

A W A L K  
I N T H E  
D A R K

T H E J O U R N E Y I N T O M A N H O O D

M A R S H A L L F O R A N

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# *Intro*

For a brief moment, I stood in front of Mr. Manning's door, surveying the unique Japanese inspired design while running my index finger along the carvings in the polished walnut brown facade. I hesitated to knock and put my bags down on the welcome mat.

Mr. Manning and his wife, Marlene, had been my friends for many years. Their son, Tim, and I were teammates in college and we were nearly inseparable by the time we graduated. The two of us shared a streak of craziness and an endless thirst for laughter, but the pursuit of academic excellence was perhaps our greatest bond. On any given night, you could find the two of us at Berkeley's International House Café with books spread across the table and brows furrowed as we scribbled notes, solved problems, and prepared for exams.

The future looked extremely bright for both of us as we hung up our football helmets and shoulder pads, received our degrees, and entered the real world to make our mark. However, waiting for me outside the gates of higher education were long roads of darkness where I bumped into success, and fell into failure; often confused, angry, and anxious as I struggled to become a man.

When I finally decided to knock on the door, Mr. Manning gently opened it and stood before me. He turned his head slightly to the side, pursed his lips together and nodded just a hair; his eyes searching mine with a sullen expression. Mustering a smile, I nodded my head and extended my hand. A decade and a half after graduation, neither of us ever expected a reunion to be under these circumstances; which had him offering me, a fully grown man, a temporary shelter where I could rebuild my life and myself.

The guest bedroom in the downstairs of the Manning house became an important sanctuary as I sorted things out. I often lay awake late in the evening, tracing the moonlit shadows on the ceiling with my eyes as I considered the path of my life and the somewhat desperate place I landed. How did I get here? That question haunted me for months and led me to finally step aside from the wreck and examine the proverbial black box.

I struggled for many months, trying to come to terms with both my boyhood experience and the man I had become. I dove into my memories to unravel the tangled mess that my life had turned into. Both the pain and the insights provided the inspiration for this book. I started writing about it, then researching and writing some more. I spent two years working on this piece as I hashed out how a perfectly good man born with all the advantages one could hope for had found himself nearly homeless, unmarried, and completely burned out in the middle of his life. And none of it was due to drugs, alcohol, gambling or other nasty pitfalls that snare so many men. So, what gives?

I began to understand something significant about myself, a truth that I'm certain is shared among a great deal of men. I entered manhood carrying forward pieces of a boy who did not successfully traverse the complex journey through boyhood. Like me, there are plenty of men out there who got lost in the confusing darkness of their boyhood years and are still partially boys, lacking the essential tools to deal with reality, responsibility, their emotions, and the complexities of intimate relationships. These partially frozen boys

are wreaking havoc—either quietly or not so quietly—in their lives and in our world.

The writing and research process often required me to examine the significantly negative impact that the “little boy” lost inside of me had created in my adult life. At times, it just left me feeling completely despondent, weighing up the vast amount of wasted opportunity, poor decisions, and unnecessary strife—and realizing I had only myself to blame for it all.

To shake it off, I would grab my board and head into the surf next to San Clemente Pier. Even though I hoped to forget about things as I paddled out past the break, I eventually found myself bobbing in the swells, looking in my mental review mirror at the years I owned a business, had employees, and earned well within the upper five percent of incomes in the country.

After more mistakes than I can count, that was gone. All of it.

The real darkness in my boyhood years came from an abusive alcoholic mother and a father who made me feel ashamed of my efforts to achieve in life as they were never good enough. Yet, he never helped me succeed by teaching or coaching me to the level he expected me to reach. I was patronized and lied to by both of them throughout my entire adolescence and into my twenties. Though it made me feel sick, I always accepted their excuses for poor behavior and abuse as part of my survival strategy. I smoldered in the pain and no one could see what was happening to me. They just saw a healthy looking athletic kid and parents who were attractive and quite wealthy.

While I dove into my past, I also reflected on the women I had in my life over the years and the promising relationships that suffered a stunted growth. My personal wrecking ball always showed up.

And then there were all the friendships that evaporated and the steady stream of conflict in my life. Had I brought about my own demise in an insane personal game of self-sabotage? I found that not to be the answer.

Achilles of Greek mythology had only one vulnerable part of his body, the heel. As an infant, his mother dipped him in the River Styx, which offered powers of invulnerability. However, the hand she held him with as she lowered Achilles into the river covered one of his heels from touching the water. Many years later, a poisonous arrow shot from the battlefield struck that vulnerable heel and he died soon afterward.

Clearly, an Achilles heel, a grave weakness, was continuously undermining my ability to pull it all together as a man. This disability was founded during my boyhood years, but it was a darkness within me that I couldn't see at the time. Then I reached great heights of academic and athletic success by the time I was in college. I had received a full scholarship to play football, a starting position on the team, and accolades for my scholastic achievements. I pretty much figured that my success as a man was a given and that my boyhood struggles were behind me at that point. While I gained some strong values and great discipline from striving toward those collegiate "wins", not one of them guaranteed my success or fulfillment in life as a man. I would later discover that those accomplishments required a much greater set of life skills, values, and belief in oneself.

The reality is that I crossed the threshold into manhood with shamefully low self-esteem and no idea how to construct my life and manage it. Critical life skills were missing, such as the ability to self-govern my emotions and set boundaries with people. As I got older, the world became a dark, dangerous looking place that I did not know how to navigate. These issues undercut the best in me—both my potential and capability to maximize the talents I had been given and make something out of the promising relationships and career work I started after college. The darkness in my boyhood years became the darkness that unraveled my life in manhood.

This kind of crippling life experience is entirely avoidable. I believe *the failure of men is written in boyhood*. Therefore, parents—regardless of socio-economic situations and marital status—can raise a

young man who wins in life, but they have to build their son from the inside out, throughout his boyhood.

## *Shrouded in Myth*

Something else has been whittling away at me as I've continued my journey in manhood—my futile attempts at achieving the model of man that I bought into as an adolescent. It was futile because that symbol was a myth, a figment of imagination that was planted in my mind as a boy. Immediately after college, I began wildly chasing what has been consistently sold to me as the ideal man: a wealthy, powerful, intimidating, womanizing swashbuckler—conqueror in search of conquest. The truth is, being a man demands an entirely different set of criteria and competencies. Because I want your son to grow, live, and thrive more fully than I did, I've written this book.

Striving to be the “ideal male” is a dead end, no-growth, life experience. I always felt I was falling short of the ideal, and I hated myself for being unable to hit that goal. I was always reaching for affirmation in the wrong places and from the wrong people. There is a multitude of men out there like me, who are chasing their tails in pursuit of the false measures of success. This is a very difficult path for men to find themselves on in life—and a far too common one. As men, we find ourselves stalled in the midpoint of the path only to see unfulfilled dreams and unrealized ideals.

Perhaps this is one of the reasons that **nearly four times more men than women take their lives in this country and represent 79 percent of all suicides**. It's a startling, scary statistic.

In the same 24 months of my writing, there have been 12 mass shootings carried out by men that killed nearly 100 innocent people and injured twice that many. What is driving this rage? Is it evil at work or a tragic effort by these perpetrators of violence to capture the power and significance they desperately wanted to achieve as men, never found, and resorted to collect on it through the barrel of

a gun? I'm not smart enough to have an answer to this, but I believe these events are indicators of both the state of our society and the troubled psyche of men.

Once my work on this book took me beyond my own plight as a man and into the current state of affairs within the male population, specifically the Me Generation, it became evident that the process of “making men” is a broken one. I wonder if it has ever been clearly understood. Can you tell me when a man is a man? Nearly everyone has a different answer to this. The tools and principles required to get there successfully are not being taught. Finding the path through boyhood successfully looks to be a walk in the dark, now more than ever.

Our school systems and sports programs are not providing the guidance required to evolve from a boy to a man emotionally, morally, or spiritually. At the same time, the constant stream of messages from all forms of media peddles a tremendous load of garbage. The mind simply can't digest it all. Those confusing and often misguided messages are focused on image and convincing both you and your son that he is not good enough as he is. Popular culture is content with dismantling any clear picture of what becoming and being a man is all about. Heck, are men supposed to be metrosexual or macho action heroes? What is acceptable? What is right?

Many parents are adding to the problem. In Charles Sykes' book, *A Nation of Victims*, he calls out parents who have done everything for the kids, including fighting their personal battles—teaching them to flee personal responsibility and blame others. This environment of coddling doesn't build resilient men who are capable of rebounding from failure and effectively dealing with adversity. The current trend is that our country has a growing number of boys out there who can't cope with their problems, get frustrated easily by life's basic challenges, and expect instant results when they try for something. They're falling behind in life because of it.

If you think this is just hype, look at the age of economic emancipation, the point in which a young man becomes economically independent of his parents. It was at 20 to 21 years old in the 1970s. Today, that number is 28 years old. Are you kidding me?!

This population of underperforming and unfocused boys posts some noticeable numbers. **Over the last 25 years, the number of non-college educated men has tripled—soaring from 8 percent to 25 percent.** Women are also going for more post-graduate degrees than men and starting up more businesses. I saw a t-shirt recently that read “Girls Rule, Boys Drool” across the front, printed in cute pink script. It made me laugh and then I ran into articles from across the country that discussed how boys are falling behind and failing to launch out of the house. Boys are at risk and the numbers cannot be denied: **70 percent of delinquency court cases involve males, and 95 percent of kids involved in juvenile court are boys.**

Certainly, one of the biggest issues impeding the development of our boys is the huge number of single moms raising boys alone. Please don't misunderstand me. I have a lot of respect and understanding for single moms. They are heroic, dynamic, and some of the most overwhelmed people I know. Unfortunately, it takes a man to lead a boy through boyhood and into manhood. More specifically, it takes a fine man to make a fine man. The overwhelming lack of this kind of guidance is complicating the development of fine young men in our country. In 1960, 5.1 million children grew up without a dad. Today, over 13 million boys are growing up with mom as the legal guardian. **Boys without dads are two times more likely to end up in jail. 71 percent of high school dropouts come from fatherless homes.**

The good news is that “dad” doesn't have to be there, but a focused effort to fill the void does. This includes tirelessly teaching and reinforcing the principles and personal virtues, such as those described in this book (character, chivalry, leadership, compassion, vision, and more.) Most importantly, achieving this objective also includes

involving solid male mentors to back you up and help guide your son. If you initially have trouble finding the right mentor(s), please start with me, my blog, and videos, which I labor over to help you and your son with the best information and inspiration I can provide.

## *The Compounding Challenges*

Getting ahead in this world is difficult and takes real strength of character—call it “grit.” And more than any other period in history, the attainment of knowledge and skills is paramount—and not the skills of the old economy. We are no longer an agrarian or industrial economy; we are an information economy and the competition is global. Soft skills and specialized knowledge, discussed at length in the ensuing chapters, are the gate keepers to achieving a good standard of living.

Continuing education—whether it is college, an apprenticeship program, or trade school, after high school—is key to not just getting ahead, but keeping up. That said, the competition to get into desirable, four-year colleges is getting a little insane. The population of our country continues to grow, but the size of our universities remains the same; more and more high school graduates are vying for the same colleges. Adding to the competitive flavor are the applicants coming from overseas; the population of international students reached a record in 2011 at over 750,000. This overall application pool has created some eye-popping admission statistics. For example, Harvard rejects 50 percent of applicants with perfect SAT scores. Stanford set a record for applications in 2013, with nearly 39,000 applicants from around the world. They accepted 2,210 or half of one percent of those who applied. UCLA received 80,499 applications in 2013 and will enroll only about one in ten.

Doesn't this stress you out? I mean, how is *your* son going to make it!? Maybe it's time you become a “Tiger Mom” and drive your son furiously to compete in school, master the violin, and succeed beyond his peers. *Hardly*. That is just a recipe to cook up one

stressed-out boy who fears each scholastic misstep and poor result in his young life will potentially ruin his future. Believe me, I survived this anxiety-ridden path through grade school—minus the violin (thanks for sparing me on that one, dad.)

This kind of pressure is not constructive in the journey through boyhood as it does little, if anything, to form critical inner qualities, such as character and emotional intelligence. Nor does it help him understand what it is to have meaning and purpose in his life—to nurture his own unique interests and talents. Growth and development in these capacities will lead him to discover the kind of success later in life that eludes most people—working with passion and the sense of fulfilling a mission while contributing to society. We’re doing the wrong things to motivate our boys and the statistics cannot be denied. Let’s get ourselves back on track so we can be the parents, mentors, coaches, and educators we should be.

Boys need greater focus on molding principles and social skills rather than achievement—academic or otherwise. If we can come through for them in this way, we will end up producing far more boys who actually fulfill their potential in grade school and long after. I am deeply passionate about the pursuit of excellence, but we need to find balance here. Excellence is something to influence, not force.

Keep in mind that higher education promises nothing in or for manhood. What Calvin Coolidge said generations ago still remains true today: “The world is full of educated derelicts.” I attended the #1 ranked public university in the nation, UC Berkeley, and received a degree in a specialized field with high marks. But it had little bearing on my overall success as man. We choose a code to live by, make our own choices, fulfill our own dreams, and achieve our own goals. College doesn’t do that. We do.

It is imperative for boys to define their lives from the internal and not the external measures of success. Among the many reasons for doing so is the specter of substantial risks that they will face throughout boyhood from peer pressure and misguided curiosity.

The negative influences that catch them in adolescence can have staggering effects in their lives as men. Let's take a look at this for a moment, because the threats are out there in force.

Social media alone presents substantial risks and social pressure that simply did not exist in the previous generation. As one example, nearly 20 percent of the kids in our country surveyed by the Center for Disease Control (CDC) in 2011 said they had been subjected to cyber-bullying. The effects of that relentless bullying have been linked to a rising number of adolescent suicides over the past few years.

Bad influences are snaring masses of adolescents. According to the CDC's 2011 report, nearly 40 percent of teens admitted to drink ing alcohol within the 30 days prior to the survey; of that group:

- Almost 25 percent had driven in a car with a driver who had been drinking alcohol;
- 25 percent had smoked marijuana;
- Nearly 21 percent had also used prescription drugs without a prescription (OxyContin, Percocet, Vicodin, Xanax); and
- 25.6 percent had been offered drugs on school campus.

It makes me cringe to think about the percentage of those offered drugs off-campus, such as a friend's house or party, where there is little risk of getting caught carrying and selling.

Nearly half of those teens surveyed admitted to having had sex, and of that group, nearly 40 percent didn't used condoms. Half of the 19 million newly reported sexually transmitted disease (STD) infections occur in the age group of 15 to 19 years old. Child psychologists discuss the "explosion" of STDs in the last ten years among their adolescent clients, and report that the depression they treat in these patients is often conjoined with chronic STDs, such as herpes.

Our young people also comprise the most distracted generation to date—loaded down with smartphones and tablets stuffed in every pocket and backpack, streaming tweets, YouTube videos, Instagram messages, Facebook feeds, texts and so forth. *Achievement requires*

*focus*. A well- to high-performing mind and body need downtime and rest for recovery. Hours of “screen time” a day are interrupting this natural pattern. In my opinion, we are at war with these machines and only beginning to understand the negative impact they are having on our brains and social behavior. The digital distraction is a total game changer in youth development.

Let me be clear on this point: **none of us men are off the hook**—not your son, not your wealthy neighbor’s son, not the son of two “functional,” loving parents. Every boy has to traverse the dangerous journey from boyhood to manhood and confront the bitter challenges that create obstacles along this rite of passage. Every boy will be shown illusions of manhood and told myths about “real men” that they will contend with in their lives. Our boys need a guiding hand to shine a light in the darkness.

I appreciate and admire all the PhDs who have written incredibly informative books on the topic of raising boys. I write to you not from a clinical or academic perspective, but from the front lines. I did not successfully run the gauntlet through boyhood and I have failed in many ways as a man. My transition from boyhood into manhood was brutal, solitary, and required decades of my life to sort out. My personal journey, bared throughout this book, will be of the utmost value for you and your son to digest.

This book and my story are not about how to eliminate low self-esteem, bad grades, rebellious behavior, drug use, violence, or childhood depression. Every boy will face down times of low self-esteem, poor academic results, bad choices, peer pressure, aggression, and sadness. We can’t prevent the ugliness of childhood; we can only understand and minimize the impact. With this book, I aim to accomplish two things: challenge the cultural and media paradigms that define men; and provide tools to help your son manage and successfully pass these states with self-control, honor, strong character, real self-esteem—the attributes of a fine man.

During the time I wrote this composition, my life turned around. I began living my days as a gentleman, not a rogue, and stopped living my life according to the definition of a male that I had accepted as truth. I tapped back into the qualities that had made me successful before my detour and began resolving the parts of me that kept destroying my life. Most importantly, I found my passion and deep purpose in life. It is right here.

My mission to help boys reach a life of purpose, living with character, chivalry, strong values, self-control, leadership ability, and compassion among the many other qualities I discuss in the following pages. Men of this cloth will successfully further our society. We need them, badly. I'm here for you and hope to reach your boy's heart and mind with you.

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