



From Boys to Men: Spiritual Rites of Passage in an Indulgent Age

By Bret Stephenson

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Bret Stephenson shows readers that older cultures didn't magically avoid adolescence; instead they developed successful rituals and rites of passage for sculpting teen boys into healthy young men. Stephenson explains how to reintroduce these successful practices and traditional understandings into modern family life and programs for youth to create a society with happy and healthy adolescent boys.

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Editorial Review

Review

"SLAYING THE DRAGON is a crucial read for parents, teachers, grandparents, and everyone who makes policies about young men. Bret Stephenson, a noted authority in adolescent male development, begins his exciting book by explaining how our cultural erasure of an organized and ritualized male adolescence has done great harm to our children. Then he re-invents rites of passage and the rituals of male adolescence to fit our contemporary age. Stephenson is masterful in his presentation of how to help boys "slay the dragon" and thus find a contributive, healthy and successful manhood. I highly recommend this book!"

--Michael Gurian, Author of A FINE YOUNG MAN, THE WONDER OF BOYS and THE WONDER OF GIRLS

"Bret Stephenson takes a hard look at how we are raising boys and explores how ancient wisdom and traditional practices can be used to help adolescent males become healthy young men and active members of the community."

--Aaron Kipnis, Author of ANGRY YOUNG MEN, KNIGHTS WITHOUT ARMOR, GENDER WAR-GENDER PEACE

From the Author

This book may be a difficult read for some of you. Why? Because it makes us adults take a hard look at the state of our children. In my opinion, it's a state of emergency. I'm an adolescent counselor, and I make my living helping twelve-year-old girls who have had two abortions, fourteen-year-old heroin addicts, boys who have been punching bags for their fathers, and kids on medications who have never spoken to the prescribing doctor. I've worked with kids whose father taught them how to steal and paid them to do so, and kids who grew up in the backseats of cars. I've also had a lot of success with such kids, and I am constantly amazed by their resiliency and their ability to still have a sense of humor after all they've been through.

What I do for a living is a twentieth-century invention. My job didn't exist in America a few generations ago, nor did it have a counterpart in native cultures throughout history. I tell my clients and those who attend my workshops and seminars that my overall career goal is to actually unemploy myself. My goal is for no parents to need my skills to get their kids off drugs or out of the gang. My goal is for teens not to need counseling therapy. My goal is for kids to be able to perform in life without mood-altering drugs. If we could fix these problems, I think to myself, I'd be happy to be out of a job and moving on to something else.

A while back my wife commented on the fact that after a career filled with damaged, difficult, and often violent kids, the only thing I ever bring home with me is frustration with *adults*. She's right. In a world filled with challenging teens, my only problem is with the adults who limit my ability to help the kids. I see the machinery of the system--schools, social services, juvenile justice--as an impediment to really helping kids.

The cure for adolescent problems in America, like so many other modern cultural issues we're dealing with such as homelessness, environmental destruction, and pollution, will come from a consciousness shift in the country. So I'm trying to help create that consciousness shift. Along with great youth workers like Aaron

Kipnis, David Oldfield, and Michael Gurian, I'm trying to tell America it's time to rethink how we interact with and guide our boys into adulthood and manhood. And, as you will see, I propose that we look to traditional initiations and rites of passage to provide models for this transformation.

A number of people close to me have remarked about how passionate and even obstinate I am about teen issues. My soapbox never seems to be faraway. Am I zealous and opinionated? Yes, I admit that. Am I driven and demanding? Yes again. In the eighteen years I've worked in counseling I've known too many kids who self-destructed on drugs and alcohol, were abused and neglected by their parents, were viewed as rebels and failures because they didn't fit the one school model we offer them. I've had too many kids commit suicide. I've had kids who have been shot and who have shot others. One kid I worked with actually killed another kid I was working with.

The plight of our children must rise higher on our adult priority lists. My sincere hope is that this book will help you see the problems teen boys face and gain some skills and techniques to help you deal more successfully with them. We grown-ups need to respond to the cultural emergencies facing our teens and recognize the need for implementing a different approach to molding our young men. In this book we'll look at traditional ways of promoting teens to adulthood by using time-honored rituals and concepts.

From the Inside Flap

For years we have followed Bret Stephenson's work as he tackled one of the most difficult areas in our immature culture: the lack of a grounded and effective passage to manhood for adolescent boys. Scholars such as Campbell and Jung have pointed out that this absence leaves the psyche open to self-initiation--but often in destructive or pathological ways. *From Boys to Men* thus steps into a cultural and existential gulf, to help the lost young heroes of our world and time find their way out of the labyrinth, their luminous shamanic path through the zone of perils, their personal "path with heart" (even as this book seems to us to be Bret Stephenson's "path with heart").

Stephenson makes it clear that the rewards are equal to the difficulty of travel in this cultural "no-man's-land." The way is littered with the lost young souls wearing labels such as ADHD, autism, oppositional-defiant disorder, and Youth at Risk, as well as downright criminal sociopaths who murder their schoolmates. Stephenson's work shows that it takes not only guidance and mentorship, but extraordinary personal courage, and access to the time-honored mythic maps (the "Hero's Journey," the "Shamanic Initiation") to thread such a zone of perils.

This book fills an important psychological and mythological need of our time. Parents, counselors, and educators can all profit by its commonsense and timeless wisdom. Stephenson takes the reader through this zone with expertise, compassion, and some darn good storytelling!

Stephen Larsen, Ph.D., and Robin Larsen, Ph.D.

Stephen Larsen is psychology professor emeritus at the State University of New York, Ulster, and the author of *The Healing Power of Neurofeedback*, *The Shaman's Doorway*, and *The Mythic Imagination*. Robin Larsen is an exhibiting artist and art historian and coauthor, with her husband, Stephen, of *Joseph Campbell: A Fire in the Mind* and *The Fashioning of Angels*. The Larsens co-direct the Center for Symbolic Studies, a nonprofit organization that works with youth at risk and offers educational programs for young artists, dancers, and athletes.

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Raymond Roth:

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Patricia Koop:

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