

## Jesse's Coming of Age

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“It all started with A Fine Young Man: What Parents, Mentors and Educators Can Do to Shape Adolescent Boys into Exceptional Men, by Michael Gurian. Jesse is certainly an exceptional man. Now 25, he is a loving, independent, bull-headed, son-of-a-gun ... and I guess I'm the gun. When Jesse was 12 this book jumped at me from the shelf. It is nothing about shaping these adolescent boys into the men we want them to be. It's all about allowing them to grow in love and giving fathers and mothers a well told physiological, psychological, and cultural context to help us understand what's happening. From another point of view I might say “to better understand what they're up against.”

I also recommend this book because having read it, there is no way the reader could conceive of a child's “Coming of Age” as a ceremony. It's a process. While this may seem obvious to process minded Quakers, one could very easily become ensnared in planning an event without taking the whole process into consideration. With this supreme caveat and out of the necessity imposed by time and space, I turn my attention to the event that unfolded for Jesse.

His 13<sup>th</sup> birthday fell in the month of March. Birthdays were often marked by ice cream and cake fueled young guys digging out tunnels in mounds of snow and attacking one another with intense yet joyful warrior passion. But those years were passed. What lay ahead was a mystery to us both. I'd forgotten, and he had yet to learn. In the preceding months I had read the Gurian book and determined that this time in Jesse's life called out for a milestone. Such a marker would be infused with import for this time, with a community expression of support for Jesse and confidence in his promise. It would be a celebration but also a charge. Somehow though, it needed to be a natural extension of our family life. If it felt forced, it would feel fake. In fact, it would be. And if teenagers as a group are known for any particular quality, acuity in crap detection is one.

**Planning the guest list.** Jesse was fortunate to have a number of men who were important to him as he grew up, and most lived nearby. He had a dad and a brother, Chris, seven years his senior. Two uncles, Doug, my bro who would have to travel seven hours to be present, and Chuck, my bro-in-law who also made his home in New Hampshire. Jesse had a best friend from the days before memory whose parents were almost a second home and family for Jesse; Steve, the second dad, was the one who first took Jesse to fish at the back ponds. Graham was a family friend, like an uncle to Jesse and member of Concord Meeting. Graham and family joined us for summer vacations and celebrations of all important events. It was Graham, seven years my senior, who taught me the value of these milestones and that it is our shared

lives in community that make them possible. There was “Uncle” Al, my cousin, as playful as a kid, for whom maintaining family connections was as natural as breathing. And Rich, First Day School teacher, and friend. Mild has we may have been, that was a whole ton of testosterone to assemble. With Jesse we made nine.

**Planning the date.** Getting nine of us together was going to be a challenge so advance planning became key. Unbeknownst to Jesse we set the date months in advance. The most practical time was in the summer, a time that would seem to work best for all and to get Chris home from college and Doug up from Pennsylvania. I had to give up on the idea of linking this with a birthday. The actual date was not as significant as this general time in Jesse’s life.

**Planning the focus.** We had something to say to Jesse. I had no clue what it would be. He needed to begin to prove himself a man. But how? What could have an element of fear of the unknown for Jesse? An element of mystery? Physical challenge? And yet be safe from my vantage point. How would we also ensure our time together would be of the highest quality and not devolve into platitudes, men one-upping one another, or worse yet, aimless grunting and belly scratching? First of all, this was a very cool group of guys. The answers to these questions lay in trusting that we, Jesse’s male mentors, would figure it out. It was our job to do what needed doing. By agreeing to show up we each acknowledged a responsibility to Jesse and that our lives were inextricably and inexplicably intertwined.

We were familiar with the woods and the mountains. In New Hampshire they are the backdrop to our lives. And so, it was that they naturally became the primary set in this play of three acts that arose with unexpected clarity.

**Act One - The Test.** Here’s how it played out. Jesse was told that a special event was planned for the day and to not make other plans. All would be revealed in due time. The day began early. Jesse and I were up at 6:00 and on the road to the White Mountains for the Liberty Spring Trail to climb Mount Liberty out of Franconia Notch. I did so with deep trepidation as the sky was heavy with low clouds and the forecast for the north country was iffy at best. It was about a 2000 foot ascent, very steep with granite boulders as stairs in many places. What Jesse did not know was that he was fully capable of making this climb independently. He was familiar with following trails. He has always been well in tune with his whereabouts and getting from point A to point B, whether in the city or in the woods.

Independently, and on a schedule beginning one half hour earlier, the other men headed out to the same location, and headed up the trail. At intervals along the way, one would drop off at a comfortable spot, to allow the others to move along and to await Jesse’s arrival. They were strung out, each as a pearl on the string. Each had taken time to consider what wisdom they felt they would want to share with Jesse. Of

course, each knew him well enough to know what he might be ready to hear given the circumstance of the moment. They also brought a token to give Jesse as a symbolic representation of their brief time together on the mountainside and, to an extent, their lives together. To this day I do not know what transpired in these conversations along the trail. They were private. Truth be told, I'll bet Jesse's memory of them is vague. No matter. For Jesse to have the specific words in their context is not the point. I have no doubt that the ultimate meaning of those conversations is firmly embedded in who Jesse is today.

As we locked up the car and shouldered our day packs, the air was chilly and moist. The sky offered just sufficient hope to press on. We hiked along a new stretch of trail before joining the Liberty Spring Trail, a stretch of the Appalachian Trail. Here New Hampshire offered up its unique challenges to the "through hikers" from Georgia. I had no doubt Jesse could find this trail junction and take the right trail, but I needed to be 100 per cent sure. At this junction I dropped my pack and told Jesse that I would not be accompanying him. This was a test. He was incredulous. He must have asked me the same questions four or five different ways punctuated with pauses and consternation. His assignment was to hike to the peak and back. There would be surprises and adventures on the way. Careful not to speak falsely I simply remained silent when necessary. Mostly I asked that he simply trust me. He was capable and all would be well. But that was it. After what seemed to me an eternity of doubt, but had to have been only a few short minutes, Jesse hiked off up the trail. He passed the test. In about 15 minutes I followed him up as stealthily as I could.

Imagine his surprise after 20 minutes to round a bend and encounter a familiar friend, Rich. What an amazing coincidence! What was he doing here? In their conversation Rich revealed nothing of what was to come. I so wished to be a fly on the wall, but this was not my time. Rich sent Jesse on his way. The plan was for Rich to await my arrival and together we would trace Jesse's steps up Mt. Liberty. As it turned out both Rich and Steve were unable to make the afternoon clear and had to hike down rather than up once Jesse had passed. It was their joy and honor to be involved to the extent they were able; and, so too, it was to Jesse's clear benefit. Had our planning lacked flexibility we would have missed out on important contributions.

Once a discernable pattern had emerged in Jesse's awareness, the initial fear and mystery must, necessarily, have given way to a growing sense of significance and depth. Eventually seven of us were assembled at the peak of Mt. Liberty. Huddled above tree line among ancient granite boulders and bedrock we paused not too long for a photo op. That photograph is among the most treasured possessions that I could count on one hand. A light but cold and wind driven sprinkle began so the band of brothers made its descent. The plan had been to spend some good time up there.

Back below tree line, not far at all below the peak, the AMC (Appalachian Mountain Club) maintained a campsite with platforms for tents under a hemlock canopy. There we came to the mutual decision that it would be safe to pause there for a meeting on one of the platforms.

**Act Two - Worship Sharing.** There we held what we Quakers know as worship sharing. Each in turn shared deeply from the heart. Why were we there? What did it mean for us? Who were we to Jesse? What could this time in Jesse's life mean for him? What lay ahead? What lay behind? There were strong pauses... no answering back... no "I was just thinkin'" statements. It was all honest, direct, and true as truth can be. We knew that we made an essential group. We understood that we would be there for Jesse and each other. For weddings. For funerals. Indeed, today we number only six from that photo, and a tear catches me unprepared.

**Act Three - Not Camping.** The intense rain held off until we were in vehicles headed for home, the kind of rain that the wipers can barely manage. Yet we were prepared to camp the night in the bottom of the Notch. Climbing down the mountainside small conversations in twos and threes arose and faded as is the way on the trail. We eyed the weather and considered our options. Nothing could be gained from huddling through a storm in separate tents. That's what the rest of the day promised. To everyone's great relief we chose to head home and do supper together at the homestead.

Ruth, Jesse's mom, answered the phone there. "Could I invite Sue, Steve's wife and Jesse's second mom, to help with supper?" Surprise. One of my guiding principles all along was that this was an exclusively male operation, and this request was not according to plan. From my time living in West Africa I had grown accustomed to the notion that we men had secrets to share with our young men, secrets that the women could never know. It really did not matter that I had no idea what those secrets were. But we all benefit from those conditions that force our egos into retreat; that cause us to reevaluate and face reality on the ground. In this case, it was reality at the other end of the phone line.

The rain caused us to plan on the fly and brought this experience into the fuller context of family and extended family, with female energy balancing male energy. I was so glad that Sue and Ruth could provide and be there for dinner. We had great conversations, and they added so much. Steve was able to make it back for dinner and storytelling, the main event of the evening. Jesse had the opportunity to recapitulate the day with others on his "most loved" list. Though not as I would have planned it, all fell into place as it needed to. We got into "Your awkward moment as a teenager." When we got to "Your first kiss" Ruth and Sue could see where this was headed and made their retreat citing "too much information." In fact they were deeply respectful of what was underway and needed no guidance from us. Years later

Jesse referred to this day as “that thing you made me do when I was 13.” I’m looking forward to sharing this writing with him and catching a glimpse of what it meant through the lens of a 25-year old.”

This piece was originally part of *Passages: A Guide to Developing a Coming-of-Age Program for Quaker Youth*, by Martha McManamy et al. Published by NEYM and included in our QREC online Resource Library.

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