

MEN'S WORK

A PRACTICAL GUIDE
TO FACE YOUR DARKNESS, END SELF-SABOTAGE,
AND FIND FREEDOM

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 **sounds true**
BOULDER, COLORADO

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PREFACE

BEFORE YOU BEGIN this journey, I thought it necessary to make a few things clear.

First, this is not my attempt to tell you what masculinity is, or how you should be as a man—although you may gain deep clarity about your own answers to these questions because of this work.

Second, over the past few decades, people have been talking about broken men, toxic masculinity, the crisis of masculinity, and countless other conversations all implying that men, collectively, have gone astray or are broken. Men are asked to change, be better, and heal with little to no direction outside of “be more vulnerable.”

After years of my own development and nearly a decade of working with a multitude of men from around the globe, I began to see that there is a certain kind of intensity that lives within men that we have largely forgotten how to navigate. An intensity of pain, confusion, rage, fear, and grief that so many men carry but have not been shown how to integrate and leverage for our benefit and the benefit of the collective. An intensity that society largely rejects, ignores, or doesn’t want to deal with, and that we as men have forgotten how to carry.

That is the aim of this book. To bring you into contact with your own intensity and pain so you can work with it. To help you learn—regardless of your faith, sexual orientation, or ethnicity—how to heal and be with the intensity of your own experience as a man.

I also want to emphasize that there are countless forms, versions, and aspects to men’s work and that this is only one part of it. I don’t claim to speak for all men doing this kind of work and am not so ignorant as to pretend like this is the only path. What follows is the work I had

to engage in and the work I have brought countless men through. It is meant to be a guide for you as a man to step into your power through the door of healing.

Lastly, while I have tried to include as many experiences as humanly possible, I am sure I have left many out. While this book is unapologetically for men and is often geared toward male-female relationships, I try, where applicable, to include a range of sexual orientations. After working with men from countless walks of life, my intention is always to be as comprehensive as possible. If you find yourself feeling excluded, my suggestion is to move away from focusing on the external details of one man's story or background and return to the internal dynamics that connect us all.

INTRODUCTION

A MAN'S PATH TO FREEDOM

"There appears to be a conscience in mankind which severely punishes the man who does not somehow and at some time, at whatever cost to his pride, cease to defend and assert himself, and instead confess himself fallible and human."

CARL JUNG

THE WORK OF men begins with pain.

How are we as men to reconcile the sheer drive and determination we feel stirring in our souls with the intense confusion, anger, and emotional bleeding-out we can often feel?

Said more directly, how do we as men tune ourselves for something more than optimal performance in the boardroom or bedroom and overcome what stands in our way? How do we design within us a compass that can lead us through life's most violent storms? A compass that leads us toward depth—depth of experience, fulfillment, and purpose?

How do we as men develop *self-leadership*?

In order to do so, most men will, at some point, have to cross the threshold into the underworld of their own pain and come to grips with the following:

I am a man who has been abused.

I am a man who has abused others.

Or said another way:

I am a man who is hurting or has been hurt.

I am a man who has hurt others or is hurting others.

It took me decades to come to terms with these two statements, and they are now the driving force behind my life's work. Not because all men have been abused, or because these things define us as men, but because most men carry a pain within them they have never been taught to heal, work with, or use in a way that would give their life deeper meaning, direction, and purpose. But that's exactly what this book aims to accomplish.

To see the pain of men, you need not look far. Take a stroll around your workplace. Wander through your neighborhood. Talk to the men in your local bars, parks, and restaurants. Look into the eyes of the man sitting on the bus across from you, and behind his hard, protective exterior you'll see the neglected responsibilities, failed relationships, and a deep fear of being seen as an imposter. These men, at their core, do not feel in control of their hearts and minds.

Because a man who avoids his pain is a man who is enslaved by it.

This is the step-by-step doctrine men are taught for dealing with pain:

- 1) Suck it up.
- 2) Stuff it down.
- 3) Pour a bottle of whiskey over the top and finish it all off by rubbing one out for good measure.
- 4) Rinse (maybe) and repeat as necessary until sufficiently numbed out or forgotten about.

Unfortunately, this is the path so many men take. Hell, it's the path I walked for a long time. We trade internal leadership, liberty, and masculinity for a safe job, mediocre marriage, and a lifetime of unactioned dreams, all in the quest of pain avoidance. We feel lost, alone, incapable of change, and helpless against the daily onslaught of internal criticism, doubt, and worries.

We have, in many ways, been sold a lie; a lie of separation.

We have been indoctrinated into a cult; the cult of specialness.

And we have an amnesia to truth; the truth of *pain being a path to purpose*.

So how do we reconcile with the pain we've been given as men, or the pain we've caused? How do we make amends for the abuse, neglect, abandonment, and trauma we may have caused ourselves and others? Is there a way to alchemize the pain we carry into a purpose? Outside of the altruistic reasoning for embarking on this quest emerges the question most men ask repeatedly: "Why should I even bother?"

Because as Robert Bly, famous poet and father of the mythopoetic men's movement, famously said, "Where a man's wound is, that's where his genius will be."

STARTING FROM (ROCK) BOTTOM

I woke up in the back seat of my car as I had done every day for the past few weeks, shoulders aching and hips cramped from stuffing my six-foot-two frame into the back seat of my two-door Pontiac G5 coupe. Nothing beats a sunrise when you're viewing it from the parking lot of the local Walmart.

It was 2010 and I couldn't hide any longer. I'd spent years trying to ignore the man I'd become. For more than a decade I curated the facade of a man I thought people wanted me to be—the nice guy. The successful man with an exciting career that took him around the world. The guy with the perfect relationship, gorgeous girlfriend, motorcycle, and cars. Externally, I thought, I was the epitome of modern masculinity.

But the man I'd hidden could no longer be concealed. The lying man, the cheating man, the angry man, and the deeply isolated and lonely man had finally come out from behind the mask.

Leading up to my stay in chateau Walmart I had been in a downward spiral for years, but I had stuffed it deep down inside. Abusing alcohol, food, drugs, porn, and sex had come to an abrupt halt. I had been running full sprint away from my own darkness only to have it show up in front of me like a brick wall. More on the particulars of this later. For now, what you need to know is . . .

I knew I was the problem, but I didn't know how to escape, fix, or change anything.

Sound familiar?

I'd known for years I was out of control. I wasn't addicted to anything specific, aside from the constant need to make decisions that would leave me with crippling shame, anger, or guilt. Or perhaps I was addicted to gratification—trying to fill a space that was in truth an unfillable abyss. Watching porn for hours at a time most days, drinking entire bottles of Jack Daniel's or Southern Comfort as fast as I could, street racing motorcycles, running from the cops, and sleeping with as many women as possible all while maintaining full-time relationships and attempting to build a career as an opera singer (sounds like a terrible plotline from an eighties soap opera, I know).

Two weeks prior to the Walmart sunrise-through-my-windshield, my girlfriend caught me cheating. It wasn't the first time. It unfortunately wouldn't be the last time, but it was definitely the most devastating time.

This is normally where you'd get the salacious details about my escapades and read on wondering if you were consuming some poorly executed *Californication* reboot script, only to find out that the guy playing David Duchovny is far less charismatic and, for some strange reason, sings opera. But out of respect for those involved, who likely don't want their lives aired out like three-day-old underwear, I'll get to the point.

I felt out of control, and it finally caught up to me. I was a reactive man. A man who lacked self-leadership, self-compassion, and who loathed the idea of needing to admit his wrongs or ask for support.

I cheated on every woman I dated. I lied, manipulated, ran, and hid all my extracurricular activities from everyone in my life.

I was the worst kind of asshole—the kind who seemed like a genuinely good guy when you met him. I was “the Nice Guy,” the classic wolf in sheep's clothing.

But that was the problem. No one knew. I was hiding the pain from my past, and I refused to admit all of the pain and destruction I was passing along to the people I loved. I had no men in my life challenging me.

No one calling me forward into my potential, no one to talk to about the deep pain I felt for the man I had become, and no one to help me clean up the mess of my life.

I felt helpless against the ever-raging inner critic, powerless to choose a different path, lost without a map or compass, and trapped with the overwhelming anger, grief, and sadness that I had carried from years of self-sabotage.

Up until that point, if you'd met me, you'd think I was doing great. But inside my head and heart, I felt out of control, lacked routines or direction, and had the kind of inner critic who would put the most abusive father in his place. This, I would later come to find, is the case with millions of men.

There, on day seventeen of sleeping in parking lots, avoiding calls from friends and family, showering at work, and swimming in a rising tide of fast-food wrappers, I reached a critical mass in my car. I cried myself to sleep more nights than I cared to admit and constantly oscillated between the foolish hope that everything was going to be fine and accepting the reality that I needed to face.

"I'm a good man," I said to myself out loud.

Why did you do all this? replied the voice in my head. How could you have been so reckless for so long . . . so out of control? Why can't you just get your shit together?

And then again out loud: "Who the fuck am I?"

The stench of self-pity smelled about as bad as my car.

You rarely win a debate with yourself, and this one wasn't going to be any different.

I had talked my way out of almost every tight spot I found myself in before, so why not this one? That too was part of the problem. I was a chameleon. I had become so good at lying and manipulating my way out of being seen as the bad guy that I couldn't see I had become the man I was trying to avoid. I didn't want to lie, cheat, hurt other people, yet there I was, still running the mental simulations of how I could maneuver my way through all the damage I caused and remain unscathed.

I was a full-grown man who was terrified of consequences.

I had hit an inflection point, a fork in the road, choose your metaphor. The kind of defining moment that comes along and confronts who you are at your core. I'd been chasing the illusion that someday I would just change. The fantasy that I would miraculously be a "good man" without having to do any of the work to clean up the mess I had made when acting out from the pain I had carried. I bought into the hollowed-out, empty-promise version of life and faith that tells us we can have whatever we want, if we only *believe* hard enough. But all of that had come crashing down. I was finally letting the naive, boyhood notion of living a carefree and consequence-free life die away.

What's the old saying about insanity and doing the same thing over and over? Exactly.

Later that night, as I once again pulled the blanket up over my chest and tried to adjust so the seatbelt buckle didn't dig into my kidney, my gaze wandered out through the back window and caught a glimpse of the sky. It was completely clear, with stars dotting the black void of the moonless night.

I'd spent the past few weeks trying to decide what to do, with zero results. I'd played out thousands of different scenarios, everything from elaborate stories that would get me out of the mess I had made to one-way tickets to Thailand. Tonight, however, as I looked out at the sparkling sky, tears began to stream down my face as I contemplated much darker thoughts.

I was tired. I felt as though the heaviness of my life had its foot planted firmly on my chest and there was no more running. I felt so much shame and anger for the man I had become.

I had no clue what to do next, but I knew I couldn't keep going down the road I was on. It was only going to lead to total self-destruction.

PAIN AS THE PATH

The wounds, scars, and pain we carry as men have a place in our lives. A function that can lead us directly to the core of deep meaning and fulfillment and provide a positive path forward. This is what initiation was *supposed* to teach us as men—how to descend into the depths of our own darkness and return a more complete and contributive participant in society.

However, this is where a man's real problem resides: He has not been taught the skill or alchemy of initiation. He has not learned how to deal with his pain, or the pain of the world, and so he bucks against it.

I realized over the years of grappling with how to heal that not only was I ill-equipped to deal with the hurt I'd been given, but I also seemed to be *woefully* ill-equipped to reconcile with, and put a halt to, the perpetual hurt I passed on to others. Like many men, I was good at inflicting pain—and men who are good at something tend to do that thing a lot.

Not only was I undereducated in the alchemical craft of turning pain into purpose, but almost every man I knew was in relatively the same situation. Most men simply haven't been taught how to deal with their pain and use it to become something better.

And this aspect of the journey is the missing link in male initiation, which has historically played the role of guiding a man through the transitory period between adolescence and adulthood, teaching him the skills of discipline, sovereignty, and the ability to face some of the most challenging aspects of his own life.

In fact, I began to see that not only have most men not been given the tools or resources to deal with the pain and suffering in their lives, but we as men are actively taught the opposite—the idiotic tactic of constant emotional avoidance. Not only this, but our emotional avoidance is seen as a theoretical and rational *strength* in certain circles.

Seeing this brings about a multitude of questions that both illuminate the foundational cracks within current masculine culture and also highlight the work we must embark on if we are to do our individual and collective parts as men in building a thriving society.

There's more: I began to see the direct correlation between a man's ability and willingness to face his own darkness and having a clear purpose, deep fulfillment, and clarity of contribution to the things that matter most to him.

But how can we as men give our pain a purpose in a culture where we are largely devoid of emotional permissions? Where the archetype of man, in order to be classified or quantified as *a* man, must do the impossible task of being brave and courageous without being vulnerable? This is one of the biggest masculine myths—the false idea that you can be courageous without being inherently vulnerable.

When we are rewarded for giving our lives, our hearts, and our emotional bodies up for sacrifice to maintain the illusion of *invulnerable* strength, we prioritize victory over connection. We praise ourselves for performance in the boardroom, bedroom, and bars, but we lack recognition for our performance in reconciliation, repair, and reparation.

There's another way. A way where victory is found within the work, and part of that work is facing our own darkness.

FORGING A NEW WAY

I want to make it clear that this book is a guidebook for *any man* embarking on the journey within. The journey into their own pain, healing, integration, and embodiment—the journey of betterment.

It is meant to acknowledge the pain that we as men carry collectively and individually.

It is meant to showcase the pain we have been given, and have passed on to others, while providing an instructional training manual for transforming this pain into purpose. One that rewards reciprocal relationships, a stronger sense of direction, and a more integrated quality of self-leadership.

The work in this book is work that any man can undertake. It's not meant to be the unequivocal guide and final word. There are many

kinds of work that men must face, and many paths he can take. I'm not so arrogant as to believe that the work I've laid out in this book is *the only* path or work a man must do. Rather, this is one man's perspective on the collective work we as men are called to do. It is the conglomeration of more than a decade of learning, listening, apprenticeship, personal work, and experience from the thousands of men I've had the honor of working with.

This book is a map for those wishing to explore masculine darkness and learn how to integrate it into their own being so they are not so controlled by it.

RECONNECTING TO MASCULINITY

This book is unapologetically pro-men and pro-masculinity. It is for men, from men, and about men. It is not in defense of men, or written as an attempt to advocate for men's rights or make excuses for men who act out and cause havoc. It is for the man who wants to heal. The man who is ready to strengthen and embolden himself. The man who is ready to better himself, face his inner demons, and fortify his masculinity.

The truth about masculinity in our modern culture is that it's largely optional. It's no longer necessary. You don't need it in order to survive, fit in, or get by within our postindustrial, globalized complex. You can live your entire life never really needing to know what it's like to live a masculine-oriented life. Hell, some women say they want more effeminate men who are entirely disconnected from their masculine traits (whether or not any of those relationships last or function is a wholly different conversation).

Most men today have never stopped to define their own lives or what masculinity truly means to them. They are bouncing around, out of control, trying to satisfy everyone around them without a clue as to how they can fulfill their inner hunger or stoke the flames of their deepest strength.

Let's make this clear with a few common examples. Do you ever wonder:

- Why you can't fully commit to a relationship, job, or healthy habits?
- Why you're so hard on yourself, and why you can't get your shit together?
- Why the marriage and family you built is out of control and on the brink of falling apart?
- Why you lack purpose, direction, or fulfillment in life?
- Why you don't know what you really want or what makes you happy?
- Why you feel like you have so much anger and need to numb out all the time?
- Why you constantly procrastinate or lack the confidence to do the things you want or need to do?
- Why it feels like you're constantly letting people down?
- "Am I *that* guy?" The guy who can't seem to kick the old habits and is consistently stuck in a cycle of watching too much porn, streaming TV and movies, playing video games, indulging in vices, and avoiding everything else?
- If being you has gotten so bad that you can't peel yourself out of bed in the morning?
- Why you're in a rut of seemingly endless self-sabotage?
- How your sex life is really doing?

Admit it: you've not only asked yourself some or all of these questions, but you've also found yourself swallowed up by them, allowing the existential malaise to bring you down. What if, once and for all, you could finally stand up to your inner critic, stop sabotaging yourself, and be a man you deeply respect? Who do you think you'd become?