They model skimpy clothes and fake breasts.

The heroes of a culture determine the destiny of a society. Perhaps our problem is that adulthood isn't championed because the responsible old person doesn't look so good on MTV. A teen is told to enjoy her youth because "it's all downhill from here." The rewards of life don't seem worth growing up.

Unfortunately, the perpetual tweenagers will discover that age is unavoidable. One day, they'll be marginalized as old or grown-up. If growing up is to be feared, then that event can cause a crisis. If the tweenagers are married with children, there's even more at stake.

It's unfortunate we don't have an official Christian coming of age ceremony for our boys. For most young men there's no "well done, my man" moment. The Jewish culture has the bar mitzvah. The first nations people have ceremonies—an African friend of mine told me about his three-day gathering. The closest thing to a rite of passage in our culture is the party at the bar when they reach legal drinking age.

As the dean of students at a small Bible college, I'm paid to coach young people into adulthood. Every year we have a fresh batch of first years that have been marinating in pop culture. Their challenge is to think reflectively about a worldview they don't realize they have.

A great measure of adult character is the response students have to correction. If they take responsibility for their own actions without blaming others, they're a long way down the road toward adulthood. When students understand that they're now adults, adult questions become acceptable and adult responsibilities are expected.

Our college decided to try something controversial to tackle the issue during the opening week of classes. We loaded up the entire male student population and took them out for a right of passage night. This was the night that every one of the guys was told upfront that they were now men.
Our campus is 20 miles from a deep valley cut out by the South Saskatchewan River. Along the tops of the hills lie the remains of historical civilizations such as the Plains Cree and Blackfoot Indians. This gave us the perfect location for an unforgettable night. We started the whole adventure standing around two authentic teepee rings. After a brief lesson on anthropology, our college president, using 1 Corinthians 13:11 as a text, talked about the way a child thinks and the way an adult thinks. Each boy (intentional noun) was given paper to reflect and record his own boyhood thinking styles.

Then, at regular intervals, each boy would begin a long hike across the plain towards a blazing torch in the distance. The boys were encouraged to reflect upon their lives as boys and the differences that life would be as men. Five torches were stretched out over a three-mile hike through pastures, hills, cactilined gorges, and windy bluffs. At each torch stood a man with directions to the next torch. The boy was pointed in the right direction, and then given a short idea to think about while walking: "A boy loves his freedoms, a man loves his responsibilities;" "As a man, you're responsible for the next generation;" etc.

At the last torch, the boys were directed towards a grove of trees near the river. A local farmer who had been involved with a boys club had brought us a genuine teepee to use. The boys entered the teepee and sat down with a group of senior men. In their own time they chose to burn the paper on which they'd written their boyhood thoughts. After being recognized as men by the leadership, they joined the rest of the students around a blazing bonfire.

A few of the guys didn't take it seriously. But the overwhelming majority was thoughtful throughout the entire process. The number one highlight that showed up on the annual student surveys was the rite of passage night.

After the whole group (about 65 guys) had finished, we gathered around the fire and had a straight talk about the temptations that young men face. Then we compared scars and injury stories. (One guy was knocked unconscious by a post pounder and another had an unfortunate run in with a javelin.) It was a powerful night with enough testosterone to intimidate a yeti.

Coaching a boy into manhood has more elements than just a rite of passage. Yet to neglect this vital step would be embarrassing. Young guys are craving this experience. It's best delivered as an event among a band of Christian brothers than as a sacrament of the local tavern.

Our plan is to conduct a rite of passage every two years. They may vary in format, depending on weather, river levels, and the number of fathers attending. But as this year has demonstrated, there'll definitely be a greater number of responsible attitudes in our men on campus.

There's a place we dream of where boys don't have to grow up. They can play video games as long as they like. They don't have to clean up for supper, and they certainly don't have to take responsibility for their own lives. We all know how to get there…second star on the right and straight on 'til morning.
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