

The Boy Who Found His Feet

A boy's self-initiated journey to manhood

By J. Douglas Welsh

Introduction

When I was 35 years old, a friend sent me the book *Halftime*, written by Bob Buford. The book is about transitioning your life from a focus on gaining success to developing and leading a life based on significance. Throughout my entire career I had been asking the same question: besides making money and developing my craft, what lasting value was I creating? What difference was I making—or could I make—in the future? The desire to know the answers to these questions became fundamental to my core. But at 35, recently remarried and with little savings, I had no idea what to do with the vision that the halftime concept created.

Fast-forward 17 years. I had worked for several Fortune 200 companies and had attained a measure of financial success. With each addition to our savings, the *Halftime* vision—creating an intentional ‘second half’ of life focused on creating value—became ever more central to my future. The closer I got to reaching my financial goals, the more I began thinking of leaving my corporate job to begin my halftime pursuit—but I could never pull the trigger. Then, early one spring morning while on a business trip in Denver, I finally did it. After a sleepless night, I phoned my boss and quit. When I returned home

that night and as my wife and I were sharing a glass of wine, she asked, 'How was your trip?' Given that I had to announce to her that I was voluntarily no longer employed, it was one of the more memorable glasses of wine we have shared!

Once upon a time, I owned a farm in Kentucky and became passionate about native wildlife habitat. I shared my passion with the area wildlife biologist, who consequently drew up a plan to convert cattle-grazing pastures of fescue into a diverse ecosystem of prairie grasses and wildflowers. He said fescue is like an impregnable carpet that, being a monoculture and offering little food or protection, provides wildlife with scant value. But a prairie ecosystem creates tall bunches of diverse plants that provide animals like rabbits, quail, and turkey with food, nesting areas, and protection from predators. Beaming in anticipation, he said that killing the thick, smothering fescue would allow all the native plants, which had lain dormant since the fescue was introduced several decades earlier, to spring back to life and create a naturally diverse prairie ecosystem.

So we sprayed insecticide to eradicate the fescue and a few weeks later planted a thin layer of prairie grasses and wildflowers. In about three weeks, just as the biologist had predicted, an incredible array of wildflowers, seed and flower-bearing weeds and native grasses began peeking out of the brown, dead grass. In three months the fields

were an unrecognizable riot of color and diversity--much like it was before we 'tamed' the land for our own uses over a hundred years ago.

The first step in the 'halftime' process is to unhook from our first half structure and simply let life happen--very much like eradicating the commercially introduced fescue and letting the native ecosystem re-emerge. This 'unhooking' process can engineer an uninterrupted and rare period of personal re-discovery. If you are a sailor, it's like voluntarily turning your ship into the wind to stop all apparent forward movement. For achievers and people wired for action, this can be a very unnatural, vulnerable, and difficult period.

As I learned to let life happen, questions about the role of men in today's society began to emerge. What is a man today? What are the roles of men? What do men do? How has being a man changed over time? How has the West's interpretation of Christianity influenced the concept of manhood? What might a man of the future look like, be, and do? Over the last sixty-five years or so, the roles of men and women have been dramatically converging and we now compete for and perform similar jobs, tasks and activities—and both sexes perform most tasks equally well. What impact has this had on the male psyche? From the days of the romanticized Knights of the Roundtable to the Native American cultures; from the American Frontier to the gender-equal

workplace of today—is it a ridiculous notion to try to define a broad, common vision of manhood for western society?

As I investigated the concept of ‘manhood,’ I was struck by three things. First, fatherlessness is having an undeniably catastrophic impact on the health and wellbeing of fatherless boys. Secondly, there are no consistent visions or definitions of manhood that are reinforced by society and that provide a positive, disciplined structure for men to fit into. Finally, men’s movements that sprang up in the 1980s and 90s and which attempted to provide definition, vision and accountability for men—like The Million Man March and groups inspired by *Iron John* author Robert Bly—have largely disappeared.

After several years of research on manhood, I had few answers and many more questions. . I also found it baffling that there are no widely recognized institutions or ‘best practices,’ if you will, to help boys develop into men or that define a picture of manhood for men to broadly embrace. We have few, if any, common cultural expectations of manhood to which men are held accountable.

Historically, a society’s culture provided an elder-led lifestyle that young males could emulate. But in cultures as diverse as ours today, it seems impossible to have widespread consensus about anything—especially a topic as complicated and ethereal as a common vision of the purpose and role of men.

Despite the difficulty of this task, I believe it is at our peril that we continue to sire sons without offering guidance on what it means to be a man and how our gender informs our purpose in life. I say this because I have sired two sons and felt utterly

inadequate to provide intentional parenting on this subject—not because I wasn't more than willing—but because I didn't know how!

So in my second half, contemplating the difficult questions about manhood and remembering parts of my own stumbling journey into manhood, I offer what I hope will be a thought-provoking, enjoyable tale of a **Boy Who Found His feet**.