

BECOMING A MAN

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The following is a transcription of a talk given by the Headmaster to the young men of Northridge Prep on August 27, 2007.

A couple of years ago my family was faced with the difficult decision of putting my father into a nursing home. This isn't necessarily an uncommon occurrence. Maybe some of you have grandparents or great-grandparents in a home. What was unusual about this situation was that my dad was only 54 – about the age of some of your fathers. He has a condition similar to Alzheimer's. When he went into the home he still had the ability to converse, crack jokes (his favorite one-liner—“If the rain keeps up it won't be coming down!”) and do a nearly flawless impression of Donald Duck.

His life spent working in construction had left him with a vice-like handshake – the kind you prepared for by doing finger flexes or you ran the risk of falling to your knees and yelling “Uncle!” But the most endearing quality about my dad was his ability to light up a room with his presence and good nature.

I visited my dad earlier this month, a mere three years after we place him in the Veteran's home in Manteno, a small town along I-57 on the way to the University of Illinois in Champaign. He no longer recognizes me nor can he speak in an audible, coherent manner. He can still feed himself with a bit of help, but can't shave, go to the bathroom, or shower without assistance. Seeing my father slowly degenerate into this helpless state made me pause, reflect, and contrast the image of him now with that of my memory of him when I was your age. Ultimately, I found myself asking the questions “What is a man?” and “What are the characteristics of a man?”

By society's standards a man is tough, exemplified perhaps by this statement by the infamous Mike Tyson: “When I fight someone, I want to break his will. I want to take his manhood. I want to rip out his heart and show it to him”

By society's standards a man should be wealthy. For example, growing up I had a poster in my room with a picture of a Jaguar, Lamborghini, and Porsche parked in a three-car garage on a huge estate. Underneath this image the caption read “Justification for higher education.”

By society's standards a man does whatever it takes to climb to the top, to the next rung on the ladder of professional success. Let me share a vignette that I came across recently while having lunch at a Jimmy John's.

A boat docked in a tiny Mexican village. An American tourist complimented the Mexican fisherman on the quality of his fish and asked how long it took him to catch them.

“Not very long,” answered the Mexican.

But then, why didn't you stay out longer and catch more?” asked the American.

The Mexican explained that his small catch was sufficient to meet his needs and those of his family.

The American asked, “But what do you do with the rest of your time?”

“I sleep late, fish a little, play with my children, and take a siesta with my wife. In the evenings, I go into the village to see my friends, have a few drinks, play the guitar, and sing a few songs. I have full life.”

The American interrupted, “I have an MBA from Harvard and I can help you! You should start by fishing longer every day. You can then sell the extra fish you catch. With the extra revenue, you can buy a bigger boat.”

"And after that?" asked the Mexican.

With the extra money the larger boat will bring you can buy a second one and a third one and so on until you have an entire fleet of trawlers. Instead of selling your fish to a middle man, you can then negotiate directly with the processing plants and maybe even open your own plant. You can then leave this little village and move to Mexico City, Los Angeles, or even New York City! From there you can direct your huge new enterprise."

"How long would that take?"

"Twenty, perhaps twenty-five years," replied the American.

"And after that?"

"Afterwards? Well, my friend, that's when it gets really interesting," answered the American, laughing.

"When your business gets really big, you can start selling stocks and make millions!"

"Millions? Really? And after that?" asked the Mexican

"After that you'll be able to retire, live in a tiny village near the coast, sleep late, play with your children, catch a few fish, take a siesta with your wife, and spend your evening drinking and enjoying your friends."

But I would posit that at Northridge, if you asked any faculty member what are the characteristics of a man, you would get a very different answer. Let me be so bold as to suggest these three characteristics.

Sincere and Humble

First, a true man is sincere and humble enough to admit his mistakes. This story from my college years illustrates well this point. A student hadn't prepared a lick for his final in Economics. The day of the exam came and, barring direct intervention from the Lord Almighty himself, he was doomed to fail the class. Desperate, he concocted a plan with one of his fraternity brothers who was very well acquainted with the material. The student entered the lecture hall and proceeded to take a seat next to the first floor window. When he received his exam, he subtly set it on the window ledge as his friend came by from the outside. The friend grabbed the test booklet and spent the next hour in the library composing perfect answers to the questions. He then stealthily returned the exam to the window ledge and the student turned it in, confident of a good grade. You can imagine his surprise when, a week later, grades were posted. In bold, next to his name, was the letter "F." Astonished, he stormed into the professor's office and demanded to know how he could possibly have failed the course. After asking the young man's name, the professor calmly began sorting through the stack of exams that lay before him. When he arrived at the student's test, he let out a little smile and simply nodded his head. Looking the young man squarely in the eyes he said "Son, you received a failing grade because the final exam you turned in was TYPED."

Men of Northridge, just as the gentleman in the story, you will be given many, many opportunities to make your own choices. Knowing the fine, upstanding character that many of you already possess, the majority of your choices will be good ones. You will *choose* to study hard for a final exam. You will *choose* to walk away from a party where alcohol is being consumed. You will *choose* to practice thousands of free throws until you can make 100 in a row. You will give a hand to a middle school boy having trouble opening his locker. But for every ten good decisions that you make, there is bound to be one or two real dunkers. You might copy someone else's homework because "the teacher never checks." You might try to turn in a paper that you really didn't write because "there's no way that the teacher can check all of my sources." You might linger at a party too long or give your coach or director an excuse for missing practice that saves your hide but is somewhere on the wrong side of honesty. But when you do make choices of the latter kind, the true mark of manhood, mark of maturity, is admitting your mistakes and facing the consequences.

Fights His Own Battles

Daniel Carter Beard, one of the founders of the Boy Scouts of America, recognized that everyday life has become a lot more convenient over the last 150 years (quick transportation when we're short on time, air conditioning if it happens to be just a hair over 75 degrees, disposable everything if we don't feel like washing anything, etc.) As such, we have lost opportunities to exercise fortitude and endurance during unpleasant situations. In his own words, "the hardships and privations of pioneer life which did so much to develop sterling manhood, are now but a legend in history." I would suggest that this directly relates to another salient quality of manhood—fighting your own battles.

Now that you are firmly positioned on the proverbial path to freedom—that day when you will be able to flee the clutches of your parents and do "what you want when you want"—you must begin to challenge yourself to deal with problems on your own. Whether you realize it or not, for your parents, and particularly for your mothers, one of the most difficult aspects of letting go of "their little boy" is letting you face your problems yourself and find your own solutions. Some of you may have parents who still coddle you. They may rush to your defense at every seeming injustice perpetrated against you – someone called you a name, you got cut from the team, you didn't make the school play, you're not getting along with one of your teachers, you got an unfair grade... I challenge you to personally take charge of these conflicts and encourage your mom or your dad to let you try to work things out on your own. For these years are the spring training of life. At some point you have to start practicing for when you get called up to the Big Leagues of Life.

Seeks Perfection and Handles Defeat

To continue with the baseball metaphor, did you know that the highest lifetime batting average is held by Ty Cobb at .366? The best pure hitter to ever play the game (and some would say the meanest) failed 65% of the times he stepped to the plate. He had more than 11,400 plate appearances and failed more than 7,300 times. And yet he was the best in the business!

Thomas Edison, in an effort to find the perfect material for the filament in the light bulb, tried over 9,000 experiments before striking gold.

Real men seek constant perfection yet know how to handle defeat and disappointment with great aplomb. Long before there was a World Series or electricity, our Lord challenged us with the command "Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect." Jesus knew we would fall, that we would sin – but it didn't change the level of excellence in character and faith that he challenged us to attain, just as Ty Cobb or Thomas Edison didn't despair over their countless "failures."

So, real men understand that effort doesn't always equal success. You might have spent all winter in the batting cages only to get cut from the team while a classmate of yours who never even picked up a bat makes the starting lineup on the varsity team. You might spend countless hours immersed in your Chemistry books only to get a "C" on an exam while the student sitting next to you gets an "A" with a modicum of effort.

How you handle these kinds of defeat as you go through your years here at Northridge will ultimately determine the kind of "man" that you become. Will you consistently blame others for your disappointments and failures? Or will you see these experiences as opportunities to grow in manliness? It was Theodore Roosevelt who said, "We need the iron qualities that go with true manhood. We need the positive virtues of resolution, of courage, of indomitable will, of power to do without shrinking the rough work that must always be done."

To wrap up, becoming a man isn't something that happens when you receive your high school diploma, turn eighteen, or call your dad out on the carpet for something you think he did wrong.

Actually, that makes me think of the country song “The Night I Called the Old Man Out.” One of the verses goes, “It was over in a minute, and that’s when I realized that the blood came from my mouth and nose, but the tears came from his eyes. And in memory of that fateful night I know the greatest pain was his, and I just pray someday that I’m half the man he is.”

Ultimately, that’s what we are all about here at Northridge Prep. I don’t mean punching each other in the face until we bleed, but rather helping you through some tough times – practicing with you what is known as “tough love.” We are all here to help each and every one of you become the man that God wants you to be – a man in the truest sense of the word. A man who is sincere and can admit his mistakes, a man who can fight his own battles, and a man who seeks perfection yet gracefully accepts defeat.

As I think more and more about my own father these days, I now realize with the perspective of experience that he wasn’t much of a businessman. He relied on his personality more than solid business practices. He worked long hours and, consequently, I don’t have too many memories of playing ball in the front yard with him or him teaching me how a car works. But what I am thankful for are the select moments he chose to share with me his shortcomings in an effort to help me avoid these same mistakes and grow in manliness.