Becoming a Man

A One-Year Rite of Passage Program for Adolescent Boys

Jim Warner and Tom Pitner
January 2000

British Antarctic explorer Sir Ernest Shackleton placed this advertisement in London newspapers in 1900 in preparation for the National Antarctic Expedition (which subsequently failed to reach the South Pole). Shackleton later said of the call for volunteers that: “It seemed as though all the men in Great Britain were determined to accompany me, the response was so overwhelming.”

MEN WANTED FOR HAZARDOUS JOURNEY
Honor and recognition in case of success.
Becoming a Man

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Clela Rorex  
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Copies of this document may be purchased for $15 U.S. each, with the check made out to OnCourse International. Copies of the Becoming a Man video are available for $20 U.S. each. Payment is required with your order and includes shipping / postage costs within North America. Mail your order and check to:

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Initiation in the Western Culture

Indigenous cultures, most notably African cultures and the Native Americans, mark the transition of adolescent boys (age range: 13-18) into manhood by a sequence of experiences, often over an extended period of time which include:

1) Separation from the maternal influence and the comfort of the “tribe”
2) An ordeal beyond the scope of anything the boy has previously experienced, yet surrounded with love from the elders of the tribe.
3) An initiation ritual conceived and conducted by the elders.

The ordeal involves direct and potentially dangerous encounters with the powers of nature and with the boy’s innermost self – his own demons and shadows. The initiation is a powerful, yet loving, ceremony where the boy sheds his skin of adolescence, with its comforts, masks and protections, taking his first steps into the power and responsibility of manhood.

Rites, systems or programs for transitioning into manhood are not the norm of Western culture. Religious ceremonies (e.g., the Jewish Bar Mitzvah and the Christian Confirmation) are primarily about learning a prescribed set of information followed by a celebration within the church or synagogue community. Typically, they do not involve ongoing, heart-level interaction between the youth and a community of adults nor exploration of the inner-self. Scouting programs and YMCA’s Indian Guides, while effective at linking youth with adult teachers and mentors, are primary pre-adolescent with minimal self-reflection. Big Brothers and comparable programs expose needy boys to a mature, caring adult male. Yet these programs are typically one-on-one, providing little exposure for the adolescent boy to a community of men.

Their own depression-era fathers may have taught today’s Baby Boomer fathers a work ethic or the power of education, but Boomer men were rarely initiated themselves. Few Boomers are in any type of truth-telling community – nor were their fathers. As such they are ill-equipped to initiate their own sons, instead relying on religious education, youth-groups and the school system to somehow transform their boys into men.

Teenage media (television, movies, and music) portray the American father as a combination of workaholic, nerd, authoritarian, simpleton or buffoon, incapable of real connection with his son. Male role models are star athletes and media stars. With most adult men portrayed as either clueless authority figures or narcissistic stars, adolescent boys develop their value system and code for living from one another. The sad result is the 18-year-old high school graduate in an adult body navigated by a 13-year-old psyche.
Becoming a Man: Overview of the Program

**Becoming a Man (BAM)** is a fifteen-month training and initiation experience for adolescent boys who are approaching manhood. Our inaugural program, which was conducted from March 1998 through June 1999, was targeted toward 15- and 16-year-old boys – sophomores and juniors in high school.

Jim Warner and Tom Pitner led the BAM program. Both co-leaders had been through rite-of-passage programs, had led numerous adult groups in intimate retreat and inner-self exploration weekends, and understood the process of initiation. In addition Tom had extensive experience working with adolescent youth in wilderness and small group settings.

A prerequisite for launching the program with the boys was a willing community of adult men. These “elders” would provide a safe setting or “container”, where the boys and men could both speak from their hearts and face their innermost truths and fears. These elders would also guide the boys as they transitioned from scared, ungrounded adolescents into honest, responsible, caring young men.

The first three months of the program, during spring 1998, focused on building the elder container, separate from the boys. The elder group met one evening per week for three hours to tell their personal stories, take off their masks of pretense and judgment, and open themselves to a caring, vulnerable community of adult men. This elder container consisted of eight men. Besides the two leaders, three other men had been through rite-of-passage programs (the Mankind Project) and were comfortable in an experiential, ritual-based environment. The other three men were open to the process, but had neither experienced an initiation nor been in a safe container.

Of the eight elders, two were divorced, one had never married, and the other five were still in their first marriage. All of the divorced and unmarried men were childless, yet each had an open heart for the issues and yearnings of these boys. Three of the eight elders would have their own sons in the program.

During the eight weeks where the elders met as a group without the boys, the co-leaders initiated discussions and experiences where these men would take risks both in sharing their own stories and exploring their own shadows. During this time of elder-container-building, they shared their stories, fears and joys about:

- Trust and betrayal in their lives
- Women and marriage
- Their sexuality
- Their fathers
- Their mothers
- Their work
- God, religion and spirituality
- Telling the truth and setting boundaries
- Their own adolescence
- Their own sense of life mission
- The meaning of life.
Concurrent with building the elder container, eight boys were nominated either by the elders or by other initiated men in the local community, to participate in the program. The nominated boys, and their mothers, were interviewed by the co-leaders and then invited to join the program.

While the full program would be launched in September 1998, we wished to give the boys a taste of the experience in June, prior to their summer break. As such, a one-day mini-retreat was held at a local retreat center. During a carefully choreographed, eight-hour session, the boys were exposed to the mental, spiritual, emotional and physical components of adulthood. After modeling by the elders, the boys were invited to share vulnerable parts of their lives. Trust activities, fun games, rituals, storytelling, and a communal meal formed the agenda. The boys were then given assignments for the summer.

Over the summer, two boys dropped out of the program. We chose not to replace them. The formal program with the boys was launched over the Labor Day weekend with a forty-eight hour, dual-location wilderness retreat. At this retreat the boys were held accountable for their summer assignments and were exposed to the basic tenets of the program: Work, solitude, truth-telling in community, celebration, making and keeping commitments, ritual, accountability, and directly confronting their fears. The goals of this retreat were:

- Create excitement and commitment among the boys in the program
- Strengthen the safety of the community of boys and elders
- Allow the boys and elders to “tell their stories”
- Understand life as a man, exemplified by their ancestors or lineage
- Provide specific exercises touching on the topics that would be used throughout the rest of the program.

After the Labor Day retreat the community of boys and elders would meet together two or three evenings per month for three hours. Daylong offsites or adventures complemented these weekly meetings. Each meeting, offsite or adventure was designed to explore a specific topic (e.g., sexuality, spirituality, relationships with fathers or mothers, work, service). At least once per month the elders would meet as a group, without the boys, to tune the agenda for the coming weeks and to resolve issues and conflicts within the elder community. These elder-only meetings were crucial for the elders to “get clean” with each other and then “work on their own stuff”, so that the elder container would be safe during subsequent weekly meetings and adventures with the boys.

During the year each boy seemed to “connect” with one or more of the elders. We encouraged this connection and the boy-elder pair would often meet, one-on-one, between meetings.

A seventh boy was nominated by one of the young men and was added to the group in November 1998. Both two boys and two elders interviewed the nominated boy before inviting him to join the group. The formation of this boy-elder invitation panel helped to strengthen the community and eased the integration of the new boy. In the future we are open to adding boys during the first three months of the program. Integration becomes more difficult after three months in that a new boy would miss many of the building-block themes, topics and experiences presented at the weekly meetings.

After seven months of weekly meetings and offsite adventures, the final, four-day initiation experience was scheduled for early May 1999. Elder planning began six weeks prior to this event. While every effort was made to coordinate dates for perfect attendance, one boy was unable to
attend, and one elder missed 80% of the retreat. Each boy was asked to choose one elder (not his father) to be his sponsor during the retreat. Separated from their families for four days, the boys were sent into an intense, 24-hour wilderness solo experience. Then followed a series of physical and inner-journey ordeals, culminating in a celebration feast and a ritualistic initiation experience.

At the meetings immediately following the initiation retreat, the elders welcomed the initiates, explained the purpose of the initiation experiences, and honored them as young adults.

A few weeks following the initiation experience, the boys invited their mothers, family members and close friends to attend a graduation ceremony. At this ceremony each boy was recognized by his initiation sponsor, received a graduation certificate, and was invited to speak to the community about his experience. Relatives and other attendees at the graduation were then invited to honor the initiated boys.

The graduation ceremony was the final meeting of the “formal” BAM program. Over the summer 1999, an anthology video was developed which captures the essence of the program. This video was presented as a gift to the initiated boys at a “reunion” dinner, held in September 1999.
The Becoming a Man Program

Timeframe and Other Programs

In choosing a timeframe for the program our most important criterion was to develop a safe container, where the elders and boys could share their lives with one another at a deep level. Some initiation programs last only a single weekend, and consist of a compacted separation-ordeal-initiation experience. These intense trainings can provide a “mountaintop” experience for all (participants and leaders/elders/staff), and often catalyze change in a participant’s life. However, it was our experience that this change only becomes rooted in the participant’s life if it is followed by months of ongoing, small group, community building. The New Warrior Training Adventure, sponsored by the Mankind Project, is an example of an intense, 3-day initiation experience. The Mankind Project also offers follow-up weekly “integration” meetings that strengthen the sense of community spawned during the training.

The Senior Rites of Passage Program (SRPP), led by Jeffrey Duvall and Rachael Kessler, is conducted over four months during the second half of the adolescents’ senior year in high school. Both boys and girls participate in the program. Jeffrey and Rachael build a safe container during the fourteen weeks preceding a wilderness retreat experience and parent-child sharing evening. This highly acclaimed program, prepares seniors for “leaving the nest” and introduces them to truth-telling, intimate, mixed-gender community. The ultimate goal of SRPP is not an initiation experience, but rather a forum for late-teens to speak the truth about their lives in a group of peers. Many participants rank it as the top experience of their high school years, a watershed event that prepares them for leaving home.

Duvall and Kessler’s program has 15-20 participants, two leaders and 2-3 adult staff people. The adults’ job is to “hold the container.” There is little one-on-one interchange between the participants and leaders/adults between the weekly meetings. At the end of the 16-week program, the participants (all high school seniors) are encouraged to continue their “community” without the leaders.

For the BAM program we wanted to emphasize the one-on-one relationship between elders and boys between sessions. We assumed (correctly) that building a safe container among sixteen-year-old sophomores would take longer than with 18-year-old seniors.

Since a student’s life is tuned to the academic calendar (September-June), we chose to have the school year be the primary timeframe for the program. As such, we wanted a memorable launching event in late August or early September, with a concluding initiation experience in late April or early May. In addition we needed a minimum of eight weeks to build the elder container, plus time to plan and execute a one-day introductory event for the nominated boys.
Given the above objectives and constraints, we now recommend the following timetable, tuned slightly from what we actually used in the BAM program:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time Period</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>November/December 1997</td>
<td>Co-leaders plan the program and develop both announcement materials and explanatory literature.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January/February 1998</td>
<td>Co-leaders recruit, screen and select elders for the program.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March/April/May 1998</td>
<td>Building the elder community; recruiting, screening and selection of boys for the program.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May or June 1998</td>
<td>One day “stimulate interest” retreat with the elders and boys.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June/July/August 1998</td>
<td>Summer break; no formal meetings. One-on-one experiences with the elders and boys. On-going recruitment of additional boys if the program is not full. Boys work on summer assignments. Additional elders may be added, but time must be allotted to integrate them within the elder community.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>August/September 1998</td>
<td>Multi-day retreat experience with the boys and elders.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September 1998 – April 1999</td>
<td>Weekly or bi-weekly meetings of the entire community. Occasional offsites or day-long special adventures. Continuing one-on-one experiences with the boys and elders.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mid-December 1998 – Mid-January 1999</td>
<td>Holiday break</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April/May 1999</td>
<td>Wilderness initiation experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May/June 1999</td>
<td>Concluding graduation ceremony.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

During the first four months of the program (September – December 1998) our goals were to build a safe container and have varied experiences, primarily around self-reflection and relationships (friends, father, mother, sexuality, self-esteem, and truth telling). In a sense the first six months were about going “downward and inward.”
The final five months of the program (January – May 1999) were oriented “upward and outward”, with assignments and experiences built around:

- Achievements (something they didn’t think they could do)
- Relationships (new levels or “breakthroughs” with key family members or others)
- Control (breaking a bad habit or creating a new habit that could serve them for a lifetime).

Progress and “success” in each of these areas would bolster the boys’ self-esteem, giving them greater confidence to both face adversity and celebrate diversity. The intent was to have all programs in the final five months impact both meaning and passion in a boy’s life.

**Criteria for Leadership**

Ideally, the initiation leadership team consists of two or three mature, initiated men who have both extensive leadership training and experience in facilitating small, intimate groups. At least one of the co-leaders needs experience in building a confidential, truth-telling rapport with adolescent boys, through coaching, Boy Scouts or a similar program. Before building the elder community the leadership team must invest time with one another, discovering and rediscovering each other’s strengths, weaknesses, gifts and shadows.

An effective leadership team evolves more from alchemy than from formula. Nevertheless, a strong leader has most of the following criteria:

- Has been through his own initiation experience
- Is held accountable by one or more men, other than the BAM leaders and elders
- Has experience in leading small groups of men
- Maintains composure under pressure; able to facilitate conflict resolution; able to express his emotions and “hold” others as they express emotion.
- Adaptability; prepared to scuttle the agenda and work “in the moment”
- Has experienced, personally, any process or exercise that will be used with the elders or boys
- Continues to do his own introspection work and is open to exploring his shadows
- Wide-ranging relational skills; empathic, direct, confrontational, compassionate
- Committed to ongoing learning and self-development
- At ease with people; patient and caring; not intimidated; not intimidating
- At ease either taking control or giving up control; doesn’t have to be in charge, but comfortable taking the reins when called for
- Aware of details without being consumed by them
- Deep sense of the spiritual; a sense of a Power beyond himself that guides his work
- Knows that this work stems from a desire to serve versus a need for recognition
- Strong “sovereign” energy; the presence to lead; the ability to be decisive
- A love for youth, respecting their fears and vulnerability, while acknowledging and blessing their potential

Perhaps the most important criterion is the leader’s ongoing commitment to his own inner work within a community of other men. Such environments are rare in Western culture. The New Warrior Training offered by the Mankind Project offers both initiatory experiences, ongoing participation in confidential integration groups, and opportunities for leadership training.
To find out more about the Mankind Project call 800.870.4611. The one-week Leadership Training Program led by the Men’s Council Project (MCP) is another excellent starting point for this work. Call Tom Daly at 303.530.3337.

Criteria for Selection of Elders

Ideally, elders have most or all of the leadership criteria listed above. We strongly recommend that the elders go through an initiation experience, like the New Warrior Training, before participating in a rite-of-passage program for adolescents. Several elders had been through either the New Warrior Training or a comparable experience which saved time in building the elder community.

Maturity and a sense of wisdom are more important than an initiation experience. Our youngest elder was 38-years-old. All had achieved personal success in their chosen professions and, even more importantly, all had faced, endured, and survived major crises in their lives: vocational, relational, physical, emotional, or spiritual.

Beyond the base criteria, we encourage diversity among the elders: Ethnic, marital, vocational, spiritual, interests, and thinking style preferences.

Our group of eight elders included four fathers (three of whom had boys going through the program), one married man with no children, two divorced men with no children, and a single man. All men had some spiritual practice including solo meditation, regular church attendance, and daily prayer. We had reasonable vocational diversity with technology professionals, a teacher, a media professional, an attorney, and two consultants. We lacked ethnic diversity (all men were white, middle-class males).

All elders were heterosexuals. We felt this was important for two reasons:

1) Liability. We would already be broaching many sensitive areas with the boys. Many mothers were already wary. Since sexual preference is a potentially explosive area, we chose not to have it brought out overtly by having a homosexual man on the team.

2) While open to the possibility that one of the young men might be gay, we would focus our program around healthy heterosexual models.

After leading at least two BAM programs, we might relax this criterion and consider adding a gay man to the BAM team – with full disclosure to the boys’ parents before the start of the program.

The elders must be aware of and accept the time commitment required by the program. They must also have a passion for this work – guiding scared, immature boys as they shed their adolescence and become young men. This passion provides the energy to stay committed and present-in-the-moment when the interactions become strained or tedious, and when other priorities compete for the elders’ time and energy.

In summary, we believe that elders need to have a proven character and value system that supports this work. They must be committed to examining their own lives, openly and honestly, in a community of other men. Ideally, they will have participated in some rite-of-passage or initiation work and will continue to do their own awareness training (i.e., are willing to examine their lives).
Those who have not been through a more formal rite-of-passage will be committed to deepening their own awareness, including initiation training.

Selection of Boys

The BAM training was targeted to boys in high school. We had six sophomores and a junior. Regardless of the ages or grade-levels chosen, we recommend that the boys be no more than one grade-level apart. The seven participants attended four different high schools. Two boys were best friends, and four of the boys knew each other through sports. One boy’s father was Afro-American and his mother Caucasian. All the other boys were Caucasian.

In the future, we would strive for more ethnic and racial diversity. Three boys came from a divorced home where the father was absent. A fourth boy’s father had died when he was five. His mother had remarried and then divorced, and he still lives alone with his mother.

Each mother and father, if living nearby, supported their son’s participation in the program. We did not seek the support or approval of absent fathers. In the future we would be more proactive in at least making contact with absent fathers prior to the program.

An important criterion was the boy’s willingness to rearrange the rest of his life (e.g., sports, school functions, jobs, and church activities) to participate in the training. Each boy verbally committed to the entire training at the end of the September retreat. Three boys’ fathers participated as elders in the program. However, at the initiation event, the father was not the sponsor for his own son. While the program could have been run with only father-son pairs, we believe the mix of father-son pairs, boys without fathers in the program, and elders without sons in the program allowed each participant to see the joys and challenges of different home situations.

Building the Elder Container

Eight men, including the two leaders, participated in a one-day mini-retreat for candidate elders. Two of these men later dropped out, and another man was added prior to the September retreat with the boys. Our goals for this initial retreat with candidate elders were:

- Model the creation of a safe container where the participants could “share their stories”
- Expose the participants to ritual space – a place where they could detach from their everyday world and explore safely their inner selves
- Have the participants leave with a sense of “eldership”
- Have the participants realize that they must go through the same experiences as the boys – they could not ask the boys to do anything they had not done themselves
- Have the participants understand and voice their commitment to the one-year program
- Establish Jim and Tom as the co-leaders of the program and the final decision makers during times of tension or ambiguity
- Have the elders leave feeling empowered and supported to step out and lead sections of the program that matched their gifts.
The co-leaders developed an agenda that met these goals:

- **Build the “Container”**
  - Opening poem/story
  - Body exercise (Tai Chi or equivalent)
  - Several rounds asking increasingly more probing questions:
    - Name, age, marital status
    - Your gifts/goals
    - The blocks to using your gifts
    - Your hopes/expectations for this year with the boys
    - Your fears about the coming year
  - Co-leaders talk about their vocational work and their expectations for the year

- A life sharing exercise from birth to high school for each elder. The Life Walk (see the Life Walk Appendix for a complete description) involves the individual standing in the middle of a circle and speaking about an event in the present tense, at that age … essentially reliving that event. For example:
  - “I am nine years old and mom and dad just came into the living room to tell me they are getting a divorce. I feel scared and wonder if it’s my fault. They are both crying, and I wonder if I should be crying too.”

- Exercise and follow-on discussion around health and personal well-being

- Exercise on shame/embarrassment, followed by a discussion on our role as elders to create a shame-free container for the boys

- Exercise on issues-clearing and “getting clean” with each other; how to deal with interpersonal conflict within a container (see the Clean Talk Appendix)

- Trust exercises using blindfolds

- Co-leaders present the schedule for the Spring meetings, primarily for building and strengthening the elder container

- Closing exercise/visualization on the role of mentors in our lives

- Closing check-out soliciting commitment of the elders to the program.

The following eight weeks the elders met one evening per week for two hours to continue sharing their stories, to face inner- and inter-personal conflicts, and to develop the launching experience for the boys. Specific topics at these weekly, elder-only meetings included:

- The relationship of the elders with their fathers
- Relationships with their mothers and women; open discussions around sex
- Spirituality and blessing
- Introduction of the King, Warrior, Magician, Lover archetypes and their use as a model for leadership
- Exercises for drawing out the current issues in each man’s life (see Drawing Exercise Appendix)
- Exercises for drawing out an elder’s sense of purpose/destiny in his life.

We expected the elders to share their lives at or beyond the level we would expect the boys to share in the fall. By expressing the shaming, hurtful, fearful, sad, angry and joyous times in their lives openly with one another, the elders would be able to “hold” comparable sharing by the boys.
Selecting the Boys … and Their Mothers

Concurrent with these container-building elder meetings, the leaders arranged interviews with each of the candidate boys and their mothers. Either a high school counselor or one of the elders had recommended each boy. While each boy had his own set of issues and wounds, the co-leaders felt that no boy was suffering from psychological wounds that might hinder the container.

The primary goal of these interviews was to befriend the boy so he would share some of the issues in his life. We were then able to present our plans for the program, tailored to address his issues.

Many of the mothers were understandably skeptical of the program, especially when we explained the confidentiality imperative and that initiation would involve separation from the mother. We were fortunate in that all mothers, especially the single mothers, were yearning for greater adult male contact for their sons. Many expressed deep gratitude for our work before the program had even begun.

We did not have the situation of a boy from a two-parent home where the father did not participate as an elder. Such a situation has the potential to shame the father, as the boy has intimate experiences with elders without similar experiences with his own father. Only after getting both his and his father’s commitments to the program would we allow such a boy to participate. In addition, we (the leaders) would want to meet bi-monthly with the father and son to discuss the boy’s experience within the program and to facilitate any issues clearing between the two of them.

Prior to the program we would be clear with the father and the boy that anything shared by the boy within the program would be confidential, and that the father could not get information from the elders about his son.

Fees and Budget

Each of the elders and co-leaders was asked to contribute $750 U.S. to the program in either cash or an in-kind contribution. We asked for one-third in May 1998, one-third in September 1998, and the final third in January 1999. The boys were asked to contribute $500 U.S. to the program, $200 being earned by the boy via some form of employment outside his home (i.e., by getting a job). These contributions were sufficient to cover the program expenses, but with no surplus.

The main expenses (90%) were the retreats, the drum-making and the video. Sunrise Ranch gave us very favorable rates for use of their facilities and meals during our retreats, as did Keith Fairmont and Jeffrey Duvall for leading the drum-making workshop. Tom Hunter and several other residents at Sunrise Ranch graciously contributed their time during both the sweat lodge ceremony and the initiation adventure.

One of the co-leaders handled all financial management. We had some problems “collecting” from the boys. In the future, we would require fixed payments from the boys, one-half prior to the September retreat and one-half in January.
The First Event with the Elders and Boys

First Event – Introduction

Ten weeks after the initial elder retreat we scheduled our first event with the nominated boys. This eight-hour mini-retreat was held at Sunrise Ranch, a nearby retreat center. The goals were:

- Take the boys out of their “comfort zone” and stretch them
- A sense of unity; we are all in this together
- Have the boys experience what it is like to be seen and heard for who they are as they tell their stories
- Experience joy, blessing and celebration
- Experience safety during the exploration of sensitive topics
- Have each boy “connect” with at least one elder; not his father
- Present the elders as a safe, caring group of men, who do not have all of the answers.

Our strategy for achieving these goals was:

- A sense of separation from the rest of the world; take on a new identity
- Experiences where each boy stands alone and speaks about his fears and vulnerabilities
- Exercises where each person (both boys and elders) must rely totally upon another person (trust)
- Group/team adventures
- Spontaneous, creative, joyful, silly games or exercises
- Introduce and experience rituals
- Each elder assumes a leadership role for one or more exercises.

The eight-hour time frame allowed each boy to get a taste of the BAM training, without being either bored or overwhelmed. Recognizing that this would be the boy’s first impression of both the program and the elders, the flow of this mini-retreat was carefully planned. The entire agenda is given below and may be modified based on the time allotted and the openness and appropriateness of the venue.

First Event – Agenda:

Opening Activities:

Each elder drove to the venue with one or two boys whom he either did not know or knew least. Upon arrival each boy and elder was randomly assigned a new identity (an animal name) which they wore on their chest. They were referred to by this name for the rest of the day. These names helped model separation from the “normal” world, an underlying theme of the program. To begin building community among the boys, they were sent out as a group on an assignment (wood-gathering). Pictures were taken to mark the beginning of this year-long experience. While the boys gathered wood, the elders discussed their communication with the boys during the ride to the venue, and confirmed elder responsibilities for the rest of the day.

The boys and elders reconvened in the ritual space for a brief welcoming by the co-leaders before being sent out on the first activity.
First Activity: Trust Adventure with an Elder

❖ Each boy is blindfolded and then paired or tripled with an elder who leads the boy(s) on a trust walk.
❖ Four “stations” are established to introduce the boys to physical, mental, emotional and spiritual challenges. The co-leaders plan and oversee the adventure as the elders are paired or tripled with the boys.
  ➢ Station One – Mental
    ▪ Each boy pair/triple answers a riddle and goes to the next station.
  ➢ Station Two – Spiritual
    ▪ Each boy and elder find a spiritual symbol from nature which they will describe later to the entire group.
  ➢ Station Three – Emotional
    ▪ Each boy and elder, individually, make some emotional expression using their body that conveys one of the primary emotions: Anger, Sadness, Fear, Happiness.
  ➢ Station Four – Physical
    ▪ A strenuous, non-competitive activity, where both the boy and elder work up a sweat (e.g., brisk-paced hike up a hill with a heavy pack).
❖ Boys and elders convene at a common location, ideally around a campfire, to debrief this adventure.

Second Activity: Vulnerability

❖ At the campfire area or in a meeting room, each boy randomly selects the name of another elder. The boy and elder pairs meet, and share the answers to 4-5 intimate questions. Later the boy will introduce the elder and vice-versa in front of the entire community around the campfire.
The questions we chose were:
  ➢ What do you love about yourself?
  ➢ What do very few people know about you?
  ➢ What are you really good at?
  ➢ What are you not so good at?
❖ Back at the campfire or meeting room the introductions are made and the other members of the community welcome each boy or elder.
❖ A second round of sharing follows the introductions. Specifically, each person answers questions about himself:
  ➢ What’s important to you?
  ➢ What sucks in your life?
  ➢ What’s missing in your life that’s important to you?
  ➢ What makes you angry?
  ➢ What makes you happy?
❖ In a final round each person is invited to speak about the spiritual object from nature which he had selected during the first activity.

Third Activity – Goofy Games

The first two exercises can be quite stressful, both physically and emotionally, especially for boys who have rarely shared their lives with men, or have been shamed, teased or embarrassed by either peers or authority figures. The third activity involved three games where each participant, including the elders, would “compete” in a just-for-fun game. The goals were:
- Silliness without shame or having to show-off
- The ability to “compete” without having winners or losers
- Spontaneity and pure laughter.

Following the goofy games, a fun dinner (spaghetti and salad with no plates or utensils) was cooked and served by the elders to the boys. During the first few adventures of this retreat the elders had been in leading or controlling roles. By preparing and serving the dinner we wanted to model service to the boys.

Following the dinner, the boys cleaned the kitchen while the elders re-stoked the fire and prepared the closing session.

**The Closing Evening Session**

- Each person had an opportunity to speak about the impact, positives and negatives, of the day’s experiences
- Each elder spoke about why he chose to be in the program
- A spontaneous blessing. Any man or boy could call out another man or boy and give them an affirmation or blessing in front of the whole community. Elders modeled, and the boys jumped right in. The general blessing format was, “I see a man / young man who …”
- The boys were given an assignment for the summer. The assignment can vary depending on the age of the participants, but might include such things as:
  - Read a book considered to be a classic
  - Earn $200 you can contribute to the program
  - Perform a personal act of service on behalf of a family member
  - Dance with girl.

The boys were informed that they would be held accountable for these assignments at the end of the summer.

- Each person had an opportunity to express his closing thoughts and feelings about the day, and the session was closed.
Fall Retreat – Launching the Program

The eight-hour first event was held in late May. There were no planned activities with the boys over the summer. The elders spoke or wrote to each boy at least once, and one-on-one contact between the elders and boys was encouraged.

After the summer break a forty-eight hour launching retreat was held over the Labor Day weekend. We began the event on Saturday evening to accommodate the high school sports schedules of several student athletes.

Fall Retreat – Goals:

The primary goals for this retreat were:

- Reestablish the camaraderie that had begun at the spring retreat
- Strengthen three levels of community:
  - Boys among themselves
  - Boys one-on-one with an elder
  - The entire community of boys and elders
- Expose the boys to the fundamental concepts of the program:
  - Truth-telling and accountability
  - Service
  - Solitude and a spiritual practice
  - Working as a team
  - Strenuous activity
  - Sharing emotions without shame
  - Making commitments.

Fall Retreat – Flow of Events:

Day 1 (Evening Only):

We would have preferred to have the entire retreat at a single, wilderness location. However, since we could not begin until Saturday evening, we chose to drive only a short distance to a secluded mountain cabin owned by one of the elders.

- 6:00 p.m. arrival at elder’s cabin. Each boy was given a bandanna and a journal.
- Offer a snack: Nuts, raisins, fruit, juice … sustenance without volume. We wanted the boys physically alert for the evening’s activities, but we would not offer them dinner that evening.
- The initial container was a circle of stumps and chairs near a stream. A series of check-in rounds, led by different elders:
  - A time in your life when you were out of control
  - A time in your life when you were scared and you knew it
  - A time when you were deeply embarrassed
  - A time when you were alone
  - A time of great joy
Throughout the program we wanted to emphasize the importance of “seeing” other men. As such, each elder was instructed to listen to a specific boy and at the end of the rounds to mirror back what the boy had said.

Following the check-ins, each boy was invited to do a mini Life Walk, reliving 2-3 pivotal or transformative events in his life. Again, the elders mirrored back the events of the Life Walk.

After a break and another snack, the boys divided into teams to play Capture the Flag. Some elders acted as “marshals” while others were bandits, giving the boys bad advice. During the game two elders were building a fire by the stream.

Following the game, the boys and elders debriefed around the fire about the evening. The boys were encouraged to talk about what it was like to win or lose and to be given bad advice by people in authority (the elders).

After a ritual story, the boys were sent to bed in sleeping bags on the floor of the cabin.

Day 2 (Full Day):

7:00 a.m. wakeup call.

Outdoors quiet time near a stream. After a period of silent meditation, an elder led the boys and elders through a Tai Chi stretching exercise. Meanwhile one of the elders was preparing a sumptuous breakfast.

Following breakfast one elder led a simple check-in round to launch the day.

The elders then modeled a “change of habit” commitment, where they needed the help of the community to keep the commitment. Examples included:

- Give up alcohol
- Give up profanity
- Begin and maintain a daily meditation practice
- Let go of animosity being carried toward a father.

Each elder then chose a boy to coach him (the elder) and hold him (the elder) accountable for his commitment.

The boys were then given time to think and journal about a commitment they would like to make. Later in the day the boys would be invited into the circle to speak about the habit-changing commitment they wished to make for the fall. They would also be asked to choose one elder to hold them accountable.

The boys then prepared their own lunch and the community drove to the second retreat location.

The second location was a National Forest Service cabin, accessible only by four-wheel drive vehicles, at an elevation of 11,000 feet. The cabin had wood heat, an outdoor firepit, bunks for all of the participants, propane heat for cooking and outdoor toilets. We had to bring our own water, food and sleeping bags.

We arrived at the trail head parking lot at 1:00 p.m. All of the boys and two elders took one of the four-wheel drive vehicles to drop off our gear and set-up. Since the circular trip (trail head – cabin – trail head) took about an hour the entire group of boys and elders were not at the cabin until about 2:30 p.m.

The boys were charged to make bed assignments and lunch for all participants.

Since we were in a new location, a new container needed to be established. Once everything in the cabin was set up, the boys were led outside and blindfolded. As each boy was brought into the meeting area, his blindfold was removed, he was smudged (a blessing / purification / welcoming ceremony using sage), and then invited to take his place in the circle.
Once in the circle the co-leaders began an accountability round about the summer assignments. All of the boys, except one, had failed to achieve one or more of the summer commitments (reading a classic, earning money, serving the family, dancing with a girl).

In an emotional session, with the elders and co-leaders holding tough boundaries, the boys learned that saying, “I’m sorry” or “I’ll do better”, or simply skating through an assignment would not be accepted in a circle of men.

The uniform support of the elders was crucial at this point. With the co-leaders asking, “So, is this how you run your life?”, “How are going to make this up to the community?” and “You let this community down. What are you going to do to get back into integrity with us?”, caused several boys to become tearful and say, “I didn’t sign up for this.”

The elders mirrored their emotion, but did not back down from the questions. As expected, most of the boys had little “Warrior” energy (i.e., they had weak boundaries and little discipline). They were used to being coddled and forgiven, and as a result took few things seriously.

Following the accountability exercise, the co-leaders talked for a few moments on the requirements within this community of telling the truth and honoring commitments. These applied to both the elders and the boys.

Two elders then supervised the boys making dinner. The boys were also charged with gathering wood for an after-dinner fire.

Dinner was then held inside the cabin with the boys offering a blessing before the meal.

After dinner and cleanup the boys were invited to speak by the fire about something they wished to let go of in their life. Examples included:

- Anger toward my father
- Fear of speaking to girls
- Frustration with their mother’s interference in their lives.

After the letting-go exercise upbeat music was played on a sound system and the elders led a spontaneous, do-your-own-thing dance outside the cabin under the stars.

The boys and elders then went to bed in silence.

**Day 3 (Dawn until Early Evening):**

- 7:00 a.m. wake-up.
- Two elders led a silent meditation exercise in the wilderness for half an hour.
- The boys were then in charge of making breakfast with one elder supervising.
- Following breakfast, another elder led the boys on a strenuous two-hour hike. During the hike the boys were to find both a community talking staff that would be used throughout the rest of the year, and a personal icon (stone or piece of wood) that could be affixed to the staff representing the uniqueness of each boy.
- During the hike, the elders held a staff meeting and cleansing session to discuss what had come up among them during the prior day. Periodic staff meetings and cleansing sessions, where the elders can bring up issues among themselves, were critical for maintaining the strength of the elder container. The boys are very aware of any friction that exists between or among the elders.
- During the hike two elders made lunch.
- Following the hike the boys were allowed to work on the staff (carvings, attaching their icons)
- After lunch both the elders and the boys were asked to speak what they wished to get out of the program. All comments were captured on a flip chart and later distributed to each participant.
- The boys were then invited to introduce their talking staff to the community.
- Each boy was asked to speak about the personal icon he had selected for the talking staff.
Each boy was asked to present to the group the commitment(s) he was going to make for the fall, and the elder he wanted to hold him accountable.

Each boy and elder was then invited to speak about his commitment to the entire program. We asked that each person make the program a priority in his life, scheduling other events in his life around the weekly meetings and bi-monthly adventures. In a gripping moment, one boy chose to drop out of the program, while his father chose to stay in the program.

Photographs were taken to commemorate the time together.

The boys were then instructed to do a leave-no-trace cleaning of the cabin and surrounding grounds … plus a little extra. Other boys prepared brown bag meals for the return trip.

A co-leader conducted a closing ritual to end the retreat.

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**BAM Elders Outside of Forest Service Cabin**

**Fall Retreat – Closing Thoughts**

The primary goals for the retreat were met. In retrospect we could have invested more time for the boys and elders to “tell their stories” using the Life Walk. The elders held the container by presence versus sharing. As a result many of the boys viewed the elders as yet another authority figure in their lives telling them what to do. While this is a component of container building, we may have served the boys better by having the elders share more of their stories.

A wilderness setting with no other people besides the boys and elders worked well. A single location would have been preferred, perhaps staying at the elder’s cabin. The boys needed very clear instructions on the types of habit-changing commitments that they would make for the fall. Several boys made cavalier, unmeasurable commitments (e.g., do better in school). They needed examples.
Weekly Meetings

After the fall retreat, the boys and elders met for three hours on Sunday evenings. Sunday was chosen to avoid conflict with the boys’ high school activities and work schedules. The first four months we met in a meeting room at the local YMCA. After that we met in a general purpose room at a local school. Both locations were private, allowing us to be noisy without risk of either disturbing others or being disturbed.

General Flow of the Weekly Meetings

The general flow of these weekly meetings was:

- 2 ½ to 3 hours in length
- Elders arrived 30-60 minutes ahead of the boys to:
  - Debrief the prior week
  - Plan this evening’s and future evening’s events
  - Work on their own issues
  - Create a ritual space:
    - Circle of chairs with the boys and elders alternating positions
    - Carpet in the middle of the floor representing a “person’s life”
    - Talking stick
    - Set up music
- After social time the elders and boys were invited to “check-in” for the evening. This would typically be 1-2 minutes per person.
- The floor was then opened for container cleansing – any issue between two individuals that needed to get resolved before the meeting. Sometimes, this cleansing took half of the meeting, since the boys were learning how to speak their truths to one another and to the elders.
- Sometimes we just opened the floor, giving the boys an opportunity to talk about the present issues in their lives. The boys appreciated this unstructured “open forum” time.
- Each boy then met privately with his accountability elder to discuss his progress or shortfalls in achieving the commitment(s) he made at the fall retreat.
- Similarly, each elder then met privately with the boy holding the elder accountable for his commitments. This accountability symmetry helped the boy view the elder as a friend and guide, and not just another authority figure.
- Typically, each weekly meeting had a theme. Following the accountability session with the elders, one elder would lead an exercise around the theme for the evening.
- After the exercise, a check-out round closed the evening.

Themes/Topics:

The leaders and elders conceived and led exercises in the following topic areas:

Fathers

Each participant, boys and elders, was asked to bring an icon (picture, memorabilia, gift…) that reminded them of their relationship with their father. Each person was then invited to present and describe his icon to the group. After this presentation an elder led a guided visualization where each person was invited, in his heart, to speak what he longed to say to his father, and receive back
what he longed to hear from his father. The boys were then invited, if they chose, to share their personal visualization experience with the group.

**Mothers**

As with the Father exercise, each participant was asked to bring an icon that reminded them of their relationship with their mother. Instead of a visualization, each boy was asked to speak about a current joy and a current frustration he had with his mother. He was then invited to speak about how he would like to change his relationship with his mother.

**Relationships with Girls**

The boys were invited to write out questions they would like to ask teenage girls. These included:

- What do girls look for in a guy? What do they find attractive? What makes you want to go out with a guy?
- Would you go out with a guy you didn’t know at all? Or, what do you need to know about him before you would go out on a date?
- Which is more important, looks or personality?
- What signs do you give a guy so that he knows you want to “get physical”?
- How does a guy know if a girl likes him?
- How does a guy know if a girl wants a strong friendship or a more romantic / deeper relationship? How do you move from one to the other? How do you know when to move from one to the other?
- Why do girls use one guy to get to another guy?
- What’s the first step you’d like a guy to take before asking you out?
- Do girls care if a guy doesn’t “go for it” (physically) on the first date? Or, what are your expectations (physically) for the first date, and following dates?
- What are “turn-offs” – things about a guy or things he does that would cause you to write him off?

These questions were then given, via email, to teenage girls, who knew none of the boys, and the written answers were given to the boys the following week. An elder then led a general discussion on dating and girl-boy relationships. Dialogue among the boys and elders was the important part of this exercise. The girls’ answers were simply a catalyst for community discussion.

**Sexuality**

The week before this topic the boys were invited to list, anonymously, on 3”x5” cards questions they would like to ask about sexuality and their relationships to girls/women. The cards were then collected and read in front of the group without referencing individual names. The questions and topics included:

- What turns a girl on?
- Masturbation … men and women. Is it wrong to masturbate?
- When is the sex act “finished”?
- Elders regrets about sex.
- Elders’ most erotic sex act.
- Menstruation cycles in women; having sex during menstruation cycles.
When is it “okay” to be sexually active?
What is “making out” vs. “having sex” vs. “making love”? 
How should I feel before, during and after the sex act?
Use of pornography.
Sexuality and spirituality.

Three adult women, none of whom knew any of the boys, were then given these topics and questions to review. The following week the women were invited to participate in a panel addressing the issues with the boys and elders.

At the panel session the elders chose which questions would be addressed; the boys remained silent. While this was appropriate for the first question to break the ice, in retrospect we could have allowed the boys to ask subsequent questions, since enough safety was established after the first question.

Thinking Styles – Honoring and Appreciating Mental Diversity

The boys and elders participated in the “Diversity” game available from Applied Creativity Inc., P.O. Box 3641, Seminole, FL 34642, telephone: 813.391.5080. The game, played with a sense of fun, discovery and adventure, provides valuable information based on brain dominance and corresponding thinking style preferences of individuals and groups. It helps participants understand left-brain and right-brain thinking, as well as cerebral and limbic modes of thinking. The exercise helps the group see which participants are:

- Quadrant A (blue): Logical, analytical, mathematical, technical, problem-solvers
- Quadrant B (green): Organizational, administrative, conservative, controlled, planful
- Quadrant C (red): Interpersonal, emotional, musical, spiritual, talkers
- Quadrant D (yellow): Artistic, holistic, imaginative, synthesizers, conceptualizers.

The output complements other psychometric testing, such as Myers-Briggs and the shadow assessment described below. The process is engaging and provocative, and can be used with any group of eight or more people.

Facing our Shadows

This evening was primarily a teaching piece around the four Jungian archetypes: King, Warrior, Magician, Lover. The boys were presented with the characteristics of a mature archetype and the shadows (or ways we sabotage ourselves) of each archetype. The boys were then invited to speak about the areas where they felt strong and weak.

An assessment is available on the Internet for determining the mature characteristics and shadows of an individual associated with each archetype. The assessment is scored immediately, includes a set of summary notes and is free. It is available on the website:

www.oncourse360.com

Choose the “Holistic Living 360” survey from the dropdown menu
Dealing with the Difficult Issues or Dilemmas in our Lives

For this exercise, each boy was invited to write out a tough problem he was facing in his life that had two sides. Examples included:

- Do I stay in my current high school or switch?
- Do I ask girl A or girl B to the homecoming dance?
- Should I have sex with my girlfriend?

Each boy was asked to write out the arguments for each side. Then, he was invited to select one person (boy or elder) to play side A and another person to play side B. A psycho-drama was then created where the boy stood in the middle and the “voices” of A and B were positioned around him. He then listened to both voices at once and was asked to determine which one was more compelling to him.

This exercise requires a very safe container and experienced facilitation. Certain issues can lead to deep emotion. The leaders must be prepared to guide the participant without either telling him what to do or shaming him. That said, this is a very powerful exercise, allowing the boys to face, head-on, the no-clear-answer issues in their lives.

Resolution to these issues almost always involves going through a fear (e.g., be rejected, look stupid, lose money, be in a bad relationship). The exercise helps the boy speak and face the fear in front of a group of other men. In so doing, he is often released from the gridlock of the fear and can make a good decision.

Secrets, Shame, Confession, Getting Clean

The theme of this exercise is speaking to another person and then “getting clean” about a sense of “dirtiness” or shame from a prior life event or relationship. The previous week the boys were asked to consider something they were carrying that made them feel shameful or dirty; perhaps something they felt embarrassed about based on a prior action or relationship. At the meeting, elders brought buckets of mud and placed them in the center of the circle. Each boy was then invited to pair-off with an elder of his choice. Both stripped to the waist, then one-at-a-time, the elder or boy would speak to the other person some shame or secret he had been carrying and the location in or on his body where he was carrying the shame. He would then invite the other person to place mud on that place on his body.

After one person had spoken about either single or multiple incidents of secrets or shame, the roles were reversed. At the end each person was asked, “Is there anything more you wish to speak?” Often this would bring up even deeper shame or secrets to be spoken and then made visual with the mud.

After the placement of the mud to represent the shame, the boys and elders showered together to represent “getting clean” or release from their secrets or shame. The showering as a group also broke the ice around possible shame about their bodies.
Note: This is also a powerful exercise and requires a very safe container. The boys must not be coerced into “speaking their shame”, for example, “I’ve told you my shame, now you have to tell me yours.” Mirroring is highly recommended so that each person knows he has been heard after he speaks his shame.

**Hiding and Defense Mechanisms**

This exercise involves creating physical masks to represent the ways we hide our feelings and our truth. The easiest way to do this exercise is to go to a novelty store and purchase white plastic masks with eye, nose and mouth holes. Magic marker pens can then be used to draw on these masks.

The preferred approach is to go to either a theatrical supply store or an orthopedist and get the gauze used to make actual facial features or casts for broken bones.

The exercise is highly tactile. Each boy pairs off with an elder. Assume the boy’s mask will be made first. The elder coats the boy’s face with Vaseline. Any facial hair is covered with toilet paper or tissues. The gauze is then dipped in water and placed on the boy’s face. Scissors are necessary to cut the gauze into customized shapes to fit around the eyes, nose and mouth.

After about 20 minutes and the placement of 20-30 gauze strips, a mask has been created on the boy’s face. The boy must sit motionless as the mask is created and allowed to dry for an additional ten minutes. The mask is then removed and the elder and boy switch roles.

**Mask-Making Exercise**
After the masks are created, each person holds the mask and speaks to the group about his defense mechanisms – how he “checks out” or hides when under pressure. The leaders then ask the boy (or elder) how he would like the group to help him when we see him “checking out”. Later, these masks can be used in the mother-honoring celebration (see below).

**Honoring the Mothers**

This day-long event was held about two months into the program, when the mothers were beginning to wonder, “What’s going on with my son?” The goal was for the elders to meet with the mothers to update them on the program, for the mothers to ask their questions, for the boys to honor the mothers, and for the mothers to honor their sons.

The boy’s responsibility was to plan, buy supplies / food, and cook a sumptuous feast for the entire community, including their mothers. They prepared the menu, developed a budget, did the shopping, cooked the meal, set the table, and cleaned up. Elders were available for supervision, but it was the boys’ project. A venue was chosen that allowed all participants to dine together. This was one of the elder’s homes, but it could have been any location that had a suitable kitchen and a private eating area.

The mothers were told there would be a celebration dinner given in their honor and they would have an opportunity to meet with all of the elders (many of whom they had not met). The mother’s involvement was from 6:00 – 9:00 p.m.

Under elder supervision, the boys did the shopping and arrived at the venue in time to prepare and cook the meal. The mothers arrived at 6:00 p.m. to meet privately with the elders in a question-and-answer session about the program. Elders talked about the general flow of the program without breaking confidentiality from the weekly sessions with the boys.

After the question-and-answer session, the mothers were invited to another room where the masks of their sons were on a table. Each mother was given a set of paints and a brush, and asked to paint her son’s mask to represent the hopes and fears she had for her son as he approached manhood. This also gave the mothers a chance to speak with and get to know one another during this creative exercise.
Becoming a Man – Rite of Passage Program for Adolescent Boys
By: Jim Warner and Tom Pitner – January 2000

After the masks were painted, the mothers were invited to the banquet table. One of the boys offered the blessing and the feast began.

After dinner, but before clean up, the entire community, including the mothers, formed a circle. The mothers were invited, one at a time, to come to the center of the circle with their son and share with him the hopes and fears they had painted on the mask. The boy was then asked to mirror back to the mother her remarks, so she would know that she had been heard. Each boy was then asked to speak back to his mother what he sees in her – the gifts he had received from her. The mother was then asked to mirror back to the boy what she had heard.

After the sharing, each person was invited to speak a short statement to close the evening. The mothers went home and the boys and elders cleaned up after the celebration.
Projection - You Spot It, You Got It

This exercise is a sequel to the Shadows exercise described above. The purpose of the exercise is twofold:

- To experience other people’s projections, both good and bad, and not let them impact us
- To own our projections and judgments.

For greater emotional safety, elders work with elders, and boys work with boys. The exercise consists of two rounds. In the first round, each boy addresses each other boy, eye-to-eye, and says, “A talent or gift you have that I like is…” Elders keep notes on what is said. The second round format is similar, except the boy says, “Something I don’t like about you is …” The comments are not lengthy and the receiving boys are encouraged not to become defensive about what is said. After the boys complete their rounds, the elders do the same exercise.

When everyone has had a chance to speak both the good and bad things they see in others, each boy is then invited to the center of the circle where an elder holds a mirror in front of him. Another elder then reads back, both the bad and good things, the young man said to his peers. The idea is that: If you see something in another person, it is likely true about you. For the mirroring exercise, we recommend starting with the negative comments and finishing with the positive ones, so the boys can leave with a more upbeat feeling about themselves.

Experienced facilitation is important for this exercise in that some boys may be unprepared emotionally to hear “bad things” about themselves from another boy.

Special Events

Besides the weekly meetings, several day-long special events were held during the course of the program. The primary goal of these events was to deepen the community among the boys and elders.

Work Project

In this 6-hour project the boys and elders worked side-by-side in a manual labor project that paid $10.00 per hour. Half of the money earned went to defray the costs of the program. The other half was given to a charity chosen by the boys. Following the work day, the boys and elders “dined “ together in a fast food restaurant.

Winter Games Adventure

One of the elders had a mountain townhome. The boys and elders drove to the home on a Saturday afternoon. The elders made dinner for the boys followed by an open council session among all participants – no agenda, just say whatever is on your mind about the program. This turned into a “bitch” session by the boys, which the elders simply mirrored back to them: No judgments, no defenses, no excuses – and no commitments to change anything about the program. The evening was simply a chance for the boys to vent any frustrations they were carrying.
This worked well and further helped to cleanse the elder/boy container so that deeper sessions could
be held through the rest of the year. The following day the elders arranged “winter games”
involving snowball fights and sledding. It was an opportunity for the boys to have fun and
adventure without “anything heavy”.

**Super Bowl Party**

For this half-day event the boys came up with a budget, menu, and betting pool for the Super Bowl.
The boys and elders shared preparation and clean up. The boys were responsible for organizing an
evening of entertainment centered around the Super Bowl. Elders were simply participants, waiting
to see what the boys came up with. Essentially this is a role reversal meeting, where it is the boys’
responsibility to establish a container and set the agenda.

**Drum Making Workshop and Sweat**

This full day (9:00 a.m. to 9:00 p.m.) activity involved the creation, from scratch, of cowhide
drums. Two experienced, initiated men, who had conducted many drum-making workshops, led the
boys through a six-hour ritual process involving the creation of their own personal drum. The
drums were 18” in diameter and 2” in height. The process involved:

- Sanding the rims
- Painting the inside of the rims to represent our past
- Painting the outside of the rims to represent our aspirations for the future
- Stretching and lacing the leather skins over the rims.

Each elder and boy made his own drum, and was instructed on how to make his own beater for the
derum.

Each boy / elder took his drum home to dry. The drums were then brought to and played at
subsequent meetings and the initiation weekend.
Drum-Making Workshop

While the drums were being made, a group of men (not elders) prepared a sweat lodge. The sweat leader (not an elder) invited the boys and men into the lodge and opened the ceremony. Nakedness was optional. The sweat consisted of three rounds, each led by a different elder. They were:

1) Letting go of baggage (past)
2) Acknowledgement, forgiveness and / or blessing of a person or persons in your life (present)
3) Hopes and prayers (future).

Due to the ritualistic nature and sensitivity of topics of the sweat lodge, elders must be fully briefed and in agreement with the experience before the sweat is conducted.

Following the sweat lodge a simple meal was served. The boys were responsible for clean up and the evening concluded.
In this day-long exercise, the boys experienced the service and love of other men outside of the elder community:

- The two men who led the drum making workshop
- The men who built the fire and led the sweat ceremony
- The men who prepared and cooked their dinner for them.

**Service and Giving Project**

Community service must be part of any rite-of-passage program. We asked the boys to find a local charity or service organization that could use the boys’ and elders’ manual labor for a day. The boys chose a food bank organization, where the boy/elder community worked side-by-side in organizing a food warehouse.

At the end of the day the boys then presented a check to the organization for half of the money earned during the work session (see above).

This project gave the boys the experience of working, without pay, for a charitable cause. The boys experienced both service and giving without any fanfare or recognition.
Initiation Adventure

Introduction

This adventure was the culmination experience for the program. Its three components were:

- Separation (primarily from their mothers and from “the rest of their world”)
- Ordeal and initiation (achieving something they did not think they could achieve)
- Re-integration, blessing and life purpose.

Planning began three months before the actual retreat. Even with this advanced planning, one boy and one elder were unable to attend. The retreat began on Wednesday afternoon and concluded late Saturday evening.

The initiation adventure was held at a nearby retreat center (Sunrise Ranch). Our criteria in choosing this center were:

- Access to nature
- Privacy
- A supporting staff or local community experienced in rite-of-passage and wilderness adventures
- Indoors meeting areas if the weather was uncooperative.

Preparation

Our original plan called for a desert camping experience, where we would have had to bring all of our own provisions and shelter. We determined that both the travel time (eight hours) and logistics would be too difficult to coordinate, especially during the boys’ school year, so we opted for the local retreat center. This proved to be a wise decision in that all meals were arranged and we had optional indoor shelter. This allowed the elders to focus on working with the boys rather than managing support logistics.

Mothers were informed one month prior to the retreat that their sons would be out of school for two days (see Appendix with Letter to Mothers). Each elder made a call to one mother describing, in general terms, the initiation experience, and soliciting her support in the separation from her son. This “separation” can be alarming to some mothers and must be explained. While not absolute (the boy will return home in a few days), this separation is symbolic of the boy beginning to take responsibility for his life – loved by his mother, but no longer insulated or protected by her. He must begin to refine his identity, independent of the motherly influence. The script of this conversation between the elder and mother is given as an Appendix to this document.

Three weeks before the event each boy chose a non-parent elder to be his “sponsor” for the initiation adventure. This elder would be responsible for picking up the boy after school on Wednesday and taking him to the retreat center that day. He would also take home the boy on Saturday evening. During the retreat, the sponsoring elder was responsible for the boy’s safety (physical and emotional).
A key component of the initiation process would be for the boys to receive a blessing. We solicited the mothers’ help in contacting up to twenty friends, relatives, teachers or coaches of the boy who would write them “blessing letters”. An example solicitation letter for these blessing letters is included as an Appendix. The soliciting letters were emailed or posted by the sponsoring elder with a stamped, return address envelope or return email address to encourage an expeditious response by the “blesser.” Prior to the adventure this elder assembled the letters which would be given to the boy as part of a blessing ceremony during the retreat.

At the Sunday evening meeting two weeks prior to the retreat the boys were given an explicit list of what to bring. This list is included in an Appendix.

**Separation, Physical Ordeal, Solo**

On the day of the retreat the boys’ mothers were instructed to encourage and bless them as they left for school. Immediately after school, the elders picked up the boys at their respective schools and drove them, in silence, to the retreat location – which was unknown to the boys.

After the boys arrived we entered the first stage of the initiation process – taking away their identity. Working with one boy at a time, we took away all of their personal belongings, except the essentials for the adventure. They were then asked to strip to their underwear, socks and shoes, and put on a black sweat suit. Each boy was then given a number, which would be his name for the ensuing solo experience.

Stripped of their identity, the boys then moved into the ordeal phase of the initiation adventure. This involved stuffing all of their belongings, plus makeshift shelter materials, into a plastic garbage bag, which they carried one-half mile, uphill, to a wilderness area. Once at the wilderness location, the co-leaders took each boy to a secluded 10’-x-10’ location where the boy would spend the next twenty-four hours alone. Supplies included a sleeping bag, ground cloth, tarp, rope, warm clothes, and water. No food was provided.

During this solo period, the elders held vigil at a centralized campsite. Every few hours the sponsoring elder would check on his initiate, without speaking.

Our original plan called for the boys to be on solo for 36 hours – from 8:00 p.m. Wednesday until 8:00 a.m. Friday. However, the weather turned brutal. A heavy wet snow began falling Wednesday evening and continued for the next 24 hours! The boys were hungry, scared and miserable – which intensified their learning. However, we were wary of hypothermia since their sleeping gear and clothes had become wet. In the interest of safety, we led them back down the mountain on the second evening and entered the next phase of the retreat.
The Inner Journey

As the boys carried their gear off the mountain, the elders prepared an indoor meeting room which was reserved as a weather contingency. As the boys walked down they were told to go inside themselves and find a new name, which characterized their “inner state” after the mountain solo. The boys entered a vestibule area, one at a time, and were given a dry sleeping bag and sweat suit. The co-leaders asked them to speak their new name, which was then taped on their chest. The co-leaders then blindfolded the boy and spoke of how the boy’s journey would now move from the physical world to the inner self.

An elder then led each boy to “his space” for the night inside the meeting room. The boys were allowed to go to the bathroom, blindfolded, and were given some hot tea, but no other nourishment. The boys were instructed to remain, in silence, in their space for the rest of the evening. Elders slept in the conference room with the boys.

The following morning the boys were awakened, in silence, and moved to a location in a council circle. Still blindfolded, and in silence, the boys were then served a four-course “breakfast” by the elders, consisting of an orange, a single pecan nut, an apple slice, and a raisin. The intent was twofold: To teach the boys respect for food and to savor their food through meditative awareness.

After breakfast, the blindfolds were removed and the boys were given time to find their own space in the room, where they would reflect and journal on their experience to this point in the adventure. After the journaling time a co-leader led the boys on a guided visualization exercise, asking them to identify a fear they were facing in their lives. Following the visualization, the boys were led, one by one, to meet with the co-leaders and their sponsoring elder for a ritual process where they explored
that inner place of fear. The father of the boy was not present, intentionally, because the boy’s emotional work might be related to his father.

Mission and Purification

Following his experience with the co-leaders, each boy chose a new name, representing a sense of mission for his life. Then the boy went to a sauna with his sponsoring elder and his father (if present) for a ritual purification. The process concluded with the boy and his sponsor going to the kitchen area for light soup and bread – but not a full meal. The boy then either wrote in his journal or slept until each boy had gone through both the ritual process with the co-leaders and the sauna purification.

Celebration and “Reverse” Initiation of the Elders

Concurrent with the process work and purification, the staff at the retreat center was preparing a celebration feast, complete with linen tablecloths, china, goblets and decorations. The boys were welcomed to the feast as peers with the elders. After a series of toasts, the boys were encouraged to develop a reverse initiation for the elders to be conducted that evening. With less than an hour of preparation, they came up with a highly creative and often hilarious spoof of the separation and ordeal processes they had gone through over the prior two days. The boys were then given the evening off to connect among themselves in the meeting room. They were told to be at a “men’s meeting” the following morning.

The Blessing

We launched the final day as a “circle of men”. One of the co-leaders spoke about the four basic disciplines to include in our everyday life: Praying, studying, working, playing.

The other co-leader then led the boys on a guided visualization about giving and receiving blessings. A common need we discovered during the weekly meetings with the boys was their yearning for unconditional love. Each boy was then called out individually to receive a blessing from his sponsor, from one other elder and his father (if present). The boy was then invited to offer a return blessing to these three people. The others in the community witnessed these blessings.

Then each boy and his sponsor went to a quiet, private place at the facility. The sponsoring elder then gave his boy the packet of letters written by friends, relatives, coaches and others. The elder “held the space” for the boy while the boy read and received the blessings in the letters. The boys were then given journaling time to capture the experience of receiving their blessings, both verbally from the elders and on paper from relatives and friends.

The reading of these letters was a moving and powerful experience, well worth the advance efforts to solicit the letters. These letters launched the re-integration stage of the initiation.

Life Purpose, Service, Integration, Initiation

The co-leaders then led a brief visualization on a sense of purpose or service in a person’s life. The boys were asked to go back to a time in their life when they felt they were “in the zone” – serving
others out of their true talent; a time when they felt truly alive. They were then asked to tell the story of this time to an elder who then introduced them to the group and welcomed them with another new name representing this time in their life – their time in the zone. The boys were then asked to consider and then journal about how they might channel this time from their childhood into a time of service and mission as an adult.

After lunch the boys put this sense of service into practice by seeking out senior citizens who had apartments at the retreat facility, and offering them their (the boys’) time in an act of service. The seniors had been briefed by the elders that morning and were waiting for the boys with specific tasks. The boys were only given the name of the senior citizen. It was their responsibility to find the person and offer the service. To ensure that time was spent in both task fulfillment and conversation with the senior, the boys were instructed to stay with the senior until a staff elder took their picture with the senior.

Following the acts of service to the seniors, the elders and boys broke into teams to clean the facility. This included leave-no-trace cleanup of the wilderness area, laundering all wet clothes, and the folding and packing of all of the camping gear.

Following the cleanup, the co-leaders instructed the boys on what they should share with their parents, siblings and friends about the retreat. The boys were asked not to say anything about the experiences of the retreat, or the personal sharing or experiences of any of the other boys or elders. They were, however, encouraged to speak about any changes that occurred in themselves, including any new discoveries or resolutions. The boys were encouraged to practice the daily disciplines (prayer, study, work, play) and were warned how “the rest of the world” would try to drain or diminish this experience from them when they returned.

Dinner continued the service component of the retreat as the boys served not only the community of elders, but also the sixty residents at the retreat center. They acted as servers, busboys and dishwashers. Meanwhile, the elders prepared the evening’s initiation experience.

After group pictures, the boys were invited back into the main meeting room for a formal initiation ritual. The format of the ritual depends on the experience of the leaders and the strength of the elder container. Regardless of the individual processes chosen, the ritual consists of stepping-through-fear, truth-telling, surrender, honoring and blessing.

Following the initiation ritual, the boys traded their black sweat suits for their street clothes. As a final step, each boy was given, once again, his last name, marking his readiness to return to “the real world.” After a brief check-out and a closing circle the group left in silence.
Graduation

Approximately four weeks after the initiation adventure, parents, siblings, and friends were invited to the boys’ graduation. The primary purpose was to honor the boys for their work and acknowledge the guests for their support of the boys. The room was “decorated” with icons from our work including the carpet, talking stick, drums, and candles. We wanted to expose the guests to the ritual of our work without overwhelming them with ritual.

The co-leaders opened the evening by reviewing the origins of the program, the foundations of the work, and the original BAM program goals. We spoke briefly about the concepts of a safe container, weekly meetings, the bi-monthly adventures, and the concluding initiation experience, without revealing specifics of these events. We also spoke of the role of confidentiality, community, ritual, emotion, play and sacredness.

Individual elders then introduced themselves and shared thoughts about the program and adventures. Each elder introduced an initiated young man, presented him with a certificate, and encouraged the young man to speak to the assembled community about his own experiences, especially how his life had been changed. The floor was then opened for the guests to speak, and all mothers spoke in front of the group. The entire community was then invited to form a large circle and close the evening … and adventure… with a three-word check-out. Refreshments were served and the evening concluded.
Elders at Graduation Ceremony

BAM Video and Follow-up Meeting

One of the elders is a professional videographer. During the summer he assembled both pictures taken during the many events through the course of the program and home video clips, primarily from the initiation, into a professional video commemorating the program and honoring the boys.

One final meeting among the elders and boys was held in the fall of 1999. After a meal prepared by the elders, the video was shown to the boys and a discussion ensued about potential next steps. The response was mixed on continuing the program on a weekly or monthly basis or “moving on to other things.” The concluding sentiment was that those who wished to continue the program would initiate ongoing events, with attendance being optional. The boys were encouraged to take the lead in initiating ongoing events. Several elders maintained one-on-one contact with individual boys, but the entire group did not meet again.
Overall Look at the Program – What Worked

Looking back on the entire Becoming a Man experience, the following elements worked well. We encourage others who are planning a rite-of-passage program for adolescents to consider some or all of these elements:

- Experienced co-leaders who had both done their own inner personal work and facilitated such work with men and boys.
- Inviting fathers and sons to participate together.
- Complement this by inviting some boys whose fathers are absence from their lives.
- Inviting non-fathers to participate as elders.
- Regular (three weeks per month) council sessions, conducted in a container where the boys feel safe to share the difficult issues in their lives.
- The Clean Talk model (see Appendix) which gave the boys and elders a clean way for dealing with conflict, difficult issues, and anger in their lives.
- All boys in the same age range; ideally in the same grade-level. Having boys from different schools.
- The maturity of the elder group allowed us to hold the container well. Each elder had either ritual experience or initiation experience, and was either familiar with or open to any experience we arranged for the boys.
- Leadership was shared among the co-leaders and elders. The elders were able to step-up and lead different experiences during the weekly meetings, assisting the co-leaders with much of the preparation and facilitation.
- Use of a retreat center for our multi-day retreats and day-long experiences. We were fortunate to have access to Sunrise Ranch in Loveland, Colorado, for all retreats (except the 48-hour fall retreat), the drum-making workshop and the sweat lodge ritual.
- The eight-hour “mini-retreat” in the spring preceding the formal launch of the program. This gave the boys a taste of the main program before the long summer break.
- Conducting the program during the school year: September – May. In one sense the program became another “class” for the boys, similar to their school classes. Time for the program could be budgeted into their week. We anticipated, correctly, that it would be difficult to maintain continuity over the summer holidays.
- One-on-one meetings between the boys and elders. While the boys found support in the full community of boys and elders, most boys, especially those whose fathers were absent, desired regular one-on-one contact with a male adult. Ballgames, help with school, service projects, or “just hanging out” gave the boys a chance to connect with an adult male that was not an authority figure (e.g., father, coach, teacher, pastor).
Retrospective: What We Would Have Done Differently

- Better handling of money. The co-leaders funded much of the program. Money trickled in from the elders and boys during the course of the program, but often only after repeated requests from the co-leaders. We recommend getting all of the money up-front, and then presenting regular accounting statements to the elders and boys, if requested.

- Assign a treasury team (a boy and an elder) to manage finances. Most of these boys had little experience with money management. Giving a boy responsibility for a several thousand dollar budget could have been a great learning experience.

- Clarity on the role of the co-leaders in setting overall direction and as the final decision makers in times of duress or ambiguity. During any event or process the co-leaders must make it clear who (co-leader or elder(s)) is leading, and the role of the other elders in supporting the experience.

- More time to build and strengthen the elder container. The first meetings of the elders helped launch the elder container, but we should have had at least monthly, elder-only meetings during the following year both to iron out conflicts among the elders and to work on our personal issues. Most of the elder-only meetings focused on planning, and not on container-building or the sharing of personal issues.

- Being more realistic on time commitments. The co-leaders anticipated about 15 hours per month as their likely investment in the program; the actual commitment was closer to 30 hours per month. The elder commitment averaged 15-20 hours per month. While much of the co-leaders’ time was invested in developing the experiences outlined in this document, we underestimated the planning time, communication time, and one-on-one time with the boys. In the future we recommend over-estimating the time required and then offering much-appreciated breaks (e.g., a week off with no events).

- We could have gone deeper on several topics, including: Sexuality, dating, dealing with peer pressure, work, money and service. We touched on each of these areas, but the boys, particularly in this age range, desired greater exposure on these topics, especially sexuality and dating.

- Allowing more open time at the weekly meetings for “venting” by the boys about both the program and issues in their lives. We often became so caught up in “getting through the agenda for the day” that we missed the felt need of the boys to just talk about their lives.

- The boys were very sensitive to a perceived “double standard” between themselves and the elders, especially related to elders missing meetings without a reasonable excuse, and the elders’ accountability on commitments and promises. As elders we occasionally fell into the common adult-child trap of, “Do what I say, not what I do.” This unintended, yet very apparent, duplicity eroded the safety of the container more than any other actions. All elders must be aware of this danger and vigilant in taking the boys’ viewpoint on all elder actions.

- Contact among the boys between meetings. Most of the boys had little contact with one another outside of the weekly meetings. As such, the mindset of “taking care of your brother” or “sticking up for another boy who is facing peer pressure”, did not take root. An email network or mandated “how-are-you-doing” call during the week might have fostered deeper friendships among the boys, especially those who attended different schools.

- We needed to invest more time helping adolescent boys deal with authority figures. Especially in this age group, it took a long time for the boys to view the elders as mentors, guides and friends, and not “yet another authority figure telling me what to do.” Additional one-on-one time with the boys would have helped this … or working with an older group of boys (e.g., high school seniors).
Life-changing commitments and goal setting. In both September and January we asked the boys to speak about commitments they wished to make, habits they wished to adopt, habits they wished to break, and disciplines they wanted to add to their lives. Most boys gave little thought to these exercises, and developed simplistic goals that they thought would please the elders and “get them off my back.” The boys did not embrace a sense of responsibility, perseverance, working through trials, and celebrating successes. These are critical components of manhood and need to be emphasized more in future programs.

Set the calendar at least three months ahead. Several elders, including the co-leaders, had extensive travel during the program. Often, we had to finesse our scheduling around the boys’ sports and other high school commitments (e.g., school play). This was particularly aggravating in selecting the date for the initiation adventure, where we invested several hours trying, unsuccessfully, to find dates acceptable to all the boys and all the elders.

Adolescent boys are very concerned about “looking good”. We dealt with a lot of adolescent pretense and immaturity. Humor and sarcasm were common defense mechanisms when a boy began to approach a sensitive topic (e.g., using alcohol, asking out girls, sex). Reflective and caring facilitation is required for these boys to express their feelings without reverting to defense mechanisms.

Keeping the mothers informed. Other than the preparation for the initiation experience, we had little communication with the mothers. Some mothers were emotionally unprepared for the mother-honoring event, not realizing they would be asked to speak to their son in front of the entire community. Written notices explaining the main events (initial retreat, mother-honoring, work day, service project, drum-making, graduation) strengthen the trust between the mothers and elders. Asking an elder to act as “communications officer” addresses this problem. We also suggest a 1-2 page newsletter mailed or emailed to the mothers every other month addressing:

- The boys are learning …
- The boys have completed exercises that address …
- The boys are developing a sense of their …
- The calendar for the next three months is …

These could be covered in a simple newsletter without breaching the confidentiality of the BAM container.
Summary of Key Success Factors

- At least two co-leaders
- Realistic budget and fees; collect the money up-front
- Mature, seasoned, initiated elders
- Regular communication with the mothers
- Build the elder container before working with the boys
- Memorable first event with the boys
- Risk/trust exercises; early and often
- Container cleansing; early and often
- Teach reflective listening skills; early and often
- Integrate ritual into most experiences
- Diversity among the elders (vocation, education, spirituality, marriage status, ethnicity, thinking preferences)
- Safe, private, consistent meeting place
- Regular elder-only meetings; work on our own issues; spread responsibility
- Help the boys establish stretch goals for themselves; have them select an elder guide to work with them in achieving these goals.
- Careful interviewing and selection of the boys and elders to participate in the program. Only accept people who are willing to commit. We do not have enough time to continue “selling the program” once it has begun.
Appendix I – The Life Walk

A Life-Sharing Exercise for Small Groups

Introduction:

In a Life Walk, conceived originally by Mark Gerzon, a small group member is asked, literally, to walk his or her life, sharing experiences at different ages --- past, present and future. Ideally, the chairs in the meeting area are arranged in a circle, with rectangles of cardboard, vinyl or wood laid out on the floor. The numbers on the rectangular steps represent ages in a person’s life, from birth to age 80, with another (optional) step representing life after death.

The Life Walker stands on each panel and speaks, in the present tense, about what is happening at that stage in his or her life. During the Walk an example statement from childhood might be, “I am seven years old and mom just came into my room to say that she and dad are getting a divorce. I am feeling ...”

The Life Walker prepares for his or her Walk by thinking about the key periods and transitional events in his or her life. Five minutes is sufficient preparation. Notes are not used during the Walk. The events that are meant to be spoken will surface at the appropriate age – the participant will know what to say.

Other Guidelines:

❖ For most walks, the member will walk on each age step, from birth through life-after-death, even if he or she has nothing to say for a particular age. Often by standing on the age, reflections, hopes and feelings will be triggered.
❖ An often-used variation is to limit the Walk to a specific range of years (e.g., from birth to age 20). This is appropriate for small groups that know well each other’s current issues.
❖ Other small group members are highly respectful of the Life Walker. They should be silent during the Walk.
❖ After the walk the participant stands in the middle of the floor. Other forum members then mirror what they heard during the Walk using statements like, “I see a man who ...”, “I see a boy who ...”, “I see a woman who ...”, “I see a little girl who ...” No questions, just statements. The participant does not respond.
❖ Sometimes, a Walker will start describing his or her Walk in the past or future tense, especially when re-living difficult or crisis periods. The moderator may gently remind the Walker to speak in the present tense --- “I am ...” statements --- to be in that time of his or her life.
❖ The Life Walk is a timed exercise. Typically, five to twelve minutes is allotted for each Walker. The time keeper informs the Walker at the mid-point and when two minutes remain. At the end of the allotted time, the Walker may have fifteen seconds to wrap-up, and then walk the rest of the steps in silence. Whether you allow five minutes or forty minutes, some Walkers will not finish. A timed Walk forces the participant to focus on highlights.
❖ A variation is to allow the Walker a two-minute “overtime” period to revisit one or more steps.
❖ If rectangular steps are not available, duct tape steps, with ages written on the tape, can be just as effective.
The Life Walk offers profound insights into the background and hopes of small group members or attendees at a retreat. The Walk allows an individual to “get into” pivotal stages of his or her life, experiencing and sharing the emotions of the stage. The Walk also evokes how the person sees his or her future. The Life Walk can be a powerful and safe exercise for anyone to share his or her life.

**Life Walk Variations:**

- Walker re-lives a particular event: For example, a time when the participant was “out of control” or did something “totally crazy.”

- Relationship Life Walk, re-living times when the Walker was shaped (either positively or negatively) by another person or persons (e.g., father, coach, mentor)

- Spiritual Life Walk, where the walker describes only those events or periods that shaped his / her spiritual life. Walker speaks in the present tense about his / her death, and from the position of life-after-death.

- Romantic involvement or sexual Life Walk. This is a great pre-cursor to a discussion on marriage or relationships.

**How to Introduce the Life Walk to a Small Group:**

““The Life Walk is a timed exercise that gives you the opportunity to share important events or transitional times from birth up to [specify an ending time]. A series of tiles are laid out on the floor representing ages of your life. Since the tiles are only shown in five year increments, you stand somewhere between them to represent ages that are not shown.”

“Each of you will be given ___ minutes (e.g., 8) to walk your life from birth to ________. There is no ‘right way’ to do this. Nor, is it required that you finish. Some people will only relive events for the first 15-20 years of their life in the ___ minute period. Others finish a ___-year LifeWalk in less than 5 minutes.”

“We’ll give each of you a few minutes to sit quietly, listen to the music and perhaps compose your thoughts of what you might say. However, you won’t use any notes during your walk. From our experience, as you stand on the different tiles, ‘file folders’ in your mind will open up on key events … which you will then relive during the walk.”

“As you walk your life, we ask you to described events or relationships in the first person, present tense. For example, {this is where the facilitator needs to stand up on the tiles and demonstrate}:

- I am 8 years old, mom and dad just ask me to come and see them in the living room. They are telling me that they are getting divorced and I will be living half time with dad and half time with mom. I am scared and confused … I don’t know what to make of this.

- I am 15 years old and president of the student body. I am living a double life; during the day I am a ‘model student’. But at night I am a juvenile delinquent hanging out with kids from the south side of town. We make Molotov cocktails and throwing them at cars. Somehow I am lucky; all of my friends get caught, but I always manage to sneak away.”
I am 23 years old and on a blind date that my roommate set up. She is the most beautiful girl I have ever seen. We date for 4 months, then she breaks it off and I am devastated. I don’t know what to make of it until my friend tells me she is turned off by my use of drugs. I go cold turkey off marijuana and seek her out for second chance. We are married 5 months later.”

“As a reminder you will have __ minutes to do your walk no matter how many years you complete. We will ring a bell at the 5 minute mark, the 7 minute mark and at ____ minutes. After the third bell you will have a chance to finish off your current experience … then you’re done. We then ask you to stand in the center to get feedback from the rest of us who have witnessed your walk. Our comments to you will be something like:

… I see a boy who is sad when his parents divorced at age 8
… I see an adolescent as a model student and a juvenile delinquent
… I see a young man who cleaned up his act because of a girl and eventually married her.

“An important part of this feedback is that we reflect back what we have seen from the LifeWalker, and not project our own stuff on him or her. For example saying, “I see a man who is going to get through his current crises and have a very fulfilling life”, is a projection … we don’t know this. Simply reflect back what we’ve seen. One of the greatest needs of a human being is to be seen by others for who they are and where they have been, without judgment or projection. That’s what we are doing here.”

“During the walk, everyone is silent except for the walker. The only exception is that I, the facilitator, may occasionally word coach the participant. Oftentimes, when reliving an emotional event, perhaps the death of a loved one, the LifeWalker may revert to the past tense, saying things like, ‘I remember …’ versus ‘I am…’. My job is to gently remind the person to stay in the present tense … reliving the moment.”

“That’s enough background … any questions?”

“OK, take a few minutes and prepare your thoughts, remembering that file folders you may not consider now might open when you begin your walk.”

“There is no particular order to the LifeWalk … whenever you’re ready step up behind the birth year, compose your thoughts, and begin your walk. We will begin timing, when you begin speaking. Also, if you should encounter a particularly emotional time during your walk, it is perfectly all right to just stand at that time and relive the moment. Our commitment as a group is to honor you as you relive key moments in your life.”

“The walk is open. Who would like to begin?”
Appendix II - Life Issue Drawings

While the Life Walk deals with a participant’s past, this drawing exercise allows participants to depict, graphically, the difficult issues they face in their current lives. As in the Life Walk exercise, other members of the group give feedback to the participant on what they “see” in the drawings.

The exercise works as follows. Each participant is given three large sheets of drawing paper (e.g., 11-x-17) and a set of drawing tools (crayons, magic markers). Each participant is then given 30-40 minutes to produce three different drawings:

- A depiction of their life today
- A depiction of what they would like their life to look like
- A depiction of what is blocking them from getting what they want.

Participants are encouraged to use graphical depictions versus words in their drawings. We also suggest that the drawings be produced using the participant’s “off-hand” (i.e., a right-handed person should draw using their left hand and vice versa).

When the drawings are completed each participant is invited to share his / her drawings with the group. All three drawings are displayed at once. Typically, a participant then takes 5-10 minutes to explain the graphical trilogy. Group members are then given a few minutes to ask clarifying questions about the drawings. Then, the participant is silent while group members provide feedback on what they “see” in an individual drawing or the trilogy. For example:

- “Your spouse is always drawn bigger than you are.”
- “In your depictions of people, none of them have any faces except…”
- “The other people are drawn using varying colors, but you always draw yourself in black.”

The feedback is not meant as psychoanalysis; it simply mirrors what other group members see in the drawings. The participant can then choose to consider or disregard the feedback. As with the Life Walk, this exercise must be taken seriously. Often, group members will be inclined to make humorous or sarcastic comments about potentially sensitive areas shared by the participant. The group leader needs to anticipate this and intervene as necessary so that the participant does not feel judged or shamed.

This exercise works best for groups that are serious about going to deeper levels, regardless of the length of time they have met as a group.
Appendix III – Clean Talk

A Model for Addressing and Clearing Conflicts or Issues within a Small Group (or Forum)

This model, developed by Cliff Barry and Mary Ellen Blandford of Shadow Work Seminars, allows members to get “clean” with one another about an issue or conflict they have. It also allows a member to express himself/herself about an issue he/she has with the forum. The purpose of the model is not, necessarily, to achieve resolution, but rather for issues and conflicts to be brought into the open.

Often, when the first person in the forum has the courage to use this model to air an issue, the dam will burst, and other minor or major issues among members will surface. Once they are cleared using this model, members are clean to support each other on deeper personal or business issues without being subconsciously sidetracked about unresolved inter-personal conflicts.

Ideally, issues clearing is conducted with the members seated in an open circle with no table in the middle. If one member [A] has an issue with another member [B], [A] invites [B] to join him in the middle of the circle. If [A]’s issue is with the entire forum, he asks one person [B] to represent the entire forum and invites [B] to join him in the center of the circle.

The success of any conflict resolution model hinges on the participants’ ability to mirror the statements and emotions of each other without becoming detoured by innate defense mechanisms. [A]’s job is to present the issue, including his feelings, judgments and wants. [B]’s job is to listen attentively and to reflect back to [A] what [A] has said.

[A] presents the issue using the following structure:

- A statement of the facts {The Facts}
- [A]’s judgment about the issues or [B] {The Judgment}
- [A]’s feelings about the issue {The Feelings}
- What [A] wants {The Want}

As an example, assume that [A] lives three hours from the site of forum meetings yet always arrives on time. On the other hand, [B] lives fifteen minutes from the meeting location and has arrived 5-15 minutes late for the last several meetings. [B] is normally apologetic when he arrives late, and then makes excuses (e.g., complains about the heavy traffic or the last minute phone call he had to take). [A] has had enough of [B]’s excuses and wants to get clean on this issue. [A] invites [B] to the center of the circle.

“[B], I have an issue regarding your punctuality at our forum meetings, and I want to get clean with you about this.” {Beginning of The Facts} Today, you arrived 15 minutes after the designated start time, last month you arrived 30 minutes late, and three month’s ago you were 20 minutes late. Three month’s ago you called the moderator to say you would be late, but there have been no calls to the moderator or anyone else prior to the last two meetings. You paid a fine and said you were sorry. I live 3 hours from the meeting site and have arrived on time for the last four meetings. {End of The Facts,}”
{The Judgment} “When you arrive late like this it makes me think that you don’t care about me or the other members of the forum. It seems you are putting your own priorities ahead of ours. I hear you say you’re sorry, but since the problem continues, I don’t believe you. I question your commitment to this group.”

{The Feelings} “[B], When you arrive late like this, it makes me feel angry. It has been eating at me and I haven’t been a full contributor because of it.”

{The Want} “[B], First, I wanted to get this off my chest. I also want to hear from you your level of commitment to this group and your commitment to be on time to future meetings.”

Most people in [B]’s position tend to craft their defense strategy while [A] is still speaking. They may launch into a litany of excuses or retaliate with anger toward [A] rather than mirroring to [A] the facts, feelings, judgments and wants related to the issue. To do this in a clean fashion, [B] would respond as follows:

“[A], let me see if I have this straight. First I would like us to get very clear on the facts. I do agree that I was fifteen minutes late today and twenty minutes late to the last meeting, but I believe it was only fifteen minutes three month’s ago. I have indeed paid fines for being late, so it looks like, with the one correction, we agree on the facts.”

“I see that you are angry about this. You believe that I am putting my priorities ahead of the forum and that I am not really committed to the group. You question whether or not I’m really sincere when I say I’m sorry. You want to get this off your chest. And you want to hear my commitment both to the forum and to be on time for subsequent meetings. Do I have this correct?”

[A] then has a chance to respond. If [B] responded incorrectly, the two continue a dialog until [B] has mirrored back correctly all of [A]’s feelings, judgments, and wants. Notice that [B] is simple mirroring back to [A]. He is neither making excuses nor making a retaliatory attack. It is important that [B] reflect accurately [A]’s view of the issue. [B] does not have to agree with [A]’s view, he must simply reflect it back. After this mirroring, [B] gives [A] a chance to get completely clean using the following statement:

“[A], is there anything else you want to say about this?”

Often, [A] will discover some other frustration around the issue that needs to be spoken. Sometimes [A] will have the insight that the particular issue is merely a symptom of a much deeper issue in [A]’s life, unrelated to [B].

Often, after [A]’s issue has been reflected back to him the tension is dissipated completely. Resolution of the issue may or may not occur at this time. The important thing is that the issue has been surfaced totally and that [A] believes he has been heard. [B] may or may not pledge his commitment both to the forum and to being on time for subsequent meetings. This is often worked out between the two of them outside of the forum meeting.
To review, the general structure of a Clean Talk session is:

- The two parties discuss the issue in the center of the group
- The moderator or another forum member may offer word coaching to the two members
- [A] states the facts around the issue
- [A] states his judgments around the issue
- [A] states how he feels about the issue
- [A] states what he wants
- [B] mirrors back the facts and gets agreement with [A] about these facts. Note that the only thing that [A] and [B] must agree on is the facts
- [B] mirrors back [A]’s judgments, feelings and wants related to the issue
- [A] verifies that [B] has indeed heard him correctly
- [B] asks [A] if there is anything else that [A] wants to get clean about
- The two parties dialog as above until [A] has aired all of his feeling, judgments and wants and [B] has mirrored them back to [A]’s satisfaction.
- [B] may then respond directly to [A]’s wants or set a time when the two of them can seek to resolve the issue. Resolution does not have to occur during the forum meeting. Often, [A] just wants to be heard about the issue … to get it off of his chest. Venting the issue to [B] in front of the group is often all that is wanted.
Appendix IV – Letter to Mothers

To: Mothers of Boys in Becoming a Man Program (Before Initiation Adventure)

Dear Moms:

The wilderness adventure and initiation weekend for the Becoming a Man Program will begin on Wednesday, {date1}, and conclude on {date2}. The elders will pick up the boys after school on Wednesday. We will plan to have the boys home on {date2} by {time2}. The boys will be unavailable for events, including homework and phone calls, from {date1} through {date2}.

The chosen venue will be within {xxxx} hours of {city}. Once chosen, we ask that you do not share the venue selection with your son. He will need to bring a warm sleeping bag and appropriate outdoor clothing for spring in the mountains. He’ll also need his drum. He will be informed of other things to bring.

The boys will miss school on Thursday and Friday, {dates}. Either we or you can prepare appropriate communications to the boys’ respective schools informing them of the program and requesting “excused absences” for the boys. It is the boys’ responsibility to communicate with their teachers and plan their lives so their academics do not suffer by missing these two days.

While the elders have worked as a team in guiding the boys, each boy has selected a single elder to be his special support person during the retreat. You will be contacted directly by your son’s supporting elder prior to the retreat. He will have some requests for you as we plan the celebratory conclusion of the retreat.

While we will have a few more meetings after this retreat, we consider the retreat to be the culmination event for our program. Over the last seven months we have striven to build safety in the group of elders and boys, allowing the boys to share their difficult issues and fears on topics such as girls, grades, work, dating, sex, God, boundaries, authority and truth-telling. The goals of this final retreat are to have them look deeply within themselves, forming the courage and character they’ll need in their transition from adolescence to manhood.

As co-leaders with the other six elders, we have relished the opportunity to work with your sons. They are ready for this adventure. They are also ready to transition from being boys into being mature, aware, responsible, playful adults. We are deeply grateful for your support over the last seven months and your support now as we prepare for this culmination event.

Sincerely,

{Co-leaders’ signatures}
Appendix V – The Elder’s Message to the Mothers

Script of Phone Call to the Mothers Prior to the Initiation Retreat

Your sons will be embarking on a rite-of-passage adventure. As a group of elders working with the boys, we have been preparing for this adventure for nearly a year. We believe the boys are ready.

The adventure will be held at a retreat center within four hours of Boulder. The emergency phone number is: {number1}. You may leave a message for {co-leaders}, and the staff at the retreat center will find one of them immediately. This number is only manned from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. You may leave a message at {number2}. Messages on this number will be checked each evening at 10:00 p.m.

We will return to {home city} late on {date2}. You will receive a call from me or another elder on {date2} letting you know the time we expect to be back. We will make sure your son gets home that evening (given the drive, it may be after midnight).

As the sponsoring elder for your son, I’ll be picking him up at his school on Wednesday afternoon after his last class. We will go directly from the school to the retreat location; he will not be coming home.

As the parent you will have to call the school attendance office to inform them that your son will be “taking a personal day” on both Thursday and Friday. You must do this within 48-hours of the absence for this to be considered an excused absence. Your son will also have to make appropriate arrangements with his teachers to get his assignments for Thursday and Friday and to arrange his schedule so he doesn’t get behind. I suggest you coordinate with your son the timing of his contacting his teachers and you contacting the attendance office. If you’d like, I can call the principal at the school and inform him about our program … and that this will definitely not be a vacation!

We’d also like you to prepare a letter to the school saying it’s okay for him to be picked up by me on Wednesday. This may not be an issue at his school, but we want to anticipate any problems now, and deal with them.

Your son has been given a list of things to bring. If he asks for your help, please feel free to help him. If he doesn’t ask for help, please do not offer. It is his responsibility to assemble the list of items he will need.

Wednesday morning will be the last time you see your son before the adventure. We would be grateful if you could arrange to have some one-on-one time with him before he goes to school. You might say something like:

“Son, I see that you have prepared and are prepared for this adventure with the elders and other young men. I want to bless you as you go on this retreat. Goodbye.” Then, turn and walk away. The “goodbye” is important. It’s certainly not permanent, but it symbolically marks the transition – the natural and necessary separation – he must go through in moving from being an adolescent to becoming a man.
Initiation into manhood is not done over a single weekend. However, we want to provide him with a launching experience during this retreat. This initiation involves separation (like when you say “goodbye”), an ordeal, integration, honoring and celebration. The ordeal will be in the wilderness. While it will be taxing to him both physically and emotionally, safety is our primary concern. As in any outdoor adventure (including Boy Scout camping or even most sports) there is an element of risk, especially when the participants are stretched. We acknowledge that risk and will do our best to provide a safe environment.

Lastly, I want to thank you for your support in this year-long adventure. We believe this adventure will be the most memorable event of our year together with your son, and your encouragement has meant a great deal to me and the elder team.

We will continue to meet for a few weeks into May. The actual closure date for the program has not been determined, but will be no later than {date3}.

You will likely want to ask your son questions about the adventure when he returns. While the processes and experiences of the adventure will be confidential, as well as any of the disclosures or experiences of the other participants, you may want to ask your son the following: “Son, if you are open to it, and without violating any confidentiality, I’d be interested in hearing what you discovered about yourself at the retreat.” He may choose not to respond, but some phrasing like this helps you look supportive without being probing or intimidating.

I’d be happy to answer any other questions you might have.
Appendix VI – Elder Letter Soliciting a Blessing

{Date}

To: The Family and Friends of ________

Dear Family and Friends of ________,

For the last nine months ________ has been participating in a Rite-of-Passage program designed for adolescent boys who are transitioning into manhood. On {initiation event date}, ________ and ___ other young men will participate in a wilderness adventure that will conclude with an initiation ceremony and celebration. As part of the celebration we will be giving the young men a number of letters – from people like you – encouraging, honoring and loving them.

The Rite-of-Passage program consists of _____ boys and _____ elders who have been together during the last nine months. I have been one of the elders and will be ________’s personal sponsor, advocate, and “cheerleader” during the wilderness adventure. In speaking with his mother {and father} your name was offered as someone who knows ________ and who might write a letter of encouragement, blessing and / or love. We’d be grateful if you could take a few minutes to compose and return such a letter. Enclosed is a return envelope, addressed to ________ at my home address. Or, you can send it by email to ________. I will make sure he gets your letter at the end of the adventure.

I ask that you write what comes from your heart for ________. You might consider sentences something like:

- ________, I see in you a young man who […] then describe some of his special attributes, strengths, virtues …]
- I remember the time […] then describe a time when he did something well, or when he was very happy, or when he faced adversity and succeeded
- I want to encourage [or bless] you as you […] then describe an interest or strength he has that you want to encourage him to follow
- I see that the future holds for you […] your upbeat thoughts on his future.

I’m sure you get the idea. Please stick to positive comments, remembrances and predictions. Our goal is to have the young men leaving the retreat feeling uplifted and blessed. Note that these letters will be a surprise to the boys, so please don’t let them know about your letter.

Both for myself and on behalf of the other elders in this program, I’m grateful that you will consider writing a letter to ________. Please return your letter in the enclosed envelope or email it to ________ so it arrives on or before {deadline date}.

Sincerely,
[Elder name here]
[Elder mailing address here] [Elder phone here]

Becoming a Man elder
Appendix VII – Boys’ List of What to Bring to the Initiation Retreat

- Backpack to carry the following:
  - Warm (down to 25 degrees) sleeping bag
  - Pad for sleeping bag
  - A 1-quart (approx.) water bottle
  - Small pocket knife
- Warm clothing, including:
  - Warm, ideally waterproofed, footwear
  - 2-3 pairs of warm (wool) socks
  - Warm winter hat and gloves
  - Warm jacket
  - Long underwear
- Other warm outerwear (sweater, fleeces, Gore-Tex pants …)
- Rain gear (GOOD rain jacket; ideally, rain pants, but this is not mandatory)
- 4 small plastic bags (1 gallon size)
- 1 larger garbage bag
- 1 roll of toilet paper
- A few Band-Aids and a tube of antiseptic
- One pair shorts or cutoffs and a T-shirt (anticipating warmer weather)
- Bathing suit
- Sunscreen and chapstick
- Your mask
- Your drum and a beater
- Appropriate toiletries
- A bath towel and a face towel
- If you wear contact lenses, wear your glasses on Wednesday, and bring your contacts in a separate case.

Everything else will be provided.