In the early 1990s I received a package in my mailbox with a US postage stamp on it, sent by my friend Robin Maslen. Since Rob lived in South Australia, I was naturally intrigued. Rob was one of my psychotherapy mentors, a remarkable man who had smashed himself up in his late teens on a motorcycle, abandoned plumbing as a trade, become a well-known social worker, the Commissioner of Scouts for South Australia, and one of the country’s best-known teachers of therapists. When Rob sent you something, it was worth reading.

I walked up the half-kilometre driveway of my small farm in the hills behind Hobart, reading carefully as I went. The article was an interview with a 70-year-old American poet called Robert Bly, whom I had never heard of. Bly was pointing out something that should have been blindingly obvious, but that I had never thought about before: for hundreds of thousands of years of prehistory, men always helped boys into manhood with concerted and focused attention, processes and specific teaching. The whole community helped to do this (in those days, men and women actually lived in a connected community).

For 95 percent of human history, boys weren’t launched out into adulthood, they were welcomed into it, into a lifelong support network that would work to ensure their contribution would be a good one. Their wellbeing would be a priority to everyone around them. Today we give our son the keys to the car, then go inside and pray he will be okay. In ancient times, they were more proactive than that.

For most of human history, the most important task facing the whole community was turning each generation of boys into capable men (and girls into capable women). They could not afford to leave this to chance: by the age of fourteen, every young man needed to be safe, skilful, integrated and responsible. Everyone’s life depended on it; there was no place for hoons in a Neolithic clan.

I talked widely with friends and colleagues about this, and soon began writing about how we had to raise boys with more direct and clear involvement from good men. Men shouldn’t stand at a distance, but should team up with women, and with each other, to do this. We had to increase the male role model component in schools, homes and families, and tackle boy energy in a way that embraced it but also directed it firmly in good ways.

For the next 20 years I toured the world, talking passionately about this to parents and schoolteachers. I was sowing these seeds – boys need men, and boys need help to become good men; it can’t be left to chance. And gradually, smarter people than me, who knew the teaching of boys inside out, began to put this into practice. For most of us, schools are our closest thing to community, where we have a sense of belonging, through our kids, and where they meet other adults of good calibre and shared goals. Schools are places that set out to make adults, but that have rarely taken up this challenge beyond the merely academic sense, and a few platitudes at Assembly.

This is beginning to change. This chapter tells the delightful and moving story of some of the programs at the forefront of this change. I hope you will want these kinds of programs to be there for your children, too. May they spread wider and wider into education and the community. …
‘The Rite Journey’

Schoolteachers Graham Gallasch and Andrew Lines have taught children and young men for a total of 40 years, specialising in physical education and sport. They combine the Lutheran tradition – a hard-nosed Christianity with its roots in the Reformation – with Waldorf education – the more subtle and creative schooling based on Rudolph Steiner’s work, which emphasises myth and ritual as part of children’s needs.

Andrew told me, when we met for breakfast in an Adelaide cafe, that he had grown concerned about the boys he was teaching, noticing their behaviour in the school and in the streets, and the attitudes in their written work. Their heroes were rock stars, sportsmen and others who showed poor treatment of women and girls, excessive drug and alcohol use, and self-destructive and stupid behaviour. The boys’ attitudes, at least the ones they projected, were often racist, sexist, violent and stereotyped. Andrew suspected a root cause behind these boys’ poor idea of manhood: in most cases there was simply no respected male figure in their lives who could teach them to be fine men. How could they be expected to turn out well?

He also noted another trend in the boys’ lives: that much of their waking time was spent looking at screens. They were being educated about life by sources that had no interest in their welfare. Andrew was well aware of the research that showed today’s young people to be the most troubled, anxious, lonely and disturbed of any generation of adolescents in history. He began to put two and two together.

As experienced teachers, Andrew and Graham had listened to many parents and fellow teachers who expressed total despair at how to help their boys and girls make it through adolescence. Then, in 2004, they attended a seminar run by the renowned futurist, Peter Ellyard. Ellyard pointed out that the whole of Year 9 in secondary school is traditionally a wasted year, when kids just do not want to learn. He suggested a radical idea: Year 9 should be turned from a problem into a solution. It should be a year focused on ‘the mysteries of adulthood’, specifically teaching how to function as a successful grown-up. To study the very thing these young men were most concerned about – how to become a man.

The Rite Journey is overlaid onto Year 9 or 10 of secondary school. It is substantial and long term – the research indicates that programs for changing kids have little effect unless they create long term relationships over a year or two, and are woven into the whole of their school experience.

The Rite Journey features ceremonies and retreat experiences, but at its core, for three lessons a week of around an hour each, the boys study how to be a man. Five C’s – consciousness, communication, celebration, connection and challenge – form the framework of this. The boys develop and strengthen relationships with the special teachers who spend this year with them. They are helped to connect more deeply to parents, mentors, their own spirit, and the outside world.

They listen and learn about life as an adult. They use innovative and potent ways of learning, such as the use of drumming as a metaphor for managing anger. They pass through the seven steps of ‘the hero’s journey’ from boyhood to the start of manhood, facing tests and challenges, culminating in a solitary experience in the wild.

The first year-long Rite Journey programs were conducted in 2005. (A parallel program was also offered for girls.) Many students expressed profound gratitude for the experiences the course gave them. Parents, too, were deeply thankful for a program that helped their children grow, not just as academic learners, but towards becoming fine young men and women.

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