MAPS AND METAPHORS OF THE HUMAN HEART:

1, 2, 3--Mystery

By

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Appendix to Chapter 3

Virtual Man, Missing Man: Are Boys Becoming Men in Our Communities?

I was invited to a gathering in our small rural community about the deteriorating well-being of our youth. About thirty-five individuals were present, representing most of the local agencies working with children and teens. As I looked around the group midway through the meeting, it dawned on me that only five men were in attendance compared to thirty women! When I pointed this out to the group, a 4-H leader (a woman) remarked that at a recent 4-H gathering of kids, trained leaders, and parents, of the forty-two participants there all thirty youth were girls, all eight certified leaders were women, and three of the four parents were also women - only one man was present. I commented that these women, who were keeping households, raising children, holding down jobs, and who still had time to attend a community meeting, seemed to have their act together, but on the other hand, I asked, where were the men of our community in dealing with our concern for our youth?

The next morning, I read a newspaper article which stated that fewer young men these days are going on to college after high school. Later in the week, I mentioned the meeting and the newspaper article to the high school counselor, wanting to know if she had noticed anything similar in the schools. She indicated that, over several years, very few of the top academic performers, those who graduate with honors, have been male. She did observe that those few males who did better academically than most other male students were involved in sports and other extra-curricular activities. So, early the following morning when I picked up the keys for the high school gym where I regularly play basketball with a group of men, I talked to the football coach, who was supervising about twenty-five of his players at 6:30 a.m. in the weight room. He stepped out of his office and began counting off his players one-by-one, and then stated that twenty-four out of the twenty-five football players who were there had dads who were strongly involved in their sons’ lives; and the one who did not have a dad had a mother who was quite interested and involved with her son’s activities. The coach commented that this was a very select group, as most boys did not have men who were involved in their lives. Where were the rest of the men in our community, and why weren’t they involved with their boys?

Before we started playing basketball that day, I asked a man who coaches young kids in basketball about this apparent lack of male involvement in boys’ lives. He made three observations: One, at the initial organizational meeting of his basketball team, only one man was present and the rest were women; two, he has noticed that a lot of young boys are coming to their first potential basketball team with fewer skills, clearly exhibiting little playing time with Dad; and, three, that young boys are easily frustrated and many quit quite readily when they cannot match their performance on the latest sports video game. Another man who coaches soccer chimed in that most of the new members who join his soccer team are girls. (That’s when I remembered that the numbers of adults who hunt and fish are declining, while the number of women who do so is increasing.) We all agreed that this situation was significant and that it did not bode well for the future.
In the following few days, I collected some additional information to deepen my understanding of what might be happening to our boys. The Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction has a website on which is kept the annual standardized test results for school districts. I looked at the performance results for our students and found that, for those tests that measure language-related skills (Language Arts, Social Studies and Reading), the number of male students scoring at the most proficient level (Advanced) consistently declines from Grade 4 to Grade 8 to Grade 10 and is always less than that of the female students. This had been the case each year for the four years from 2002 through 2005, as follows:

- **In the four years of statewide annual testing between 2002 and 2005, about 1/3 of male Grade 4 students (30%) scored in the advanced range of the Language Arts section, compared to only about 1/5 of male Grade 8 students (22%) and only about 1/10 of male Grade 10 students (13%). (During the same period and testing, over 30% female students consistently performed at the advanced level.)**

- **Across all grades in Social Studies, about 55% of boys scored at the advanced level in 2002, after which the proportion declined each year until 2006, when only 50% of boys did so. (In 2002, 60% of girls scored at the advanced level, and this increased each year until 2006, when 70% of girls scored at the advanced level.)**

- **In Grade 10 between 2002 and 2005, male student performance at the advanced level of the Reading section decreased from a high of about 60% to only 45% in 2006. (From 2002 to 2006, the proportion of Grade 10 girls performing at the advanced level also declined from 70% to 55%)**

What is happening to cause this declining language-related performance of the best male students between 4th and 10th grades? The National Concern and Conversation about Boy’s Performance College Administrators have become greatly concerned that fewer and fewer males are applying for admission. This situation has brought together a diverse group of scholars who suggest that the ways in which boys are different from girls may help to explain some of what is happening to boys. Following is a brief summary:

**Within (The Individual)**

**Gender developmental differences (pace of maturation, specialization, hormones):**

*The brain develops at different rates in boys and girls.* In girls, the language areas of the brain develop earlier and prior to the areas used for spatial relations and for geometry. For boys, it's the other way around. Girls’ brains are completely wired by about age eighteen, while boys’ brains are not completely wired until approximately age twenty. A curriculum that ignores these differences can produce boys who can't write and girls who think they're "dumb at math."

*The brain is wired differently in boys and girls.* Girls can process language on both sides of the brain. In boys, the brain regions involved in talking are more completely specialized to the left side, while abilities such as geometry are more completely specialized to the right side. Girls can recover language function after brain injury in
ways that most males cannot. Speculation exists that language functions for girls may be more integrated with other functions, e.g., processing emotions.

*Girls hear better than boys.* The typical teenage girl has a sense of hearing many times more acute than that of a teenage boy. That's why daughters so often complain that their fathers are shouting at them. Dad doesn't think he's shouting, but Dad doesn't hear his voice the way his daughter does.

*Girls and boys respond to stress differently.* This is true not only for our species, but for every mammal scientists have studied. Stress enhances learning in males, while the same stress impairs learning in females.

**Between (The Interpersonal)**

**The nature of early relationships that pair and partner:**

*The amount of time a parent and child interact has significantly decreased* in the past thirty-five years. In addition, poverty has been associated with providing a poorer language environment, which affects intelligence and the ability to achieve, as indicated in Betty Hart and Todd Risley's (2003) classic research on social-class differences in language acquisition This work was featured in an article by Paul Tough in last Sunday's *New York Times Magazine* (2007) "What It Takes To Make A Student."

Here's the abstract from Hart and Risley (2003):

By age 3, children from privileged families have heard 30 million more words than children from underprivileged families. Longitudinal data on 42 families examined what accounted for enormous differences in rates of vocabulary growth. Children turned out to be like their parents in stature, activity level, vocabulary resources, and language and interaction styles. Follow-up data indicated that the 3-year-old measures of accomplishment predicted third grade school achievement.

*This is obviously serious stuff. Here's some of Tough's discussion:*

They found...that vocabulary growth differed sharply by class and that the gap between the classes opened early. By age 3, children whose parents were professionals had vocabularies of about 1,100 words, and children whose parents were on Welfare had vocabularies of about 525 words. The children’s I.Q.s correlated closely to their vocabularies.

When Hart and Risley addressed the question of just what caused those variations, the answer they arrived at was startling. By comparing the vocabulary scores with their observations of each child’s home life, they were able to conclude that the size of each child’s vocabulary correlated most closely to one simple factor: the number of words the parents spoke to the child. In the professional homes, parents directed an average of 487 “utterances” per hour—anything from a one-word command to a full soliloquy—to their children. In welfare homes, the children heard 178 utterances per hour. What’s more, the kinds of words and statements that children heard varied by class. The most basic difference was in the number of “discouragements” a child heard—prohibitions and
words of disapproval—compared to the number of encouragements—words of praise and approval. By age 3, the average child of a professional heard about 500,000 encouragements and 80,000 discouragements. For the welfare children, the situation was reversed: they heard, on average, about 75,000 encouragements and 200,000 discouragements. Hart and Risley found that as the number of words a child heard increased, the complexity of that language increased as well. As conversation moved beyond simple instructions, it blossomed into discussions of the past and future, of feelings, of abstractions, of the way one thing causes another—all of which stimulated intellectual development.

Hart and Risley showed that language exposure in early childhood correlated strongly with I.Q. and academic success later on in a child’s life. Hearing fewer words, along with a lot of prohibitions and discouragements, had a negative effect on I.Q.; hearing lots of words, along with more affirmations and complex sentences, had a positive effect on I.Q. The professional parents were giving their children an advantage with every word they spoke, and the advantage just kept building up.

*Older siblings powerfully train younger siblings.* Sibling relationships serve as a potential training ground for deviant behaviors and relational difficulties or as a context for healthy development and relational functioning. Pronounced sibling conflict in middle childhood is a robust predictor of later deviance, delinquency, and other behavior problems in late adolescence and early adulthood. There are strong connections between early social competencies with siblings and peers and positive adjustment later in development.

**Among (The Social)**

*School environments can misfit the relative strengths and weaknesses of male students:*

In a nationwide study involving more than 8,000 males and females ranging in age from 2 to 90, Vanderbilt researchers Stephen Camarata and Richard Woodcock (2006) discovered that females have a significant advantage over males on timed tests and tasks. Camarata and Woodcock found the differences were particularly significant among pre-teens and teens.

We found very minor differences in overall intelligence, but if you look at the ability of someone to perform well in a timed situation, females have a big advantage," Camarata said. "It is very important for teachers to understand this difference in males and females when it comes to assigning work and structuring tests. To truly understand a person's overall ability, it is important to also look at performance in un-timed situations. For males, this means presenting them with material that is challenging and interesting but is presented in smaller chunks without strict time limits.

The findings are particularly timely, with more attention being paid by parents, educators, and the media to the troubling achievement gap between males and females in U.S. schools.
"Consider that many classroom activities, including testing, are directly or indirectly related to processing speed," the researchers wrote. "The higher performance in females may contribute to a classroom culture that favors females, not because of teacher bias but because of inherent differences in sex processing speed." An additional question is whether this finding is linked to higher high school dropout rates for males and increased special education placement for males that do stay in school.

In their new article, Camarata and Woodcock focus on understanding differences in processing speed between males and females.

"Processing speed doesn't refer to reaction time or the ability to play video games," Camarata said. "It's the ability to effectively, efficiently and accurately complete work that is of moderate difficulty. Though males and females showed similar processing speed in kindergarten and pre-school, females became much more efficient than males in elementary, middle and high school."

The researchers found that, in tests measuring processing speed, males scored lower than females in all age groups, with the greatest discrepancy found among adolescents. However, the study also found that males consistently outperformed females in some verbal abilities, such as identifying objects, knowing antonyms and synonyms, and completing verbal analogies, thus debunking the popular idea that girls develop all communication skills earlier than boys. Camarata and Woodcock compiled their results through an evaluation of three sets of data collected from 1977 to 2001 as part of the Woodcock-Johnson Series of Cognitive and Achievement Tests.

School, however, is not the primary context in which male youth are motivated. The primary environment for youth (especially boys) is virtual, and it is violent and sexual:

Data from media and gaming industries, as well as from the American Psychological Association, show that:

- The total amount of media content to which young people (8-18) are exposed each day has increased by more than an hour over the past five years (from 7:29 to 8:33), with most of the increase due to video games (up from 0:26 to 0:49) and computers (up from 0:27 to 1:02, excluding schoolwork).
- The actual number of hours devoted to media use has remained steady, at about 6½ hours a day.
- Kids are spending the equivalent of a full-time workweek using media, plus overtime.
- Boys spend twice as much time playing video games as girls.
- Older boys, ages 9 to 12, show a tendency to gravitate away from specific traditional toy categories in favor of spending more time playing video games,
while girls in the same age group continue to show little to no difference in time spent between playing with video games and toys. However, as girls get older, they are more likely than boys to find interests outside of both the traditional toy and video games markets.

- Violent video games can increase aggressive behavior in children and adolescents, both in the short- and long-term, according to an empirical review of the last twenty years of research. (APA, 2005)

- Youth who played violent video games for a short time experienced an increase in aggressive behavior following the video game. One study showed participants who played a violent game for less than 10 minutes rated themselves with aggressive traits and aggressive actions shortly after playing. In another study of over 600 8th and 9th graders, the children who spent more time playing violent video games were rated by their teachers as more hostile than other children in the study. The children who played more violent video games had more arguments with authority figures and were more likely to be involved in physical altercations with other students. They also performed more poorly on academic tasks.

- The very youngest children in America are growing up immersed in media, spending hours a day watching TV and videos, using computers, and playing video games.

- Children 6 and under spend an average of two hours a day using screen media (1:58) about the same amount of time they spend playing outside (2:01), and well over the amount they spend reading or being read to (39 minutes).

**Transition from Teenage Student into Young Adult Community Member**

It is becoming clear that boys are becoming more sedentary (video games), are interacting with their parents less (decreasing verbal skills), show significant decrements in language-related academic achievement, and fewer are going on to college, perhaps, in part, facilitated by gender differences and a lack of goodness-of-fit in school environments. But what is happening to them and where are they going during the teenage and young adult years? In a comprehensive survey completed in September, 1997, the Sawyer County Family Preservation and Support Planning Committee documented the disintegrating social circumstances and the general worsening of the well-being of youth and their families, as well as the increased inadequacies of the current service delivery systems in medicine, mental health, education, and social services to deal with and resolve these trends.

Thinking to update and supplement this information, I stopped by the Clerk of Court’s office and asked if they had any data they might be willing to share about youth in our community. Within a few days they promptly provided me with information going back to 1993 about court cases filed in the county. Among other information, I found that:

- *There were 4 times as many cases of disorderly conduct in 2006 than there were in 2000.*
• There were 1.5 times as many truancies in 2006 (99) than there were in 2000 (67).

• In any four-year period since 1993, between 202 and 389 juvenile delinquency cases have been filed in the county.

• In each year since 2000, among youth aged 14-20, underage drinking cases filed in the county have increased, from 85 in year 2000 to 137 in year 2006.

What might begin to explain these disturbing numbers?

I reviewed what I knew and gathered additional information that was easily available about how well boys were becoming men in our community and in our nation. Among other things, I discovered the following:

There are more males in jail now than at any other time in our history (in absolute numbers and in proportion to the overall number of males in the population). According to the Census Bureau, fully one-third of young men ages 22 to 34 are still living at home with their parents—a roughly 100 percent increase in the past twenty years, the most ever to do this. This phenomenon cuts across all demographics, in families rich and poor; black, white, Asian, and Hispanic; urban, suburban, and rural. No such change has occurred with regard to young women. Fewer males are going on to college after high school and greater numbers of females are going on to college, which is of growing concern to college administrators (and to young women, who are finding the dating pool ever more sparse on college campuses!). Males are getting married later in life; the average age at the time of first marriage is fast approaching thirty. Fewer people are hunting and fishing, while increasing numbers of women doing both.

How does this relate to how boys interact with girls, especially as teens and young adults?

Despite a nearly one-third decline over the past decade in teen pregnancy and birth rates in the United States, one in three girls still becomes pregnant by age twenty; half of all first out-of-wedlock births are to teenagers. Teen parenthood means fewer children grow up in stable two-parent families, since teen mothers are unlikely to marry the biological fathers of their children. For example, within one year of their child’s birth, fewer than 8% of unmarried teen mothers actually marry the baby’s father. Young unwed mothers’ chances of ever marrying are dramatically reduced (40% lower for those who have a first child outside of marriage and 51% lower for women who do not marry the biological father of their child within six months of the birth). Only 30% of unwed teen mothers who get married are still in their first marriages at age forty. Teens who marry are two to three times more likely to divorce than people who marry in their twenties. What is happening here? Are boys truly becoming mature and responsible men?

Local Historical Context of Boys Maturing into Men

There have been five primary waves of community transition and translocation in northwestern Wisconsin: The Dakota (First Contact); the Ojibwa (Sustained Engagement
and Intertribal Conflict); the French/British/American explorers and fur traders (European Control); the American loggers and immigrant settlers (American Settlement and Construction); and, finally, successive waves of merchants, tourists, and professionals (Development of Community into the Modern Era), each lasting roughly 100 years, from 1500 A.D. to 2000 A.D. The significant alterations in the composition of community between these eras produced momentous transitions in the character and quality of interpersonal and family relationships, which continue to have crucial, ongoing impacts today. Engagements between those already in the community and each wave of newcomers bringing different "ways of being in relationship" changed the predominant relational forms and values in the community, as follows:

- From share to trade to exchange relationships (giving and receiving)—increasing consideration of nature as commodity
- From support to provision to service relationships (giving to getting)—increasing consideration of people as commodity
- From supply to promotion to sales relationships (getting to get)—increasing consideration of suffering as commodity

These changes in the composition of community and the consequent shifts in the primary relational values have had profound effects upon the nature and quality of individual, family, and community health. Broadly speaking, a discernible movement has taken place away from a communal, cooperative and affiliate social fabric (village life) based upon sharing human resources, toward individualistic, competitive, and specialized hierarchical systems (institutional life) focused upon securing economic resources. These changes have created a very fragmented and conflicted social situation in which the disintegration of family life is implicitly and subtly reinforced by current ideological, political, and institutional forces. As a result, youth and adults are disheartened and confused by the lack of experience and models for living in a coherent and cooperative way. This is particularly the case for boys and men.

In this history of change over time, perhaps northwestern Wisconsin collected more introverted men than other areas, as well as men who were disinclined to participate in the more paved and civil society of city life. (I am seeing more and more movement of this sort of male out of our community to places like Alaska. And, anecdotally, I am seeing more in-migration of males who want to get away from all the people in the city and go "...to a place where I can think and do what I want without being bothered by the opinions of anyone else.")

The history of men in our community might be broken up into four periods according to the different male roles emphasized and valued during each.

**The Frontier Man.** Foragers, fur traders, and forest loggers were all wild men of the frontier who typically traveled over a large area in the territorial region. In these wilderness environments, men were known for their strength and stamina, which were needed to accomplish the prodigious tasks involved in great manual labor. Pace and speed were highly valued for individual procurement of natural resources (timber, minerals) and travel and transport of raw materials. How can the wild man in the untamed
lands of the nineteenth century’s Age of the Frontier (after the Revolutionary and through the Civil Wars) be described? One phrase captures much of the flavor: *farther and faster are good.*

**The Machine Man.** Foresters and farmers settled to become industrious men of the machine. Typically, they lived and traveled in a much smaller area around community settlements. People in these rural communities, valued the amount of land you had in production, and increasingly, the size and scale of the operations you handled with mechanized processing and production (tractors, trailers, and trucks); that is, efficient handling and processing time were highly valued. How can the domesticated man of the cultivated lands in the early twentieth century’s Age of Industry (before WWI through WWII and the Korean War) be described? One phrase captures much: *Bigger is better.*

**The Business Man.** Salesmen, developers, and marketers try to create an appetite in the consuming public for their products and services and then as quickly and as broadly as they can try to meet the consuming demand: Show them, sell it to them, hit it big, get out, and move on. Competing in and securing the greatest possible share of the consumer marketplace and delivering goods as efficiently (cheaply) as possible is the challenge. How may the late twentieth century entrepreneurial man (before and after the Vietnam War) be described? One phrase captures much: *Quickly and cheaply to many is great.*

**The Virtual Man.** Financiers and fun-seekers are sedentary men of technology who seek virtual control and command. These men spend much of their time in an office at work or a room at home—or in the very comfortable seat of a vehicle. Their world has been concentrated and simultaneously expanded by the power and potency of a single computer chip. The ability to pack and store information and energy directly into the smallest of places, paces, and speeds creates an almost unimaginable intensity and potency compared to the work and play arrangements for men in the past. How can the virtual man of the twenty-first century’s paved lands in the Age of the Mass Media (through the Middle East and Gulf conflicts) be described? One phrase captures much: *A blast is best.*

**Consequences of Community Transitions**

The consequences of these changing male roles show some interesting twists in our community. Except in the 1980s, when families returned to this area because of increasing economic opportunities, *for the past 100+ years there have always been more men than women here.* In the early years of “Hayward, Hurley and Hell” (before and after 1900), most men were loggers (and of the few women, many served the men’s weekend nightly needs). By the 1930s and 1940s, half the households in the county were involved in farming, and the CCC camps were populated with men from the cities who could not find work. The influx of men after WWII who worked in new, timber-related manufacturing plants rounded out this ongoing surplus of men each decade, a surplus that ranged from *200-1400 more men than women in the community at any one time.* While I am not trying to support exaggerated stereotypes like the “jack-pine savage” or the “northwoods’ redneck,” I must state that a certain introverted male culture of outdoor independence and “leave me alone to my own ways” has been going on for a very long time here.
On the other hand, how is it that women have come to take care of the home, take care of the kids, and work outside the home, all at the same time? A simple answer is that, historically in our community, men tend to go away and contend against others, while women tend to stay put and interact with others. The loggers go out and away into the forest, the men in the city traveled away to the rural CCC camps, and men went away to WWI, WWII, the Korean War, Vietnam, and now the Gulf Wars, leaving behind all their previous roles and responsibilities. Meanwhile, in each case women stayed home and took care of the household, the kids, and the community, increasingly taking part-time and then full-time jobs outside the home. Women learned to do this together by helping one another, and over the decades they learned new skills that were previously mostly male role responsibilities, including financial management, transportation and vehicle maintenance, home repair, child discipline, interaction with school authorities and other community agency representatives, and so on. Women stayed where they were and added new role responsibilities, while keeping all the old ones. By the time men came home from the wars, women could and did do much of what only men used to. What happened to marital relationships, and what happened to the boys and men in this inevitable growth toward self-sufficiency in women?

Men and women born after 1930 and prior to 1950 experienced the deprivations of the Great Depression, and then the men experienced the terrible trauma of World War II and the Korean War, while the women experienced the hardships of doing without men on the home front. These parents raised their children (Baby Boomers born after 1950) filled with a strong desire to give them an easier, better life than the one they themselves had experienced. A primary thread running through their lives was an attitude of seeking the good life of a house, a car, modern appliances, and a good education for their children so that the children could, in turn, better themselves. And, indeed, the Baby Boomers were able to better their parents in securing material goods through inheritance, more education, and strong economic times in the U.S. through the 1970s and 1980s after the Vietnam War.

In response to the chaos and confusing failures of Vietnam, men who served there added “living for the moment” to their WWII fathers’ desire for “getting the good life.” While most mothers of Baby Boomer women worked and a few went on to get a college education, a majority of their daughters went on to college during and after the Vietnam era. So, while the men were away at war, women during World War II gained the workplace, and the next generation of women during Vietnam gained the university. This meant that, in the following good economic times of the 1980s and 1990s, both men and women could contribute financial resources and procure nearly all of what they wanted their children to have materially. And they did so, with unforeseen consequences for the current generation of children, especially for boys. For our boys received all that they needed and became the “receiving generation” that followed the “getting generation” of the Baby Boomers and the “sacrificing and giving generation” of the Great Depression and World Wars.

Currently there are about 16,000 people in our county—about 12,000 adults and 4,000 youth. This translates to about 6,000 adult males and 2,000 male youth; that is,
there are 3 adult males for every male child in the county. In another interesting trend, while the number of households has been rapidly increasing, the number of people living together has decreased. In the decades between 1890 and 1920, the average household contained 5 people; by 1940, the number was down to 4; from 1960 through the 1980s, the average number of people in each home was about 3; and by 2000, the average household size was down to just over 2 persons. Given that two adults living with children is now the smallest household group and is far outnumbered by single adults living alone, two adults living together without children, and single-parent households, it is clear we have plenty of men available to interact with male children.

Where are these men and what are they doing?

**How & Why: Three Primary Historical Mechanisms**

Exploring the history of how these shifts in the way we participate in group life, care about intimate relationships, and perceive individual reality came into being might direct us fruitfully toward answers to our questions about boys and men. Critical to answering the first question are seminal studies of human migration, technological innovation, and population growth and settlement, which illuminate historical shifts in three areas: **Innovation** (things, tools, technologies), **increasing ease and speed of travel and transportation** (time), and **inverting people and production priorities** (timing and placement of transactions).

While changing from using moccasins to boots and trading lodges for houses meant more effective protection from the elements and easier survival, this insulation against natural forces contributes to our being oblivious to the consequences in the human use of *force*: we have reduced harm by encapsulating ourselves, and in so doing, we have increased harm to all else, fundamentally changing the historical nature of *personal agency and power*. While shifting from walking trails to canoe routes, wagon roads, canals, railways, highways, and finally airways has created more links, often the result is less connection. Making the *flow* of things, people, information, and energy easier, faster, and more efficient isolates and disengages us from one another, fundamentally changing the historical nature of *how we attach and connect*. While moving and managing objects, people, energy, and information among corporate entities at a faster and faster pace leads to more productivity, it may also lead to contributing less to those we care about during our unavoidably busy work engagements. Constructing group *forms* that organize individuals more productively separates us from our families and neighbors and alienates us from proximal communal life, fundamentally changing the historical nature of *our priorities and values*.

I call these three major historical shifts (1) **individualization of force** (which, at its extreme, for instance, fosters road rage, urban snipers, and the creation of IEDs), (2) **acceleration of flow** (long to-do lists, multitasking, and virtual relationships via cell phone), and (3) **reversal, or inversion of form** (which is a shift from “many serving the one” to “one serving the many”). These shifts begin to describe the specific mechanisms whereby we are losing personal happiness, interpersonal harmony, and social health.

Less contact with the land and less connection with one another and other life has led to greater fragmentation of land and life, decreasing our capacities and opportunities to
contribute together to our mutual well-being. Thus, by seeking to survive and seeking to secure providence from the land, we have lost direct and regular contact with it; we are awash in the diverse goods and comforts we have created to please ourselves (notice the increasing number of personal storage facilities), and that have confused us. While seeking the attractions of “the good life,” we have acquired many unhealthy attachments and have lost our way in lonely wandering amongst a plethora of material things and self-pleasing activities. While seeking to survive, we have become attracted and attached to our own meager material constructions, as well as confused by the innumerable bits of data and information, policies, plans, and programs that others design and do, thereby losing our local opportunities to contribute, to give rather than to get.

What are we to do with these disturbing dysfunctions that have covered and destroyed the land? How have these challenges and changes affected our children, especially in the context of adult-child interactions within family life? How does a boy develop on his way to becoming an adult?

**Power, Acceleration, and Virtual Reality**

Every young child begins as a little physicist, understanding how to move and apply agency in the world. Moving through and across a mud puddle is an experiment in self-locomotion at a very personal scale, as is trying to catch the evading frog which jumps from the puddle into the taller-than-the-top-of-the-head grasses of the surrounding meadow. Sitting in your father’s lap and driving a four-wheeled, all-terrain vehicle in the through the puddle and over the frog (or traveling to the far ends of the world on your mother’s laptop computer with her help) is an exercise in the use of power and mobility unmatched in the experience of children in previous generations. The use of such force and power with such immediacy, ease, and control, as well as the speed and pace of modern mobility, has displaced the smaller, more personal and more appropriately scaled developmental opportunities that family culture has crafted over the millennia for children. Today, as we grow from children into adults, we quickly move from walking to using tricycles and bicycles and on to using cars, trucks, and jets. In an ever increasing individualization of power and pace, we move quickly from play phones to cell phones and from video games and television to teleconferencing.

There are at least two consequences of this displacement and dislocation. First, we move too fast across the landscape to sense and experience its details, that is, we lose the opportunity for contact with that which might catch our attention and awareness in the manner that defines what we perceive reality to be. Second, we move quickly past the consequences of the use of such power upon the landscape and within ourselves, not accountable nor responsible since we do not see and feel what has happened where we no longer are, having moved on elsewhere, always moving on to somewhere else.

Every youth becomes a biologist and then a young psychologist, learning how to engage other living beings in more and less satisfying ways. Putting a caterpillar into a perforated jar with milkweed and watching with your best friend as the caterpillar spins a chrysalis, and, eventually, watching a butterfly emerge is an intimate engagement, a connecting, of both of quiet and patient proportions. Chatting on the internet and playing a violent video game in virtual reality with a person you’ve never met, or going to a fast-
food joint in the mall with your girlfriend and buying another nice pair of shoes for the next prom, are quite different engagements in controlling the nature of what happens in relationships and easily collecting the material goods we desire. The modern consequences of habitually getting and keeping material objects creates a disconnection with and detachment from the flow of living relationships.

Every teenager and young adult becomes a sociologist and eventually an economist as he negotiates the most important provisions and priorities of social life in the larger world. Helping your extended relations or neighbors harvest wild rice, lamb, or put up a shed yields lessons in how to contribute to a common cause that has generous but different benefits for all participants. Persuading your boss to give you a raise, your wife to allow you to buy a four-wheeler, and your uncle to permit you driving the four-wheeler on his land, and then trying to find some time to do so out of a busy schedule that involves working two jobs, transporting kids to school activities, and doing house projects—all are part of a modern, purpose-driven, product-driven lifestyle. The consequences and disruption of working hard and long to “get the good things in life” is that the living of that life in relation with others rarely occurs, and when it does occur, it often occurs as conflicted negotiation (distrust) rather than as considerate contribution and participation.

Finally, in an ideal world, each adult might eventually become priest and pastor, clergy and cleric, humbling to the great mystery of learning, loving, and living. When we pause and pray or sit quietly and watch a sunset or a butterfly, we listen to the silence that is sacred. As we travel too quickly across the landscape, we noisily displace our perception of reality, using technology in powerful ways primarily to secure material objects we desire yet disconnected from the flow of relationship around us. As we work ever more busily in pursuit of individual objectives that are apart from and that disturb the relations among us, our minds fill up and our hearts are flooded with the emptiness of our passage. We often come to despair as we lose healthy landscapes, healthy marriages, and healthy families and communities.

For boys, these general phases of development have shifted over time, especially during the last 150 years or so. Their character, timing, and focus are different, but the developmental phases have remained the same in one or two critical ways. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, we had the wild or wilderness boy who explored remote places away from home. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, we had the hard-working farm boy who stayed close to home but continued a close relationship with more cultivated lands. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, we had the city boy and boy athlete who adapted to, maneuvered, and competed in the concrete jungle. And in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, we have the game boy who plays in a virtual reality totally constructed by adults. And yet, through all these transitions since the Revolutionary and Civil Wars, we also have had the boy hero and the soldier boy who went away to fight against savages, tyrants, dictators, and the armies of evil, and who might come home a warrior and a man.

Until recently, play was the primary vehicle in which a boy could practice these roles into which he would grow to be a man. Through play and real practice with fathers, uncles, brothers, and neighboring men, each boy would begin to participate in and
contribute to purposeful work at quite an early age. And the values of such boy-to-men activities were voiced in the children’s literature of the times, and then on TV and in the movies, and now, finally, in the video games and other virtual media our boys spend most of their time experiencing. These stories, songs, and scenes depict what boys try to do that they have never done, what they try to do that they will do as adults, what they might try to do that they should not do, what they might try to do that is unlikely but still possible, and, more recently, what virtual reality allows them to try to do that they will never and can never, do. It is unclear how positive, healthy, and accessible such virtual role models provided by Grand Theft Auto and Mission Impossible are to these game boys who would become men.

One day recently, as I was walking down an aisle at Walmart, I stopped to watch two young teenage boys playing at a PlayStation 3 demonstration console. Never having seen this video game before, I watched with avid interest as they played virtual basketball. The two stood at ease, hardly moving except for a flick of the fingers and a glance of the eyes. The realistic nature of the movements of the basketball figures on the screen amazed me. One boy repeatedly maneuvered his team figure to shoot a three-point shot from a long distance, making four shots in a roll. Having played grade-school, high-school, college, and city-league basketball for over half a century, and having more than a passable outside shot, I recalled the flow and feeling of making four long shots in a row within me—a very pleasurable feeling, indeed! At that moment, the boy commented, “It’s easy to make this shot every time,” with a bored look upon his face. And there it was—the difference between hours, weeks, and years of practice and play and the experience of total virtual command and control. There was no way I could have explained to this young person the difference between my feeling and his.
Summary Observations

Four major areas contribute to and influence what is happening to boys today, either enabling or disabling them from becoming men:

- Historical continuity and context (circumstances of the times)
- Community culture; man culture; peer culture; boy culture
- Gender differences
- Violent video games, media modeling

The waves of in-migration into our community not only transported people, it translated relational ways of being into new forms. We changed from caring, cooperating, and sharing to competing, consuming, and securing. For different historical reasons at any particular time, there almost always have been more men than women in our rural community. However, while the roles for men have shifted from the frontier to the mechanical to the virtual, women’s traditional roles still exist (see the new trends in women sewing stylish clothes for themselves); moreover, these have been augmented by newer roles, especially in the service industries of health, education, and welfare.

Whatever the historical community contexts and selection for certain types of people (e.g., outdoor introverts), our modern circumstances are unique with respect to how boys grow up today. More than ever before, boys are being raised in single-parent and step-parent families, where one or both parents are working. More than ever before, boys have access to powerful machines they can drive through the woods, to school, and across the countryside, which means they do not even have to walk anywhere if that is not specifically required. More than ever, boys are spending their time in exciting virtual realities of games, TV, and movies, passively occupied with fantasy roles that are unlikely to be accessible to them in reality and consuming time that might be spent finding more active hobbies and avocations that might ignite their passion. By the time they are teens, boys have been fed, clothed, sheltered, transported, and provided with recreational toys of unheralded technical power and intensity. A young boy hardly needs to leave his bedroom, or a teen his car, to enjoy streaming pictures of entire worlds of action and excitement. Are we surprised such boys are overweight, sedentary, and unimaginative professors of “hanging out?”

And, of course, a teenage boy in our community does not even need money for fuel or drink or drug, for there are always friends who will happily supply these things. Young boy-men in rural America have moved from working on cars (the mechanical man) to being addicted to “reality” media (the virtual man). Therefore, is it surprising that our boys, in addition to the traits listed above, are also non-verbal, non-relational, and non-motivated to achieve academically, let alone find a passion and purpose for living well? And where are those three men for each boy in our community, and what are they doing about this? Clearly, we should be asking what the young women are asking: How are we to find (recover) the “missing man?”
Simple Recommendations

• Identify the 6,000 adult males in our community and secure their committed participation.

• Form these men into small teams of three to five mentors for each male student (about 1,000 boys) attending elementary and middle school.

• Restrict the use of virtual media (TV, video games, cell phones) to no more than two hours per day for each child or youth.

• Create a place for boys and men (a House of Men & Boys) and a nearby place for girls and women (a House of Women & Girls) that each group can make into a regular place of creative interaction with youth. Eventually, a place in which couples and parents can interact (a House of Partners & Parents) could be built between and connected to the other two houses.

• Re-compose educational and home contexts to facilitate more direct and more frequent adult-youth interactions, and in such a way as to better respond to (improve goodness-of-fit) confirmed gender differences so as not to disadvantage boys and to better facilitate their maturation.

• Pay specific attention to enhancing boys’ verbal communication and relationship skills. This issue is extremely important.

• Create a clear understanding of the following so that men, women, and youth in the community are able to provide coherent answers to the following two sets of questions:
  
  o What is a boy?
  o What is a man?
  o What is the difference between the two?
  o What are the best paths from boyhood to manhood?

  o In the past have you had a man as a close friend and companion?
  o Do you now have a man as a close friend and companion?
  o What are the qualities of such a man?
  o How do find and sustain such a relationship?
Concluding Remarks

Now, following these simple recommendations is like having a fishing rod, bait, and a net to catch boys. But equipment does not make a fisherman, and fish do not like to be caught. Understanding development, particularly in relation to prosocial behavior, is like learning to read the riffles and pools and like knowing how fish move in them when they are hungry.

Prosocial development unfolds over time in a stage-like fashion, roughly in four-year blocks. The primary domains within which prosocial behaviors develop are the physical (doings), the emotional (feelings), the mental (thoughts) and the moral/sacred (inspiration).

When observing children as they develop prosocial behavior, we usually focus on three areas. One, activities they enjoy and with which they amuse themselves, like play and pretending; two, behaviors characterized by caring and cooperating, as when they empathize with and help another child; and three, their increasing capacities to share and contribute to others in a beneficial manner in small groups. As children mature and become less self-centered, eventually they may develop the ability to dedicate and devote themselves to the welfare of family and community.

During the years 0-4 and 4-8, children play alone or with a sibling, and then with a sibling or friend. They focus on play activities and they care about what the sibling or friend is doing also, or what they are doing it with (things, stuff, toys). During years 8-12, the focus of their doings and feelings involves a special friend; they play and pretend with that best friend, caring and cooperating more consistently and deeply with time. That special person is often the person who likes what he or she likes and cares about what he or she cares about (baseball, cooking, etc). During years 12-16, young people discover that more than one special person enjoys similar activities and has similar feelings; thus, they form groups of best friends (jocks, druggies, preppies, granolas, etc) according to different preferences for activities and company. During years 16-20, a potential partner often emerges out of this small group of buddies and best friends. And, of course, when a partner has been confirmed, a family often begins. In general, these waves of development proceed and peak, first in similar and shared doings (6yo), then in similar and shared feelings (10yo), then in similar and shared thoughts (14yo), and finally in similar and shared commitment and dedication (18yo). Each of these peaks is a major milestone, characterized by a confident and successful sense of personal agency, avocation, vocation, and devotion, which might simply be described as follows:

• Agency, personal power, instrumental efficacy—lead to either a sense of being able to make an effect on the world, which can be delightful…or to a sense of being helpless in an overpowering world, which can be quite depressing.

• Avocation, personal and interpersonal passion, caring connection—lead to the feeling of attachment to certain activities and persons, whether they be hobbies or family and friends, and a desire to engage them intimately…without which a person can feel very bored and lonely.
• Vocation, personal/interpersonal/social purpose, considerate contribution to common cause—lead to a determination to fulfill a social identity at home, at work, and in the community...without which a person can feel very empty.

• Devotion—deferring to that which is more important than oneself...without which despair comes easily and quickly.

Liking to shoot a basketball leads to playing one-on-one with a best friend for hours, which leads to playing on a basketball team; liking to play music leads to playing music with a friend and then with a band; liking to sell lemonade and make money can lead to creating a product with a friend and then to hiring employees as the business grows. Having the pleasurable sense of agency or personal power to shoot a ball, play some music, or make money often becomes a shared passion and avocation with someone you are close to and like to spend time with; and, out of a number of different passions, a vocation may be discovered that fully engages a social community. This phased prosocial development is especially relevant for boys and girls as they begin to come into relationship with one another.

During the first four years, children learn to move around their world with balance: walking and talking and performing a host of other body actions we will call “do it” (0-4 years), for the sake of simplicity. Once children can move around their world at home with familiarity and reliability, we kick them out and they go to school where they get to “do it to stuff” (4-8 years): coloring, making toothpick sculptures, and playing ball on the playground. After this capacity is well developed, what children did to things they try to do to people around them “do it to people” (8-12 years.) They find that people are not objects and that people have feelings about being prodded, pushed, or broken.

Girls tend to reach this realization before boys and attempt to discover which girlfriend feels similarly about activities, stuff, and people. A girl who feels the same often becomes the “best” friend, while girls who feel differently are only acquaintances or “the enemy,” and boys are so different that they are just “weird.” By the time they reach the 12-16 period, girls are “doing it with people,” most often with the girlfriends who are like themselves. They are also discovering how they can do stuff safely with girls who do not feel the same way they do, widening their empathy. (Eventually, a girl will reach the next phase of “do it for someone” (16-20) that is the beginning of family life.)

In this same time period/stage (12-16 years), many boys realize that doing things to and with people involves learning how people feel, which is a messy, emotional business. Therefore, it seems easier to remain in the “doing stuff to stuff” arena and being with one or more other people (usually boys) who like to “do stuff to stuff.”

Teenage girls have a common and perhaps accurate impression that teenage boys treat them like objects, which, if the truth be told, seems just a lot easier for teenage boys to do instead of trying and being considerate of illogical, touchy-feely emotions. Objects are more predictable and controllable! Because we guys tend to get stuck between the stages of 0-4 and 4-8 of just “doing it” and “doing it to stuff,” girls often get developmentally stuck between the 8-12 and 12-16 stages of “doing it to and doing it with,” unable to move into the next anticipated developmental stage because of boys’ reluctance to do it.
with feeling and with an appreciation for their feelings. Sometimes young women who get married fall into the next stage (16-20) of “doing it for” children and husbands, which allows husbands to remain “doing it” and “doing it to stuff;” we sometimes call this “work” or “providing.”

Now, this developmental shorthand of the body is matched by a simple map and shorthand for mental development. Infants 0-4 years old need what they cannot provide themselves, children 4-8 years old want what they can see and touch in the same room or space they are in (or see on the TV), while pre-teens 8-12 years old can imagine and wish for what isn’t here. Teenagers 12-16 will or won’t do whatever pleases them, regardless of what you say to them!

If this shorthand holds true, a person can listen to the words people commonly use and determine what developmental stage they seem to be thinking in. If our previous outline of “doing” was accurate, then men stuck between “doing it” and “doing it to stuff” (typically 6-8 years) should be needing and wanting stuff like trucks, guns, big deer racks, fast snowmobiles, big fish, big salaries, and trophy wives. Similarly, one would expect that girls stuck between “doing it to” and “doing it with” (typically 14-16 years) might be wishing for empathetic companionship and understanding from young men who are more mature than most males—if the girls can find them.

Finally, what mediates doing and thinking development is feeling. Following our proposed developmental placement of most men and women, we might find that young adult men tend to be either mad or glad depending upon whether they can be off doing things or, instead, have to respond to the disappointed expectations of their female partners. On the other hand, women are likely to be displeased and upset with their relationships with men until children come along for them “to be with and for.” If, as may be common, men are indeed irritated and frustrated (mad) and women disappointed (sad), we have one potential simple map of the predicament that outlines one of the most salient physical, emotional, and mental features of gender relationships.

With this quick outline of a map, we can begin to perceive the effects on the prosocial development of the boys of men who like to be off by themselves in the woods (i.e., absent, introverted fathers): they spend hours each day playing violent video games like Grand Auto Theft, where treating people like objects to destroy is exciting and rewarding (and provides them with an extremely unrealistic view of personal agency or power); they lack the great variety of available activities and other interested people to develop passions for and/or the opportunities to make considerate contributions in common cause with others.

Therefore, we must add one major item to our list of recommendations:

*Boys and young men must have opportunities to give, offer, and share the unique gifts that are within each person, so that they might be with and for others in a valued way.*
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