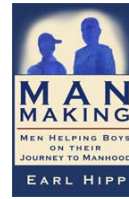


Man-Making

Men Helping Boys on Their Journey to Manhood



A Young Man's Rite Of Passage By Earl Hipp

Recently a good friend of mine, Gary, was preparing to send his son off to college. In our conversations, he spoke of his awe at how fast his son, Ben, had grown up and how quickly this time of departure had arrived. He also spoke about his lingering sadness about his son leaving home and the enormously empty place it would leave. In the mix of this complicated bag of feelings, there was also the pride he felt that his son was moving toward this next phase of his life.

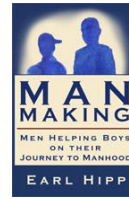
What really caught my attention were Gary's fears about his son's ability to handle the social pressures of college life, his worries about his son's lack of academic discipline, and many other concerns about whether his son was really ready for the experience. While his joy, pride, and anxiety were all pretty normal, like all fathers who face a transition at this time their son's life, he was still seeing the boy in the young man, and he was holding on.

As a man who had also watched the boy grow up, and as his surrogate uncle, I realized I was hearing the call to be an elder and man-maker in the lives of this father and son. I took a risk and suggested to Gary that a Rite-of-Passage ceremony might help both father and son to launch into this new adventure together. I also shared my belief that based on thousands of years of men launching boys toward manhood, both Ben and the men who would be involved possessed the natural and necessary hardwiring deep in their genes for this experience to have a profound effect. Gary considered the idea for a while and eventually decided to go along. In a moment I'll tell you what actually happened, but what follows are some of my suggestions to Gary on how to set up this Rite-of-Passage event.

- Ask the women to leave the house for this "male only" event, and for everyone's comfort, promote it as a "brief" experience of thirty to sixty minutes.
- Draw the attendees from the pool of men in your community who have touched Ben's life. Male relatives, teachers, coaches, neighbors, and friends of Gary's who have been part of Ben's life. These men, in their very presence and stories, will bring a powerful sense of the flow of Ben's life from boyhood to the present.
- Without over-scripting what happens, ask men to come prepared to tell a story that comes out of their history with Ben. Then, if it's comfortable for them, ask them to be ready to tell a story about a personal transition they faced, read lines of scripture, share a poem, or offer any advice they think would be important for a young man at this juncture.

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- Ask each man to bring a talisman which will be given to Ben during the ceremony. This can be any small object that symbolizes their wishes, hopes, and dreams for him. On placing this token in the center of the circle, a man can tell a short story about this “sacred object” to give it power and meaning.
- Invite the men to consider and during the ceremony offer Ben whatever form of on-going commitment of support they can comfortably make and honor.
- Men have gathered in this way, for this purpose, for millennia. When the ceremony begins, it will feel natural and the impact will be increased considerably if Ben and the others sit in a circle with “fire” at the center (candles are fine).
- To further ritualize the event, Gary could choose a man to formally open and close the circle. This man would set the tone at the beginning with a statement or reading, and again at the closing when, after a final blessing from Gary, he will officially mark the point in time when Ben is launched into the next part of his life.
- It can never hurt to feed the guys after the doings.

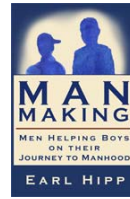
The actual event came off pretty much as it was suggested with a few modifications. The dozen or so men arrived, a circle was made, candles were lit, and Gary welcomed and thanked them for their support of Ben. Then each man took a turn talking about his life, speaking about and to Ben, and offering up his sacred object as a gift.

As the experience unfolded, all of us were drawn into each other’s stories where feelings of fear, courage, sadness, loss, regret, and joy flowed freely. Tears came and went, laughter emerged, and blessings were proffered. I think that because of the men’s hunger for this kind of sweetness and intimacy, the experience became timeless. I don’t even remember how long it went on, just that time wasn’t important. We were all being transformed by the process and liked it.

Toward the end, Gary took all of the sacred objects, put them in a medicine bag of deerskin, and gave them to Ben. Like the rest of us with considerably softened hearts, Gary gave his son a powerful blessing by acknowledging his manhood. He stated that going forward he would walk alongside of him in unconditional love and as his most powerful ally. I don’t remember the exact words, and all I could think about was how much I would have loved that blessing from my father.

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After his father's blessing, Ben was given his first opportunity to speak. At this moment, as he tried to find the right response, he started with tears and then collapsed into sobbing. He was, for the first time in his life, surrounded by men who had loved him in a thousand small and large ways. These were good men who had stepped out of their lives again to gift him in this moment with these wonderful, intimate pieces of themselves so that he would know he was not alone as he moved forward. I think it was just too much for him to handle . . . initially.

With our full permission, he sobbed his fears and failings looking down at the floor. In barely coherent voice, it appeared he was struggling to justify his life to this point, to get our forgiveness, and let in all of the blessings. As I was able to confirm later, it wasn't easy to witness this bittersweet and too familiar struggle to feel deserving of the love that was offered.

And then a strange thing started to happen. The sobbing slowly began to subside. There were moments of laughter in his remarks, and he began to raise his glance and make occasional eye contact with the men in the circle. Gradually, his breathing eased and he started to thank us, generally, and spoke to some of us individually. As this was happening he sat up straighter in his chair, looked at more of us, and I think, allowed himself to join the circle.

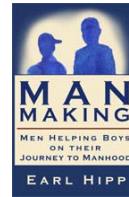
When he was done, Gary again thanked the men and asked us to circle up around the "fire." He took out a picture of Ben as a little boy and put the edge of the photo into the fire. As it burned slowly, Gary spoke to Ben saying that he would always love, cherish, and remember the wonderful boy he was, but from today forward he would honor, cherish, love, and unconditionally support the man his is and is becoming. When the picture was no more than ashes, he dropped it and extinguished the candles. Wordlessly, father and son's eyes met, they reached out and held one another in a long, sweet, and loving hug. Men cried, applause rang out, men who didn't know each other swapped hugs, there was backslapping, laughter, and energy bouncing off the walls.

Finally someone announced that the food was ready, and in a tired by happy retreat we headed for the kitchen. Almost as a counterpoint to the potency of the circle, our conversations moved to guy talk about sports, computers, families, work, and a lot of "why when I was going to school" conversation.

It was unspoken, but clear, that a good and powerful thing had been accomplished. In a number of ways the day's events had changed many male lives for the better. Standing in the kitchen with my beans and brat, I found myself talking to other men but also noticing the goings on around me. The sounds of camaraderie all around, Ben's smiles and voice as he got the individual attention of one man after another, and Gary's occasional and proud glances at his son. They all validated the importance, and maybe the absolute necessity, of intentional man-making in the lives of boys and men.

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Earl Hipp

Earl Hipp, M.A., is an author and professional speaker. Since 1985 he has published seven books for young people on topics such as stress, grief & loss, self-esteem, and violence prevention. Taken together Earl's books have sold over a half-million copies. *Man-Making – Men Helping Boys on their Journey to Manhood*, his most recent book, was published in the fall of 2006.

To learn more about Earl, how this book came to be written, or to order a copy of the book, use [this link](#) to visit the Man-Making website. You may also want to visit the [Man-Making Blog](#), a regularly-updated collection of ideas, stories, books, program descriptions, articles, and website reviews related to the topic of man-making.

On the Man-Making website you can learn about Earl's conference programs and workshops. You'll also find a growing list of articles, recommended books, films, websites, and model programs focused on the man-making challenge.

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