



**Steve McGraw, PsyD**  
**A Modern Day Odyssey: Guiding our Boys  
on the Path to Adulthood**

*Attendee Notes for Menlo School Workshop: Feb. 5, 2011*

Steve McGraw, PsyD, is a clinical psychologist in private practice in Palo Alto. He received his doctoral degree from the California School of Professional Psychology-Alameda and teaches at a number of local graduate programs. He is the father of three sons and is a popular speaker at local parent education conferences.

**Focus:** The unique fragility of the male brain, and how to help our sons lead with empathy, or “lead from the heart.”

**On the need to reset and get calm before attempting to connect:** Make sure you reset, get calm and into a state of mindfulness. Before entering the house after a long workday, sit in the driveway in your car and feel the steering wheel in your hands. Pass a few minutes until you are present and calm. For boys and men, this may not come naturally. Steve gave an example of a teenage boy and his father who were both frustrated and disconnected from each other. The boy, sullen and uncommunicative, was failing to turn in his school assignments on time. His father was frustrated and not able to reach his son. Steve asked the father to recall his son as a newborn and at five years old. Recalling his son as a vibrant, energetic boy who looked up to his father, the father’s anger faded and he was suddenly able to feel differently about their relationship and find a way to move from alienation to connection with his son.

**On the aspirations of boys:** Boys want mission and meaning. Boys want to experience different dimensions of themselves (mindsight). Boys want and need to befriend themselves. Boys long for movement and freedom in their inner world. Boys long for connection, belonging, and worth.

**On what boys complain about:** Boys complain about a lack of sense of worth. They feel overwhelmed, can’t relax, can’t sleep. Boys do not find school meaningful. Boys believe “I’m not good enough.” Boys find it difficult to find any good friends or parents to talk with about real things.

**On the emotional isolation of our sons:** Boys have a sensitive, tender side that often remains hidden. Many of Steve’s clients express the sentiment that it’s difficult to talk to guy

friends. Even with good friends, when a teen boy discloses a concern, the response, “Dude, that sucks!” usually ends a conversation.

***On what boys need:*** Boys need face time, interpersonal interaction. Their well-being is directly related to connection. In order for their brains to grow and to learn empathy, boys need face time. They become what they experience. The problem: boys, who are more sensitive, may tend to freeze or become paralyzed during social encounters, and may avoid them. Most boys tend to want to spend a lot of time alone in their rooms. Media also detracts from face time, eye contact, connection.

***On the normal emotional state of boys:*** Boys really care, have big hearts, but have difficulty “leading from the heart.” Boys are extremely sensitive to how their parents are doing; every boy says he notices when a parent is stressed. Boys are constantly asking, “Where do I belong?” Boys want to preserve a façade of emotional strength and develop techniques to mask their emotions. They do not want their parents to see them “undone.” Boys suppress their emotional vulnerability, which requires boys to disconnect, and results in them not being able to access their emotional selves and sense what they are feeling (mindsense). Boys may act lazy, but they cannot relax; this is one of the reasons for self-imposing isolation. Boys are frustrated by the student role; high achieving male students from affluent neighborhoods express that “70% of schoolwork is useless. I’m never going to need this stuff.”

***On the need to struggle and the difficulty of being empathically motivated:*** Boys are wired for struggle. The male rest state is fight, flight or freeze. The male brain has a larger amygdala; this has implications for aggression and provides a natural energy to discover the world. The male brain and presence of testosterone make it very difficult for boys to lead with empathic behavior. Increased stress leads to more competitive behavior, a sense of being on guard and/or instant posturing. Boys have an “endangered mindset”, a hypervigilant, vulnerable state. They are “The Sentinel” and can never relax. When it feels like a war zone, how can boys focus on their inner life?

***On video games, social media and other seducers:*** Boys feel like they are in control of their destiny when they play video games or engage with social media. They know they are somewhat anesthetized. They are attracted by the journey and sense of mission. We need to find other ways to help our sons feel in control and engaged in a meaningful mission so that they become active generators of their own lives and tethered to reality.

***On specific ways to help our sons:*** Help your son find “islands of competence.” At family dinners, share your own imperfections and mistakes, and let your son hear adults thinking through issues and expressing emotions. Don’t let the “student role” dominate; boys need to engage in something other than academics. Boys need to contribute and should do chores. Boys need to be involved, need action. Help boys move beyond self-engagement; they need to become mentors and help others. They need to be trained to be kind, helpful and engaged, to act in empathy and feel in control. Boys need to practice being engaged, practice being happy. Boys become what they experience. Teach our sons to sense their body signals and connect

them with emotions. Help our sons access their emotional selves; help them learn to befriend themselves.

***On the male odyssey:*** The journey to adulthood is long, full of triumphs and despair, the movement from hubris to humility, full of temptations and captivity. Boys need to dig deep to make the journey.

***Recommended books:***

- *The Happiness Advantage* by Shawn Aker
- *Raising Happiness: 10 Simple Steps for More Joyful Kids and Happier Parents* by Christine Carter
- *Mindsight* by Dan Siegel