

***Meeting Boys' Deepest Needs:  
Ten Changes We Need to Make as  
We Try to Help Boys Grow Spiritually***

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Let me give my talk a slightly more precise title: Meeting Boys' Deepest Needs. Ten Changes We Need to Make as We Try to Help Boys Grow Spiritually.

Two caveats at the outset. First, I am an American, and I unconsciously share the well-known insularity and limitations of being an American. Second – and obviously – I speak as a Christian, even though my deepest spiritual conversations during the past 15 years have been with a Hindu graduate of my school. Though I speak as an American and as a Christian, I hope you will find it possible to translate what I have to say into your own national and spiritual context.

Those of you who have seen the film *City Slickers* and will remember how Mitch Robbins addresses his children: Value this time in your life, kids, because this is the time in your life when you still have choices, and it goes by so quickly. When you're a teenager, you think you can do anything, and you do. Your twenties are a blur. Your thirties, you raise your family, and you make a little money, and you think to yourself, "What happened to my twenties?" Your forties, you grow a little pot belly, you grow another chin. The music starts to get too loud and one of your old girlfriends from high school becomes a grandmother. Your fifties, you have a minor surgery. You'll call it a procedure, but it's a surgery. Your sixties, you have a major surgery, the music is still too loud but it doesn't matter because you can't hear it any[more]. Seventies, you and your wife retire to Fort Lauderdale, you start eating [breakfast the night before, lunch around ten, and supper at two]. And you spend most of your time wandering around malls looking for the ultimate in soft yogurt and muttering, "How come the kids don't call?" By your eighties, you've had a major stroke, and you end up babbling to some Jamaican nurse who your wife can't stand but who you call mama. Any questions?

The first of what I propose as 10 necessary changes is this: If we want to help boys meet their deepest needs, their spiritual needs, we must stop *denying* and start *embracing* life's realities.

We expend an enormous amount of energy denying aging and death. When I was a boy in small-town Ohio, grandparents lived in our homes. We kids saw people get old and we saw people die. Today, we are terrified of our own aging, and we banish old people to elder-care facilities; we want to see as little as possible of old age. And you will all be excited to hear that in the U.S. people no longer die; they "pass away."

I arrived at Eton College in England for my second round as one of the chaplains on August 31, 2007. I had not been in my new flat for an hour when the phone rang. It was a housemaster: "You are our house chaplain," he announced. "Our house man has just died and I am hopeful

that you can conduct his funeral.” A few minutes later I walked over to visit the man’s widow. Three days later I did the funeral at the Slough Crematorium. The housemaster brought along to the funeral three of his senior boys – all strapping rugby players, each elegantly attired in a Savile Row suit. As I was giving the eulogy, I noticed that all three boys were crying. I assumed they had been close to Albie, and at the gathering afterwards, I said to one of them, “You must have known Albie well.” “No,” he said, in clipped Etonian English, “Hardly at all.” When I was doing my rounds at this boy’s house a week or so later, he said to me, “Sir, I hope you didn’t think I was rude, but the fact is none of us knew Albie more than to speak to. This probably seems odd to you, but we were upset because it suddenly hit us all for the first time that people actually die. It’s not like television or video games. Albie actually died. He’s dead.”

One night, when I was doing the rounds at another Eton house, I encountered a senior boy who had an Oxford application in his hand. “I see you’re applying to Oxford,” I said with my usual brilliance. He responded, “It’s funny that you’re *here* tonight, because I need a chaplain. I am having an existential crisis. I have just realized that life is meaningless. I worked really hard at my prep school so I could get into Eton. I’ve worked really hard here at Eton so I could get into Oxford. And I suddenly realize that, if I get into Oxford, I will work really hard there, so I can get a good job, in which I’ll work really hard so I can get a better job, in which I’ll work really hard so I can get an even better job, so I can be rich and die.”

The first change we must make, if we intend to meet boys’ deepest needs, is to stop denying the only certain truth of human existence: the reality of death. A life shaped without embracing that reality is hollow.

Necessary change #2. We need to move away from the lie that getting things is what brings happiness, that getting things is what brings fulfillment in life.

Though the economic slump made this year an exception, in any normal year about 250 of Yale’s top graduates go to New York City to work in investment banks and consulting firms – to “work in money,” as they say. Over the past few decades, the brightest and best graduates of our nation’s most prestigious universities have found it impossible to resist the Big Apple’s seductive financial bribes – the vast salaries and bonuses offered by Wall Street.

Over the past 35 years, I’ve had many a conversation with these super-successful young people – particularly young men -- who after a few years in these lucrative jobs, begin to ask, “What’s so great about this life?”, “Why did I want this so much?”

When I was a newly ordained 24-year-old priest, I was assigned to one of the richest parishes in the country, and I said to the rector, “These people don’t need God. They have swimming pools, tennis courts, multiple cars.” The rector, a wise man, said, “These people you think have everything may well be, in all important ways, the poorest people you will ever work with,” and I discovered in my seven years there that their financial riches did not bring them happiness. For the past 34 years, living in Boston, I have been helping out in a so-called slum parish, and I would have to say that the people of that parish are, on the whole, happier than the affluent suburbanites I worked with in Cleveland.

American boys – like the Eton boy I just mentioned -- are indoctrinated from childhood that happiness is assured if you get into one of the great prestigious universities. But there is mounting evidence that those who win the glittering prize of admission to Harvard and Stanford do not experience nirvana, do not become instantly or permanently happy. Three years ago, Harvard's former president Derek Bok returned for a year as acting president. A reporter asked him, "If you had to use a single word to characterize today's college students, what word would you choose?" He responded: "To me what characterizes students today is emptiness." Emptiness.

So we have to ask ourselves: Will getting stuff – getting money, getting success, getting pleasure – fill that emptiness, make us happy? Michael Jackson got all three – money, success, and pleasure. No one had more money, success, and pleasure. And yet he was, of all men, the most wretched.

Is it possible that a certain ancient teacher was right: That it is more blessed to give than to receive? That happiness comes from giving?

I used to be skeptical about the service trips our students made and continue to make to far-off places, building sewers in El Salvador, for example. Are these trips worth the money? But I am always astonished, when our students return, to hear how hard they labored, often in grueling conditions. Even they themselves are surprised at how hard they work – and their parents are incredulous. No fun-and-game activities are scheduled into these trips, yet somehow these kids return aglow about the experience. They not only have bonded with one another; they have experienced the greatest joy in life – the joy of giving – and, *mirabile dictu*, they have also had fun. They have discovered, in short, that it is more blessed to give than to receive.

Necessary Change #3. We need to move from a one-dimensional worldview to an awareness that there is Something Beyond. We need to acknowledge the universal human longing for Something More. The American writer John Updike observed that if we live imprisoned in a claustrophobic one-dimensional universe, where the only things that exist are what we can see, we confine ourselves to "a closed-in hell..."

People are breaking out of that one-dimensional universe. British atheist A.N. Wilson's book, "God's Funeral," was a best seller in 1999. He has recently announced that he has become a Christian. He recently remarked that atheists are like "people who have no ear for music or who have never been in love." [Timothy Larsen in *The Wall Street Journal*, May 29]

On June 14, *New York Times* columnist Michael Winerip wrote about an unchurched 13-year-old boy named Ryan Sweeney who – out of the blue – asked his irreligious parents to take him to church. The stunned parents reluctantly agreed. "As the weekend approached, the father hoped that the son might lose momentum. But that Sunday, Mr. Sweeney saw a vision almost as miraculous as a statue of the Virgin Mother weeping real tears: [his] 13-year-old boy who got up on his own at 8 a.m., put on a shirt with a collar, brushed his hair and was ready for church." Now months later, Mr. Sweeney says, "I've come to look forward to Sunday mornings.... I just feel a little reluctant to become a parishioner," he said. But every week that [reluctance] softens."

Ryan Sweeney is not an anomaly. The latest U.S. National Survey of Youth and Religion, published by Oxford University Press, shows that only 1.4% of U.S. teenagers are atheists and only 1.4% agnostics. 84% are sure of their belief in God, 12% are “unsure in their belief about God,” and, as I said, less than 3% are atheists or agnostics. [Christian Smith and Melinda Denton, *Soul Searching*, 41, 86] There is, in American youth, a deep longing for Something Beyond. Many of you will remember Harvard’s renowned chaplain, Peter Gomes, who spoke at our New York conference. Peter says that never in his 35 years at Harvard has there been anything like as much interest in religion as there is right now.

Writing in the May 2 *New York Times*, Charles Blow discussed the recent Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life. This study reveals the astonishing fact that the majority of children raised (like Ryan Sweeney) without any religious affiliation are choosing to join a religious group. “So what is the reason for this flight of the unchurched to churches?” he asks. One reason, of course, is that children rebel against their non-religious parents by becoming religious. But the overwhelming reason given by the young people in the study is that “their spiritual needs were not being met.” What does Blow deduce from all this: “We [humans] are more than cells, synapses, and sex drives. We are amazing, mysterious creatures forever in search of something greater than ourselves.” He quotes Dale McGowen, co-author of the new book on parenting: These converts “are not looking for a dogma or a doctrine, but for transcendence from the everyday.” They are trying to break out of a one-dimensional universe – they long for Transcendence, for Someone Beyond.

Without being consciously aware of it, boys experience this inner emptiness, this longing for Something More, even more than girls experience it. It is this inner emptiness, indeed, which makes boys five times as likely as girls to commit suicide.

The only thing that can ultimately satisfy this deep longing for Something Beyond is a relationship with God. That’s why Pascal said, “There is a God-shaped hole in our lives – and only God can fill it.”

The other day at lunch, a Yale professor said to me with great authority, “God only exists if I think he exists. I don’t think God exists; therefore He doesn’t exist.” I replied, “No. God exists, whether or not you or I experience God.” I was reminded of the story of the young American tourist visiting Florence. He spent a full 45 minutes at the Uffizi looking at the Donatellos and the Botticellis and the Raphaels. And when he came out after his full 45 minutes, he said, “I don’t see what’s so great about all that stuff.” A hundred years from now, long after this American tourist is in his grave, millions will still crowd the Uffizi to gaze at these enduring masterpieces. It is not the masterpieces that are on trial; it is the American tourist who is on trial. The masterpieces will continue to exist whether the American tourist perceives them or not.

When I was taken as a boy to hear the world-renowned Cleveland Orchestra under George Szell, I said to my mother, “I hate this music. This is your music. To me it’s just noise.” I knew what I liked – I liked Elvis Presley. But Beethoven is Beethoven, and Beethoven is not in the least affected by whether Tony Jarvis can “hear” him or whether Tony Jarvis likes him! Long after I am in my grave, millions will flock to hear orchestras play Beethoven. And the long-forgotten

Tony Jarvis will burn in hell. Do you ever wonder, like I do, why your mother didn't strangle you?

Most boys – even boys of no religious background – have some instinctive experience of God. I think of one particular instance of this because it was an informal, non-classroom occasion in one of my houses at Eton. The formal house gathering was breaking up, an older boy started asking me serious questions. To my surprise, ten or so boys stayed in the common room as he quizzed me. He asked me: “Do you really believe in prayer?” I responded, “Yes. I do. Prayer comes from the deepest recesses of our being. Real prayer,” I said, “is often desperate; when we pray we cry out our deepest needs and desires.” I then stupidly asked these guys if they understood what I meant and if they could share some experience of prayer from their own lives. Now these guys were not only boys, they were diffident, reserved British boys, Etonians, who do not talk easily about such matters. A terrible silence ensued. I kicked myself for getting myself up this tree, and I did what every artless teacher does and I restated the question about 27 different ways, each time to no response. The boys gazed fixedly at the floor. Then, out of the blue [There is a God!], a tall boy in the corner suddenly said with great dignity, “I pray all the time that my mother can stop drinking. She really wants to stop, she keeps promising me she'll stop, and she's tried so hard to stop. But she always slips back and crashes and burns. I just keep praying.” The whole room suddenly became electric and almost at once I received a cascade of responses: “My father has lost his job and he doesn't see how he can pay my fees next year at Eton. I really want to come back and I keep praying he finds a job.” Their testimonies were a thousand times more eloquent than anything I said. Prayer is one of the most natural and instinctive of human acts; in my experience the vast, vast majority of boys pray, though they rarely talk about it. Boys instinctively seek to break out of the one-dimensional universe; boys instinctively long for Someone Beyond.

Necessary Change #4. As boys seek to move beyond the “bleak desecralized landscape” of secularism to God, we must stop giving them baby food and start offering them a substantial meal.

And by a substantial meal, I do not mean comparative religions, or world religions, or whatever you want to call it. As I visit schools in my program at Yale, I have discovered that world religions is many a milquetoast headmaster's idea of a safe answer to “doing something spiritual.” “Give them all the religions, and then no one can say we're pushing any one.” These heads then bathe themselves in pluralistic, multicultural self-congratulation.

The study of world religions should certainly be in the curriculum of the modern global village school. But I always recall what a student said to me when I was teaching world religions years ago at a small college. She said, “This course isn't really religion; it's actually history and sociology.” A world religions course objectifies religion, makes religion something to be observed but not experienced. “This is Tuesday, it must be Buddhism.” My Hindu friend says it is like visiting a zoo: “Look at the nice Hindus, don't they do interesting things?”

Last summer at this conference, a teacher told me that the only religion her headmaster will allow her to teach is a course in world religions. Such a course, she said to me, has all the depth of a cocktail party. In most cases, and there are exceptions, very little spiritual sustenance is

provided in such a cocktail party course. Every religion is kept at a safe distance; it is analyzed, but not experienced. Such a course is not really a course in religion, and such a course does little or nothing to address the deepest questions boys are asking.

Boys are interested in whether life has any meaning, in whether there is any reason to get up in the morning. They want to know why they are exhausting themselves in the rat race to get into university in order to get a good job so they can be rich and die. They want to know if there is anything worth living – or dying – for. These existential questions are the questions that real religion courses should focus on and address.

Archbishop Robert Runcie, speaking to the Headmasters Conference in England, commented that “religion can only be experienced from the *inside* – the *sampling* mentality that underlies the ‘smorgasbord approach’ is no more appropriate to religious belief than [it is] to personal relationships.” We deepen our experience of God within a particular religion. Relationship – relationship with humans and relationship with God – requires profound encounter, all-encompassing commitment. It does not come from analytical standing-aside or from dabbling.

Necessary Change #5. We need to move from analysis to synthesis. We still cling to the world-view of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century Enlightenment. We still credulously labor under the faulty assumption that the highest form of mental activity is analysis. Despite the horrors of the past century – and the potential horrors that cloud our future – we cling to a naive trust in the infallibility of human reason. The 21<sup>st</sup> Century secularist goes on echoing the 18<sup>th</sup> Century shibboleth at “Man has come of age” and can banish superstitions such as religion.

But this 18<sup>th</sup> century world-view is no longer adequate for our time. We increasingly realize that we do not discover truth principally by analysis or by deconstruction. My own specialty is art history, and last summer I went again to Chartres Cathedral in France. For many years I have lectured on its great stained-glass windows. But you cannot discover the essence of a Chartres window by analysis: by tearing it down into all the small pieces of glass that make it up. You find out the essence – the beauty, the truth – of a window by looking at the whole window. A Chartres window is far, far greater than the sum of its parts. And our response to the glass at Chartres is not merely rational. We respond with our whole being, not just our minds. We are moved emotionally and spiritually – in the same way we are moved by a great piece of music.

A Chartres window – like great music -- calls us not to analysis but to surrender. Its beauty compels not just our minds but our whole being. Great art and music leave us in a state of ecstatic wonder. The experience of the Living God likewise compels awe and surrender.

Last Wednesday, when I arrived in Auckland from Los Angeles, I sat down at a bar and quietly asked if there was a New Zealand beer. “There is,” said one of the men, “and I am drinking it.” He then handed me his empty bottle of Steinlager. I jet-laggedly fondled the bottle, and the man finally said, “Look mate, if you want to find out what our beer tastes like don’t read the list of ingredients. For God’s sake, man, Taste it.” That, of course, is how you experience religion! You don’t observe it and analyze it, you drink it in, you taste it!

Our deepest loves are beyond reason, yet they are real and true and good. The heart has its reasons. The heart longs not to tear down and analyze, but to stand in awe, to appreciate, to enter into intimacy, to surrender.

Necessary change #6. We need to rid ourselves of the idea that the purpose of religion is comfort and peace. At the heart of all true religion is the concept of sacrifice – of costly self-giving. Real religion does not call us to a bland, syrupy, effete peace and tranquility. Real religion calls us to greatness, heroism, and self-sacrifice. I talked a minute ago about how fulfilled boys are by involvement in demanding service projects. But you see this daily in school by watching boys on a sports team. Team play involves many, many hours of drudgery in practice, and exhausting and painful commitment in games. Boys expect and want nothing less. It is the costly sacrifices they make on teams that give them, in the end, a tremendous sense of fulfillment. Boys likewise long for and respect a religion that calls them to something costly.

At the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of St. Paul's School, Harvard's great theologian Paul Tillich talked about how German boys in the 1930's flocked to Adolph Hitler because Hitler called them to a life of purpose and self-sacrifice, while the churches and schools offered them only a limp-wristed, flaccid, luke-warm, and watered-down Christianity that asked nothing of them.

Today in many of our church schools, I fear, boys often find the Christianity offered to them to be bland, syrupy, and effete. They do not hear the voice of a compelling Jesus saying, "Come and follow me! I am offering you the opportunity to do something great with your one and only life, to do something costly and dangerous and exciting."

A student of mine at Yale shared with me a story told by Professor Fred Craddock. One day at Princeton Craddock chanced to sit at lunch next to a female graduate student. He discovered that she was a Roman Catholic nun. "I was a buyer for Macy's in New York," she said. "I had a nice apartment and everything was going my way. In fact, I was engaged to be married. But about two months before the wedding, I had prayed, I had thought, I had prayed, I had thought. I called him. He came over and I gave him [back] the ring. He didn't understand, but he took the ring and he left." Sometime later she ran into the man on the New York subway. She was wearing her nun's habit, holding the strap, and she suddenly realized he was right in front of her. "Hello," she said. "Hello," he responded. Then they both cried and said goodbye again. Professor Craddock then asked the nun, "Does it still hurt?" She said, "Yes." When he told the story to his students, Craddock asked, "If it still hurts, why did she leave the man?" His answer: Because not everybody lives by the principle, "If it feels good, do it." [Original version in Fred Craddock, *Craddock Stories*, 90]

The Yale boy who told this story was deeply moved as he shared it with me. In response, I told him a story I had just read about a 19-year old boy named Ross McGinnis who grew up in Knox, Pennsylvania. In high school, Ross played basketball, loved cars, got mediocre marks, worked at McDonald's, and when he graduated, he enlisted in the army. At army boot camp, he was chiefly remembered for his hilarious impersonations; he was the only recruit who could make the drill sergeant laugh. Ross went to Iraq when he was still 18. He was a gunner in a humvee, and one day, after he had just turned 19, his humvee was escorting a 250-kilowatt generator that was being installed to provide more electricity for one of the neighborhoods of Baghdad. An

insurgent lobbed a grenade at the humvee and the grenade went down the gun hatch where four other soldiers were confined in a tiny space. Ross yelled “Grenade,” as it came flying at the humvee, and then, by army regulation, he should have jumped out of the humvee to save his life. But instead, Ross immediately jumped down inside the hatch, deliberately covered the grenade with his body, and was blown to bits, saving the lives of his four buddies.

Here’s what one of those four buddies – Ian Newland – said when Ross was posthumously awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor: “I should have died that day, [but Ross died for the four of us that we might live]. There isn’t a single day, a single hour goes by now that I don’t take in everything. The smell of my daughter’s hair. The smile my son gives me out of nowhere. The soft touch of my wife’s hand. Normally those are things that people might take for granted. I am able to appreciate these things all over again, every day, every hour, because of what Ross did.”

At age 19, Ross McGinnis had already decided, somehow, that there was something greater than getting stuff, that there was something greater than protecting himself, that there was something greater than his own wellbeing. At age 19, Ross McGinnis made a choice to lay down his life for his buddies. He deliberately chose death so that the others could have life. “Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.”

When the Jesus who said these words went up to the young men of Galilee and said, “Follow me,” he did not promise them a life of ease, of affluence, of self-indulgence. Jesus promised them a hard life of self-sacrifice. It is difficult to turn down ease and comfort and security. Caring about other people is exhausting, taking the time and effort to help people is costly. But Jesus promised them that that hard life – which in the end cost all but one of his disciples their lives – he promised that that hard life was the most fulfilling life -- the happiest life -- there could be.

The best way to address spiritual and ethical issues with boys is not through abstract study of concepts but through stories about people. Boys quickly tire of abstract discussion. But show them the great ancient or modern saints such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer or Anne Frank standing against Hitler, or Martin Luther King standing against racial injustice, or the boy who went belly down on a hand-grenade in Iraq. Such lives *incarnate* great principles of self-sacrifice and they grip and inspire boys.

Necessary change #7. We need to stop dumbing down religion in our schools. We need to stop making religion bland and inoffensive and boring. In America, we are now seeing some of our religious schools – in the name of inclusion – watering down the faith in the name of inclusion. As a result, they often have nothing left worth including people in.

It is a huge error to think that if your school is committed to a particular faith – Presbyterian like Lindisfarne or Catholic or Jewish – you are therefore being exclusivist. A Jewish friend of mine recently asked his rabbi to include a hymn at the funeral of his Jewish wife, a hymn she had loved as a girl at Northfield, a Christian school. I know two Roman Catholics who are devoted to the Quaker schools they attended. Whenever I asked our Muslim parents at Roxbury Latin why they sent their sons to a school that explicitly identified itself as “Judeo-Christian,” they always



gave the same reply, “We searched for a place where God was at the center of the school’s daily life. When we found Roxbury Latin, we knew it was the best place for our son.” When you are a Catholic or Jewish or Quaker School with integrity, you have something to include students in.

We founded a tuition-free school in my slum parish in Boston – Epiphany by name – for the poorest of the poor. We have a weekly Anglican Eucharist for the students. As it happens, there is not a single Anglican in the school, but it is thrilling to hear the Muslim, Catholic, and un-churched children offer up their concerns in prayer in the midst of this unadulterated Anglican Eucharist.

You cannot be inclusive, unless you have something to include people in.

Necessary Change #8. We must move from questions to answers. The Great Cliché of the past three decades has been: “It is more important to ask the right questions than to find the right answers.” Obviously asking the right questions is important. In my early years of teaching I started my senior English course with the three novels of Camus because they blew away a lot of misconceptions in boys’ minds. My headmaster, Rowland McKinley, called me in one day and asked, “Do you believe in God?” I thought this was a rather odd question to be asking me as I stood there in my clerical collar. “Well,” he said, “I am getting a lot of complaints from parents saying you are destroying their sons’ religious beliefs.” I explained what I was doing and he was fine. Obviously, I think asking the right questions is a good thing. But the purpose of asking questions is to find answers.

Teachers have an obligation to share the answers they have discovered on their own pilgrimages. I remember a boy at a school in Australia (where I was a guest teacher) erupting at the school’s chaplain – the chaplain was one of those “I don’t have any answers, only questions” types. The boy almost shouted, “Don’t you adults know anything? Don’t you have convictions on the important issues of the day? Don’t you care about anything more important than my tucking in my shirt? Tell us what you think, for God’s sake. We’re capable of sorting out what we hear.” When we as teachers offer our insights and answers we are not declaring ourselves to be all-wise or infallible. And we can always add, as I once heard the Archbishop of Canterbury add, “I could be wrong.” But boys want to see us as people with convictions, they want to know what values we live by.

Necessary Change #9. Boys don’t want to be coddled; they want to be challenged. They want the existential challenge of a religion that says there is purpose and meaning to life. They want something to live and even die for. And they want the ethical challenge that calls them to be better than they are. I was visiting an elementary school some time ago and the teacher had a poster in her class – the poster had a little girl on it and underneath it said: “I am perfect just the way I am.” What rubbish! I am all in favor of positive reinforcement, and I was touched recently at the funeral of a 28-year old graduate of my school, that the family had prominently displayed two letters of praise I had written to him as a boy. He had cherished and saved them. Positive reinforcement is highly desirable.

But boys also need correction. I could share with you a considerable number of failures in my career, but let me share with you one tactic that never failed. I used this tactic often, but one

brilliant boy in particular springs to mind. I told this boy that he was behaving like a jerk and that he had to start going out of his way not just to avoid being awful but he had also to start actively being nice. He responded, “But that’s not my real self. It would be hypocritical – even dishonest -- for me to change. It would not be the real me.” I replied, “The real you is awful. I don’t want the real you. From now on I want you to pretend you are kind and generous.” “But that’s not me,” he protested. I said, “I know it’s not you; that’s why I want you to put on an act. Fake it. Pretend you’re a good guy. Every day before you go home, you have to report to me something really nice you said or did to someone at school.” We reached the end of the first day. I said, “You can’t go home until you have done what I require.” He sat sulking outside my office. By supertime he said, “My mother is waiting for me outside.” I said, “You haven’t yet said or done something nice.” But aren’t you going home?” “Not until you do what I require.” “But everybody’s gone.” “Find a janitor,” I suggested. He did. The janitor gave him some erasers to clean, and I let him go. I required the boy to see me every day for five weeks, and you all know the end of this story. This boy discovered how much happier he was being kind, and he became one of the nicest kids in the school. This tactic never failed. Why are we so afraid to draw lines, to raise expectations? Boys may hate us at first, but, in the end, boys love us for it, admire us, name their children after us!

Necessary change #10. It is not about the subject we teach; it’s about us. Boys do not learn subjects. Boys learn teachers. They will forget most the stuff you teach them, but they won’t forget you – your stories, and the values you convey by the way you live. I always tell new headmasters, “The most important thing you do is to bend down and pick up trash when you see it on your campus. If you don’t, they won’t. If you do, they just might.” Boys notice every detail of our lives. Boys are dangerously observant spies.

Boys know if you care about them. I visited an Episcopal boys’ school recently and attended chapel. The service was a liturgical shambles. The chaplain’s sermon was atrocious. But every boy at that school likes this guy because they know he cares about them. I bet ten teachers said to me, “When alumni return, the first person they want to see is John.” This man of modest talent is a huge influence for good, a powerfully memorable person. All because they know he loves them.

Boys learn by what we do more than by what we say. St. Francis of Assisi instructed his followers to go out into the community and preach – and, if necessary, he said, when you preach, use words.

And here are my final words to you: When the Jesuits founded Nativity Prep for the poorest of the poor in Boston, I talked one afternoon with a boy at the school. I said, “How do you like it here?” The boy replied, “I never kneeled down before. Father Hearn showed me how to pray and told me I could be somebody. Now I want to be somebody.” One caring teacher can change everything. It is our own lives that best teach boys how to live the abundant life. That is an awesome responsibility – and it is the very heart of what makes teaching not a job but a divine vocation.