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# FATHERED BY GOD

JOHN ELDREDGE



THOMAS NELSON  
*Since 1798*

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How gladly would I treat you like sons . . .

—JEREMIAH 3:19 NIV



# INTRODUCTION

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ONE OF THE MOST HAUNTING EXPERIENCES I HAVE EVER had as a man took place on an early summer day in Alaska. My family and I were sea kayaking with humpback whales in the Icy Strait, and we stopped on the shore of Chichagof Island for lunch. Our guide asked us if we wanted to go for a hike into the interior of the island, to a clearing where grizzlies were known to feed. We were all over that invitation. After a twenty minute walk through a spruce forest, we came into what appeared to be a broad, open meadow about four hundred yards across. Being midday, and hot, there were no bears to be seen. "They're sleeping now through the afternoon. They'll be back tonight," he said. "C'mere—I want to show you something."

The meadow was actually more of a bog, a low-lying jungle of brushy groundcover about two feet high, barely supported underneath by another foot of soaked moss and peat. A very difficult place to walk. Our guide led us to a trail of what seemed to be massive footprints, with a stride of about two feet between them, pressed down into the bog and making a path through it. "It's a marked trail," he said. A path created by the footprints of the bears. "This one is probably centuries old. For as long as the bears have been on this island, they've taken this path. The cubs follow their elders, putting their feet exactly where the older bears walk. That's how they learn to cross this place."

I began to walk in the marked trail, stepping into the firm, deep-worn places where bears had walked for centuries. I'm not sure how to describe the experience, but for some reason the word *holy* comes to mind. An ancient and fearful path through a wild and untamed place. I was following a proven way, laid down by those much stronger and far more prepared for this place than me. And though I knew I did not belong there, I was haunted by it, could have followed that path for a long, long time. It awakened some deep, ancient yearning in me.

This is a book about what it looks like to become a man, and —far more to our need—*how* to become a man. This material was previously released in a book entitled *The Way of the Wild Heart* but we felt that many men (and women!) missed that message and so we have re-presented it here. There is no more hazardous undertaking, this business of "becoming a man," full of dangers, counterfeits, and disasters. It is the Great Trial of every man's life played out over time, and every male young and old finds himself in this journey. Though there are few who find their way through. Our perilous journey has been made all the more difficult because we live in a time with very little direction. A time with very few fathers to show us the way.

As men, we desperately need something like that marked trail on Chichagof Island. Not more rules, not another list of principles, not formulas. A sure path, marked by men for centuries before us. I believe we can find it.

What you are holding in your hands is a map. It chronicles the stages of the masculine journey from boyhood to old age. This is not a book of clinical psychology, nor a manual on child development. For one, I am unqualified to write that sort of book. Further, I find the

unreadable. Ponderous. Boring. What do you recall of your psychology textbook from high school or college? But I do love maps. Most men do. The pleasure of a map is that it gives you the lay of the land, and yet you still have to make choices about how you will cover the terrain before you. A map is a guide, not a formula. It offers freedom.

It does not tell you how fast to walk, though when you see the contour lines growing very close together, you know you are approaching steep terrain and will want to mend your stride. It does not tell you why the mountain is there, or how old the forest is. It tells you how to go where you are going.

A companion workbook is available to help you, and you'll *experience* a whole lot more of the journey if you do the workbook too. The best approach would be to read this first, *then* go back through it with the workbook. Maybe get a few guys to go through it together. The workbook is now available as a free download at [www.ransomedheart.com/fatheredbygod](http://www.ransomedheart.com/fatheredbygod). Share it with your group; copy it for your friends! (The workbook will not be available in stores.)

I've often wondered at the long lists found in many places in the Bible that recount a roster of men as "the son of so-and-so, who was the son of so-and-so." You'll find many of these rosters in the Scriptures, and elsewhere in ancient literature. Perhaps these accounts reveal something we hadn't noticed before—a father-view of the world held by those who wrote them, shared by those who would read them. Perhaps they saw in the father-son legacy the most significant of all legacies, that to know a man's father was in great part to know the man. And then, if you step back further to have a look, you'll see that the God of the Bible is portrayed as a great Father—not primarily as mother, not merely as Creator—but as Father.

It opens a new horizon for us.

You see, the world in which we live has lost something vital, something core to our understanding of life and a man's place in it. For the time in which we live is, as the social prophet Alexander Mitcherlie had it, a time without a father. I mean this in two ways. First, that most men and most boys have no real father able to guide them through the jungles of the masculine journey, and they are—most of us are—unfinished and unfathered men. Children. Or boys in men's bodies. But there is a deeper meaning to the phrase "a time without a father." Our way of looking at the world has changed. We no longer live, either as a society or even as the church, with a father-view of the world, the view centered in the presence of a loving and strong father deeply engaged in our lives, to whom we can turn at any time for the guidance, comfort, and provision we need.

And that is actually an occasion for hope. Because the life you've known as a man is *not* all there is. There is another way. A path laid down for centuries by men who have gone before us. A marked trail. And there *is* a Father ready to show us that path and help us follow it.

# 1 THE MASCULINE JOURNEY

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Stand at the crossroads and look;  
ask for the ancient paths,  
ask where the good way is, and walk in it,  
and you will find rest for your souls.

—JEREMIAH 6:16 NIV

ALL I WAS TRYING TO DO WAS FIX THE SPRINKLERS.

A fairly straightforward plumbing job. The guy who came to drain our system and blow out for the winter told me last fall that there was a crack in “the main valve,” and I’d better replace the thing before I turned the water back on come next summer. For the past several days it had been hot—midnineties, unusually hot for Colorado in May—and I knew I’d better get the water going or my yard would soon go the way of the Gobi Desert. Honestly, I looked forward to the project. Really. I enjoy tackling outside chores for the most part, enjoy the feeling of having triumphed over some small adversity, restoring wellness to my domain. Traces of Adam, I suppose—rule and subdue, be fruitful, all that.

I disengaged the large brass valve from the system on the side of the house, set off to the plumbing store to get a new one. “I need one of these,” I said to the guy behind the counter. “It’s called a reducing valve,” he replied, with a touch of condescension. Okay, so I didn’t know that. I’m an amateur. Nevertheless, I’m ready to go. Valve in hand, I returned home to tackle the project. A new challenge loomed before me: soldering a piece of copper pipe to a copper fitting that carried the water from the house to the sprinklers, reduced pressure by the valve now in my possession. It seemed simple enough. I even followed the instructions that came with the butane torch I bought. (Following instructions is usually something I do only once a project has become a NASCAR pileup, but this was new ground for me, the valve was expensive, and I didn’t want to screw the whole thing up.) Sure enough I couldn’t do it, couldn’t get the solder to melt into the joint as needed to prevent leaks.

Suddenly, I was angry.

Now, I used to get angry at the drop of a hat, sometimes violently angry as a teenager punching holes in the walls of my bedroom, kicking holes in doors. But the years have had their mellowing effect, and by the grace of God there has also been the sanctifying influence of the Spirit, and my anger surprised me. It felt . . . disproportionate to the issue at hand. I can’t get a pipe soldered together. So? *I’ve never done this before. Cut yourself some slack.* But reason was not exactly ruling the moment, and in anger I stormed into the house to try to find some help.

Like so many men in our culture—solitary men who have no father around to ask how to do this or that, no other men around at all, or too much pride to ask the men who are around—I turned to the Internet, found one of those sites that explains things like how to surmount

household plumbing problems, watched a little animated video on how to solder copper pipe. It felt . . . weird. I'm trying to play the man and fix my own sprinklers but I can't and there's no man here to show me how and so I'm watching a cute little video for the mechanical challenged and feeling like about ten years old. A cartoon for a man who is really a boy. Armed with information and wobbling confidence, I go back out, give it another try. Another miss.

At the end of the first round I merely felt like an idiot. Now I feel like an idiot doomed to failure. And I'm seething. A counselor and author both by trade and by intuition, I am nearly always watching my inner life with some detached part of me. *Wow, that part of me says, Have a look at this. What are you so hacked off about?*

I'll tell you why I'm hacked. There are two reasons. First, I'm hacked because there's no one here to show me how to do this. Why do I always have to figure this stuff out on my own? I'm sure if some guy who knew what he was doing were here, he'd take one look at the project and tell me right away what I'm doing wrong, and—more important—how to do it right. Together, we'd tackle the problem in no time and my yard would be saved and something in my soul would feel better.

I'm also hacked because I can't do it myself, mad that I *need* help. Long ago I resolved to live without needing help, vowed to figure things out on my own. It's a terrible and common vow to orphaned men who found ourselves alone as boys and decided that there really is no one there, that men are especially unreliable, so do it yourself. I'm also ticked at God because why does it have to be so hard? I know—this was a lot to get out of a failed attempt to fix my sprinklers, but it could have been a dozen other situations. Doing my taxes. Talking to my sixteen-year-old son about dating. Buying a car. Buying a house. Making a career move. Any trial where I am called upon to play the man but immediately feel that nagging sense of, *I don't know how this is going to go. I'm alone in this. It's up to me to figure it out.*

Now, I do know this—I know that I am not alone in feeling alone. Most of the guys I've ever met feel like this at some point.

My story does not end there. I had to drop the project and get to work, leaving torque pipe, and tools on my porch out of the merciful rain—merciful because it might buy me twenty-four hours to get this figured out before the death of my yard. I had to make an important phone call at 4:00 p.m., so I set my watch alarm in order not to miss it. I made the call, but failed to notice that my alarm did not go off. That took place at 4:00 a.m. the next morning. (I hadn't noticed the little "a.m." next to the 4:00 when I set the thing.) I'd gone to bed with no resolution inwardly or otherwise, and bang—I was yanked out of a deep sleep at 4:00 a.m. to face it, and all my uncertainties. Wham—just as suddenly, I am hit with the thought: *Get it right.*

This is perhaps the defining vow or compelling force of my adult life: you are alone in the world and you'd better watch it 'cause there isn't any room for error, so Get It Right. The detached observer in me says, *Wow—this is huge. You just hit the mother lode. I mean, jeez—this has defined your entire life and you've never even put it into words. And now here it*

~~and you know what this is tied to, don't you? Lying there in the dark of my bedroom, Stas sleeping soundly beside me, the broken sprinkler system lying in misery just outside the window by my head, I know what this is about.~~

It's about fatherlessness.

## UNFINISHED MEN

A boy has a lot to learn in his journey to become a man, and he becomes a man only through the active intervention of his father and the fellowship of men. It cannot happen any other way. To become a man—and to know that he *has* become a man—a boy must have a guide, a father who will show him how to fix a bike and cast a fishing rod and call a girl and land the job and all the many things a boy will encounter in his journey to become a man. This we must understand: masculinity is *bestowed*. A boy learns who he is and what he's made of from a man (or a company of men). This can't be learned in any other place. It can't be learned from other boys, and it can't be learned from the world of women. "The traditional way of raising sons," notes Robert Bly, "which lasted for thousands and thousands of years, amounted to fathers and sons living in close—murderously close—proximity, while the father taught the son a trade: perhaps farming or carpentry or blacksmithing or tailoring."

When I was young, my father would take me fishing early on a Saturday morning. We would spend hours together out there, on a lake or a river, trying to catch fish. But the fish were never really the issue. What I longed for was his presence, his attention, and his delight in me. I longed for him to teach me how, show me the way. This is where to drop that line. This is how you set the hook. If you can get a group of men talking about their fathers, you'll hear this core longing of a man's heart. "My father used to take me with him out in the field." "My father taught me how to play hockey, out in the street." "I learned to frame a house from my dad." Whatever the details might be, when a man speaks of the greatest gift his father gave him—if his father gave him anything at all worth remembering—it is always the passing on of masculinity.

This is essential, for life will test you, my brothers. Like a ship at sea, you *will* be tested and the storms will reveal the weak places in you as a man. They already have. How else do you account for the anger you feel, the fear, the vulnerability to certain temptations? Why can't you marry the girl? Having married, why can't you handle her emotions? Why haven't you found your life's mission? Why do financial crises send you into a rage or depression? You know what I speak of. And so our basic approach to life comes down to this: we stay in what we can handle, and steer clear of everything else. We engage where we feel we can win, and we must—as at work—and we hold back where we feel sure to fail, as in the deep waters relating to our wife or our children, and in our spirituality.

You see, what we have now is a world of uninitiated men. Partial men. Boys, mostly, walking around in men's bodies, with men's jobs and families, finances, and responsibilities. The passing on of masculinity was never completed, if it was begun at all. The boy was never

taken through the process of masculine initiation. That's why most of us are Unfinished Men and therefore unable to truly live as men in whatever life throws at us. And unable to pass on to our sons and daughters what *they* need to become whole and holy men and women themselves.

At the same time there are these boys and young men and men our own age around us who are all very much in need—desperate need—of someone to show them the way. What does it mean to be a man? *Am* I a man? What should I do in this or that situation? These boys are growing up into uncertain men because the core questions of their souls have gone unanswered, or answered badly. They grow into men who act, but their actions are not rooted in a genuine strength, wisdom, and kindness. There is no one there to show them the way.

Masculine initiation is a journey, a *process*, a quest really, a story that unfolds over time. It can be a very beautiful and powerful event to experience a blessing or a ritual, to hear words spoken to us in a ceremony of some sort. Those moments can be turning points in our lives. But they are only moments, and moments, as you well know, pass quickly and are swallowed in the river of time. We need more than a moment, an event. We need a process, a journey, an epic story of many experiences woven together, building upon one another in progression. We need *initiation*. And, we need a Guide.

## FATHERED ON THE SOUTH PLATTE

I moved to Colorado in August of 1991. There were many reasons involved in the move from Los Angeles—a job, a shot at grad school, an escape from the seemingly endless asphalt-smog-and-strip-mall suffocation of L.A.—but beneath them all was a stronger desire to get to the mountains and the wide-open spaces, get within reach of wildness. I couldn't have articulated it at the time, but my soul was yearning to take up the masculine journey that felt aborted in my early teens. And with that, I wanted to become a fly fisherman.

My dad and I fished together when I was young, and those are among my most treasured memories of him. He taught me first to fish with a worm on a bobber, and then to cast a spinning rod. He was not a fly fisherman, but I wanted to be. Around the age of twenty-five, I bought myself a rod and reel and began to try to teach myself—a pattern by which, unfortunately, I have learned most of what I've learned in my life. We often speak of a man who's done this successfully as a "self-made man." The appellation is usually spoken with a sense of admiration, but really it should be said in the same tones we might use of the dearly departed, or of a man who recently lost an arm—with sadness and regret. What the term really means is "an orphaned man who figured how to master some part of life on his own."

Back to fly-fishing. When we got to Colorado I learned of a section of the South Platte River known for its reputation as a fly fisherman's dream. "The Miracle Mile" was past its heyday, but still a place that the best fly fishermen headed to, and so I went. It's a beautiful stretch of river that flows through open ranchland between two reservoirs. The banks are low and spacious, with only the occasional willow—a forgiving place for a novice to learn to cast.

spent the good part of a morning in the river, seeing trout all around me but unable to catch even one. Every time I looked upriver there was this guy, rod bent double, laughing and whooping as he brought yet another giant rainbow to his net. At first I envied him. Then I began to hate him. Finally, I chose humility and simply wanted to watch him for a while, try to learn what he was doing.

I stood at a respectful distance up the bank, not wanting to appear as an encroacher on his beloved spot, and sat down to watch. He was aware of me, and after casting maybe two or three times and hooking yet another fish, he turned and said, "C'mon down." I forgot his name, but he told me he was a fly-fishing guide by profession, and on his days off this was where he most liked to fish. He asked me how I was doing and I said, "Not good." "Lemme see your rig." I handed him my rod. "Oh . . . well, first off, your leader isn't long enough." Before I could apologize for being a fishing idiot, he had taken out a pair of clippers and nipped my leader off completely. He then tied on a new leader with such speed and grace I was speechless. "What flies you been usin'?" "These," I said sheepishly, knowing already they were the wrong flies only because I figured everything I was doing was wrong.

Graciously he made no comment on my flies, only said, "Here—this time of year you want to use these," pulling a few small midges off his vest and handing them to me. He tied one on my tippet, and then began to show me how to fish his treasured spot. "C'mon over here, right next to me." If a fly fisherman is right-handed, the instructor typically stands close on his left so as not to take the forward cast in the ear or the back of his head. "Now—most folks use one strike indicator when they're fishing the fly below the surface [I felt good that at least I knew that—had read it in a book]. But that won't help you much. You've got to know you're getting a dead drift." Success in fly-fishing rests upon many nuances, but chief among them is your ability to present your fly naturally to the fish, which means that it drifts down with the current in the same fashion as the real food they see every day—without any tugging or pulling motion contrary to the speed and direction of the current. "The secret is to use two or even three. Like this."

After about ten minutes of coaching, he stepped out of the water to watch me—just as a father who's taught his son to hit a baseball steps back to watch, let the boy take a few swings all by himself. I hooked a trout and landed it. He came back into the water to show me how to release it. "I usually kiss mine on the forehead. Superstition." He laid one on the brood of the large rainbow and released it into the cold water. "Have fun," he said, and without looking back he went downriver about to the spot where I'd been fishing earlier and began to catch fish there, one after another. I caught fish too. And while that made me happy, there was a deeper satisfaction in my soul as I stood in the river, fishing well. Some primal need had just been touched and touched good. As I drove home I knew the gift had been from God, that he had fathered me through this man.

## INITIATION

We aren't meant to figure life out on our own. God wants to father us. The truth is, he ~~has~~ been fathering us for a long time—we just haven't had the eyes to see it. He wants to father us much more intimately, but we have to be in a posture to receive it. What that involves is a new way of seeing, a fundamental reorientation of how we look at life, and our situation in it. First, we allow that we are unfinished men, partial men, mostly boy inside, and we need *initiation*. In many, many ways. Second, we turn from our independence and all the ways we either charge at life or shrink from it; this may be one of the most basic and the most crucial ways a man repents. I say "repent" because our approach to life is based on the conviction that God, for the most part, doesn't show up much. I understand where the conviction came from, battle it constantly myself, but still—it's faithless, is it not? We must be willing to take an enormous risk, and open our hearts to the possibility that God *is* initiating us as men—maybe even in the very things in which we thought he'd abandoned us. We open ourselves up to being fathered.

I'll admit, it doesn't come easily. A sort of fundamental mistrust is something we learn through the course of our days, built on that core mistrust in God we inherited from Adam. Making the switch will feel awkward. As Gerald May says, the more we've become accustomed to seeking life apart from God, the more "abnormal and stressful" it seems "to look for God directly." *Especially* as a Father, fathering us. But it is worth it. *It is worth* it. Worth allowing ourselves to be fathered, accepting that this new way of living will take some getting used to, and taking the posture that we'll do whatever it takes to get used to it.

What I am suggesting is that we reframe the way we look at our lives as men. And the way we look at our relationships with God. I also want to help you to reframe the way you relate to other men, and especially you fathers who are wondering how to raise boys. This reframing begins when we see that a man's life is a process of initiation into true masculinity. It is a series of stages we soak in and progress through. And as for God, I believe that what he is *primarily* up to at any point in a boy's or a man's life is initiating him. So much of what we misinterpret as hassles or trials or screw-ups on our part are in fact God fathering us, taking us through something in order to strengthen us, or heal us, or dismantle some unholy thing in us. In other words, initiate us—a distinctly masculine venture.

## THE STAGES

If I were to sketch out for you the masculine journey in broad strokes, I believe this is how it unfolds, or better, how it was *meant* to unfold: Boyhood to Cowboy to Warrior to Lover to King to Sage. All in the course of about eighty years or so, give or take a decade or two.

Now, let me be quick to add that one cannot pin an exact age to each stage. There is overlap, and there are aspects of each stage in every other. Watch a boy for an afternoon (a very good idea, if it's been some time since you were a boy), and you'll see the warrior, the cowboy, the king. Yet he is a boy, and it is as a boy he must live during those years. Great damage is done if we ask a boy to become a king too soon, as is the case when a father



abandons his family, walking out the door with the parting words, "You're the man of the house now." A cruel thing to do, and an even more cruel thing to say, for the boy has not yet become a man, not yet learned the lessons of boyhood and then young manhood. He has not yet been a warrior, nor a lover, and he is in no way ready to become a king.

When we ask this of him, it is a wound equal to a curse, for in a moment he is robbed of his boyhood, and asked to leap over stages of masculine maturity no man can leap over. No, there is a path that must be taken. There is a Way. Not a formula. A Way. Each stage has its lessons to be learned, and each stage can be wounded, cut short, leaving the growing man with an undeveloped soul. Then we wonder why he folds suddenly when he is forty-five, like a tree we find toppled in the yard after a night of strong winds. We go over to have a look and find that its roots hadn't sunk down deep into the earth, or perhaps that it was rotten on the inside, weakened by disease or drought. Such are the insides of Unfinished Men.

To begin with, there is boyhood, a time of wonder and exploration. A time of tree forts and comic books, pollywogs and Popsicles. Snakes and snails and puppy dog tails, as the old nursery rhyme has it. Above all else, it is the time of being the beloved son, the apple of your father's eye. A time of affirmation. For though I maintain my premise laid out in *Wild Heart*—that every man shares the same core Question, and that Question runs something like "Do I have what it takes?"—I believe that Question is far more urgent to the cowboy stage and after. Before and beneath that Question and a man's search for validation lies a deeper need—to know that he is prized, delighted in, that he is the beloved son. Our need for our father's love.

The cowboy stage comes next, around the period of adolescence (thirteen seems to be the year of transition), and it runs into the late teens to early twenties. It is the time of learning the lessons of the field, a time of great adventures and testing, and also a time for hard work. The young man learns to hunt or throw a curveball or break a horse. He gets his first car and with it an open horizon. He takes off into the woods alone, or with a few buddies, travels to Europe, becomes a ranger or a smoke jumper. A time of daring and danger, a time of learning that he does, indeed, have what it takes.

Sometime in his late teens there emerges the young warrior, and this phase lasts well into his thirties. Again, the stages overlap, and there is some aspect of them in every phase of a man's life. Whether six or sixty, a man will always be a warrior, for he bears the image of warrior God (see Exod. 15:3). But there is also a time in a man's life when one of the stages is prominent. The warrior gets a cause and, hopefully, a king. He heads off to law school or the mission field. He encounters evil face-to-face, and learns to defeat it. The young warrior learns the rigors of discipline—especially that inner discipline and resolution of spirit you see in Jesus, who "set his face like flint" (Isa. 50:7 NIV) and could not be deterred from his mission. He might join the marines, or he might become a math teacher in the inner city, battling for the hearts of young people. That he gets a mission is crucial, and that he learns to battle the kingdom of darkness is even more crucial. Passivity and masculinity are mutually exclusive, fundamentally at odds with one another. To be a man he must learn to live with courage, take action, go into battle.

This is typically the time when he also becomes a lover, though it would be best for him and for her if he lived as a warrior for some time first. As I also described in *Wild at Heart*, too many young men do not get their Question answered as a young cowboy, and as an uncertain warrior they have no mission to their lives. They end up taking all that to the woman, hoping in her to find validation and a reason for living (a desperately fruitless search, as many men now understand). A lover comes to *offer* his strength to a woman, not to get it from her. But the time of the lover is not foremost about the woman. It is the time when a young man discovers the Way of the Heart—that poetry and passion are far closer to the Truth than are mere reason and proposition. He awakens to beauty, to life. He discovers music and literature; like the young David, he becomes a romantic and it takes his spiritual life to a whole new level. Service *for* God is overshadowed by intimacy *with* God.

Then—and only then—is he ready to become a king, ready to rule a kingdom. The crisis of leadership in our churches, businesses, and governments is largely due to this old dilemma: men have been given power, but they are unprepared to handle it. The time of ruling is a tremendous test of character, for the king will be sorely tested to use his influence with humility, for the benefit of others. What we call the midlife crisis is often a man coming into a little money and influence, and using it to go back and recover what he missed as the beloved son (he buys himself toys) or the cowboy (he goes off on adventures). He is an undeveloped, uninitiated man.

A true king comes into authority and knows that the privilege is *not* so he can now arrange for his comfort. He might be made president of a company or commander over a division; he might become a senior pastor or a high school basketball coach. This is the time of ruling over a kingdom. Hopefully, he draws around him a company of young warriors, for he is now a father to younger men.

Finally, we have the sage, the gray-haired father with a wealth of knowledge and experience, whose mission now is to counsel others. His kingdom may shrink—the kids have left the house, so he might move into something smaller. He steps down from his role as president, and his income may shift to savings and investments made while he was king. But his *influence* ought to increase. This is not the time to pack off to Phoenix or Leisure World—the kingdom needs him now as an elder at the gates. He might in fact be an elder in his church, or he might serve on the board of education. His time is spent mentoring younger men, especially kings, as Merlin mentored Arthur, as Paul mentored Timothy. At a time in life when most men feel their time has passed, this could be the period of their greatest contribution.

Now, let me say again that these stages are all present to some degree at any period in a man's life, and they all come together to make a whole and holy man. The boy is very much a king of a little kingdom—his bedroom, the tree house, the fort he has built secretly in the basement or woods. And the man, though now a king in a far more serious manner, must never lose the wonder of the boy, that condition we call “young at heart.” For by maturity we do not mean rigidity, calcification of the heart. As George MacDonald said, “The boy should be enclosed and kept, as his life, the child at the heart of him, and never let it go . . . the child is not meant to die, but to be for ever fresh-born.” Jesus spoke to this when he said we must

become like a child if we would live in his kingdom (Matt. 18:3).

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Having said this, it does seem to me that each of the stages—archetypes, they might be called—does have a season when it comes into its own, when it seems to dominate and flourish for a good reason. So, I will speak of the stages in both respects.

## IMAGERY OF THE STAGES

David might be the definitive biblical expression for the masculine journey. His life as a man is apparently worth giving special attention to, since God devotes sixty-some chapters of his book to David's life, whereas most of the other guys are lucky to get a paragraph or two. When we meet David he is in the cowboy stage, a teenager living out in the fields, watching over the family flocks. I thought to call this stage the Shepherd stage, but the word has been so badly hijacked by religious imagery it now conveys the opposite of the life it actually was. Our images of shepherds have been framed by Christmastime, through the charming little figurines found on coffee-table crèche displays or, closer to my point, the neighborhood kids in bathrobes, with towels on their heads, playing the role in the local pageant. They are cut from a different cloth. Actual shepherds are *rugged*.

On the eve of his passage from cowboy to warrior, David stands in the camp of the army of Israel, before his king, who is trying to dissuade the teenager from single-handed combat against a notorious mercenary (Goliath). David says, "Your servant has been keeping his father's sheep. When a lion or a bear came and carried off a sheep from the flock, I went after it, struck it and rescued the sheep from its mouth. When it turned on me, I seized it by its hair, struck it and killed it" (1 Sam. 17:34–35 NIV). Those experiences came during his cowboy stage, and we see here how rugged and dangerous that stage is meant to be. We also see that he learned its lessons rather well. Was David ever the beloved son? It's difficult to tell. We have no record of his boyhood per se, though we do have two other pieces of information that might fill in to some degree. He was the youngest of eight boys, and that can be good and that can be bad. Typically, the youngest is the apple of his father's eye—as were Joseph, and Benjamin. But when you read the Psalms, there can be no doubt that David knew he was a beloved son of God; his poems are filled with the kind of heartfelt assurance of God's love and favor that only a beloved son can express.

As for the warrior, can there be any doubt that David sets the bar for this stage? "Saul has slain his thousands, and David his tens of thousands" proclaimed the women of Israel (1 Sam. 18:7 NIV). He was a lover, to be sure—though our thoughts probably jump at this point to the affair with Bathsheba. But it is from David we learn that the lover stage is *not* first about women at all—it is about the life of the heart, the life of beauty and passion and a deep romance with God, all of which can be seen in his poetry. And of course, David was, literally, a king.

You see the stages also in the life of Jesus. Surely, he is the beloved son, both of his parents and of God. The brief account we have of his childhood contains the story of when

Jesus disappeared from the caravan his family was traveling with as they left the feast of the Passover in Jerusalem. What is remarkable is that it took Mary and Joseph two days to notice the boy was missing—demonstrating either gross parental neglect (a theory unsupported by the rest of what we know about the family) or remarkable security and assurance in the boy. And of course, much more to the point of our own journey here in this book, we have the pronouncement by God the Father over Jesus as he rises from the waters of the Jordan: “This is My beloved Son” (Matt. 3:17 NKJV). The confidence Jesus has in his Father’s love, their bold and unquestioned intimacy, is the hallmark of his life, the explanation for everything else. This man knows his Father adores him.

I would place the cowboy years of Jesus’ life in the carpenter’s shop, hour upon hour on Joseph’s side, learning woodcraft from his father and all the lessons lumber and hand tools have to teach a young man. A wonderful way for a teen to spend those years. Apparently he is comfortable in the wilderness as well, for he often goes there during his ministry years to be restored, to be with God his Father.

He enters the warrior phase as he enters his ministry, a three year period marked by intense warfare, climaxing when he vanquishes the evil one, secures our ransom from the dungeons of darkness, wrestles the keys of hell and death from his enemy. Over the course of those years we also see a passionate lover wooing and winning the heart of his Bride. (And it might be good to remember that the Song of Songs was authored by the Spirit of God, who is without doubt the greatest lover of all time.) And of course, he is King, Lord now of heaven and earth, and a returning Warrior King who will bring final victory to his people and usher in the golden era of his realm. His earthly life was cut short, but even still we see the sage in the depth and insight of his masterful teaching. Of course, he is our Wonderful Counselor even now.

## YOU’LL FIND THE STAGES EVERYWHERE

Now that you have an outline for the Stages of the masculine journey, you will see them throughout all the great stories.

*The Prince of Egypt*, based on the life of Moses, is our first example. When the story begins he is a beloved son—spoiled, no doubt, and in great need of passage into the cowboy stage—but a beloved son nevertheless. His parents saw something special in the babe, and risked their lives to save his. Moses is adopted into Pharaoh’s house, raised there in the life of privilege. He is hurled into the cowboy phase out in the wilderness, as a shepherd (which, as we said, was a rugged and demanding life, full of danger and adventure). Then, upon the call of God to free his people, he becomes a warrior and then the king and sage of the Israelites as they make their sojourn to the Promised Land.

Consider also J. R. R. Tolkien’s trilogy, *The Lord of the Rings*. Each of the main characters is an image for a stage or several stages. The hobbits—especially Frodo—are the picture of the beloved son. Strider is the paramount cowboy (a “ranger,” as they are called,

title you might easily substitute for “cowboy” wherever I talk about this stage). Then he becomes the great warrior Aragorn, who becomes king. Gandalf is their Sage. Looking closely you can also see a boy’s journey into manhood through the lives of the hobbits, whose journey-story it is. When we meet the hobbits they are living in the stage of the beloved son—curly hair, good-hearted, mischievous—their shire world a safe place they are free to explore. When they take to the road, they enter the cowboy stage. Yes, they have a mission, but they do not fully appreciate its gravity. At first it is a joy to be on the road, camping out, seeing new sights, experiencing life beyond a feather pillow. Aragorn takes them “into the wild,” where they begin to be toughened, sleeping on the ground, enduring weather, danger, long treks. They go on to become warriors, learn to battle, go to war.

The stages also form the story line for the movie *The Lion King*. The opening scene announces the arrival of the lion cub Simba. He is the beloved son of the lion king Mufasa and clearly the apple of his father’s eye. But his youth is cut short by a sudden loss of innocence—as happens with so many boys—and he is hurled into the cowboy stage, taking to the road. However, he has no Aragorn to guide him, and his time in this stage is corrupted by staying in it too long, and living only for today. This happens to many fatherless young men who live in adventure for adventure’s sake, snowboarding, surfing, refusing to grow up. Simba enters the lover stage when Nala finds him in the forest, and they enjoy a sort of Edenlike idyll. But he is an aimless lover, as are so many young men who have not first passed through the warrior stage, and Nala grows impatient with him, as so many young women grow impatient with the young men they love but who show no signs of getting on with their lives.

Fortunately for Simba and for the realm, he is at this juncture found by a sage—the old baboon Rafiki—who takes him back to the father, and with that return come his true identity and call. He is restored to a father-centered world—the very restoration we also need. It is time for Simba to complete his journey into manhood, as warrior and king. He goes back to face his enemy, triumphs over the evil one, assumes the throne, and ushers in a new golden age for the kingdom.

## TAKING UP THE QUEST

Thus our journey of masculine initiation. Now, we don’t know much about stages of development in our instant culture. We have someone else make our coffee for us. We no longer have to wait to have our photos developed—not even an hour—for now we have digital cameras that deliver back to us the image, instantly. We don’t have to wait to get in touch with someone—we can e-mail them, page them, call them on a cell phone, instant-message them at this moment. We don’t need to wait for our leather jackets or our jeans or caps to age to get that rugged look—they come that way now, prefaded, tattered. Character that can be bought and worn immediately.

But God is a God of *process*. If you want an oak tree, he has you start with an acorn. If you want a Bible, well, he delivers that over the course of more than a thousand years. If you

want a man, you must begin with the boy. God ordained the stages of masculine development. They are woven into the fabric of our being, just as the laws of nature are woven into the fabric of the earth. In fact, those who lived closer to the earth respected and embraced the stages for centuries upon centuries. We might think of them as the ancient paths. Only recently have we lost touch with them. In exchange for triple-venti nonfat sugar-free vanilla lattes. The result of having abandoned masculine initiation is a world of unfinished, uninitiated men.

But it doesn't have to be this way. We needn't wander in a fog. We don't have to live alone, striving, sulking, uncertain, angry. We don't have to figure life out for ourselves. There is another way. Wherever we are in the journey, our initiation can begin in earnest. Far better for us—and for those who have to live with us, who look to us—to rediscover the stages and honor them, live within them, raise our sons through them. Which brings us back to our predicament: who is going to do this for us?

## 2 TRUE SON OF A TRUE FATHER

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I will be a Father to you,  
and you will be my sons . . .

—2 Corinthians 6:18 niv

THE TIME IS THE MIDDLE AGES, 1184 ANNO DOMINI, the year of our Lord. The time is between the Second and Third Crusades. A young man, a blacksmith called Balian, has lost both his wife and son. And with them, because of their tragic deaths, he has also lost his faith. He is certainly losing heart. As he hammers away in his little smithy, a mysterious figure rides up on horseback, apparently a lord of some sort, armed, asking for shoes for his horses. The captain of a company, he studies the silent, angry young man, watches him at work. He then announces to Balian that he is his true father—Godfrey, Baron of Ibelin, a great warrior returning to Jerusalem with a company of men. He invites Balian to come with him.

At first the young man refuses. Why? Perhaps he has lost the capacity to hope. Perhaps the years of fatherlessness have caused him to mistrust this alleged father. You might answer for him, for his story is also ours in many ways. A fatherless man labors alone under the sorrows of his life. His true father comes to him, a vague and somewhat imposing figure, and calls him on a journey. The man hesitates, as we hesitate, unsure of the father and his intentions. How would you have responded, given the circumstances? Think about it. It might help you understand how you will respond to the offer God is extending to you.

After Godfrey rides away, Balian changes his mind, catches up with the men in the forest, hoping to find in Jerusalem—for he has heard it to be so—the forgiveness of his sins. A step in the right direction. Balian follows his father, if only to find forgiveness, as so many good men in the church believe in God, if only for forgiveness. But the father intends much more. Godfrey embraces Balian as his beloved son, heir to his domain (Rom. 8:17). He gives men in exchange for his life (Isa. 43:4). They take to the road together—for Balian, it is the time of the cowboy. His father trains him to be a warrior, and initiates him into the knighthood. He fathers Balian into the great mission of his life, to serve the true king of Jerusalem.

The kingdom of heaven is an insightful picture of the masculine journey, and we can be greatly helped by pictures like this one. As Norman Maclean wrote, “The nearest anyone can come to finding himself at any given age is to find a story that somehow tells him about himself.” This is a good story to begin with. And there are many others to come.

## FATHERLESS

You are the son of a kind, strong, and engaged Father, a Father wise enough to guide you on the Way, generous enough to provide for your journey, offering to walk with you every step.

This is perhaps *the* hardest thing for us to believe—really believe, down deep in our hearts, so that it changes us forever, changes the way we approach each day.

Of the thousands of conversations I've had with men over the years, in a counseling office or around a campfire, and of all the personal struggles that fill the pages of my own journals, I believe this is *the* core issue of our shared dilemma as men. We just don't believe it. Our core assumptions about the world boil down to this: we are on our own to make life work. We are not watched over. We are not cared for. Whatever our fathers might have provided, we are not much different now than Balian at the start of his story. When we are hit with a problem, we have to figure it out ourselves, or just take the hit. If anything good is going to come our way, we're the ones who are going to have to arrange for it. Many of us have called upon God as Father, but, frankly, he doesn't seem to have heard. We're not sure why. Maybe we didn't do it right. Maybe he's about more important matters. Whatever the reason, our experience of this world has framed our approach to life. We believe we are fatherless.

Just yesterday I was on the phone with a young friend about to enter his final year of grad school. We were chatting about all the pressures and demands that go with such a time in life—and a new marriage added to the equation—when I asked him a question designed to change the direction of the conversation, lift his eyes to the horizon. "Sam, what is bringing you joy these days?" A moment's pause. He then began to talk about a sea kayak he was saving up for, hoped to purchase come September. "But I feel like God is opposed to it." That comment struck me as odd. It felt . . . out of the blue. "Why?" I asked. "I don't know," he said. "I guess I find it hard to believe that he wants anything good for me." Ah, yes. This young man would not be alone in that feeling.

Sam began to wonder out loud about his doubts. "I'm just now remembering . . . my dad never played with me. Ever. I'd be outside, and he'd never come out." His awareness was growing, the light dawning on his story. "I always wanted a tree fort when I was a boy. But we lived in the city. Then we moved to the country when I was thirteen, and it was awesome. I had all the trees in the world. I built this tree fort. But even though my dad worked in construction, he didn't help me. I sat in it maybe five or six times. My dad never came out. I remember feeling like, *This sucks. Who's here to see this?*" A sad story. Small wonder Sam finds it hard to believe that God wants anything good for him. I said, "I'm so excited about the kayak—I think God is, too." A longer pause, and then Sam spoke for many a man: "It's like you're speaking French to me. I just don't get it."

A simple story, about a kayak. But one I've heard repeated hundreds, perhaps thousands, of times before, in one form or another, from different men at different stages, touching on the same basic doubt in our hearts. Of course, it runs into much deeper waters than buying a kayak, especially when it involves the death of a child, a dream that has died, a life that feels mostly hard and disappointing and not much else. Whatever life has taught us, and though we may not have put it into these exact words, we feel that we are alone. Simply look at the way men live. If I were to give an honest assessment of my life for the past thirty years, I'd have to confess the bulk of it as Striving and Indulging. Pushing myself hard to excel, taking on the battles that come to me with determination but also with a fear-based



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