

# Four vital lessons that we need to teach young men

Posted by [Brendan Malone](#) on Nov 8, 2013 | [1 comment](#)

After my hugely popular blog post earlier this week, '[What kind of man would do that and then brag about it on Facebook?](#)', a lot of people have asked me what I think we can do to fix the problem of the 'Rōnin' generation – those young men who lack a deep sense of direction and purpose because of the loss of authentic masculine identity.

It just so happens that I regularly speak to groups of men about these issues, and have a seminar called 'Authentic' which explores the very question: 'what does it take to be a real man?'

I thought it would be a good idea to follow up my blog post earlier this week with another one today which offers some of the key points of my Authentic seminar, particularly the four key lessons we need to be teaching our young men.

## Lesson 1: You need to have a moral code

Good men are men of principle.

They live lives that are governed by firm principles, and their consistent striving to live out these principles is what makes them men of integrity – men whose reputations are built on the back of a consistent commitment to goodness and honesty.

I remember speaking to a group of young men in a high school last year, afterwards one of the older teachers approached me and told me the story about when he learned to drive a car as a young man. He explained to me that the local police officer awarded him his license without much of a test because of his father. The police officer told him that because of his father's character and reputation he knew he could trust the fact that his father had taught him how to drive with responsibility and skill.

A moral code is the very thing we can hang our hats on when the chips are down, and that is precisely when it is most important to have one. Anyone can be a moral man when the going is good, but to be a good man who does the right thing when the odds are against him, or when it would be much easier to choose the easy and selfish way out, that's precisely when the need for a clear moral code is at its greatest.

When I say moral code I mean a set of principles that have some meat on their bones, principles that are built on virtue.

Things like 'I will be a man who respects and cares for women', 'I will be a man who treats the vulnerable members of my community with compassion', 'I will be a man who is honest in his business dealings', etc.

With virtue there is no wriggle room – you can't be both an honest man and a liar, or a prudent man who acts without thinking first. It's all or nothing with virtue, and that's precisely the kind of challenge that masculinity is tailor-made for.

One of the exercises I do with young men in high schools is to get them to write their own moral code, and then I encourage them to take it away with them and put it somewhere they will see it every day. I challenge them to look at it every morning and remind themselves what kind of man they are going to strive to be for the rest of the day, and then to look at it again last thing at night before they go to sleep, and to measure how they lived up to it that day. If they are aware of areas where they have stuffed up I encourage them to set themselves the challenge to work harder the next day at rectifying their mistakes.

I remember a father came up to me once after a father and son breakfast that I spoke at. He told me, that when I had talked about the importance of men having a moral code, his high school-aged son had leaned over to him and asked 'dad, what's a moral code?' The father told me that, to his horror, it had suddenly dawned on him that he had never once talked to his teenage son about morality or ethics. He said that he'd never even thought about how important that conversation actually was until his son leaned over to him and asked him that question that morning.

This is not a conversation that our culture is having with young men. Instead our culture regularly presents young men with the idea that status, rather than character, is the thing that matters most.

I remember once sitting in an airport lounge, and opening one of the free magazines there only to be confronted with a two page advertisement for the latest Omega watch. It was being touted to me by none other than Mr James Bond himself; Daniel Craig. The whole purpose of this advert was to try and convince me that having this watch would give me the gravitas and status of one of Hollywood's biggest action stars.

So many men today spend so much time trying to achieve some kind of status by imitating other men that they have forgotten that the most important status that a man can possess is to be known as a truly good man.

As I challenge the groups of men I speak to: what will people be talking about at your funeral? Will they be saying things like: 'he was a generous man, a great father, a loving husband'? Or will they be saying: 'has anyone seen the chicken sandwiches?'

The answer to that question is determined by the way we live our lives as men, and if we live principled lives then people won't be talking about the food at our funeral reception, they will be toasting our good deeds and noble exploits.

## **Lesson 2: You need to serve**

Service is hugely important for us as men, because it allows us to take the gift our masculine energy and strength and direct it outwards for the benefit of others.

This is the EXACT opposite of what pornography teaches men. Pornography teaches us how to turn our masculinity in on itself for its own self-serving gratification and pleasure. In the

process men are taught to reduce women to the level of mere objects to be used and disposed of at will.

One of pornography's greatest harms is that it reduces the profound gift of human personhood to the level of a commodity that is used by others for their own, and ultimately meaningless, gratification.

If men don't learn how to serve, then we will ultimately become slaves to the various appetites and superficial things that dominate so much of current Western culture.

I remember once seeing a motivational poster that said 'if you want to be happy for an hour, watch TV. If you want to be happy for a day, go to an amusement park. If you want to be happy for a lifetime, go and serve other people.' Never a truer word was spoken by a cheap cardboard poster.

As the classic Bob Dylan song says:

*“you're gonna have to serve somebody, yes indeed  
You're gonna have to serve somebody,  
It may be the devil or it may be the Lord  
But you're gonna have to serve somebody.”*

Sadly a lot of men in our culture have not yet figured out that true freedom and happiness is not actually found in doing whatever you want, but in doing what is good true and beautiful.

Service obviously starts in the home, and in our relationships, but it also extends to our wider community and even our daily interactions with work colleagues, and the person who pumps our gas or serves us at the local cafe.

Men of service are men who live lives that are orientated outwards, rather than lives lived largely for self, and self-gratification. Lives of self-gratification have a very nasty habit of quickly becoming lives of enslavement to the things that can never provide any sense of meaning and purpose. The end result is a perfect life of loneliness – where everything looks fine on the exterior, but ultimately the lack of personal investment in the lives of others makes us men with no meaningful sense of connection to the world in which we live.

## **Lesson 3: You need to live a life of purpose and challenge**

Every man is passionate about something, and men who want to find a sense of direction in life need to figure out what that passion is and throw themselves headlong into it.

It might be sports, it might be making model trains, it might be songwriting, it might be chess, it might be historical trivia, it might be gardening – whatever it is, you need to discover it and then make time to invest yourself in it.

If you are lucky your passion will earn you a living, but for a lot of blokes that probably isn't going to be the case, and so it's going to be a matter of making it part of our regular routine somewhere else.

Finding your passion and then throwing yourself into it is another excellent way of directing our masculine energy and strength outwards by investing it in projects – and oh how we men love a good project (too often we are prone to making the mistake of treating our personal relationships like projects to be managed, but that's a whole other blog post!)

There is a sense of direction and purpose in a good project. The world of the man-project is a world which makes sense to us blokes, it is our happy place where we can really put our strengths to good use, and then watch as the fruits of our labors unfold before our very eyes.

The band *The Mutton Birds* have perfectly captured the truth about the essence and importance of the man project in their song 'A thing well made', about a man who runs a hunting and fishing store:

*“Look at the way this gun fits the crook of your arm  
to make a thing like that you'd need to know what you were about  
you'd need to know where you were going  
and go there in a straight line  
and everything else you'd have to shut right out  
can you see the man who made that  
can you see him putting it down and standing back  
can you see the moment when he said  
that's it  
that's perfect*

*at a time like that  
you wouldn't care about your job  
or your mortgage  
or the fight you had with your wife cause  
when a man holds a thing well made  
when a man holds a thing well made  
there's connection  
there's completeness”*

The man project also provides us with an opportunity to show the rest of the world that we've got some chops, that our kung fu is strong and that we've got something tangible to offer the world.

Yep, that's right, it allows us the opportunity to show off – to puff out our chests with a sense of achievement and pride when we do something that is worthy of notice.

Our man projects are also one of the ways in which we leave a positive mark on the world – there is always a story (that usually becomes mythic in the retelling) about that try we scored at the social rugby match, or the playhouse we built for the kids, or the fish we caught on the fishing trip, etc. These stories usually relate to some form of challenge, and we are meant to be challenged as men. These moments of challenge and achievement are our way of showing

the world that we have something worthwhile to offer, that we have the metal to make it in this world, that we are leaving a legacy that counts for something in our wake.

If we don't teach and provide our young men with the opportunity to challenge and test themselves then they will find destructive and ugly ways to try and prove to the world that they are real men.

They will drink themselves stupid just to prove that they are the 'big man' who can handle his liquor better than any other bloke. Or they will use and abuse women in order to become the sexual barbarian with the most female trophies notched into his bedpost.

You get the point.

Men need purpose in their lives, we need to know that our efforts count for something.

As the character Tyler Durden opines in the movie Fight Club:

***"I see all this potential, and I see squandering... an entire generation [of men] pumping gas, waiting tables; slaves with white collars. Advertising has us chasing cars and clothes, working jobs we hate so we can buy sh\*t we don't need."***

Or as someone else once said: 'if you live your life at the level of superficiality, whoever controls the superficial will control you'.

We need a sense of purpose, and we need to be challenged, in order to be afforded those opportunities to leave our mark on this world, a legacy that isn't superficial and meaningless, instead it is something that catches the eye of another and makes them say 'man, that was awesome'.

## **Lesson 4: You need to know how to love**

So many of the cultural problems we face today are caused by a lack of love.

And I'm not talking about some pornography-fueled Don Juan fantasy, or mere emotional sentimentality (as I tell young men: 'sure, that mushy feeling in your tummy that the pop stars keep telling you about could be love, or could be indigestion').

I'm talking about authentic love, the kind that Aristotle was on about when he described love as 'seeking the good of the other'.

So much of our culture today is self-orientated, self-referential, but authentic love is not.

It seeks the good of others, even when it might hurt or cost us something to do this.

The only way to be sure that love is real, and not something else, like emotional sentimentality, is when it translates into concrete action, and for that to happen it needs to be directed outwards.

If I tell my wife and kids that I love them, but then I spend all my time lying on the couch watching DVDs and eating chips while my wife cooks, cleans, shops, cares for the kids, and goes out to work to pay the bills, do I really truly love my wife and kids?

I have yet to meet a young man who has answered in the affirmative when I ask that question – they instinctively know, like everyone does, that authentic love is not just words and feelings, it has to manifest itself in concrete actions in the real world.

The problem is that we aren't reminding young men of this fact nearly as much as we should be anymore.

**“We don't need to reinvent manliness. We only need to will ourselves to wake up from the bad dream of the last few generations and reclaim it.”**

**-Waller R. Newell-**