

Becoming a Man by August

The boy sitting next to me on the prop plane from Toronto to North Bay was seventeen years old, a rising high school senior with a slight beard. He had the misfortune to sit next to a child psychologist, a so-called expert on boys, who would pester him with questions for the entire trip about how he was spending his summer, and why. “This is kind of like a final exam,” he observed, trying to get me to relent, but I wouldn’t let go.

After he had gamely answered a number of my questions about the summer camp to which he was headed, I sprang the BIG one on him, the question I have asked many boys his age. “Do you consider yourself to be a man?”

“Yes...” he replied immediately. Then he caught himself, hesitating momentarily before declaring with conviction: “Well, *no*...but I will be in August!”

What could a seventeen-year-old boy do during between the last week of June and August that he could anticipate would make him a man? American culture doesn’t have any universal ritual that sees a boy through that psychologically difficult passage from boyhood to manhood. Many boys, actually, almost every boy, struggles with what it means to become a man. Boys (or young men, if you prefer) of seventeen, nineteen and into their early twenties wrestle with the riddle: what test do I have to pass to become a man and who will be able to recognize that I have reached that point? My young companion thought he had found an answer.

It turned out that he was going to embark the next morning on a fifty-day canoeing trip that would take him and nine companions through lakes, rivers, rapids, mud and ferocious mosquitoes, all the way up to Hudson’s Bay, a distance of 600 miles. He and his friends had been preparing for this by developing wilderness skills for the last four years at their camp. They would carry all of their own food, they would not shower for weeks; they would take risks and they would suffer. Toward the end of their journey they would see the Northern lights and would visit an Inuit settlement. They might see moose and wolves, but, he told me, they were not going to be tourists. “This isn’t about seeing wild animals,” he asserted.

What was his definition of manhood? “It’s taking responsibility,” he said. “At the end of the day, it’s taking responsibility and taking things you’ve learned from others and creating your own self.

“It’s about finishing a grueling portage,” he said, “It’s about doing work and getting a result.”

Didn’t he get that from school and varsity athletics? No. Though he did well in school and had bright college prospects, school didn’t address his hunger to be a man, not even playing sports. “After sports you go home, take a shower and watch TV.” When he

was canoe tripping, he felt as if he made a sustained effort that connected him to all the men who had canoed before him at that camp, for more than one hundred years

Could he find the experience he sought among his friends back home? What were they doing this summer? “Hanging out. They’re playing video games,” he said. They didn’t get it. “It’s frustrating. You try to explain to them how great it is. You tell them about paddling all day, and cooking your own food, about the mosquitoes and carrying a wood canoe and they say, ‘What, are you crazy?’”

This young about-to-be man described his father as a “good guy,” his mother as a hardworking professional, and his step-father as financially successful, but none of them seemed to hold the key to helping him become a man. American culture has no universal ritual for helping boys move from boyhood to manhood. Jewish boys have their bar mitzvahs, Mormon boys have their year of missionary service; other boys sign up for the military. Yet every boy yearns to be a man, and traditional societies always took boys away from their parents to pass an initiation rite. We no longer have such rituals, but boys still wonder: what is the test, where do I find it, how do I pass it, and who will recognize that moment when I pass from boyhood to manhood? We fail to provide a meaningful path, a challenging path that speaks to the souls of a majority of boys.

The key to his manhood lay with the counselors who would accompany him on the journey, and with his companions whose lives he would protect and who would, in turn, look out for him. Past the rain, the bugs and the smelling bad, he would discover his manhood in community and in the kind of challenge that only nature offers up.

Our plane journey over, I wished him luck. And then I couldn’t get our conversation out of my mind. While a demanding canoe trip is not for every boy, I’m certain that every boy is searching for a test. You can find the test by taking on anything that requires commitment and courage. However, there is something that happens in the out-of-doors that strips you down to the essentials: safety, companionship and a shared sense of mission. You set aside all the busyness and crap of daily life, and then you can think about what it actually means to be a man.

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