

This is not a balanced article. Safety in Emergent Manhood. It simply attempts to highlight a few elements affecting the growth from childhood, through adolescence, to adulthood for young men. And it is written unapologetically from a church perspective.

This article was originally presented as our church's men's group prepared for a time of ministry on John Eldredge's *Wild at Heart* material. This ministry has a cutting edge that especially helps High School-aged young men, young adult men, and our older men – help them on their journey to be everything that God wants them to be! But, the benefits are there for everyone - ultimately.

A part of **responsible leadership** is to create;

- an environment of opportunity for the next generation to discover their place, and develop in it;
- and to monitor levels of protection around those the leadership is responsible for. To create a “safe space” – be it around church, OHS issues, parenting, even being a tour guide, whatever!

These two responsibilities must be held in tension - broadening the initial narrow view / reduced skills level, etc, of the developing male, while not allowing unnecessary danger to intrude.

However, sometimes what is “safety” may, to an untrained eye, look quite dangerous... getting out of your own control zone (or beyond the control zone of a “helicopter parent” – a modern descriptor for a parent who constantly hovers nearby and dives in to rescue their child / adolescent / and sometimes even their young adult(!) at the slightest sign of difficulty) can lead to new experiences not possible when everything is controlled – and these experiences can have far-reaching benefits.

Coupled with this is the fact that often what appears to be risky to a young one (or to an overly-protected person) may in fact not be quite what it seems. Parts of our African experience have taught us this! For instance, our 2003 encounter with a ranger experienced in elephant behaviour! What was so scary for us on the edge of an agitated herd in an open truck did not faze him, as he was skilled in the difference between aggressive and bluff elephant behaviour (could've fooled us though!).

Learning environment considerations have changed and are still changing.... certainly, what was considered “normal” after-school, play scenarios in the 1950's would not pass muster today – off into the gully, practising war scenarios, running the gauntlet games, playing impromptu tackle rugby league in the paddock, all with **no supervision!** Kids were mostly expected to sort out their own pecking order (including an occasional fight!). But, we learned how to fit into a non-controlled environment and adapt! Initiative was encouraged by my parents (both of them) – sometimes by deliberate (brief) absences!

THE PROTECTION RESPONSIBILITY OF A MAN

God has declared Himself to be a shelter from storms and a shade from heat (**Isa 25:4-5**). Note the context – the dust of death has been removed there, and life and liberty released (**25:6-8**).

Similarly, following on this in **Isa 32:2-4**, God declares a day when “each man” will be (like God Himself) a shelter and a shade – a place of protection.

Releasing godly manhood is a massive factor to bless and benefit a church, a family, a community, even a nation. To do that, boys have to go on their journey through adolescence (with all its modern obsession with self and selfishness) to manhood – so they in turn can one day become a shelter and a shade – **for others!!**

THE ADVENTURE RESPONSIBILITY OF A MAN

A male life devoid of adventure is not really lived at all. However, sometimes, while from God's viewpoint, it's all under control, from our side, it looks like chaos and danger! Being a protection may **not** mean always jumping in immediately in “rescue” mode!

15 years of trailer rides from the mid-1980's at Kangaroo Valley illustrate this... Roaring around at night, spotlighting, over drops, blind turns, through water courses, off the tracks and into the bush in the dark, screaming and yelling.... It was adrenalin-rush stuff... Except what I didn't tell them was that I had quietly gone out in the daytime, double-checked the routes, ensured the creeks weren't too impassable, and made sure nothing had changed too much from last year's adventure!

And to this day, we have people, now parents, recount their vivid memories of bouncing around in the bush with Uncle Brian – for some it was their first-ever excursion beyond suburbia (and Mum's protective gaze). Some even fell out once or twice! But no one got hurt enough to require medical attention.... In fact the bruises and bumps often were proudly displayed next day to admiring listeners... Boys, especially.

Sadly, the authorities have now banned such rides – gone forever.

EXTRACTS FROM WILD AT HEART

God's relationship with us and with our world is just that: a *relationship*. As with 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 Lewis says, "Love anything and your heart will be wrung and possibly broken, If you want to make sure of keeping it intact you must give it to no one, not even an animal." But God does give it, again and again and again, until he is literally bleeding from it all. God's willingness to risk is just astounding-far beyond what any of us would do were we in his position. [p32]

...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. (Psa 62:11-12) [p38]

Lest we neglect Eve, I must point out that she fails her design as well. Eve is given to Adam as his *ezer kenegdo-or* as many translations have it, his "help-meet" or "helper." Doesn't sound like much, does it? But Robert Alter says this is "a notoriously difficult word to translate." It means something far more powerful than just "helper"; it means "*lifesaver*." The phrase is only used elsewhere of God, when you need him to come through for you desperately. "There is no one like the God of Jeshurun, who rides on the heavens to help you" (Deut 33:26). Eve is a life-giver; she is Adam's ally. It is to *both* of them that the charter for adventure is given. It will take both of them to sustain life. And they will both need to fight together. .

Eve is deceived... and rather easily, as my friend, Jan Meyers, points out. In *The Allure of Hope*, Jan says, "Eve was convinced that God was withholding something from her." Not even the extravagance of Eden could convince her that God's heart is good. "When Eve was [deceived], the artistry of being a woman took a fateful dive into the barren places of control and loneliness." Now every daughter of Eve wants to "control her surrounding, her relationships, her God." No longer is she vulnerable; now she will be grasping. No longer does she want simply to share in the adventure; now, she wants to **control** it. And as for her beauty, she either hides it in fear and anger, or she uses it to secure her place in the world. "In our fear that no one will speak on our behalf or protect us or fight for us, we start to recreate both ourselves and our role in the story. We manipulate our surroundings so we don't feel so defenceless." Fallen Eve either becomes rigid or clingy. Put simply, Eve is no longer simply *inviting*. She is either hiding in busyness or demanding that Adam come through for her, usually, an odd combination of both.

AN EXAMPLE OF FEAR TO THE EXCESS

Fear, not dealt with, not faced, generates excessive control. Control of itself is not wrong, but when it goes beyond proper levels, it has awful consequences; eg. germs cause disease, therefore, one goal should be to create a totally germ-free environment. We had a man in our church in the 1960's gripped by obsessive fearful behaviour – wiping taps in restaurants, then not able to go out at all. A very "nice, inoffensive" man but riddled with fears – real and imagined. Somewhere in this process, a demonic dimension took a healthy level of fear and made it an area of bondage. It ruled and paralysed his life, including contributing to the failure of his marriage. His (ex)wife stayed around the church for a while, but she couldn't relate to him as "head of the house" in his state of unceasing fearfulness. It was awful. He couldn't make a decision, not even hold an opinion in a conversation... And sadly, there was no capable ministry available at the time to help him.

Coping with and overcoming fear is a major element of coming into adulthood. A major success in my ministry was one of our church's girls who between 6 and 9 years old went from someone terrified of going into a backyard swimming pool to jumping off the top-rail of a bridge into the lake near our children's camp!. In three short years, she conquered an irrational fear, and over the years since then has continued to push on to other new horizons. (Irrational) fear and faith cannot co-exist. That really is why our kids' camps have always had elements of **risk** embedded in them. And our annual church ski-trip especially brings that out big-time!! Again, especially among the young males....

Allan Woodcock noted the difficulty of single parenting in this journey. He said a woman (mother) can nurture a boy through to adolescence, but it takes the involvement of a **man / men** to take him through adolescence to **manhood**. In our broken world, where its sinful state is now marked more by fragmented relationships (and especially, absentee fathers) than any other single indicator, the church, and especially its **MEN**, have the opportunity to rise up and lead the way, not just for their own progeny, but for others as well. To help others emerge to biblical, balanced manhood!

Manhood is a **learned** thing, it's not automatic.

May the learning be a good balance between safety control and adventure, between health and safety - and risk! It is at this edge, that real manhood emerges. May the challenges we receive in this area have a maximised benefit on the life of every young male, every father, every leader, on our church, and indirectly, on our neighbours and community!