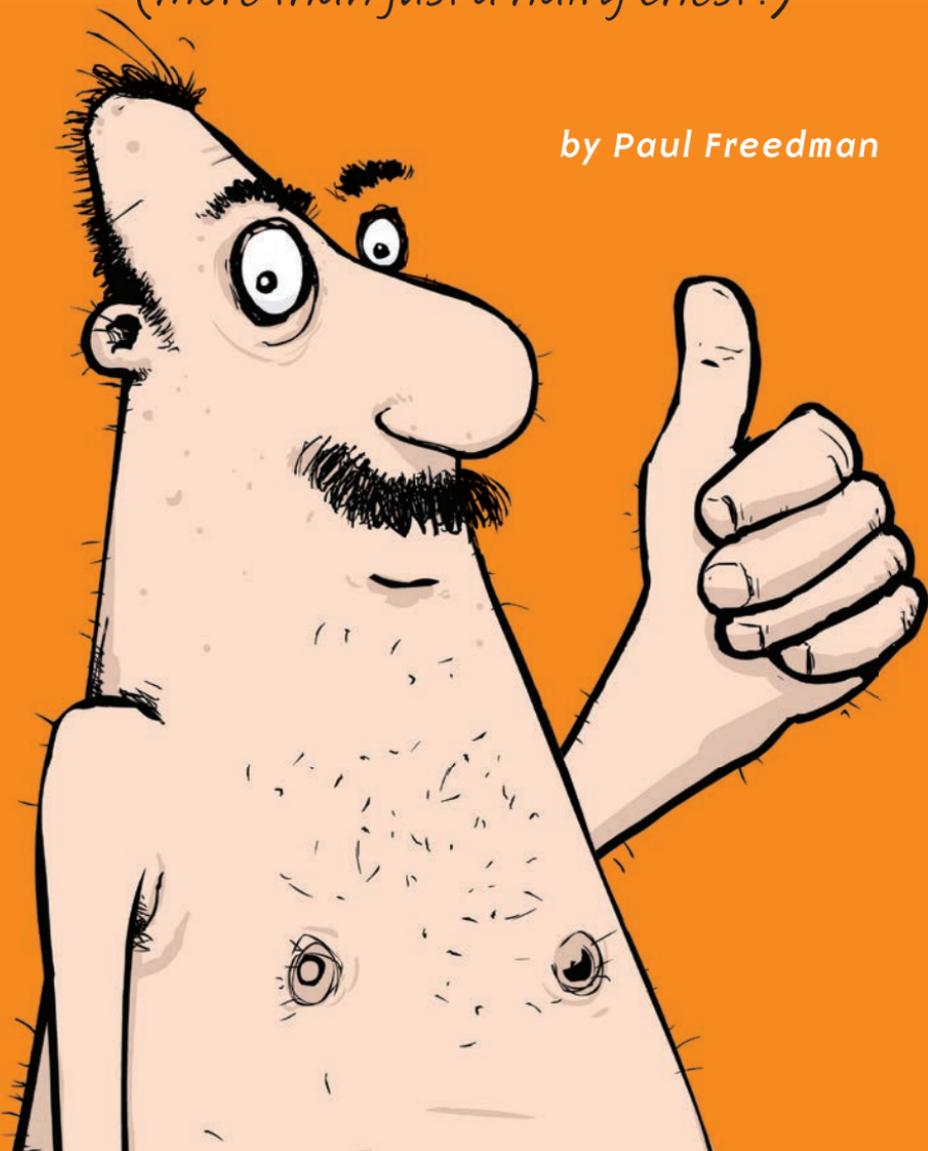


# MANHOOD

*(more than just a hairy chest?)*

*by Paul Freedman*



## A CONVERSATION WITH STEVE BIDDULPH



Some 16 years ago an Aussie bloke called Steve Biddulph stuck his head above the parapet with a book called, of all things, *Manhood*. Steve wasn't unknown. His parenting book, *The Secret of Happy Children*, had sold half a million copies. But *manhood*? What would a parenting counsellor know about that?

Everyone knew what 'men' were, surely? Of course they did! And 'manhood' was all about hairy chests and war heroes, wasn't it? But Steve Biddulph suggested we'd got it wrong. Men, he claimed, needed to get a life. Being male wasn't really about that macho stuff, and men were doing it hard. Boys, too, were in trouble, with few good role models, and little or no help negotiating the tricky transition from boyhood to manhood. The book became an instant best-seller. And Steve soon found himself conducting standing-room-only seminars – and, later, publishing a string of equally popular books about raising boys, raising girls, and raising babies. (We're still waiting for *Raising Rotweilers!*)

Grapevine talked with Steve back then in a 'manhood' interview that generated lots of feedback. But when, just recently, we heard that he'd revisited and rewritten his book ... we hurried to track him down and ask him "What's new?"

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**STEVE BIDDULPH:** Well, if I had to sum it all up I'd say there's been a generational change. Most people can see that men are different from their father's generation (and there's science to prove it!) For example, on average fathers now are spending 300% more time on parenting than they did back in the 1980s.

All over the developed world people are noticing it.

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### HOMEGROWN DADS

*You see dads wheeling prams now as a matter of course ... capably handling*

*toddlers ... really involved in the everyday parenting of their children ... and doing lots of leisure things with them. All that was quite rare and exceptional in the recent past.*

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A dad's job back then was to get out and make a living – and *mum* did the hands-on stuff with the kids. Whereas men, these days, no longer feel ashamed of pushing a pram.

But men aren't just parenting more – they're also finding better friendships, freer lives, more space for self-expression,

more soul-time. Instead of being money-making robots all their lives.

**GRAPEVINE:** So are men now completely out of the woods?

**STEVE:** No. Men still have by far the highest suicide rates, imprisonment rates, and accident rates. Every parent of a teenage boy knows that chilling worry about whether he'll come home safe. But the figures are improving!

There was a peak of what you might call 'disconnected men' – the men who fought in World War II. And men of our generation (the 40 to 60-year-olds of today) probably got less fathering than any other generation. But perhaps that very thing made us determined to do better.

Today, I think – I really hope – we've turned a corner. Masculinity is sort of like a river – the river flows into us, and we flow it on into our children. Neuroscience suggests that role-modelling is very much wired into us. There are things called 'mirror neurons' – and they map into our body what we see someone else doing. If, for example, we're watching someone play tennis, our mirror neurons are firing off within us, sending messages to our muscles as if *we* were playing tennis too ... even though we're only watching it. Similarly, if we have a great sports teacher at school, or a wonderful English teacher, those mirror neurons help us take on the whole demeanour of that person.

(You see little children doing this when they take on Mum's or Dad's expressions – they'll put their teddy-bear to bed in just the way Mum puts them to bed.)

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### **THE MISSING LINK**

*But that broken chain of masculinity in the 20th century – when dads were*

*hardly more than a ghostly figure in the house at night time, or buried behind a newspaper, or not there at all – knocked out that role-modelling. Boys no longer knew how to 'do' male ...*

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Boys who hadn't seen a man's way of being patient – or being tender, or being angry without being frightening – just didn't know how to do that.

In the 60s we had to get women doctors and women professionals and women scientists to come to school – so that girls could learn that, yes, women could be and do those things. We role-model on people we perceive as being like us, and gender really comes into that.

When we don't have those role models, it leaves a vacuum. So many 14-year-old boys put on a sort of mask. They're aware, of course, that manhood is coming at them like a train, but they haven't got the software or the examples. So there's a cover-up thing that happens where the boys slam on this mask – and become the 'tough guy', or the 'cool dude', or the hard-working 'go-getter', or 'Mr Cheerful' ...

**GRAPEVINE:** Do they get a lot of ideas about those role-types from TV and movies?

**STEVE:** Oh, yes – very much so. And when a man's life goes wrong – a crisis happens, or marriage problems hit – the wife and children aren't happy sitting at the dinner table with a man in a mask. They need more than that.

The wife can find her man boring, not very sexy any more, not much of a companion. The kids feel like there's no longer a real person there. And even the man himself doesn't really know who he is or how he should be behaving.



**GRAPEVINE:** That tough-guy act – being staunch, never showing any fear, never crying – are those stereotypes for men still around?

**STEVE:** Sadly they're still very common, especially among blue-collar guys who struggle anyway with employment, at the bottom of the heap and feeling a bit useless. We're living in a society where you really get a kicking if you don't look tough. Tattoos, smoking, downing lots of alcohol ... the whole thing is part of the mask. (And, of course, plenty of corporate guys wear those masks, too!)

But, you know, this isn't *all* bad. That 'staunchness' that men show – there's a time when it helps.

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### **TOUCHY-FEELY**

*If you're on Omaha Beach on D day with people dying and screaming all round you, you don't want your buddies to be 'getting in touch with their feelings'! And kids don't like it, either, if one of their parents, dad or mum, breaks down and can't cope.*

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So that staunchness can be a *positive* quality. But, if we don't watch out, it can become automatic – we forget to soften or let go, and we become like a robot.

**GRAPEVINE:** Soldiering must leave a lot of scars in men and make it hard to come home and be 'normal' – right?

**STEVE:** For sure! I was a Vietnam veterans' counsellor for quite a time. In fact, I've worked with soldiers from many wars now, and I don't think anyone who's been in combat is unharmed. It isn't possible to kill other people and see friends killed, and not be changed. But with help, that can make you more

heartfelt, more loving. It's a process that has to be passed through.

There's a place near Rotorua – a little out-of-the-way stream that goes over a waterfall. I went there with my son a few years ago. It was where Maori warriors of old would 'wash away' the blood of war ... a sacred place where, if there'd been fighting, they could go and wash in this place ... the women would sing to them to help get the killing, the blood-lust and the grief out of their souls.

The ancient Greeks had something very similar. These societies recognised that men have to heal from fighting – and be honoured for the cost this has had on their souls.

The 20th century saw a hundred million people killed in wars, and most men in the western world were somehow caught up in that. It's put this terrible wound through our fathers' generation.

**GRAPEVINE:** I guess the damage would range from a reluctance to talk about 'their war' right through to shell-shock and even madness?

**STEVE:** Yes – and it often left a very distorted emotional range. They either felt nothing or they'd go volcanic. It was very frightening for their families.

**GRAPEVINE:** Let's talk about the relationship between boys and their fathers ...

**STEVE:** Well, the core of this is that a father is nearly always a boy's main link to maleness. That 'river' flows through him. But, sadly, therapists today find that only about one man in 10 is close to his dad – and three in 10 are *barely speaking!* So relationships between dads and sons are in bad shape.

Robert Bly calls this the "father wound" – and, when I bring this up in seminars,

people often start weeping. When people – men or women – look at their relationship with their dad, it's often a huge gaping wound in their life story. They desperately wanted their father's love, but it just never came through.

Somewhere in our hearts we carry this idea of what a father is supposed to be like: strong and caring and safe and shielding and fun! Both men and women have this 'hole' in their heart waiting to be filled – and we measure our real father against the dream-father.

Now, if that dream-father never materialised, men especially believe the fault lies with them: "*There's something wrong with ME! I wasn't interesting enough or athletic enough or good enough at school to earn my dad's love!*" And so it becomes a bitterness.

**GRAPEVINE:** How did men respond to your book, *Manhood*?

**STEVE:** Many of them did a remarkable and heroic thing – they decided to go and find their dad. One in particular traced his dad all the way to England – went there and found his dad in a nursing home, dying.

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### JUST IN TIME

*He got there three weeks before the old man died. He got his dad out of the nursing home and tenderly looked after him, right up until the end. He hadn't seen his dad for 40 or 50 years. He wrote to me and thanked me "for giving me back my father" ...*

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That was probably the most moving letter I ever received.

Think what that would've been like for the father, too – to have your son show



up after all that time and care about you, look after you like that, and want to know your story! It would be the defining event of your life, surely – and a kind of redemption.

I'm really big on redemption. It's the primary human story: we screw up ... but sometimes we get another chance. And giving our father (and ourselves) that other chance can be very, very beneficial for men.

In dealing with all this stuff, I found myself asking, "What is a man? How is a man different from a boy?" And I came across the work of a Franciscan monk, Richard Rohr. It was like a lightning bolt for me. Rohr pointed out that there are psychological shifts – moments of perception – that have to happen to really get through that junction between boyhood and manhood.

**GRAPEVINE:** You mean, key ideas we need to take on board?

**STEVE:** That's right, yes. Rohr pins down five of them – and they're very counter to the cultural norms of today's consumer society:

1. You are going to die.
2. Life is hard.
3. You aren't really all that important.
4. Your life isn't just about you.
5. You are not in control of the outcome.

The pivotal one, I think, is that we're not in this world for ourselves (#4). It's an absolute re-shaping of how we understand our existence. When you're a boy (all these things apply to some extent to girls too, of course, but this one's especially true for boys) you're sure that life's all about you ... what adventures you can have, what fun you can have and what pleasures the world offers. You look at life as a present to unwrap. The "world's your

oyster” – waiting for you to suck out all the pleasure you can.

Now, there’s a whole psychology movement, believe it or not, that charts how ‘happy’ people are in various life situations. And a primary finding is that people who seek their own pleasure are actually not very happy.

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### MADE TO LAST?

*A new car generally makes you happy for about three days. Getting married makes you happy for about a week. None of those dreams that “so-and-so or such-and-such would really make me happy ...” actually work for very long if we get them.*

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What we need to learn is that *we’re not here for ourselves.*

I remember being taught this by a very old aboriginal man. His name was David Mowarjalai, a Ngarinyin elder from the Kimberley. He told us that in his culture, boys were specifically taught that the job of men is to look after the life around them – of kangaroos and trees, and the women and children.

He deeply believed that a man’s joy and fulfilment will come from doing whatever he can to ensure that other people thrive ... that the land stays in good shape ... that there’s plenty to eat ... that there’s no fighting.

It’s seeing your children’s and grand-children’s and other people’s happiness. This is what puts a smile on your face ... and keeps it there!

Our culture promotes an infantile approach to happiness: buy this – get that – take a trip to here ... and you’ll be utterly happy! Our culture tells us “you

can have it all” – and “it’s all about you!” But actually, of course, it’s NOT! That’s what *toddlers* think. We need to grow up and understand those five home-truths.

The truly mature man understands that he’s *never* completely in control of his life – sometimes he has very, very little control indeed. Life can be *hard* – and we need to be told the truth about that.

**GRAPEVINE:** Society, of course, pushes the opposite view: it’s me-me-me! What’s that doing to our teenagers?

**STEVE:** It’s a recipe for catastrophe! Adolescence is a very dangerous passage for our young people. One-in-five young girls develops serious problems today – it usually starts around 14 when she gets into dangerous sex or binge drinking. And it’s just as dangerous for boys. If someone’s going to have a car-crash, do risky stuff, or get into trouble with bad company – it’s almost bound to happen between 14 and 20.

And, often, it’s because we adults aren’t doing our job properly.

**GRAPEVINE:** What about men in their relationships with women – are we seeing any changes?

**STEVE:** I think that’s improving. I have a friend who’s a very senior marriage counsellor, and he says that marriage counselling in the 80s and 90s was very difficult. When the couple came in, the man had no voice. The woman and the counsellor would have a long chat – they’d be totally on the same wavelength – and the man would sit there, unable to voice his world.

My friend told me: “What we’ve got to do is have men’s groups, and men’s books, and men’s retreats ... things that help men say what they’re thinking.” By listening to



other men, you recognize more of your inner world, and you can find words to express it. Suddenly you can express yourself in a way women can also understand.

Now today, I think we're seeing that happen to a greater and greater extent. We may not be totally out of the woods, us men, but things are moving in a better direction.

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### **ALIVE & KICKING**

*If you talk to women about what they look for in a man, surprisingly most want a man who doesn't just agree with them. They want men to be open about their feelings, more alive, more intense, but in a safe way – so their anger or sorrow or fear isn't turned into hurting people.*

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**GRAPEVINE:** Do men sometimes terrify women and kids by being loud and physical ... unable to control their reactions?

**STEVE:** Yes. Even with my own kids, I had to realise that I could be way too loud. There's research that shows that girls are really bothered by loud voices (their hearing is more acute than male hearing!) So it's extremely important that dads always act and speak gently. Often we think we're just being firm – making our point – but there's a definite physical menace in men who are loud, angry and not on top of their emotions.

Someone put it like this: children's doors open inwards. They can't "close the door" of their world. Anyone who wants to can just kick that door down. And children who experience that can never feel completely safe.

So men need to learn how to restrain that energy and power. When men play rough-and-tumble with their kids (and that's a very helpful thing, exciting and fun if it's done right), Dad has to know how to contain it – when to put on the brakes – so the child feels exhilarated by Dad's energy, but still safe.

Boys actually learn how to be safe, from these roughhouse games with their dad!

**GRAPEVINE:** What about the so-called 'men's movement' – is it helping blokes to be better blokes?

**STEVE:** When people talk of the men's movement (or the women's movement, too), there's a depressing tendency to marginalise it. They portray the women's movement as women wearing overalls and burning their bras – or the men's movement as guys banging drums in the forest.

Now a 'movement' isn't that – it's an outbreak of common sense! It's something that everybody suddenly grasps and moves forward with. The women's movement was marked by a time when everybody suddenly realised that *"Of course we should pay women the same as men! Of course our daughters can be doctors and airline pilots as well as mothers and nurses!"*

The men's movement isn't those little fringe phenomena (even though some of those are very healthy). Rather, it's the fact that your average 28-year-old dad today just automatically assumes that he'll be at the birth ... and wants to change nappies ... and nothing's going to stop him from playing with his kids and bonding with them. That he has a spirit and a creative side ... and can make real friends and have his own life, not be just a walking wallet until the day he dies.

That's the *real* men's movement, throughout the western world – and it marks a great shift from one generation to the next.

**GRAPEVINE:** Something else we're starting to see is households where the dad not only looks after the kids at least 50% of the time – but he's the main stay-at-home parent, with the woman earning the income. Another good sign of change?

**STEVE:** Absolutely! When I started doing parenting talks 30 years ago now, it was funny. You'd get 50 women show up and one man – if you were lucky! Now we get 500 men and 500 women. You have to be as old as me to realise what a revolution this is.

But it doesn't come through as much

in the media as it should, sadly. They still portray men as hopeless and dumb (exactly as they did *women* in the 1950s)

**GRAPEVINE:** You believe a man's work – his vocation – is terrifically important to his self-image and well-being don't you?

**STEVE:** True. The work we choose to do can be either the source of terrible damage to us, as men, or huge satisfaction. If we do a job that we don't care about – have no passion for – if it's just to pay the bills and allow us a little bit of life around the margins, that can destroy us.

If you want the acid test about your job, ask yourself: Would you still do your job if nobody paid you? Or would you never go anywhere near 'work' ever again in your life?

**GRAPEVINE:** If you had to answer, "No, *I'm only here because I've got kids to feed, new school uniforms to pay for, and so on ...*" what's that doing to you?

**STEVE:** It's pretty clear that it's doing you harm. Now, I don't know how we solve it. It may be that we have to find activities or involvements that restore some soul, some creativity – volunteering or being part of community. But the corporate world – 'the system' – always tries to enslave us.

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### **GOTTA FIGHT BACK**

*The question we have to ask is: what are the shackles that hold us? Often it's consumerism. We have something like four times the spending power that families did in the 1950s – but, in spite of this, we generally work longer hours and we feel less happy.*

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Happiness studies show a peak in the 1950s. That was the happiest decade of

the 20th century ... and we've been going down ever since.

Now if you were alive then and can remember them, the 1950s weren't all that great. The commonest drug back then was *Valium* – one-in-three women took it. Yet even so, figures suggest it was the happiest time we've known. What does that say?

If the shackles on you are there because you feel you've just got to have a five-bedroom house, two cars and holidays abroad ... if you're chained to those consumerist goals, perhaps you need to look at the equation again. Some of the goals we have that make us slaves are goals we can change. Lots of people today are starting to walk away from that mindset – not the majority, yet, but encouraging numbers.

**GRAPEVINE:** What's your message, then, to guys today who're wondering what it mean to be a man – what it's really all about at a deep level? After all the thinking and writing you've done on it, what do you think is the essence of manhood?

**STEVE:** The answer to that is *inside you!* Nobody else can tell you how to be a man. There isn't a prescription or an official

'right way' to do it. However, if you bounce off other men and hang around other men you admire, your maleness will start to resonate – but it'll still be 'you'.

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### TWENTY-THIRTEEN?

*In the 50s everyone knew exactly what a man was – he was John Wayne. In the 60s it was 'the sensitive new age guy'. But that was still an act. We have to trust, man or woman, that our selfhood is not something we need to pretend or act out. It comes from inside.*

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You might be someone who takes on huge corporations and wrestles them to their knees – or you might be someone who grows roses.

Either way, that's fine.

What's important is that you are YOU! 🌸

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FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT STEVE BIDDULPH, HIS RESOURCES AND IDEAS, VISIT [WWW.STEVEBIDDULPH.COM](http://WWW.STEVEBIDDULPH.COM).

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Thanks so much – John Cooney (founder/editor)

