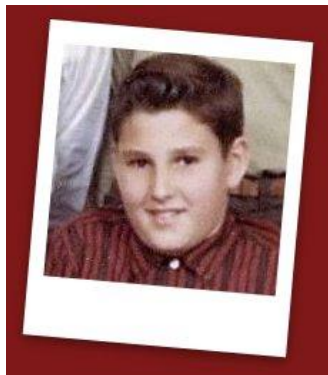


# Man Up!

By Glenn Smith



When you hear the phrase “Man Up” what comes to mind? I remember when I was about 12 years old my sister, who was eight years my senior, came into my room and asked the question: “Who are better, men or women?” Without hesitation, I answered, “me.” I was stumped when she asked, “What are the reasons you would say that?” I remember thinking, well, we are better because we are bigger, louder, stronger, and in charge. She smiled and suggested I take a long look at what those attributes really meant. She challenged me to find both male and female role models that emulated those qualities. Hmm... To be honest, at twelve I did not give it much more thought. I went about my business being large and in charge. I can say since that day, the phrase “man up” has taken on a few “shifts” of perspective.

As a teen, I began defining the terms bigger as taller, louder as being noticed, stronger as more muscular, and in charge, meaning that I needed to step up and assert my will. This served me well through my twenties as I was successful in overcoming challenges in sports, taking on leadership in various causes and projects, asserting my will to excel in academics, and starting a career. Many folks looked up to me, and I felt that I was being the man I had always wanted to be.

As I approached my thirties, I started to become less certain if my approach to manhood was serving me as well. I was not as successful as I thought I could be in my personal relationships. I had yet to establish a long-term intimate relationship. I began being involved in more conflicts with those I worked for, those I worked with, and those who worked for me. I lost jobs because of my inability to “play nice with others.” Hmm... maybe I needed to revisit the conversation I had with my sister years ago.

Then as now, being a man brings many references to my mind. I was fortunate to have a strong image of a father to go back and study. Along the way, I have met many men and women who helped me reinvent the image of how I was practicing being a man. Several of the young men that I have mentored grew up in homes that had limited male role models to use as a benchmark to evaluate themselves. Over 70% of the 1,500 plus incarcerated men I have taught grew up without a male presence in the home. Many of these young men watched their older fatherless siblings with their friends on the streets and followed their lead. Others learned from images taken from the media, including movies and sitcoms where the male superhero conquers the villain. Still others followed the examples of men who were gladiators of sport or men who ran the world of business. We all watched and learned from the experiences we lived.

For over 35 years, I have asked the question “What does it mean to ‘man up’?” I’ve asked the young teenage men I have mentored, and I’ve asked the men taking my life skills classes. Through my mentors and discussions I have with other men who are searching for an alternative way to “man up”, I have heard hundreds of imaginative answers.

Now in my late fifties I have begun solidifying what being a man is to me. I still believe it is okay for a man to be louder, bigger, stronger, and in charge; however, the meaning of those attributes has shifted drastically.

Bigger no longer means physically larger, instead it now means being above the drama of any given situation. It means to me that I can be mindful of the greater good and not allow people who are not good for me to rent space in my brain. Being bigger means to be intentional about who I want to be in any given situation and not to embarrass myself or those I represent including my family.

Louder no longer means to me to overstate or to squelch others from speaking. I have learned to speak less and silently act more. I have learned that my actions speak much louder than my words and that I can get my point across with plenty of noise by simply being the change I want to see in the world.

Stronger has become less about strength of body, although I like to keep myself fit, and more about strength of mind and spirit. Strong is about figuring out what is right for me and then following through and being it. Strength is about integrity, standing up for and living my beliefs. Stronger is about being honest in a dishonest world, kind in an unkind world and spiritual in a world in which our creator seems distant.

In charge has shifted from being a sage on a stage to a guide on the side. When I’m in charge, I try to remember the Gandhi quote: “Leaders will not be remembered by how many followers they have, but how many leaders they help create.”

The first step for all men is to examine the initial information we received, re-look at the original images we held to as truths, and study the tradition of what the word being a man has meant to each of us. Then seek out both men and women we respect. Look within. Self-evaluate, and let go of truth of someone else’s image of what it means to man up. When we do this, I doubt we will come to the same conclusions I have. The men who do this and remember their answers as they mentor and raise their children will learn to become the father they always wished they had and the one they now aspire to be. Now it’s your turn so - Man Up!

Thanks Sis,

Glenn M. Smith

