

BUILDING MEN WHO MATTER

*On the Marvel and Mystery of
Raising Teenage Boys*

BROTHER JAMES M. KELLY, C.F.X.



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SECTION ONE

THE FINAL YEARS AT
SAINT XAVIER HIGH SCHOOL
1998-2001

ON THE OBLIVIOUS NATURE OF THE ADOLESCENT MALE

If you have ever tried to pilot your car up the front driveway at St. X when classes are changing, you have had a first-hand experience of the oblivious nature of the adolescent male. Although you may be driving a large sport utility vehicle, which is hard to miss, you will quickly discover that the students pay absolutely no attention to your efforts to drive through this adolescent multitude. As they completely block your way, they will look right at you and smile. This is not rudeness. It is oblivion. They are either talking to their friends, thinking about their latest life crisis or planning their excuse for missing homework for the next teacher. You and your car have not registered on their reality screen. In despair, you will finally give up and wait for the passing period to end before you go on your way.

I don't need to tell you that adolescents go through a period of complete self-absorption. The good news is that they grow out of it, but while they're in it, this stage can be somewhat maddening for parents. Your son is oblivious to so many things. He's oblivious to the chaos of his room and the chaos he might leave scattered about the house as his belongings creep out of his room. He's oblivious to the havoc that his failure to think ahead and to plan ahead can wreak on family plans and on the lives of the other members of his family. Most of all, he can be

oblivious to the effect that his actions and words have on the feelings of others. He might be hypersensitive about his own feelings, but when it comes to the feelings of others, he simply doesn't register them in his mind. This does not mean that he is going to grow up to be an insensitive and uncaring father and husband. It simply means that he's being a typical teenage male.

I have mentioned to you before that our Christian Awakening Retreat in the junior year can be, although not always, a wake-up call for a boy about his own oblivion to the feelings and needs of others. Any adult in the St. X community who has worked on these retreats can tell you a multitude of stories of boys who suddenly discover how shabbily they have been treating their parents, their siblings and their friends. This shabby treatment has far more to do with oblivion than it does with bad will. Teenage boys are so absorbed in themselves that they don't focus on how their words and their actions affect others. When they finally recognize this, they really begin to grow up. Our retreat closings are usually peppered with apologies to parents from boys who have finally realized that they have taken their parents for granted, and that their parents have endured this shabby treatment while they patiently waited for their sons to grow up.

Another sad wake-up call for the teenage male is when one of his friends loses a parent. I recall a time in Connecticut when three boys in the junior class lost their fathers within three weeks. We saw an incredible change in the junior class in the time after those deaths. All of a sudden we had 200 boys who were actually contemplating what life would be like without their fathers and who, for at least a few weeks after those deaths, were incredibly considerate of their fathers. Of course, the insight didn't last as long as we would have liked.

If your son is in a stage of high oblivion, don't worry too much about it. It will pass. Gradually, he will recognize that there is a world around him and that other people have feelings just as he does. Of course, it won't pass completely since there is some oblivion that just goes with being a man. Ten years from now his wife will be telling him, just as his mother does now, that he really should write a thank-you note to his grandmother for the birthday gift she sent him six months ago. Since women tend not to be oblivious, they can serve as a good reality check for the men in their lives. My godson is a rather dilatory writer of thank-you notes and, for years, his mother made sure that he thanked me whenever I sent him a gift. Now his lovely wife, Tracy, has taken over that task. Of course, I would never remember to send birthday cards and gifts to him or to anyone else unless my lovely secretary, Mrs. Dolle, didn't remind me. She keeps careful track of my calendar and reminds me four or five times before any occasion when I need to send a card or a gift. Oblivious teenage males do become less oblivious as time goes on. Just don't hope for a total transformation!

ON LEADING THE HORSE TO WATER

In the Broadway musical *Mame*, the lead character, Mame Dennis, sings a song which captures beautifully the dilemma facing anyone who has to raise a child. Mame has had to raise her nephew and, at a point in the play when he's about to marry a girl who is obviously wrong for him, Mame wonders if his lack of good sense is her fault. She asks:

Did he need a stronger hand?
Did he need a lighter touch?
Was I soft or was I tough?
Did I give enough?
Did I give too much?
At the moment when he needed me,
did I ever turn away?
Should I blame the times I pampered him,
or blame the times I bossed him?
What a shame!
I never really found the boy
before I lost him.
Would I make the same mistakes
if he walked into my life today?

Mame's questions are the very real questions of a parent. If my son makes a mess of his life or his algebra grade, is it my

fault? Did I put too much pressure on him or not quite enough? Where does my responsibility end and his begin?

The old adage, “You can lead a horse to water, but you can’t make him drink,” is a very appropriate answer to such parental questions. Your responsibility is to lead the horse to water. Having been led there, your son (the horse) has to do the drinking. You can’t do it for him. If he’s a stubborn horse who refuses to drink, it’s not your fault. Pampering, bossing, strong hand, light hand, scolding, praising—all of these are means which any parent uses to get the horse to water. God only knows what the perfect blend of these elements looks like. Your own parents probably didn’t find it and, most likely, neither will you.

In his letter this month, Dr. Sangalli outlines for you some practical steps that you, as parents, can take to lead your son to water. You can’t force him to study, but you can see that he has the proper environment and the appropriate ground rules to facilitate study should he decide to put his mind to it. If junior can’t talk to his girlfriend for three hours on the phone at night, then perhaps he might just use those three hours to pound German or French or physics into his head. If you take Dr. Sangalli’s advice and set the stage for your son’s academic success, you have fulfilled your obligations and have led the horse to water. The rest is up to the horse.

At the last judgment, God is obviously going to ask you if you fulfilled responsibly your duties as a parent. I would like to suggest that, when you stand before the throne of God, He is not going to ask you if your son became a doctor or a derelict. I suspect that He’s going to ask you if you did your best to lead the horse to water.

Please pray for the faculty as we begin this school year. They

Section One—The Final Years at Saint Xavier High School

have the formidable task of trying to lead 1,500 young men to water. I'll pray for you as you attempt to do the same with your son. Let's all pray that the horses have the good sense to drink!

ON PRAISE AND PATIENCE

Shortly after the graduation of the Class of 1998, I received a letter from one of the graduates whom I had taught in English during his junior year. The young man was one of the finest students I have taught, and I very much value his talent and his opinion. The letter was basically a thank-you note which also offered me some suggestions about my teaching style.

Since I have the luxury of teaching only one class, I correct student essays very thoroughly, and I give each of my students an audiotape with suggestions as to how he can revise his essay to make it better. The kids jokingly say that I not only yell at them in class but at home as well. I firmly believe that good writing doesn't just happen. A student will only become a decent writer if he is willing to submit his work to constructive criticism and to revise his essay until it is really good. I learned this method from my own senior English teacher in high school. After we had written an essay, Sister Mary Hughita would have each member of the class stand up and read his or her essay. She would then say to the class, "All right, boys and girls, criticize." Sister Hughita did "peer review" of writing thirty years before it became the thing to do in education. Inevitably, when I read my essay, Sister Hughita would modify her instructions to, "All right, boys and girls, criticize ruthlessly." It was painful, but it helped me learn how to write.

I still submit everything which I write for publication to two very critical editors, so I can tell my students that I suffer along with them in the writing process. My former student said that he learned to write well because I was so critical of his writing and because I offered him ways of improving his writing. So far, so good.

The young man went on, however, to tell me that, while my criticism of students' work did indeed help them to improve their writing style, I did not take sufficient time to praise them when they did well. He also mentioned that I can be incredibly impatient when students aren't hitting the mark I have set for them. He put this all very politely within the context of my own philosophy of writing: You learn more from criticism than you do from anything else. The sad thing is that he didn't tell me anything which I didn't already know and which I hadn't worked sufficiently hard to improve. It did, however, touch me very deeply that he cared enough to take me at my word and to offer me suggestions. He concluded with, "Please take this letter as a sign of my care and concern for you and your continued success as a teacher, and don't change too much. Thank you for a wonderful experience at St. X."

I took this letter very much in the spirit in which he had written it, and I learned once again how much I can learn from my students. I suspect that you, as parents, have had similar experiences. There is some incredible wisdom swirling about in the maelstrom of the male adolescent. They have difficulty articulating their insights, but if you listen carefully, you can sense the wisdom. Sometimes they can articulate it quite clearly as my former student did in his letter to me.

Praise and patience! As with teaching the art of writing,

so with life. We probably all would do better and would be more effective as school teachers and as parents if we were more patient and if we took more time to praise.

Patience has never been my strong suit, and I suspect that I'm probably a little too old to change that significantly. I do think that I can learn to praise my students more when they do well, or at least to couch my criticism in terms which help them see the good work they have done even as I suggest ways to improve. I'm going to try to take "praise and patience" as my personal themes for this school year. Perhaps you could join me and take these themes in your parenting of your son. Then we can both pray for each other that God will help us to make these themes a reality in our lives.

ON DOBIE THE SAINT BERNARD AND FINDING THE RIGHT GARDEN

When I was a boy in high school, the school chaplain, Father Shea, had a Saint Bernard named Dobie who spent most of his time sleeping on the cool terrazzo floor outside of Father Shea's office in the senior hallway of the school. While Dobie didn't particularly like the girls in the school, perhaps because they were somewhat afraid of him, he loved the boys because the boys would always stop to pat him on the head or to scratch him behind the ears or to play with him if Dobie were in the mood. Of course, boys and dogs could be the topic of a letter in itself. Dobie was among the most lethargic of very large dogs. On one occasion during my senior year, we had an incredible blizzard; when we returned to school, the snow was piled everywhere and the temperature was frigid. No matter what the weather—rain, sleet or snow—the students at my high school always went out to the school yard after lunch. The boys stood on one side of the school yard and the girls on the other with a nun in the middle watching us like a hawk. When we came out into the school yard on the first day back to school after the blizzard, we were all dumbfounded to find Dobie as frisky as a puppy. He was bounding about the snow banks, barking and having a grand time for himself. The boys, of course, immediately began to play with him, chasing him and throwing snowballs at him. Dobie loved it. Dobie was

born and bred to live in the Alps, carrying a cask of whiskey to stranded travelers. By some cruel trick of fate, he found himself in a climate not to his liking. While Massachusetts winters can be cold, they aren't like Switzerland's, and Dobie never seemed to adjust. You might say that Dobie was not in the right garden. He couldn't grow as he was supposed to because he was a mountain dog far from the mountains.

One of your son's tasks as he matures from boy to man is to find the right garden in which to grow, the right climate in which to develop his gifts. The right garden can take a bit of searching, and he may have a number of false starts before he finds it. When we admit a freshman class to St. X, most of the young men take to the school like ducks to water. They have been in the same elementary school for eight years with the same students, and they appreciate the larger environment that St. X has to offer them. It's the right garden at the right time. There are others in the freshman class who take longer to adjust. St. X is the right garden, but it takes them longer to figure that out. Some of them don't figure it out until after they've graduated! There are always a few for whom St. X is just not the right garden. They need either a smaller school or a school that is less "rough and tumble" than the all-male environment of St. X. This search for the right garden goes on during high school and after it. Young people today may attend two or more colleges before they earn a degree and may change their major four or five times. Some do college on the six, seven and even ten-year plan. While this search for the right garden might be frustrating to a young man's parents, hopefully the search will lead him to a productive and happy life. Patience, obviously, is the key for parents with a searching son. Of course, parents have the perfect right to tell the "searcher" after a few

years that he has to pay for the search if he plans to continue it over a good number of years.

I think I've probably told this story, but I had a boy in school years ago who was the "classic jock." He had a healthy disdain for anything artistic, and if I had suggested when he was in high school that he would find his life's work in the arts, he would've laughed quite scornfully. Yet, at the tenth reunion of his graduating class from St. John's High, he was an actor, making his way quite successfully in the theater. When I pointed the irony out to him, he shrugged, smiled and said, "Life has a way of changing your perspective, doesn't it?" It took him a while, but he found the right garden in which to grow.

I have a million other examples like him. There was the incredibly lazy and unfocused young man I had in senior English in the late '70s who is now a Ph.D. and a college professor. Then there's my all-time favorite. I had a young man in junior Religion who got his girlfriend pregnant and who had to leave school to marry her. In those days, we wouldn't allow a boy to remain in school if he were married. At his fifteenth reunion he was still with the young lady and had three children. Because his education had been interrupted, he didn't have the best paying job, but I think he was probably the happiest man at that reunion. Fortunately the young lady turned out to be the right woman, and his family provided him with the right garden. He said to me on that night, "A great wife and good kids. What more could a man ask for?" What more, indeed!

You don't want your son to be like Dobie the dog, out of place in his world, wondering what his purpose in life is. His search to find the right garden may take some time, and you may often find it incredibly frustrating. While he's on this

search, you'll need patience and understanding and, at times, he'll need a good kick in the butt. You can still give him a good kick and be patient and understanding. That's one of those parental tricks you've learned from experience. When your son is frustrating you because he can't decide where he wants to go to college or what he wants to study, or when he tells you that he needs to go off and ski for a year to find himself, remember Dobie the dog. At some point the weather will turn and, like Dobie, your son will find his garden. Just pray that it happens before he's 30!

ON LETTING GO

This letter is directed to the parents of the graduating seniors. Parents of underclassmen will have to put this one away until their sons graduate.

My godson, Colin, is the closest thing I'll ever get to a son, and I'm incredibly grateful to his parents for having shared him with me. Colin and I have been very close during his 26 years of life, and whenever I was "back East," I always made a point of getting together with him. We had a godfather/godson tradition of always going to an Irish pub in Worcester, Massachusetts, called O'Connors. Although Colin's name is Novick, his mother's maiden name was O'Malley, so there are good Irish genes mixed in with his Polish genes. I was around for all of the important events in Colin's life, from First Communion through his graduation from the University of Chicago. When he graduated from Chicago, he received an award the week before graduation. His parents couldn't attend, so I stood in for them, thanks to the rather inexpensive airfare from Louisville to Chicago on Southwest Airlines.

Three years ago, Colin called me to tell me that he had just proposed to his girlfriend. Colin has a rather romantic streak to him, so he proposed on the top of Mount Washington. She had the good sense to accept his proposal. The day that he told me of his engagement, I must admit that I had a little twinge. I had to accept that he was growing up and that, with

EPILOGUE

If you have found anything helpful in this book, I would ask that you pray for the author. As you have probably deduced from some of the letters, I have been on a four-year journey with cancer. That journey has entered a rather serious stage. I am, however, a very lucky man. For the past four years, I have been enveloped in the prayer of those who love and care for me. I can't tell you how consoling I have found that. God makes his love known to us in the people who love us, and God has been very present to me through these people.

I have been a very fortunate man in my vocation. I have taught boys who, in many ways, taught me more than I taught them. I've had the good fortune to love every school at which I have been missioned, including the faculty and staff at each school with whom I have been privileged to serve. Most importantly, I love all of the boys whom I've met and taught over the last forty years. The late Brother Lambert always said that he hoped the one thing his "old boys" would remember about him is how very much he loved them. I can honestly say that I have that same hope for my "old boys." Whether I actually taught them in class or they were simply boys in the three schools over which I have presided as headmaster, I hope that they know how very much I love them. Whether I've known every boy whose hand I've shaken as I've presented him with his diploma doesn't matter. I've loved them all. At the

Mount, I know most of the students in the graduating class because Mount boys are so friendly and they make sure you know who they are. Still, at graduation, Mr. Fitz whispers in my ear the names of those boys who go by a name other than the name on their diploma. Regardless, I love them all simply because they are Mount boys. We call them “Mount Men,” but, in this Xaverian Brother’s mind, they are all boys, boys on a journey to manhood, but boys nonetheless. It has been my great spiritual privilege to walk with them and with their parents on that journey.