

Boys to Men
By
Daniel E. White June 17, 2024

The words got me thinking. Remember how popular “Ballad of the Green Berets” by Staff Sergeant Barry Sadler was? It played as I was listening to the radio around Memorial Day.

The instrumentation is stirring, martial, makes one take notice. SSgt Sadler sings about the 3 in 100 soldiers trying to become a Green Beret who are chosen. To this point, the focus is on how special a soldier must be in order to be selected.

Then comes the part of the ballad that got me thinking. The Green Beret soldier in the song does not make it home from the war. His wish is that his wife will raise their son to be a good enough man to be chosen to be a Green Beret.

A dad wishing that a son follow in his footsteps, join the family firm, take up the family cause: there is nothing unusual there. Sons often bear fathers’ hopes, for better or worse.

From long ago, the idea that a society will have a warrior class, usually populated by men, has persisted. An elite soldier envisions his son as one, too.

I heard the sergeant singing a few days after reading the May 20 edition of the Christian Science Monitor. The “From the Editor” essay, by April Austin, is “Where Boys Learn to be Men.” She wrote:

“My late husband and I tried to give Ben experiences growing up that encouraged him to find his own authentic version of masculinity. For several summers, Ben attended an all-boys camp where the staff nurtured as well as challenged him. But it turned out the optimal role model was closer to home—his dad.”

“Last year, in a speech at the memorial service for his father, Ben made an especially telling observation, which he gave me permission to share here. ‘I only built up the ability to see deeper because I watched and studied my dad,’ Ben wrote. ‘Surrounded by the stereotypes and expectations of masculinity and what it meant to be a man, I had to square those ideas with what my father was actually doing. He helped me navigate the difficult world of male adolescence not through speeches and proclamations, but by being this interesting and wildly curious being who shared his world with me.’”

“That world included vulnerability and strength. Tears and high-fives.”

“Boys grow into men who become engaged and conscientious fathers by watching those around them.”

“Stereotypes and expectations of masculinity and what it takes to be a man.” I thought much about that when I was headmaster of a boys’ boarding school in the 1980s, when the women’s movement was changing how the culture regarded women’s role in modern society. Didn’t that inherently impact what men’s roles would be after that?

As might be expected, the teenage boys with whom I lived and worked usually rolled their eyes when I brought up the subject. But how would manhood be defined when what had been the traditional “male” roles for a very long time no longer were the exclusive purview of men?

Ben showed that there were alternatives to “society’s limited views of manhood.”

Dad was a minister in the Disciples of Christ denomination, the faith of his father, the original Dan White. My namesake wanted to be a preacher, but his eyesight precluded his going to college. He ran a store for most of his life. From what Dad said, Poppa White hoped that one of his sons would become a minister.

The second Dan White, my uncle, Dad’s older brother, chose to become a banker. I think Dad wanted to be a doctor. But he knew his dad’s hopes, and so he went to seminary and spent a career as a parish minister. Dad never complained. I cannot imagine, though, him not asking “what if.”

Dad, in turn, hoped that one of his sons would choose to follow in his profession. I was admitted to the Claremont School of Theology but also to graduate study in Political Science at the University of Washington and chose the latter. My brother was enrolled at Fuller Theological Seminary but, prompted by a wise professor who said that one could have a ministry in professions other than preacher, went into information technology.

Dad never openly expressed disappointment. Shortly before he died, he observed that my work in schools was a lot like his in churches; I just couldn’t marry or bury people.

Like Ben Austin, though, I learned lessons that went beyond a vocation. To be sure, there were occasional “speeches and proclamations” from Dad but he, too, was curious, a lifelong learner. He had a generosity of spirit that unfortunately made him susceptible to charlatans on occasion, but he generally thought positively about his fellow humans. More than once, he brought a hard-luck story home for a meal.

He preached love in his sermons, even when it brought him criticism at times from congregants. He cried sometimes. He loved my mother and his family passionately.

What it means to be a man will inevitably be re-defined as the roles of women change, too. In my experience, the dominant influence a dad has on a son is not a function of vocation or persistent stereotypes. What matters most is the kind of person a son sees in his dad.

Ben got it right.

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