

CHAPTER 5

BECOMING THE MAN MY CHILDREN WOULD WANT TO KNOW

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David (not his real name) looked as if I had hit him between the eyes with a two-by-four. I had asked a simple yet profound question. It was a question that would change the course of his life forever.

David and I were having lunch at an upscale restaurant in the financial district of Phoenix, Arizona. David said, “I’m miserable. My marriage is intolerable.” He described his wife’s raging anger at him, their power struggles over whether their children should go to church with him, and the utter dysfunctionality of their relationship. “My attorney is preparing divorce papers,” he said, “but nothing has been filed yet.”

David also shared how he’d been looking at pornography and, occasionally, visiting prostitutes. “I’ve been exploring internet dating,” he said. “I’ve met a woman online who is very interesting. I’ve had some online conversations with her, and I’m thinking of inviting her to meet me for coffee.”

It was then that I leaned forward, looked David in the eyes, and asked softly, “And what is your intention in inviting this woman for coffee?”

I purposefully emphasized the word intention, and the question stopped David in his tracks. I had guessed—correctly—that David had no conscious awareness of his true intention for meeting with the woman. How did I know? Because, like David, there once was a time when I went

from one relationship to the next as if sleepwalking, without looking at what I was doing, who I was choosing as a partner, or why. For many years, my intimate relationships with women were based primarily on satisfying my sexual needs and my desire for someone who would mother me. My involvement in these relationships was shallow, selfish, and immature. Like David, at one time I was a very hot mess.

Learning to live life with intentionality was just one of many steps in my transcendence from the muck and mire to an awareness of the joy, beauty, and fulfillment that is our natural birthright. And I'm proud of how I'm now able to share my story, life experience, and skills as a coach, healer, teacher, guide, and minister as I support others on their life journey.

But, I did not always have those skills and experience.

I was 28 years old when I finally faced some harsh realities. *I'm broke, I reflected. I'm about to be divorced, and I have two very young children. I've squandered away a small inheritance, and I'm not earning enough to support myself, much less a soon-to-be ex-wife and a young son and daughter.* I was severely depressed and was using alcohol and marijuana to numb my anguish and my dissatisfaction, discomfort, and rejection of myself (my Self) and my responsibilities. *My life is an absolute shambles*, I admitted to myself.

I awoke to a painful reality. *Nothing is working—what I believe about myself, how I think I should live my life or the way I think things should be. I need to step back, start over, and learn a new way of navigating through life—a new way of being.* Thus began my journey of transcendence to how I experience life today.

I moved back in with my parents. At age 30 and working full-time in the family-owned commercial real estate business, I enrolled in a local university to complete my undergraduate degree. My life was finally turning around. Although I was still drinking almost daily and smoking weed to numb my inner unhappiness, for the most part I was functioning in ways that our general culture would consider to be mature and acceptable. Best of all, each visit with my children was better than the last as I accepted the reality that I was a parent and capable of fulfilling that role. My kids and I were having more fun and sharing greater love and connection in our times together.

And then the bottom fell out. Through circumstances beyond my control, it became impossible for me to be with my children for an indefinite period of time. *This isn't fair!* I screamed to myself. *I don't deserve this! But most of all, it's not fair to the kids! They should know my family and me as they grow up. That's what would be in their best interest.*

For two years, I did everything I could think of to change the situation. I was confused, hurt, and angry but kept my rage bottled up inside me until I developed an ulcer. I spent thousands of dollars on attorneys who eventually said they could do nothing for me. Ultimately, I conceded that there was nothing more that I could do. Utterly heartbroken, I thought, *Okay then, I'll let my ex-wife and kids get on with their lives, and I'll get on with mine. But God, if you're listening, I make this solemn commitment to you: I will do whatever I have to do to become the man my children would want to know as their father. And I hope and pray that one day they will be willing to give me a chance and see that I'm a pretty good guy after all.*

I completed my undergrad program and graduated with a bachelor's degree at age 32. I continued working in the family real estate business and stopped smoking weed. A few years later, I went on to law school, where I studied hard and did well. I saw how my almost daily drinking was getting in my way, so I stopped drinking. I graduated with honors and landed a job at a prestigious law firm in Phoenix, Arizona. My work was challenging and yet rewarding. *I'm really on my way now,* I thought.

Yet, my intimate relationships with women remained out of kilter. Following an intense, chaotic, and volatile fling while in law school, I finally took a look at what I'd been doing, what I was and wasn't seeking, and the women I'd been choosing to sleep with. *This clearly isn't working,* I thought. *Perhaps I should try something different.*

Growth, change, and transformation require us to get out of our comfort zone. *If I want to create different results, I'll have to get out of the comfort zone of how I've always done things in the past to open a path for healing old wounds and choosing a new way of being in my life.*

Soon after moving to Phoenix, I began six years of intense psychoanalysis. Several years later, I earned a master's degree in Spiritual Psychology from the University of Santa Monica (USM). Spiritual Psychology engages us in exploring the evolution of human consciousness. It helps us answer the

questions, “Who am I? Why am I here? And, how can I make a meaningful difference in the world?”

At USM, I learned and integrated concepts and practices that truly have transformed my day-to-day, moment-to-moment life experience. I once saw my life through the lens of being a victim of outside people and circumstances. I have rewritten my life story, and I now see myself as a hero who has overcome great challenges and who now celebrates the beauty of the world and enjoys the abundance that is always available to each of us. Following are a few examples of practices I learned at USM and that now support me on my journey through life:

- Seeing the loving essence in myself and others. When I see myself and others as Divine beings having a human experience, I open to the reality that our true nature is love. I relate to myself and others from a center of love and compassion instead of fear and insecurity. I remember that we are all doing the best we can at all times. I now understand that if we could do better, we would.
- Heart-centered listening enables me to pay attention and listen to the deeper meaning beyond the plain words that the other person is saying. Perhaps this person is hurt or afraid of being hurt in some way, I think. Perhaps they are insecure or unsure of how to take the next step in their life. By really listening to another person, I may cultivate a deeper understanding of them and what they’re struggling with, which facilitates compassion and creates greater trust and connection in our relationship.
- Using everything for learning, growth, and healing. At USM, we learned that “Planet Earth is a school, and everyone has a unique curriculum to complete.” The challenges and upsets we encounter along the way are there to help us learn, grow, and heal. Over time I was able to see that my separation from my children was an opportunity to examine what led up to that situation and choose a different course in my life from that time forward. Painful though it was, that separation ultimately was a great gift to my family and me.
- The power of positive intention. I learned that blindly going through life leads to a life without meaning or purpose and, potentially, disastrous results like the separation from my children. On the other

hand, I have experienced how having a clear, positive intention opens the door to infinite possibilities in my life. When I slow down and consciously articulate my intention about a course of action, I invite the Universe to complete the scene in ways that are far more beautiful and creative than anything that I might imagine.

That deep inner work helped me gain insight into who I really am and the family and other dynamics that led me to make the choices that I'd been making previously, choices that were harmful to me as well as to others. It also helped me see that I could make different choices—healthy choices—not based on the false beliefs about myself and the world I learned from my parents, at school, or from Madison Avenue.

For example, I grew up in the Deep South in the 1950s and 1960s. I witnessed cultural norms based on what I now see as domination, oppression, and humiliation of others based on the color of their skin or gender. And although I objected to those norms and spoke out against them, in certain ways I also unconsciously adopted those norms and engaged in behaviors that objectified or demeaned others—particularly women. Once I became aware of these behaviors, I could choose to act differently.

While at USM, I participated in a men's group that met monthly. A profoundly different energy and conversation emerge when men gather in a safe environment where only other men are present. It was extremely valuable and supportive for me to hear other men's stories, concerns, doubts, hopes, fears, and accomplishments and to be able to share my own. We opened up, allowed ourselves to become vulnerable, and expressed things that were on our hearts but that we otherwise kept locked deep inside—things that, as boys, we learned it was *not* okay to share.

Like most other men, I learned at an early age that we will be judged as “weak” if we feel, much less express, our fears, concerns, and insecurities. I still cringe and squirm whenever I remember one particularly dreadful moment. I was a terrified first grader on the drill field at an all-boys military day school. An upperclassman was reprimanding me for something, and I burst out in tears. Enraged, he leaned in until he was only inches from my face and screamed, “Don't cry!” His own face became beet red as he drove home the final nail, “Boys, don't cry!” I stifled the hurt, and it was many years later before I once again allowed myself to indulge in the healing release of a good cry.

As I continued my participation in the men's group, I heaved a sigh of relief as I realized *I am not alone in my struggles and insecurities. I'm not the only little boy going through life in the body of an adult male but bearing the wounds of my childhood. And although the sources of our wounds are unique to each man, there is a common theme that runs through our collective stories. I have something in common with each of these other men. We have been shamed, humiliated, and told that we are unworthy of love or not good enough in some way. I'm not the only one who grew up in a household where love is conditional. Sadly, we have all been beaten, molested, or abandoned in some way—physically, emotionally, psychologically, or all of the above.*

And yet, by opening up and becoming vulnerable, sharing my stories, and reaching out and touching other men in the group—with my words, heart, or hands—I learned I could and do help others heal as I heal myself. *I'm not helpless!* I exclaimed to myself one day. *I am helpful! I can safely let go of my old stories, in which I am the victim, and write a new story for myself.*

In my new story, I am strong, courageous, wise, kind, gentle, and loving. In my new story, I give myself permission to experience all my emotions—joy, sorrow, anger, love—without shame and without fear that I will die (in a figurative sense) if I go there. In my new story, I am not broken. Instead, I am good enough.

I became intrigued by some new questions as I witnessed my own growth and healing and that of the other men in the group. *We are smart, sensitive, well-intentioned men. We've come of age during the rise of women's liberation and the feminist movement. We know, or think we know, what we should not say, do, or touch. But too often, we seem lost when it comes to taking our rightful place as partners, brothers, fathers, sons, or leaders in our community.*

I began to explore a number of interesting and challenging questions about myself. *Who am I as a man? What is masculinity, and how do I express that power in a positive, constructive, and loving manner? How can I more fully show up as a man for myself, my wife and children, and my community?*

This exploration is still very much a work in process. My answer so far has been that *I am a true man who is kind, honest, and loving, a man who keeps his word, and a man who lives a life of integrity in which I am helpful to myself, my loved ones, my community, and all of Planet Earth.*

I believe it's time for men to step up, do their inner work, and step boldly into an awareness of our inherent strength and magnificence as Divine beings currently in a male body. It's time for us to serve ourselves, our partners, and the world as authentic men. This belief inspired me to create the Authentic Man Project as a vehicle to continue my own growth and expansion and a means by which I support other men, including David, in transforming their lives. I find meaning, fulfillment, and purpose in my life as I share my stories, my journey, and my experience with fellow men who are ready to unlearn old, unhealthy beliefs and patterns, step out of self-destructive behaviors and dysfunctional relationships and replace them with a positive self-image, inner peace, fulfillment, and healthy relationships.

The journey that began at age 28—now 40 years ago—continues. I may have mastered skills to a certain extent and gained some insight into the questions described above, yet I remain a work-in-progress and will be just that for the remainder of my life. At the same time, I now experience profound joy, satisfaction, and fulfillment whenever I have the opportunity to use my skills and experience to support others—men and women—on their own journeys of transformation and transcendence.

One more key ingredient in my transformation was meeting Ellen shortly after I moved to Phoenix. Ellen is unlike any of the women that I'd previously chosen as a mate. Heck, Ellen is unlike any other woman, period! We've created a wonderful relationship for over 28 years now. We are friends, lovers, and partners. We make an effort to communicate well and lovingly. We're grateful for one another, and we don't take each other for granted.

Ellen supported me in reaching out to my son and daughter after a 20-year separation. Thankfully, they welcomed the opportunity to reconnect. We've enjoyed a wonderful, close, and loving relationship over the last 18 years, and we just keep getting closer and closer. Best of all, this connection has added two beautiful granddaughters to Ellen and my lives!

I've enjoyed many successes over the years, but my transcendence to become the man my children would want to know as their father is by far my greatest success story.

I leave you with this thought: If I can do it, you can do it! *You* can transform your life, transcend whatever challenges you face and, with

Spirit's guidance and support, manifest what your heart desires. In my work as a coach, healer, minister, and guide, I've found that each of us already has the answers we seek. We just need the right question.

I would welcome the opportunity to speak with you and explore whether and how I might be able to support you on your magnificent journey. Perhaps I'll have just the right question for you, as I've had for David and many others!

May you be blessed always, and in all ways.



Jere Friedman, J.D., M.A., CMMI, is an employee of the Universe—*with full benefits!* Jere holds a master's degree in Spiritual Psychology and uses that training, along with other skills and life experience, in his work as a soul-centered coach, gongmaster, certified meditation and mindfulness instructor, certified breathwork healer, minister, and practicing attorney.

Jere's life work is to contribute to the evolution of consciousness on Planet Earth by supporting others in finding their own way to joy, fulfillment, and inner peace. Jere is available for one-on-one and group coaching. He also facilitates classes, workshops, and retreats and does public speaking for the general public as well as in professional and corporate settings. Topics include spirituality, Spiritual Psychology, meditation and mindfulness, conscious leadership, reclaiming your life from burnout, and many others. Jere also leads The Authentic Man Project, which consists of various programs, mastermind groups, weekend retreats, and group or one-on-one coaching designed to create a safe environment in which men can learn and integrate more authentic ways of expressing their masculinity in today's world.

Jere also regularly facilitates public and private gongbaths and sound healing sessions, Gong and Breathwork Healing Journeys, and Cacao and Gongbath Ceremonies. Playing gongs allows Jere's Inner Child to come out to play and teaches him to be present and focused in the moment.

Jere has personally experienced the transformational rewards of reduced stress, increased inner peace and calm, enhanced relationships, improved focus and efficiency, heightened intuition, and living a more authentic life that becomes available when a person makes a commitment to himself or herself to reclaim his or her birthright. Ask Jere—he'll show you how easy it is to claim these benefits for yourself!

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