

“Changing the world one boy at a time”

by Mark Honigsbaum

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More at risk than girls of committing suicide, underperforming at school and turning to criminal behaviour, young men are in crisis. Can a new scheme that uses myths and mentors help to show them the way to manhood?

Rob is bent double, trying to follow a rope strung low through a thicket of thorns. He is wearing a blindfold and carrying a balloon, so progress is slow. Rob is 17. He has no idea where the rope leads. All that he has been told is that his balloon is precious and he mustn't lose it.

As he reaches the end of the rope Rob comes to a halt, sensing the presence of people. “Come with me. I know the way,” says one man. “I can help you if you ask me,” says a second. Rob hesitates, considering these different messages. “You must choose,” says a third man.

Still clutching the balloon, Rob reaches out to the second man – the right choice – and together they head off into the dark. Rob does not know it yet but he has just met the man who will mentor him through the rest of the weekend and into the weeks beyond.

Rob, like many young men today, is in crisis. Perhaps bullied at school for being overweight, or else abandoned by their fathers, they lash out in their grief and anger in the playground and risk exclusion. Or they may simply be confused about who they are and prefer GameCubes and cannabis to interacting with adults and studying.

All these types attended a recent gathering organised by a group called Band of Brothers at a wooded retreat near Salisbury. The brainchild of the psychotherapist Michael Boyle, the weekend was

entitled “Quest”, a rite-of-passage event modelled on the tale of Parzival, written by the medieval German poet Wolfram von Eschenbach.

The Band of Brothers philosophy is that boys today (and, indeed, many men) are, like the young hero of Eschenbach's story, wounded and out of touch with their emotions. Borrowing from thinkers such as Robert Bly and from processes developed by the ManKind Project which runs emotional skills courses for men (motto: “Changing the world one man at a time”), Boyle argues that boys need to be initiated into manhood by mature male mentors.

In the distant past, runs his theory, this job was done by tribal elders, while in the industrial age boys used to be apprenticed into a trade under the guidance of older men. Today, Boyle argues, we have lost all that.

“The reason the majority of the kids I see are in trouble,” he says, “is that they don't have any positive male role models in their lives to do things with them. When their energy isn't acknowledged, recognised, channelled, it goes bad.”

Do boys need men?

To suggest that boys need men today is to risk being laughed nervously out of court – such is the concern about paedophilia that any exclusive contact between men and boys tends to arouse suspicion. In any case, many feminists dismiss talk of a “boy crisis” as a defensive male response to the improved academic performances of girls and to the erosion of masculine hegemonies in the workplace and at home.

Fatherhood itself is also under attack. In a recent study that followed 60 fatherless families over ten years, Peggy Drexler, a psychologist at Cornell University, found that women were just as good as men at raising sons, and that fathers, or male mentors, were not needed to engender “boyishness”.

Yet there is a boy crisis. Whether you take the suicide rate (twice as high for young males as females, and the biggest cause of death for men under 35), or the record levels of male self-harm, or the explosion of boys being diagnosed with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and hosts of anxiety-related conditions, the signs are everywhere.

Boys are twice as likely as girls to be diagnosed with learning difficulties and twice as likely as girls to fail Key Stage Two English. They are also at the centre of the modern sense of alarm over antisocial behaviour, blamed for crimes both petty and serious, for happy slapping and for hanging around in hoodies looking sinister.

Will Hutton wrote recently in the Observer of the “emotional turmoil” of today’s teenage boys and pointed to the number of families without a father. He concluded that boys “need mentors” and “more contact with adult men”.

The debate has been raging for at least a decade in the United States. The Harvard psychologist Michael Thompson’s book *Raising Cain* is both a bestseller and a documentary, and policy-makers have responded with initiatives such as the Eagle Academy, a mentoring programme that pairs African-American boys from New York schools with high-achieving lawyers, police officers and entrepreneurs.

Recently Tony Sewell, a British educationalist frustrated by his inability to help failing African-Caribbean pupils in inner-city schools, set up a similar programme here. Sewell teamed the boys with male mentors and sent them to an academy in Jamaica each summer where they learned,

among other things, how to build robots – an activity that he says engages their attention “24/7”.

Such mentoring projects are controversial, as the debate about getting the balance right in school is highly charged. Even though there is little doubt that fathers can have a positive influence on their sons, feminists are surely right to argue that it’s better to live with no father at all than to have one who beats the mother.

We cannot afford to neglect the differences between boys and girls, differences that make boys four times more likely than girls to suffer from developmental disorders such as reading delay, hyperactivity, autism, stammering and Tourette’s syndrome. Although some feminists may desire it, you cannot simply wish away patriarchy and a certain type of masculinity.

Knights and grails

As Conn and Hal Iggulden, authors of *The Dangerous Book for Boys*, put it: “In this age of video games and mobile phones, there must still be a place for knots, tree houses and stories of incredible courage . . . Men and boys today are the same as they always were, and interested in the same things.”

Like the Igguldens’ “how to” manual, the Quest weekend is based on the premise that things really are different for boys. But whereas the Igguldens hark back to a halcyon age of boyhood, *Band of Brothers*, for all its talk of Parzival and knights and grails, has its eye on the present. It was working in prisons, with those excluded from school, and with drug abusers and the violent, that drove Boyle to come up with Quest.

For reasons of confidentiality, I am constrained from revealing too much about the participants or the processes they went through. As one of the men who stood in the dark and uttered the words “I can help if you ask me”, I have undertaken, like the other male mentors, to

be bound by the “Knights’ Code” and my word is my bond. Like the ManKind Project, the basic idea is to present the boys with a series of challenges. “Who are you really?” the brochure asks each of the boys. “Are you ready to start making your own choices or are you still trying to prove something? Trying to please your mother? Your dad? The teachers? Them? Do you think you will be happy when you’ve got enough stuff and can be like the man in the ads? Or do you suspect there may be something missing, something else?”

Most of the boys and young men had been referred by fathers or elder brothers who had taken part in ManKind Project events and so had some idea of what to expect. None the less, it was clear from their expressions as they arrived that most would have preferred to have been elsewhere.

One 17-year-old arrived clutching a sports bag and bedroll, his face a picture of fear. I later learned that he had been arrested for violent behaviour and was facing the threat of a renewed court order if he didn’t take steps to curb his outbursts. Anger management classes had not worked.

He was the only one of the five to make the wrong choice on the rope walk – he opted for the first man, the one who supposedly “knew the way”, as opposed to the one who offered help if asked. Almost immediately, he realised his mistake. He had chosen the first man because, as he put it, he was “scared” and it seemed the “safest” option. The revelation seemed to transform him: the tense and wary adolescent was soon showing an open and unthreatening side, and an infectious grin.

The Parzival connection

As the other four warmed to the story of Parzival, it was clear that a similar alchemy was at work with them, too. This tale of a young man whose warrior father died before the hero was born has inspired, among other works, Thomas Mann’s *The Magic Mountain* and George Lucas’s

Star Wars, and it has been adapted in modern prose by the British novelist Lindsay Clarke.

In Clarke’s retelling, Parzival is an innocent raised alone in the forest by his deranged mother. One day he has a vision of three knights and, convinced he has seen his destiny, he abandons his mother and ventures into the world in search of honour, glory and service.

It isn’t long before Parzival, following the advice of his father’s former squire (the bad mentor of the story) finds himself in trouble. Only after he has lost all faith in the chivalric code he once idealised and, letting his horse lead him, finds his way to a second mentor – a wise old knight – is he ready to begin the journey into manhood.

The key to the story is Parzival’s two visits to the Grail castle of the Fisher King. The first is a failure because he lacks understanding and confidence, and the second, which follows his meeting with the wise mentor, a success. He now understands what is required of him and shows his compassion; he has acquired emotional intelligence.

Loosely, the weekend in the Salisbury forest presented the boys and young men with tasks that mirrored Parzival’s quest, and, judging by my experience as a mentor, it worked. The young man I was paired with told me he had come in search of “clarity”. Torn between a passion for drumming and continuing a college course he found dull, he admitted that he had become aimless and indecisive, and this was infecting his friendships and his relationships with women.

By the end of the weekend, however, he appeared to have found what he was searching for: he would pursue a drumming career. Invigorated by this decision, he agreed, like the others, to embark on three further “knightly” challenges – an act of forgiveness, an act of gratitude and a secret act of generosity – or what in modern parlance we would call cognitive behavioural therapy.

It is asking a great deal of one weekend that it should change a group of young men for good, and it is too early to say whether the change in the drummer is lasting. When I called him a week later his passion for drumming was undimmed but he admitted that he had struggled with the first task, “forgiving his mother”. The 17-year-old appeared to have taken his lessons to heart, however. “People still try to wind me up, but I don’t take it as personally as I used to,” he told me. “I feel a lot more stable.”

According to Boyle, the lesson that the Parzival story can teach is one we all need to learn or to remember: boys need to be given the space to make mistakes, but they also require guidance. Or, as he puts it: “Boys need men, basically.”

Is the world more female, or are boys still sexist?

In 2005, 80 per cent of girls passed National Curriculum tests in English, compared to 67 per cent of boys.

It is this underachievement in literacy that causes the most concern about inequalities between the sexes. It was one of the findings of a joint research team from the Universities of Strathclyde and Glasgow, providing confirmation of “significant gender-related inequalities” that show girls outperforming boys at all levels.

The researchers said that in treating gender equality as part of a broader approach to social justice and social inclusion, there is “a danger that gender becomes lost or fudged . . . Authorities should check that specific attention is given in issues in relation to learning and teaching. Indeed, this may be essential in the light of forthcoming legislation on equality.”

The gulf between the sexes has remained stubbornly high in the past few years, with 10 per cent more girls than boys gaining five or more A* to C grades at GCSE in 2003, and boys five times

more likely to be excluded from school. Related to this is another staggering gender-biased statistic: boys outnumber girls by four to one in achieving a school detention.

While social class and ethnicity are also issues and variables in the debate, another point of particular significance to the educational achievements of any child appears to be the educational achievement of his or her mother.

In attempting to find answers to the reasons for the achievement gap academics tend to line up behind two schools of thought. The first one is inspired by Australian and US research which suggests that there is a particular crisis in the masculine role, and that this is linked to a new female dominance. Boys, they argue, suffer because the curriculum and the teaching force has become increasingly feminised. This might be dubbed the “world is more female” theory.

The second school of thought is a more feminist perspective that blames patriarchy. It asserts that boys are still locked into a 1950s perspective of masculinity, where they think working hard at school is uncool and feminine. As such, they fail in the classroom because of their own sexist beliefs, which are perpetuated by the usual attitudes of many schools and, of course, in some cases, by the boys’ own parents.

Both theories are probably right. Boys seem to be victims of an education system that does not listen to their specific needs for more male primary teachers, active learning and less course work. On the other hand, they are victims of a patriarchy that has come back to bite them.



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The boy crisis: A short history

1969: The Divorce Reform Act challenges the idea of the nuclear family

1985: The ManKind Project launches in the US to promote the idea that manliness depends on having male mentors

1994: The number of women attending British universities overtakes men for the first time

2000: Girls do better than boys in A-levels for the first time.

Anthony Clare publishes *On Men: masculinity in crisis*, prompting academic debate in the UK

2005: The Commission for Racial Equality warns that British schools are failing black boys. The US psychologist Peggy Drexler publishes *Raising Boys Without Men*, arguing that single mothers can successfully raise masculine sons

2006: The suicide rate for young males continues to outstrip that for young women