WILD at HEART
OTHER BOOKS BY JOHN ELDREDGE

The Sacred Romance (with Brent Curtis)
The Sacred Romance Workbook
The Journey of Desire
Wild at Heart Field Manual
Dare to Desire
Waking the Dead
A Guidebook to Waking the Dead
Epic
The Ransomed Heart
Captivating (with Stasi Eldredge)
Walking with God
Personal Guide to Walking with God
Walking with God: A DVD Study
WILD at HEART

Discovering the Secret of a Man’s Soul

John Eldredge

Thomas Nelson
Since 1798

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I love your warrior hearts.
You definitely have what it takes.
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Brent, for teaching me more about what it means to be a man than anyone else ever has, and Craig, for taking up the sword.
INTRODUCTION

I know. I almost want to apologize. Dear Lord—do we really need another book for men?

Nope. We need something else. We need permission.

Permission to be what we are—men made in God’s image. Permission to live from the heart and not from the list of “should” and “ought to” that has left so many of us tired and bored.

Most messages for men ultimately fail. The reason is simple: They ignore what is deep and true to a man’s heart, his real passions, and simply try to shape him up through various forms of pressure. “This is the man you ought to be. This is what a good husband/father/Christian/churchgoer ought to do.” Fill in the blanks from there. He is responsible, sensitive, disciplined, faithful, diligent, dutiful, etc. Many of these are good qualities. That these messengers are well-intentioned I have no doubt. But the road to hell, as we remember, is paved with good intentions. That they are a near total failure should seem obvious by now.

No, men need something else. They need a deeper understanding of why they long for adventures and battles and a Beauty—and why God made them just like that. And they need a deeper understanding of why women long to be fought for, to be swept up into adventure, and to be the Beauty. For that is how God made them as well.

So I offer this book, not as the seven steps to being a better Christian, but as a safari of the heart to recover a life of freedom, passion, and adventure. I believe it will help men get their heart back—and women as well. Moreover, it will help women to understand their men and help them live the life they both want. That is my prayer for you.
It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly, . . . who knows the great enthusiasms, the great devotions; who spends himself in a worthy cause; who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who have never known neither victory nor defeat.

—TEDDY ROOSEVELT

The kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and violent men take it by force.

—MATTHEW 11:12 NASB
At last, I am surrounded by wilderness. The wind in the top of the pines behind me sounds like the ocean. Waves are rushing in from the great blue above, cresting upon the ridge of the mountain I have climbed, somewhere in the Sawatch Range of central Colorado. Spreading out below me the landscape is a sea of sagebrush for mile after lonesome mile. Zane Grey immortalized it as the purple sage, but most of the year it’s more of a silver gray. This is the kind of country you could ride across for days on horseback without seeing another living soul. Today, I am on foot. Though the sun is shining this afternoon, it will not warm above thirty here near the Continental Divide, and the snow I worked up scaling this face is now making me shiver. It is late October and winter is coming on. In the distance, nearly a hundred miles south by southwest, the San Juan Mountains are already covered in snow.

The aroma of the pungent sage still clings to my jeans, and it clears my head as I gasp for air—in notably short supply at 10,000 feet. I am forced to rest again, even though I know that each pause broadens the distance between me and my quarry. Still, the advantage has always been his. Though the tracks I found this morning were fresh—only a few hours old—that holds little promise. A bull elk can easily cover miles of rugged country in that amount of time, especially if he is wounded or on the run.

The wapiti, as the Indians called him, is one of the most elusive creatures we have left in the low forty-eight. They are the ghost kings of the high country, more cautious and wary than deer, and more difficult to track. They live at higher elevations, and travel farther in a day, than nearly any other game. The bulls especially seem to carry a sixth sense to human presence. A few times I’ve gotten close; the next moment they are gone, vanishing silently into aspen groves so thick you wouldn’t have believed a rabbit could get through.

It wasn’t always this way. For centuries elk lived out on the prairies, grazing together on the rich grasses in vast numbers. In the spring of 1805 Meriwether Lew is described passing herds walling in the thousands as he made his way in search of a Northwest Passage. At times the curious wandered so close he could throw sticks at them, like bucolic dairy cows blocking the road. But by the end of the century westward expansion had pushed the elk high up into the Rocky Mountains. Now they are elusive, hiding out at timberline as outlaws until heavy snows force them down for the winter. If you would seek them now, it is on their terms, in forbidding haunts well beyond the reach of civilization.

And that is why I come.

And why I linger here still, letting the old bull get away. My hunt, you see, actually has little to do with elk. I knew that before I came. There is something else I am after, out here in the wild. I am searching for an even more elusive prey...something that can only be found through the help of wilderness.

I am looking for my heart.
bigger than he ever imagined, much more serious than CEO or “prince of Egypt.” Under foreign stars, in the dead of night, Jacob received a new name, his real name. No longer is he a shrewd business negotiator, but now he is one who wrestles with God. The wilderness trial of Christ is, at its core, a test of his identity. “If you are who you think you are . . .” If a man is ever to find out who he is and what he’s here for, he has got to take that journey for himself.

He has got to get his heart back.

WESTWARD EXPANSION AGAINST THE SOUL

The way a man’s life unfolds now adays tends to drive his heart into remote regions of the soul. Endless hours at a computer screen; selling shoes at the mall; meetings, memos, phone calls. The business world—where the majority of American men live and die—requires a man to be efficient and punctual. Corporate policies and procedures are devised with one aim to harness a man to the plow and make him produce. But the soul refuses to be harnessed; it knows nothing of Day Timers and deadlines and P&L statements. The soul longs for passion, for freedom, for life. As D. H. Law rence said, “I am not a mechanism.” A man needs to feel the rhythms of the earth; he needs to have in hand something real—the tiller of a boat, a set of reins, the roughness of rope, or simply a shovel. Can a man live all his days to keep his fingernails clean and trim? Is that what a boy dreams of?

Society at large can’t make up its mind about men. Having spent the last thirty years redefining masculinity into something more sensitive, safe, manageable and, well, feminine, it now berates men for not being men. Boys will be boys, they sigh. As though if a man were to truly grow up he would forsake w ildness and w anderlust and settle down, be at home forever in Aunt Polly’s parlor. “Where are all the real men?” is regular fare for talk shows and new books. *You asked them to be women,* I want to say. The result is a gender confusion never experienced at such a wide level in the history of the world. How can a man know he is one when his highest aim is minding his manners?

And then, alas, there is the church. Christianity, as it currently exists, has done some terrible things to men. When all is said and done, I think most men in the church believe that God put them on the earth to be a good boy. The problem w ith men, w e are told, is that they don’t know how to keep their promises, be spiritual leaders, talk to their w ifes, or raise their children. But, if they will try real hard they can reach the lofty summit of becoming . . . a nice guy. That’s w hat w e hold up as models of Christian maturity: Really Nice Guys. We don’t smoke, drink, or swear; that’s what makes us men. Now let me ask my male read-ers: In all your boyhood dreams growing up, did you ever dream of becoming a Nice Guy? (Ladies, w as the Prince of your dreams dashing . . . or merely nice?)

Really now—do I overstate my case? Walk into most churches in America, have a look around, and ask yourself this question: What is a Christian man? Don’t listen to w hat is said, look at w hat you find there. There is no doubt about it. You’d have to admit a Christian man is . . . bored. At a recent church retreat I w as talking with a guy in his fifties, listening really, about his ow n journey as a man. “I’ve pretty much tried for the last tw enty years to be a good man as the church defines him.” Intrigued, I asked him to say w hat he thought that w as. He paused for a long moment. “Dutiful,” he said. “And separated from his heart.” A perfect description, I thought. Sadly right on the mark.

As Robert Bly laments in *Iron John,* “Some w omen w ant a passive man if they w ant a man at all; the church w ants a tamed man—they are called priests; the university w ants a domesticated man—they are called tenure-track people; the corporation w ants a . . . sanitized, hairless, shallow man.” It all comes together as a sort of westward expansion against the masculine soul. And thus the heart of a man is driven into the high country, into remote places, like a w ounded animal looking for cover. Women know this, and lament that they have no access to their man’s heart. Men know it, too, but are often unable to explain w hy their heart is missing. They know their heart is on the run, but they often do not know w here to pick up the trail. The church wags its head and w onders w hy it can’t get men more up to speed for its programs. The answer is simply this: We have not invited a man to know and live from his deep heart.

AN INVITATION

But God made the masculine heart, set it w ithin every man, and thereby offers him an invitation: Come, and live out w hat I meant you to be. Permit me to bypass the entire nature vs. nurture “is gender really built-in?” debate w ith one simple observation: Men and w omen are made in the image of God as *men or as women.* “So God created man in his ow n image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them” (Gen. 1:27). Now, w e know God doesn’t have a body, so the uniqueness can’t be physical. Gender simply must be at the level of the soul, in the deep and everlasting places w ithin us. God doesn’t make generic people; he makes something very distinct—a man or a woman. In other w ords, there is a masculine heart and a feminine heart, w hic h in their ow n w ays reflect or portray to the w orld God’s heart.

God meant something w hen he meant man, and if w e are to ever find ourselves w e must find that. What has he set in the masculine heart? Instead of asking what you think you ought to do to become a better man (or w oman, for my female readers), I w ant to ask, *What makes you come alive?* What stirs your heart? The journey w e face now is into a land foreign to most of us. We must head into country that has no clear trail. This charter for exploration takes us into our ow n hearts, into our deepest desires. As the playw right Christopher Fry says,

*Life is a hypocrite if I can’t live*

*The way it moves me!!*

There are three desires I find w ritten so deeply into my heart I know now I can no longer disregard them without losing my soul. They are core to w ho and w hat I am and ye arn to be. I gaze into boyhood, I search the pages of literature, I listen carefully to many, many men, and I am convinced these desires are universal, a clue into masculinity itself. They may be misplaced, forgotten, or misdirected, but in the heart of every man is a desperate desire for a battle to fight, an adventure to live, and a beauty to rescue. I w ant you to think of the films men love, the things they do with their free time, and especially the aspirations of little boys and see if I am not right on this.

A BATTLE TO FIGHT

There’s a photo on my w all of a little boy about five years old, w ith a crew cut, big cheeks, and an impish grin. It’s an old photograph, and the color is fading, but the image is timeless. It’s Christmas morning, 1964, and I’ve just opened w hat may have been the best present any boy received on any Christmas ever—a set of tw o pearl-handled six-shooters, complete w ith black leather holsters, a red cow boy shirt w ith tw o w id mustangs embroidered on either breast, shiny black boots, red bandanna, and straw hat. I’ve donned the outfit and w on’t take it off for w eeks because you see, this is not a “costume” at all: it’s an identi ty. Sure, one pant leg is tucked into my boot and the other is hanging out, but that only adds to my “fresh off the trail” persona. My thumbs are tucked inside my gun belt and my chest is out because I am armed and dangerous. Bad guys bew ar: This town’s not big enough for the both of us.

Capes and sw ord s, camouflage, bandannas and six-shooters—these are the uniforms of boyhood. Little boys yearn to know they are pow erful, they are dangerous, they are someone to be reckoned with. W hy many parents have tried in vain to prevent little Timmy from playing w ith guns? Give it up. If
you do not supply a boy with weapons, he will make them from whatever materials are at hand. My boys chew their graham crackers into the shape of hand guns at the breakfast table. Every stick or fallen branch is a spear, or better, a bazooka. Despite what many modern educators would say, this is not a psychological disturbance brought on by violent television or chemical imbalance. Aggression is part of the masculine design; we are hard-wired for it. If we believe that man is made in the image of God, then we would do well to remember that “the LORD is a warrior; the LORD is his name” (Ex. 15:3).

Little girls do not invent games where large numbers of people die, where bloodshed is a prerequisite for having fun. Hockey, for example, was not a feminine creation. Nor was boxing. A boy wants to attack something—and so does a man, even if it’s only a little white ball on a tee. He wants to hack it into kingdom come. On the other hand, my boys do not sit down to tea parties. They do not call their friends on the phone to talk about relationships. They grow bored of games that have no element of danger or competition or bloodshed. Cooperative games based on “relational interdependence” are complete nonsense. “No one is killed?” they ask, incredulous. “No one wins? What’s the point?” The universal nature of this ought to have convinced us by now: The boy is a warrior; the boy is his name. And those are not boyish antics he is doing. When boys play at war they are rehearsing their part in a much bigger drama. One day, you just might need that boy to defend you.

Those Union soldiers who charged the stone walls at Bloody Angle; the Allied troops that hit the beaches at Normandy or the sands of Iwo Jima; what would they have done w/out this deep part of their heart? Life needs a man to be fierce—and fiercely devoted. The wounds he will take throughout his life will cause him to lose heart if all he has been trained to be is soft. This is especially true in the murky waters of relationships, where a man feels least prepared to advance. As Bly says, “In every relationship something fierce is needed once in a while.”

Now, this longing may have submerged from years of neglect, and a man may not feel that he is up to the battles he knows await him. Or it may have taken a very dark turn, as it has w/ inner-city gangs. But the desire is there. Every man wants to play the hero. Every man needs to know that he is powerful. Women didn’t make Braveheart one of the best-selling films of the decade. Flying Tigers, The Bridge on the River Kwai, The Magnificent Seven, Shane, High Noon, Saving Private Ryan, Top Gun, the Die Hard films, Gladiator—the movies a man loves reveal w/ hat his heart longs for, w/ hat is set inside him from the day of his birth.

Like it or not, there is something fierce in the heart of every man.

AN ADVENTURE TO LIVE

“My mother loves to go to Europe on her vacations.” We were talking about our love of the West, a friend and I, and why he moved out here from the East Coast. “And that’s for her, I guess. There’s a lot of culture there. But I need widness.” Our conversation w/as stirred by the film Legends of the Fall, the story of three young men coming of age in the early 1900s on their father’s ranch in Montana. Alfred, the eldest, is practical, pragmatic, cautious. He heads off to the Big City to become a businessman and eventually, a politician. Yet something inside him dies. He becomes a hollow man. Samuel, the youngest, is still a boy in many ways, a tender child—literate, sensitive, timid. He is killed early in the film and w/e know he w/as not ready for battle.

Then there is Tristan, the middle son. He is w/ out heart. It is Tristan w/ oembodies the West—he catches and breaks the wild stallion, fights the grizzly w/ a knife, w/ ins the beautiful woman. I have yet to meet a man who wants to be Alfred or Samuel. I’ve yet to meet a woman who wants to marry one. There is a reason the American cow boy has taken on mythic proportions. He embodies a yearning every man knows from very young—to “go West,” to find a place where he can be all he knows he was meant to be. To borrow Walter Brueggeman’s description of God: “wild, dangerous, unfeathered and free.”

Now, let me stop for a moment and make something clear. I am no great white hunter. I have no dead animals adorning the walls of my house. I didn’t play football. In fact, in college I weighed 135 pounds and w/asn’t much of an athlete. Despite my childhood dreams, I have never been a race car driver or a fighter pilot. I have no interest in televised sports. I don’t like cheap beer, and though I drove an old jeep its tires are not ridiculously large. I say this because I anticipate that many readers—good men and women—will be tempted to dismiss this as some sort of macho-man pep rally. Not at all.

When w/e inter falls to provide an inadequate snow base, my boys bring their sleds in the house and ride them down the stairs. Just the other day, my wife found w/them ou their second-story bedroom window, preparing to rappel down the side of the house. The recipe for fun is pretty simple raising boys: Add to any activity an element of danger, stir in a little exploitation, add a dash of destruction, and you’ve got yourself a w inner. The way they ski is a perfect example. Get to the top of the highest run, point your skis straight downhill and go, the faster the better. And this doesn’t end w/th age; the stakes simply get higher.

A judge in his sixties, a real southern gentleman w/ a pinstriped suit and an elegant manner of speech, pulled me aside during a conference. Quietly, almost apologetically, he spoke of his love for sailing, for the open sea, and how he and a buddy eventually built their own boat. Then came a twinkle in his eye. “We were sailing off the coast of Bermuda a few years ago, w/ e were hit by a northeaster (a raging storm). Really, it came up out of nowhere. Two twin-foot swells in a thirty-foot boat broke. I thought we were all going to die.” A pause for dramatic effect, and then he confessed, “It was the best time of my life.”

Compare your experience w/atching the latest James Bond or Indiana Jones thriller w/ th, say, going to Bible study. The guaranteed success of each new release makes it clear—adventure is w/tened into the heart of a man. And it’s not just about having “fun.” Adventure requires something of us, puts us to the test. Though we may fear the test, at the same time we yearn to be tested, to discover that we have what it takes. That’s why we set off down the Snake River against all sound judgment, w/ hy a buddy and I pressed on through grizzly country to find good fishing, w/ y I went off to Washington, D.C., as a young man to see if I could make it in those shark-infested waters. If a man has lost this desire, says he doesn’t w ant it, that’s only because he doesn’t know he has what it takes, believes that he will fail the test. And so he decides it’s better not to try. For reasons I hope to make clear later, most men hate the unknown and, like Cain, w ant to settle down and build their own city, get on top of their life. But you can’t escape it—there is something wild in the heart of every man.

A BEAUTY TO RESCUE

Romeo has his Juliet, King Arthur fights for Guinevere, Robin rescues Maid Marian, and I will never forget the first time I kissed my grade school sweetheart. It was in the fall of my seventh-grade year. I met Debbie in drama class, and fell absolutely head over heels. It was classic puppy love: I’d wait for her after rehearsals were over, carry her books back to her locker. We passed notes in class, talked on the phone at night. I had never paid such attention, really, until now. This desire awakens a bit later in a boy’s journey to manhood, but when it does his universe turns on its head.

Now, this longing may have submerged from years of neglect, and a man may not feel that he is up to the battles he knows await him. Or it may have taken a very dark turn, as it has w/ inner-city gangs. But the desire is there. Every man wants to play the hero. Every man needs to know that he is powerful. Women didn’t make Braveheart one of the best-selling films of the decade. Flying Tigers, The Bridge on the River Kwai, The Magnificent Seven, Shane, High Noon, Saving Private Ryan, Top Gun, the Die Hard films, Gladiator—the movies a man loves reveal w/ hat his heart longs for, w/ hat is set inside him from the day of his birth.

Like it or not, there is something fierce in the heart of every man.
There is nothing so inspiring to a man as a beautiful woman. She'll make you want to charge the castle, slay the giant, leap across the parapets. Or maybe, hit a home run. One day during a Little League game, my son Samuel was so inspired. He likes baseball, but most boys starting out aren't sure they really have it in them to be a great player. Sam's our firstborn, and like so many firstborns he is cautious. He always lets a few pitches go by before he takes a swing, and when he does, it's never a full swing; every one of his hits up till this point were in the infield. Anywy ay, just as Sam steps up to bat this one afternoon, his friend from down the street, a cute little blonde girl, shows up along the first-base line. Standing up on tiptoe she yells out his name and w aves to Sam. Pretending he doesn't notice her, he broadens his stance, grips the bat a little tighter, looks at the pitcher with something fierce in his eye. First one over the plate he knocks into center field.

A man wants to be the hero to the beauty. Young men going off to war carry a photo of their sw eetheart in their w allet. Men who fly combat missions will paint a beauty on the side of their aircraft; the crew s of the WWII B-17 bomber gave those flying fortresses names like Me and My Gal or the Memphis Belle. What would Robin Hood or King Arthur be without the w oman they love? Lonely men fighting lonely battles. Indiana Jones and James Bond just w ouldn't be the same without a beauty at their side, and inevitably they must fight for her. You see, it's not just that a man needs a battle to fight; he needs someone to fight for. Remember Nehemiah's words to the few brave souls defending a wall-less Jerusalem? "Don't be afraid . . . fight for your brothers, your sons and your daughters, your wives and your homes." The battle itself is not enough; a man yearns for romance. It's not enough to be a hero; it's that he is a hero to someone in particular, to the w oman he loves. Adam was given the w ind and the sea, the horse and the haw k, but as God himself said, things were just not right until there was Eve.

Yes, there is something passionate in the heart of every man.

THE FEMININE HEART

There are also three desires that I have found essential to a woman's heart, which are not entirely different from a man's and yet they remain distinctly feminine. Not every w oman w ants a battle to fight, but every w oman yearns to be fought for. Listen to the longing of a w oman's heart: She w ants to be more than noticed—she w ants to be w anted. She w ants to be pursued. "I just w ant to be a priority to someone," a friend in her thirties told me. And her childhood dreams of a knight in shining armor coming to rescue her are not girlish fantasies; they are the core of the feminine heart and the life she knows she w as made for. So Zach comes back for Paula in An Officer and a Gentleman, Frederick comes back for Jo in Little Women, and Edw ard returns to pledge his undying love for Eleanor in Sense and Sensibility.

Every w oman also w ants an adventure to share. One of my wife's favorite films is The Man from Snowy River. She loves the scene w here Jessica, the beautiful young heroine, is rescued by Jim, her hero, and together they ride on horseback through the w lds of the Australian w ilderness. "I w ant to be la iso in Ladyhaw k," confessed another female friend. "To be cherished, pursued, fought for—yes. But also, I w ant to be strong and a part of the adventure." So many men make the mistake of thinking that the w oman is the adventure. But that is w here the relationship immediately goes downhill. A woman doesn't w ant to be the adventure; she w ants to be caught up into something greater than herself. Our friend w ent on to say, "I know myself and I know I'm not the adventure. So when a man makes me the point, I grow bored immediately. I know that story. Take me into one I don't know."

And finally, every w oman w ants to have a beauty to unveil. Not to conjure, but to unveil. Most w omen feel the pressure to be beautiful from very young, but that is not w hat I speak of. There is also a deep desire to simply and truly be the beauty, and be delighted in. Most little girls w ill remember playing dress up, or w edding day, or "twirling skirts," those flowing dresses that were perfect for spinning around in. She'll put her pretty dress on, come into the living room and tw irl. What she longs for is to capture her daddy's delight. My w ife remembers standing on top of the coffee table as a girl of five or six, and singing her heart out. Do you see me? asks the heart of every girl. A nd are you captivated by what you see?

The world kills a w oman's heart w hen it tells her to be tough, efficient, and independent. Sadly, Christianity has missed her heart as w ell. Walk into most churches in America, have a look around, and ask yourself this question: What is a Christian w oman? Again, don't listen to w hat is said, look at what you find there. There is no doubt about it. You'd have to admit a Christian w oman is . . . tired. All w e've offered the feminine soul is pressure to "be a good servant." No one is fighting for her heart; there is no grand adventure to be swept up in; and every woman doubts very much that she has any beauty to unveil.

BY WAY OF THE HEART

Which w ould you rather be said of you: "Harry? Sure I know him. He's a real sweet guy." Or, "Yes, I know about Harry. He's a dangerous man . . . in a really good way." Ladies, how about you? Which man w ould you rather have as your mate? (Some w omen, hurt by masculinity gone bad, might argue for the "safe" man . . . and then wonder why, years later, there is no passion in their marriage, why he is distant and cold.) And as for your own w ife, w hich w ould you rather have said of you—that you are a "tireless worker," or that you are a "captivating woman"? I rest my case.

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The world kills a w oman's heart w hen it tells her to be tough, efficient, and independent. Sadly, Christianity has missed her heart as w ell. Walk into most churches in America, have a look around, and ask yourself this question: What is a Christian w oman? Again, don't listen to what is said, look at what you find there. There is no doubt about it. You'd have to admit a Christian w oman is . . . tired. All w e've offered the feminine soul is pressure to "be a good servant." No one is fighting for her heart; there is no grand adventure to be swept up in; and every woman doubts very much that she has any beauty to unveil.

BY WAY OF THE HEART

Which w ould you rather be said of you: "Harry? Sure I know him. He's a real sweet guy." Or, "Yes, I know about Harry. He's a dangerous man . . . in a really good way." Ladies, how about you? Which man w ould you rather have as your mate? (Some w omen, hurt by masculinity gone bad, might argue for the "safe" man . . . and then w onder why, years later, there is no passion in their marriage, w hy he is distant and cold.) And as for your own w ife, w hich w ould you rather have said of you—that you are a "tireless worker," or that you are a "captivating woman"? I rest my case.

What if? What if those deep desires in our hearts are telling us the truth, revealing to us the life we w ere meant to live? God gave us eyes so that we w ould see; he gave us ears that we w ould hear; he gave us w ills that we w ould choose, and he gave us hearts that we w ould live. The w ay w e w ake is t he heart is everything. A man must know he is pow erful; he must know he has w hat it takes. A w oman must know she is beautiful; she must know she is w orth fighting for. "But you don't understand," said one w oman to me. "I'm living with a hollow man." No, it's in there. His heart is there. It may have evaded you, like a w ounded animal, aw ays out of reach, one step beyond your catching. But it's there. "I don't know w hen I died," said another man. "But I feel like I'm just using up oxygen." I understand. Your heart may feel dead and gone, but it's there. Something w ild and strong and valiant, just w aiting to be released.

And so this is not a book about the seven things a man ought to do to be a nicer guy. It is a book about the recovery and release of a man's heart, his passions, his true nature, w hich he has been given by God. It's an invitation to rush the fields at Bannockburn, to w eep, to leap from the falls and save the beauty. For if you are going to know w ho you truly are as a man, if you are going to find a life w orth living, if you are going to love a w oman deeply and not pass on your confusion to your children, you simply must get your heart back. You must head up into the high country of the soul, into w ild and uncharted regions and track down that elusive prey.
Finally, someone is going to stand up to the English tyrants. While the nobles jockey for position, Wallace rides out and interrupts the parley. He picks a

That they may take our lives, but they'll never take our freedom!” he tells them they have what it takes. At the end of his stirring speech, the men are

And dying in your beds, many years from now, would you be willing to trade all the days from this day to that to come back here and tell our enemies

Another deal—Wallace goes straight for the hearts of the fearful Scots. “Sons of Scotland . . . you have come to fight as free men, and free men you

The highlanders come down, in groups of hundreds and thousands. It’s time for a showdown. But the nobles, cowards all, don’t want a fight. They

Longshanks. A ruthless oppressor, Longshanks has devastated Scotland, killing her sons and raping her daughters. The Scottish nobles, supposed

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Wallace, if you’ll recall, is the hero of the film Braveheart. He is the w arrior poet w ho came as the liberator of Scotland in the early 1300s. When Wallace

WHERE DO WE COME FROM?

I may have w alked into that feed store a squirrely little kid, but I walked out as Sheriff Wyatt Earp, the Lone Ranger, Kit Carson. I had an identity and a

Remember that little guy I told you about, w ith the shiny boots and a pair of six-shooters? The best part of the story is that it w asn’t all pretend. I had a

place to live out those dreams. My grandfather, my father’s father, was a cowboy. He w orked his own n cattle ranch in eastern Oregon, between the
desert sage and the Snake River. And though I w as raised in the suburbs, the redemption of my life and the real training grounds for my ow n masculine
journey took place on that ranch, w here I spent my boyhood summers. Oh, that every boy should be so lucky. To have your days filled w ith tractors and
pickup trucks, horses and roping steers, running through the fields, fishing in the ponds. I w as Huck Finn for three w onderful months every year. How I

loved it w hen my grandfather—“Pop” is w hat I called him—w ould look at me, his thumbs tucked in his belt, smile, and say, “Saddle up.”

One afternoon Pop took me into tow n, to my favorite store. It w as a combination feed and tack/hardw are/ranch supply shop. The classic dry goods
store of the Old West, a w onderland of tools and equipment, saddles, bridles and blankets, fishing gear, pocketknives, rifles. It smelled of hay and
linseed oil, of leather and gunpow der and kerosene—all the things that thrill a boy’s heart. That summer Pop w as having a problem w ith an overrun
pigeon population on the ranch. He hated the dirty birds, feared they w ere carrying diseases to the cattle. “Flying rats,” is w hat he called them. Pop
walked straight over to the firearms counter, picked out a BB rifle and a quart-sized milk carton w ith about a million BBs in it, and handed them to me. The
old shopkeeper looked a bit surprised as he stared down at me, squinting over his glasses. “Isn’t he a bit young for that?” Pop put his hand on my
shoulder and smiled. “This is my grandson, Hal. He’s riding shotgun for me.”

BRAVEHEART INDEED

Wallace, if you'll recall, is the hero of the film Braveheart. He is the w arrior poet w ho came as the liberator of Scotland in the early 1300s. When Wallace
arrives on the scene, Scotland has been under the iron fist of English monarchs for centuries. The latest king is the w orst of them all—Edward and the
Longshanks. A ruthless oppressor, Longshanks has devastated Scotland, killing her sons and raping her daughters. The Scottish nobles, supposed
protectors of their flock, have instead piled heavy burdens on the backs of the people while they line their ow n purses by cutting deals w ith
Longshanks. Wallace is the first to defy the English oppressors. Outraged, Longshanks sends his armies to the field of Sterling to crush the rebellion.
The highlanders come down n, in groups of hundreds and thousands. It’s time for a show down n. But the nobles, cow ards all, don’t w ant a fight. They
want a treaty w ith England that w ill buy them more lands and power. They are typical Pharis ees, bureaucrats . . . religious administrators.

Without a leader to follow, the Scots begin to lose heart. One by one, then in larger numbers, they start to flee. At that moment Wallace rides in w ith
his band of w arriors, blue w arpaint on their faces, ready for battle. Ignoring the nobles—w ho w ant to parley w ith the English captains to get
another deal—Wallace goes straight for the hearts of the fearful Scots. “Sons of Scotland . . . you have come to fight as free men, and free men you
are.” He gives them an identity and a reason to fight. He reminds them that a life lived in fear is no life at all, that every last one of them w ill die some day.

“Dying and your beds, many years from now, w ould you be w illing to trade all the days from this day to that to come back here and tell our enemies
that they may take our lives, but they’ll never take our freedom!” he tells them they have w hat it takes. At the end of his stirring speech, the men are
cheering. They are ready. Then Wallace’s friend asks,

*Fine speech. Now what do we do?*
*Just be yourselves.*
*Where are you going?*
*I’m going to pick a fight.*

Finally, someone is going to stand up to the English tyrants. While the nobles jockey for position, Wallace rides out and interrupts the parley. He picks a
fight with the English overlords and the Battle of Stirling ensues—a battle that begins the liberation of Scotland.

Now—is Jesus more like Mother Teresa or William Wallace? The answer is . . . it depends. If you’re a leper, an outcast, a pariah of society whom no one has ever touched because you are “unclean,” if all you have ever longed for is just one kind word, then Christ is the incarnation of tender mercy. He reaches out and touches you. On the other hand, if you’re a Pharisee, one of those self-appointed doctrine police . . . watch out. On more than one occasion Jesus “picks a fight” with those notorious hypocrites. Take the story of the crippled w oman in Luke 13. Here’s the background: The Pharisees are like the Scottish nobles—they, too, load heavy burdens on the backs of God’s people but do not lift a finger to help them. What is more, they are so bound to the Law that they insist it is a sin to heal someone on the Sabbath, for that would be doing “work.” They have twisted God’s intentions so badly they think that man w as made for the Sabbath, rather than the Sabbath for man (Mark 2:27). Christ has already had a number of skirmishes w ith them, some over this very issue, leaving those quislings “w ld w ith rage” (Luke 6:11 NLT).

Does Jesus tiptoe around the issue next time, so as not to “rock the boat” (the preference of so many of our leaders today)? Does he drop the subject in order to “preserve church unity”? Nope. He w alks right into it, he baits them, he picks a fight. Let’s pick up the story there:

One Sabbath day, Jesus was teaching in a synagogue; he saw a woman who had been crippled by an evil spirit. She had been bent double for eighteen years and was unable to stand up straight. When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, “Woman, you are healed of your sickness!” Then he touched her, and instantly she could stand straight. How she praised and thanked God! But the leader in charge of the synagogue was indignant that Jesus had healed her on the Sabbath day. “There are six days of the week for working,” he said to the crowd. “Come on those days to be healed, not on the Sabbath.” (Luke 13:10–14 NLT)

Can you believe this guy? What a weasel. Talk about completely missing the point. Christ is furious:

But the Lord replied, “You hypocrite! You work on the Sabbath day! Don’t you understand your own donkey from their stalls on the Sabbath and lead them out for water? Wasn’t it necessary for me, even on the Sabbath day, to free this dear woman from the bondage in which Satan has held her for eighteen years?” This shamed his enemies. And all the people rejoiced at the wonderful things he did. (Luke 13:15–17 NLT)

**A BATTLE TO FIGHT**

Christ draws s the enemy out, exposes him for w hat he is, and shames him in front of everyone. The Lord is a gentleman??? Not if you’re in the service of his enemy. God has a battle to fight, and the battle is for our freedom. As Tremper Longman says, “Virtually every book of the Bible—Old and New Testaments—and almost every page tells us about God’s w arring activity.” I w onder if the Egyptians who kept Israel under the w hip w ould describe Yahw eh as a Really Nice Guy? Plagues, pestilence, the death of every firstborn—that doesn’t seem very gentlemanly now, does it? What w ould Miss Manners have to say about taking the promised land? Does w holesale slaughter fit under “Calling on Your Neighbors”?

You remember that w ld man, Samson? He’s got a pretty impressive masculine résumé: killed a lion with his bare hands, pummeled and stripped thirty Philistines when they used his wife against him, and finally, after they burned her to death, he killed a thousand men w ith the jawbone of a donkey. Not a guy to mess w ith. But did you notice? All those events happened w hen “the Spirit of the LORD came upon him” (Judges 15:14, emphasis added). Now, let me make one thing clear: I am not advocating a sort of “macho man” image. I’m not suggesting we all head off to the gym and then to the beach to kick sand in the faces of w impy Pharisees. I am attempting to rescue us from a very, very mistaken image w e have of God—especially of Jesus—and therefore of men as his image-bearers. Dorothy Sayers wrote that the church has “very efficiently pared the claws of the Lion of Judah,” making him “a fitting household pet for pale curates and pious old ladies.” Is that the God you find in the Bible? To Job—who has questioned God’s strength, he replies:

Do you give the horse his strength or clothe his neck with a flowing mane? Do you make him leap like a locust, striking terror with his proud snorting? He paws fiercely, rejoicing in his strength, and charges into the fray.

He laughs at fear, afraid of nothing; he does not shy away from the sword. The quiver rattles against his side, along with the flashing spear and lance.

In frenzied excitement he eats up the ground; he cannot stand still when the trumpet sounds.

At the blast of the trumpet he snorts, “Aha!”

He catches the scent of battle from afar, the shout of commanders and the battle cry. (Job 39:19–25)

The war horse, the stallion, embodies the fierce heart of his Maker. And so do w e; every man is “a stem of that victorious stock.” Or at least, he was originally. You can tell what kind of man you’ve got simply by noting the impact he has on you. Does he make you bored? Does he scare you with his doctrinal nazism? Does he make you want to scream because he’s just so very nice? In the Garden of Gethsemane, in the dead of night, a mob of thugs “carrying torches, lanterns and w eapons” comes to take Christ away. Note the cow ardice of it—w hy didn’t they take him during the light of day, down in the town? Does Jesus shrink back in fear? No, he goes to face them head-on.

Jesus, knowing all that was going to happen to him, went out and asked them, “Who is it you want?”

“Jesus of Nazareth,” they replied.

“I am he,” Jesus said. (And Judas the traitor was standing there with them.) When Jesus said, “I am he,” they drew back and fell to the ground.

Again he asked them, “Who is it you want?” And they said, “Jesus of Nazareth.”

“I told you that I am he,” Jesus answered. “If you are looking for me, then let these men go.” (John 18:4–8, emphasis added)

Talk about strength. The sheer force of Jesus’ bold presence knocks the w hole posse over. A few years ago a good man gave me a copy of a poem Ezra Pound w rote about Christ, called “Ballad of the Goodly Fere.” It’s become my favorite. Written from the perspective of one of the men w ho follow ed Christ, perhaps Simon Zelotes, it’ll make a lot more sense if you know that fere is an Old English w ord that means mate, or companion:

*He we t the goodliest fere o’ all For the priests and the gallows tree*

*Ay* lover he was of bravvy men, *O* ships and the open sea, When they came w’ a hool to take Our Man His smile was good to see, *First let these go!* quo’ our Goodly Fere, *Or I’ll see ye damned,* says he.

Ay e he sent us out through the crossed high spears And the scorn of his laugh rang free, *Why took ye me when I walked about Alone in the town?* says he.

Oh we drunk his *Hale* in the good red wine When we last made company, No capon priest was the Goodly Fere But a man o’ men was he, I ha’ seen him drive a hundred men W’ a bundle o’ cords swung free, That they took the high and holy house For their pawn and treasure . . . I ha’ seen him cow a thousand men On the hills o’ Gallow.
They whined as he walked out calm between,  
With his eyes like the grey o' the sea,  
Like the sea that broods no voyaging  
With the winds unleashed and free,  
Like the sea that he cowed at Gennesaret  
With two words spoke's suddenly:  
A master of men was the Goodly Fere,  
A mate of the wind and sea,  
If they think they ha' slain our Goodly Fere  
They are fools eternally.

Jesus is no “capon priest,” no pale-faced altar boy with his hair parted in the middle, speaking softly, avoiding confrontation, who at last gets himself killed because he has no way out. He works w ith w ood, commands the loyalty of dockworkers. He is the Lord of hosts, the captain of angel armies. And when Christ returns, he is at the head of a dreadful company, mounted on a w hite horse, w ith a double-edged sword, his robe dipped in blood (Rev. 19). Now that sounds a lot more like William Wallace than it does Mother Teresa.

No question about it—there is something fierce in the heart of God.

WHAT ABOUT ADVENTURE?

If you have any doubts as to whether or not God loves wildness, spend a night in the woods . . . alone. Take a walk out in a thunderstorm. Go for a swim with a pod of killer whales. Get a bull moose mad at you. Whose idea was this, anyway? The Great Barrier Reef w ith its great white sharks, the jungles of India w ith their tigers, the deserts of the Southwest w ith all those rattlesnakes—w ould you describe them as “nice” places? Most of the earth is not safe; but it’s good. That struck me a little too late w hen hiking in to find the upper Kenai River in Alaska. My buddy Craig and I w ere after the salmon and giant rainbow trout that live in those icy w aters. We w ere w arned about bears, but didn’t really take it seriously until w e w ere deep into the w oods. Grizzly sign w as eveyw here—salmon strew n about the trail, their heads bitten off. Piles of droppings the size of small dogs. Huge claw marks on the trees, about head-level. We’re dead, I thought. What are we doing out here?

It then occurred to me that after God made all this, he pronounced it good, for heaven’s sake. It’s his w ay of letting us know he rather prefers adventure, danger, risk, the element of surprise. This w hole creation is unapologetically wild. God loves it that w ay. But w hat about his own w ildness? We know he has a battle to fight—but does God have an adventure to live? I mean, he already knows everything that’s going to happen, right? How could there be any risk to his life; hasn’t he got everything under absolute control?

In an attempt to secure the sovereignty of God, theologians have overstated their case and left us w ith a chess-player God playing both sides of the board, making all his moves and all ours too. But clearly, this is not so. God is a person w ho takes immense risks. No doubt the biggest risk of all was w hen he gave angels and men free w ill, including the freedom to reject him—not just once, but every single day. Does God cause a person to sin? “Absolutely not!” says Paul (Gal. 2:17). Then he can’t be moving all the pieces on the board, because people sin all the time. Fallen angels and men use their powers to commit horrendous daily evils. Does God stop every bullet fired at an innocent victim? Does he prevent teenage liaisons from producing teenage pregnancies? There is something much more risky going on here than we’re often willing to admit.

Most of us do everything we can to reduce the element of risk in our lives. We wear our seat belts, w atch our cholesterol, and practice birth control. I know some couples who w ho have decided against having children altogether; they simply aren’t willing to chance the heartache children often bring. What if they are born w ith a crippling disease? What if they turn their backs on us, and God? What if . . . ? God seems to fly in the face of all caution. Even though he knew w hat would happen, w hat heartbreak and suffering and devastation would follow upon our disobedience, God chose to have children. And unlike some hyper-controlling parents, w ho take away everything of choice they can from their children, God gave us a remarkable choice. He made us free to love.

This is the world he has made. This is the world that is still going on. And he doesn’t w alk away from the mess w e’ve made of it. Now he lives, almost cheerfully, certainly heroically, in a dynamic relationship w ith us and w ith the w orld. “Then the Lord intervened” is perhaps the single most common phrase about him in Scripture, in one form or another. Look at the stories he w rites. There’s the one w here the children of Israel are pinned against the Red Sea, no w ay out, w ith Pharaoh and his army barreling down on them in murderous fury. Then God shows up. There’s Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, w ho get rescued only after they’re thrown into the fiery furnace. Then God shows up. He lets the mob kill Jesus, buri him . . . then he w ells up. Do you know w hy God loves writing such incredible stories? Because he loves to come through. He loves to show us that he has w hat it takes.

It’s not the nature of God to limit his risks and cover his bases. Far from it. Most of the time, he actually lets the odds stack up against him. Against Goliath, a seasoned soldier and a trained killer, he sends . . . a freckle-faced little shepherd kid w ith a slingshot. Most commanders going into battle want as many infantry as they can get. God cuts Gideon’s army from thirty-tw o thousand to three-hundred. Then he equips the ragtag little band that’s left with torches and watering pots. It’s not just a battle or two that God takes his chances with, either. Have you thought about his handling of the gospel? God needs to get a message out to the human race, w ithout w hic w ill perish . . . forever. What’s the plan? First, he starts w ith the most unlikely group ever: a couple of prostitutes, a few fishermen w ith no better than a second-grade education, a tax collector. Then, he passes the ball to us. Unbelievable.

God’s relationship w ith us and w ith the w orld is just that: a relationship. As w ith every relationship, there’s a certain amount of unpredictability, and the ever-present likelihood that you’ll get hurt. The ultimate risk anyone ever takes is to love, for as C. S. Lew is says, “Love anything and your heart will w ound w her every day.” God’s willingness to risk is just astounding—far beyond what any of us would do w ere w e in his position.

Trying to reconcile God’s sovereignty and man’s free w ill has stumped the church for ages. We must humbly acknowledge that there’s a great deal of mystery involved, but for those aware of the discussion, I am not advocating open theism. Nevertheless, there is definitely something wild in the heart of God.

A BEAUTY TO FIGHT FOR

And all his wildness and all his fierceness are inseparable from his romantic heart. That theologians have missed this says more about theologians than it does about God. Music, w ine, poetry, sunsets . . . those were his inventions, not ours. We simply discovered w hat he had already thought of. Lovers and honeymooners choose places like Hawaii, the Bahamas, or Tuscany as a backdrop for their love. But w hose idea w as Haw aii, the Bahamas, and Tuscany? Let’s bring this a little closer to home. Whose idea w as it to create the human form in such a way that a kiss could be so delicious? And he
didn't stop there, as only lovers know. Starting with her eyes, King Solomon is feasting on his beloved through the course of their wedding night. He loves her hair, her smile, her lips “drop sw eetness as the honeycomb” and “milk and honey are under her tongue.” You'll notice he's working his way down:

Your neck is like the tower of David,
built with elegance . . .
Your two breasts are like two fawns . . .

Until the day breaks
and the shadows flee,
I will go to the mountain of myrrh
and to the hill of incense. (Song 4:6)

And his wife responds by saying, “Let my lover come into his garden and taste its choice fruits” (Song 4:16). What kind of God would put the Song of Songs in the canon of Holy Scripture? Really, now, is it conceivable that such an erotic and scandalous book would have been placed in the Bible by the Christians you know? And what is this, a delicate, poetic touch, “two fawns.” This is no pornography, but there is no way to try to explain it all as “theological metaphor.” That's just nonsense. In fact, God himself actually speaks in person in the Songs, once in the entire book. Solomon has taken his beloved to his bedchamber and the two are doing everything that lovers do there. God blesses it all, whispering, “Eat, O friends, and drink; drink your fill, O lovers” (Song 5:1), offering, as if needed, his own encouragement. And then he pulls the shades.

God is a romantic at heart, and he has his own bride to fight for. He is a jealous lover, and his jealousy is for the hearts of his people and for their freedom. As Francis Frangipane so truly states, “Rescue is the constant pattern of God's activity.”

For Zion’s sake I will not keep silent,
for Jerusalem’s sake I will not remain quiet,
till her righteousness shines out like the dawn,
her salvation like a blazing torch . . .

As a bridegroom rejoices over his bride,
so will your God rejoice over you. (Isa. 62:1, 5)

And though she has committed adultery against him, though she has fallen captive to his enemy, God is willing to move heaven and earth to win her back. He will stop at nothing to set her free:

Who is this coming from Edom,
from Bozrah, with his garments stained crimson?
Who is this, robed in splendid,
striking forward in the greatness of his strength?

"It is I, speaking in righteousness,
mighty to save.”

Why are your garments red,
like those of one treading the winepress?
I have trodden the winepress alone;
from the nations no one was with me.
I trampled them in my anger
and trod them down in my wrath;
their blood spattered my garments,
and I stained all my clothing.

For the day of vengeance was in my heart,
and the year of my redemption has come. (Isa. 63:1–4)

Whoa. Talk about a Braveheart. This is one fierce, wild, and passionate guy. I have never heard Mister Rogers talk like that. Come to think of it, I have never heard anyone in church talk like that, either. But this is the God of heaven and earth. The Lion of Judah.

LITTLE BOYS AND LITTLE GIRLS

And this is our true Father, the stock from which the heart of man is drawn. Strong, courageous love. As George MacDonald wrote, Thou art my life—I the brook, thou the spring.

Because thine eyes are open, I can see;
Because thou art thyself, 'tis therefore I am me.

(I Diary of an Old Soul)

I've noticed that so often our word to boys is don't. Don't climb on that, don't break anything, don't be so aggressive, don't be so noisy, don't be so messy, don't take such crazy risks. But God's design—which he placed in boys as the picture of himself—is a resounding yes. Be fierce, be wild, be passionate. Now, none of this is to diminish the fact that a woman bears God's image as well. The masculine and feminine run throughout all creation. As Lew is says, “Gender is a reality and a more fundamental reality than sex. . . . A fundamental polarity which divides all created beings.” There is the sun and then there are the moon and stars; there is the rugged mountain and there is the field of wildflowers that grows upon it. A male lion is awesome to behold, but have you ever seen a lionness? There is also something wild in the heart of a woman, but it is feminine to the core, more seductive than fierce.

Eve and all her daughters are also “a stem of that victorious stock,” but in a wondrously different way. As a counselor and a friend, and especially as a husband, I've been honored to be welcomed into the deep heart of Eve. Often when I am with a woman, I find myself quietly wondering, Why is she telling me about God? I know he wants to say something to the world through Eve—what is it? And after years of hearing the heart-cry of women, I am convinced beyond a doubt of this: God wants to be loved. He wants to be a priority to someone. How could we have missed this? From cover to cover, starting with ending, the cry of God's heart is, "Why won't you choose Me?" It is amazing to me how humble, how vulnerable God is on this point.

"You will . . . find me," says the Lord, "when you seek me with all your heart" (Jer. 29:13). In other words, "Look for me, pursue me—I want you to pursue me." Amazing. As Tozer says, "God waits to be wanted."

And certainly we see that God w ants not merely an adventure, but an adventure to share. He didn’t have to make us, but he wanted to. Though he knows the name of every star and his kingdom spans galaxies, God delights in being a part of our lives. Do you know why he often doesn’t answer your prayers right away? Because he wants to talk to us, and sometimes that’s the only way to get us to stay and talk to him. His heart is for relationship, for shared adventure to the core.

And yes, God has a beauty to unveil. There's a reason that a man is captivated by a woman. Eve is the crown of creation. If you follow the Genesis narrative carefully, you'll see that each new stage of creation is better than the one before. First, all is formless, empty and dark. God begins to fashion the raw mate rials, like an artist working with a rough sketch or a lump of clay. Light and dark, land and sea, earth and sky—it's beginning to take shape.

With a word, the whole floral kingdom adorns the earth. Sun, moon, and stars fill the sky. Surely and certainly, his work expresses greater detail and definition. Next come fish and fowl, porpoises and red-tailed hawks. The wild animals are next, all those amazing creatures. A trout is a wondrous creature, but a horse is truly magnificent. Can you hear the crescendo starting to swell, like a great symphony building and surging higher and higher?
Then comes Adam, the triumph of God's handiwork. It is not to any member of the animal kingdom that God says, "You are my very image, the icon of my likeness." Adam bears the likeness of God in his fierce, wild, and passionate heart. And yet, there is one more finishing touch. There is Eve. Creation comes to its high point, its climax with her. She is God's finishing touch. And all Adam can say is, "Wow." Eve embodies the beauty and the mystery and the tender vulnerability of God. As the poet William Blake said, "The naked woman's body is a portion of eternity too great for the eye of man."

The reason a woman wants a beauty to unveil, the reason she asks, Do you delight in me? is simply that God does as well. God is captivating beauty. As David prays, "One thing I ask of the LORD, this is what I seek: that I may . . . gaze upon the beauty of the LORD" (Ps. 27:4). Can there be any doubt that God wants to be worshiped? That he wants to be seen, and for us to be captivated by what we see? As C. S. Lewis wrote, "The beauty of the female is the root of joy to the female as well as to the male . . . to desire the enjoying of her own beauty is the obedience of Eve, and to both it is in the lover that the beloved tastes of her own delightfulness."

This is far too simple an outline, I admit. There is so much more to say, and these are not hard and rigid categories. A man needs to be tender at times, and a woman will sometimes need to be fierce. But if a man is only tender, we know something is deeply wrong, and if a woman is only fierce, we sense she is not what she was meant to be. If you'll look at the essence of little boys and little girls, I think you'll find I am not far from my mark. Strength and beauty. As the psalmist says, One thing God has spoken, two things have I heard: that you, O God, are strong, and that you, O Lord, are loving. (Ps. 62:11–12)
Our local zoo had for years one of the biggest African lions I’ve ever seen. A huge male, nearly five hundred pounds, with a wonderful mane and absolutely enormous paws. *Panthera leo*. The King of the Beasts. Sure, he was caged, but I’m telling you the bars offered small comfort when you stood within six feet of something that in any other situation saw you as an easy lunch. Honestly, I felt I ought to shepherd my boys past him at a safe distance, as if he could pounce on us if he really wanted to. Yet he was my favorite, and whenever the others would wander on to the monkey house or the tigers, I’d double back just for a few more minutes in the presence of someone so powerful and noble and deadly. Perhaps it was as fear mingled with admiration; perhaps it was simply that my heart broke for the big old cat.

This wonderful, terrible creature should have been out roaming the savanna, ruling his pride, striking fear into the heart of every wildebeest, bringing down zebras and gazelles whenever the urge seized him. Instead, he spent every hour of every day and every night of every year alone, in a cage smaller than your bedroom, his food served to him through a little metal door. Sometimes late at night, after the city had gone to sleep, I would hear his roar come down from the hills. It sounded not so much fierce, but rather mournful. During all of my visits, he never looked me in the eye. I desperately wanted him to, wanted for his sake the chance to stare me down, would have loved it if he took a swipe at me. But he just lay there, weary with that deep weariness that comes from boredom, taking shallow breaths, rolling now and then from side to side.

For after years of living in a cage, a lion no longer even believes it is a lion . . . and a man no longer believes he is a man.

**THE LION OF JUDAH??**

A man is fierce . . . passionate . . . wild at heart? You wouldn’t know it from what normally walks around in a pair of trousers. If a man is the image of the Lion of Judah, how come there are so many lonely women, so many fatherless children, so few men around? Why is it that the world seems filled with “caricatures” of masculinity? There’s the guy who lives behind us. He spends his entire weekend in front of the tube watching sports while his sons play outside—without him. We’ve lived here nine years and I think I’ve seen him play with his boys maybe twice. What’s with that? Why won’t he engage? And the guy the next street over, who races motorcycles and drives a huge truck and wears a leather jacket and sort of swaggers when he walks. I thought James Dean died years ago. What’s with that? It looks manly, but it seems cartoonish, overdone.

How come when men look in their hearts they don’t discover something valiant and dangerous, but instead find anger, lust, and fear? Most of the time, I feel more fearful than I do fierce. Why is that? It was as one hundred and fifty years ago that Thoreau wrote, “The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation,” and it seems nothing has changed. As the line from *Braveheart* has it, “All men die; few ever really live.” And so most women live quiet resignations, having given up on their hope for a true man.

The real life of the average man seems a universe away from the desires of his heart. There is no battle to fight, unless it’s traffic and meetings and hassles and bills. The guys who go to work every Thursday morning down the street go to the coffee shop and share a few Bible verses with each other—where is their great battle? And the guys who hang out down at the bowling alley, smoking and having a few too many—they’re in the exact same place. The sworlers and castles of their boyhood have long been replaced with pencils and cubicles; the six-shooters and cow boy hats laid aside for minivans and mortgages. The poet Edwin Robinson captured the quiet desperation this way:

> Miniver Cheevy, child of scorn,  
> Grew lean while he assailed the seasons;  
> He wept that he was ever born,  
> And he had reasons.  
> Miniver loved the days of old  
> When swords were bright and steeds were prancing;  
> The vision of a warrior bold  
> Would set him dancing.  
> Miniver Cheevy, born too late,  
> Scratched his head and kept on thinking;  
> Miniver coughed, and called it fate,  
> And kept on thinking. ("Miniver Cheevy")

Without a great battle in which a man can live and die, the fierce part of his nature goes underground and sort of simmers there in a kind of anger that seems to have no reason. A few weeks ago I was on a flight to the West Coast. It was dinner time, and right in the middle of the meal the guy in front of me drops his seat back as far as it can go, with a couple of hard shoves back at me to make sure. I wanted to knock him into First Class. A friend of mine is having trouble with his toy shop, because the kids who come in “tick him off” and he’s snapping at them. Not exactly good for business. So many men, good men, confess to losing it at their own children regularly. Then there’s the guy in front of me at a stoplight yesterday. It turned green, but he didn’t move; I guess he wasn’t paying attention. I gave a little toot on my horn to draw his attention to the fact that now there were twenty-plus cars piling up behind us. The guy was out of his car in a flash, yelling threats, ready for a fight. Truth be told, I wanted desperately to meet him there. Men are angry, and we really don’t know why.

And how come there are so many “sports widows,” losing their husbands each weekend to the golf course or the TV? Why are so many men addicted to sports? It’s the biggest adventure many of them ever taste. Why do so many others lose themselves in their careers? Same reason. I noticed the other day that the *Wall Street Journal* advertises itself to men as “adventures in capitalism.” I know guys who spend hours on-line, e-trading stocks. There’s a taste of excitement and risk to it, no question. And who’s to blame them? The rest of their life is chores and tedious routine. It’s no coincidence that many men fall into an affair not for love, not even for sex, but, by their own admission, for adventure. So many guys have been told to put that adventurous spirit behind them and “be responsible,” meaning, live only for duty. All that’s left are pictures on the wall of days gone by, and maybe some gear piled in the garage. Ed Sissman writes,

> Men past forty
I hope you're getting the picture by now. If a man does not find those things for which his heart is made, if he is never even invited to live for them from his deep heart, he will look for them in some other way. Why is pornography the number one snare for men? He longs for the beauty, but without his fierce and passionate heart he cannot find her or in her or keep her. Though he is powrfully drawn to the woman, he does not know how to fight for her or even that he is to fight for her. Rather, he finds her mostly a mystery that he knows he cannot solve and so at a soul level he keeps his distance. And privately, secretly, he turns to the imitation. What makes pornography so addictive is that more than anything else in a lost man's life, it makes him feel like a man with no over ever requiring a thing of him? The less a guy feels like a real man in the presence of a real woman, the more vulnerable he is to porn.

And so a man's heart, driven into the darker regions of the soul, denied the very things he most deeply desires, comes out in darker places. Now, a man's struggles, his wounds and addictions, are a bit more involved than that, but those are the core reasons. As the poet George Herbert warned, "he begins to die, that quits his desires." And you know what? We all know it. Every man knows that something's happened, something's gone wrong... we just don't know what it is.

**OUR FEAR**

I spent ten years of my life in the theater, as an actor and director. They were the most part, joyful years. I was young and energetic and pretty good at what I did. My wife was part of the theater company I managed, and we had many close friends there. I tell you this so that you will understand what I am about to reveal. In spite of the fact that my memories of theater are nearly all happy ones, I keep having this recurring nightmare. This is how it goes: I suddenly find myself in a theater—a large, Broadway-style playhouse, the kind every actor aspires to play. The house lights are low and the stage lights full, so from my position onstage I can barely make out the audience, but I sense it is a full house. Standing room only. So far, so good. Actors love playing to a full house. But I am not loving the moment at all. I am paralyzed with fear. A play is under way and I've got a crucial part. But I have no idea what that part is. I don't know what part I'm supposed to be playing; I don't know my lines; I don't even know my cues.

This is every man's deepest fear: to be exposed, to be found out, to be discovered as an impostor, and not really a man. The dream has nothing to do with acting; that's just the context for my fear. You have yours. A man bears the image of God in his strength, not so much physically but soulfully. Regardless of whether or not he knows the biblical account, if there's one thing a man does know he knows he is made to come through. Yet he wonders... Can I? Will I? When the going gets rough, when it really matters, will he pull it off? For years my soul lived in this turmoil. I'd often wake in the morning with an anxiousness that had no immediate source. My stomach was frequently tied in knots. One day my dear friend Brent asked, "What do you do now that you don't act anymore?" I realized at that moment that my whole life felt like a performance, like I am always "on." I felt in every situation like I suddenly find myself in a theater—a large, Broadway-style playhouse, the kind every actor aspires to play. The house lights are low and the stage lights full, so from my position onstage I can barely make out the audience, but I sense it is a full house. Standing room only. So far, so good. Actors love playing to a full house. But I am not loving the moment at all. I am paralyzed with fear. A play is under way and I've got a crucial part. But I have no idea what that part is. I don't know what part I'm supposed to be playing; I don't know my lines; I don't even know my cues.

One of my clients got a great promotion and a raise. He came in depressed. Good grief, I thought. Why? Every man longs to be praised, and paid well on top of it. He confessed that although the applause felt great, he knew it only set him up for a bigger fall. Tomorrow, he'd have to do it all over, hit the ball out of the park again. Every man feels that the world is asking him to be something he doubts very much he has it in him to be. This is universal. I've yet to meet an honest man who won't admit it. Yes, there are many dense men who are wondering what I'm talking about; for them, life is fine and they are doing great. Just wait. Unless it's really and truly a reflection of genuine strength, it's a house of cards, and it'll come down sooner or later. Anger will surface, or an addiction. Headaches, an ulcer, or maybe an affair.

Honestly—how do you see yourself as a man? Are words like strong, passionate, and dangerous words you would choose? Do you have the courage to ask those in your life what they think of you as a man? What words do you fear they would choose? I mentioned the film Legends of the Fall, how every man who's seen it wants to be Tristan. But most see themselves as Alfred or Samuel. I've talked to many men about the film Braveheart and though every single one of them would love to be William Wallace, the dangerous warrior-hero, most see themselves as Robert the Bruce, the weak, intimidated guy who keeps folding under pressure. I'd love to think of myself as Indiana Jones; I'm afraid I'm more like Woody Allen.

The comedian Garrison Keillor wrote a very funny essay on this in his The Book of Guys. Realizing one day that he was not being honest about himself as a man, he sat down to make a list of his strengths and weaknesses:

**USEFUL THINGS I CAN DO:**

- Be nice.
- Make a bed.
- Dig a hole.
- Writebooks.
- Sing alto or bass.
- Read a map.
- Drive a car.

**USEFUL THINGS I CAN'T DO:**

- Chop down big trees and cut them into lumber or firewood.
- Handle a horse, train a dog, or tend a herd of animals.
- Handle a boat without panicking the others.
- Throw a fastball, curve, or slider.
- Load, shoot, and clean a gun. Or bow and arrow. Or use either of them, or a spear, net, snare, boomerang, or blowgun, to obtain meat.

Defend myself with my bare hands.

Keillor confesses: "Maybe it's an okay report card for a person but I don't know any persons... For a guy, it's not good. A woman would go down the list and say, 'What does it matter if a guy can handle a boat? Throw a curveball? Bag a deer? Throw a left hook? This is 1993.' But that's a woman's view of manhood." Craig and I were joking about this as we hacked our way through grizzly-infested woods in Alaska. The only other guys we met all
day were a group of locals on their way out. They looked like something out of Soldier of Fortune magazine—sawed-off shotguns, pistols, bandoleers of ammo slung across their chests, huge knives. They were ready. They had what they take. And we? We had a whistle. I'm serious. That's what we brought for our dangerous trek through the wild: a whistle. Talk about a couple of pansies. Craig confessed, “Me—what can I really do? I mean really? I know how to operate a fax machine.”

That's how most men feel about their readiness to fight, to live with risk, to capture the beauty. We have a whistle. You see, even though the desires are there for a battle to fight, an adventure to live, and a beauty to rescue, even though our boyhood dreams once were filled with those things, we don’t think we’re up to it. Why don’t men play the man? Why don’t they offer their strength to a world desperately in need of it? For two simple reasons: We doubt very much that we have any real strength to offer, and we’re pretty certain that if we did offer what we have it wouldn’t be enough.

POSERS

Adam knew what he had blown it, that something has gone wrong with him, that he is no longer what he was meant to be. Adam doesn’t just make a bad decision; he gives away something essential to his nature. He is married now, his strength is fallen, and he knows it. Then what happens?
Adam hides. “I w as afraid because I w as naked; so I hid” (Gen. 3:10). You don’t need a course in psychology to understand men. Understand that verse, let its implications sink in, and the men around you w ill suddenly come into focus. We are hiding, every last one of us. Well aware that w e, too, are not w hat w e w ere meant to be, desperately afraid of exposure, terrified of being seen for what w e are and are not. W e have run off into the bushes. W e hide in our office, at the gym, behind the new spaper and mostly behind our personality. Most of w hat you encounter w hen you meet a man is a facade, an elaborate fig leaf, a brilliant disguise.

Driving back from dinner one night, a friend and I w ere just sort of shooting the breeze about life and marriage and work. As the conversation deepened, he began to admit some of the struggles he w as having. Then he came out w ith this confession: “The truth is, John, I feel like I’m just [bluffing] my way through life . . . and that someday soon I’ll be exposed as an impostor.” I w as so surprised. This is a popular, successful guy w ho most people like as the moment they meet him. He’s bright, articulate, handsome, and athletic. He’s married to a beautiful w oman, has a great job, drives a new truck, and lives in a big house. There is nothing on the outside that says, “not really a man.” But inside, it’s another story. It aw ays is.

Before I ever mentioned my nightmare about being onstage with nothing to say, another friend shared w ith me that he, too, is having a recurring nightmare. It involves a murder, and the FBI. Apparently, in his dream, he has killed someone and buried the body out back of his house. But the authorities are closing in, and he knows that any moment they’ll discover the crime scene and he’ll be caught. The dream aw ays ends just before he is found out. He w akes in a cold sweat. “Any day now, I’ll be found out” is a pretty common theme among us guys. Truth be told, most of us are faking our way through life. W e pick only those battles w e are sure to win, only those adventures w e are sure to handle, only those beauties w e are sure to rescue.

Let me ask the guys w ho don’t know much about cars: How do you talk to your mechanic? I know a bit about fixing cars, but not much, and when I’m around my mechanic I feel like a w eenie. So w hat do I do? I fake it; I pose. I assume a sort of casual, laid-back manner I imagine “the guys” use w hen hanging around the lunch truck, and I w ait for him to speak. “Looks like it might be your fuel mixture,” he says. “Yeah, I thought it might be that.” “When w as the last time you had your carb rebuilt?” “Oh, I dunno . . . it’s probably been years.” (I’m guessing he’s talking about my carburetor, and I have no idea if it’s ever been rebuilt.) “Well, w e’d better do it now or you’re going to end up on some country road miles from now here and then you’ll have to do it yourself.” “Yeah, I say casually, as if I don’t w ant to be bothered having to rebuild that thing even though I know. I w on’t have the slightest idea w here to begin. All I have is a w histle, remember? I tell him to go ahead, and he sticks out his hand, a big, greasy hand. His head man w as a prettty intimidating guy. Many heads rolled in his office. My plan w as basically to try to avoid him at all costs; w hen I did run into him in the hall way, even in “friendly” conversation, I w ays felt about ten years old.

How about sports? A few years ago I volunteered to coach for my son’s baseball team. W h at was a mandatory meeting that all coaches needed to attend before the season, to pick up equipment and listen to a “briefing.” Our recreation department brought in a retired professional pitcher, a local boy, to give us all a pep talk. The pose w hat he w ent on was incredible. Here’s a bunch of balding dads w ith beer bellies sort of sw aggering around, talking about their ow n baseball days, throwing out comments about pro players like they knew them personally, and spitting (I kid you not). Their “attitude” (that’s a tame w ord) w as so thick I needed w aders. It w as the biggest bunch of posers I’ve ever met . . . outside of church.

That same sort of thing goes on Sunday mornings, its just a different set of rules. Dave runs into Bob in the church lobby. Both are w earing their happy faces, though neither is happy at all. “Hey, Bob, how are ya?” Bob is actually furious at his wife and w ants to leave her, but he says, “Great, just great, Dave. The Lord is good!” Dave, on the other hand, hasn’t believed in the goodness of God for years, ever since his daughter w as killed. “Yeah – God is good, all the time. I’m just so glad to be here, praising the Lord.” “Me too. W e’ll be praying for you!” I w ould love to see a tally of the number of prayers actually prayed against the number of prayers promised. I bet its about one in a thousand. “And I’ll be praying for you too. Well, gotta go! You take care.” “Take care” is our way of saying, “I’m done w ith this conversation and I w ant to get out of here but I don’t w ant to appear rude so I’ll say something that sounds meaningful and caring,” but in truth, Dave doesn’t give a rip about Bob.

Adam falls, and all his sons w ith him. After that, w hat do you see as the story unfolds? Violent men, or passive men. Strength gone bad. Cain kills Abel; Lamech threatens to kill everybody else. God finally floods the earth because of the violence of men, but it’s still going on. Sometimes it gets physical; most of the time, it’s verbal. I know Christian men w ho say the most aw ful things to their w ives. Or they kill them w ith their silence; a cold, deadly silence. I know pastors, w arm and friendly guys in the pulpit, w ho from the safety of their office send out blistering Emails to their staff. It’s cow ardice, all of it. I was intrigued to read in the journals of civil war commanders how the men you thought w ould be real heroes end up just the opposite. “Roughs that are always ready for street fighting are cowards on the open battlefield,” declared one corporal. A sergeant from the same division agreed: “I don’t know of a single fist-fighting bully but w hat he makes a cow ardly soldier.” The violence, no matter w hat form, is a cover-up for fear.

What about the achievers, the men running hard at life, pressing their way ahead? Most of it is fear-based as well. Not all of it, but most of it. For years, I w as a driven, type A, hard-charging perfectionist. I demanded a lot of myself and of those who worked for me. My w ife didn’t like to call me at a single fist-fighting bully but what he makes a cowardly soldier.” The violence, no matter what form, is a cover-up for fear.

What about the achievers, the men running hard at life, pressing their way ahead? Most of it is fear-based as well. Not all of it, but most of it. For years, I was a driven, type A, hard-charging perfectionist. I demanded a lot of myself and of those who worked for me. My wife didn’t like to call me at
our wedding, I am faced with the reality that I now have this woman as my constant companion and I have no idea what it really means to love her, nor if I have whatever it is she needs from me. *What if I offer her all I have as a man and it’s not enough?* That’s a risk I was not willing to take. But I knew I had what it took at the theater, and so slowly I began to spend more and more time there. Late nights, weekends, eventually every waking moment. I was hiding, like Adam, running from the fact that my strength was being called for and I really doubted I had any.

The evidence is clear: Adam and Eve’s fall sent a tremor through the human race. A fatal flaw entered the original, and it’s been passed on to every son and daughter. Thus every little boy and every little girl comes into the world set up for a loss of heart. Even if he can’t quite put it into words, every man is haunted by the question, “Am I really a man? Have I got what it takes . . . when it counts?” What follows is the story we are personally much, much more familiar with.

*I’m indebted to Crabb, Hudson, and Andrews for pointing this out in The Silence of Adam.*
CHAPTER FOUR

THE WOUND

Little Billy’s mother was always telling him exactly what he was allowed to do and what he was not allowed to do. All the things he was allowed to do were exciting. One of the things he was NEVER NEVER allowed to do, the most exciting of them all, was to go out through the garden gate all by himself and explore the world beyond.

—ROALD DAHL, THE MINPIN

In the clearing stands a boxer
And a fighter by his trade
And he carries the reminders
Of every glove that laid him down
and cut him till he cried out
in his anger and his shame
"I am nothing, I am nothing"
But the fighter still remains.

—PAUL SIMON
"The Boxer"
(© 1968 by Paul Simon)

I believe I was the only one in the entire company to come all the way through Normandy without getting wounded.

—PVT. WILLIAM CRAFT, 314TH INFANTRY REGIMENT

The story of Adam’s fall is every man’s story. It is simple and straightforward, almost mythic in its brevity and depth. And so every man comes into the world set up for a loss of heart. Then comes the story we are much more aware of—our own story. Where Adam’s story seems simple and straightforward, our own seems complex and detailed; many more characters are involved, and the plot is sometimes hard to follow. But the outcome is always the same: a wound in the soul. Every boy, in his journey to become a man, takes an arrow in the center of his heart, in the place of his strength. Because the wound is rarely discussed and even more rarely healed, every man carries a wound. And the wound is nearly always given by his father.

A MAN’S DEEPEST QUESTION

On a warm August afternoon several years ago my boys and I were rock climbing in a place called Garden of the Gods, near our home. The red sandstone spires there look like the dorsal fins of some great beast that has just surfaced from the basement of time. We all love to climb, and our love for it goes beyond the adventure. There’s something about facing a wall of rock, accepting its challenge and mastering it that calls you out, tests and affirms what you are made of. Besides, the boys are going to climb everything any way—the refrigerator, the banister, the neighbor’s grape arbor—so we might as well take it outside. And it’s an excuse to buy some really cool gear. Anyway, when I climb with the boys we always top-rope, meaning that before the ascent I’ll rig protection from the top of the rock down, enabling me to belay from the bottom. That way I can coach them as they go, see their every move, help them through the tough spots. Sam was the first to climb that afternoon, and after he clipped the rope into his harness, he began his attempt.

Things were going well until he hit a bit of an overhang, which even though you’re roped in makes you feel exposed and more than a little vulnerable. Sam was unable to get over it and he began to get more and more scared the longer he hung there; tears were soon to follow. So I told him the honest reassurance I told him to head back down, that we didn’t need to climb this rock today, that I knew of another one that might be more fun. “No,” he said, “I want to do this.” I understood. There comes a time when we simply have to face the challenges in our lives and stop backing down. So I helped him up the overhang with a bit of a boost, and on he went with greater speed and confidence. “Way to go, Sam. You’re looking good. That’s it . . . now reach up to your right . . . yep, now push off that foothold . . . nice move.”

Notice what a crucial part of any male sport this sort of “shop talk” is. It’s our way of affirming each other without looking like we’re affirming. Men rarely praise each other directly, as women do: “Ted, I absolutely love your shorts. You look terrific today.” We praise indirectly, by way of our accomplishments: “Whoa, nice shot, Ted. You’ve got a wicked swing today.” As Sam ascended, I was offering words of advice and exhortation. He came to another challenging spot, but this time sailed right over it. A few more moves and he would be at the top. “Way to go, Sam. You’re a wild man.” He finished the climb, and as he walked down from the back side I began to get Blaine clipped in. Ten or fifteen minutes passed, and the story was forgotten to me. But not Sam. While I was coaching his brother up the rock, Sam sort of sidled up to me and in a quiet voice asked, “Dad . . . did you really think I was a wild man up there?”

Miss that moment and you’ll miss a boy’s heart forever. It’s not a question—it’s the question, the one every boy and man is longing to ask. Do I have what it takes? Am I powerful? Until a man knows he’s a man he will forever be trying to prove he is one, while at the same time shrink from anything that might reveal he is not. Most men live their lives haunted by the question, or crippled by the answer they’ve been given.

WHERE DOES MASCULINITY COME FROM?

In order to understand how a man receives a wound, you must understand the central truth of a boy’s journey to manhood: Masculinity is bestowed. A boy learns who he is and what he’s got from a man, or the company of men. He cannot learn it any other place. He cannot learn it from other boys, and his mother can’t whisper to him until he’s a man. He cannot learn it anywhere but from his father’s hand. Jacob gets the blessing, and nearly a century later, leaning on his staff, he passes it on to his sons—he gives them a name and an identity. “You are a lion’s cub, O Judah . . . Issachar is a raw boned donkey . . . Dan will be a serpent . . . Gad will be attacked by a band of raiders, but he will attack them at their heels . . . Joseph is a fruitful vine . . . his bow remained steady” (Gen. 49:9, 14, 17, 19, 22, 24). The Baptist’s father names him John, even though the rest of the family was going to name him after his father, Zechariah. Even Jesus needed to hear those words of affirmation from his Father. After he is baptized in the Jordan, before the brutal attack on his identity in the wilderness, his Father speaks: “You are My Son, w hom I love; w ith you I am well pleased” (Luke 3:22). In other words, “Jesus, I am deeply proud of you; you have what it takes.”

One father-naming story in particular intrigues me. It centers around Benjamin, the last son born to Jacob. Rachel gives birth to the boy, but she will die as a result. With her last breath she names him Ben-Oni, which means “son of my sorrow.” But Jacob intervenes and names him Benjamin—“son of my right hand” (Gen. 35:18). This is the critical move, when a boy draws his identity no longer from the mother, but from the father. Notice that it took an active intervention by the man; it always does.
A boy is brought into the world by his mother, and she is the center of his universe in those first tender months and years. She suckles him, nurtures him, protects him; she sings to him, reads to him, watches over him, as the old saying goes, "like a mother hen." She often names him as well, tender names like "my little lamb," or "Mama's little sw eheart," or even "my little boyfriend." But a boy cannot grow to manhood with a name like that, let alone a name like "son of my sorrow," and there comes a time for the shift when he begins to seek out his father's affection and attention. He wants to play catch with Dad, and wrestle with him, spend time outside together, or in his workshop. If Dad works outside the home, as most do, then his return in the evening becomes the biggest event of the boy's day. Stasi can tell you w hen it happened for each of our boys. This is a very hard time in a mother's life, when the father replaces her as the sun of the boy's universe. It is part of Eve's sorrow, this letting go, this being replaced.

Few mothers do it willingly; very few do it well. Many women ask their sons to fill a void in their soul that their husband has left. But the boy has a question that needs an answer, and he cannot get the answer from his mother. Femininity can never bestow masculinity. My mother w ould often call me "sw eheart," but my father called me "tiger." Which direction do you think a boy would w ant to head? He w ill still turn to his mother for comfort (w ho does he run to w hen he skis his knees?), but he turns to Dad for adventure, for the chance to test his strength, and most of all, to get the answer to his question. A classic example of these dualing roles took place the other night. We were driving down the road and the boy w er e talking about the kind of car they w ant to get w hen it comes time for their first set of w heels. "I w as thinking about a Humvee, or a motorcycle, maybe even a tank. What do you think, Dad?" "I'd go w ith the Humvee. We could mount a gun on top." "What about you, Mom—w hat kind of car do you w ant me to have?" You know w hat she said . . . "A safe one."

Stasi is a wonderful mother; she has bit her tongue so many times I w onder that she still has one, as she holds her peace w hile the boys and I rush off to some adventure begging destruction or bloodshed. Her first reaction—"a safe one"—is so natural, so understandable. After all, she is the incarnation of God's tenderness. But if a mother w ill not allow her son to become dangerous, if she does not let the father take him away, she w ill emasculate him. I just read a story of a mother, divorced from her husband, w ho w as so furious that he wanted to take the boy hunting. She tried to get a restraining order to prevent him from teaching the boy about guns. That is emascula tion. "My mom w ouldn't let me play w ith GI Joe," a young man told me. Another said, "We lived back east, near an amusement park. It had a roller coaster—the old w ooden kind. But my mom w ould never let me go." That is emascula tion, and the boy needs to be rescued from it by the active intervention of the father, or another man.

This kind of intervention is pow erfully portrayed in the movie A Perfect World. Kevin Costner plays an escaped convict who takes a young boy hostage and heads for the state line. But as the story unfolds, w e see that w hat looks like the boy's ruin is actually his redemption. The boy is in his uperant pants when Costner abducts him. That is where many mothers want to keep their sons, albeit unconsciously. She w ants her little lamb close by. Over the days that follow, days "together on the road" I might add, Costner and the boy—w ho has no father—grow close. When he learns that the boy's mother has never allowed him to ride a roller coaster, Costner is outraged. The next scene is the boy, arms high in the air, rolling up and down country roads on the roof of the station wagon. That's the invitation into a man's world, a world involving danger. Implicit in the invitation is the affirmation, "You can handle it; you belong here."

There comes a moment w hen Costner buys the boy a pair of pants (the symbolism in the film is amazing), but the boy w on't change in front of him. He is a shy, timid boy w ho has yet to even smile in the story. Costner senses something is up.

"What's the matter—you don't want me to see your pecker?"

"It's . . . puny."

"What?"

"It's puny."

"Who told you that?"

The boy, Phillip, is silent. It is the silence of emasculation and shame. The absence of the father's voice is loud and clear. So Costner intervenes, and speaks. "Lemme see . . . go on, I'll shoot you straight." The boy reluctantly bares himself. "No, Phillip. That's a good size for a boy your age." A smile breaks out on his face, like the sun coming up, and you know a major threshold has been crossed for him.

FROM STRENGTH TO STRENGTH

Masculinity is an essence that is hard to articulate but that a boy naturally craves as he craves food and water. It is something passed between men.

"The traditional way of raising sons," notes Robert Bly, "w hich lasted for thousands and thousands of years, amounted to fathers and sons living in close—murderous close—proximity, while the father taught the son a trade: perhaps farming or carpentry or blacksmithing or tailoring." My father taught me to fish. W e w ould spend long days together, out in a boat on a lake, trying to catch fish. I will never, ever forget his delight in me when I'd hook one. But the fish w ere never really the important thing. It w as the delight, the contact, the masculine presence gladly bestowing itself on me. "Atta boy, Tiger! Bring him in! That's it . . . well done!" Listen to men when they talk warmly of their fathers and you'll hear the same. "My father taught me to fix tractors . . . to throw a curveball . . . to hunt quail." And despite the details, what is mostly passed along is the masculine blessing.

"Fathers and sons in most tribal cultures live in an amused tolerance of each other," says Bly. "The son has a lot to learn, and so the father and son spend hours trying and falling together to make arrow heads or to repair a spear or track a clever animal. When a father and son spend long hours together, w hic h some fathers and sons still do, w e could say that a substance almost like food passes from the older body to the younger." This is why my boys love to w restle w ith m e—w hy any healthy boy w ants the same w ith his father. They love the physical contact, to brush against my cheek, feel the sandpaper of my wiskers, my strength all around them, and to test theirs on me.

And it's that testing that is so essential. As they've gotten older, they love to start punching matches w ith m e. Luke just did it this morning, I'm dows nstairs fixing breakfast; Luke senses the opportunity, and he sneaks down stairs and silently stalks me; when he's in range, he lets loose a w allop. It hurts, and they need to see that it hurts. Do they have a strength like Dad's? Is it growing, real, substantive? I'll never forget the day w hen Sam gave me a bloody lip, quite by accident, w hen w e w ere w restling. At first he drew back in fear, waiting. I'm sorry to admit, for my anger. Thankfully, on this occasion I just w iped the blood away, smiled, and said, "Whoa . . . nice shot." he beamed; no, he st rutt ed. Shook his antlers at me. Word quickly spread through the house and his younger brothers w ere on the scene, eyes w ide at the fact that one of them had draw n blood. New possibilities opened up. Maybe young bucks can take on the old bull.

"The ancient societies believed that a boy becomes a man only through ritual and effort—only through the 'active intervention of the older men,'" Bly reminds us. The father or another man must actively intervene, and the mother must let go. Bly tells the story of one tribal ritual, w hic h involves as they all do the men taking the boy away for initiation. But in this case, w hen he returns, the boy's mother pretends not to know him. She asks to be introduced to "the young man." That is a beautiful picture of how a mother can cooperate in her son's passage to the father's world. If she does not, things get very messy later—especially in marriage. The boy develops a bond w ith his mother that is like emotional incest. His loyalties are divided. That is w hy Scripture says, "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his w ife" (Gen. 2:24, emphasis added).

Sometimes, w hen the mother clings, the boy will try to tear himself away, violently. This typically comes in the teenage years and often involves some ugly behavior, maybe some foul words on the part of the young man. She feels rejected, and he feels guilty, but he knows s he must get away. This was
my story, and my relationship with my mother has never been good since. I've found that many, many adult men resent their mothers but cannot say why. They simply know they do not want to be close to them; they rarely call. As my friend Dave confessed, "I hate calling my mom. She always says something like, 'It's so good to hear your little voice.' I'm twenty-five and she still wants to call me her little lamb." Somewhere, he senses that proximity to his mother endangers his masculine journey, as though he might be sucked back in. It is an irrational fear, but it reveals that both essential ingredients in his passage were missing: Mom did not let go, and Dad did not take him away.

Whatever the mother's failure, it can be overcome by the father's engagement. Let's come back to the rock climbing story with Sam. "Did you really think I was a wild man up there?" He did not ask, "Do you think I am a nice boy?" He asked about his strength, his dangerous capacity to really come through. A boy's passage into manhood involves many of those moments. The father's role is to arrange for them, invite his boy into them, keep his eye out for the moment the question arises and then speak into his son's heart, yes, you are. You have what it takes. And that is why the deepest wound is always given by the father. As Buechner says, "If strangers and strange sights can shake the world of children, it takes the people they know and love best to pull it out from under them like a chair."

### THE FATHER-WOUND

Dave remembers the day the wound came. His parents were having an argument in the kitchen, and his father was verbally abusing his mother. Dave took his mom's side, and his father exploded. "I don't remember all that was said, but I do remember his last words: ‘You are such a mama's boy,'” he yelled at me. Then he walked out." Perhaps if Dave had a strong relationship with his dad most of the time, a wound like this might be lessened, healed later by words of love. But the blow came after evening between them. Dave's father was often gone from morning till night with his own business, and so they rarely spent time together. What is more, Dave felt a lingering disappointment from his dad. He wasn't a star athlete, which he knew his dad highly valued. He had a spiritual hunger and often attended church, which his dad did not value. And so those words fell like a final blow, a death sentence.

Leanne Payne says that when the father-son relationship is right, "the quiet tree of masculine strength within the father protects and nurtures the fragile striping of masculinity within his son." Dave's father took an axe and gave his hardest blow to his young tree. How I wish it were a rare case, but I am deeply sorry to say I've heard countless stories like it. There's a young boy named Charles who loved to play the piano, but his father and brothers were jocks. One day they came back from the gym to find him at the keyboard, and who knows what else had built up years of scorn and contempt in his father's soul, but his son received both barrels: "You are such a faggot." A man my father's age told me of growing up during the depression; times were hard for his family, and his father, an alcoholic rarely employed, hired him out to a nearby farmer. One day while he was in the field he saw his father's car pull up; he hadn't seen him for weeks, and he raced to meet his dad. Before he could get there his father had grabbed the check for his son's wages, and, spying the boy running toward him, he jumped in the car and sped away. The boy was five years old.

In the case of violent fathers, the boy's question is answered in a devastating way. "Do I have what it takes? Am I a man, Papa?" No, you are a mama's boy, an idiot, a faggot, a seagull. Those are defining sentences that shape a man's life. The assault wounds are like a shotgun blast to the chest. This can get unexplainably evil when it involves physical, sexual, or verbal abuse carried on for years. Without some kind of help, many men never recover. One thing about the assault wounds—they are obvious. The passive wounds are not; they are pernicious, like a cancer. Because they are subtle, they often go unrecognized as wounds and therefore are actually more difficult to heal.

My father was in many ways a good man. He introduced me to the West, and taught me to fish and to camp. I still remember the fried egg sandwiches he would make us for dinner. It was his father's ranch that I worked on each summer, and my dad and I saw a lot of the West together as we'd make the long drive from southern California to Oregon, often with fishing detours through Idaho and Montana. But like so many men of his era, my father had never faced the issues of his own wounds, and he fell to drinking when his life began to take a downhill turn. I was about eleven or twelve at the time—a very critical age in the masculine journey, the age when the question really begins to surface. At the very moment when I am desperately wondering what it means to be a man, and do I have what it takes, my father checked out, went silent. He had a workshop out back, attached to the garage, and he would spend his hours out there alone, reading, doing crossword puzzles, and drinking. That is a major wound.

As Bly says, "Not receiving any blessing from your father is an injury . . . Not seeing your father when you are small, never being with him, having a remote father, an absent father, a workaholic father, is an injury." My friend Alex's father died when he was four years old. The sun in his universe set, and he was left with a remote father, an absent father, a workaholic father. As Buechner says, "If strangers and strange sights can shake the world of children, it takes the people they know and love best to pull it out from under them like a chair.

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The message delivered with my wound (my father disappearing into his own battles) was simply this: You are on your own. John. There is no one in your corner, no one to show you the way and above all, no one to tell you if you are or are not a man. The core question of your soul has no answer, and can never get one. What does a boy do with that? First, I became an unruly teen. I got kicked out of school, had a police record. We often misunderstand behavior as "adolescent rebellion," but those are cries for involvement, for engagement. Even after God's dramatic rescue of me at the age of nineteen, when I became a Christian, the wound remained. As my dear friend Brent said, "Becoming a Christian doesn't necessarily fix things. My wounds are still lodged deep and refused to allow some angry wounds inside to heal."

I mentioned earlier that for years I was a very driven man, a perfectionist, a hard-charger, and a fiercely independent man. The world rewards that kind of drivenness; most of the successful men reading this book are driven. But behind me was a string of casualties—people I had hurt, or dismissed...
—including my own father. There was the near casualty of my marriage and there was certainly the casualty of my own heart. For to live a driven life you have to literally shove your heart down, or drive it with whips. You can never admit need, never admit brokenness. This is the story of the creation of that false self. And if you had asked my wife during the first ten years of our marriage if we had a good relationship, she probably would have said yes. But if you had asked her if something was missing, if she sensed a fatal flaw, she would have immediately been able to tell you: he doesn't need me. That was my vow, you see. I won't need anyone. After all, the wound was as deep and unhealed, and the message it brought seemed so final: I am on my own.

Another friend, Stan, is a successful attorney and a genuinely good guy. When he was about fifteen, his father committed suicide—stuck a gun in his mouth and pulled the trigger. His family tried to put it all behind them, sweep it under the rug. They never spoke of it again. The message delivered by that gruesome blow was something like this: Your background is very dark; the masculine in your family cannot even be spoken of; anything wild is violent and evil. The effect was another sort of vow: "I'll never do anything even remotely dangerous, or risky, or wild. I'll never be like my dad (how many men live with that vow?). I won't take one step in that direction. I will be the nicest guy you ever met." You know what? He is. Stan's the nicest guy you could meet—gentle, creative, caring, soft-spoken. And now he hates that about himself; he hates the thought that he's a pushover, that he won't take you on, can't say no, can't stand up for himself.

Those are the two basic options. Men either overcompensate for their wound and become driven (violent men), or they shrink back and go passive (retreating men). Often it's an odd mixture of both. Witness the twin messages sported by young college-age men especially: a goatee, which says, "I'm kind of dangerous," and a baseball hat turned backward, which says, "But really I'm a little boy; don't require anything of me." Which is it? Are you strong, or are you weak? Remember Alex, who stood at the door waiting for a daddy who would never return? You wouldn't in a million years have guessed that was his story if you'd known him in college. He was a man's man, an incredible football player. A hard-drinking, hard-living man every guy looked up to. He drove a truck, chewed tobacco, loved the outdoors. He used to eat glass. I'm serious. It was sort of frat party trick he took on, the ultimate display of dangerous strength. He'd literally take a bite out of a glass, chew it slowly and swallow it. When he worked as a bouncer for a tough bar, it made a pretty impressive show to get the roughnecks in line. But it was a show—the whole macho-man persona.

Charles, the artistic boy, the piano player whose father called him a "faggot"—what do you think happened there? He never played the piano again after that day. Years later, as a man in his late twenties, he does not know what to do with his life. He has no passion, cannot find a career to love. And so he cannot commit to the woman he loves, cannot marry her because he is so uncertain of himself. But of course—his heart was taken out, way back there in his story. Dave is also in his twenties now, drifting, deeply insecure, and loaded with the great deal of self-hatred. He does not feel like a man and he believes he never will. Like so many, he struggles with confidence around women and around men he sees as real men. Stuart, whose father abandoned him, became a man without emotion. His favorite character as a boy was Spock, the alien in Star Trek who lives solely from his mind. Stuart is now a scientist and his wife is immensely lonely.

On and on it goes. The wound comes, and with it a message. From that place the boy makes a vow, chooses a way of life that gives rise to the false self. At the core of it all is a deep uncertainty. The man doesn't live from a center. So many men feel stuck—either paralyzed and unable to move, or unable to stop moving. Of course, every little girl has her own story too. But I want to save that for a later chapter, and bring it together with how a man fights for a woman's heart. Let me say a few more words about what happens to a man after the wound is given.
A few years ago now my middle son, Blaine, made the big transition to first grade. That's a huge step for any child—leaving the comfort and safety of Mom's side, spending all day at school, being among the “big kids.” But Blaine's a very outgoing and w insome boy, a born leader, and w e knew he'd handle it swimmingly. Every night at the dinner table he regaled us w ith tales of the day's adventures. It was fun to recall w ith him the joys of those early school days—a shiny new lunchbox, brand-new yellow No. 2 pencils, a box of Crayolas w ith a built-in sharpen er, a new desk, and new friends. We heard all about his new teacher, gym class, w hat they played at recess, how he w as emerging as a leader in all the games. But then one night he w as silent. “What's w rong, Tiger?” I asked. He w ou ldn't say, w ou ldn't even look up. “What happened?” He didn't w ant to talk about it. Finally, the story came out—a bully. Some first-grade poser had pushed him down on the playground in front of all his friends. Tears w ere streaming down h is cheeks as he told us the story.

“Blaine, look at me.” He raised his tearful eyes slowly, reluctantly. There was shame w ritten all over his face. “I w ant you to listen very closely to w hat I am about to say. The next time that bully pushes you down, here is w hat I w ant you to do—are you listening, Blaine?” He nodded, his big wet eyes fixed on mine. “I w ant you to get up . . . and I w ant you to hit him. . . . as hard as you possibly can.” A look of embarrassed delight came over Blaine's face. Then he smiled.

Good Lord—w hy did I give him such advice? And w hy w as he delighted w ith it? Why are some of you delighted w ith it, w hile o thers are appalled?

Yes, I know that Jesus told us to turn the other cheek. But w e have really misused that verse. You cannot teach a boy to use his strength by stripping him of it. Jesus was able to retaliate, believe me. But he chose not to. And yet w e suggest that a boy who is mocked, shamed before his fellows, stripped of all pow er and dignity should stay in that beaten place because Jesus w ants him there? You w ill eremasculate him for life. From that point on all will be passive and fearful. H e w ill grow up never knowing how to stand his ground, never knowing if he is a man indeed. Oh yes, he w ill be courteous, sweet even, deferential, minding all his manners. It may look moral, it may look like turning the other cheek, but it is merely weakness. You cannot turn a cheek you do not have. Our churches are full of such men.

At that moment, Blaine's soul w as hanging in the balance. Then the fire came back into his eyes and the shame disappeared. But for many, many men their souls still hang in the balance because no one, no one has ever invited them to be dangerous, to know their own strength, to discover that they have w hat it takes. “I feel there is this stormy ocean w ithin me, and I keep trying to make those waters calm and placid,” confessed a young friend in his early twenties. “I would love to be dangerous,” he said, sighing. “You mean . . . it's possible? I feel like I have to ask permission.” Why on earth would a young man have to ask permission to be a man? Because the assault continues long after the wound has been given. I don't mean to create a wrong impression—a man is not wounded once, but many, many times in the course of his life. Nearly every blow ends up falling in the same place: against his strength. Life takes it away, one vertebra at a time, until in the end he has no spine at all.

FINISHING HIM OFF

I read a case a few years ago about a baby boy who suffered a terrible blow during surgery: his penis w as “accidentally removed.” The event took place back in the '70s, and a decision was made that reflected the widely held belief that “sex roles” are not truly part of our design, but merely shaped by culture and therefore interchangeable. His genitalia were reconstructed in female form, and he w as raised as a girl. That story is a parable of our times. It is exactly w hat we've tried to do to boys, starting from when they are very young. As Christina Hoff Sommers says in her book The War Against Boys, “It's a bad time to be a boy in America.” Our culture has turned against the masculine essence, aiming to cut it off early. As one example she points to the way in which the shootings at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, are being used against boys in general.

Most of you will remember the tragic story from April 1999. Two boys walked into the school library and began shooting; when it was all over, thirteen victims and their two assailants were dead. Sommers is alarmed about the remarks of William Pollack, director of the Center for Men at McLean Hospital, and so am I. Here w hat he said: “The boys in Littleton are the tip of the iceberg. And the iceberg is disease these boys may have is being male.

To give a man back his heart is the hardest mission on earth.

Nothing worth having comes without some kind of fight.

---FROM THE MOVIE MICHAEL

“Lovers in a Dangerous Time”
(capital in 1982 for Stealing Fire)

---BRUCE COCKBURN

“Walking Wounded”
written in 1982 for Stealing Fire

---JAN KRIST

“Mammals as a dangerous people”
written in 1982 for Stealing Fire

---FROM THE MOVIE MICHAEL

“Theatrical version of the movie Michael”
written in 1982 for Stealing Fire

---LIONEL TIGER

“Lovers in a Dangerous Time”
written in 1982 for Stealing Fire

---MICHAEL TIGER

The Decline of Males
written in 1982 for Stealing Fire

---JAN KRIST

“At least three to four times as many boys than girls are essentially defined as ill because their preferred patterns of play don’t fit easily into the structure of the school. Well-meaning psycho-managers then prescribe tranquilizing drugs for ADD, such as Ritalin . . . The situation is scandalous. The use of drugs so disproportionately among boys betrays the failure of school authorities to understand sex differences . . . The only disease these boys may have is being male.”

But it's not just the schools. (Many of them, by the way, are doing a heroic job.) How about our churches? A young man recently came to me very angry
and distraught. He was frustrated by the way his father, a church leader, was coaching him in sports. He's a basketball player and his team had made the city finals. The night of the big game, as he was heading out the door, his father literally stopped him and said, “Now don't go out there and 'kick butt'—that's just not a nice thing to do.” He is not making this up. What a ridiculous thing to say to a seventeen-year-old athlete. Go out there and give 'em... w ell, don't give 'em anything. Just be nice. Be the nicest guy the opposing team has ever met. In other words, be soft. That is a perfect example of what the church tells men. Someone I read said the church may have a masculine exterior, but its soul has turned feminine.

Emasculation happens in marriage as well. Women are often attracted to the weaker side of a man, but once having caught him they settle down to the task of domesticating him. Ironically, if he gives in he'll resent her for it, and she in turn will wonder here the passion has gone. Most marriages wind up there. A weary and lonely w oman asked me the other day, “How do I get my husband to come alive?” “Invite him to be dangerous,” I said. “You mean, I should let him get the motorcycle, right?” “Yep.” She shrank back, disappointment on her face, “I know you're right, but I hate the idea. I've made him tame for years.”

Think back to that great big lion in that tiny cage. Why w ould w  e put a man in a cage? For the same reason we put a lion there. For the same reason we put God there: he's dangerous. To paraphrase Sayers, we've also pared the claws of the Lion Cub of Judah. A man is a dangerous thing. Women don't start wars. Violent crimes aren't for the most part committed by w omen. Our prisons aren't filled w ith w omen. Columbine wasn’t the w ork of w omen young girls. Obviously, something has gone wrong in the masculine soul, and the way we've decided to handle it is to take that dangerous nature away... entirely.

“We know that our society produces a plentiful supply of boys,” says Robert Bly, “but seems to produce few er and few er men.” There are two simple reasons: We don’t know how to initiate boys into men; and second, we’re not sure we really want to. We want to socialize them, to be sure, but away from all that is fierce, and wild, and passionate. In other words, away from masculinity and toward something more feminine. But as Sommers says, we have forgotten a simple truth: “The energy, competitiveness, and corporeal danger of normal, decent males is responsible for much of what is right in the world.” Sommers reminds us that during the Columbine massacre, “Seth Houy threw his body over a terrified girl to shield her from the bullets; fifteen-year-old Daniel overreached for the gun. He was shot in the eye by his own weapon. He was only fifteen years old, he had no idea he would end up in the shelter. Many more are alive, but badly wounded. They are trying to conclude? What would be your assessment of the situation? Whatever else went through your mind, you'd have to admit, the damage is almost overwhelming. When you reach the cliffs, the only point of safety, you find squads of men with no leader. They are shell-shocked, nothing to do but wait for the order to go. Snipers on the cliffs above continue to take them out. Everywhere you look, there are pain and brokenness. The place looks like a battlefield, the Omaha Beach of the soul.

That strength so essential to men is also what makes them heroes. If a neighborhood is safe, it’s because of the strength of men. Slavery was stopped by the strength of men, at a terrible price to them and their families. The Nazis were stopped by men. Apartheid wasn't defeated by women. Columbine wasn’t the work of two young girls. Obviously, something has gone wrong in the masculine soul, and the way we’ve decided to handle it is to take that dangerous nature away... entirely.

Let’s say it’s June 6, 1944, about 0710. You are a soldier in the third w ave onto Omaha Beach. Thousands of men have gone before you and now it is your turn. As you jump out of the Higgins boat and w ade to the beach, you see the bodies of fallen soldiers everywhere—floating in the water, tossing in the surf, lying on the beach. Moving up the sand you encounter hundreds of wounded men. Some are limping toward the bluffs w ith you, looking for shelter. Others are barely crawling. Snipers on the cliffs above continue to take them out. Everywhere you look, there are pain and brokenness. The damage is immense and no leader. They are shell-shocked, stunned and frightened. Many have lost their weapons; most of them refuse to move. They are paralyzed w ith fear. Taking all this in, w hat w ould you conclude? W hat would be your assessment of the situation? Whatever else went through your mind, you'd have to admit, This is one brutal war, and no one w ould have disagreed or thought you odd for having said so.

But w e do not think so clearly about life and I’m not sure why. Have a look around you—w hat do you observe? W hat do you see in the lives of the men that you w ork w ith, live by, go to church alongside? A re they full of passionate freedom? Do they fight w ell? A re their w omen deeply grateful for how w ell their men have loved them? A re their children radiant w ith affirmation? The idea is almost laughable, if it weren’t so tragic. Men have been... entirely.

Sommers reminds us that during the Columbine massacre, “Seth Houy threw his body over a terrified girl to shield her from the bullets; fifteen-year-old Daniel overreached for the gun. He was shot in the eye by his own weapon. He was only fifteen years old, he had no idea he would end up in the shelter. Many more are alive, but badly wounded. They are trying to conclude? What would be your assessment of the situation? Whatever else went through your mind, you’d have to admit, This is one brutal war, and no one w ould have disagreed or thought you odd for having said so.

But we do not think so clearly about life and I’m not sure why. Have a look around you—what do you observe? What do you see in the lives of the men that you work with, live by, go to church alongside? Are they full of passionate freedom? Do they fight well? Are their women deeply grateful for... men that you work with, live by, go to church alongside? Are they full of passionate freedom? Do they fight well? Are their women deeply grateful for... men that you work with, live by, go to church alongside? Are they full of passionate freedom? Do they fight well? Are their women deeply grateful for... men that you work with, live by, go to church alongside? Are they full of passionate freedom? Do they fight well? Are their women deeply grateful for... men that you work with, live by, go to church alongside? Are they full of passionate freedom? Do they fight well? Are their women deeply grateful for... men that you work with, live by, go to church alongside? 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gospel, like his father and great-grandfather. His wound was an attempt to take that out. He’s a seagull, remember? All he can do is “squawk.” I failed to mention Reggie earlier. His dad wounded him when he tried to excel in school. “You are so stupid; you’ll never make it through college.” He wanted to be a doctor, but he never followed ed his dream.

On and on it goes. The wound is too well aimed and far too consistent to be accidental. It was an attempt to take you out; to cripple or destroy your strength and get you out of the action. The wounds we’ve ever watched were leveled against us with stunning accuracy. Hopefully, you’re getting the picture. Do you know why there’s been such an assault? The Enemy fears you. You are dangerous big-time. If you ever really got your heart back, lived from it with courage, you would be a huge problem to him. You would do a lot of damage . . . on the side of good. Remember how valiant and effective God has been in the history of the world? You are a stem of that victorious stalk.

Let me come back to the second lesson of the parable from D-Day plus one. The other reason those men were lying there, pinned down, unable to move is because no one had ever shown them how to take a house before. They had been trained, but not for that. Most men have never been initiated into manhood. They have never had anyone show them how to do it, and especially, how to fight for their heart. The failure of so many fathers, the emasculating culture, and the passive church have left men without direction.

That is why I have written this book. I am here to tell you that you can get your heart back. But I need to warn you—if you want your heart back, if you want the wound healed and your strength restored and to find your true name, you’re going to have to fight for it. Notice your reaction to my words. Does not something in you stir a little, a yearning to live? And doesn’t another voice rush in, urging caution, maybe wanting to dismiss me altogether? He’s being melodramatic. What arrogance. Or, maybe some guys could, but not me. Or, I don’t know . . . is this really worth it? That’s part of the battle, right there. See? I’m not making this up.

OUR SEARCH FOR AN ANSWER

First and foremost, we still need to know what we never heard, or heard so badly, from our fathers. We need to know what we are and if we have what it takes. What do we do now with that ultimate question? Where do we go to find an answer? In order to help you find the answer to The Question, let me ask you another: What have you done with your question? Where have you taken it? You see, a man’s core question does not go away. He may try for years to shove it out of his awareness, and just “get on with it.” But it does not go away. It is a hunger so essential to our souls that it will compel us to find a resolution. In truth, it drives everything we do.

I spent a few days this fall with a very successful man I’ll call Peter. He was hosting me for a conference on the East Coast, and when Peter picked me up at the airport he was driving a new Land Rover with all the bells and whistles. Nice car, I thought. This guy is doing well. The next day we drove around in his BMW 850CSi. Peter lived in the largest house in town, and had a vacation home in Portugal. None of this wealth was inherited; he worked for every dime. He loved Formula One racing, and fly-fishing for salmon in Nova Scotia. I genuinely liked him. Nowhere’s a man, I said to myself. And yet, there was something missing. You’d think a guy like this would be confident, self-assured, centered. And of course, he seemed like that at first. But as we spent time together I found him to be . . . hesitant. He had all the appearances of masculinity, but none of it felt like it was coming from a true center.

After several hours of conversation, he admitted he was coming to a revelation. “I lost my father earlier this year to cancer. But I didn’t cry when he died. You see, we were never really close.” Ah yes, I knew what was coming next. “All these years, knocking myself out to get ahead . . . I wasn’t even enjoying myself. What was it for? I see now . . . I was as trying to win my father’s approval.” A long, sad silence. Then Peter said quietly, through tears, “It never worked.” Of course not; it never does. No matter what you make, no matter how far you go in life, that will never heal your wound or tell you who you are. But, oh how many men buy into this one.

After years of trying to succeed in the world’s eyes, a friend still clings stubbornly to that idea. Sitting in my office, bleeding from all his wounds, he says to me, “Who’s the real stud? The guy making money.” You understand that he’s not making much, so he can still chase the illusion.

Men take their souls’ search for validation in all sorts of directions. Brad is a good man who for so many years now has been searching for a sense of significance through belonging. As he said, “Out of my wounds I figured out how to get life: I’ll find a group to belong to, do something incredible that others will want, and I’ll be somebody.” First it was the right gang of kids in school; then it was the wrestling team; years later, it was the right ministry team. It has been a desperate search, by his own admission. And it hasn’t gone well. When things didn’t work out earlier this year at the ministry he was serving, he knew he had to leave. “My heart has burst and all the wounds and arrows have come pouring out. I have never felt such pain. The sentences scream at me, ‘I do not belong. I am wanted by no one. I am alone.’”

Where does a man go for a sense of validation? To whom do you speak? To who pays attention to him? How attractive is his wife? Where does an audience want? Does not something in you stir a little, a yearning to live? And doesn’t another voice rush in, urging caution, maybe wanting to dismiss me altogether? He’s being melodramatic. What arrogance. Or, maybe some guys could, but not me. Or, I don’t know . . . is this really worth it? That’s part of the battle, right there. See? I’m not making this up.

TAKING IT TO EVE

Remember the story of my first kiss, that little darling I fell in love with in the seventh grade and how she made my bicycle fly? I fell in love with Debbie the very same year my father checked out of my story, the year I took my deepest wound. The timing was no coincidence. In a young boy’s development, there comes a crucial time when the father must intervene. It arrives early in adolescence, somewhere between the ages of eleven and fifteen, depending on the boy. If that intervention does not happen, the boy is set up for disaster; the next wounding that opens in his soul is sexual. Debbie made me feel like a million bucks. I couldn’t have put words to it at the time; I had no idea what was really going on. But in my heart I felt I had found the answer to my question. A pretty girl thinks I’m the greatest. What more can a guy ask for? If I’ve found Juliet, then I must be Romeo.

Debbie made me feel like a million bucks. I couldn’t have put words to it at the time; I had no idea what was really going on. But in my heart I felt I had found the answer to my question. A pretty girl thinks I’m the greatest. What more can a guy ask for? If I’ve found Juliet, then I must be Romeo.

When she broke up with me, it began what has been a long and sad story of searching for “the woman that will make me feel like a man.” I went from girlfriend to girlfriend trying to get an answer. To be the hero to the beauty—that has been my longing, my image of what it means to really, finally be a man. By calls it the search for the Golden-haired Woman.

He sees a woman across the room, knows immediately that it is “She.” He drops the relationship he has, pursues her, feels wild excitement, passion, beating heart, obsession. After a few months, everything collapses; she becomes an ordinary woman. He is confused and puzzled. Then he sees once more a radiant face across the room, and the old certainty comes again. (iron John)

Why is pornography the most addictive thing in the universe for men? Certainly there’s the fact that a man is visually wired, that pictures and images arouse men much more than they do women. But the deeper reason is because that seductive beauty reaches down inside and touches your desperate hunger for validation as a man you didn’t even know you had, touches it like nothing else most men have ever experienced. You must understand—this is deeper than legs and breasts and good sex. It is mythological. Look at the lengths men will go to find the golden-haired woman. They have fought duels over her beauty; they have fought wars. You see, every man remembers Eve. We are haunted by her. And somehow we believe that if we could find her, get her back, then we’d also recover with her our own lost masculinity.

You’ll recall the little boy Philip, from the movie A Perfect World? Remember what his fear was? That his penis was puny. That’s how many men
articate a sense of emasculation. Later in life a man's worst fear is often impotence. If he can't get an erection, then he hasn't got what it takes. But the opposite is also at work. If a man can feel an erection, well then, he feels powerful. He feels strong. I'm telling you, for many men The Question feels hardwired to his penis. If he can feel like the hero sexually, well, then mister, he's the hero. Pornography is so seductive because what a wounded, famished man to think when there are literally hundreds of beauties willing to give themselves to him? (Of course, it's not just to him, but when he's alone with the photos, it feels like it's just for him.)

It's unbelievable—how many movies center around this lie? Get the beauty, win her, bed her, and you are the man. You're James Bond. You're a stud. Look carefully at the lyrics to Bruce Springsteen's song, Secret Garden (from his Greatest Hits recording, 1995):

She'll let you in her house
If you come knockin' late at night
She'll let you in her house
If you pay the price
She'll let you deep inside
But there's a secret garden she hides.
She'll lead you down a path
There'll be tenderness in the air
She'll let you come just far enough
So you know she's really there
She'll look at you and smile
And her eyes will say
She's got a secret garden
Where everything you want
Where everything you need
Will always stay
A million miles away

It's a deep lie we edded to a deep truth. Eve is a garden of delight (Song 4:16). But she's not everything you want, everything you need—not even close. Of course it will stay a million miles away. You can't get there from here because it's not there. It's not there. The answer to your question can never, ever be found there. Don't get me wrong. A woman is a captivating thing. More captivating than anything else in all creation. “The naked woman’s body is a portion of eternity too great for the eye of man.” Femininity can arouse masculinity. Boy oh boy can it. My wife flashes me a little breast, a little thigh, and I'm ready for action. All systems alert. She tells me in a soft voice that I'm a man and I'll leap tall buildings for her. But femininity can never bestow masculinity. It's like asking a pearl to give you a buffalo. It's like asking a field of wildflowers to give you a '57 Chevy. They are different substances entirely.

When a man takes his question to the woman what happens is either addiction or emasculation. Usually both.

Dave, whose father blew a hole in his chest when he called him “mama's boy,” took his question to the woman. Recently he confessed to me that younger woman are his obsession. You can see why—they're less of a threat. A younger woman isn't half the challenge. He can feel more like a man there. Dave's embarrassed by his obsession, but it doesn't stop him. A younger woman feels like the answer to his question and he's got to get an answer. But he knows his search is impossible. He admitted to me just the other day, “Even if I marry a beautiful woman, I will always know there is an even more beautiful woman out there somewhere. So I'll wonder—could I have won her?”

It's a lie. As Bly says, it's a search without an end. “We are looking at the source of a lot of desperation in certain men here, and a lot of suffering in certain women.” How often I have seen this. A friend's brother hit rock bottom a few years back when his girlfriend broke up with him. He was a really successful guy, a high school star athlete who became a promising young attorney. But he was carrying a wound from an alcoholic, workaholic father who never gave him what every boy craves. Like so many of us, he took his heart with its question to the woman. When she dumped him, my friend said, “It blew him out of the water. He went into a major nosedive, started drinking heavily, smoking. He even left the country. His life was shattered.”

This is why so many men secretly fear their wives. She sees him as no one else does, sleeps with him, known s w hat he's made of. If he has given her the power to validate him as a man, then he has also given her the power to invalidate him too. That's the deadly catch. A pastor told me that for years he's been trying to please his wife and she keeps giving him an “F.” “What if she is not the report card on you?” I suggested. “She sure feels like it. She's the one who bestows the power to validate him as a man, and she also has the power to devalue him.”

She'll look at you and smile
And her eyes will say
She's got a secret garden
Where everything you want
Where everything you need
Will always stay
A million miles away

If you pay the price
If the words you say are right
She'll let you in her house
Oh, I realized, she's just an ordinary woman.

“Do you have this validation?” a young woman told me about the man she was dating. “He gave me his validation,” she said, “and I'm ready for action. All systems alert. She tells me in a soft voice that I'm a man and I'll leap tall buildings for her. She's the one who bestows the power to validate him as a man, and she also has the power to devalue him.”

He was coming to me for his validation,” a young woman told me about the man she was dating. “He's coming to me for his validation,” she said, “and I'm ready for action. All systems alert. She tells me in a soft voice that I'm a man and I'll leap tall buildings for her. She's the one who bestows the power to validate him as a man, and she also has the power to devalue him.”

What's fascinating to note is that homosexuals are actually more clear on this point. They know that what is missing in their hearts is masculine love. The problem is that they've sexualized it. Joseph Nicolosi says that homosexuality is an attempt to repair the wound by filling it with masculinity, either the feminine love that was missing or the masculine strength many men feel they do not possess. It, too, is a vain search and that is why the answer there. In fact, you can't get your answer from any of the things men chase after to find their sense of self. There is only one source for the answer to your question. And so no matter where you've taken your question, you've got to take it back. You have to walk away. That is the beginning of your journey.
CHAPTER SIX

THE FATHER’S VOICE

No man, for any considerable period of time, can wear one face to himself and another to the multitude without finally getting bewildered as to which may be the truth.

—NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE

Esse quam videri
To be, rather than to appear
Who can give a man this, his own name?

—GEORGE MACDONALD

Summers in the eastern Oregon sagebrush are hot, dry, and dusty. When the sun was high the temperature could soar into the 90s, so we never had saved most of the hard labor on the ranch for the early morning or late afternoon and evening, when the cool air drifted up from the river valley below. Sometimes we’d fix irrigation ditches during the heat of the day, which for me was a great excuse to get really wet. I’d tramp along in the ditch, letting the warm muddy water soak my jeans. But most of the time we’d head back to the ranch house for a glass of iced tea. Pop loved his tea sweetened with a healthy dose of sugar, the way they drink it in the South. We’d sit at the kitchen table and have a glass or two and talk about the events of the morning, or a plan he had to sell some cattle at the auction, or how he thought we’d spend the afternoon.

One day late in the summer of my thirteenth year, Pop and I had just come in for our ritual when he stood up and walked over to the window. The kitchen faced south and from there gave a view over a large alfalfa field and then on toward the pasturage. Like most ranchers Pop grew his own hay, to provide feed for cattle and horses we kept over the winter. I joined him at the window and saw that a steer had gotten out of the range and into the alfalfa. I remembered my grandfather telling me that it’s dangerous for a cow to stuff itself on fresh alfalfa; it expands in their stomach like rising bread and could rupture one of their four chambers. Pop was clearly irritated, as only a cow boy can be irritated at cattle. I, on the other hand, was excited. This meant adventure.

“Go saddle up Tony and get that steer,” he said, sitting back in his chair and kicking his boots up on the one in front of him. His demeanor made it clear that he was not going with me; he was, in fact, not going anywhere. As he poured himself another glass of tea my mind raced through the implications of what he said. I meant I first had to go catch Tony, the biggest horse on the ranch. I was scared of Tony, but I knew he was the best cattle horse. I had to saddle him up by myself and ride out to get that steer. Alone. Having processed this information I realized I had been standing there for hours knowledge how long and it was time I got going. I walked out the back porch toward the corral I felt two things; and felt them strongly: fear . . . and honor.

Most of our life-changing moments are realized as such later. I couldn’t have told you why, but I knew I’d crossed a threshold in my life as a young man. Pop believed in me, and w hatever news I had the day that I didn’t, the fact that he believed made me believe it too. I got the steer that day . . . and a whole lot more.

DESPERATE FOR INITIATION

A man needs to know his name. He needs to know he’s got what it takes. And I don’t mean “know” in the modernistic, rationalistic sense. I don’t mean that the thought has passed through your cerebral cortex and you’ve given it intellectual assent, the way you know about the Battle of Waterloo or the ozone layer—the way most men “know” God or the truths of Christianity. I mean a deep knowing, the kind of knowing that comes when you have been there, entered in, experienced firsthand in an unforgettable way. The way “Adam knew his wife” and she gave birth to a child. Adam didn’t know about Eve; he knew her intimately, through flesh-and-blood experience at a very deep level. There’s knowledge about and knowledge of. When it comes to our question, we need the latter.

In the movie Gladiator, set in the second century A.D., the hero is a warrior from Spain called Maximus. He is the commander of the Roman armies, a general loved by his men and by the aging emperor Marcus Aurelius. The emperor’s f adult Commodus learns of his father’s plan to make Maximus emperor in his place, but before Marcus can pronounce his successor, Commodus strangles his father. He sentences Maximus to immediate execution as the successor to the true emperor, Marcus Aurelius; General of the Felix Legions; Commander of the Armies of the North; My name is Maximus Decimus Meridius; his enemy)

My name is Maximus Decimus Meridius; Commander of the Armies of the North; General of the Felix Legions; loyal servant to the true emperor, Marcus Aurelius; father to a murdered son; husband to a murdered wife; and I will have my vengeance, in this life or in the next.

His answer builds like a mighty wave, swelling in size and strength before it crashes on the shore. Where does a man go to learn an answer like that—to learn his true name, a name that can never be taken from him? That deep heart knowledge comes only through a process of initiation. You have to know where you’ve come from; you have to have faced a series of trials that test you; you have to have taken a journey; and you have to have faced your enemy. But as a young man recently lamented to me, “I’ve been a Christian since I was five—no one ever showed me what it means to really be a man.” He’s lost now. He moved across the country to be with his girlfriend, but she’s dumped him because he doesn’t know who he is and what he’s here for. There are countless others like him, a world of such men—a world of uninitiated men.

The church would like to think it is initiating men, but it’s not. What does the church bring a man into? What does it call him out to be? Moral. That is pitifully insufficient. Morality is a good thing, but morality is never the point. Paul says the Law is given as a tutor to the child, but not to the son. The son
is invited up into something much more. He gets the keys to the car; he gets to go away with the father on some dangerous mission. I’m struck by the poignancy of the scene at the end of the Civil War, just after Appomattox, where General Robert E. Lee has surrendered to General Ulysses S. Grant. For five years Lee has led the Army of Northern Virginia through some of the most terrible trials men have ever known. You would think they’d be glad to have it over. But Lee’s men hang upon the reins of his horse and beg him not to go, plead for one more chance to “whip those Yankees.” Lee had become their father, had given those men what most of them had never had before—an identity and a place in a larger story.

Every man needs someone like Robert E. Lee, or that brigadier general from the 29th: “You’ve seen how to take a house. Do you understand? Do you know how to do it now?” “Yes, sir.” “We need someone like my grandfather, who can teach us how to ‘saddle up.’ But Lee is long gone, brigadier generals are rare, and my grandfather has been dead for many years. Where do we go? To whom can we turn? To a most surprising source.

HOW GOD INITIATES A MAN

A number of years ago, at a point in my own journey when I felt more lost than ever, I heard a talk given by Gordon Dalbey, who had just written Healing the Masculine Soul. He raised the idea that despite a man’s past and the failures of his own father to initiate him, God could take him on that journey, provide what was missing. A hope rose within me, but I dismissed it with the cynicism I’d learned to use to keep down most things in my soul. Several weeks later, perhaps months later, I was downstairs in the early morning to read and pray. As with so many of my “quiet times,” I ended up looking out the window toward the east to watch the sun rise. I heard Jesus whisper a question to me: “Will you let me initiate you?” Before my mind ever had a chance to process, dissect, and doubt the whole exchange, my heart leaped up and said yes.

“Who can give a man this, his own name?” George MacDonald asks. “God alone. For no one but God sees what the man is.” He reflects upon the white stone that Revelation includes among the rewards God will give to those who “overcome.” On that white stone there is a new name. It is “new” only in the sense that it is not the name the world gave to us, certainly not the one delivered with the wound. No man will find on that stone “mama’s boy” or “fatty” or “seagull.” But the new name is really not new at all when you understand that it is your true name, the one that belongs to you, “that being whom he thought when he began to make the child, and whom he kept in his thought throughout the long process of creation” and redemption. Psalm 139 makes it clear that we are uniquely planned and created, knit together in our mother’s womb by God himself. He had someone in mind and that someone has a name.

That someone has also undergone a terrible assault, and yet God remains committed to the realization of that same someone. The giving of the white stone makes it clear—that is what he is up to. The history of a man’s relationship with God is the story of how God calls him out, takes him on a journey and gives him his true name. Most of us have thought it was the story of how God sits on his throne waiting with a man, but the man steps out of line. Not so. He created Adam for adventure, battle and beauty; he created us for a unique place in his story and he is committed to bringing us back to the original design. So God calls Abram out from Ur of the Chaldeans to a land he has never seen, to the frontier, and along the way Abram gets a new name. He becomes Abraham. God takes Jacob off into Mesopotamia somewhere, to learn things he has to learn and cannot learn at his mother’s side. When he rides back into town, he has a limp and a new name as well.

Even if your father did his job, he can only take you partway. There comes a time when you have to leave all that is familiar, and go on into the unknown with God. Saul was a guy who really thought he understood the story and very much liked the part he had written for himself. He was the hero of his own little mini-series, “Saul the Avenger.” After that little matter on the Damascus road he became Paul, and rather than heading back into all of the old and familiar ways he is led out into Arabia for three years to learn directly from God. Jesus shows us that initiation can happen even when we’ve lost our father or grandfather. He’s the carpenter’s son, which means Joseph was able to help him in the early days of his journey. But when we meet the young man Jesus, Joseph is out of the picture. Jesus has a new teacher—his true Father—and it is from him he must learn who he really is and what he’s really made of.

Initiation involves a journey and a series of tests, through which we discover our real name and our true place in the story. Robert Ruark’s book The Old Man and the Boy is a classic example of this kind of relationship. There’s a boy who needs a lot of teaching, and there’s an old man who’s got a lot of wisdom. But the initiation doesn’t take place at a school desk; it takes place in the field, where simple lessons about the land and animals and seasons turn into larger lessons about life and self and God. Through each test comes a revelation. The boy must keep his eyes open and ask the right questions. Learning to hunt quail helps you learn about yourself: “He’s smarter than you are, and every time you go up against him you’re proving something about yourself.”

Most of us have been misinterpreting life and what God is doing for a long time. “I think I’m just trying to get God to make my life work easier,” a client of mine confessed, but he could have been speaking for most of us. We’re asking the wrong questions. Most of us are asking, “God, why did you let this happen to me?” Or, “God, why won’t you just... (fill in the blank—help me succeed, get my kids to straighten out, fix my marriage—you know what I’ve been wanting about hearing). But to enter into a journey of initiation with God requires a new set of questions: What are you trying to teach me here? What issues in my heart are you trying to raise through this? What is it you want me to see? What are you asking me to let go of? In truth, God has been trying to initiate you for a long time. What is in the way is how you’ve mishandled your wound and the life you’ve constructed as a result.

CONTEMPT FOR THE WOUND

“Men are taught over and over how the world is supposed to be a girl’s world, and yet God is fiercely committed to the restoration and release of your masculine heart. But a wound that goes unacknowledged and unwept is a wound that cannot heal. A wound you think you deserve is a wound that cannot heal. That is why Brennan Manning says, “The spiritual life begins with the acceptance of our wounded self.” Really? How can that be? The reason is simple:
THWARTING THE FALSE SELF

From the place of our woundedness we construct a false self. We find a few gifts that work for us, and we try to live off them. Stuart found he was good at math and science. He shut down his heart and spent all his energies perfecting his “Spock” persona. There, in the academy, he was safe; he was also recognized and rewarded. Alex was good at sports and the whole macho image; he became a glass-eating animal. Stan became the nicest guy you could ever meet. “In the story of my life,” he admitted, “I want to be seen as the Nice Guy.” I became a hard-charging perfectionist; there, in my perfection, I found safety and recognition. “When I was eight,” confesses Brennan Manning, “the impostor, or false self, was born as a defense against pain. The impostor within whispered, ‘Brennan, don’t ever be your real self anymore because nobody likes you as you are. Invent a new self that everybody will admire and nobody will know.’” Notice the key phrase: “as a defense against pain,” as a way of saving himself. The impostor is our plan for salvation.

So God must take it all away. This often happens at the start of our initiation journey. He thwarts our plan for salvation; he shatters the false self. In the last chapter I told you of Brad’s plan for self-redemption: he would belong to the “inside group.” Even after it failed him time and again, breaking his heart over and over, he wouldn’t give it up. He simply thought his aim was off; if he found the right group, then his plan would work. Our plan for redemption is hard to let go of; it clings to our hearts like an octopus. So what did God do for Brad? He took it all away. God brought Brad to the point where he thought he had found the group, and then God prevented him from maneuvering his way in. Brad wrote me a letter to describe what he was going through:

God has taken all that away, stripped me of all the things I used to earn people’s admiration. I knew what he was up to. He put me in a place where my heart’s deepest wounds and arrows—and sin—came out. As I was weeping all these pictures of what I want to belong to came up—speaker, counselor, in a group—and it was as if Jesus asked me to give them up. What came from my heart was surprising—incredible fear. And then the image of never getting them. A sentence arose in my heart: “You want me to die? If I give those up then I’ll never belong and be somebody. You are asking me to die.” It has been my hope of salvation.

Why would God do something so cruel? Why would he do something so terrible as to weigh us down in the place of our deepest wounding? Jesus warned us that “whoever wants to save his life will lose it” (Luke 9:24). Christ is not using the word bios here; he’s not talking about our physical life. The passage is not about trying to save your skin by ducking martyrdom or something like that. The word Christ uses for “life” is the word psyche—the word for our soul, our inner self, our heart. He says that the things we do to save our psyche, our soul, those plans to save and protect our inner life—those are the things that will actually destroy us. “There is a way that seems right to a man but in the end it leads to death” says Proverbs 16:25. The false self, our plan for redemption, seems so right to us. It shields us from pain and secures us a little love and admiration. But the false self is a lie; the w hole plan is built on pretense. It’s a deadly trap. God loves us too much to leave us there. So he thwarts us in, many, many different ways.

In order to take a man into his wounding, so that he can heal it and begin the release of the true self, God will thwart the false self. He will take away all that you’ve leaned upon to bring you life. In the movie The Natural, Robert Redford is a baseball player named Roy Hobbs, perhaps the most gifted baseball player ever. He’s a high school wonder boy, a natural who gets a shot at the big leagues. But his dreams of a professional career are cut short when Hobbs is wrongfully sentenced to prison for murder. Years later, an aging Hobbs gets a second chance. He’s signed by the New York Knights—the worst team in the league. But through his incredible gift, unmanned by the years, Hobbs leads the Knights from ignominy to the play-of game for the National League pennant. He rallies the team, becomes the center of their hopes and dreams.

The climax of the film is the game for the championship. It’s the bottom of the ninth; the score is Pittsburgh 2, Knights 0. The Knights have 2 outs; there’s a man on first and third when Hobbs steps up to the plate. He’s their only chance; this is his moment. Now, there’s something you must know, something absolutely crucial to the story. Ever since his high school days, Hobbs had played with a bat he made himself from the heart of a tree felled by lightning in his front yard. Burned into the bat is a lightning bolt and the words “w onder boy.” That bat is the symbol of his greatness, his giftedness. He has never, ever played with another. Hobbs steps to the plate. His first swing is a miss; his second is a foul ball high and behind. His third is a solid hit along the first-base line; it looks like it’s a home run, but it also lands foul. As Hobbs returns to the plate, he sees his bat lying there . . . in pieces. It shattered on that last swing.

This is the critical moment in a man’s life, when he has counted on coming crashing down, when his golden bat breaks into pieces. His investments fail; his company lets him go; the church fires him; he is leveled by an illness; his wife walks out; his daughter turns up pregnant. What is he to do? Will he stay in the game? Will he shrink back to the dugout? Will he scramble to try to put things back together, as so many men do? The true test of a man, the beginning of his redemption, actually starts when he can no longer rely on what he’s used all his life. The real journey begins when the false self fails. A moment that seems like an eternity passes as Hobbs stands there, holding the broken pieces, surveying the damage. The bat is beyond repair. Then he says to the bat boy, “Go pick me out a winner, Bobby.” He stays in the game and hits a home run to win the series.

God will take away our “bat” as well. He will do something to thwart the false self. Stuart “saved” himself by becoming emotionless. Last year his wife walked out on him. She’s had it with his two-dimen sional existence; he’s w h oman wants to be married to Spock? Alex recently suffered a series of panic attacks that left him almost unable to leave his home. The whole macho construct fell to the ground. At first, nobody could believe it; Alex couldn’t believe it. He was invincible, the strongest guy you ever met. But it was all built as a defense against the wounding. Our loss doesn’t necessarily have to be something so dramatic. A man may simply awaken one day to find himself lost, lost as Dante described himself: “In the middle of the road of my life, I was crushed by a rock.”

How many help you give to those who would learn?
To some sore pain, to others a sinking heart;
To some a weariness worse than any smart;
To some a haunting, fearing, blind concern;
Madness to some; to some the shaking dart
Of hideous death still following as they turn;
To some a hunger that will not depart.
To some a deep unrest—a scorn
Of all they are or see upon the earth;
A gas, at dusty night and clearing morn,
As on a land of emptiness and dearth;
To some a bitter sorrow; to some the sting
Of love misprized—of sick abandonment,
To some a frozen heart, oh, worse than anything!
The messengers of Satan think to mar,
But make—driving the soul from false to feel—
To thee, the reconciler, the one real,
In whom alone the would be and the are met.

(Edward Macdonald, *Diary of an Old Soul*)

This is a very dangerous moment, when God seems set against everything that has meant life to us. Satan spies his opportunity, and leaps to accuse God in our hearts. You see, he says, God is angry with you. He's disappointed in you. If he loved you he would make things smoother. He's not out for your best, you know. The Enemy alys tempts us back tow ard control, to recover and rebuild the false self. We must remember that it is out of love that God thwarts our impostor. As Hebrew's reminds us, it is the son whom God disciplines, therefore do not lose heart (12:5–6).

God thwarts us to save us. We think it will destroy us, but the opposite is true—we must be saved from what really will destroy us. If we woul d walk with him in our journey of mascul ine initiation, we must walk away from the false self—set it down, give it up willingly. It feels crazy; it feels immensely vulnerable. Brad has stopped looking for the group. Stuart has begun to open up his heart to emotion, to relationship, to all that he buried so long ago. Alex stopped "eating glass," stopped the w hole macho thing to face w hat he had never faced inside. I gave up perfectionism, left Washington, and w ent looking for my heart. We simply accept the invitation to leave all that we've relied on and venture out w ith God. We can choose to do it ourselves, or w e can wait for God to bring it all down.

If you have no clue as to w hat your false self may be, then a starting point w ould be to ask those you live w ith and w ork w ith, "What is my effect on you? What am I like to live w ith (o r w ork w ith)? What don't you feel free to bring up w ith me?" If you never, ever say a w ord in a meeting because you fear you might say something stupid, w ell then, it's time to speak up. If all you ever do is dominate a meeting because your sense of worth comes from being in charge, then you need to shut up for a w hile. If you've run to sports because you feel best about yourself there, then it's probably time to give it a rest and stay home w ith your family. If you never play any game w ith other men, then it's time you go d own to the gym w ith the guys and play some hoops. In other words, you face your fears head-on. Drop the fig leaf; come out from hiding. For how long? Longer than you w ant to; long enough to raise the deeper issues, let us w ound surface from beneath it all.

Losing the false self is painful; though it's a mask, it's one we've worn for years and losing it can feel like losing a close friend. Underneath the mask is all the hurt and fear we've been running from, hiding from. To let it come to the surface can shake us like an earthquake. Brad felt as if he w as going to die; you may too. Or you may feel like Andy Gullahorn, who wrote the song "Steel Bars" from Old Hat (@ 1997 by Andy Gullahorn):

*So this is how it feels at the rock bottom of despair*  
When the house I built comes crashing down  
And this is how it feels when I know the man that I say I am  
Is not the man that I am when no one's around

But this is not the end of the road; it's the trailhead. What you are journeying towards is freedom, healing, and authenticity. Listen to the next part of Andy's song:

*This is how it feels to come alive again*  
And start fighting back to gain control  
And this is how it feels to let freedom in  
And break the chains that enslave my soul

**WALKING AWAY FROM THE WOMAN**

As we walk away from the false self, we will feel vulnerable and exposed. We will be sorely tempted to turn to our comforts for some relief, those places that we've found solace and rest. Because so many of us turned to the woman for our sense of masculinity, we must walk away from her as well. I do not mean you leave your wife. I mean you stop looking to her to validate you, stop trying to make her come through for you, stop trying to get your answer from her. For some men, this may mean disappointing her. If you've been a passive man, tiptoeing around your wife for years, never doing anything to rock the boat, then it's time to rock it. Stand up to her; get her mad at you. For those of you violent men (including achievers), it means you stop abusing her. You release her as the object of your anger because you release her as the one who was supposed to make you a man.

Repentance for a driven man means you become kind. Both types are still going to the woman. Repentance depends on which way you've approached her.

But I have counseled many young men to break up with the woman they were dating because they had made her their life. She was the sun of his universe, around which he orbited. A man needs a much bigger orbit than a woman. He needs a mission, a life purpose, and he needs to know his name. Only then is he fit for a woman, for only then does he have something to invite her into. A friend tells me that in the Masai tribe in Africa, a young man cannot court a woman until he has killed a lion. That's their way of saying, until he has been initiated. I have seen far too many young men commit a kind of emotional promiscuity with a young woman. He will pursue her, not to offer his strength but to drink from her beauty, to be affirmed by her and feel like a man. They will share deep, intimate conversations. But he will not commit; he is unable to commit. This is very unfair to the young lady. After a year of this sort of relationship a dear friend said, "I never felt secure in what I meant to him."

When we feel the pull toward the golden-haired woman, we must recognize that something deeper is at play. As Bly says,

What does it mean when a man falls in love with a radiant face across the room? It may mean that he has some soul work to do. His soul is the issue. Instead of pursuing the woman and trying to get her alone... he needs to go alone himself, perhaps to a mountain cabin, for three months; write poetry, canoe down a river, and dream. That would save some women a lot of trouble. (Iron John)

Again, this is not permission to divorce. A man who has married a woman has made her a solemn pledge; he can never heal his wound by delivering another to the one he promised to love. Sometimes she will leave him; that is another story. Too many men run after her, begging her not to go. If she has needs to go alone himself, perhaps to a mountain cabin, for three months; write poetry, canoe down a river, and dream. That would save some women a lot of trouble. (Iron John)

When he may come back to her w ith his question answered. A man does not go to a woman to get his strength; he goes to her to another to the one he promised to love. Sometimes she will leave him; that is another story. Too many men run after her, begging her not to go. If she has needs to go alone himself, perhaps to a mountain cabin, for three months; write poetry, canoe down a river, and dream. That would save some women a lot of trouble. (Iron John)

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We simply accept the invitation to leave all that we've relied on and venture out with God. We can choose to do it ourselves, or we can wait for God to bring it all down.
Adam chose Eve over God.

If you think I exaggerate, simply look around. Look at all the art, poetry, music, drama devoted to the beautiful woman. Listen to the language men use to describe her. Watch the powerful obsession at work. What else can this be but worship? Men come into the world without the God who was our deepest joy, our ecstasy. Aching for what we know not what, we meet Eve’s daughters and we are history. She is the closest thing we’ve ever encountered, the pinnacle of creation, the very embodiment of God’s beauty and mystery and tenderness and allure. And what goes out to her is not just our longing for Eve, but our longing for God as well. A man without his true love, his life, his God, will find another. What better substitute than Eve’s daughters? Nothing else in creation even comes close.

To a young man who had never been without a girlfriend since the eighth grade, I gave the advice that he should break up, call off all dating for one year. From the look on his face you’d have thought I told him to cut off his arm . . . or something worse. Do you see what is at work here? Notice that the struggle with pornography or masturbation is most difficult when you are lonely, or beat up, or longing for comfort in some way. This will become more intense as you get closer to your wound. The longing for the ache to go away, and the pull toward other comforters can seem overwhelming. I’ve watched it in many men. I know it in myself. But if this is the water you are truly thirsty for, then why do you remain thirsty after you’ve had a drink? It’s the wrong well.

We must reverse Adam’s choice; we must choose God over Eve. We must take our ache to him. For only in God will we find the healing of our wound.
CHAPTER SEVEN

HEALING THE WOUND

I think I’ve given a wrong impression of my life with my sons. Rock climbing, canoeing, wrestling, our quest for danger and destruction—you might get the impression we’re a sort of military academy of the backwoods or one of those milieu cults. So let me tell you of my favorite event of the day. It comes late in the evening, at bedtime, after the boys have brushed their teeth and we’ve said our family prayers. As I’m tucking them in, one of my boys will ask, “Dad, can we snuggle tonight?” Snuggle time is when I’ll cuddle up next to them on a bed that’s really not big enough for both of us—and that’s the point, to get very close—and there in the dark we’ll just sort of talk. Usually we start laughing and then we have to whisper because the others will ask us “to keep it down in there.” Sometimes it breaks into tickling, other times it’s a chance for them to ask some serious questions about life. But whatever happens, I hate matters most is what’s going on beneath all that: intimacy, closeness, connection.

Yes, my boys want me to guide them into adventure, and they love to test their strength against mine. But all of that takes place in the context of an intimate bond of love that is far deeper than words can express. What they want more than anything, what I love to offer them more than anything, is soul-to-soul oneness. As Tom Wolfe said, “The deepest search in life, it seemed to me, the thing that in one way or another was central to all living was man’s search to find a father, not merely the father of his flesh, not merely the lost father of his youth, but the image of a strength and wisdom external to his need and superior to his hunger, to which the belief and power of his own life could be united.” (“The Story of a Novel”)

THE SOURCE OF REAL STRENGTH

Guys are unanimously embarrassed by their emptiness and woundedness; it is for most of us a tremendous source of shame, as I’ve said. But it need not be. From the very beginning, back before the Fall and the assault, ours was meant to be a desperately dependent existence. It’s like a tree and its branches, explains Christ. You are the branches, I am the trunk. From me you draw your life; that’s how it was meant to be. In fact, he goes on to say, “Apart from me you can do nothing” (John 15:5). He’s not berating us or mocking us or even saying it with a sigh, all the while thinking, I wish they’d put it together and stop needing me so much. Not at all. We are made to depend on God; we are made for union with him and nothing about us works right without it. As C. S. Lewis wrote, “A car is made to run on gasoline, and it would not run properly on anything else. Now God designed the human machine to run on himself. He himself is the fuel our spirits were designed to burn, or the food our spirits were designed to feed on. There is no other.”

Why is this important? Because so many men I know live with a deep misunderstanding of Christianity. They look at it as a “second chance” to get their act together. They’ve been forgiven, now they see it as their job to get their act together. They’re trying to finish the marathon with a broken leg. But follow this closely now: You’ll recall that masculinity is an essence that is passed from father to son. That is a picture, as so many things in life are, of a deeper reality. The true essence of strength is passed to us from God through our union with him. Notice what a deep and vital part of King David’s life this is. Remembering that he is a man’s man, a warrior for sure, listen to how he describes his relationship to God in the Psalms:

I love you, O LORD, my strength. (18:1)
But you, O LORD, be not far off;
O my Strength, come quickly to help me. (22:19)
O my Strength, I watch for you;
you, O God, are my fortress, my bower,
loving God. (59:9)

I dare say that David could take on John Wayne or James Bond any day; yet this true man is unashamed to admit his desperate dependence on God. We know we are meant to embody strength, we know we are not what we were meant to be, and so we feel our brokenness as a source of shame. As we spoke of his wound recently, and how he needed to enter into it for healing, Dave protested. “I don’t even want to go there. It all feels so true.” Men are typically quite harsh with the broken places within them. Many report feeling as though there is a boy inside, and they despise that about themselves. Quit being such a baby, they order themselves. But that is not how God feels. He is furious about what’s happened to you. “It would be better to be thrown into the sea with a large millstone tied around the neck than to face the punishment in store for harming one of these little ones” (Luke 17:2 NLT). Think of how you would feel if the wounds you were given, the blows dealt to you, were dealt to a boy you loved—your son, perhaps. Would you shame him for it? Would you feel scorn that he couldn’t rise above it all? No. You’d feel compassion. As Gerard Manley Hopkins wrote, “Quit being such a baby.”

In the movie Good Will Hunting, there is a beautiful picture of what can happen when a man realizes he has “owed” his wound, and discovers he doesn’t have to. Will Hunting (played by Matt Damon) is a brilliant young man, a genius, who works as a janitor at MIT and lives in a rough part of town. No one knows about his gift, because he hides it behind a false self of “tough kid from the wrong side of the tracks.” He’s a fighter (a violent man), That
A child takes life as it comes because he has no other way of taking it. The world had come to an end that Saturday morning, but each time we had moved to another place, I had seen a world come to an end, and there had always been another world to replace it. When somebody you love dies, Mark Twain said, it is like when your house burns down; it isn’t for years that you realize the full extent of your loss. For me it was longer than for most, if indeed I had realized it fully even yet, and in the meantime the loss came to get buried so deep in me that after a time I scarcely ever took it out to look at it all, let alone speak of it. (The Sacred Journey) That is the way we are with our wound, especially men. We bury it deep and never take it out again. But take it out we must, or better, enter into it. I entered my wound through the surprising door of my anger. After we moved to Colorado, about eleven years ago, I found myself snapping at my boys for silly things. A spilled glass of milk would elicit a burst of rage. Whoo, John, I thought, there are things going on inside; you’d better have a look under the hood. As I explored my anger with the help of my dear friend Brent, I realized I was so furious about feeling all alone in a world that constantly demanded more of me than I felt able to give. Something in me felt young—like a ten-year-old boy in a man’s world but without a man’s ability to come through. There was much fear beneath the surface; fear that I would fall, fear that I could be found out, and finally, fear that I was ultimately on my own. Where did all this fear come from? I wondered. Why do I feel so alone in the world . . . and so young inside? Why does something in my heart feel orphaned? My answer came through several movies. As I’ve written about in other places, I was blindsided by A River Runs Through It because through its beautiful retelling of boys who never really had their father except during their fishing trips, and how in the end they lost even that. I realized I had lost my father, and like Buechner the loss got buried so deep in me that after a time I scarcely ever took it out. I was pierced by A Perfect World because I saw there just how much a boy’s father means to him and how I longed for that intimacy with a source of strength who loved me and could tell me my name. I so identified with Will Hunting because I, too, w as a fighting who saw myself as up against the rest of the world and I had also accepted my wound and never grieved it. I thought it was my fault. In some ways God had to sneak up on me through those stories because I wasn’t willing to just skip happily down the path to my heart’s deepest pain. We fight this part of the journey. The whole false self, our “lifestyle,” is an elaborate defense against entering our wounded heart. It is a chosen blindness. “Our false self stubbornly blinds each of us to the light and the truth of our own emptiness and hollowless,” says Manning. There are readers who even now have no idea what their wound is, or even what false self arose from it. Ah, how convenient that blindness is. Blissful ignorance. But a wound unfelt is a wound unhealed. We must go in. The door may be your anger; it may be rejection that you’ve experienced, perhaps from a girl; it may be failure, or the loss of the golden bat and the way God is thwarting your false self. It may be a simple prayer: Jesus, take me into my ignorance. But a wound unfelt is a wound unhealed. We must go in. The door may be your anger; it may be rejection that you’ve experienced, perhaps from a girl; it may be failure, or the loss of the golden bat and the way God is thwarting your false self. It may be a simple prayer: Jesus, take me into my ignorance. But a wound unfelt is a wound unhealed. We must go in. The door may be your anger; it may be rejection that you’ve experienced, perhaps from a girl; it may be failure, or the loss of the golden bat and the way God is thwarting your false self. It may be a simple prayer: Jesus, take me into my ignorance.
instead w as validation. My heart knew that if a man I know is a man thinks I'm one, too, w ell then, maybe I am one after all. Remember—masculinity is bestowed by masculinity. But there have been other significant ways in which God has worked—times of healing prayer, times of grieving the wound and forgiving my father. Most of all, times of deep communion with God. The point is this: Healing never happens outside of intimacy with Christ. The healing of our wound flows out of our union with him.

But there are some common themes that I share with you as you seek the restoration of your heart. The first step seems so simple it's almost hard to believe w e overlook it, never ask for it, and w hen w e do, w e sometimes struggle for days just to get the words out.

It begins w ith surrender. As Lew is says, "Until you have given yourself to him you will not have a real self." W e return the branch to its trunk; w e yield our lives to the One who is our Life. And then w e invite Jesus into the wound—w e ask him to come and meet us there, to enter into the broken and unhealed places of our heart. When the Bible tells us that Christ came to "redeem mankind" it offers a whole lot more than forgiveness. To simply forgive a broken man is like telling someone running a marathon, "It's okay that you've broken your leg. I w on't hold that against you. Now finish the race." That is cruel, to leave him disabled that way. No, there is much more to our redemption. The core of Christ's mission is foretold in Isaiah 61:

The Messiah will come, he says, to bind up and heal, to release and set free. What? Your heart. Christ comes to restore and release you, your soul, the true you. This is the central passage in the entire Bible about Jesus, the one he chooses to quote about himself when he steps into the spotlight in Luke 4 and announces his arrival. So take him at his word—ask him in to heal all the broken places w ithin you and unite them into one whole and healed heart. Ask him to release you from all bondage and captivity, as he promised to do. As MacDonald prayed, "Gather my broken fragments to a whole place... Let mine be a merry, all-receiving heart, but make it a whole, with light in every part." But you feel like forgiving; you will never get there. Feelings take time to heal after the choice to forgive is made. We allow God to bring the hurt up from our wounds. We have been deprived, by his father and his mother and by the culture. My father had his own wound that no one ever offered to heal. His father was an angelic man, but all the same, he made me a broken child. When he said, "I began to think of him not as someone who had deprived me of love or attention or companionship, but as someone who himself had borne me alone." I am sorry to think of all the years my wife endured the anger and bitterness that I redirected at her from my father. As someone has said, "As a boy, a man I did not know what love was, because my heart was broken." I now know it was a choice.

Abiding in the love of God is our only hope, the only true home for our hearts. It's not that we mentally acknowledge that God loves us. It's that we let our hearts come home to him, and stay in his love. MacDonald says it this way:

"I have such a hard time with that, just being loved. It feels so naked. I'd rather be in control, be admired for what I bring to the group." Later he wrote this in a letter to me:

"After it all came crashing down, I was overwhelmed by sadness and grief. The pain is incredible. In the midst of this God asked me, "Brad, will you let me love you?" I know what he is asking. I feel anxious that I need to go e-mail all these schools and secure a future. But I'm tired of running away. I want to come home. I flipped through my Bible and came to John 15, "Just as the Father has loved you, I have also loved you; abide in my love." The battle is very intense. At times it is all clear. At others it is a fog. Right now all I can do is cling to Jesus as best I know how and not run from all that is in my heart.

Abiding in the love of God is our only hope, the only true home for our hearts. It's not that we mentally acknowledge that God loves us. It's that we let our hearts come home to him, and stay in his love. MacDonald says it this way:

When our hearts turn to him, that is opening the door to him... then he comes in, not by our thought only, nor in our idea only, but he comes himself, and of his own will. Thus the Lord, the Spirit, becomes the soul of our souls... Then indeed we are; then indeed we have life; the life of Jesus has... become life in us... we are one with God forever and ever. (The Heart of George MacDonald)

Or as St. John of the Cross echoes, "O how gently and how lovingly dost thou lie awaked in the depth and centre of my soul, w here thou in secret and in silence alone, as its sole Lord, abidest, not only as in Thine own house or in Thine own chamber, but also as w ithin my own bosom, in close and intimate union (Living Flame of Love)." This deep intimate union with Jesus and w ith his Father is the source of all our healing and all our strength. It is, as Leanne Payne says, "the central and unique truth of Christianity." After a retreat in w hich I laid out the masculine journey to a small group of men, I received this E-mail:

My father never left, he just never had time for me or words of encouragement. He has spent his entire life making himself the center of attention. For the first time I understand why I am highly driven, why I never let anyone get close to me—including my wife—and why I am an imposter to most people. I broke down and cried. I feel the presence of God in my heart like I have never felt him before... the begining of a new heart.

Time has come for us to forgive our fathers. Paul warns us that unforgiveness and bitterness can wrack our lives and the lives of others (Eph. 4:31; Heb. 12:15). I am sorry to think of all the years my wife endured the anger and bitterness that I redirected at her from my father. As someone has said, forgiveness is setting a person free and then discovering the person was you. I found some help in Bly's experience of forgiving his own father, when he said, "I began to think of him not as someone w ho had deprived me of love or attention or companionship, but as someone w ho himself had been deprived, by his father and by the mother and by the culture." My father had his own wound that no one ever offered to heal. His father was an alcoholic, too, for a time, and there were some hard years for my dad as a young man just as there were for me.

Now you must understand: Forgiveness is not a feeling, but an act of the will. As Neil Anderson has written, "Don't wait to forgive until you feel like forgiving; you will never get there. Feelings take time to heal after the choice to forgive is made." We allow God to bring the hurt up from our past, for "if your forgiveness doesn't visit the emotional core of your life, it will be incomplete." We acknowledge that it hurts, that it matters, and we choose to extend forgiveness to our father. This is not saying, "It didn't really matter"; it is not saying, "I probably deserved part of it anyway." Forgiveness says, "It was w rong, it mattered, and I release you."

And then we ask God to father us, and to tell us our true name.

GOD'S NAME FOR US

I noticed a few years ago, a ways into my own masculine journey, that I related w ell to Jesus and to "God," but not to God as Father. It's not hard to figure out why. Father has been a source of pain and disappointment to me... to many of us. Then I read this in MacDonald:

In my own childhood and boyhood my father was the refuge from all the ills of life, even sharp pain itself. Therefore I say to son or daughter who has no pleasure in the name of the Father, "You must interpret the word by all that you have missed in life. All that human tenderness can give or desire in the nearness and readiness of love, and all infinitely more must be true of the perfect Father—of the maker of fatherhood." (The Heart of George MacDonald)

The gift was perfectly timed, for I knew it was time to allow God to father me. (All along the process of my initiation, God has provided w ords like that, messages, people, gifts to open the next leg of the journey.) Masculinity is passed from father to son, and then from Father to son. Adam, Abraham, Jacob, David, Jesus—they all learned who w e were out of their intimacy with God, w ith the Father. After all, w ho can give a man this, his own name? God alone. For no one but God sees w hat the man is. This is usually thought of w ith a sense of guilt—yes, God sees me... and what he sees is my sin. That's w rong on two counts.

First off, your sin has been dealt w ith. Your Father has removed it from you "as far as the east is from the west" (Ps. 103:12). Your sins have been
washed away (1 Cor. 6:11). When God looks at you he does not see your sin. He has not one condemning thought towards you (Rom. 8:1). But that’s not all. You have a new heart. That’s the promise of the new covenant: “I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put My Spirit in you and move you to follow My decrees and be careful to keep My laws” (Ezek. 36:26–27). There’s a reason that it’s called good news.

Too many Christians today are living back in the old covenant. They’ve had Jeremiah 17:9 drilled into them and they walk around believing my heart is deceitfully wicked. Not anymore it’s not. Read the rest of the book. In Jeremiah 31:33, God announces the cure for all that: “I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people.” We will give you a new heart. That’s why Paul says in Romans 2:29, “No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit.” Sin is not the deepest thing about you. You have a new heart. Did you hear me? Your heart is good.

What God sees when he sees you is the real you, the true you, the man he had in mind when he made you. How else could he give you the white stone with your true name on it? I’ve brought you along in Dave’s story—how his father dealt him the wound of “man’s boy,” how he sought his sense of masculinity through women, how he embraced his wound and its message as final and true. We sat together one day in my office, his life pretty well detailed and unpacked before us, as if we had unpacked a trunk of secrets and laid them all out to the light of day. What else was there to say? “You’ve only got one hope, Dave . . . that your dad was wrong about you.”

You must ask God what he thinks of you, and you must stay with the question until you have an answer. The battle will get fierce here. This is the last thing the Evil One wants you to know. He will play the ventriloquist; he’ll whisper to you as if he were the voice of God. Remember, he’s the accuser of the brethren (Rev. 12:10). After I saw Gladiator, I so longed to be a man like Maximus. He reminded me of Henry V, from Shakespeare’s play—a courageous, valiant man. Maximus is strong and courageous and he fights so well; yet his heart is given over to eternity. He yearns for heaven but stays to fight so that others might be free. I wept at the end, pierced by a longing to be like him. Satan was all over that, telling me that no, I was as really Commodus—the conniving wretch who plays the villain in the movie. What made that blow so hard to shake is the fact that once I was Commodus; I was a selfish, conniving man who had manipulated everything for my own benefit. That was a long time ago, but the accusation stuck.

I left for a trip to England where I did four conferences in five days. It was a brutal trip and I was under a great deal of spiritual attack. What a relief it was to slump into my seat and catch my plane home. Tired to the bone, spent and beat up, I needed to hear words from my Father. So I began to pour my heart out to him in my journal.

What of me, dear Lord? Are you pleased? What did you see? I am sorry that I have to ask, wishing I knew without asking. Fear, I suppose, makes me doubt. Still, I yearn to hear from you—a word, or image, a name or even just a glint from you.

This is what I heard:

You are Henry V after Agincourt . . . the man in the arena, whose face is covered with blood and sweat and dust, who strove valiantly . . . a great warrior . . . yes, even Maximus.

And then

You are my friend.

I cannot tell you how much those words mean to me. In fact, I’m embarrassed to tell them to you; they seem arrogant. But I share them in hopes that they will help you find your own. They are words of life, words that heal your wound and shatter the Enemy’s accusations. I am grateful for them; deeply grateful. Oh, what wonderful stories I could tell here of how many times God has spoken to me and to other men since we’ve been asking the question. My friend Aaron went to a park near our home and found a place of solitude. There he waited for the Father’s voice. What he first heard was this: “True masculinity is spiritual.” Aaron has for so long felt that spirituality was feminine; it put him in a terrible bind because he is a very spiritual man, and yet longs to be a real man. God spoke exactly what he needed to hear—masculinity is spiritual. Then he heard, “True spirituality is good.” And then, “You are a man. You are a man.”

It’s a battle to get to this place, and once words like these have been spoken the Enemy rushes in to steal them. Remember how he assaulted Christ in the wilderness, right on the heels of hearing words from his Father. Another friend and I were talking about these stories and many more like them. He sort of sighed and said, “Yes, I remember a time in church when I heard God say to me, ‘You’re doing great. I am proud of you, right where you are.’ But I could not believe it. It just doesn’t seem true.” That is why we always rest on propositional truth. We stand on what Scripture says about us. We are forgiven. Our heart is good. The Father’s voice is never condemning. From that place we ask God to speak personally to us, to break the power of the lie that was delivered with our wound.

He knows your name.

OUT OF OUR WOUND COMES OUR GLORY

I have a favorite painting in my office, a reprint of Charlie Schreyvogel’s My Bunkie. It’s a scene of four cavalry soldiers done in the Western style of Remington. The action is a rescue; one of the riders has apparently been shot off his horse and three men are galloping in to pick him up. In the foreground, the stranded soldier is being swept up onto the back of the horse of his bunk mate (his “bunkie”), while the other two are providing rifle cover. I love this scene because that is what I want to do and be; I want to ride to the rescue of those who have been shot down. But sitting in my office one day, God began to speak to me about the painting and my role in it. You cannot be the man who rescues, John, until you are the man without a horse, the man who needs rescuing.

Yes. True strength does not come out of bravado. Until we are broken, our life will be self-centered, self-reliant; our strength will be our own. So long as you think you are really something in and of yourself, what will you need God for? I don’t trust a man who hasn’t suffered; I don’t let a man get close to me who hasn’t faced his own wound. Think of the posers you know—are they the kind of man you would call at 2:00 A.M., when life is collapsing around you? Not me. I don’t want clichés; I want deep, soulful truth, and that only comes when a man has walked the road I’ve been talking about. As Buechner says, To do for yourself the best that you have in you to do— to grit your teeth and clench your fists in order to survive the world at its harshest and worst—is, by that very act, to be unable to let something be done for you and in you that is more wonderful still. The trouble with steeling yourself against the harshness of reality is that the same steel that secures your life against being destroyed secures your life also against being opened up and transformed. (The Sacred Journey)

Only when we enter our wound will we discover our true glory. As Bly says, “Where a man’s wound is, that is where his genius will be.” There are two reasons for this. First, because the wound was given in the place of your true strength, as an effort to take you out. Until you go there you are still posing, offering something more shallow and insubstantial. And therefore, second, it is out of your brokenness that you discover what you have to offer the community. The false self is never wholly false. Those gifts we’ve been using are often quite true about us, but we’ve used them to hide behind. We thought that the power of our life was in the golden bat, but the power is in us. When we begin to offer not merely our gifts but our true selves, that is when we become powerful.

That is when we are ready for battle.
CHAPTER EIGHT

A BATTLE TO FIGHT: THE ENEMY

Enemy-occupied territory—that is what this world is.

—C. S. LEWIS

We are but warriors for the working-day;
Our gavess and our gift are all beaten to
With rainy marching in the pulch field . . .
But, by the mar, our hearts are in the trim

If we would endeavor, like men of courage, to stand in the battle, surely we would feel the favorable assistance of God from Heaven. For he who giveth us occasion to fight, to the end we may get the victory, is ready to succor those that fight manfully, and do trust in his grace.

—HENRY V

If there are any great battles? Is there any great adventures? Are there any great enemies? I want to explain that indeed there are, but before I could reply he got this gleam in his eye and asked, “And are there any dragons?” O, how deeply this is written into the masculine soul. The boy is a warrior; the boy is his name. A man needs a battle to fight; he needs a place for the warrior in him to come alive and be honed, trained, seasoned. If Bly is right (and I believe he is), that “the early death of a man’s warriors keeps the boy in him from growing up,” then the opposite is true—if we can reawaken that fierce quality in a man, hook it up to a higher purpose, release the warrior within, then the boy can grow up and become truly masculine.

As I was working on this book a few days ago, Blaine came downstairs and without a word slipped a drawing he had made in front of me. It is a pencil sketch of an angel with broad shoulders and long hair; his wings are swaying around him as if just unfurled to reveal that he is holding a large two-handed sword like a Scottish claymore. He holds the blade upright, ready for action; his gaze is steady and fierce. Beneath the drawing are the words, written in the hand of a nine-year-old boy, “Every man is a warrior inside. But the choice to fight is his own.” And a little child shall lead them. Blaine knows as deeply as he knows anything that every man is a warrior, yet every man must choose to fight. The warrior is not the only role a man must play; there are others we will explore later. But the warrior is crucial in our movement toward any masculine integrity; it is hardwired into every man.

THE WARRIOR HEART

I have in my files a copy of a letter written by Major Sullivan Ballou, a Union officer in the 2nd Rhode Island. He writes to his wife on the eve of the Battle of Bull Run, a battle he senses will be his last. He speaks tenderly to her of his undying love, of “the memories of blissful moments I have spent with you.” Ballou mourns the thought that he must give up “the hope of future years, when, God willing, we might still have lived and loved together, and seen our sons grow up and become honorable men.” Yet, in spite of his love the battle calls and he cannot turn from it. “I have no misgivings about, or lack of confidence in the cause in which I am engaged, and my courage does not halt or falter . . . how great a debt we owe to those who went before us through the blood and sufferings of the Revolution . . . Sarah, my love for you is deathless, it seems to bind me with mighty cables that nothing but Omnipotence could break” and yet a greater cause “comes over me like a strong wind and bears me irresponsibly on with all these chains to the battle-field.”

A man must have a battle to fight, a great mission to his life that involves and yet transcends even home and family. He must have a cause to which he is devoted even unto death, for this is written into the fabric of his being. Listen carefully now: You do. That is why God created you—to be his intimate ally, to join him in the Great Battle. You have a specific place in the line, a mission God made you for. That is why it is so essential to hear from God about your true name, because in that name is the mission of your life. Churchill was called upon to lead the British through the desperate hours of WWII. He said, “I felt as if I were walking with destiny, and that all my past life had been but a preparation for this hour and for this trial.” The same is true of you; your whole life has been preparation.

“I’d love to be William Wallace, leading the charge with a big sword in my hand,” sighed a friend. “But I feel like I’m the guy back there in the fourth row, with a hoe.” That’s a lie of the Enemy—that your place is really insignificant, that you aren’t really armed for it at all. In your life you are William Wallace—w ho else could be? There is no other man who can replace you in your life, in the arena you’ve been called to. If you leave your place in the line, it will remain empty. No one else can be who you are meant to be. You are the hero in your story. Not a bit player, not an extra, but the main man. This is the next leg in the initiation journey, when God calls a man forward to the front lines. He wants to develop and release in us the qualities every warrior needs—including a keen awareness of the enemies we will face.

Above all else, a warrior has a vision; he has a transcendence to his life, a cause greater than self-preservation. The root of all our woes and our false self was this: We were seeking to save our life and we lost it. Christ calls a man beyond that, “but whosoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it” (Mark 8:35). Again, this isn’t just about being willing to die for Christ; it’s much more daily than that. For years all my daily energy was spent trying to beat the trials in my life and arrange for a little pleasure. My weeks were wasted away either striving or indulging. I was a mercenary. A warrior needs weapons to carry and how to use them. Whatever specific terrain you are called to—at home, at work, in the realm of the arts or industry or world politics, you will always encounter three enemies: the world, the flesh, and the devil. They make up a sort of unholy trinity. Because they always conspire together it’s a bit difficult to talk about them individually; in any battle at least two of them are involved, but usually it’s all three. Still, they each have their own personality, so I’ll take them one at a time and then try to show how they collude against us. Let’s start with the enemy closest at hand.

THE TRAITOR WITHIN

However strong a castle may be, if a treacherous party resides inside (ready to betray at the first opportunity possible), the castle cannot be kept safe from the enemy. Traitors occupy our own hearts, ready to side with every temptation and to surrender to them all. (John Owen, Sin and Temptation)

Ever since that fateful day when Adam gave away the essence of his strength, men have struggled with a part of themselves that is ready at the drop of a hat to do the same. We don’t want to speak up unless we know it will go well, and we don’t want to move unless we’re guaranteed success. What the Scriptures call the flesh, the old man, or the sinful nature, is that part of fallen Adam in every man that always wants the easiest way out. It’s much
SABOTAGE

Rich is a deeply passionate young man who is really trying to learn what it means to be a man. A few weeks ago he had plans to go out with some friends. They promised to call him before they left and then pick him up; they never called. A few days later, when one of them brought it up, Rich said, “Oh, that’s okay. It’s no big deal.” But inside, he was furious. That is sabotage. He deliberately chose to push his true strength down and live the false self. Do that enough and you won’t believe you have any strength. I’ve noticed when I deny the anger I am feeling, it turns into fear. If we will not allow what Sam Keen calls “fire in the belly,” something weaker will take its place. I had a chance a few years back to tell my boss what I really thought, but I didn’t. Normally he would have said “Oh, that’s okay. It’s no big deal,” and paid the higher price; but not this time. He told the guy that the order he gave him was changed; not in sinful anger (there’s a difference), not to hurt him but to help him. He actually asked me to, called to see if I was free to chat for a moment. I know what he was calling me for, and I told him I was busy. For days afterward I felt wretched, I felt like a poser. I sabotaged my strength by refusing it.

SABOTAGE also happens when we give our strength away. Taking a bribe, letting yourself be bought off, accepting flattery in exchange for some sort of loyalty, is sabotage. Refusing to confront an issue because if you keep quiet you’ll get a promotion or be made an elder or keep your job corrupts you dow n deep. Masturbation is sabotage. It is an inherently selfish act that tears you down. I’ve spoken with many men whose addiction to masturbation has eroded their sense of strength. So does sexual involvement with a woman you are not married to. Carl is another young man who wormed the ladies seem to find especially attractive. I am astounded when I see many women who offer when they are famished for the love and affection they have never had from their fathers. They will throw themselves at a man to get a taste of being wanted, desired. Carl came to me because his sexual activity was out of control. Dozens upon dozens of women offered themselves to him and each time he gave in he felt weakened; his resolve to resist was less the next time around.

Things began to change for Carl when he saw the whole sexual struggle not so much as sin but as a battle for his strength. He wanted to be strong, wanted it desperately, and that began to fuel his choice to resist. As à Kempis said, “A man must strive long and mightily within himself, before he can learn fully to master himself.” Carl and I spent hours praying through every one of those relationships, confessing the sin, breaking the bonds sexual liaisons form between souls, cleansing his strength, asking God to restore him. He did, and I am grateful to say those days are over for Carl. It wasn’t easy, but it was real, he is happily married now.

THE REAL THING

Start choosing to live out your strength and you’ll discover that it grows each time. Rich was as after some brakes for his car; he called the parts store and they quoted him a price of $50 for the pair. But when he got down there, the guy told him it would be $50. He was taking Rich for a fool and something in him. Normally he would have said “Oh, that’s okay. It’s no big deal,” and paid the higher price; but not this time. He told the guy that the price was $50 and stood his ground. The guy backed down and stopped trying to rip him off. “It felt great,” Rich told me later. “I felt that I was finally acting like a man.” Now that may seem like a simple story, but this is where you will discover your strength, in the daily details of your life. Begin to taste your true strength and you’ll want more. Something in the center of your chest feels weighty, substantial.

We must let our strength show up. It is time so strange, after all this, that a man could not allow his strength to arrive, but many of us are unnerved by our own masculinity. What will happen if we really let it out? In Healing the Masculine Soul, Gordon Dalbey tells a remarkable story about a man who was plagued by a recurring dream, a nightmare “in which a ferocious lion kept chasing the man until he dropped exhausted and awoke screaming.” The man was dismayed; he did not know what the dream meant. Was the lion a symbol of fear? Something in his life overwhelming him? One day the man agreed, then reported what was happening: “The lion is snorting and shaking his head, standing right there in front of me . . . I ask him who he is . . . and—Oh! I can’t believe what he’s saying! He says, “I’m your father.”

I had a recurring dream similar to this one for many years—especially in adolescence. A great wild stallion was standing on the ridge of a hill; I sensed danger but not an evil danger, just something strong and valiant and greater than me. I tried to sneak away; the stallion alw ays turned in time to see me and came charging down the hill. I woul d w ake just as he was upon me. It seems crazy that a man would sneak away from his strength, fear it to show up, but that is why we sabotage. Our strength is wid and fierce, and we are more than unsettled by what may happen if we let it arrive. One thing we know: Nothing will ever be the same. One client said to me, “I afraid I’ll do something bad if I let all this show up.” No, the opposite is true. You’ll do...
something bad if you don’t. Remember—a man’s addictions are the result of his refusing his strength.

Years ago Brent gave me a piece of advice that changed my life: “Let people feel the weight of who you are,” he said, “and let them deal with it.” That brings us into the arena of our next enemy.

THE WORLD

What is this enemy that the Scripture calls “the world”? Is it drinking and dancing and smoking? Is it going to the movies or playing cards? That is a shallow and ridiculous approach to holiness. It numbs us to the fact that good and evil are much more serious. The Scriptures never prohibit drinking alcohol, only drunkenness; dancing was a vital part of King David’s life; and while there are some very godly movies out there, there are also some very ungodly churches. No, “the world” is not a place or a set of behaviors—it is any system built by our collective sin, all our false selves coming together to reaw and destroy each other. Take all those posers out there, put them together in an office or a club or a church, and what you get is what the Scriptures mean by the w orld.

The w orld is a carnival of counterfeits—counterfeit battles, counterfeit adventures, counterfeit beauties. Men should think of it as a corruption of their strength. Battle your way to the top, says the world, and you are a man. Why is it then that the men who get there are often the emptiest, most frightened, prideful posers around? They are mercenaries, battling only to build their own kingdoms. There is nothing transcendent about their lives. The same holds true of the adventure addicts; no matter how much you spend, no matter how far you take your hobby, it’s still merely that—a hobby. And as for the counterfeit beauties, the w orld is constantly trying to tell us that the Golden-Haired Woman is out there—go for her.

The w orld offers a man a false sense of power and a false sense of security. Be brutally honest now—where does your own sense of power come from? Is it how pretty your wife is—or your secretary? Is it how many people attend your church? Is it knowledge—that you have an expertise and that makes others come to you, bow to you? Is it your position, degree, or title? A white coat, a Ph.D., a podium, or a paneled office can make a man feel like pretty neat stuff. What happens inside you when I suggest you give it up? Put the book down for a few moments and consider what you w orld think of yourself if tomorrow you lost everything that the w orld has rewarded you for. “Without Christ a man must fail miserably” says MacDonald, “or succeed even more miserably.” Jesus warns us against anything that gives a false sense of power. When you w alk into a company dinner or a church function, he said, take a backseat. Choose the path of humility; don’t be a self-promoter, a glad-hand er, a poser. Climb the ladder; have the mail clerk over for dinner; treat your secretary like she’s more important than you; look to be the servant of all. Where am I deriving my sense of strength and power from? Is a good question to ask yourself . . . often.

If you want to know how the w orld really feels about you, just start living out of your true strength. Say what you think, stand up for the underdog, challenge foolish policies. They’ll turn on you like sharks. Remember the film Jerry McGuire? Jerry is an agent for professional athletes who comes to a sort of personal epiphany about the corruption of his firm. He issues a memo, a vision statement urging a more humane approach to their work. Let’s stop treating people like cattle, he says; stop serving the bottom line and really serve our clients. All his buddies cheer him on; when the firm dumps him (as he knew they would) they rush to seize his clients. I’ve seen this time and time again. A friend of mine confronted his pastor on some false statements the pastor had made to get his position. This shepherd of the flock started circulating rumors that my friend was gay; he tried to ruin his reputation.

The w orld of posers is shaken by a real man. They’ll do whatever it takes to get you back in line—threaten you, bribe you, seduce you, undermine you. They crucified Jesus. But it didn’t work, did it? You must let your strength show up. Remember Christ in the Garden, the sheer force of his feelings. Where am I deriving my sense of strength and power from? Is that all that was going on in that moment?

I sat at the wheel silent and steaming. On the outside, I looked cool; inside, here is what was happening: Geez, doesn’t she think I know how to get there? I hate it when she does that. Then another voice says, She always does that. And I say (internally—the whole dialogue took place internally, in the blink of an eye), Yeah, she does . . . she’s always saying stuff like that. I hate that about her. A feeling of accusation and anger and self-righteousness swept over me. Then the voice says, John, this is never going to change, and I say, This is never going to change, and the voice says, You know, John, there are a lot of women out there who would be deeply grateful to have you as their man, and I think, Yeah—there are a lot of women out there . . .

You get the picture. Change the characters and the setting and the very same thing has happened to you. Only, you probably thought the whole thing was your own mess.

The devil no doubt has a place in our theology, but is he a category we ever think about in the daily events of our lives? Has it ever crossed your mind that not every thought that crosses your mind comes from you? What I experienced in the midst of traffic that day happens all the time in marriages, in ministries, in any relationship. We are being lied to all the time. Yet we never stop to say, “Wait a minute . . . who else is speaking here? Where are those ideas coming from? Where are those feelings coming from?” If you read the saints from every age before the Modern Era—that pride-filled age of reason, science, and technology—were thoroughly educated in—you’ll find that they take the devil very seriously indeed. As Paul says, “We are not unaware of his schemes” (2 Cor. 2:11). But we, the enlightened, have a much more commonsense approach to things. We look for a psychological or physical or even political explanation for every trouble we meet.

Who caused the Chaldeans to steal Job’s herds and kill his servants? Satan, clearly (Job 1:12, 17). Yet do we ever give him a passing thought when we hear of terrorism today? Who kept that poor w oman bent over for eighteen years, the one Jesus healed on the Sabbath? Satan, clearly (Luke 13:16). But do we ever consider him when we are having a headache that keeps us from praying or reading Scripture? Who moved Ananias and Sapphira to lie to the apostles? Satan again (Acts 5:3). But do we really see his hand behind a fallout or schism in ministry? Who was behind that brutal assault on your own strength, those wounds you’ve taken? As William Gurnall said, “It is the image of God reflected in you that so enrages hell; it is this at which the demons hurl their mightiest weapons.”

There is a whole lot more going on behind the scenes of our lives than most of us have been led to believe. Take Christmas for example.
Most of you probably have a Nativity scene that you take out over the holidays and place on a mantel or coffee table. Most of these scenes share a regular cast of characters: shepherds, wise men, maybe a few barnyard animals, Joseph, Mary, and, of course, the baby Jesus. Yes, ours has an angel or two and I imagine yours does as well. But that's about as far as the supernatural gets. What is the overall mood of the scene? Don't they all have a sort of warm, pastoral atmosphere to them, a quiet, intimate feel like the one you get when you sing "Silent Night"? And while that's all very true, it is also very deceptive because it is not a full picture of what's really going on. For that, you have to turn to Revelation 12:

A great and wondrous sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet and a crown of twelve stars on her head. She was pregnant and cried out in pain as she was about to give birth. Then another sign appeared in heaven: an enormous red dragon with seven heads and ten horns and seven crowns on his heads. His tail swept a third of the stars out of the sky and flung them to the earth. The dragon stood in front of the woman who was about to give birth, so that he might devour her child the moment it was born. She gave birth to a son, a male child, who will rule all the nations with an iron scepter... And there was war in heaven. Michael and his angels fought against the dragon, and the dragon and his angels fought back. But he was not strong enough, and they lost their place in heaven. The great dragon was hurled down—that ancient serpent called the devil or Satan, who leads the whole world astray. He was hurled to the earth, and his angels with him. (vv. 1–5, 7–9)

As Philip Yancey says, I have never seen this version of the story on a Christmas card. Yet it is the truer story, the rest of the picture of what was going on that fateful night. Yancey calls the birth of Christ the Great Invasion, "a daring raid by the ruler of the forces of good into the universe's seat of evil." Spiritually speaking, this is no silent night. It is D-Day. "It is almost beyond my comprehension too, and yet I accept that this notion is the key to understanding Christmas and is, in fact, the touchstone of my faith. As a Christian I believe that we live in parallel worlds. One world consists of hills and lakes and barns and politicians and shepherds watching their flocks by night. The other consists of angels and sinister forces" and the whole spiritual realm. The child is born, the woman escapes and the story continues like this:

Then the dragon was enraged at the woman and went off to make war against the rest of her offspring—those who obey God's commandments and hold to the testimony of Jesus. (Rev. 12:17)

Behind the world and the flesh is an even more deadly enemy... one we rarely speak of and are even much less ready to resist. Yet this is where we live now—on the front lines of a fierce spiritual war that is to blame for most of the casualties you see around you and most of the assault against you. It's time we prepared ourselves for it. Yes, Luke, there is a dragon. Here is how you slay him.
CHAPTER NINE

A BATTLE TO FIGHT: THE STRATEGY

She was right that reality can be harsh and that you shut your eyes to it only at your peril because if you do not face up to the enemy in all his dark power, then the enemy will come up from behind some dark day and destroy you while you are facing the other way.

Gird your sword upon your side, O mighty one; clothe yourself with splendor and majesty. In your majesty ride forth victoriously.

-FREDERICK BUECHNER

As part of Christ’s army, you march in the ranks of gallant spirits. Every one of your fellow soldiers is the child of a King. Some, like you, are in the midst of battle, besieged on every side by affliction and temptation. Others, after many assaults, repulses, and raiplings of their faith, are already standing upon the wall of heaven as conquerors. From thence they look down and urge you, their comrades on earth, to march up the hill after them. This is their cry: “Fight to the death and the City is your own, as now it is ours!”

-WILLIAM GURNALL

The invasion of France and the end of WWII actually began the night before the Allies hit the beaches at Normandy, when the 82nd and 101st Airborne Divisions were dropped in behind enemy lines to cut off Hitler’s reinforcements. If you’ve seen The Longest Day or Saving Private Ryan, you remember the dangers those paratroopers were facing. Alone or in small groups, they moved through the dead of night across a country they had never been to in order to fight an enemy they couldn’t see or predict. It was a moment of unparalleled bravery . . . and cow ardice. For not every trooper played the man that fateful night. Sure, they jumped; but afterward, many hid. One group took cow ardice to a new level.

Too many had hunkered down in hedgerows to await the dawn; a few had even gone to sleep. Pvt. Francis Palys of the 506th saw what was perhaps the worst dereliction of duty. He had gathered a squad near Vierville. Hearing “all kinds of noise and singing from a distance,” he and his men sneaked up on a farmhouse. In it was a mixed group from both American divisions. The paratroopers had found liquor in the cellar . . . and they were drunker than a bunch of hillbillies on a Saturday night wingding. Unbelievable!

Unbelievable indeed. These men knew they were at war, yet they refused to act like it. They lived in a dangerous denia—a denial that not only endangered them but countless others who depended on them to do part. It is a perfect picture of the church in the West when it comes to spiritual warfare. During a recent church staff meeting, a friend of mine raised the suggestion that some of the difficulties they were facing might be the work of the Enemy. “And what does he insist you do?” he asked. “Well, I suppose that sort of thing does happen,” one of the other pastors replied. “In the Third World, perhaps, or maybe to thwart a major crusade. You know . . . places where cutting-edge ministry is going on.”

STAGE ONE: “I’M NOT HERE”

Incredible. What a self- indictment. “Nothing dangerous is happening here.” Those men have already been taken out because they’ve sw allow ed the Enemy’s first line of attack: “I’m not here—this is all just you.” You can’t fight a battle you don’t think exists. This is right out of The Screwtape Letters, where Lew is has the old devil instruct his apprentice in this very matter:

My dear Wormwood, I wonder you should ask me whether it is essential to keep the patient in ignorance of your own existence. That question, at least for the present phase of the struggle, has been answered for us by the High Command. Our policy, for the moment, is to conceal ourselves.

As for those who w ho want to be dangerous (cutting-edge), take a close look at 1 Peter 5:8-9: “Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that your brothers throughout the world are undergoing the same kind of sufferings.” What is the Holy Spirit, through Peter, assuming about your life? That you are under spiritual attack. This is not a passage about nonbelievers; he’s talking about “your brethren.” Peter takes it for granted that every believer is under some sort of unseen assault. And what does he insist you do? Resist the devil. Fight back, take a stand.

A ministry partnership that some dear friends were central to has just dissolved this week, I am deeply sad to say. They had teamed up with another organization to bring the gospel to cities across the U.S. These conferences are very powerful; in fact, I’ve never seen anything even close to the impact they have. Through grateful tears, the attendees talk about the healing, the freedom, the release they have experienced. They recover their hearts and are draw n into an intimacy with Whom most have never, ever experienced before. It’s beautiful and awe-inspiring. Now, do you think the Enemy just lets that sort of thing go swimmingly along without any interference whatsoever?

The partnership hit some chopper warts, nothing much at all really, nothing unusual to any relationship, yet the other members simply decided to end the coalition and walk away mid-season. Were there personal issues involved? You bet; there always are. But they were minor. It was mostly misunderstanding and injured pride. There was not one w ho, not one thought as far as I could tell about the Enemy and w hat he might be doing to break up so strategic an alliance. When I brought up the fact that they said they would do w ell to interpret things w ith open eyes, keeping the attacks of the Evil One in mind, I was dismissed. These good people w ith good hearts wanted to explain everything on a “human” level and let me tell you—when you ignore the Enemy, he wins. He simply loves to blame everything on us, get us feeling hurt, misunderstood, suspicious, and resentful of one another.

Before an effective military strike can be made, you must take out the opposing army’s line of communication. The Evil One does this all the time—in ministries and especially between couples. Marriage is a stunning picture of what God offers his people. Scripture tells us it is a living metaphor, a walking parable, a Rembrandt painting of the gospel. The Enemy knows this, and he hates it with every ounce of his malicious heart. He has no intention of just letting that beautiful portrait be looked out before the world w ith such deep appeal that no one can resist God’s offer. So just like in the Garden, Satan comes in to divide and conquer. Often I’ll feel this sense of accusation w hen I’m w ith my wife. It’s hard to describe and it usually isn’t put into words, but I just receive this message that I’m blowing it. I finally brought this up w ith Stasi and tears came to her eyes. “You’re kidding,” she said. “I’ve been feeling the same thing. I thought you were disappointed w ith me.” Wait a minute, I thought. If I’m not sending this message and you’re not sending this message . . .

Most of all the Enemy will try to jam communications w ith Headquarters. Commit yourself to prayer every morning for tw o w eeks and just w atch w hat’ll happen. You won’t w ant to anoint; an important meeting w ill be called that interferes; you’ll catch a cold; or, if you do get to your prayers, your mind will w an der w ith you’ll have for breakfast and how much you should pay for that w at er heater repair and w hat color socks w ould look best w ith your gray suit. Many, many times I’ve simply come under a cloak of confusion so thick I suddenly find myself wondering why I ever believed in Jesus in the first place. That sweet communion I normally enjoy with God is cut off, gone, vanished like the sun behind a cloud. If you don’t know w hat’s up you think you really have lost your faith or been abandoned by God or w hatever spin the Enemy puts on it. Osw ald Chambers w arns us, “Sometimes there is nothing to obey, the only thing to do is to maintain a vital connection w ith Jesus Christ, to see that nothing interferes w ith that.”

Next comes propaganda. Like the infamous Tokyo Rose, the Enemy is constantly broadcasting messages to try to demoralize us. As in my episode during the traffic jam, he is constantly putting his spin on things. After all, Scripture calls him the “accuser of our brethren” (Rev. 12:10 NKJV). Think of what that goes on—w hat hat you hear and feel—w hen you really blow it. I’m such an idiot; I always do that; I’ll never amount to anything. Sounds like accusation to me. How about w hen you’re really trying to step f orward as a man? I can guarantee you w hat w ill happen w hen I’m going to speak. I was driving to the airport for a trip to the West Coast, to give a talk to men about Wild at Heart. All the w ay there I w as under this cloud of heaviness; I was
nearly overcome by a deep sense of John, you’re such a poser. You have absolutely nothing to say. Just turn the car around, go home, and tell them you can’t make it. Now in my clearer moments I know it’s an attack, but you must understand that all this comes on so subtly it seems true at the time. I nearly gave in and went home.

When Christ is assaulted by the Evil One in the widderness, the attack is ultimately on his identity. “If you are the Son of God,” Satan sneers three times, then prove it (Luke 4:1–13). Brad returned from the mission field last year for a sabbatical. After seven years abroad, most of the time w ithout any real companionship, he was pretty beat up; he felt like a failure. He told me that when he woke in the morning he’d “hear” a voice in his thoughts say, Good morning . . . Loser. So many men live under a similar accusation. Craig had really been entering into the battle and fighting bravely the past several months. Then he had a nightmare, a very vivid, grisly dream in w hich he had molested a little girl. He woke up feeling filthy and condemned. That same week I had a dream w here I was accused of committing adultery; I really hadn’t, but in my dream no one would believe me. Follow this: So long as a man remains no real threat to the Enemy, Satan’s line to him is You’re fine. But after you do take sides, it becomes Your heart is bad and you know it.

Finally, he probes the perimeter, looking for a weakness. Here’s how this w orks: Satan w ill throw a thought or a temptation at us in hopes that w e w ill sw allow it. He knows your story, knows w hat w orks w ith you and so the line is tailor-made to your situation. Just this morning in my prayer time it was pride, then w orry, then adultery, then greed, then gluttony. If I thought this w as all me, my heart, I’d be very discouraged. Knowing that my heart is good allowed me to block it, right then and there. When Satan probes, make no agreements. If w e make an agreement, if something in our heart says, Yeah, you’re right, then he pours it out. You’ll see a beautiful w oman and something in you will say, You want her. That’s the Evil One appealing to the traitor w ithin. If the traitor says, Yes, I do, then the lust really begins to take hold. Let that go on for years and you’ve given him a stronghold. This can make a good man feel so awful because he thinks he’s a lustful man w hen he’s not; it’s an attack through and through.

Please don’t misunderstand me. I’m not blaming everything on the devil. In almost every situation there are human issues involved. Every man has his struggles; every marriage has its rough spots; every ministry has personal conflicts. But those issues are like a camfriere that the Enemy throws gasoline all over and turns into a bonfire. The flames leap up into a raging inferno and we are suddenly overwhelmed with what we’re feeling. Simple misunderstandings become grounds for divorce. All the while we believe that it’s us, w e are blowing it, w e’re to blame, and the Enemy is laughing because w e’ve sw allowed the lie “I’m not here, it’s just you.” We’ve got to be a lot more cunning than that.

HANGING ON TO THE TRUTH

In any hand-to-hand combat, there’s a constant back-and-forth of blows, dodges, blocks, counterattacks, and so forth. That’s exactly what Satan is doing in the unseen around us. Only it takes place, initially, at the level of our thoughts. When w e are under attack, w e’ve got to hang on to the truth. Dodge the blow, block it w ith a stubborn refusal, slash back w ith what is true. This is how Christ answ ered Satan—he didn’t get into an argument w ith him, try to reason his way w ayt. He simply stood on the truth. He answ ered w ith Scripture and w e’ve got to do the same. This w ill not be easy, especially w hen all hell is breaking loose around you. It will feel like holding on to a rope while you’re being dragged behind a truck, like keeping your balance in a hurricane. Satan doesn’t just throw a thought at us; he throws feelings too. Walk into a dark house late at night and suddenly fear sw eeps over you; or just stand in a grocery line w ith all those tabloids shouting sex at you and suddenly a sense of corruption is yours.

But this w here your strength is revealed and even increased—through exercise. Stand on w hat is true and do not let go. Period. The traitor w ithin the castle will try to lower the drawbridge but do not let him. When Proverbs 4:23 tells us to guard our hearts, it’s not saying, “Lock them up because they’re really criminal to the core”; it’s saying, “Defend them like a castle, the seat of your strength you do not want to give away.” As à Kempis says, “Yet w e must be watchful, especially in the beginning of the temptation; for the enemy is then more easily overcome, if he is not suffered to enter the door of our hearts, but is resisted w ithout the gate at his first knock.”

Remember the scene in Braveheart w here Robert the Bruce’s evil father is whispering lies to him about treason and compromise? He says to Robert what the Enemy says to us in a thousand ways: “All men betray; all men lose heart.” How does Robert answer? He yells back, “Yet we must be watchful, especially in the beginning of the temptation; for the enemy is then more easily overcome, if he is not suffered to enter the door of our hearts, but is resisted without the gate at his first knock.”

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STAGE TWO: INTIMIDATION

Stasi lived under a cloud of depression for many years. We had seen her find some healing through counseling, but still the depression remained. We had addressed the physical aspects that we could through medication, yet it lingered still. Okay, I thought to myself, the Bible tells me that we have a body, a soul, and a spirit. We’ve addressed the body and soul issues . . . what’s left must be spiritual. Stasi and I began to read a bit on dealing w ith the Enemy. In the course of our study she came across a passage that referred to different symptoms that sometimes accompany oppression; one of them was dizziness. As she read the passage out loud she sounded surprised. “What about it?” I asked. “Well . . . I get dizzy spells a lot.” “Really? How often?” “Oh, every day.” “Every day??!!” I had been married to Stasi for ten years and she had never even mentioned this to me. The poor woman had simply thought they were normal for everyone since they were normal for her.

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GOD IS WITH US

Be strong and courageous, because you will lead these people to inherit the land I swore to their forefathers to give them. Be strong and very courageous. Do not be terrified; do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go. (Josh. 1:6–9)

Joshua knew what it was to be afraid. For years he had been second in command, Moses’ right-hand man. But now it was his turn to lead. The children of Israel weren’t just going to waltz in and pick up the promised land like a quart of milk; they were going to have to fight for it. And Moses was not going with them. If Joshua was completely confident about the situation, why would God have told him over and over again not to be afraid? In fact, God gives him a special word of encouragement: “As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will never leave you nor forsake you” (Josh. 1:5).

How was God “with them”? As a mighty warrior. Remember the plagues? Remember all those Egyptian soldiers drowned with their horses and chariots out there in the Red Sea? It was at that display of God’s strength that the people of Israel sang, “The LORD is a warrior; the LORD is his name” (Ex. 15:3). God fought for Moses and for Israel; he even covenanted to Joshua to do the same and they took down Jericho and every other enemy.

Jeremiah knew what it meant to have God “with him” as we all do. “But the Lord is with me like a mighty warrior,” he sang. “so my persecutors will stumble and not prevail” (Jer. 20:11). Even Jesus walked in this promise when he battled for us here on earth:

You know what has happened throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John preached—how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him. (Acts 10:37–38, emphasis added)

How did Jesus win the battle against Satan? God was with him. This really opens up the riches of the promise Christ gives us when he pledges “I am with you always, even to the end of the age” and “I will never leave you nor forsake you” (Matt. 28:20; Heb. 13:5 NKJV). That doesn’t simply mean that he’ll be around, or even that he’ll comfort us in our afflictions. It means he will fight for us, with us, just as he has fought for his people all through the ages. So long as we walk with Christ, stay in him, we haven’t a thing to fear.

Satan is trying to appeal to the traitor’s commitment to self-preservation when he uses fear and intimidation. So long as we are back in the old story of saving our skin, looking out for Number One, those tactics will work. We’ll shrink back. But the opposite is also true. When a man resolves to become a warrior, when his life is given over to a transcendent cause, he can’t be cowed by the Big Bad Wolf threatening to blow his house down. After Revelation describes what war in heaven between the angels and Satan’s doom will be to the earth, it tells how the saints overcame him:

They overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony; and they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death. (12:11)

The most dangerous man on earth is the man who has reckoned with his own death. All men die; few men ever really live. Sure, you can create a safe life for yourself . . . and end your days in a rest home babbling on about some forgotten misfortune. I’d rather go down swinging. Besides, the less we are trying to “save ourselves,” the more effective a warrior we will be. Listen to G. K. Chesterton on courage:

Courage is almost a contradiction in terms. It means a strong desire to live taking on the form of a readiness to die. “He that will lose his life, the same shall save it,” is not a piece of mysticism for saints and heroes. It is a piece of everyday advice for sailors or mountaineers. It might be printed in an Alpine guide or a drill book. The paradox is the whole principle of courage: even of quite earthly or quite brutal courage. A man cut off by the sea may save his life if he will risk it on the precipice. He can only get away from death by continually stepping within an inch of it. A soldier surrounded by enemies, if he is to cut his way out, needs to combine a strong desire for living with a strange carelessness about dying. He must not merely cling to live, for then he will be a coward, and will not escape. He must not merely wait for death, for then he will be a suicide, and will not escape. He must seek his life in a spirit of furious indifference to it; he must desire life like water and yet drink death like wine.

STAGE THREE: CUTTING A DEAL

The third level of attack the Evil One employs, after we have resisted deception and intimidation, is simply to try to get us to cut a deal. So many men have been bought off in one way or another. The phone call—a betrayal. To do spiritual disciplines when the only reason we have is that we “ought” to. But we’ll find a way to make it work when we are convinced we’re not perfectly—nobody ever does and that’s not the point anyway—but you would have a reason to seek him. We give a half-hearted attempt at the important as flossing. But if you saw your life as a great battle and you fought for him. Bored, sated, and fat, he strolls around on the roof of the palace looking for something to amuse him. The Evil One points out Bathsheba at an affair? He was in his heart of hearts really wanted to fall? What man begins his journey wishing, “I think one day, after twenty years of ministry, I’ll torpedo the whole thing was plotted. In his case it was a long and subtle assignment to wear his defenses down not so much through battle as through boredom. I knew that man; he had no great cause to fight for, just the monotony of “professional Christian ministry” that he hated but couldn’t get out of because he was being so well paid for it. Unless you are aware that that’s what it is, you’ll be taken out too.

Notice this—when did King David fail? What were the circumstances of his affair with Bathsheba? “In the spring, at the time when kings go off to war, David sent Joab out with the king’s men and the whole Israelite army” (2 Sam. 11:1). David was no longer a warrior; he sent others to do his fighting for him. Bored, satiated, and fat, he strolls around on the roof of the palace looking for something to amuse him. The Evil One points out Bathsheba and the rest is history—which, as we all know, repeats itself. William Gurnall wams us,

Persisting to the end will be the Burr under your saddle—the thorn in your flesh—when the road ahead seems endless and your soul begs an early discharge. It weighs down every other difficulty of your calling. We have known many who have joined the army of Christ and like being a soldier for a battle or two, but have soon had enough and ended up deserting. They impulsively enlist for Christian duties . . . and are just as easily persuaded to lay it down. Like the new moon, they shine a little in the first part of the evening, but go down before the night is over. (The Christian in Full Armor)

THE WEAPONS OF WAR

Against the flesh, the traitor within, a warrior uses discipline. We have a two-dimensional version of this now, which we call a “quiet time.” But most men have a hard time sustaining any sort of devotional life because it has no vital connection to recovering and protecting their strength; it feels about as important as flossing. But if you saw your life as a great battle and you knew you needed time with God for your very survival, you would do it. Maybe not perfectly—nobody ever does and that’s not the point anyway—but you would have a reason to seek him. We give a half-hearted attempt at the spiritual disciplines when the only reason we have is that we “ought” to. But we’ll find a way to make it work when we are convinced we’re history if we don’t.

Time with God each day is not about academic study or getting through a certain amount of Scripture or any of that. It’s about connecting with God. Do not be terrified; do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go. (Josh. 1:5–7, 9)

Run. He can’t win, you know. As Franklin Roosevelt said, “We have nothing to fear but fear itself.”
The discipline, by the way, is never the point. The whole point of a “devotional life” is connecting with God. This is our primary antidote to the counterfeit the world holds out to us. If you do not have God and have him deeply, you will turn to other lovers. As Maurice Roberts says, Eccstasy and delight are essential to the believer’s soul and they promote sanctification. We are not meant to live without spiritual exhilaration. The believer is in spiritual danger if he allows himself to go for any length of time without tasting the love of Christ. When Christ ceases to fill the heart with satisfaction, our souls will go into silent search of other lovers. (The Thought of God)

A man will devote long hours to his finances when he has a goal of an early retirement; he’ll endure rigorous training when he aims to run a 10k or even a marathon. The ability to discipline himself is there, but dormant for many of us. “When a warrior is in service, how ever, to a True King—that is, to a transcendent cause,” says Bly, “he does well, and his body becomes a hard-working servant, which he requires to endure cold, heat, pain, wounds, scarring, hunger, lack of sleep, hardship of all kinds, do what is necessary.”

Against the Evil One we wear the armor of God. That God has provided weapons for war for us sure makes a lot more sense if our days are like a scene from Saving Private Ryan. How many Christians have read over those passages about the shield of faith and the helmet of salvation and never really know what to do with them. What lovely poetic imagery! I wonder what it means. It means that God has given you armor and you’d better put it on. Every day. This equipment is really there, in the spiritual, unseen realm. We don’t see it, but the angels and our enemies do. Start by simply praying through the passage in Ephesians as if suiting up for the arena:

“Then put on the whole armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, . . . And yes, Lord, I wear your righteousness today against all condemnation and corruption. Fit me with your holiness and purity—defend me from all assaults against my heart. . . . and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. . . . I do choose to live for the gospel at any moment. Show me where the larger story is unfolding and keep me from being so lax that I think the most important thing today is the soap operas of this world.

“Put on the breastplate of righteousness in place. . . . And now, Lord, I will stand my ground and fight. I am not a quitter. I have been wounded in the service of the Lord.”

A warning before we leave this chapter: You will be wounded. Just because this battle is spiritual doesn’t mean it’s not real; it is, and the wounds a man can take are in some ways more ugly than those that come in a firefight. To lose a leg is nothing compared to losing heart; to be crippled by shrapnel from a battlefield is nothing compared to the wounds a man can receive in the unseen spiritual arena.

Yes, we need men to whom we can bare our souls. But it isn’t going to happen with a group of guys you don’t trust, who really aren’t willing to go to battle with you. It’s a long-standing truth that there is never a more devoted group of men than those who have fought alongside one another, the men of a warrior culture, a place for men to learn to fight like men. We don’t need a meeting of Really Nice Guys; we need a gathering of Really Dangerous Men.

We few, we happy few, we band of brothers;,
For to his death that sheds his blood with me
Shall be my brother . . .
For he to-day that sheds his blood with me
Shall be my brother . . .

Henry V

But Henry rallied his troops to his side when he reminded them that they are not mercenaries, but a “band of brothers.” That’s what we need. I think of Henry V at Agincourt. His army has been reduced to a small band of tired and weary men; many of them are wounded. They are outnumbered five to one. But Henry rallies his troops to his side when he reminds them that they are not mercenaries, but a “band of brothers.”

We don’t need accountability groups; we need fellow warriors, someone to fight alongside, someone to watch our back. A young man just stopped by the gift shop at the airport where I used to work to buy a t-shirt for his best friend. He wanted the quote from Shakespeare’s Henry V: “We few, we happy few, we band of brothers.”

We have no equivalent now for a Purple Heart of spiritual warfare, but we do. One of the noblest moments that aw ait us will come at the Wedding Feast of the Lamb. Our Lord will rise and begin to call those whom he w ere wounded in battle for his name’s sake and they will be honored, their courage reawarded. I think of Henry V’s line to his men,

HONOR WOUNDS

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Blaine w as showing me his scars the other night at the dinner table. “This one is where Samuel threw a rock and hit me in the forehead. And this one is from when I fell into that sharp log. I can’t remember what this one was from; oh, here’s a good one—this one is from when I fell into the pond while chasing Luke. This one is a really old one when I burned my leg on the stove cooking.” He’s proud of his scars; they are badges of honor to a boy . . . and to a man. We have no equivalent now for a Purple Heart of spiritual warfare, but we do. One of the noblest moments that await us will come at the Wedding Feast of the Lamb. Our Lord will rise and begin to call those whom he were wounded in battle for his name’s sake and they will be honored, their courage reawarded. I think of Henry V’s line to his men,

He that outlives this day, and comes safe home,
Will stand a tip-top when the day is named,
And rouse him at the name of Crispian
Then will he strip his sleeve and show his scars,
And say, “These wounds I had on Crispian’s day”
Old men forget; yet all shall be forgot,
But he that remembers not to remember,
What feats he did that day, shall shall our names . . .
Be in their flowing cups freshly remember’d.

“The kingdom of heaven suffers violence,” said Jesus, “and violent men take it by force” (Matt. 11:12 NASB). Is that a good thing or a bad thing?
Hopefully by now you see the deep and holy goodness of masculine aggression and that will help you understand what Christ is saying. Contrast it with this: “The kingdom of heaven is open to passive, wimpy men who enter it by lying on the couch watching TV.” If you are going to live in God’s kingdom, Jesus says, it’s going to take every ounce of passion and forcefulness you’ve got. Things are going to get fierce; that’s why you were given a fierce heart. I love the image of this verse given to us by John Bunyan in *Pilgrim’s Progress*:

Then the Interpreter took [Christian] and led him up toward the door of the palace; and behold, at the door stood a great company of men, as desirous to go in, but [dared] not. There also sat a man at a little distance from the door, at a tableside, with a book and his inkerhorn before him, to take the names of them that should enter therein; he saw also that in the doorway stood many men in armor to keep it, being resolved to do the men that would enter what hurt and mischief they could. Now was Christian somewhat in amaze. At last, when every man [fell] back for fear of the armed men, Christian saw a man of a very stout countenance come up to the man that sat there to write, saying, “Set down my name, sir,” the which when he had done, he saw the man draw his sword, and put a helm upon his head, and rush toward the door upon the armed men, who laid upon him with deadly force; but the man, not at all discouraged, fell to cutting and hacking most fiercely. So after he had received and given many wounds to those that attempted to keep him out, he cut his way through them all, and pressed forward into the palace.
CHAPTER TEN

A BEAUTY TO RESCUE

Beauty is not only a terrible thing, it is also a mysterious thing. There God and the Devil strive for mastery, and the battleground is the heart of man.

—FYODOR DOSTOYEVSKY

You'll be glad every night
That you treated her right.

Cowboy take me away
Closer to heaven and closer to you.

Once upon a time (as the story goes) there was a beautiful maiden, an absolute enchantress. She might be the daughter of a king or a common servant girl, but we know she is a princess at heart. She is young with a youth that seems eternal. Her flowing hair, her deep eyes, her luscious lips, her sculpted figure—she makes the rose blush for shame; the sun is pale compared to her light. Her heart is golden, her love as true as an arrow. But this lovely maiden is unattainable, the prisoner of an evil power who holds her captive in a dark tower. Only a champion may win her; only the most valiant, daring, and brave warrior has a chance of setting her free. Against all hope he comes; with cunning and raw courage he lays siege to the tower and the sinister one who holds her. Much blood is shed on both sides; three times the knight is thrown back, but three times he rises again. Eventually the sorcerer is defeated; the dragon falls, the giant is slain. The maiden is his; through his valor he has won her heart. On horseback they ride off to his cottage by a stream in the woods for a rendezvous that gives passion and romance new meaning.

Why is this story so deep in our psyche? Every little girl knows the fable without ever being told. She dreamed one day her prince will come. Little boys rehearse their part with w ooden swords and cardboard shields. And one day the boy, now a young man, realizes that he wants to be the one to win the beauty. Fairy tales, literature, music, and movies all borrow from this mythic theme. Sleeping Beauty, Cinderella, Helen of Troy, Romeo and Juliet, Antony and Cleopatra, Arthur and Guinevere, Tristan and Isolde. From ancient fables to the latest blockbuster, the theme of a strong man coming to rescue a beautiful woman is universal to human nature. It is written in our hearts, one of the core desires of every man and every woman.

I met Stasi in high school, but it wasn’t until late in college that our romance began. Up till that point we were simply friends. When one of us came home for the weekend, we’d give the other a call just to “hang out”—see a movie, go to a party. Then one summer night something shifted. I dropped by to see Stasi; she came sauntering down the hall barefoot, wearing a pair of blue jeans and a white blouse with lace around the collar and the top buttons undone. The sun had lightened her hair and darkened her skin and how is it I never realized she was the beautiful maiden before? We kissed that night, and though I’d kissed a few girls in my time I had never tasted a kiss like that. Needless to say, I was history. Our friendship had turned to love without my really knowing how or why, only that I wanted to be with this woman for the rest of my life. As far as Stasi was concerned, I was her knight.

Why is it that ten years later I wondered if I even wanted to be married to her anymore? Divorce was looking like a pretty decent option for both of us. So many couples wake one day to find they no longer love each other. Why do most of us get lost somewhere between “once upon a time” and “happily ever after”? Most passionate romances seem to end with a bitter note in front of the TV. Why does the dream seem so unattainable, fading from view even as we discover it for ourselves? Our culture has grown cynical about the fable. Don Henley says, “We’ve been poisoned by these fairy tales.” There are dozens of books out to refute the myth, books like Beyond Cinderella and The Death of Cinderella.

No, we have not been poisoned by fairy tales and they are not merely “myths.” Far from it. The truth is, we have not taken them seriously enough. As Roland Hein says, “Myths are stories w hich confront us with something transcendent and eternal.” In the case of our fair maiden, we have overlooked two very crucial aspects to that myth. On the one hand, none of us ever really believed the sorcerer was real. We thought we could have the maiden w ithout a fight. Honestly, most of us guys thought our biggest battle was asking her out. And second, we have not understood the tower and its relation to her wound; the damsel is in distress. If masculinity has come under assault, femininity has been brutalized. Eve is the crown of creation, remember? She embodies the exquisite beauty and the exotic mystery of God in a w ay that nothing else in all creation even comes close to. And so she is the special target of the Evil One; he turns his most vicious malice against her. If he can destroy her or keep her captive, he can ruin the story.

EVE’S WOUND

Every woman can tell you about her wound; some came with violence, others with neglect. Just as every little boy is asking one question, every little girl is, as well. But her question isn’t so much about her strength. No, the deep cry of a little girl’s heart is am I lovely? Every woman needs to know that she is exquisite and exotic and chosen. This is core to her identity, the way she bears the image of God. Will you pursue me? Do you delight in me? Will you fight for me? And like every little boy, she has taken a wound as well. The wound strikes right at the core of her heart of beauty and leaves a devastating message with it: No. You’re not beautiful and no one will really fight for you. Like your wound, hers almost always comes at the hands of her father.

A little girl looks to her father to know if she is lovely. The power he has to cripple or to bless is just as significant to her as it is to his son. If he’s a violent man he may defile her verbally or sexually. The stories I’ve heard from women who have been abused w oul d tear your heart out. Janet w as molested by her father w hen she was three; around the age of seven she showed her brothers how to do it. The assault continued until she moved away to college. What is a violated woman to think about her beauty? Am I lovely? The message is, No . . . you are dirty. Anything attractive about you is dark and evil. The assault continues as she grows up, through violent men and passive men. She may be stalked; she may be ignored. Either w ay, her heart is violated and the message is driven farther in: you are not desired; you will not be protected; no one will fight for you. The tower is built brick by brick, and when she’s a grown woman it can be a fortress.

If her father is passive, a little girl will suffer a silent abandonment. Stasi remembers playing hide-and-seek in her house as a girl of five or six. She’d find a perfect place to crawl into, full of excited anticipation of the coming pursuit. Snuggled up in a closet, she w ould w ail for someone to find her. No one ever did: not even after she was missing for an hour. That picture became the defining image of her life. No one noticed; no one pursued. The youngest in her family, Stasi just seemed to get lost in the shuffle. Her dad traveled a lot, and when he w as home he spent most of his time in front of the TV. An older brother and sister were trouble in their teens; Stasi got the message. “Just don’t be a problem; we’ve already got too much to handle.”
So she hid some more—hid her desires, hid her dreams, hid her heart. Sometimes she would pretend to be sick just to get a drop or two of attention.

Like so many unloved young women, Stasi turned to boys to try to hear what she never heard from her father. Her high school boyfriend betrayed her on prom night, told her he had been using her, that he really loved someone else. The man she dated in college became verbally abusive. But when a woman never hears she’s worth fighting for, she comes to believe that’s the sort of treatment she deserves. It’s a form of attention, in a twisted way; maybe it’s better than nothing. Then w e fell in love on that magical summer night. But Stasi married a frightened, driven man who had an affair w ith his work because he wouldn’t risk engaging a woman he sensed he wasn’t enough for. I aw mean; I awn’t evil. I aw nice. And let me tell you, a hesitant man is the last thing in the w orld a woman needs. She needs a lover and a warrior, not a Really Nice Guy. Her w orst fear w as realized—I w ill never really be loved, never really be fought for. And so she hid some more.

Years into our marriage I found myself blinded by it all. Where is the beauty I once saw? What happened to the woman I fell in love w ith? I didn’t really expect an answer to my question; it was more a shout of rage than a desperate plea. But Jesus answered me anyway. She’s st ill in there; but she’s captive. Are you willing to go in after her? I realize that I had—like so many men—married for safety. I married a woman I thought w ould never challenge me as a man. Stasi adored me; w hat more did I need to do? I w anted to look like the knight, but I didn’t w ant to bleed like one. I was deeply mistaken about the whole arrangement. I didn’t know about the tower, or the dragon, or w hat my strength w as for. The number one problem between men and their women is that men want the maiden without any sort of cost to themselves. They want all the joys of the beauty without any of the woes of the battle. This is the sinister nature of pornography—enjoying the woman at her expense. Pornography is w hat happens w hen a man insists on being energized by a woman; he uses her to get a feeling that he is a man. It is a false strength, as I’ve said, because it depends on an outside source rather than emanating from deep w ithin his center. And it is the paragon of selfishness. He offers nothing and takes everything. We are warned about this sort of man in the story of Judah and Tamar, a story that if it weren’t in the Bible you would have thought I drew straight from a television miniseries.

Agur son of Jakeh is onto something here. There is something mythic in the way a man is w ith a woman. Our sexuality offers a parable of amazing depth w hen it comes to being masculine and feminine. The man comes to offer his strength and the woman invites the man into herself, an act that requires courage and vulnerability and selflessness for both of them. Notice first that if the man w ill not rise to the occasion, nothing w ill happen. He must move; his strength must swell before he can enter her. But neither w ill the love consummate unless the woman opens herself in stunning vulnerability. When both are living as they w ere meant to live, the man enters his woman and offers her his strength. He sp ills himself there, in her, for her; she draws him in, embraces and envelopes him. When all is over he is spent; but ah, w hat a sweet death it is.

And that is how life is created. The beauty of a woman arouses a man to play the man; the strength of a man, offered tenderly to his woman, allows her to be beautiful; it brings life to her and to many. This is far, far more than sex and orgasm. It is a reality that extends to every aspect of our lives. When a man w ithholds himself from his woman, he leaves her w ithout the life only he can bring. This is never more true than how a man offers—or does not offer—his w ords. Life and death are in the power of the tongue says Proverbs (18:21). She is made for and craves w ords from him. I just went upstairs to get a glass of water from the kitchen; Stasi was in there baking Christmas cookies. The place w as a mess; to be honest, so w as she, covered w ith flour and w earing a pair of old slippers. But there w as something in her eye, something soft and tender, and I said to her, “You look pretty.” The tension in her shoulders g ave w ay; something tw inkled in her spirit; she sighed and smiled. “Thank you,” she said, almost shyly.

If the man refuses to offer himself, then his w ife w ill remain empty and barren. A violent man destroys w ith his w ords; a silent man starves his w ife. “She’s w ilting,” a friend confessed to me about his new bride. “If she’s w ilting then you’re w ithholding something,” I said. Actually, it w as as several things—his w ords, his touch, but mostly his delight. There are so many other ways this plays out in life. A man w ho leaves his w ife w ith the children and the bills to go and find another, easier life has denied him his strength. He has sacrificed them w hen he should have sacrificed his strength for them. What makes Maximus or William Wallace so heroic is simply this: They are willing to die to set others free.

This sort of heroism is w hat we see in the life of Joseph, the husband of Mary and the stepfather to Jesus Christ. I don’t think we’ve fully appreciated w hat he did for them. Mary, an engaged young woman, almost a girl, turns up pregnant w ith a pretty w ild story: “I’m carrying God’s child.” The situation is scandalous. What is Joseph to think; w hat is he to feel? Hurt, confused, betrayed no doubt. But he’s a good man; he w ill not have her stoned, he w ill simply “divorce her quietly” (Matt. 1:19).

An angel comes to him in a dream (w hich shows you w hat it sometimes takes to get a good man to do the right thing) to convince him that Mary is telling the truth and he is to follow through w ith the marriage. This is going to cost him. Do you know w hat he’s going to endure if he marries a woman the whole community thinks is an adulteress? He w ill be shunned by his business associates and most of his clients; he w ill certainly lose his standing in the whole community w hen his w ife is found to be unfaithful. This is the way of a ship on the high seas, w hich is not slippery, w hich is not to be disturbed by the wind, w hich stands its course—his words, his touch, but mostly his delight. There are so many other ways this plays out in life. A man w ho leaves his w ife w ith the children and the bills to go and find another, easier life has denied him his strength. He has sacrificed them w hen he should have sacrificed his strength for them. What makes Maximus or William Wallace so heroic is simply this: They are willing to die to set others free.

They will be called oaks of righteousness” (Isa. 61:3). There, under the shadow of a man’s strength, a woman finds rest. The masculine journey takes a man away from the woman so that he might return to her. He goes to find his strength; he returns to offer it. He tears down the walls of the tower that has held her w ith his w ords and w ith his actions. He speaks to her heart’s deepest question in a thousand w ays. Yes, you are lovely. Yes, there is one w ho will fight for you. But because most men have not yet fought the battle, most women are still in the tow er.

OFFERING OUR STRENGTH

There are three things that are too amazing for me,
Four that I do not understand:
the way of an eagle in the sky,
the way of a snake on a rock,
the way of a ship on the high seas,
and the way of a man with a maiden. (Prov. 30:18–19)

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Judah is the fourth son born to Jacob. You might remember him as the one who came up w ith the idea to sell his brother Joseph into slavery. Judah has three sons himself. When the eldest becomes a man, Judah finds a w ife for him named Tamar. For reasons not fully explained to us, their marriage is short-lived. “But E r, Judah’s firstborn, was wicked in the LORD’s sight; so the LORD put him to death” (Gen. 38:7). Judah gives his second son to Tamar, as w as the law and custom of that time. It is Onani’s responsibility to raise up children in his brother’s name; but he refuses to do it. He is a proud and self-centered man w ho angers the Lord, “so he put him to death also” (38:10). You’re beginning to get the idea here: selfish men, a woman

USING HER

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wronged, and the Lord is mad.

Judah has one son left—Shelah. The boy is the last of his strength and Judah has no intention of spending it on Tamar’s behalf. He lies to Tamar, telling her to go back home and when Shelah is old enough he’ll give him to her as her husband. He does not. What follows is hard to believe, especially when you consider that Tamar is a righteous woman. She disguises herself as a prostitute and sits by the road Judah is known to use. He has sex with her (uses her), but is unable to pay. Tamar takes his seal and cord and staff as a pledge. Later, word gets out that Tamar is pregnant; Judah is filled with wrath he insists is righteous indignation. He demands that she be burned to death, at which point Tamar produces the witness against him. “See if you recognize whose seal and cord and staff these are.” Judah is nailed. He more than recognizes them—he realizes what he has been doing all along. “She is more righteous than I, since I couldn’t give her to my son Shelah” (38:25–26).

A sobering story of what happens when men selfishly refuse to spend their strength on behalf of the woman. But the same thing happens in all sorts of other ways. Pretty women endure this abuse all the time. They are pursued, but not really; they are wanted, but only superficially. They learn to offer their bodies but never, ever their souls. Most men, you see, marry for safety; they choose a woman who will make them feel like a man but never really challenge them to be one. A young man who claims to be wrangling with the woman he is dating and one he knew but could not capture years ago. Rachel, the wondrous she is currently dating, is asking a lot of him; truth be told, he feels in way over his head. Julie, the woman he did not pursue, seems more approachable; in his imagination she would be just the perfect mate. Life with Rachel is tumultuous; life with Julie seems calm and tranquil. “You want the Bahamas,” I said. “Rachel is the North Atlantic. Which one requires a true man?” In a brilliant twist of plot, God turns our scheme for safety on us, requiring us to play the man.

Why don’t men offer what they have to their women? Because we know down in our guts that it won’t be enough. There is an emptiness to Eve after the Fall, and no matter how much you pour into her she will never be filled. This is where so many men falter. Either they refuse to give what they can, or they keep pouring and pouring into her and all the while feel like a failure because she is still needing more. “There are three things that are never satisfied,” warns Agur son of Jakeh, “four things that never say, ‘Enough!: the grave, the barren womb, land, w hich is never satisfied w ith w ater, and fire, w hic h says, ‘Enough!’” The barrenness of Eve can never seem to be filled. She needs God more than she needs you, just as you need him more than you need her.

So w hat do you do? Offer w hat you have. “I’m afraid it won’t work,” a client said to me when I suggested he move back toward his wife. “She’s given up on me coming through for her,” he confessed, “and that’s good.” “No it’s not,” I said. “That’s awful.” He was headed to a family reunion back east and I suggested he bring his wife with him, make it a vacation for the two of them. “You need to move toward her.” “What if it doesn’t work?” he asked. So many men are asking the same question. Work for what? Validate you as a man? Resurrect her heart in a day? Do you see now that you can’t bring your question to Eve? No matter how good a man you are you can never be enough. If she’s the report card on your strength then you’ll ultimately get an F. But that’s not w hy you love her—to get a good grade. You love her because that’s w hat you are made to do; that’s w hat a real man does.

EVE TO ADAM

My friend Jan says that a woman who is living out her true design will be “valiant, vulnerable, and scandalous.” That’s a far cry from the “church ladies” we hold up as models of Christian femininity, those busy and tired and rigid women who have reduced their hearts to a few mild desires and pretend everything is going just great. Compare their femininity with that of the women named in the genealogy of Jesus. In a list that is nearly all men, Matthew mentions four women: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and “Uriah’s wife” (1:3, 5–6). That Bathsheba goes unnamed tells you of God’s disappointment w ith her, and of his delight in these three whom he takes a notable exception to name in an otherwise all-male cast. Tamar, Rahab and Ruth . . . whoa; this will open up new horizons of “biblical femininity” for you.

Tamar we now know. Rahab is in the “hall of fame of faith” in Hebrews 11 for committing treason. That’s right—she hid the spies who were coming in to scope out Jericho before battle. I’ve never heard a woman’s group study Tamar or Rahab. But w hat about Ruth? She’s often held up as a model of women’s love for Christ. Ruth is a woman who needs a man. “Where are you going?” Boaz asks her (uses her), but is unable to pay. Tamar takes his seal and cord and staff as a pledge. Later, word gets out that Tamar is pregnant; Judah is filled with wrath he insists is righteous indignation. He demands that she be burned to death, at which point Tamar produces the witness against him. “See if you recognize whose seal and cord and staff these are.” Judah is nailed. He more than recognizes them—he realizes what he has been doing all along. “She is more righteous than I, since I couldn’t give her to my son Shelah” (38:25–26).

“Four things that never say, ‘Enough!’: the grave, the barren womb, land, which is never satisfied with water, and fire, which says, ‘Enough!’” The barrenness of Eve can never seem to be filled. She needs God more than she needs you, just as you need him more than you need her.

So what do you do? Offer what you have. “I’m afraid it won’t work,” a client said to me when I suggested he move back toward his wife. “She’s given up on me coming through for her,” he confessed, “and that’s good.” “No it’s not,” I said. “That’s awful.” He was headed to a family reunion back east and I suggested he bring his wife with him, make it a vacation for the two of them. “You need to move toward her.” “What if it doesn’t work?” he asked. So many men are asking the same question. Work for what? Validate you as a man? Resurrect her heart in a day? Do you see now that you can’t bring your question to Eve? No matter how good a man you are you can never be enough. If she’s the report card on your strength then you’ll ultimately get an F. But that’s not why you love her—to get a good grade. You love her because that’s what you are made to do; that’s what a real man does.

IT IS A BATTLE

Will you fight for her? That’s the question Jesus asked me many years ago, right before our tenth anniversary, right at the time I was wondering what had happened to the woman I married. You’re on the fence, John, he said. Get in or get out. I knew what he was saying—stop being a nice guy and act like a warrior. Ray the man. I brought flowera, took her to dinner, and began to move back toward her in my heart. But I knew there was more. That
night, before we went to bed, I prayed for Stasi in a way I'd never prayed for her before. Out loud, before all the heavenly hosts, I stepped between her and the forces of darkness that had been coming against her. Honestly, I didn't really know what I was doing, only that I needed to take on the dragon. All hell broke loose. Everything we'd learned about spiritual warfare began that night. And you know what happened? Stasi got free; the tower of her depression gave way as I began to truly fight for her.

And it's not just once, but again and again over time. That's where the myth really stumps us. Some men are willing to go in once, twice, even three times. But a warrior is this in good. Oswald Chambers asks, "God split the life of his son that the world might be saved; are we prepared to spill out our lives?" Daniel is in the midst of a very hard, very unpromising battle for his wife. It's been years now without much progress and without much hope.

Sitting in the restaurant the other night, tears in his eyes, this is what he said to me: "I'm not going anywhere. This is my place in the battle. This is the hill that I will die on." He has reached a point in his life where all must come to, sooner or later, when it's no longer about winning or losing. His wife may respond and she may not. That's really no longer the issue. The question is simply this: What kind of man do you want to be? Maximus? Wallace? Or Judah? A young pilot in the RAF wrote just before he went down in 1940, "The universe is so vast and so ageless that the life of one man can only be justified by the measure of his sacrifice."

As I write this chapter, Stasi and I have just returned from a friend's wedding. It was the best nuptials either of us have ever been to; a wonderful, romantic, holy affair. The groom was young and strong and valiant; the bride was seductively beautiful. Which is what had made it so excruciating for me. Oh to start over again, to do it all over the right way, marry as a young man knowing what I know now. I could have loved Stasi so much better; she could have loved me so much better as well. We've learned every lesson the hard way over our eighteen years. Any wisdom contained in these pages was paid for dearly. On top of that Stasi and I were in a difficult place over the weekend; that was the campfire. Satan saw his opportunity and turned it into a bonfire without even one word between us. By the time we got to the reception, I didn't want to dance with her. I didn't even want to be in the same room. All the hurt and disappointment of the years—hers and mine—seemed to be the only thing that was ever true about our marriage.

It wasn't until later that I heard Stasi's side of the script, but here is how the two fit together. Stasi: He's disappointed in me. No wonder why. Look at all these beautiful women. I feel fat and ugly. Me: I'm so tired of battling for our marriage. How I wish we could start over. It wouldn't be that hard, you know. There are other options. Look at all these beautiful women. On and on it came, like a wave over me.

"Jesus, come rescue me. I know what's going on; I know this is assault. But right now it all feels so true. Jesus, deliver me. Get me out from under this waterfall. Speak to me; rescue my heart before I do something stupid. Deliver me, Lord."

Slowly, almost imperceptibly, the wave began to lift. My thoughts and emotions quieted down to a more normal size. Clarity was returning. The campfire was just a campfire again. Jesus, you know the pain and disappointment in my heart. What would you have me do? (The bar was no longer an option, but I was still planning to just go straight to my room for the rest of the night.) I want you to go back in there and ask your wife to dance. I knew he was right; I knew that somehow this was deep inside that's what I was feeling. We needed to do this for our marriage.

I grabbed a book but could not read; I tried to pray but did not want to. Finally, some words began to arise from my heart:

"Jesus, come rescue me. I know what's going on; I know this is assault. But right now it all feels so true. Jesus, deliver me. Get me out from under this waterfall. Speak to me; rescue my heart before I do something stupid. Deliver me, Lord."

"Jesus, you know the pain and disappointment in my heart. What would you have me do? (The bar was no longer an option, but I was still planning to just go straight to my room for the rest of the night.) I want you to go back in there and ask your wife to dance. I knew he was right; I knew that somehow this was in deep inside that's what I was feeling. We needed to do this for our marriage.

I went back to the reception and asked Stasi to dance; for the next two hours we had one of the best evenings we've had in a long time. We nearly lost to the Evil One; instead, it will go down as a memory we'll share with our friends for a long, long time.

Close

Stasi has given me a number of wonderful presents over the years, but last Christmas was unforgettable. We'd finished with the feeding frenzy the boys call unwrapping presents. Stasi slipped out of the room with the words, "Close your eyes . . . I have a surprise for you." After a good deal of rustling and whispers, she told me I could look. Before me was a long rectangular box on the family room floor. "Open it," she said. I removed the bow and lifted the lid. Inside was a full-size claymore, a Scottish broadsword exactly like the one used by William Wallace. I had been looking for one for several months, but Stasi did not know that. It was not on my Christmas list. She had done this out of the vision of her own heart, as a way of thanking me for fighting for her.

Here is what her note read:

Because you are a Braveheart; fighting for the hearts of so many people . . . and especially for mine. Thanks to you I know a freedom I never thought was possible. Merry Christmas.
There is a river that winds its way through southern Oregon, running down from the Cascades to the coast, which has also wound its way through my childhood, carving a path in the canyons of my memory. As a young boy I spent many summer days on the Rogue, fishing and swimming and picking blackberries; but mostly, fishing. I loved the name given to the river by French trappers; the river Scoundrel. It gave a mischievous benediction to my adventures there—I was a rogue on the Rogue. Those golden days of boyhood are some of my most cherished memories and so last summer I took Stasi and the boys there, to share with them a river and a season from my life. The lower part of the Rogue runs through some hot and dry country in the summer months, especially in late July, and we were looking forward to kayaking as an excuse to get really wet and find a little adventure of our own.

There is a rock that juts out over the river somewhere between Morrison’s Lodge and the Foster Bar. The canyon narrows there and the Rogue deepens and pauses for a moment in its rush to the sea. High rock walls rise on either side, and on the north—the side only boaters can reach—Jumping Rock. Cliff jumping is one of our family favorites, especially when it’s hot and dry and the jump is high enough so that it takes your breath away as you plunge beneath the water at the top, dive into the cold water. When you come back up the crowd is cheering and something in you is also cheering because you did it. We all jumped that day, first me, then Stasi, Blaine, Sam, and even Luke. Then some big hulking guy who was going to back down once he saw what the view was like from above, but he had to jump because Luke did it and he couldn’t live without it either.

I was struck dumb. It could have been Balaam’s donkey, for all I was concerned. Suddenly my life up till that point made sense in a sickening sort of way. As the poet George Chapman has said,

Don’t ask yourself what the world needs. Ask yourself what makes you come alive, and go do that, because what the world needs is people who have come alive.

—CHRISTOPHER FRY

As the poet George Chapman has said, “Give me a spirit that on this life’s rough sea Loves to have his sails fill’d with a lusty wind Even till his sail-yards tremble, his masts crack, And his rapt ship runs on her side so low That she drinks water, and her keel ploughs the air.” Life is not a problem to be solved; it is an adventure to be lived. That’s the nature of it and has been since the beginning when God set the dangerous stage for this high-stakes drama and called the whole world enterprise good. He rigged the world in such a way that it only works when we embrace risk as the theme of our lives, which is to say, only when we live by faith. A man just won’t be happy until he’s got adventure in his work, in his love and in his spiritual life.
call about that time from a firm back in Washington, D.C., offering me a plum job at an incredible salary. I would be in a prestigious company, flying in some very pow-erful circles, making great money. God was thickening the plot, testing my resolve. Down one road was my dream and desire, with which I had no means to pay for, and an absolutely uncertain future after that; down the other was a comfortable step up the ladder of success, a very obvious next career move and the total loss of my soul.

I went to the mountains for the weekend to sort things out. Life makes more sense standing alone by a lake at high elevation with a fly rod in hand. The tentacles of the world and my false self seemed to give way as I climbed up into the Holy Cross Wilderness. On the second day God began to speak. John, you can take that job if you want to. It's not a sin. But it'll kill you and you know it. He was right; it had False Self written all over it. If you want to follow Me, he continued, I'm heading that way. I knew exactly what he meant—that w ay headed into w iderness, frontier. The following week three phone calls came in amazing succession. The first was from the Washington firm; I told them I was not their man, to call somebody else. As I hung up the phone my false self was screaming what are you doing?! The next day the phone rang again; it was my wife, telling me that the university had called w anting to know where my first tuition installment was. On the third day a call came from a longtime friend who had been praying for me and my decision. "We think you ought to go to school," he said. "And we want to pay your way."

WHERE WOULD YOU WAIT FOR?

Where would you be today if Abraham had carefully weighed the pros and cons of God's invitation and decided that he'd rather hang on to his medical benefits, three weeks paid vacation and retirement plan in Ur? What would have happened if Moses had listened to his mother's advice to "never play with matches" and lived a careful, cautious life steering clear of all burning bushes? You wouldn't have the gospel if Paul had concluded that the life of a Pharisee, while not everything a man dreams for, was at least predictable and certainly more stable than following a voice he heard on the Damascus road. After all, people hear voices all the time and who really knows whether it's God or just one's imagination. Where would we be if Jesus was not fierce and wild and romantic to the core? Come to think of it, we wouldn't be at all if God hadn't taken that enormous risk of us in the first place.

Most men spend the energy of their lives trying to eliminate risk, or squeezing it down to a more manageable size. Their children hear "no" far more than they hear "yes"; their employees feel chained up and their wives are equally bound. If it works, if a man succeeds in securing his life against all risk, he'll wind up in a cocoon of self-protection and wonder all the while why he's suffocating. If it doesn't work, he curses God, redoubles his efforts and his blood pressure. When you look at the structure of the false self men tend to create, it always revolves around two themes: seizing upon some sort of competence and rejecting anything that cannot be controlled. As David Whyte says, "The price of our vitality is the sum of all our fears."

For murdering his brother, God sentences Cain to the life of a restless wanderer; five verses later Cain is building a city (Gen. 4:12, 17). That sort of commitment—the refusal to trust God and the reach for control—runs deep in every man. Whyte talks about the difference between the false self's desire "to have pow er over experience, to control all events and consequences, and the soul's wish to have pow er through experience, no matter what may be." You literally sacrifice your soul and your true pow er when you insist on controlling things, like the guy Jesus talked about who thought he finally pulled it all off, built himself some really nice barns and died the same night. "What will it profit a man if he gains the w hole world, and loses his o w n soul?" (Mark 8:36 NKJV).

You can lose your soul, by the way, long before you die.

Canadian biologist Farley Mow at had a dream of studying wolves in their native habitat, out in the wilds of Alaska. The book Never Cry Wolf is based on that lonely research expedition. In the film version Mow at's character is a book worm named Tyler who has never so much as been camping. He hires a crazy old Alaskan bush pilot named Rosie Little to get him and all his equipment into the remote Blackstone Valley in the dead of winter. Flying in Little's single-engine Cessna over some of the most beautiful, rugged, and dangerous w iderness in the w orld, Little pries Tyler for the secret to his mission:

LITTLE: Tell me, Tyler . . . what's in the valley of the Blackstone? What is it? Manganese? (Silence) Can't be oil. Is it gold? Is it gold?

TYLER: It's kind of hard to say.

LITTLE: You're a smart man, Tyler . . . you keep your own counsel. We're all of us prospectors up here, right, Tyler? Scratchin' for that . . . that one crack in the ground . . . and never to scratch again.

(After a pause)

I'll let you in on a little secret, Tyler. The gold's not in the ground. The gold is not anywhere up here. The real gold is south at 60, sittin' in living rooms, facing the boob tube bored to death. Bored to death, Tyler.

Suddenly the plane's engine coughs a few times, sputters, gasps . . . and then simply cuts out. The only sound is the wind over the wings.

LITTLE: (Groans) Oh, Lord.

TYLER: (Panicked) What's w rong?

LITTLE: Take the stick.

Little hands over control of the powerless plane to Tyler (w ho has never flow n a plane in his life) and starts frantically rummaging around in an old toolbox between the seats. Unable to find w hat he's looking for, Little explodes. Screaming, he empties the toolbox all over the plane. Then just as abruptly he stops, calmly rubbing his face w ith his hands.

TYLER: (Still panicked and trying to fly the plane) What's w rong?

LITTLE: Boredom, Tyler. Boredom . . . that's what's w rong. How do you beat boredom, Tyler? Adventure, ADVENTURE, Tyler!

Little then kicks the door of the plane open and nearly disappears outside, banging on something—a frozen fuel line perhaps. The engine kicks back in off into a long, majestic valley below.

Rosie Little may be a madman, but he's also a genius. He knows the secret to a man's heart, the cure for what ails him. Too many men forsake their dreams because they aren't w illing to risk, or fear they aren't up to the challenge, or are never told that those desires deep in their heart are good. But the soul of a man, the real gold Little refers to, isn't made for controlling things; it's made for adventure. Something in us remembers, however faintly, that is God's department. He is no matter what you do. But
that I could hear it without running off and doing something stupid. I've met men who've used advice like it as permission to leave their wife and run off with their secretary. They are deceived about what it is they really want, what they are made for. There is a design God has wove into the fabric of this world, and if we violate it we cannot hope to find life. Because our hearts have strayed so far from home, he's given us the Law as a sort of handrail to help us back from the precipice. But the goal of Christian discipleship is the trans formed heart; we move from a boy who feels the Law to the man who is able to live by the Spirit of the law. “My counsel is this: Live freely, animated and motivated by God’s Spirit. Then you won’t feed the compulsions of selfishness ... Legalism is helpless in bringing this about; it only gets in the way” (Gal. 5:16, 23 The Message).

A man's life becomes an adventure, the whole thing takes on a transcendent purpose when he releases control in exchange for the recovery of the dreams in his heart. Sometimes those dreams are buried deep and it takes some unearthing to get to them. We pay attention to our desire. Often the clues are in our past, in those moments when we find ourselves loving what we were doing. The details and circumstances change as we grow, but the themes remain the same. Dale was as the neighborhood ring leader as a boy; in college, he was captain of the tennis team. What makes him come alive is when he is leading men. For Charles it was art; he was always drawing as a child. In high school, what he loved best was ceramics class. He gave up painting after college and finally came alive again when he was. But there's a piece of forgotten courage, one difficult to hear, demanding not a raise, but another life.

To recover his heart's desire a man needs to get away from the noise and distraction of his daily life for time with his own soul. He needs to head into the wilderness, to silence and solitude. Alone with himself, he allows whatever is there to come to the surface. Sometimes it is grief for so much lost. Sometimes, it even starts with w ith temptation, w hen a man thinks that w hat will really make him come alive is something unholy. At that point he should ask himself, “What is the desire beneath this desire? What is it I want?” (Whyte says, “for a kind of forgotten courage, one difficult to hear, demanding not a raise, but another life.”)

I have studied many times.

The marble which was chiseled for me—
A boat with a furled sail at rest in a harbor.
In truth it pictures not my destination
But my life. For love was offered me, and I shrank from its disillusionment;
Sorrow knocked at my door, but I was afraid;
Ambition called to me, but I shied from the chances.
Yet all the while I hungered for meaning in my life
And now I know that we must lift the sail
And catch the winds of destiny
Wherever they drive the boat.
To put meaning in one’s life may end in madness,
But wisdom is where the torture
Of restlessness and vague desire—
It is a boat longing for the sea and yet afraid.

(EDGAR LEE MASTERS)

INTO THE UNKNOWN

“The spiritual life cannot be made suburban,” said Howard Macey. “It is always frontier and we who live in it must accept and even rejoice that it remains untamed.” The greatest obstacle to realizing our dreams is the false self’s hatred of mystery. That’s a problem, you see, because mystery is essential to adventure. More than that, mystery is the heart of the universe and the God who made it. The most important aspects of any man’s world—his relationship with his God and with the people in his life, his calling, the spiritual battles he’ll face—every one of them is fraught with mystery. But that is not a bad thing; it is a joyful, rich part of reality and essential to our soul’s thirst for adventure. As Oswald Chambers says:

Naturaly, we are inclined to be so mathematical and calculating that we look upon uncertainty as a bad thing... Certainty is the mark of the common-sense life... Gracious uncertainty is the mark of the spiritual life. To be certain of God means that we are uncertain in all our ways, we do not know what a day may bring forth. This is generally said with a sigh of sadness; it should rather be an expression of breathtaking expectation. (My Utmost for His Highest)

There are no formulas with God. Period. So there are no formulas for the man who follows him. God is a Person, not a doctrine. He operates not like a system—not even a theological system—but with the originality of a truly free and alive person. “The realm of God is dangerous,” says Archbishop Anthony Bloom. “You must enter into it and not just seek information about it.” Take Joshua and the Battle of Jericho. The Israelites are staged to make their first military strike into the promised land and there’s a lot hanging on this moment—the morale of the troops, their confidence in Joshua, not to mention their reputation that will precede them to every other enemy that aw aits them. This is their D-Day, so to speak, and w ord is going to get around. How does God get the whole thing off to a good start? How do he send the men marching across the city blowing trumpets for a week; on the seventh day he has them do it seven times and then give a big holler. It works marvelously, of course. And you know what it is? It never happens again. Israel never uses that tactic again.

There’s Gideon and his army reduced from thirty-two thousand to three-hundred. What’s their plan of attack? Torches and water pots. It also works splendidly and it also never happens again. You recall Jesus healing the blind—he never does it the same way twice. I hope you’re getting the idea because the church has really been taken in by the world on this one. The Modern Era hated mystery; we desperately want a means of controlling our own lives and we seem to find the ultimate Tower of Babel in the scientific method. Don’t get me wrong—science has given us many wonderful advances in sanitation, medicine, transportation. But we’ve tried to use those methods to tame the wildness of the spiritual frontier. We take the latest marketing methods, the newest business management fad, and we apply it to ministry. The problem with modern Christianity’s obsession with principles is that it removes any real conversation with God. Find the principle, apply the principle—what do you need God for? So Oswald Chambers warns us, “Never make a principle out of your experience; let God be as original with other people as he is with you.”

Originality and creativity are essential to personhood and to masculine strength. The adventure begins and our real strength is released when we no longer rely on formulas. God is an immensely creative Person and he wants his sons to live that way too. There is a great picture of this in Raiders of the Lost Ark, of all places. Of course Indiana Jones is a swashbuckling hero who can handle ancient history, beautiful women, and a forty-five with ease. But the real test of the man comes when all his resources have failed. He’s finally found the famous ark, but the Germans have stolen it from him and loaded it onto a truck. They’re about to drive off with it down a road heavy Nazi military protection. Jones and his two companions are watching helplessly as victory slips through their fingers. But Indiana is not finished; oh no, the game has just begun. He says to his friends:

JONES: Get back to Cairo. Get us some transport to England...boat, plane, anything. Meet me at Omars. Be ready for me. I’m going after that truck.

SAULACH: How?

JONES: I don’t know...I’m making this up as I go.

When it comes to living and loving, what’s required is a willfulness to jump in with both feet and be creative as you go. Here’s but one example: A few years ago I got home from a trip on a Sunday afternoon and found the boys playing out on the front yard. It was a cold November day, too cold to be outside, and so I asked them what we were up. “Mom kicked us out.” Knowing there’s often good reason when Stasi banishes them I pressed for a confession, but they maintained their innocence. So, I headed for the door to get the other side of the story. “I didn’t go in there if I were you, Dad,” Sam warned. “She’s in a bad mood.” I knew exactly what he was describing. The house was shut; inside all was dark and quiet.
Now, let me ask the men reading this: What w as everything inside me telling me to do? Run away. Don’t even think about going in. Stay outside. And you know w hat? I could have stayed outside and looked like a great dad, playing catch with my sons. But I am tired of being that man; I have run for years. Too many times I’ve played the cow ard and I’m sick of it. I opened the door, w ent inside, climbed the stairs, w alked into our bedroom, sat down on the bed and asked my w ife the most terrifying question any man ever asks his w oman: “What’s wrong?” After that it’s all mystery. A w oman doesn’t w ant to be related to w ith formulas, and she certainly doesn’t w ant to be treated like a project that has a nswer to it. She doesn’t w ant to be solved; she w ants to be known. Mason is absolutely right w hen he calls marriage the “Wild Frontier.”

The same holds true for the spiritual battles that w e face. After the Allies landed in France, they encountered something no one had planned or prepared them for; hedgerow s. Enclosing every field from the sea to Verdun w as a w all of earth, shrubs, and trees. Aerial photographs revealed the existence of the hedgerow s, but the Allies assumed they w ere like the ones found across England, w hich are tw o feet high. The Norman hedgerow s w ere ten feet high and impenetrable, a veritable fortress. If the Allies used the sol itary gateways into each field, they w ere mowed down by German machine gunners. If they tried to drive their tanks up and over, the underbelly w as exposed to antitank w eapons. They had to improvise. American farmboys rigged all sorts of contraptions on the front of the Sherman tanks, w hich allow ed them to punch holes for explosives or break right through the hedgerow s. Grease monkeys from the states rebuilt damaged tanks over night. As one captain said, I began to realize something about the American Army I had never thought possible before. Although it is highly regimented and bureaucratic under garrison conditions, when the Army gets in the field, it relaxes and the individual initiative comes forward and does what has to be done. This type of flexibility was one of the great strengths of the American Army in World War II. (Citizen Soldiers)

It w as truly Yankee ingenuity that w orks on the war. This is w he re w e are now—in the midst of battle w ithout the training w e really need, and there are few men around to show w e how to do it. We are going to have to figure a lot of this out for ourselves. We know how to attend church; w e’ve been taught not to sw ear or drink or smoke. We know how to be nice. But w e don’t really know how to fight, and w e’re going to have to learn as w e go. That is w here our strength will be crystallized, deepened, and revealed. A man is never more a man than w hen he embraces an adventure beyond his control, or w hen he walks into a battle he isn’t sure of winning. As Antonio Machado w rote,

FROM FORMULA TO RELATIONSHIP

I’m not suggesting that the Christian life is chaotic or that a real man is flagrantly irresponsible. The poser w ho squanders his paycheck at the racetrack or the slot machines is not a man; he’s a fool. The sluggard w ho quits his job and makes his w ife go to work so he can stay home to practice his golf swing, thinking he’ll make the pro tour, is “worse than an unbeliever” (1 Tim. 5:8). What I am saying is that our false self demands a formula before he’ll engage; he w ants a guarantee of success, and mister, you aren’t going to get one. So there comes a time in a man’s life w hen he’s got to break away from all that and head off into the unknown w ith God. This is a vital part of our journey and w e balk here, the journey ends.

Before the moment of Adam’s greatest trial God provided no step-by-step plan, gave no formula for how w e w as to handle the w hole mess. That w as not abandonment; that w as the way God honored Adam. You are a man; you don’t need Me to hold you by the hand through this. You have what it takes. What God did offer Adam w as friendship. He w asn’t left alone to face life; he w alked w ith God in the cool of the day and there they talked about love and marriage and creativity, w hat lessons he w as learning and w hat adventures w ere to come. This is w hat God is offering to us as w ell. As Chambers says,

There comes the baffling call of God in our lives also. The call of God can never be stated explicitly; it is implicit. The call of God is like the call of the sea, no one hears it but the one who has the nature of the sea in him. It cannot be stated definitely what the call of God is to, because his call is to be in companionship with himself for his own purposes, and the test is to believe that God knows what he is after. (My Utmost for His Highest, emphasis added)

The only w ay to live in this adventure—w ith all its danger and unpredictability and immensely high stakes—is in an ongoing, intimate relationship w ith God. The control w e s o desperately crave is an illusion. Far better to give it up in exchange for God’s offer of companionship, set aside stale formulas so that w e might enter into an informal friendship. Abraham knew this; Moses did as w ell. Read through the first three chapters of Exodus—it’s filled w ith a give-and-take between Moses and God. “Then the Lord said to Moses,” “then Moses said to the Lord.” The two act like they know each other, like they really are intimate allies. David—a man after God’s own heart—also w alked and w arred and loved his w ay through life in a conversational intimacy w ith God.

When the Philistines heard that David had been anointed king over Israel, they went up in full force to search for him, but David heard about it and went down to the stronghold. Now the Philistines had come and spread out in the Valley of Rephaim; so David inquired of the LORD, “Shall I go and attack the Philistines? Will you hand them over to me?” The LORD answered him, “Go, for I will surely hand the Philistines over to you.” So David went to Baal Perazim, and there he defeated them. . . . Once more the Philistines came up and spread out in the Valley of Rephaim; so David inquired of the LORD, and he answered, “Do not go straight up, but circle around behind them and attack them in front of the balsam trees. As soon as you hear the sound of marching in the tops of the balsam trees, move quickly, because that will mean the LORD has gone out in front of you to strike the Philistine army.” So David did as the LORD commanded him; and he struck down the Philistines all the way from Gibeon to Gezer. (2 Sam. 5:17–20, 22–25)

Here again there is no rigid formula for David; it changes as he goes, relying on the counsel of God. This is the way every comrade and close companion of God lives. Jesus said, “I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master’s business. Instead, I have called you friends” (John 15:15).

What is perhaps the hardest part is the misunderstanding I live with from others on a daily basis. Sometimes the winds howl around me; other times I fear I'll fall. The other day I was feeling way out on the end of my rope, cutting a path across a sheer face of risk. Out of my heart rose a question. What are we doing, God?
*We're climbing Everest.*
I am sometimes almost terrified at the scope of the demands made upon me, at the perfection of the self-abandonment required of me; yet outside of such absoluteness can be no salvation. —GEORGE MACDONALD

Freedom is useless if we don’t exercise it as characters making choices . . . We are free to change the stories by which we live. Because we are genuine characters, and not mere puppets, we can choose our defining stories. We can do so because we actively participate in the creation of our stories. We are co-authors as well as characters. Few things are as encouraging as the realization that things can be different and that we have a role in making them so. —DANIEL TAYLOR

Obey God in the thing he shows you, and instantly the next thing is opened up. God will never reveal more truth about himself until you have obeyed what you know already . . . This chapter brings out the delight of real friendship with God. —OSWALD CHAMBERS

At once they left their nets and followed him —MATTHEW 4:20

Now, reader, it is your turn to write—venture forth with God. Remember, don’t ask yourself what the world needs . . .
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Developing a Conversational Intimacy with God is the first volume in the Conversations with Ransomed Heart series. This new audio series takes you deeper into the issues that affect your heart and relationship with God. This first volume explores why an intimate walk with Christ is part of the normal Christian life. Christ longs to speak, and it is our right and privilege to hear His voice. If you long for more in your relationship with God, this CD will help you get there.

Lots more great resources from John Eldredge at www.ransomedheart.com
AN EXCERPT
FROM

WALKING
WITH GOD

by JOHN ELDREDGE
This is a series of stories of what it looks like to walk with God over the course of about a year.

It is our deepest need, as human beings, to learn to live intimately with God. It is what we were made for. Back in the beginning of our story, before the fall of man, before we sent the world spinning off its axis, there was a paradise called Eden. In that garden of life as it was meant to be, there lived the first man and woman. Their story is important to us because whatever it was as they were, and whatever it was as they had, we also were meant to be and to have. And what they enjoyed above all the other delights of that place was this—they walked with God. They talked with him, and he with them.

For this you and I were made. And this we must recover.

I've spent too many years trying to figure out life on my own. Reading books, attending classes, always keeping an eye out for folks who seemed to be getting the hang of things. I'd notice that the neighbors' kids seemed to be doing well, and I'd think to myself, What do they do that I'm not doing? Their kids are in sports. Maybe I should get mine in sports. I'd walk away from a conversation with someone who seemed to be on top of the world, and after a while I'd think, She seems so well-read. I'm not reading enough. I should read more. I'd hear that a colleague was doing well financially, and quickly find to, He spends time managing his money. I ought to do that. We do this the all time, all of us, this monitoring and assessing and observing and adjusting, trying to find the keys to make life work.

We end up with quite a list. But the only lasting fruit it seems to bear is that it ties us up in knots. Am I supposed to be reading now, or exercising, or monitoring my fat intake, or creating a teachable moment with my son?

The good news is you can't figure out life like that. You can't possibly master enough principles and disciplines to ensure that your life works out. You weren't meant to. And God won't let you. For he knows that if you succeed without him, you will be infinitely further from him. We will come to believe terrible things about the universe—things like I can make it on my own and if only I try harder, I can succeed. That whole approach to life—trying to figure it out, beat the odds, get on top of your game—it is utterly godless. Meaning, entirely without God. He is now here in those considerations. That sort of scrambling smacks more of the infamous folks who raised the tower of Babel than it does of those who walked with God in the garden in the cool of the day.

In the end, I'd much rather have God.

You might have heard the old saying "Give someone a fish, and you feed him for a day. Teach someone to fish, and you feed him for the rest of his life." The same holds true for life itself. If you give someone an answer, a rule, a principle, you help him solve one problem. But if you teach him to walk with God, you won't need to have him solve the rest of his life. You've helped him tap into an inexhaustible source of guidance, comfort, and protection.

Really now, if you knew you had the opportunity to develop a conversational intimacy with the wisest, kindest, most generous and seasoned person in the world, wouldn't it make sense to spend your time with that person, as opposed to, say, slogging your way through on your own?

Whatever our situation in life—butcher, baker, candlestick maker—our deepest and most pressing need is to learn to walk with God. To hear his voice. To follow him intimately. It is the most essential turn of events that could ever take place in the life of any human being, for it brings us back to the source of life. Everything else we do long for can then flow forth from this union.

But how do we get there? How do we learn to live with God, to walk with him each day in conversational intimacy? Over the years I've read with longing the stories of early disciples like Athanasius, who had the help of a spiritual giant like Anthony, or the Benedictines with whom Benedict, or the followers of Columbus living with him on Iona, and I found myself wondering, But where do people get that today? Those stories feel like Aesop's fables. Charming, but archaic. I don't know anyone who lives in the same hut with a genuine spiritual counselor, mentor, father, or director with whom he can process the unfolding events of his life anytime he'd like. I know such fathers exist, and I pray they increase. But in the meantime, they are rare. Most of us haven't the option.

But we can still learn.

You might not have the means to hire a fly fisherman, but if you could watch someone cast who has been at it for a few years, you would learn a lot. When Stasi and I first married, we loved to hang out with couples who'd been hitched for a decade of two. There was so much to gain simply from hearing their experiences, the good and the bad. In truth, it was often the tales of their mistakes that helped us most. And so I've found that by describing my experiences and putting words to the things God is showing me, I can shed light on your experiences and put words to things God is showing you. In sharing these stories, I am in no way suggesting that this is the only way to walk with God. But as George MacDonald said, "As no scripture is of private interpretation, so is there no feeling in a human heart which exists in that heart alone, which is not, in some form or degree, in every heart."

And so what I offer here is a series of stories of what it looks like to walk with God over the course of about a year. I'm going to open my journals to you. Or at least part of them. The more helpful part, I hope. When Ernest Hemingway wrote Green Hills of Africa in 1935, he felt he was taking a worthy risk: "[I have] attempted to write an absolutely true book to see whether the shape of a country and the pattern of a month's action can, if truly presented, compete with a work of the imagination." How much more valuable might this be if we could share with one another the stories of our true encounters with God—not the mountaintop encounters, as they are lived out over a year.

Some of these stories will open up new horizons for you. That is certainly my hope. Learning to hear the voice of God may itself be a new frontier, and an exciting one, with unexpected joys around each new turn. You will no doubt come across lessons you've already learned, probably some better than I. But, you may have forgotten. We do forget even the most precious encounters we have with God. Perhaps I will help you to remember and recover what you might have lost. I may also help you to tell your own story as well, give you eyes to see what is unfolding and help you to set it down.

I believe a deeper walk with God is available. I believe we can learn to hear his voice. But I'm well aware that it takes time, and we all need help interpreting the events of our lives, and what we are experiencing. So I have added another dimension to this book. At certain pivotal junctures along the way you will find references to the website www.walkingwithgod.net. On that site I provide further guidance, clarification and counsel through video. It's not exactly sharing a hut with Anthony or Benedict, but it will help a great deal in your walk with God.

I take some comfort in this quote from Frederick Buechner:

There is something more than a little disconcerting about writing your autobiography. When people have occasionally asked me what I am working on, I have found it impossible to tell them without an inward blush. As if anybody cares or should care.

But I do it anyway. I do it because it seems to me that no matter who you are, and no matter how eloquent or otherwise, if you tell your own story with sufficient candor and concreteness, it will be an interesting story and in some sense a universal story. . . .
If God speaks to us at all other than through such official channels as the Bible and the church, then I think that he speaks to us largely through what happens to us, so what I have done in this book . . . is to listen back over what has happened to me—as I hope my readers may be moved to listen back over what has happened to them—for the sound, above all else of his voice. . . . [For] his word to us is both recoverable and precious beyond telling. (Now and Then)
The Power of Assumptions

I ran into an old acquaintance at the bookstore today.

Actually, I was nearly out the door when he called my name, so I turned back in to say hello and chat for a few moments. He seemed... not well. Half the man he used to be. I wondered why. I expected him to say that he had suffered some major loss. A loved one, I feared. Or maybe he was as a prolonged illness. Not that he was visibly deteriorating as some do in the late stages of cancer. But there was something about his countenance, a loss of some essential part of himself. You know the look. Many people have it, actually. It's a confused and disheartened look. As we talked, it became clear that he had simply been eroded by a number of confusing years strung together by disappointment.

As I left the store, I found myself thinking, He held such promise. What happened?

It has to do with assumptions.

He assumed that God, being a loving God, was going to come through for him. In the sense of bless his choices. His ministry. Make his life good. He looked sort of dazed and hurt that it hadn't happened. He was trying to put a good face on it, but you could see that he had lost heart. This may be one of the most common, most unquestioned, and most naive assumptions people who believe in God share. We assume that because we believe in God, and because he is love, he's going to give us a happy life. A + B = C. You may not be so bold as to state this assumption out loud—you may not even think you hold this assumption—but notice your shock when things don't go well. Notice your feelings of abandonment and betrayal when life doesn't work out. Notice that often you feel as though God isn't really all that close, or involved, feel that he isn't paying attention to your life.

Now, it's not fair to diagnose someone else's life without having some intimate knowledge of their situation, the story leading up to it, and what God is after. But I do have enough information to say that this man assumed the Christian life was basically about believing in God and doing good. Be a good person. That's good. That's a beginning. But it's just a beginning. It's sort of like saying that the way to have a good friendship is not to betray the other person. That will certainly help. You certainly want to have that going. But there's a whole lot more to friendship than simply not committing a betrayal, wouldn't you say? I know this fellow also holds the assumption that God doesn't really speak to his children. And so, when he found himself assaulted and undermined by all that had unfolded in his life, he had no source of guidance or explanation. It was sad to see the toll it had taken.

I left the store thinking about assumptions—how they are either helping us or hurting us, every single day of our lives. Our assumptions control our interpretation of events, and they supply a great deal of the momentum and direction for our lives. It's important that we take a look at them. And life will provide hundreds of opportunities to take a look at our assumptions in a single week. Especially as we walk with God.

I'll tip my hand to one assumption I am making. I assume that an intimate, conversational walk with God is available, and is meant to be normal. I'll push that a step further. I assume that if you don't find that kind of relationship with God, your spiritual life will be stunted. And that will handicap the rest of your life. We can't find life without God, and we can't find God if we don't know how to walk intimately with him. A passage from the gospel of John will show you what I'm getting at. Jesus is talking about his relationship with us, how he is the Good Shepherd and we are his sheep. Listen to how he describes the relationship:

"I tell you the truth, the man who does not enter the sheep pen by the gate, but climbs in by some other way, is a thief and a robber. The man who enters by the gate is the shepherd of his sheep. The watchman opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice,"... 

"Whoever enters through me will be saved. He will come in and go out, and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full." (John 10:1-4, 9-10)

The sheep live in dangerous country. The only way they can move securely in and out and find pasture is to follow their shepherd closely. Yet most Christians assume that the way to find the life God has for us is to (A) believe in God, (B) be a good person, and (C) he will deliver the rest. A + B = C. But Jesus says no, there's more to the equation. I do want life for you. To the full. But you have to realize there is a thief. He's trying to destroy you. There are false shepherds too. Don't listen to them. Don't just wander off looking for pasture. You need to do more than believe in me. You have to stay close to me. Listen to my voice. Let me lead.

Now there's a thought: if you don't hold the same assumptions Jesus does, you haven't got a chance of finding the life he has for you for.

Does God Still Speak?

I was talking on the phone yesterday with a young woman who was interviewing me for an article of some sort. She asked what this book was about, and I tried to explain it in this way: "This is a sort of tutorial on how to walk with God. And how to hear his voice." I told her several stories (including the one about the Christmas tree ordeal). There was a long pause, that pregnant sort of pause that tells me I've just hit upon a great need and a great doubt.

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If I say, “Surely the darkness will hide me and the light become night around me,” even the darkness will not be dark to you; the night will shine like the day, for darkness is as light to you.

For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother’s womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well.

My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place. When I was woven together in the depths of the earth, your eyes saw my unformed body. All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be.

How precious to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them!

Were I to count them, they would outnumber the grains of sand. When I awake, I am still with you.

(Prayer of David: Psalm 139:1–18)

Whatever else we might believe about intimacy with God at this point, the truth is that God knows us very intimately. He knows what time you went to bed last night. He knows what hat you dreamed about. He knows what you had for breakfast this morning. He knows where you left your car keys, what you think about your aunt, and why you are going to dodge your boss at 2:30 today. The Scriptures make that very clear. You are known. Intimately.

But does God seek intimacy with us?

Well, start at the beginning. The first man and woman, Adam and Eve, knew God and talked with him. And even after their fall, God goes looking for them. “Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the LORD God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the LORD God among the trees of the garden. But the LORD God called to the man, ‘Where are you?’” (Genesis 3:8–9).

What a beautiful story. It tells us that even in our sin God still wants us and comes looking for us. The rest of the Bible continues the story of God seeking us out, calling us back to himself.

But does God speak to his people?

Can you imagine any relationship where there is no communication whatsoever? What would you think if you met two good friends for coffee, and you knew that they’d been at the café for an hour before you arrived, but as you sat down and asked them, “So, what have you been talking about?”

They said, “Nothing.” “Nothing?” “Nothing. We don’t talk to each other. But we’re really good friends.” Jesus calls us his friends: “I’m no longer calling you servants because servants don’t understand what their master is thinking and planning. No, I’ve named you friends because I’ve let you in on everything I’ve heard from the Father.” (John 15:15 MSG).

Or what would you think about a father if you asked him, “What have you been talking to your children about lately?” and he said, “Nothing. I don’t talk to them. But I love them very much.” Wouldn’t you say the relationship was missing something? And aren’t you God’s son or daughter? “Yet to all who love him, love him, and live their lives in an intimate relationship with him, Jesus says that eternal life is to know God (John 17:3). Not just ‘know about’ like you know about the ozone layer or Ulysses S Grant. He means know as two people know each other, know as Jesus knows the Father—intimately.”

But does God speak to his people?

The Bible is filled with stories of God talking to his people. Abraham, whom he called the friend of God, said, “The LORD, the God of heaven, who brought me out of my father’s household and my native land and who spoke to me...” (Genesis 24:7). God spoke to Moses “as a man speaks with his friend” (Exodus 33:11). He spoke to Aaron too: “Now the LORD spoke to Moses and Aaron about the Israelites” (Exodus 6:13). And David: “In the course of time, David inquired of the LORD. Shall I go up to one of the towns of Judah?” he asked. The LORD said, “Go up.” David asked, “Where shall I go?” “To Hebron,” the LORD answered (2 Samuel 2:1). The Lord spoke to Noah. The Lord spoke to Gideon. The Lord spoke to Samuel. The list goes on and on.

I can hear the objections even now. “But that was different. Those were special people called to special tasks.” And we are not special people called to special tasks? I refuse to believe that. And I doubt that you want to believe it either, in your heart of hearts.

But for the sake of the argument, notice that God also speaks to “less important” characters in the Bible. God spoke to Hagar, the servant girl of Sarah, as she was running away. “She gave this name to the LORD who spoke to her; ‘You are the God who sees me,’ for she said, ‘I have now seen the One who sees me’” (Genesis 16:13). The God who sees even me. How touching. In the New Testament, God speaks to a man named Ananias who plays a small role in seven verses in Acts 9:

The Lord called to him in a vision, “Arise!” He answered, “Yes, Lord.”

The Lord told him, “Go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul...”

When Ananias answered, “I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your saints in Jerusalem. And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name.”

But the Lord said to Ananias, “Go!” (Acts 9:10–15)

Now, if God doesn’t also speak to us, why wouldn’t he have given us all these stories of him speaking to others? “Look—here are hundreds of inspiring and hopeful stories about how God spoke to his people in this and that situation. Isn’t it amazing? But you can’t have that. He doesn’t speak like that anymore.” That makes no sense at all. Why wouldn’t God give you a book of exceptions? This is how I used to relate to my people, but I don’t do that anymore. What good would a book of exceptions do you? That’s like giving you the owner’s manual for a Dodge even though you drive a Mitsubishi. No,
the Bible is a book of examples of what it looks like to walk with God. To say that he doesn’t offer that to us is just so disheartening.

It is also unbiblical. The Bible teaches that we hear God’s voice:

He wakens me morning by morning,
waits my ear to listen like one being taught. (Isaiah 50:4)

For he is our God
and we are the people of his pasture,
the flock under his care. (Psalm 95:7)

Today, if you hear his voice,
do not harden your hearts. (Psalm 95:7–8)

“The man who enters by the gate is the shepherd of his sheep. The watchman opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice . . . .

“I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me—just as the Father knows me and I know the Father—and I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd.” (John 10:2–4, 14–16)

We are his sheep. Jesus says that his sheep hear his voice.

“Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me” (Revelation 3:20). Jesus is speaking. He makes an offer. Who is the offer for? “Anyone.” That would include you. What does Jesus say will happen? “Hears my voice.” As in, hear his voice. And if we respond to his voice and his knocking, what will Jesus do? “I will come in and eat with him, and he with me.” Sharing a meal is an act of communion, an offer of friendship. Jesus wants to pull up a chair, linger at our table, and converse with us. He offers to be intimate with us. What could be clearer? We are made for intimacy with God. He wants intimacy with us. That intimacy requires communication. God speaks to his people.

For more on this come to www.walkingwithgod.net
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