



Boys World
A Collection of Columns
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by
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Introduction

Introduction

“A Boy’s World” is a collection of columns about boys in contemporary America. “A Boy’s World” is introductory and hopefully offers some understanding of the inner experiences and the outward behaviors of pre-teen boys as they make their way towards adolescence and the inexorable journey to manhood.

I offer these columns in dedication to the boys, and to all the adults who love them, and whom the boys depend on to help them navigate the path.

I gratefully acknowledge first and foremost the boys who’ve allowed me to be a part of their lives, their parents who’ve trusted me to be of service to their sons, and all the other adults who’ve given me the opportunity to be of some value to the boys in their lives. Finally, my deepest heartfelt gratitude to Gordon Clay and MenStuff.org for enthusiastic support, encouragement, and the space to originally publish these columns.

BoysWork: An Introduction

Welcome to BoysWork! This monthly space is to bring you lots of goodies about boys: their world-view, experiences, conflicts, relationships and their path into manhood. It will cover boys of all ages: the little ones before adolescence, the teenage dragons, the young adults lurching into manhood, and, from time to time, grown-ups wrestling with making it all the way into manhood.

I am a psychologist, musician, and a black belt in the Japanese martial art Aikido. I've played and worked with boys and their families for nearly 25 years. My mission is working with boys to mature, to become responsible, to accomplish their goals and become successful men who's skills, talents and abilities are experienced as powerful, positive, and purposeful.

Boys and boyhood are in trouble. It's full of play and full of perils. There are serious myths and misunderstandings about boys, and a dangerous dilemma between their deepest purposes, their natural development, and the cultural definitions and expectations of males. The biggest threat is the path to manhood is very confusing, difficult, if not seemingly impossible for them which is contributing to a lot of problems with school work, attention, impulsive behavior, withdrawal, substance abuse, and family problems. Conflicts abound!

Grown ups and boys don't see reality the same way: they have different points of view. Fighting over which point of view is right or wrong is a win/lose approach and will not work. Adults may win the battle, but they'll lose the war. The relationship with the boy will deteriorate because love is diminished in the win/lose process. And, it interferes with his maturing. The boy may win the fights, but loses ground in growing up.

My practice is to provide a positive, creative path for boys, with their families and other adults, toward maturity and manhood. A path that both honors the boys' uniqueness and the realities of the world in which they live: at home, in school, and in the community. I understand both worlds: the perspective of the boys and the perspective of the adults, and know how to harmonize them and how to help them to harmonize with one another, instead of struggling all of the time. This approach creates more love and strength, less strife and weakness.

Aikido is great training for boyswork. I get a lot of practice understanding and using conflict to create more harmony, understanding, and long-term resolutions.

I teach the boys and their families the principles of power and conflict. I show them how to blend and harmonize, to listen and lovingly understand one another without surrendering their points of view and how to create solutions that are successful for everyone: solutions that don't undermine another's power and respects their integrity and right to make choices.

BoysWork is a forum for and about boys. A space to share with you how I understand boys: from my experiences playing and working with them, from their own stories, and from the research and work of colleagues in the field. Feel free to ask questions. You can communicate easily with me at ted@tedbraude.com.

Playing Men - Preparing for Manhood

The primary soul task of a boy is preparing becoming a man.

This is not conventional psychology. It isn't meant to dismiss or disregard the reams of excellent research and writing on the lives of boys. It is to alert us that a *fundamental truth and reality* is a boy's life is an inextricable trajectory towards manhood. We ignore this truth, not only at the peril of each boy, but at our collective peril as well. Boys long for contexts that recognize and embrace this task. And we need their best in the challenges we face as a humanity.

I repeat, a boy's soul task is preparing bringing into manhood the capacities, qualities, truths and purposes that are uniquely his.

"How do we prepare him for manhood?" is too often the question. I find it more useful to ask "who is the man he is becoming?" Each boy is born into a path with purpose and meaning. His play is preparation, practice if you will, for becoming the man of that purpose and meaning.

Play is everything to boys. It is magical, the alchemy of soul mixing with everyday events creating the persons they will be. Although boys go through different forms and phases of play from very early childhood through adolescence, there are two essential qualities to their play: imitation and imagination. It is through imitation and imagination that they practice becoming men.

Boys imitate everything, especially men and male figures in their lives. Their imitation is conducted through imaginative play. They imitate the voices, movements, actions, moods and mannerisms of men and male characters they experience. When boys play, their imaginations are fully engaged as that man. They are *being that man*, literally a living image of the man in play.

Grown ups often make a big mistake reducing a boys activity to "it's just play" or "he's pretending to be" so and so. The boy is *trying out and practicing the qualities* of the man-in-play (and getting better and better at it with each practice/play). He's fulfilling a principle of nature: you are/become what you do repeatedly.

The reality of play can be a hard concept for grownups to get a handle on because we tend to be literal. It can even be alarming. When a boy is playing fighting or war (pretty common), it doesn't necessarily mean he is preparing to be a violent, aggressive soldier (although many do). He is likely imagining himself into the essential qualities, such as courage, tenacity, endurance, cleverness etc. underlying the character in play: qualities he will need as the man fulfilling the purposes and meanings he is meant to live.

So the next time a boy is playing and a grownup walks in the room and tells him to stop and come to dinner or something like that and he looks up cocking his head and stares at them with a puzzled 'huh' look on his face, remember his reality is "can't you see I'm fighting with Gollum over the Ring of Power on the edge of the Cracks of Doom while the war over Middle Earth is raging. I can't stop!" and he is fully engaged in the practice of preparing to be a man through imaginative-imitative play.

All Body

Boys are all body.

I know I'm painting with a broad brush, but my experience is that their primary means of experiencing, processing and expressing reality is physical (as opposed to verbal). The path to manhood, their practicing, is through what they sense, organize, understand and communicate with their bodies. Bodies first; minds second.

This drives a lot of grown ups crazy. An adult talks to a boy, tells him what to do, and the kid nods his head or even says "OK" and appears to understand. He hears them all right, but he's grounded in what he's *doing*. Bottom line, he keeps on playing (or doing whatever he's doing with his body). Then mom, dad or whomever goes ballistic. While she or he shouts, the boy scrunches up his face and frighteningly looks at him or her with a "what happened?" look. As the barrage of words come at him regarding his disobedience, misbehavior or irresponsibility, he shakes inside gaping at the grown up grunting or whispering a response at best or totally speechless at worst. Truth is, he's shocked.

I'm not completely exaggerating with "shocked." Boys' bodies are like finely tuned instruments, resonating with the pulse of life, rapidly responding to the gross and subtle vibrations that touch their skins and auras. They experience a physical, sensory understanding that resides below the level of verbal awareness. They "know" what they "feel" in a felt, physical way but will be hard-pressed to put it into words. When they're "surprised" out of their play by an angry, shouting adult, it sends them careening like a car out of control. He really doesn't understand at a *physical level* because the words didn't register in his body.

A mom I know is blessed with two boys, two years apart who "fight" constantly. Makes her want to jump off a cliff. She just doesn't get it. "Why can't they talk with each other?" she asked once in absolute frustration. I smiled, laughed, and said "they're boys. They're testing their strength, playing and having fun. It's all a game." She said, "I'm not having any. I can't get their attention." Smiling again, I said, "go up to the older boy and put your hand on his shoulder or take his hand, then look at him. He'll look at you and calm right down. He'll follow you anywhere." Next time I saw her, guess what? With a glow greater than her previous frustration, she said "worked like a charm."

A teacher I know with an urban classroom has a bunch of boys who can challenge a saint. One in particular is absolutely non-responsive to verbal instructions. But he purrs like a kitten when she places her hand on his shoulder or calmly rubs his head. If his work is going to get done, it is through the communication that occurs through touch and body language.

Boys learn by doing. It's not that they don't understand and can't process words. It's that the locus of their reality is body based. Their attention is focused: in their bodies and in what they're bodies are doing. When a positive connection is physically made with them, magic happens. When it isn't made, there is hell to pay.

Focused

Boys are focused. That's right: boys are extremely focused. Their attention is immediate, now and thorough on what they are doing. It may not be what the grown ups want them to do. That is usually the conflict.

Parents often complain that they can't get their son to concentrate or focus his attention. They assign him a task, say sitting down and doing his homework, putting away his toys, or cleaning his room and the boy is all over the place. He may squeeze in five or ten minutes at the "task" then he's up getting a drink of water, going to the bathroom, checking out what's up television or provoking a sibling.

He's focused all right. He's just not focused on what his parents want him to pay attention. His attention is on playing and not the "task" at hand.

Watch a boy playing. Doesn't matter if it's a video game, action figures, toy trucks, or a pick up roller hockey game. He's riveted on what he's doing. You could practically drop a bomb next him and he'd keep right on going. His mind, body and spirit are fully engaged in the activity. That's his whole reality, period.

The same is true with reading a book, drawing a picture, or putting a puzzle together. Active or sedentary, his attention is absolute: right in front of his nose.

That is why you hear the reverse complaint of "he won't concentrate," which is "I can't get his attention!"

When grown-ups admonish boys for "not paying attention," they get very confused. The feeling in their bodies is they've done something wrong, but the words "he doesn't pay attention," or "he can't focus" do not make sense. They're sure they have superb attention and concentration skills, they're just not doing what the grown-ups expect of them. It's either they *don't want* to focus on the "task" at hand, or their desire isn't strongest enough to get the "task" done or they're absorbed in something else.

It isn't a matter of capability or skill. It's a conflict of desire and will between the boy and the adults. The trick is to use problem solving and conflict resolution skills appropriate to the age of the boy. Otherwise, the confusion he experiences about his "focusing" and "attention" becomes part of his identity, undermining his confidence and turns into a neverending game with the grown-ups to the frustration of everyone.

I knew a dad with a very active 8 year old boy. His son was almost always in motion on his imagined motorcycle or skateboard. Getting him to sit still and either eat his dinner or complete some homework was a major ordeal. It was no fun for anyone with lots of yelling and crying. One day, dad decided to "jump" on his motorcycle and ride along next to his son to the dinner table and "park the bikes" to cool off while they ate. They could finish their ride after dinner or the schoolwork was done. His eyes twinkled delightedly as he told me how he joins in the play, re-directing the boy. The tasks get done. More importantly, his identity regarding his focus, concentration, and attention is strong and confident.

Boys Say It Like It Is

Boys say it like it is: for them. They are not, generally speaking, diplomatic. If the thought is in their heads, chances are, it's going to come out of their mouths. Uncensored. Without judgment or awareness of how what they say might effect someone else. That is, until they are old enough to have learned the lesson on how much impact they can have with their mouths.

I often hear grown-ups accuse boys of "speaking without thinking." Well, not exactly. The truth is, they are thinking, and whatever it is, they say it. More often than not, it is a function of their basic curiosity and connection with the physical world around them. For boys, that includes people too. He sees someone in a wheelchair, for example, and blurts out, "what's wrong with his legs?" Or he sees a girl with a scar on her face and spits out, "what happened to your face? How did you get that ugly mark?" This can embarrass the crap out of the grown-ups with him.

Now, he's not trying to cause trouble. He's curious and speaking his thoughts as they occur to him. If the scar looks "ugly" to him, that's what he says. There's no intent to judge or hurt the girl's feelings. He's just "speaking his mind."

The problem is, "speaking his mind" can be very disturbing for other people. Adults and children alike. The girl may burst into tears (then again, she may just explain what happened to her face) and the boy is going to be shocked. His thought will be, "what in the world is she crying about?" He'll be just as curious about her crying as he was about the scar. Until or unless he gets a whiff that he's in "trouble." The grown-ups around either look angrily at him or speak harshly. Then, confusion sets in: "what did I do wrong?" he frets. He can't figure it out because his question(s) were natural to him and now everyone's upset with him.

Without careful, step-by-step guidance to develop his understanding of how the girl felt hurt in response to his question, it's bad-news bears for the boy. When all he gets from the grown-ups is anger, judgment, and criticism, he learns to either "keep his mouth shut" (to the bane of everyone who later want to know what he feels since he never talks about them) and/or to associate words as weapons and use them for effect.

And boys can be very hurtful with their words. Modern American life offers ample opportunities for them to learn, from grown-ups, peers, television, movies, video games and media figures, how to "waste someone" with words. It just isn't their natural tendency. But it sure gets mistaken as one.

For boys, their connection to the world is a body-mind unity. Life is as it is and that is how they "see" it. His perception and response have a felt sense for him, but are neutral in judgment: he is connected with the natural world. There is no intent to harm someone when he opens his mouth. What is absent, is an empathic sense of what might occur as a result of his "speaking his mind." It is a quality that requires empathy to teach, so that empathy is learned. That's the job of adults.

Sensitive and Strong

Part One

Boys are sensitive and strong. Normally, attention is focused on “strong,” which is front and center generally dominating their play. But boys have a surprising sensitivity. Their language skills and focus of attention belie this truth, yet you would be amazed at how many moms volunteer to me: “my son is very sensitive.”

You may think I’m contradicting myself since previous columns described boys as self-absorbed, focused on what’s right in front of them, and not naturally empathic.

And they are, but that is the paradox. While their attention is singular, their bodies are extremely sensitive, finely tuned instruments resonating with the sense of what is going on around them. They are particularly sensitive to the thoughts and feelings expressed by others toward them. This is most obvious when they’re yelled at. Boys (of all ages) hate being yelled at. It sends their nervous systems into a frenzy.

In simple language, boys “pick up the vibes” around them. They don’t have a natural verbal language for understanding or expressing what they experience. That they “get it” comes through their actions. Too much of the time, their actions are misinterpreted as “misbehavior” when more accurately they represent something the boys are sensing/feeling and showing through body movements. The general rule, to capitalize on boys’ sensitivity, is focus on their sense/feelings first, behavior second. This exercise gives them a fighting chance to hone their understanding of their experience and shape it into a skill with confidence and strength.

Boys’ sensitivity conveys a fundamental quality often overlooked: their need for connection and dependence. Cultural assumptions aside, boys biologically depend on an experience of connection for their health and well-being. For them, it is often fragile because of their sensitivity: someone is mad at them, connection is broken; someone is happy with them, connection maintained. Ignoring their need for connection and dependence, not “restoring” it when it “breaks,” is potentially very damaging. When it breaks, boys will do everything in their power to fix it. In fact, they’re driven by their need to re-connect. Failure results in an overwhelming sense of danger and loss. Restoration equals safety, security . . . love.

Little Johnny’s tuned into some agitation in his environment (maybe mom is unhappy with dad or visa versa) and is running around the room shouting when his parent shouts at him “BE QUIET!! YOU’RE MAKING TOO MUCH NOISE.” He either bursts into tears, curls up somewhere, shouts back, or slinks away. Once the uproar is over, Johnny makes his way back wherever the parent is and tries to cuddle up, sit on a lap, put his head on a shoulder, get a hug or some other behavior to re-connect. He’s not sucking up. He’s not looking to be spoiled. He’s reaching out for the only thing that matters right now: satisfaction of his need for dependence and connection. Anything less will leave his nervous system and psyche a wreck.

A sense of a “permanent” break renders a guy virtually incapable of maintaining closeness and intimacy with another person: male or female. The protection is too great and the risk too high. His sensitivity did not get exercised into a skillful tool and a source of confidence and strength. He is left feeling weak and inadequate. You can imagine the number of attempted intimate relationships that sank from misbegotten “insensitivity.”

Boys are sensitive and strong. These qualities are meant to blend and balance into a wholesome, positive and powerful masculinity. Next time, I’ll write about the strength side.

Boys: They All Want To Be Strong

Strength is everything to boys. In their day-to-day awareness, nothing matters more than being strong. It is their fundamental orientation to being in the world. No boy wants to be weak. They all want to be strong. Period.

The fact that boys have other fundamental qualities, especially sensitivity, doesn't contradict the primary importance of strength in their lives. It is just that strength is what is on their minds: it governs their sense of themselves and who they in relationship to other people. It propels them toward separation and independence. It is the seed of potential that can grow boys into powerful, positive and purposeful men. Missing this truth makes a mess of all kinds of things.

If you think I'm blowing smoke, watch boys play. They're all over each other pushing, shoving, kicking, punching, jumping: all expressions of strength. The romping shifts from boy to boy and if one is "weak" in one game, he's going to find a way to be strong in another game, even if it is with another kid. When their play is with toys or even board games, the purpose is to be strong: vroom around with a powerful car, rocket ship, or jet and, of course, win the game.

Boys' sense of strength is grounded in physical reality. He determines weak or strong by his physical strength. And his physical strength is measured against objects (breaking a tree branch against a tree trunk), images (acting out in imaginary play a strong character), and other people (wrestling with someone and knocking him down). These activities are critical. Success gives him the experience that can lead to healthy self-esteem, effectiveness in the world, and the ability to grow a sense of strength beyond the physical.

Should they always be strong and win? Can't. It's not realistic. Boys live in the real world and they are going to, and have to, experience weakness and loss. How else will they know what it feels like to be on the other side? But, it is just as critical to their development as success because it prompts them to either try again or seek alternatives in order to experience strength. They just won't like it.

Now, we all know that boys displaying their physical strength can drive grown ups crazy. It can be a bit much managing boys romping, crashing, swinging, bouncing and flying. The natural tendency is to scream, "STOP IT!!" triggering their sensitive natures and a look of "huh, what is the problem?" toward the grown ups.

They need rope: real and imaginative. Rope to play and swing from, walls to climb, hills to overcome, towers to scale, boulders to move. They need space and permission to push and test the physical, and psychological limits of their strength to lay the foundation for the transformation from physical strength to strength of character, soul and spirit.

Ironically, it is boys desire to be strong that carries the seed for their developing empathy, compassion and an ability to be of service. It is learned through cultivating their sensitivity and coupling it with their drive for strength.

You see, as long as boys perceive and experience caring and empathy as "weak" they're going to avoid it like the plague. No amount of instruction and cajoling will convince them otherwise. Discovering the strength they have through compassion and empathy, especially in the face of adversity with someone who they would usually see as an opponent, opens a gateway to recognize that physical strength is limited and a small part of a continuum of strength: a continuum that leads into strength of character, soul, and spirit.

Lost in Feelings

Emotions drive boys crazy. Ask a boy, “what are you feeling?” and he’s more likely than not going to cock his head and say “I dunno know” if he doesn’t just shrug his shoulders. The irony is boys are lost in their feelings: they have them 24/7 but, for a slew of reasons, they don’t either understand or pay attention to them.

Boys come with the full palette of emotions: happy, sad, angry, hurt and scared to name some fundamentals. They experience them physically, in their bodies, as a something that doesn’t necessarily have a word or name to go with it. The fact is, boys are basically missing the operating instructions to easily figure them out and put them into words.

It just happens that their brain functioning doesn’t naturally identify feelings and emotions into concepts and verbal language. The experiences are there, but the processes that move experiences into the realm of concepts and words are poor. Hence, it is simply a big struggle for him.

This frustrates the bee-jeebers out of grown ups, especially mothers, because it seems like their boy is stonewalling them when they’re asked “what are you feeling?” or “how did you feel?” or any of the kissing cousins of those questions. They get a blank stare or “I dunno?” and the poor fellow is absolutely at a loss for words and his body’s going haywire because he can’t compute the question, the relationship is disconnecting, and he’s probably got a bad feeling now.

Too add more strain to the equation, a boy’s nervous system is sensitive to begin with resulting in him being flushed with feelings most of the time. He’s swimming in them. But his natural language of feeling, his mode of awareness and expression is physical, through body movement and activity. Grown ups often will mistake his lack of conceptual awareness for an absence of feelings. Far from it. The truth is, there is a perception/communication difference between the adult and the boy.

Boys want to be strong. Strong is a feeling for them. Sad, hurt and especially fear don’t feel strong to boys. They feel weak. Bad news. The last thing boys want to feel is weak. Physically, it is very simple: if it feels weak, avoid it; if it feels strong, focus on it. This fundamental operating rule messes things up big time. Their primary reality (body-based feeling) runs smack dab into conflict with their primary operating rule (strong=good, weak=bad) generating lots of confusion. Their confusion is conveyed through body movement and physical activity in a world that focuses on conceptual understanding and verbal expression. The boys just don’t get it. The grown ups all too often miss the boat too.

Despite the progress in gender roles, boys’ social/cultural experiences continue to de-emphasizes emotions and feelings. Big boys still don’t cry, they shouldn’t be afraid, and sadness is something to get over as quickly as possible. Bonding mustn’t last too long for good heavens they might become a “mama’s boys” or even worse, a “sissies.” Emotions and feelings, except for anger (but not too much) remain the realm of the feminine. Don’t believe me? Listen to the boys. In their world, the worst label is “being like a girl,” whether it comes from each other or from a grown up.

For boys, culture claims feelings (except for anger) are weak, their bodily experience is many emotions feel weak, their brain operation leaves them conceptually and verbally high and dry, and their reality is full of feelings. Now, that seems like a prescription for disaster. Sadly, lots of times that is the outcome.

Hopeless? No way! The missing link is the seed of wholeness within every boy. His craving for strength contains a desire to integrate his experiences and generate a man with the strength of purpose and passion. He looks to adult men to show him the way.

Boys and Soul

Soul is an evasive word. I hesitate using it because it means so many things to people. But, I can't examine boys without introducing soul since it is so much a part of their lives. As I've written before, the fundamental energy of a boy's growth is the movement to manhood. The simple fact is, this movement is governed by a soul *activity* living as an inner drive unique to him unfolding into manhood.

For now, try thinking of soul, not as a *thing* (as in "his soul") but as *activity*. In particular, activity with three animate qualities that move a boy: feeling, imagination, and genius all dynamic, interacting, interrelating.

Boys move in life within or through feeling. Grown-ups tend to view them as "impulsive" and "acting without thinking." Well, sort of, but what is missing in our judgment is an awareness of soul.

Soul as feeling quality is how a boy experiences himself and the world. He knows he is, that he's alive, and in an alive world through feeling. Soul activity of feeling is body based, sensory, a primary knowing and expressive of his unique self. It is a fundamental quality of his living. His actions, experienced feeling, are expressions of this soul quality, of his unique self moving with purpose and direction from boyhood to manhood.

Growing an awareness of the soul as feeling quality helps a boy on his path immeasurably. He longs for adults to overcome the usual tendency to repress and/or deny its existence and recognize his uniqueness and resonate with his particular direction.

I will ask a boy, "what are you feeling?" and he'll respond with the characteristic, "I dunno." When I ask "what's happening in your body?" there is always an accurate physical description: lump in the throat, sick to his stomach, or ache in head for examples. There is soul activity and when I follow it, there is always movement.

Boys are imagination creatures. To paraphrase a line from the film, "The Little Mermaid," that's what they do; that's what they live for. Their main modes of imagination include play, art, construction, and daydream. Grown ups often think it's cute. And it is. But we mistakenly relegate it to "just make believe" and that causes a lot of trouble. It's downright painful when the grown-ups miss, ridicule, or criticize a boy's imagination. It hurts, firstly because of the loss of relationship, and more deeply, because he loses belief in the power of his imagination, in what is possible.

A boy's capacity to make images is much more than make believe: it is a quality of soul with the potential to create realities and add more vitality to the world. Imagination is a vital, generative capability he can integrate with the animate world he lives in. In simple language, he can both imagine something, activating the abilities to bring it into being, and he can create images of the living world around him and experience resonance with their being. In *The Once And Future King*, author T.H. White wrote eloquently of these soul activities in the training of the young Arthur by the teacher Merlin. Image making is his mode for unfurling himself into the future, becoming the man his destiny calls him to be.

Every boy contains genius. I'm not talking about the high I.Q. notion we usually equate with the word. I mean the soul quality of his born-with purpose, the creative capacity of his unique, unfolding self. Again, it is more accurate to consider genius as activity, rather than as a thing that is fixed and permanent. Difficult to identify, especially in a culture obsessed with market concepts and identity by job, the activity of genius appears in his talent, will, and day to day actions: what the boy loves doing.

Genius is his essential drive pulling him into the future to fulfill his mission, the destiny of his

lifetime. A powerful soul quality moving against any and all odds. Heaven help us when we try to repress or deny it. It's going to find its form or be miserable. The genius soul quality is obvious in hindsight with boys like Einstein or Edison, thought to be misfits and amount-to-nothings, who pursued their path with regardless of social opinions. Genius lives in every boy: he has purpose, a mission.

The trick is sensing the boy genius and playing the appropriate part in his story. Much of the time, it is a great mystery. There are clues in his interests, talents, and passions. Listening and watching with the radical receptivity of a quiet heart and mind may resonate an inner image for yourself of his genius. Blessing the image in his behavior may generate more more energy and activity for him. You may be in the ballpark. But sometimes, appearances are misleading. Acknowledgment may result in him backing away. Either you've missed the mark or that's not your part to play. Unpredictable, it is a challenging skill to recognize and relate to a boy's genius soul quality. A worthy task. Generally genius prefers recognition and response to isolation. It enlivens him. Without it, genius persists as long as there is life.

It's not job or profession that draws a boy into manhood. The unfolding of his soul work moves him along his path. Understanding a boy's soul journey, the activities of feeling, imagination and genius, were once sacred and intrinsic to a society's culture. It was an integral aspect of a culture's continuity. It guaranteed balance and homeostasis.

Our modern life imbalances boys and soul. The inner ecosystem of soul is jeopardized, its habitat shrinking so to speak. The imbalance mirrors an imbalance of soul life with his exterior world. Today, a boy's "work" includes his effort to reinstate balance: re-imagining his personal soul in service to the Soul of the World.

Boys It's Not A Friendly World

The expectations of the external world and a boy's inner nature are generally a bad fit. In fact, it's downright confusing and the source of a lot of conflict. The cultural view of boys, including long-standing archetypal images, the demands of family life, the requirements of school, the pressures from peers, and the influence of the marketplace and media wreak havoc and make it not a friendly world for boys.

Avoiding and denying emotions is still a mainstream cultural model for boys. In spite of more care and attention, grown ups still expect boys to be less emotional than girls, misunderstand the form of their feelings, are perplexed and mismanage their sensitivity, and emphasize strength with being unemotional. Boys' behaviors are often "bad" because they're physically expressive, rambunctious, and yes, even aggressive. Masculinity is under siege to the degree that many times male equals no good or foolish. The patriarchal image sours most people and without a culturally accepted mainstream alternative, the boys are left lonely on a path without a clear destination. Since the primary soul task of a boy is preparing becoming a man, you can imagine the confusion and distress this causes.

The "wild boy" and "the prince" archetypes continue to influence adult attitudes and behaviors with boys. Pollack, in his best-selling book, *Real Boys*, devotes considerable space to these boy-myths. Spelled out "wild boy" sees them as unruly by nature and having to be civilized. This view swings back and forth between excusing reckless and irresponsible behavior to constraining and criticizing boys' physicalness as inherently bad. It blinds grown ups to the depth and expressiveness of boyhood. "The prince" affords boys a privileged position. His superior status frees him from tasks and responsibilities and excuses otherwise unacceptable behavior. Together, these archetypes in practice rob boys of their developmental tasks.

Families fall into cultural patterns with the ease of ripe fruit dropping to the ground. In all fairness, how could they not?! It's an arduous agenda making a cultural shift and the best of us struggle personally with walking the talk. Families often reinforce "big boys don't cry" models and give more attention to the girl's feelings than to the boy's. Then there is the common practice of focusing on the boy's behavior and not his feelings, with it divided up into "good" behavior and "bad" behavior. Add to the recipe whatever differences and polarities there are in the mother and father and how they represent gender and it's not hard to see that it has the potential to mix up the boy.

School is for girls. That's how it is boys. For the most part, he's not made to sit still in a chair, be quiet, keep his hands to himself, only talk when he's called upon, stay in line, patiently raise his hand to answer a question, and pay attention to the teacher all of the time. That's just the tip of the iceberg. The rules and regulations of most schools are simply geared more towards girl behavior and development than boy. The upshot is boys experience a whole lot of frustration and failure (translate: weak and lose) behaviorally, socially and academically. They are held back more than girls, are identified as "learning disabled" more than girls, and diagnosed "attention deficit and hyperactive" way more than girls. The suffering for boys in school is big. It's a bad fit.

Peer pressure is a huge challenge for boys. Always has been, but it's worse now. It has the power to undermine the positive values and practices a boy learns at home. The "boy code," again articulated by Pollack in *Real Boys*, calls on them to be strong, solitary, stoic, and focused on status. No surprises there. Boys run in packs and he has to look "strong" and "tough" to his buds. Heaven help him if they see him hug his mom. An important measure of his "strength" comes from his status and position in the pack. But the pack can be incredibly cruel. His status can change from day to day. The pack is often mean, competitive, unsafe emotionally (and sometimes physically), with no honor or loyalty. And it will pit the boy against the values of his upbringing creating a conflict in loyalty between his family and his peers.

The modern marketplace and media are not a boy's best friend. They exploit his boy nature and seduce him into identifying with some of the ugliest images of masculinity imaginable. His natural desires and abilities to adventure, face challenges, and be heroic are directed into video games, watching television shows and movies, and purchasing products that fit the current fad. Absorbed in a video world, he has the illusion of daring and finesse, fooled into feeling he's an ace, with no genuine development or transferable skills. Boys have the choice of man as "fool" or man as "monster." The media portrays men as either bumbling and jokesters or violent and dangerous. Even the heroes are questionable characters. Action figure toys are grotesquely "masculine." The best have ridiculously large muscles to the worst being ugly monsters. Boys' toys are distorted caricatures of real life items almost always over emphasizing loud, aggressive, and violent. These are the social norms of play promoted by the market place and the media. A boy doesn't stand a chance.

Conflict is the common condition boys face between their natures and their world. As usual with boys, the strain is not necessarily obvious: they're not about to walk up and say, "this is really difficult for me." Their behavior holds the clues and the keys to their experience of a not-so-friendly boy world.

Boys At Risk of Missing Manhood

Today boys are at risk. Fundamentally, they are in danger of aging without becoming men. Their day-to-day experiences do not prepare them for manhood in any real, meaningful way: a manner that identifies, affirms, supports and develops their inherent male goodness, their soul capacities, or their deep purposes for being alive in this time.

I'd like to set out a hypothesis based on two contemporary understandings. First, a central threat in our lives is to the ecological welfare of the Earth as an environment to sustain human life. The second is that Consciousness includes a non-local aspect, not limited by time and space and which incorporates every single human mind. In a nutshell, boys know that human behavior is jeopardizing the survival of our species. The hypothesis is that an aspect of boys' troubles relates to this knowing and the frustration they feel (which can become futility) in their thwarted efforts to become men who can make a difference.

A deep element of the male archetype is to protect, preserve, and provide for the welfare of family and society. In post World War II life, that quality was taken up with "doing well in school" in order to "get a good job."

The emphasis on getting good grades in school so he can get a good job is archaic. It is fundamentally in conflict with his deep knowing that there is a genuine threat to humanity and that his purpose plays a part in the story of how humanity will meet the danger to its survival.

His growing up and becoming a man is essentially a sacred path incorporating a boy's soul purpose with ensuring the continuation of his people. The inner activity of a boy's soul life is unbalanced by neglect, the absence of cultural validation, and pressure to conform to a cultural system that wishes his attention be focused on what he experiences as meaningless goals.

Boys play like there is no tomorrow and their play is to prepare them for manhood. When their society directs their play away from genuine survival tasks and their place in the continuation of society, it creates stress, conflict, and ultimately ill-health and misbehavior: life makes no sense.

Boys are all body and their bodies resonate with the sense of themselves and everything around them. Their attention is focused, most importantly on what is real and meaningful to them, and their sensitivity picks up on the world around them. This has to include the deep knowing of the threat to humanity. When their society overwhelms their body knowledge and sensitivity with apparently useless information, fears they cannot develop any control over, and commands their attention towards desires and behavior that have nothing to do with growing into men who are purposeful, positive, and powerful, it undermines their fundamental soul intent: to become men, resulting in misbehavior and ill-health.

A fundamental force for boys is their desire to grow in strength. Strong begins as a physical body experience for boys. It is meant to develop into psychological and spiritual strength in the form of integrity, confidence, meaning of purpose, and a living experience of centeredness through which the power of Life flows. It is strength independent of relationship: it doesn't depend on the weakness of someone else. When their society corrupts the call to strength through images that are grossly physical, violent, and destructive and denies the existence of a sacred path to a man of genuine strength it perverts boys into becoming what Jed Diamond and others describe as "monster boys:" boys in the body of men bent on destruction and, fuels depression, disease, and violence.

Boys long to live their souls purposes and become men. It isn't something they put into words. Swimming in feelings and senses and not having an easy time verbalizing their experiences, the imbalance and conflict between their soul life and their "not so friendly world" is displayed through

their behavior. Unfortunately, it won't show up through psychological testing, or ADD/ADHD evaluations, learning disabilities assessments or any other instrument that looks at boys through our contemporary social lenses. It will show up in their behavior: he doesn't want to do schoolwork, or chores, and wants to get away with whatever he can, and is simply reluctant to grow up.

The irony is boys always want to do well - be "good" if you will, because it relates to strength and sensitivity. But the challenge is huge when the price they pay to "be good" and "fit in" costs them to deny developing in accord with their deepest desires and knowledge including playing their part in the survival of humanity.

Boys are unaware of the risk they face. As they approach adolescence, an unease sets in that is usually explained as "adjusting" to middle school. It's more than that. The imaginative play period is fading and a dawning awareness of "being-in-the-world" begins: a world that both deeply calls them to soul growth and making their place in the great story to sustain human life on Earth and, at the same time, denies, obstructs, and perverts soul growth, replacing it with directing him towards goals that, in fact, further the danger to humanity.

Boys

Crossing the Bridge and Entering the Forest

Boys change over time. The fundamentals don't shift, but their perspectives and awareness opens up as they attempt to adapt their natural tendencies and abilities to a larger sense of being in the world. The cornerstone of the change is the fading of imaginative play as their core experience: when they begin realizing that there are things going on around them.

In boyhood, life events are incorporated into his play: he literally plays his way through them in his imagination. Crossing out of this experience, a boy finds himself "trying to figure out" what is going on and respond to it. It's quite a shock and disorienting. He finds himself actually unsure of how to operate. His play "toolkit" doesn't work or get the job done.

A simple example is a boy who imaginatively plays a lot of war/battle games with toy weapons. One day, perhaps in the midst of playing, he realizes that his toy gun represents a real weapon that kills people: really, kills them, dead. His body/feeling of playful pleasure vanishes. What used to be simple fun is now empty, meaningless, maybe even awful. He is puzzled, confused, unsure of himself, lost in a new world he doesn't understand and he doesn't know what to do. It is very scary.

This boy has crossed the bridge and entered the forest. Like in the fairy tales, he's left the world as he's known it and stepped into another world. It is sort-of familiar but feels totally different. It beckons him to bring his playful, strong, sensitive, focused spirit to the challenges and events he encounters. But, it is not clear what he's "suppose" to do.

Crossing the bridge can kind of whack him upside the head. Since he generally doesn't have the best verbal and relating skills to begin with, he usually has a hard time articulating what is going on. Afraid and confused are his dominant emotions. Something like, "great, now what am I going to do?" is a thought pattern that permeates his body awareness. Since fear is a boy's least favorite feeling, next step is trying to make it go away. Doing his best to return to imaginative play is common. It's natural and normal. Of course, it doesn't work. He may become withdrawn and sullen. He may misbehave and act out. They are two sides of the same coin: he's struggling to both adapt and to communicate that he's out of kilter.

Grown-ups tend to recognize when a boy has crossed the bridge. They notice a change in his play and often in his overall behavior. Typically, they think of it as the "loss of childhood." They may be sympathetic, even nostalgic. Perhaps they act brusque and insensitive. Usually, the underlying attitude is "it's time to stop playing and grow up." Grown-ups say things like, "life isn't fun and games" or "you can't always play; there is work to be done." The boy usually gets some kind of message that translates into, "that's it! It's over. No more imaginative play." It feels like death and is deeply disturbing.

Crossing the bridge and entering the forest is a calling. It is a new twist and meant to be an awesome adventure on the path of becoming a man. He is at the beginning of a critically important road. The boy is called to **bring with him** the best of himself: his imaginative, playful, curious, sensitive, strong, focused, feeling spirit into his being in the world. It is an extraordinary opportunity to "try out his skills" in an entirely different context. It is his chance to apply imaginative play, intense curiosity, an aware sensitivity, strong determination, focused attention, and emotional empathy to the real world experiences he encounters.

Boyhood is meant to prepare boys to cross the bridge. Once they enter the forest, they cannot fend for themselves. With inadequate attention, he can wither and become lost in the forest, even trying to find his way back over the bridge. Or, he can be "well-advised" and find his way to master the terrain, exit the forest and move on to the next challenges in becoming a positive, purposeful, powerful man.

