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Growing Up Toward Life

by Doug Atkinson

I was born in Burlington, Vermont on July 11th, 1983. 38 days later, my father died of Leukemia, three years after his diagnosis. He had far outlived doctors' predictions of "three months," but I know my father only through photographs and stories, mostly from my mother, brother, and his six remaining brothers and sister. I have one picture that has been on the wall for as long as I can remember of my father holding me over his head with a wide grin and an expression that gleamed with joy. Not a day goes by that I don't wish he were here with me, and I still dream of a life where he is there. I've often wondered why he had me if he knew he was going to die and leave me alone with my mom and older brother (who was thirteen at the time).

When my brother moved out of our home in Providence, I began to understand that there was something missing at our house. I felt alone and left out when my friends hung out with their dads around the neighborhood. I don't remember exactly when I discovered what I had lost, but I felt handicapped and weaker than all the other kids as I embarked upon my life. My mother raised me well, but she was unable to provide the father figure that I needed so badly. She told me stories about how my father loved to work on his cars, so at age six I went out to our car with a screwdriver and decided that maybe I would fix something. I couldn't, and I felt a terrible void that made my stomach hurt and my eyes water. I was relieved when my mother called me inside from an experience I never cared to remember.

Between the ages of eight and ten, I began to realize that I needed to be a certain way according to my role as a man in society. I looked to older friends for guidance, and I often saw disrespectful behavior, rather than behavior that I would care to learn today. I couldn't understand why God had taken my father, and I was angry. Instead of seeing how my mother was doing an incredible job raising me alone, I only saw the ways she wasn't able to fill that gap. I was searching for my identity, and found refuge in kids who were only detrimental to my behavior.

My mother recognized that I needed a father figure, and so at age thirteen she moved us back to Burlington, Vermont, where my father's eldest brother lives. My mother also met a man about six months after we arrived who played a significant role in my upbringing. They provided me with the support that I needed, and helped me begin to see what it meant to be a "real man" in a very different sense. Although there were many struggles, I saw how a "real man" was respectful, especially to those who love him. I still am learning to walk my talk today.

I was accepted to a prep boarding school for ninth grade where I attended my freshman and sophomore years. Although I did well academically, old feelings of loneliness haunted me. Many kids there were struggling with their own difficulties, and drug abuse was rampant. Steps that I had made in the right direction during my move to Vermont began to be erased, and I was slowly

losing myself into behaviors I had long used to try to fill that void I felt in my life. I was mostly doing what I wanted, when I wanted -- playing video games for hours at a time, watching movies or just drinking and playing pool. Life didn't excite me, and I hated my classes, but I thought I was having fun.

Luckily, my older brother -- who had similar school experiences -- graduated from college and started working with "Learning as Leadership" (LaL), an organization which facilitates Personal Mastery seminars. He encouraged me to attend, and after my second seminar, I realized that boarding school wasn't for me.

Through LaL, I began to look into what was driving my behaviors and interactions with others. I learned that what I have truly wanted my entire life was to feel accepted and connected with people. Then I saw how I had been pushing away the people that I cared about most because I was afraid they would reject me for who I was. I had this huge ball of anxiety that perpetuated my feelings of anger and separation and only brought me away from my need to be close with people.

Now, I am just starting to learn to say "so what" to my fears, and create real relationships. To do that I need to allow myself to accept the fact that "the worst" (being rejected and abandoned) might happen. Of course when I look at what "the worst I can imagine" is, I can also see those fears are not very realistic.

Through LaL I began to see that I really wasn't doing what I wanted with my life, and that I could create goals that specifically address my fears. Goals that function as a way to pull myself in the right direction -- a direction that I can consciously choose.

Instead of the escape mechanisms I tried before, I am now connecting with my real passions. I am realizing that what I do now creates my future. I have committed to no drugs for life and no alcohol for 1 year, and I am challenging myself to let go of all the ways I escape. I am committed to living a more constructive life and I am learning that may mean going against what I view as "fun". Interestingly, life has become far more exciting in the process. I am learning how to live life differently; how to communicate and build relationships that harbor peace in the journey of creating a more peaceful world.

And I am learning to become a "real man". A "real man" who respects and loves all around him. A "real man" who is here to be a servant of creating a better world. A "real man" who is dedicated. A "real man", so that, most importantly, I can one day be the father for my children that I wish I had.

Doug Atkinson is a 17 year-old senior in high school (class of 2001) currently living in San Rafael, California. He attended his first Learning as Leadership seminar the summer of 1998. He continues to do work with LaL as a member of the Future Leaders Team, a group of young adults from around the country who are committed to practicing the tools of LaL to create more constructive futures for themselves and others.

Learning as Leadership (LaL) is a training and consulting firm in San Rafael, California. "Personal Mastery" is the ability to achieve goals through recognizing and addressing individual and team obstacles. Based on 18 years of practical application, LaL's workshops and coaching are designed so that participants see how their individual patterns of behavior stop them from making use of their collective expertise. Hundreds of individuals and teams have used Personal Mastery tools as the main catalyst for changing the systems and cultures in which they operate, often achieving outstanding results. LaL can be reached at 415-453-5050 or info@learnaslead.com.