

Stephen James | David Thomas

**HOW TO HIT A CURVE  
BALL  
GRILL THE PERFECT  
STEAK  
AND BECOME A REAL  
MAN**

learning what our fathers never taught us



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*How to Hit a Curveball, Grill the Perfect Steak, and Become a Real Man: Learning What Our Fathers Never Taught Us*

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“*Funny* in our day often means cynical. *Deep* often implies heavy and over my head. But Stephen James and David Thomas avoid those traps. They’re funny beyond words and deep with an honesty that touches the heart without being sentimental. I love listening to them. *How to Hit a Curveball* is wildly funny and immensely true to the core of what it means to be a man. Suffering is not an option, but how we engage our struggles will define the kind of men we become.”



**Dan B. Allender, Ph.D.**

president, Mars Hill Graduate School

author of *To Be Told* and *Leading with a Limp*

**TO OUR FATHERS**

---

Thomas Neely James Jr.  
and Monty Gene Thomas

**FOR OUR SONS**

---

Elijah, Henry, and Teddy James  
and Baker and Witt Thomas

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## *Acknowledgments*

Creating this book felt, at times, like being caught between a rock and a hard place. First, there was our writing deadline. The bulk of the manuscript was written during the summer months, sandwiched between May and September. It was kind of cramped. But the really tight spot was standing in the gap between our fathers and our sons. We're both fortunate to still have our fathers with us, and we are blessed to have sons of our own; yet it's an awkward place to be.

Much of who we are as men we can credit to our fathers. Much of who we long to be we can credit to our sons. In writing this book, we each gained a much deeper appreciation of our fathers' love, the struggle of being a man, and the challenge of raising boys. Thank you, Dads.

Our sons have exposed in us more than we ever could have imagined. More love, more passion, more fear, more futility, more incompetence, more hope, more faith, more laughs, more tears. You boys are already showing us glimpses of the great men you will one day become.

If anyone carried the burden of this book, it is our wives, not us. Heather and Connie, your support and permission (and sometimes sheer tolerance) of the writing process is humbling. Much of what we know of ourselves as men is directly related to what you have loved us into being. Our daughters, too, have revealed to us depths in our masculinity that we never knew existed—things like tenderness, wonder, stillness, and longing.

We also owe a debt of gratitude to our two agents, Matt Baugher and Greg Daniel. You are each wise men who serve and lead with humility and vision. Thank you both for sharing this burden with us.

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Last, and certainly most importantly, we thank God. As men, we are continually awed and grateful that he has given us a platform to speak to his miraculous story. It is our prayer that he would continue to keep us humble and meet us on our journey toward authentic manhood.

## If

*Rudyard Kipling*

If you can keep your head when all about you  
Are losing theirs and blaming it on you;  
If you can trust yourself when all men doubt you,  
But make allowance for their doubting too;  
If you can wait and not be tired by waiting,  
Or being lied about, don't deal in lies,  
Or being hated, don't give way to hating,  
And yet don't look too good, nor talk too wise:

If you can dream—and not make dreams your master;  
If you can think—and not make thoughts your aim;  
If you can meet with Triumph and Disaster  
And treat those two imposters just the same;  
If you can bear to hear the truth you've spoken  
Twisted by knaves to make a trap for fools,  
Or watch the things you gave your life to, broken,  
And stoop and build 'em up with worn-out tools;

If you can make one heap of all your winnings  
And risk it on one turn of pitch-and-toss,  
And lose, and start again at your beginnings  
And never breathe a word about your loss;  
If you can force your heart and nerve and sinew  
To serve your turn long after they are gone,  
And so hold on when there is nothing in you  
Except the Will which says to them: "Hold on!"

If you can talk with crowds and keep your virtue,  
Or walk with kings—nor lose the common touch,  
If neither foes nor loving friends can hurt you,  
If all men count with you, but none too much;  
If you can fill the unforgiving minute  
With sixty seconds' worth of distance run,  
Yours is the Earth and everything that's in it,  
And—which is more—you'll be a Man, my son!

## INTRODUCTION

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Where I (Stephen) grew up, seventh grade was the first year we had our own lockers. They were the long, skinny kind and the color of urine.

That year, my locker was in the big hall that ran in front of the central office. It was like Main Street. The entrance to the school was right around the corner, and unless you were headed to Shop or P.E., you were walking right by my locker. Between classes, I went to my locker to swap out books, but it was really more of an opportunity to talk with friends and act goofy with the girls than anything else.

One day in February, a rumor started circulating that a girl named Jenny “liked” me and wanted to “go together.” This news was both exciting and terrifying. I had never *gone* with anybody—heck, the only time I had even called a girl was once on an overnight at a friend’s house, when we had prank-called a girl and hung up when she answered. I had heard from some of the more experienced guys that “going together” meant



things like holding hands and kissing. And some guys even talked about getting to “second base,” which I figured out had something to do with a different kind of curve than the ones I’d seen on a baseball field. This Jenny was really cute and was known to be somewhat aggressive in terms of “base running,” which only served to heighten my anxiety.

By lunchtime, the gossip had spread through my social circle, and I was on the lookout for Jenny. I didn’t know what I was going to say if I saw her, but I knew I had better think of something.

So there I was at my locker, swapping out books, when a friend of mine nudged me and said, “Hey, dude, here she comes.” Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Jenny coming down the hall toward me, her shoulder-length blonde hair swaying from side to side in rhythm with her steps. I freaked out in fear and stared straight into my locker, hoping that she would just pass on by.

It is worth noting that in seventh grade I really wasn’t very cool. I had the physique of a middle-aged man and the fashion sense of, well, a seventh-grade boy. Back then, I still feathered my hair back each morning with pride (kind of like Scott Baio on *Joanie Loves Chachi*—not at all like the more preppy Scott Baio on *Charles in Charge*), and on this particular day I was wearing a pale-gray Kmart sweatsuit with deep pockets.

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I swear the hall grew quiet as Jenny drew closer. Everyone was waiting to see what would happen. I stood there, holding my books and praying, “God, please let this get over with quickly.”

Then it happened.

I felt a tug at my pants, and the next thing I knew, I was blowing in the wind—all of me.

You see, in an attempt to embarrass me by pulling down my sweatpants, Jenny had *also* gotten ahold of my tighty-whities and exposed me, in all my prepubescent glory, to the entire school.

For an instant, I stood frozen, with my arms full of books, my heart pounding in shame, and a cold breeze blowing between my legs. Then I dropped the books and grabbed at my pants, but not before I had earned a list of nicknames, including Winnie the Pooh, Mooner, Crack Attack, Chief Pale Cheeks, and the one that would stick with me the rest of the year: Flash. It stuck so well that people even signed my yearbook “To Flash” later that spring when school let out.

Funny now, but it wasn’t funny then. It was one of those moments where I learned a tough lesson about how painfully exposing life can be.

Sadly, the shame I felt that day is not terribly unique. What guy hasn’t been knocked around by life? What guy hasn’t been exposed as insufficient or inept?

Remember Little League? The evening breeze heavy with the scent of honeysuckle; the crowd of anxious parents cheering; the *ting* of aluminum bats; and the lump filling your throat as you dug into the batter's box, silently begging the pitcher, *Please, please don't throw me a curveball.*

Remember sneaking behind the bleachers with a *real* girl, a girl that smelled like green apples and roses; anxiously fumbling with your words and the awkward silences; leaning toward her, your eyes half-closed and your heart thumping, paralyzed with wonder at that first soft touch of her lips. Your heart enraptured with the delight of first love . . . until a few weeks later when she dumped you for the new kid in town.

And let's not forget car trouble. Driving down the road when your car starts sputtering, wheezing, and spewing. You coax it into the nearest service station, where a grease-stained guy named Bubba greets you, pops the hood, and smugly asks, "What seems to be the trouble?" And you have no idea.

### **Something's Starting to Stink**

Moments like these begin to stack up in a guy's life like manure in a horse stall. Let's be really honest here: No guy makes it past seventeen or eighteen without receiving his fair share of dings to his manhood—and that's

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if he's lucky. By the time most guys get their driver's license, they have already experienced enough emotional and spiritual fender benders that their hearts are dented and their self-image is scratched for years to come.

You know what we're talking about: parents divorcing, grandparents dying, being shamed by a coach or mentor, being rejected by a girl, humiliating yourself in front of a crowd, being betrayed by someone you trusted, or having your hopes and dreams evaporate like spilled gasoline.

Everybody gets kicked a few times in life. That's a given. The only question is *where* have you been kicked (teeth, guts, nuts, shins) and *who* did the kicking (friend, foe, family, God). Heartache is not terribly diverse, but it's certainly widespread. As counselors, we've heard thousands of sad stories from men. Every man loses his innocence at some point—some of us gradually, and some more suddenly.

Sadly, these assaults to the masculine heart result in far more than adolescent angst. When a guy's heart has been wounded, the results are significant: self-protection, distrust of others, suspicion of God, and a fervent reliance on the four horsemen of self-sufficiency: training, talent, willpower, and intellect.

Once wounded by life, most guys come to depend

far more deeply on their own skills, aptitudes, resolve, strength, and brains than they do on God. They build facades that hide the truth of who they really are. These facades come in all shapes, sizes, and combinations. They can be tough, cold, or calculating; childish, whimsical, or charming; powerful, aggressive, or assertive; pious, intellectual, or contemplative; conservative, radical, or compassionate. You get the idea. In short, we learn to fake it.

Life is painful. Though we all experience seasons of happiness, life in this world is mostly defined by loss, difficulty, and struggle. No matter our skill set, intellect, creativity, personality, or faithfulness, we cannot escape the heartache that comes with living in a wrecked world that is groaning to be repaired.<sup>1</sup> For men, this reality is uniquely hard to bear and can be even harder to articulate.

There is a myth that much of contemporary Christianity has bought into: If you *do* it right, *think* about it right, *pray* about it right, and *try* hard enough, then your life will be successful and you will be “blessed.” You know what? That’s really much more than a myth. It’s a propaganda campaign, a deception, straight from the pit of hell.

Unfortunately, men are especially susceptible to this line of heresy. Too often, in response to our heartache,

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self-doubt, or mistrust, we buy into a philosophy that suggests we can escape the pain, incompetence, and futility that is so common to life. It's tempting to adopt an attitude that says, "If we focus enough on our families, keep the right promises, and fill our toolboxes with the correct gear, then we, too, can win at work and at home." What guy doesn't love a quick fix? We're all about finding a definitive solution.

There are some very successful and popular Christian organizations (parachurch ministries, publishing houses, megachurches, and denominations) whose primary work is to sell this snake oil of self-performance. They spend much of their time promoting an ideology that says, "If you want to prosper and you want your life to turn out okay, then all you need is to do the *right* thing, the *right* way, at the *right* time." The problem with this way of thinking is that it is contrary to what the Bible teaches, and it doesn't square with the reality of life.

### **We're All Losers . . . and Winners**

Productivity and competency are not essential for living fully as a man. One treasured gift that authentic Christianity affords to guys who accept it is that we are free to live without weight and pressure. We don't have to try to earn our worth through what we make of our

lives. In fact, full living becomes possible only when we recognize our powerlessness and surrender to God. That's the threshold of freedom and the beginning of authentic manhood. If a man is fortunate enough to enter into reconciliation with God, he can be liberated from the prison of performance.<sup>2</sup>

Christian spirituality offers men a way out of the traps of relying on our abilities and accomplishments. Whether we are goofballs or sages, screwups or tycoons, bums or ne'er-do-wells. Whether we clear the bar or not, our manhood is determined by the content of our hearts, not the plaques on the wall, the size of our wallets, or even the goodness of our families.<sup>3</sup> Authentic manhood is about living from the heart with integrity, passion, and intimacy.

Any guy who has stayed awake for ten minutes in church could probably tell you that there is a big difference between knowing something in your head and having an experience in your heart that changes who you are.

What if being an authentic man has nothing to do with building a successful career, having a nice family, or mastering the mechanics of daily life? What if authenticity has far more to do with courageously tackling the deep questions of the heart, struggling with

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yourself and with God, and finding out who you are really made to be?

We guys have learned from an early age how to squash our hearts and hide who we really are. Yet we desperately want to be known. The trouble comes in that we're also afraid to reveal our hearts to those who might judge us or reject us. Erwin McManus articulates this well:

We're all struggling to figure ourselves out. We're afraid to expose our souls to those who might judge us, and at the same time, we desperately need help to guide us on this journey. If we're not careful, we might find ourselves with everything this world has to offer and later find we have lost ourselves in the clutter.<sup>4</sup>

We've gotten really good at endeavoring toward *mastery* as a way of escaping life's hard knocks and compensating for our inherent shortcomings.

But here's the truth: No matter what kind of home you've come from, there are things your father didn't teach you, lessons you didn't learn, and questions you never had answered. Whether your dad was an all-star



or a strikeout, one thing is for sure: He wasn't perfect. There were holes in his game. He didn't give you everything you needed.

### **Why This Book?**

So why another book for men? Good question. For me (David), the answer came on a Monday night when I was teaching a class I've offered for years called *Nurturing Boys*. The class is designed for parents, mentors, coaches, educators, or anybody who cares about boys. We spend three weeks wrestling with understanding boys: who they are, what they need, how they learn, and what they want. I address topics ranging from organized sports to wet dreams, video games to dating, academics to pornography, and everything in between.

In the class, I teach a section on what a boy needs from a mom and what a boy needs from a dad. In instructing fathers, one point of discussion is the importance of having an *ongoing* dialogue (not a onetime "birds and bees" talk) about development, sexuality, and the changes that take place for a young man during puberty. Every time I've taught this class over the past decade, every man in the room looks at me like I'm asking him to teach his son needlepoint while speaking Japanese. If it weren't so tragic to see their expressions, it would be comical. It's a room full of deer in the headlights.

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Where does their panic come from? As I've talked with these guys, I've learned that they all lack adequate role models in this area. They have no point of reference. I've yet to meet a man whose father had enough authentic conversations with him during his developmental years that he felt educated, informed, prepared, and confident about the changes to come. And because they have no personal experience on which to draw, the idea of engaging their own sons in this kind of dialogue feels like driving cross-country without a road map or a GPS. It just won't happen.

Usually, I attempt to defuse the panic with some humor. I say to the guys, "Well, obviously we all got the information somehow. We all managed to procreate, didn't we? We figured out that *this* part must fit inside *this* part." I typically find that most men came by the information through some risky means, or else they just stumbled into it when they got married. They either overheard some guys talking in the locker room (miseducation), discovered pornography (pollution), figured it all out through experimentation with themselves and with the opposite sex (trial and error), or some combination of the above. But more often than not, their fathers failed to initiate them into manhood with accurate information, useful instruction, or engaging leadership.

Even if you are one of the rare guys whose dad did try to instruct you, it's still likely he didn't give you all that you needed. He fell short of being perfect and was likely not as present as you needed him to be. Or he was, and then he wasn't.

I've heard stories ranging from that of a friend whose dad trapped him in the car on an out-of-town trip and forced him to sit in silence for five hours listening to cassette tapes about adolescence and sexuality, to a client whose mom showed him illustrations of erect penises and talked about how masturbation could cause him to develop permanent genital warts. (And then, when he came out of his room, his dad said, "So you got it now? You have any questions about all that stuff your mother just told ya?") These tragedies are only a couple of examples of guys who didn't get what they so desperately needed.

And learning about our bodies is just one small piece of it. There's so much more—from car care to dating to parenting to teamwork to spirituality to finances to you name it. No dad could give us everything we need. And even if he tried, he would likely step on our toes in the process. As dads now ourselves, we're already experiencing bumps in the road with our own sons. It's like the harder we try to get it right, the more we mess it up along the way.

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But that doesn't mean there's no hope. In fact, that's why we wrote this book. You see, even though we're all working with broken pieces (which is a product of the Fall, let alone our own family histories), we can come to grips with our brokenness and begin to be restored to what God designed for us to be.

### **Wanted: Instruction Manual for Life**

In our culture, most boys make the journey to manhood without a clear vision for what a man is designed to be. There are lessons and skills that we needed and never learned. As adults now, a lot of us have had to go looking for things to fill in the gaps. Sometimes we fill the gaps with good things. And sometimes we don't.

If your dad never gave you the information you needed, if you missed the instruction, if you've felt unprepared and incompetent at various points in your journey as a man—congratulations, you're normal. Every guy feels unequipped and underprepared at some level. It's not like there's an instruction manual with step-by-step procedures for every possible situation. In fact, what we really needed to learn from our fathers is how to recover when life throws us something unexpected. When we're sitting on the fastball and get the curve—or a knuckleball—instead. Part of what it

means to be a man is learning how to adapt and how to bring order out of chaos.

In the next seven chapters, we will talk to you honestly about what it means to be a man. We'll tell you some of the things your dad never told you—and maybe a few he did, and we'll share some things we've learned along the way. Even if your dad was incredible, even if he was well-intentioned and purposeful, he probably skipped over some information that would have proven useful to you in your journey of becoming a man.

This book is centered on seven core experiences that many guys face. By looking closer at these experiences, we will see how there is a deeper (and often humorous) reality at play. If men can discover more deeply the questions that stir in their hearts and then begin to address them, they can begin to be more invested in their passions, their families, their God, and their lives.

By inviting you to engage in the process and exploring some of the roadblocks we encounter along the way, we will address the basic issues that all men experience. In doing so, we hope you will begin to come to grips with your own story. And we hope that along the way you will find some other guys to share your stories with. (And if you are married we hope you will share them with your wife.) And if you have a son or know a son

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who needs a dad, we hope that you will share these stories with him, too. He needs to hear them as much as you need to tell them—especially the hard ones.

### **Who Wrote This Book**

First and foremost, we're guys who are on our own journeys. We know from our own experience that being a real man is easier said than done. Part of this book is us candidly revealing our own successes and failures as men, sons, and fathers. We are also therapists. Every day, we use our training and experiences to help men and boys, and the women who love them, journey further into their own hearts so that they can be more of who they were made by God to be.

We'll also speak of places where our dads disappointed us and failed to give us some of the information we so desperately needed and desired. Equally, we will speak to some of the extraordinary things they offered to us.

So, we'll speak out of our own experience as men, fathers, sons, husbands, and therapists. We'll offer up some practical (and sometimes humorous) topics ranging from grilling a perfect steak to negotiating a raise, skinning a deer to perfecting the swan dive. There are sidebars throughout the book that offer instruction on some basic “man friendly” practices.

More importantly, we'll offer our two cents on some deeper topics like the art of authentic manhood, engaging the fairer sex, how to navigate male friendships, and the practice of leadership. Overall we have tried to bring an honest, entertaining, and helpful perspective that will illuminate the inner lives of men. So, head to the toilet (because that's where most men do their reading), and let's start the journey.

# How to Hit a Curveball

## *The Art of Authentic Manhood*

In the spring of 1984, I (Stephen) was a fifth grader, and I was not cool.

In fact, on the social hierarchy, I was somewhere just below average and just above dork. I wasn't shunned or disliked, but neither was I popular. I was mostly ignored. I was vanilla ice cream. Sure, everybody likes vanilla ice cream. It's just not what most people would pick given the choice at Baskin-Robbins.

I did not, in any way, enjoy fifth grade. Hindsight being what it is, I can see now that I did have some good times, but with all things being equal, for me fifth grade sucked like a Hoover.

Earlier that year, my family had moved from my middle-class boyhood home out by the airport to a house on a hill in an upscale suburb south of town. What was a great move for my family was a bad move for me. The transition was horrible—kind of like drinking orange juice after brushing your teeth.



We moved from a neighborhood where I had friends in almost every house to a subdivision with only two kids my age. One was a girl, and the other was a guy who had hit puberty somewhere around kindergarten. (I called him Man-boy, though not to his face.) When I met him, he was already almost six feet tall.

Needless to say, I had trouble making new friends. Being a redneck in a community of white collars didn't help, either. In a culture of BMWs and Mercedes, my family was a nice Buick, and I came fully loaded with bright orange hair parted down the middle and feathered back on the sides—that's right, a flaming butt cut. It was a tragic scene.

The one place where I did meet some kids with whom I was able to build friendships was through the local sports leagues. Team sports became my sanctuary from the loneliness, shame, and awkwardness of school. I played soccer in the fall, basketball in the winter, and soccer again in the early spring. Slowly, I began to make connections.

When soccer was finished that spring, the father of a kid from my team invited me to come out for the local baseball league. "Absolutely!" I loved baseball. I had started playing tee-ball when I was three or four and had progressed up through coach pitch. I wasn't half bad, either. I was a good little infielder and could

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be counted on to put the bat on the ball. So, on a cold Saturday in April, I showed up at the ballpark for tryouts, along with a few hundred other boys from four to fourteen.

At the tryouts, we each hit a few balls, fielded a few grounders, caught a few flies, and ran the bases, while a line of dads watched with clipboards and rated our performances so they would know where to put us in the draft. The soccer dad ended up picking me for his eleven- and twelve-year-old team, and I was the youngest player on the team.

The first practice went well. I was enthusiastic and a hard worker, and when the first scrimmage came around, I found myself playing second base and batting third.

Summer was just around the corner, I was playing baseball, I had made a few friends, and school was nearly over for the year. I was beginning to believe that fifth grade might turn out okay after all.

At the last practice before the first game, the coach handed out the uniforms. He gave them out by size, moving from largest to smallest. Being the youngest, I got my uniform last, and the wait about killed me. Those few minutes seemed like forever. Our uniforms were black and yellow, 100 percent polyester, with a silk-screen logo on the front (some insurance company,

if I remember). After some final instructions about the upcoming game and the opening-day ceremonies, I raced excitedly to my mother, who was waiting for me in the parking lot.

The moment I got home, I ran to my bedroom to put on the uniform—stirrup socks and all. As kids, we are really cool that way. Our hopes, passions, and dreams unregulated. Our hearts right up against our rib cages. As I got dressed, I thought about Mickey Mantle, my favorite baseball player. He was tough as nails—a real man’s man. His nickname said it all: Blood and Guts. *That’s me*, I said to myself. *Blood and Guts*.

Fully outfitted, I walked into the bathroom to check out my uniform. When I climbed up onto the toilet to get a full view of myself in the mirror, my heart dropped. The uniform was way too small. I looked ridiculous—more like Fat Elvis than Mean Mickey. “Guts” was right. My pants were way too tight, and the shirt hugged my prepubescent, pudgy stomach so that I looked like John Goodman at an all-you-can-eat buffet.

I pulled at my shirt, trying to stretch it out, but to my chagrin, I learned my first lesson about polyester: It ain’t cotton. In an instant, I went from sky-high to in the dumps. As I slinked down from the toilet, I tried to pep myself up. “You can still play baseball,” I told

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myself in a weak attempt to manufacture a morsel of self-esteem.

The first game came, and we were the home team. When we took the field for warm-ups, I jogged out to my position between first and second base. But I was so self-conscious about my uniform that I might as well have been naked. Once the game began, I loosened up. I got a couple of hits and fielded a few balls, and when the game was over, I walked off the field feeling okay about myself. For the next few games, things progressed well.

By the sixth game of the season, I had nearly forgotten about my uniform issue. I was playing great, and my team was doing well. On this particular evening, we were the away team, so we batted first. On the mound against us was Man-boy—the kid from my neighborhood—all six-feet-tall, hairy-lipped inch of him.

The first two batters went down on three pitches each. With two outs, I approached the plate, determined to get something going. I knocked the dirt off my cleats and looked up at Man-boy standing on the mound. He looked even bigger than usual. My courage and resolve vanished in an instant. I got the feeling I needed to pee.

I was pretty sure that everybody could tell I was scared. For sure my coach could tell, because he yelled,

“Time!” and called me over for a chat. We met about halfway between third and home. “Stephen,” he said sternly, “move back in the box, choke up a little on the bat, and wait on the fastball. Take a good, level swing.”

“Yes, sir,” I said, never taking my eyes off Man-boy. I made my way back to the plate, dug in my cleats, and got ready to hit. In a blur, the ball zoomed past me. I barely even saw it.

“Strike!” called the umpire.

I took a couple of practice swings. Man-boy went into his windup, reared back, and threw. Then I saw something amazing, something I had never seen before in my young baseball career. The ball started behind me, and then it came right at me. I turned my head, closed my eyes, and cringed before I heard the *pop* of the ball hitting the catcher’s mitt.

“Ball,” yelled the ump.

*What was that?* I was baffled. I was sure that pitch was going to hit me, but it hadn’t. Again, my coach called a time-out. Again, we met along the third-base line. “That last pitch was a curveball,” he said. “Don’t worry, son. Just watch the ball and take a good swing. If it’s another curve, don’t swing. He can’t throw it for a strike.”

## **HOW TO HIT A CURVEBALL**

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It's been said that the quickest way to get from point A to point B is a straight line. But somewhere along the way, baseball pitchers figured out that the quickest way to sit a batter down is by putting a little *bend* in the ball. A good curveball can make even the best hitter look silly if he's not expecting it. Mastering the art of hitting a curveball is one of those things that separate the men from the boys.

According to former big leaguer and coach Rob Ellis, who has put together several training videos, here's what Hank Aaron had to say about it: "I can wait on the curveball because I know the pitcher can't throw the fastball by me."

Well, that worked great for Hammerin' Hank, but what about the rest of us? If you want to hit a breaking ball, here are a few things to remember:

1. **READ THE SPIN.** This is easier said than done when the ball is coming at you at eighty-plus miles per hour, but the best hitters claim to be able to read the spin on a curveball and distinguish it from a fastball.
2. **LIGHTEN UP.** Use a bat that's light enough that you can get around on a pitch, even if you've been fooled.
3. **BE PATIENT.** Keep your weight back and wait as long as possible before swinging.
4. **READ THE BREAK.** If it starts low, let it go. If it starts to hang, give it a bang.

5. **GO THE OPPOSITE WAY.** Instead of trying to pull the ball, hit it to the opposite field. Right-handed batters facing a right-handed pitcher should try to hit a curveball to right field.
6. **PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT.** Visit the local batting cage for a couple of weeks. Work on your timing, patience, and swing.

## How to Hit a Curveball

I got back in the batter's box, knocked the dirt off my cleats again, touched my bat to the outside corner of the plate, and waited.

Fastball.

I swung hard and foul tipped the pitch into the chain-link backstop.

“One ball! Two strikes!” The umpire declared. *All right!* I thought to myself. *I can do this.* The next pitch was another curve. Like the first one, this pitch seemed as if it started out behind me, and then came right at my head. I waited and held my ground. But this time there was no *pop* of the catcher's mitt. Only the muffled *thump* of the ball hitting me square in the back as I tried too late to get out of the way. Man, that hurt. As I shuffled to first base, I tried to choke back the tears of fear and pain and embarrassment.

My next time up, I got hit again. In fact, the same scene repeated itself on all three of my plate appearances.

*Thump.*

*Thump.*

*Thump.*

I was a magnet for Man-boy's errant curveball.

After that game, I was never the same. Over the course of the next couple of outings, I became frozen in the batter's box—watching pitch after pitch glide



right by me. When I did take a swing, I did so with my eyes closed, more wishing than swinging. If I got on base, it was because of walks. Teams we played began to yell, “Easy out!” whenever I came to the plate. I was locked up in fear and shame, and in the field I began to commit errors because of it.

I ended the season as a late-inning substitute, batting last in the lineup and playing in the outfield. By the final game, I found myself alone in right field—the position of losers and dweebs. We were winning by three runs, so the coach figured it was safe to leave me in. I had been in the game for three innings, and not a single ball had made it out of the infield.

I remember kicking the ground and digging at a hole in the grass with my cleats. Then the tide of the game began to change. Our pitcher walked two batters and gave up a single down the third-base line. The bases were loaded now, and the winning run was at the plate. I remember praying, “Please, God, don’t let him hit the ball to me.”

The next batter fouled off pitch after pitch in an epic battle. It was a long at bat, made even longer by my paralyzing fear. I ran every possible scenario through my head of what could happen if the ball was hit to me. I was rattled with questions like, *What if I can’t catch it? What if it’s right to me and I drop the ball?* I began to

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formulate a plan for how I would run toward the ball and then accidentally slip in the grass and fall so that I wouldn't have to try to make a play.

I don't remember how the game ended. But I do know that somewhere in right field that summer I promised myself I wouldn't let someone else's taunting hurt me again. I began to erect a wall around my heart.

I will never forget the heartache of fifth-grade Little League. That was the last year I played baseball.

When I think about that time, the first image that comes to mind is that of a pudgy, preadolescent boy with a butt cut, in a way-too-tight polyester baseball uniform. That picture about sums up my entire fifth-grade experience. What an icon of self-contempt. Over the course of the year, I lost most of my self-confidence, and along with it, much of my heart. The seeds of self-doubt had taken root, and I was beginning to grow ashamed of myself. I doubted that I would ever grow up to be a "real man."

### **"Real Man"**

The traditional American view of a "real man" is a guy who is more like Dirty Harry or John Wayne than Frasier Crane or Fred Rogers. You know the guy: broad-shouldered, self-confident, rough, tough, and successful. The good news is that the rugged stereotype

of an unemotional, power-hungry man is starting to fade in our society, and we are beginning to understand what a real man is supposed to look like. In Christian circles, we've been trying to come up with the answer for some time now. We've had Promise Keepers rallies, Family Life weekends, and Wild at Heart retreats.

All kinds of definitions are floating around Christendom about what it means to be a real man. They range from the really foundational, like Donald Miller's straightforward definition in *To Own a Dragon*, in which he points out that the only qualification for being a real man is having a penis.<sup>1</sup> (Brilliant!) And then there are the really expansive definitions, like Stu Weber's in his popular book *Tender Warrior*, in which he suggests that a real man has a vision, has a good family, reads the Bible, is consistent, has feelings, is kind, is caring, is helpful, and doesn't run from problems.<sup>2</sup> (Whew! That's a lot to juggle.)

Both of these definitions seem accurate—depending on your definition of *real*. If by “real” you mean what makes a man a man, then Donald Miller is right on. On the other hand, if what you mean by “real” is what a man is capable of becoming, then you might tend to migrate toward Stu Weber's definition, or other definitions and insights offered by writers such as Richard Rohr, John

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Eldredge, Gordon Dalbey, Stephen Arterburn, Robert Lewis, and countless others.

So what's the deal? Why is there such a market for all this conversation about being a "real man"? Why is the need to feel *real* so prevalent? Why are so many guys struggling with the concept of masculinity?

One big reason is that no one (except Jesus) has ever gotten it completely right—and no one ever will. We all fail as men. We all fall short of perfection . . . way short . . . helplessly short.

Our own fathers—and their fathers before them—were no exception to this truth. At some point, every father drops the ball with his son. From a human perspective, there is no perfect dad. No father does it well enough to get us through childhood with our entire hearts intact.

Our fathers' imperfections, and how those have played themselves out in our lives, are a big deal. Guys who grew up in a home where their father was absent will often face serious ramifications. How your own father may have abandoned you through his lack of heart, knowledge, passion, wisdom, skill, presence, or willingness goes a long way toward defining your idea of manhood.

For guys whose fathers misused power and authority or were abusive in their efforts to control, train, discipline,

## HOW TO SHAVE

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Even if you choose to buy an electric razor, there may still be an occasion when you'll need to shave the old-fashioned way. (Your razor might die on the morning of a big presentation, you might travel to Prague and find that your hotel room has those funky European outlets, or you might decide one day that you'd like a really close shave.) So let's talk about shaving the way it should be done—with an old-fashioned, double-edge blade and a mugful of shaving cream—so that your face will be as smooth as a baby's bum.

1. **GET A WET SHAVE.** Always shave either in the shower or right after taking a shower. The hot water will soften your beard and the steam will open your pores (which in turn will cause your whiskers to rise). If you can't get a shower first, wash your face with hot water. Run hot water over your razor, too, so that the blade will be hot.



2. **USE SHAVING SOAP.** We're not talking about the stuff in a can; we're talking about the classic stuff that comes in a bar. Applying shaving soap is best accomplished with a badger-hair brush (not boar hair, which is pricklier), which further



preps the beard by raising the hairs and transferring water to the skin. Wet the brush and use it to whip the soap into a lather; then spread it on in a circular motion. Soaps made of glycerin are the best.

3. **SHAVE WITH THE GRAIN.** If you move the razor with the grain (in the same direction that your whiskers grow), you'll get a close shave without irritation. One sure way to irritate your skin and get ingrown hairs is by shaving "up," against the grain. Use long, even strokes, and rinse the blade between each stroke.

4. **RINSE AND REPAIR.** Shaving is traumatic to your skin, so post-shave care is needed. Rinse your face with cold water (to close the pores) and gently pat your face dry with a clean towel. Finish up with a good non-alcohol-based aftershave or moisturizer (preferably with sunblock).



Adapted from Corey Greenberg, "How to Get that Perfect Shave: Latest trends and products to avoid those nicks and cuts," [www.msnbc.msn.com/id/6886845](http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/6886845); and "The Perfect Shave," [men.style.com/details/features/landing?id=content\\_5664](http://men.style.com/details/features/landing?id=content_5664).

or lead their sons, coming to terms with the impact of their father's harm is an important part of growing into their masculinity. How our dads may have shamed, controlled, or abused us through their misuse of power sets us up for misunderstanding our identity as men.

### **What Ifs?**

What if the practice of becoming a real man is supposed to be more artistic than prescriptive? What if being a real man has to do more with incorporating a growing authenticity than it does with mastering a set of skills? What if the definition of manhood is far broader than you imagined? What if authenticity looked different for one man than it does for another?

It might seem a weird illustration, but let's think about masculinity in terms of art. No one would argue that van Gogh, Cezanne, Renoir, Picasso, and Michelangelo weren't artists. It would be hard to make a case for which artist is more important. And what if we then included great poets such as Homer, Dante, Chaucer, Shakespeare, Whitman, and Frost; and writers such as Steinbeck, Hemingway, Faulkner, Irving, and Mailer; and architects such as Wren, Saarinen, Pei, and Wright; and chefs such as Pépin, Keller, or Boulud? All these men expressed themselves differently with great impact and beauty.

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Let's look at it another way—through the lens of sports. Can you compare Ty Cobb to Johnny Unitas or Wayne Gretzky? All great athletes, right? Each one of the best (if not *the* best) at what he did. But if Gretzky had tried to play baseball, he might have done okay, but he would not have been The Great One. Remember when Michael Jordan retired from basketball to play baseball and then golf?

Ralph Waldo Emerson said, “Every genuine work of art has as much reason for being as the earth and the sun.” The Bible says the same thing a bit differently:

When I look at the night sky and see the work  
of your fingers—  
the moon and the stars you set in place—  
what are mere mortals that you should think  
about them,  
human beings that you should care for  
them?  
Yet you made them only a little lower than  
God  
and crowned them with glory and honor.<sup>3</sup>

What if this means each person is a unique work of art, as important as anyone else? What if the measure of a man is not what he does or what he accomplishes,



but whether he is being himself as God reveals that to him? What if practicing authentic Christianity has less to do with our emulating Jesus and more to do with our increasingly becoming more of who we were made to be by God?

What if authentic manhood means living like Jesus and incorporating the principles he embodied in a way that helps us express our unique creative potential more fully (thus revealing the image of God more clearly)? What if we quit trying to be perfect, or be better, or be good, and instead spent our emotional and spiritual energy on trying to be ourselves?

What if spiritual maturity has more to do with our becoming more ourselves than it does with our making fewer mistakes? What if conforming to the image of Christ is more about living life in the same freedom and dependence that Jesus did, instead of losing our uniqueness to conform to a particular standard?

We think these are really important questions when considering what it means to be a *real man*.

If the goal of masculinity is an increasing authenticity through the work in our lives of love, faith, and hope, then the art of authentic manhood is something we will be practicing for the rest of our lives. In other words, maybe real manhood is a continual process of becoming, rather than something we attain, say, around

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the age of eighteen, twenty-one, or whatever age you want to suggest. Maybe that is what the Bible means when it talks about working out our salvation with fear and trembling.<sup>4</sup> We will never get this thing completely right, but that's by design. Becoming an artist is a life-long process, and we will be learning how to be “real men” for the rest of our days. What could be scarier—or more exciting—than that?

### **Art and Craft**

There is a familiar parable about a man who lived near the site where a magnificent cathedral was being built. Fascinated by the work, the man faithfully spent time every day watching the work as the stone structure took shape. Over time, he caught the attention of the bishop who oversaw the construction, and the two men developed a friendship. The cathedral took many, many years to complete, and though the man was quite young when the cornerstone was laid, he had gray hair when the work was finally finished. As the work drew to an end, the bishop, who was quite old himself by then, asked the man to dinner so the two could quietly celebrate the cathedral's completion.

When they sat down to eat, the bishop thanked God for the food. As they ate, they reminisced about all the years that had passed and all that had transpired

in the construction of the cathedral. “Friend, you have watched the work here daily for many years,” the bishop said. “You know, perhaps more than I, the effort that went into the construction of this place. Tell me what you’ve seen.”

There was a pause while the other man gathered his thoughts. He was a simple man who chose his words carefully. After considering the question for a long time, he said, “A laborer works with his hands. A craftsman works with his hands and his head. But an artist—he works with his hands, his head, and his heart.”

To live as authentic men, we must be able to bring our entire selves to bear in our lives—our hands, our heads, and our hearts. There is a vast difference between painting by numbers and creating our own unique masterpieces.

Sadly, much of the Christian men’s movement over the past two decades has taken the paint-by-numbers approach, encouraging men to work harder at being godly men, husbands, and fathers, and too often handing us tools, strategies, and techniques to “fix” our lives.

Case in point: I (Stephen) had lunch recently with a gentleman a few years older than I, who has served in significant leadership capacities in two very noteworthy parachurch ministries. During the course of

## How to Hit a Curveball

our lunch, he asked me how I was doing. I told him about a remarkable men's group meeting I had attended that morning and how surprised I was by the way God chooses to work in people's lives. He then asked me how I was doing as a man. I told him I was lonely for my wife and kids and how my heart ached with a desire for more time with them. In response, the gentleman very humbly, respectfully, and kindly told me of some techniques he had instituted in his own family. "I date my kids regularly," he said. I politely nodded as he explained how he takes each of his kids out on dates, and how he never leaves the house to run an errand without one or two of his four kids in tow. He continued by telling me that when each of his children turned ten, he took them on a trip. "It has become a tradition in our family."

When he was done speaking, I politely thanked him for his suggestions, but inside I wanted to put my salad fork through his hand. I've been "dating" each of my kids regularly since they could walk. And once a year, my wife and I make a point of taking each of our four children away, just the three of us, for a long weekend. This guy was simply missing the point. I *spend* time with my family. I deeply love my family. He was honestly trying to help, but I wasn't looking for a solution as much as I was looking for compassion. I didn't want

## **HOW TO FIX THE TOILET**

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Picture this. You've just finished an enormous Mexican dinner, and you race home to relieve the pressure. You go to flush and—*wham-o*—the toilet overflows. (Remember *Along Came Polly*, with Ben Stiller?)

It's a tragedy, but it doesn't have to happen. Fellas, turn off the freakin' water when the business doesn't go down! The shut-off valve is usually at the base of the toilet where the water line comes out of the wall.

Before you try flushing again, grab the plunger and take care of the stoppage. If you don't own a plunger, go right now and get one. We're serious—go right now. There are no other suggestions that could be more valuable than this one.

Don't turn the water back on until the deuce is set free.

Most other toilet problems occur inside the tank, where the moving parts are located. Here are some simple ways to recognize and fix three common toilet problems. Before starting any repair, turn off the water-supply valve, as mentioned above. For simple repairs, you may or may not need to flush the water out of the tank.

**Problem: Tank fills, but water still runs.** Remove the tank cover and check the float arm. The float arm and ball may be connected by an L-shaped collar, which lets you raise or lower the float ball more easily. Only about half the float ball should be below water. If there's water inside the float ball, it won't rise high enough to close the valve. Unscrew the float ball and replace it with a new one.

**Problem: Tank doesn't fill, and water still runs.** A running toilet may be caused by a defect in the lift wire, the flush ball, or the flush valve. A worn flush ball may be the problem. If the rubber flush ball has hardened or is out of shape, purchase a replacement ball and screw it onto the end of the lift rod. You may wish to purchase a flapper-type replacement for the tank ball. A flapper unit has a longer lifespan and quieter flush than the conventional flush ball. Follow the manufacturer's installation instructions.

**Problem: Toilet won't flush properly.** If the toilet handle must be held down to complete the flushing action, first check the trip lever. The lever is set at a slight angle inside the tank so that it can operate without scraping the tank's side, the overflow tube, or the intake valve. If the trip lever isn't moving freely when you flip the handle, bend it slightly toward the center of the tank. As you bend it, use one hand to hold the lever in place where it joins the handle.

A second place to check is the lift wire. It may not be raising the flush ball high enough, and the outrushing water may be pulling it back down too quickly. Simply bend the lift wire enough to shorten it. The shorter lift wire will hold the flush ball out of the way of the rushing water until enough water has passed to clear the bowl.

An inadequate flush can also be caused by a float ball that is adjusted too low to allow a full tank of water. Bend the float arm upward to correct this. The water level in most tanks should be one-half to three-quarters of an inch below the top of the overflow pipe.

If all else fails or none of this makes any sense, call the plumber. There's a reason these guys charge so much money. They know things we don't. Don't deny a man his paycheck.

Adapted from [www.fixatolilet.com](http://www.fixatolilet.com) and [www.doityourself.com/stry/h2repairtoilet](http://www.doityourself.com/stry/h2repairtoilet).

his help; I wanted his camaraderie. But instead I was handed *techniques*.

### **Painful Balancing Act**

There is great pain in trying to be authentic men, balancing family, work, faith, hobbies, and other responsibilities in a way that reflects who we want to be. The pain of not being with the people we most love is inevitable.

From time to time, we all need some suggestions for how to live out our passions in this world, but too often we try to circumvent the pain of living in a broken world with strategies for success. But unless we as men have our hearts, all our strategies will be meaningless. By “have our hearts,” we mean that we must be engaged in an ongoing and intimate relationship with ourselves. This has many facets—knowing how our past affects our present; being aware of our emotions; recognizing more and more the profound work of Christ’s resurrection in our lives, and our response to it; and identifying how our unique styles of relating impede our relationships with God and others. But most of all, it speaks of the mysterious process by which, having recognized our powerlessness and yielded our hearts back over to God, we find—to our surprise—that we have more of what we gave away in the first place: We have our hearts.



The truth is, we can do “all the right things” perfectly, but if our hearts are not present, it will be nothing more than empty religion. This is what the book of Ecclesiastes is about—having it all, knowing it all, and doing it all right, but without our hearts engaged, which makes it all as empty as vapor.

Our willingness to live in the midst of heartache with a deep awareness of our feelings, needs, desires, longings, and hopes is essential for authentic manhood. When we live this way, we find that we get to the end of ourselves pretty quickly. Practicing the art of authentic manhood means that we acknowledge our willingness and desire to be transformed and our utter powerlessness to do anything worthwhile about it on our own. That is the beginning of being a “real man.”

### **Lessons Learned**

- 1. Life is hard and painful.*
- 2. Real men come in all shapes and sizes.*
- 3. We'll never get manhood completely right.*
- 4. It's not about techniques and trying harder.*
- 5. Polyester ain't cotton.*

### **How to Move On from Here**

To grow in the art of authentic masculinity, we must first expand our definition of being a “real man” beyond the

## How to Hit a Curveball

stereotype of John Wayne and the “tips and techniques” approach of much of the recent men’s movement. We need to better understand where our concepts of masculinity were formed.

A key component of practicing the art of authentic manhood is identifying the men (and women) who helped shape our ideas of masculinity (for better or worse). Likewise, we need to identify the ways in which we exercise our masculinity well and the ways in which we misuse our masculinity.

A third way to hone the art of real manhood is to find an environment that supports our maturity as men. For us, one of the most beneficial ways that we became deeply engaged in our own masculinity was through joining men’s groups where the work of the group was focused on helping us live out our passions and develop an awareness of our feelings, needs, desires, longings, and hopes. These have been groups where other men worked to point things out that we couldn’t see in ourselves—groups that invite authenticity (not just “accountability”). Some examples of these types of groups are the Samson Society, YMCA’s Restore Ministries, or group counseling.

## Notes

### Introduction

1. Romans 8:18-27
2. Galatians 5:1
3. 1 Samuel 16:7
4. Erwin Raphael McManus, *Soul Cravings: An Exploration of the Human Spirit* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2006), 3.

### Chapter 1: How to Hit a Curveball

1. Donald Miller and John MacMurray, *To Own a Dragon: Reflections On Growing Up without a Father* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2006), 104–106.
2. Stu Weber, *Tender Warrior: Every Man's Purpose, Every Woman's Dream, Every Child's Hope* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 1999).
3. Psalm 8:3-5, NLT
4. Philippians 2:12

### Chapter 2: Hide and Seek

1. Deuteronomy 4:9
2. Frederick Buechner, *Telling Secrets* (San Francisco: Harper, 1991), 33.

### Chapter 3: Soft Curves and Softer Lips

1. Much of our understanding about the place of feelings in our lives, and their utmost importance as a way of more fully knowing and being ourselves, comes from the work of Dr. Chip Dodd, a friend and mentor of Stephen's, who runs a treatment center for impaired and addicted professionals in Nashville ([www.cpe.nashville.com](http://www.cpe.nashville.com)). Chip has written a great book about the significance of feelings, called *The Voice of the Heart: A Call to Full Living* (Sage Hill Resources, 2001).
2. Harry W. Schaumburg, *False Intimacy: Understanding the Struggle of Sexual Addiction*, revised edition (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1997), 17.
3. <http://xxxchurch.com/gethelp/index.php>.
4. C. S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed* (New York: HarperCollins, 1961), 38.

### Chapter 4: Pop the Hood

1. Genesis 3:17-19
2. Many of these thoughts on shame are developed more fully in the work of Dr. Chip Dodd.
3. Matthew 5:22
4. James 5:16, NLT

### *About the Authors*

Stephen James and David Thomas are coauthors of the companion books “*Does This Dress Make Me Look Fat?*” and “*Yup.*” “*Nope.*” “*Maybe.*” (Tyndale), as well as *Becoming a Dad: A Spiritual, Emotional and Practical Guide* (Relevant). Stephen and David are regularly featured on radio and television, including ABC Family Channel’s *Living the Life*, and in numerous publications, including *Discipleship Journal* and *Relevant* magazine.

Stephen is the congregational care pastor at Fellowship Bible Church in Brentwood, Tennessee. He speaks frequently about men’s issues, marriage/relationships, and authentic spirituality. Stephen received his master’s in counseling from Mars Hill Graduate School at Western Seminary, Seattle. He and his wife, Heather, live in Nashville with their four children.

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