

HOW TO RAISE MASCULINE SONS¹

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Helping boys grow into solid men is an enormous ministry opportunity today.

Does that statement sound a bit odd? Doesn't masculinity just happen?

Well, aside from basic physical development, the answer is a resounding no. Maybe in the past our social environment was conducive to a sapling of a boy becoming an oak of a man. But not now. As Garrison Keillor said a few years ago, "Manhood, once an opportunity for achievement, now seems like a problem to be overcome." My own journey provides clues as to what has changed. Most of our sons growing up today would only find a story like mine in a history book or movie about days gone by.

I am in my mid-fifties and grew up in a beautiful little "October Sky" kind of coal mining town in central Washington state. The dads went off to work in the morning and the moms stayed at home. Everybody knew what a man was and a woman was, at least in terms of taking care of and watching out for each other. Divorce was almost nonexistent. The town's residents knew each other. In fact, everybody knew everything, which had its advantages and disadvantages.

Families had dinner together, and television was a novelty and not a life force. For a long time we didn't even have a television set in our home, so on Tuesday nights Dad let us go to the neighbors to watch "Victory at Sea," because World War II was important to him. The rest of the time the family unit was the hub of our lives, and what we learned in school and saw in the community reinforced our family's values. That is how I grew up. I didn't know any other way.

Now that seems like "a long time ago in a galaxy far away." Every little boy knew what every little boy wanted to be, and every little girl knew what every little girl wanted to be. And the distinctions were clearly understood. This was considered normal and okay. We boys, after television became more prevalent, loved a Walt Disney show about Davy Crockett—"king of the wild frontier." We wore little Davy Crockett coonskin hats and took seriously the man's advice: "Be sure you are right, and then go ahead." Our hero's example at the Alamo meant to us that a man should be willing to travel far from home at his own expense, and maybe even at the cost of his life, to help the little people in the world getting the slats kicked out from under their lives. Bottom line, there was a place for strength and a warrior spirit in a man.

But the 1960s changed everything. That decade had many "causes" and "movements," but I believe the one having the greatest influence then, and still expanding now, was "sexual freedom." Attitudes about sexuality and changes in sexual behavior eventually affected everyone. The sexual revolution led to broad tolerance of homosexuality and tampered with core gender definitions and distinctions. Since gender is the base of personal identity, if there is any confusion on basic gender issues there will be confusion on what it means to be a man or woman made in the image of God.

Since this is now such a critical topic, in this chapter I want to try to help church leaders and all Christians understand the basic structure of masculinity and the process of shaping boys into solid men. Of course a similar discussion is needed for girls, but I will leave that for others better suited for the task. The discussion on both topics must

occur, though, because the gender issue is, in our day, the very scrimmage line of spiritual warfare.

THE PILLARS OF A MAN'S LIFE

What boys need most is a vision. If boys are going to become men, they need a clear target, a visualization of what a man is. I have found it helpful to describe that manly vision, the infrastructure of masculinity, as the four pillars of a man's heart.

The story of the "first guy," Adam, contains many clues concerning these sturdy columns that buttress manhood. In the Bible's record of Adam's early days, we find that the first man—yet unspoiled by sin—had "pillars" that could bear much weight. They were perfectly straight and balanced. After Adam's miraculous creation, God gave him a place to live and something to do: "Then the Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to cultivate it and keep it" (Gen. 2:15, NASB). Adam, still alone, was given a task and responsibility. He wasn't just to hang out and enjoy the place. The garden required someone to "cultivate" and "keep" it. This has not changed. Men still are to take care of things and others, to bear responsibility for providing for those in their care, and to lead. I call this the King Pillar. Of course this quality is not exclusive to the male gender, but I think there is a particular emphasis in masculinity about providing for those who are near and dear.

The second pillar is hinted at in Genesis 2:16-17 (NASB): "And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, 'From any tree of the garden you may eat freely, but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat.'" Here is a whisper of a man's responsibility to teach and to communicate the way life operates. A man is to know and communicate how life works. I call this the Mentor Pillar. It expresses itself differently by gifting, personality, and temperament, but a man, particularly a father, is called to communicate life wisdom.

A bit further in Adam's story, we find, "for in the day that you eat from it you shall surely die." Here the first man encounters danger. I believe God is implying, "Adam, you need to know that you are vul-

nerable here. There is a threat in the garden. You could get killed in this place. So be careful.” A man may need to fight to keep himself and others safe. He is the man “standing between” his family and all that would harm them. I refer to this as the Warrior Pillar.

Then finally in this passage we read, “Then the LORD God said, ‘It is not good for the man to be alone’” (Gen. 2:18). Adam needed help. He needed a companion. A man is made to connect with others. I call this the Friend Pillar. So along came Eve, to complete God’s image as male and female. She brought relational genius to the human race. Women generally are much more alert to and adept at relationships than are men. Adam would learn how to relate from Eve. Of course the ultimate attack against aloneness occurs in the magnificent relationship of marriage, but men need help and friendship in every context, whether single or married.

So I see these four “pillars” as a man’s core components: the king to provide, the warrior to protect, the mentor to teach, and the friend to connect. These are the qualities we seek to develop in boys who would become mighty men.

The pillars must stand straight and strong, and they must not lean. What are pillars good for if they lean? All they do is fall and crush the people around them. And for too long now, men have been way out of balance and have been crushing people in their imbalance. Let’s look at the four pillars, one at a time.

THE KING PILLAR

Jesus is the best example of the qualities revealed by all the pillars, but especially the “King Pillar.” Jesus did not order people around, or sit on a throne while servants brought Him grapes and cooled Him by waving palm branches. No, King Jesus—Lord of all—looked out for those in His realm to the point of being willing to die for them. He was the ultimate servant leader, humbling Himself in order to provide for those He loved, treating them as friends and not merely as subjects.

In developing the King Pillar in a boy, you must teach him how a man provides for others both physically and spiritually. Men

often understand the need to provide only in terms of the physical well-being of their families—a house, two cars, and an insurance policy. And that is important. One of my sons showed me some evidence of his understanding of this aspect of the King Pillar. He drives a very old pickup truck that my wife and I sold him years ago for one dollar. Now he’s married, but he still drives that decaying truck.

“Are you ever going to get a new truck?” I asked him one day.

“No, I am building capital,” he answered.

That made me smile. That’s a sign of the King Pillar in his life. He and his wife, who is working until children arrive, are saving for the future. They don’t spend a nickel of her salary.

But as good as the desire to provide for physical needs is, there is something more important: spiritual provision. A boy needs to accept Jesus Christ. He needs to develop his character in all areas, especially integrity and a good work ethic. He needs to understand and appropriately love the feminine half of the race. All of these qualities are needed to round him out as a king.

A grand king in my life was my grandpa. He would never have used that word to describe himself, for he was “just a coal miner.” One time as a young tyke, I was playing a table game with my grandpa and grandma. I didn’t want to lose to my grandma, so I cheated. Catching me in the act, Grandpa put his glasses down and said, “Stu, you are a Weber boy, and Weber boys don’t lie or cheat or steal.”

What an example of a king providing for the spiritual needs of others! Grandpa was looking far into my future and nurturing the health of my soul. In effect he was saying, “You are not just part of the human herd, Grandson. You are a man, and at your core you must have integrity.” Such provision is significant in raising a masculine son.

THE WARRIOR PILLAR

In the heart of a man is a desire to protect and even, if necessary, to die for others. In Scripture the warrior is defined as “the man of the in-between.”

Think of David in the Valley of Elah. If you want a truly masculine boy, you will say and demonstrate to him, “Son, you stand between trouble and that which would harm those near and dear to you—your wife, your children, your friends, your community.”

For some time we have been losing this warrior spirit in our culture. Men have become more passive and tend not to stand “in between” when others are in danger. The young shepherd David was not like that. He walked out to the valley of Elah and said, “What’s going on here? The champion of the Philistines is down there every day; but where’s the champion of Israel? Who will be the man of the in-between? I’ll go down” (1 Samuel 17). And Goliath was soon history.

Centuries later the greatest warrior of all said, “I am the son of David. I will be the man of the in-between. I will stand between my dear ones, my near ones, and all that will destroy them. I will absorb the blows. I will take the wounds. I will shed the blood.” And Jesus went to the cross and gave His life so that others would not have to experience eternal death.

One time my boys and I were about to drive away from a drug store when a guy ran out the front door with a package under his arm and the cashier right on his tail, yelling, “Stop, thief!” The boys looked at me, and I looked at them, and we took off after him in our truck. When we stopped the guy, the police arrived minutes later and everything was cool. That’s what men do—instinctively and without thinking of all the possible negative consequences—get involved, jump in, stop the trouble.

I am not advocating mindless bravery, of course, or brutish, vicious, unbalanced aggressiveness. I am talking about healthy, self-controlled aggressiveness when this response is needed to protect others. (Hopefully, September 11, 2001, has awakened us to the need for a warrior spirit.) If the Warrior Pillar leans toward passivity, that can hurt people just as much as brutishness. A true warrior is neither a brute nor a coward. A boy needs to be taught the delicate balance between the two extremes.

THE MENTOR PILLAR

The Mentor Pillar concerns wisdom. Every boy needs to learn the role of wisdom in life, not by a parent's lecturing or sermonizing (at least not most of the time) but through patient instruction and, more importantly, modeling.

This is where my dad was so capable. Dad is a quiet, gentle, somewhat "silent type" man of German descent. In his early years he was a coal miner and later he became a city fireman. Although not highly educated in a formal way, he is truly a self-educated man. He spent every spare nickel he had on theology books.

Why was a coal miner and fireman studying theology? My mother wondered. She didn't know the Lord in the early years of their marriage. She couldn't understand Dad's spending all his money on "religious books." But Dad was just so taken with Christ and His Word. He couldn't know enough. So he bought theology books and devoured them. I have a mental snapshot of my father at the dining room table with books spread out. He would have the Bible open and would say, "You guys ought to turn that TV off and look at this." When I would look at the page, it was just a bunch of tiny print. "This is a plan of the ages!" Dad would say excitedly. "The whole world is going to come together like this." The man read the Bible and, because of it, understood life.

Nobody had to tell me I wanted to be like my dad, I just did. He didn't so much mentor by leading formal family devotions. His life was our family devotion.

THE FRIEND PILLAR

The Friend Pillar is the whole bundling of qualities that make a man more sensitive to others. This pillar is probably the most difficult one to build in men. A warrior, for instance, doesn't like a chink in his armor, a place for the knife to go in. That hurts, so many men resist sharing their feelings or "tender side." This cloak of secrecy is destructive to men. A good man needs a tender side to balance his warrior qualities. A wise man is willing to be vulnerable and authentic in the presence of true friends.

Of course, we each have our own hearts and emotions. I did not grow up in an “emotional” home. We shook hands when you did well. And if we were really *overcome* by emotion, our second hand would grab your elbow. But we didn’t hug.

I discovered much of my tender side from my youngest boy, Ryan, who taught me to deal with my heart. I was thirty years old when he was born. We had a tuck-in time in our home, which incidentally is a great opportunity to mentor. I always went to the boys’ rooms to hang out and say goodnight, and Ryan would always get ahold of me when I would lean down to hug him in bed, and he wouldn’t let go. At first it was uncomfortable, and then this little guy said, “Dad, bear hugs are the best.” He was right, but the hugging component didn’t really compute with me because Ryan was all boy—extremely vigorous, competitive, a capable athlete. Eventually he grew to 6’2” and 220 pounds and was a normal red-blooded guy. But he always had surprising strength in his Friend Pillar. I owe him.

I urge you dads to touch your boys, hug your boys, hold your boys, sit them on your lap, squeeze them. Wrestle with them. And keep up the hugging even when they are older. As they mature, make sure they know that they need to connect with others. Tell them, “Your best friend will be your life partner and you need to learn to connect with her, and with all those who are near and dear to you emotionally. This doesn’t come naturally. Work at it. Learn it well.”

BUILDING THE PILLARS IN BOYS

How do you build these pillars in the lives of your boys? Here are a few ideas from my own experience.

Read, read, read to your boys. If you don’t like to read, get tapes for your boys. Get *The Beginners Bible*. Get *The Chronicles of Narnia*. We still have, in a special “keepsake” place, *The Little Picture Bibles*, with the pages torn to pieces that our kids learned on.

Go outside. When you are developing these pillars in boys, you need a good dose of the out-of-doors. I don’t mean you have to be a world-class hunter or fisherman, although those are great sports. Just

get outside, maybe just to hike or to go camping or to photograph wildlife. There's something about getting cold and wet and feeling the wind in your face that is good for masculine sons. It's a taste of adversity, and adversity helps us grow.

I remember camping in Oregon's Eagle Cap Wilderness. We were just lying there in the evening, enjoying the magnificent scenery when, all of a sudden, from behind the ridge the storm clouds rolled in. During the night, after a thunderstorm and downpour of rain, the river in our little meadow overflowed its banks and flowed right through the tent. We had to drag the tent up on the hillside in the darkness and try to sleep on a slope in wet sleeping bags. We didn't rest much, but we had a glorious night of learning to face adversity together "in the wild."

Watch good movies. Be discriminating when it comes to the movies you choose, but cinema can communicate messages powerfully. One of the movies we watched years ago when the boys were young was "Chariots of Fire." I had no idea how potent it would become in my son Kent's life. In significant ways it actually shaped the course of his life. He was so stricken with England that he wanted to go there. After graduating from college he went to study at Oxford, where he met a young woman. He later led her to Christ. Still later they married and now have a most magnificent marriage. That's a long way to come, and it all started with that movie when he was a youngster.

Let a boy be a boy. Sometimes this is hard for mothers to understand, especially now that normal masculine traits are suspect among many in our culture. I remember with three sons in our home how many times I had to encourage my wife, Lindy. In rightful exasperation she would say, "We're raising juvenile delinquents!" Having been a boy once, I would respond, "No, they are just boys."

Now, please understand, we were always quick to stop arrogance, disrespect, or dishonesty in their tracks. But roughhousing and wrestling around and having a good time and pulling each other's ears, that was just part of growing up as boys.

There are many more ways to build pillars in a boy's life. Let God guide you. Be creative. Do not neglect to let other men help you, and

vice versa. It's good for men and boys to hang out with other godly men and their sons. If you want to be a great basketball player, you have to hang out with great basketball players. If you want to be a good man, you need to hang out with good men. Find some comrades and lock arms with them in training your boys.

The important thing is the vision of manhood: Know what you are after and then dedicate yourself to achieving the goal of building a young man. The concept of the four pillars can help.

The growing process will continue throughout a man's life, and the rewards are significant. My son once came home during his freshman year of college and I could tell he just wasn't himself. This kid was the one who never had a bad day. He was normally jovial, happy-go-lucky, and sweet-hearted. But here he was, depressed and down on himself. I didn't know what to do.

Shared physical activity can provide a good opportunity for a man and his son to talk, so we cleaned the garage. (Now there's a thought—if you're at a loss for what to do, clean the garage!) While tossing boxes, I simply said, "Son, what's happening for you?"

He put down a box. I can still see his muscles rippling in his back, and he turned around and very uncharacteristically said, "I don't know. I don't know anything. Dad, I go to school with guys who have known since they were four years old that they were going to be pediatricians, or rocket scientists, or something. I don't even know what class I'm going to take next term, let alone what I'm going to major in. I feel like I don't know anything."

I heard myself say something completely spontaneous. (Often the best moments are the ones you could never rehearse.) "Well, I don't know either, Son. But I know this—I will be with you."

His head tilted and he said, "You know, Dad, I guess that's all I really need to know right now. Thanks." We then hugged, big time, in the dust and disarray of the garage, and I felt his warm tears on my neck and he felt mine on his. We connected emotionally.

Moments like that change you both for the good. It's all part of becoming a strong, four-pillared man.

So, in raising sons, provide, protect, teach, and connect.

NOTES

1. This chapter is derived from a seminar given by Stu Weber at the “Building Strong Families in Your Church” Conference in Dallas, Texas, in 2000. Bruce Nygren has adapted it here. *Four Pillars of a Man’s Heart* by Stu Weber (Sisters, Ore.: Multnomah, 1997) is a full book-length treatment of this subject.