



O TENDER CHILD OF BUT SIX YEARS: MAY THIS MASSIVE MOTO-CROSS-STYLE HELMET. COMPLETE WITH 14 INTAKE VENTS, FIT AND PROTECT YOU, FOR I UNDERSTAND NOT THE WAYS OF THE ONLINE SIZING CHART.

I clicked purchase, and two weeks later specified man-growth. my son, Casper, and I were roaring across a high sage desert, darkness falling, canyons plunging, chunky rocks looming, frigid wind howling, expensive epic of cinematic masculinity unfolding.

What in the end does a father want for his child? I wanted Casper to not get pneumonia on the first fucking day of our trip. But in his infinite wisdom, the god of the utility terrain vehicle (or UTV) forsook windshields, windows, climate control, and, for that matter, an effective muffler. I draped my coat across the boy's little lap.

"Don't let this blow away!" I yelled. "What?"

"Don't let this blow away!" "What?"

Our conversation might've continued in this vein had I not been so caught up in staying upright. I'd been driving this bizarre vehicle-essentially a small, high-octane dune buggy—for an hour now and was steadily getting worse at it. We were in northwest Arizona, sloshing along a canyon some-Mojave Desert. Yucca and scrub oak blurred past as we fishtailed wildly across gravelly BLM two-track. The natural thing to do would be to slow down, but the light was fading, and we had another hour, or maybe five, until we reached camp. So I gunned it, swerving into the lonesome western landscape, hunched dementedly over the wheel, an off-road, neon-helmeted Neal Cassady.

I FIRST HEARD about Wilderness Collective, the group putting on our mechanical foray, when it launched in 2011. Ostensibly, the Los Angeles outfitter offers \$3,500 high-horsepower adventures for stylish urban dudes. But that's only the wrapper. The essence of the brand is the invisible skein of brotherhood and truth stretched between the snowmobiles and dirt bikes. "Wilderness makes you better"—that's the motto. During trips to Yosemite, Alaska, and Death Valley, men rev into a higher echelon of manhood, growing closer as fathers and

sons and friends and bros. Whatever ails us is no match for the improving power of wild lands plus loud machines.

In 2019, the group launched its first child-friendly outing, "a four-day off-road adventure to the Grand Canyon designed for fathers and their kids to have the adventure of a lifetime." Each day would involve two to four hours of driving, periodic stops, and backcountry camping in Nevada, Utah, and Arizona, and eventually we'd end at the North Rim. Four staffers would prepare our food and document us assiduously. Along the way, a dozen dads would undergo un-

"Don't roll your vehicle," Martín Vielma, our chill, ponytailed guide told us at the start of the voyage. We dads and our kids, most under ten, had fanned out around him in a giant UTV warehouse in Saint George, Utah. We were a mostly white group, middle-aged, and all straight, as far I could tell: some sporty Dallas guys who went to church together, some LA guys with tattoos, a tech guy from San Francisco. Vielma reviewed a few additional points of UTV operation, but the essence was: don't be stupid.

In the run-up to the trip, I had envisioned long days of contemplation and connection. The scrubby hills and low plains of redbrown, the washed-out stretches of prickly pear and cholla—this is the type of country where you figure out a thing or two. The minute I punched the gas, I realized the idea was laughable. The drone of the motor and

slightly less than I did. That's a heavy burden in its own right; add a widespread overhaul of masculinity to the proceedings and things get extra complicated. In Heart of Maleness, the French philosopher and sociologist Raphaël Liogier describes the strange fog men find themselves in after #MeToo, "struggling to redefine our ambitions as men, our fantasies as men, our behavior as men, our desires as men. In short, our place in the world."

Frankly, anyone so disoriented by the current landscape strikes me as either willfully obtuse or weirdly dim. Toxic masculinity, as we now call it, has always oozed through civilization. For your average halfwayreflective guy, the recent wave of bad-men stories shined a new kind of light on an old situation. The challenge isn't knowing our place in the world, it's helping each other get there, starting with the youngest among us.

I suppose this is a good opportunity to acknowledge the leftist San Francisco bubble in which I raise my children, a realm where progressive values are de rigueur and offroad-vehicle riding happens only in commercials, which we don't actually see because we're busy watching documentaries about tofu. Casper, for his part, is just a normal kid in this world, kind and thoughtful and funny and rambunctious. He has a guileless jack-o'-lantern smile, and his dreams generally feature Messi. He dictated sweetly off-message signs when I took him to the Women's March (TAKE CARE OF SNOWY OWLS), and once I heard him ask

DURING TRIPS TO YOSEMITE, ALASKA, AND DEATH VALLEY, MEN REV INTO A <u>HIGHER ECHELON OF MANHOOD</u>, where between the Colorado Plateau and the GROWING CLOSER AS FATHERS AND SONS AND FRIENDS AND BROS. WHATEVER AILS US IS NO MATCH FOR THE IMPROVING POWER OF WILD LANDS PLUS LOUD MACHINES.

> the roar of the wind obliterate everything every thought, every idea, every word spoken. We were quivering husks when at last we rumbled up to a small plateau in Mohave County, Arizona.

> While I pitched our tent, the Wilderness Collective crew built a fire nearby, and in time everyone drifted over for dinner and warmth. I let Casper get to know the other kids-mostly boys, though not all-as the grown-ups chatted around the blaze. There was talk of jobs, motorcycle projects, whose kid was killing it in soccer, and, as occurs on every guy trip, epic adventures past.

> But we were here for the future. A father thrums with a deep and weary hope, after all: You, my child, shall fuck things up

his big sister how her day was. He's also a kid in a changing world. At six, he has more trans and queer people in his life than I did in my first 20 years. His first-grade class talks about conflict resolution, intent versus impact, and equity versus equality.

But healthy masculinity is about more than simply not groping your way up the ladder. I want my son to be joyful, emotionally mature, resilient, giving, and actualizedjust like his elder sister. Already among his little friends, I see cruddy guy tics creeping in: a flash of fragile ego here, a facade of invulnerability there. I try to model the good stuff, but sometimes it seems that stronger medicine is needed. Which is how we ended up sitting around a fire with a bunch of







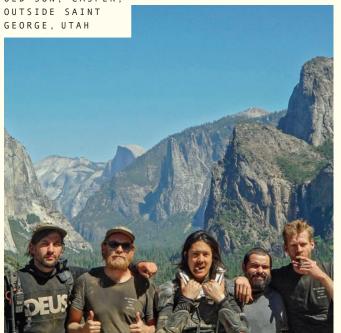


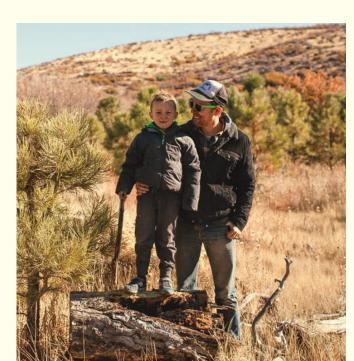




ECTIVE (3); COURTESY OF MARTÍN VIELMA/WILDERNESS COLLECTIVE

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: COURTESY OF DREW MARTIN/WILDE COLLECTIVE; COURTESY OF WILDERNESS COLLECTIVE; COURTESY





strangers on a cold night in Arizona.

I don't know what time we staggered off to bed-step one of a Wilderness Collective trip is surrendering your phone. A wind had risen, and it howled along the desert floor, shaking our tent. I pulled the boy close, his little frog legs tucked against his chest.

WILDERNESS MAKES you better. It's written on the company's mugs and shirts and hats, on the artsy yet rugged magazine it publishes, and on the short films it produces about its trips (nearly 100 so far). It's a small empire of betterness that founder Steve Dubbeldam runs from his office in LA. Dubbeldam, 37, is an everyman for our times, if every man were handsome and also a former clothing entrepreneur. He's laid-back, friendly, and eminently reasonable—that is, Canadian - and one day nearly a decade ago, he looked up and spotted a troubling gap in the cultural landscape. Where there should be character improvement plus machinebased adventure for sophisticated young men, he saw nothing.

"There's an idea I throw around: Adventure is a shortcut into guys' hearts. It's a chink in the armor. You can go deeper faster," Dubbeldam later told me. (Having just done a trial version of the Dads and Kiddos trip with his three-year-old, he was sitting ours out.) Where other men's groups might devote more time to explicit emoting, Wilderness Collective guys mostly shred all day, capped by a check-in around the fire about what brought them there. That conversation, in turn, generally opens onto larger ones about how life is going. Then: more shredding.

"I understand the paradox, exploring masculinity while doing these traditionally manly activities," Dubbeldam says. "The idea is to put a new idea in a familiar container. New idea, new container—that's too much for people."

He wanted to start finding answers to questions not getting asked enough. What does it mean to be a good man? What about a healthy and balanced one? How can we wake up a bit? Something, after all, is clearly wrong. Men suffer higher rates of self-harm than women, ditto addiction, ditto incarceration. Men with mental illness seek help less often than women. The men perpetrating the vast majority of violence—they're suffering, too. And then there's whatever small-bore distress doesn't rise to the level of measurement. For all these concerns, had time to ponder manliness when there's Dubbeldam says, "I didn't see a lot of people elevating the conversation about men."

That has changed, of course. The past few years have been marked by greater interest in the subject, if *interest* is the word for blearily noticing a global sprawl of garbage fires. But

for guys not Weinsteining their way through life, nuanced conversations about man stuff seemed to be trickier business. What if vou're just, like, partly broken? Aside from not being an asshole, how does one improve?

Which helps explain the cottage industry that has emerged in recent years, devoted to various areas of neglected growth. Picking up where men's groups of the eighties and nineties left off—the mythopoetic movement, for example, forever associated with Robert Bly-style drumming sessions organizations like Evryman, Junto, and Wilderness Collective have blossomed, creating communities where men can discuss their anger, achieve "emotional mastery," or otherwise evolve. These exist against a broader cultural backdrop of podcasts, books, assorted articles heralding "the new masculinity," and that inexplicably controversial Gillette ad that dared to suggest that bullying. catcalling, brawling, and other boys-will-beboys pursuits aren't actually "the best a man can get." In one mode or another, everyone's suddenly talking about masculinity.

I have carefully avoided that shit. In my experience, the guys most preoccupied with manhood invariably have the screwiest ideas

we consoled him during a tantrum, was that respecting his natural sensitivity or encouraging male brittleness? When we told him to stop kicking the seat, were we stifling some important inner boyhood energy, or were we helping teach a future man about impulse control? A six-year-old boy is a laboratory, every parental decision a political and ethical minefield. If it seems ridiculous that a fourday UTV romp might help navigate a segment of that minefield, well, parents are ridiculous.

ONE CAN GET a handle on UTV operation, but the insane noise never goes away. I had many things I wanted to say to Caspergeology things, camping things, whatdo-you-think-of-this-trip things-but it was impossible. Was this a giant metaphor for fatherhood and its rivers of unspoken words? I was pondering this on day two when an abandoned dollop of civilization appeared on the featureless horizon.

It was in 1917 that homesteaders first arrived in these parts, and the Mount Trumbull schoolhouse became the center of civic life. Doubling as a town hall, church, and dance hall, it saw the population peak in the thirties, then gradually plummet, as it occured

A <u>SIX-YEAR-OLD BOY</u> IS A LABORATORY, PARENTAL DECISION A POLITICAL AND ETHICAL MINEFIELD. IF IT SEEMS RIDICULOUS THAT A FOUR-DAY UTV ROMP MIGHT HELP NAVIGATE A SEGMENT OF THAT MINEFIELD, WELL, PARENTS ARE RIDICULOUS.

about it. What's more, the broadly defined men's movement has a tortuous intellectual history, swerving from a generally feminist sensibility into beleaguered victimization, and often moving into outright misogyny. As a result, you never know when a benign chat about gender will veer into crazy town. ("Yeah, fatherhood is tough! Anyway, my white-nationalist flat-earth newsletter comes out monthly....")

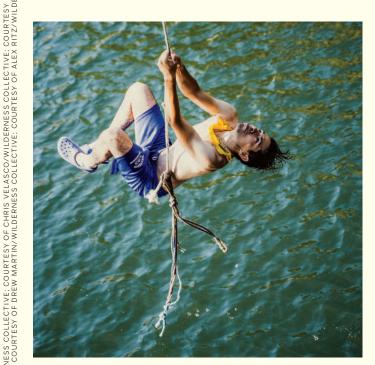
More to the point, explorations of masculinity tend to be tediously abstract. Discussing "how to be a good man" strikes me as an outdated way of discussing how to be a good person, and I already had a rough answer for that: be kind, redistribute all forms of power, and learn an instrument. Beyond that, who dinner to be cooked?

This was my jam until the birth of my son converted the theoretical topic of masculinity into an array of actual concrete questions. When Casper's sister egged him on and he went ballistic, was that on her or him? When in many such places. The last full-time resident left in 1984. The single-room building we rolled up to was simple and white, and had been unused for decades.

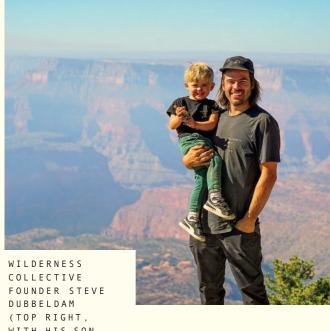
As the kids explored some rusty playground equipment out back, the dads looked inside the building. We could've been in any western ghost town. During Mount Trumbull's heyday, a thousand other Mount Trumbulls sprang to life, and with them a certain version of maleness, born of an earlier masculinity crisis.

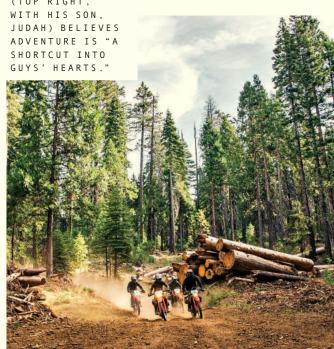
The closing of the American frontier in 1890 marked a peculiar pivot in the young nation's psyche. With the most savage and fearsome territories officially tamed, the conquering impulse was replaced by something closer to nostalgia. "Ideas of the American West became increasingly idyllic," Laurel Braitman writes in Animal Madness, a book that's only partly about nonhuman mental illness. Suddenly, new anxieties arose. Who were men without their ruggedness? What would they do without bears













and Indians to defeat?

By 1910, the Boy Scouts had been created, in part a bulwark against the softening of our citified young lads, and gradually a new ideal of American maleness-arguably the floormodel American man – took shape. If you've seen a John Wayne movie, a Marlboro Man billboard, or any of the ten million slightly less cartoonish variants that permeated the culture for decades, you are familiar.

The way Dubbeldam sees it, a better version of man is within reach. What's more, getting there isn't all that complicatedmerely being away from our phones and humbled by nature will kick-start the process. Deep talks are not required, breakthroughs not necessarily evident; the metamorphosis happens beneath the surface. Having put in my time with the homeopaths and the acupuncturists, I know what it's like to await a cure that might never present itself. Was it working? Was this snake oil? On we hurtled, madly yet hopefully selfimproving, through assorted terrified habitats. Think Walden meets Mad Max.

THE WHOLE THING SEEMED LIKE AN AD FOR A BRAND AND BRASH, MAN IS BUT ABOVE ALL MAN APPROPRIATE, YOU ARE MAN, Α MAN. $\mathsf{T}\,\mathsf{H}\,\mathsf{A}\,\mathsf{T}$ SIGRIEWED THEMSELVES UPSTAIN THE FIRST PLACE?

That afternoon, after a decent rumble south of the schoolhouse, one of the staffers waved for us to make another stop. One by one, the dads pulled their vehicles off the dirt road and everyone climbed out. A brief period of sandwich eating and football tossing followed, and then Vielma announced that we'd be taking a walk. We crossed a narrow gully and made our way to a wall of boulders. Vielma pointed up. Here and there on the sides of the rocks were some ancient-looking markings—the Nampaweap petroglyphs.

A child's natural relationship to 1,500year-old rock art is one of casual defacement. But we reeled them in quickly, and then we stood there taking it in. It was hard to know what to make of it. Was it heartening, seeing that people all those centuries ago had thoughts and feelings just like us? Was it sad, seeing how far we haven't come in the intervening years?

the dads said after a while.

MANY YEARS AGO, at a dark bar in San Francisco, some friends and I fell into a troubled conversation about the future of men. I

don't mean we foresaw #MeToo or the ascension of Brett Kavanaugh. It was our own fates we prophesied. We anticipated, with the bitter clarity of youth, the vacancy and inflexibility that take hold of men as they age, perhaps even blooming from within. We saw the unaccountable anger and emotional stuntedness posing as stoicism. The isolation and the defensiveness and the joylessness. The technological bewilderment and the many World War II books. The weirdness around women. The weirdness around men.

We did not like this, but like Wilderness Collective, we had a plan. Staving it all off was just a matter of locking in some inoculative habits: regular conversation, emotional accessibility, pushing back on each other when necessary. By the end of the night, a monthly gathering had been willed into existence.

This past year, we marked the 20th anniversary of our Man Club, and for all our efforts, I'm not sure what we've achieved. No corpse of ingrained maleness lies at our feet; we do stupid man stuff all the time. So what does that bode for men's groups in general?

Are we really the ones who can change us? Stephen James thinks so. A psychotherapist and leadership consultant in Nashville, he takes his clients on Wilderness Collective trips—something about them, he told me, helps the guys be more open, honest, brave, and understanding. In addition to running a private practice, James is the author of Wild Things: The Art of Nurturing Boys. As he sees it, these trips counteract the atomization that both suburban and urban living have wrought in men. We live too internally, he said, and no longer "have strong voices inspiring us to be wholehearted men."

I felt that old tingle at first—was "wholehearted" code for some kind of essentialist patriarchal nonsense? But what followed felt uncontroversial: modern domestic life has gotten too comfortable for some men, and they are the worse for it. "We're numb to celebration and protected from struggle," "They all look like the Stüssy logo," one of he said. "Our lives get sanitized, and that leads to anxiety and depression. Our hearts are made to live a bigger life than comfort."

Dubbeldam described his job as waking guys up—getting them to pay attention to their lives and not just their work, their

phones, or whatever else we pour too much of our lives into.

"One of my biggest goals on these trips is to spark introspection," he said. "Get them to stop and think, What direction am I going in? If I keep sailing at this angle, where does that get me in ten years?"

As Dubbeldam sees it, men are prone to tunnel vision—"I'm not going to take a breath until I get fired or acquired," as he put it. Even more troubling, he explained, is the tendency "to wait until something really terrible happens before doing some introspection."

Though, when that's the case, Wilderness Collective is there for them. Dubbeldam and James told me of campers past admitting to explosions of heartache: illness, the unraveling of a marriage, the loss of a child. Meanwhile, there's the everyday man stuff that makes everything harder. "There's a way men struggle with shame that's different from how women do," James said. "Do I measure up? Is my value what I achieve? Men seem to identify with those questions more. The question they have is, If I take my mask off, am I the same as you?"

Some time back, Dubbeldam was on a Grand Canyon expedition with a client who nine months earlier had lost his wife after a long illness. The man's life had essentially been on hold for years as her condition worsened. Then, on the third day of the trip, something changed.

"He was driving around this corner, and he took it way too fast and rolled his machine down a ravine," Dubbeldam told me, "I saw him crawl out of the bushes. Thankfully, he was OK. Around the fire that night, it woke him up. He was vibrating. Crashing and basically destroying his machine was the best thing that could've happened to him. He'd spent the past six or seven years playing it safe. And finally he wasn't."

I thought about that man for a long time. On the final night of our trip, we camped 15 feet from the edge of the Grand Canyon. (About that 277-mile-long, six-millionyear-old chasm I will only say: it's worth a look.) But nobody rolled their machine that day or any other, nobody vibrated with newfound feeling. One of the guys confessed to me that he had something of a reading addiction; otherwise we kept it on the surface. After the long trek from the canyon to the UTV warehouse in Utah, we parted with more handshakes than hugs. We agreed to keep in touch, but we haven't.

A FEW WEEKS LATER, just as the trip was fading, Casper and I clicked a link that appeared in my inbox. Immediately we were walloped with the opening licks of "Voodoo Chile" screaming over jagged shots of



PSYCHOTHERAPIST STEPHEN JAMES (BOTTOM LEFT, WITH HIS SON, ELIJAH) BRINGS CLIENTS ON WILDERNESS COLLECTIVE TRIPS TO HELP FOSTER "WHOLEHEARTED" MEN





our machines whipping along the edge of a mountain and bouncing up rocky paths. The film version of our trip was highly professional, gorgeously shot, and strangely jarring. Mundane moments—waiting for dinner, grabbing a beer—had been stylized into something visually familiar but viscerally alien. The vibe pivoted to elegiac indie rock and grainy sunset shots. There was Casper lighting a fire with Vielma; what felt nice the first time suddenly looked weirdly meaningful. Rather than garden-variety dads who'd forked over money for a fun weekend, we were heroes of a now legendary adventure.

Watching our Wilderness Collective friends tool around in their vehicles was a hoot. But it was hard not to see how desperately epic everything looked. Manliness for the camera, manliness for the subsequent anecdotes, manliness for reclaiming some inner human void. What felt strange wasn't the marketing of adventure but the marketing of the emotions that accompany adventure. The whole thing seemed like an ad for a brand called Man. Man is hip and brash, Man is solemn when appropriate, but above all Man is aspirational. If you are a man, you're gonna wanna be Man. I found it all a little perturbing. Driving a wedge between our real selves and some anxious idealized version of us-isn't that how men screw themselves up in the first place?

Were it that simple, we'd have our masculinity crises solved in half an hour. But this much was also true: somewhere around mile 17 on the last day of our trip, Casper and I hit a bump and my inner purist bounced right out of the vehicle. For reasons I did not grasp, the cameras and the engine noise and the occasionally forced bonhomie melted away in that final hour. Zipping along a bouncy road at 60 miles per hour, hand on Casper's knee, I found that I was having a ball. But not just any ball. I was a boy again, speeding through

the woods near my childhood home on a brisk fall afternoon, branches whipping my arms and untold Virginia ecosystems yielding to my BMX. It's possible I'd had passing thoughts about my life, my parents' separation, or some confounding teen behavior I'd glimpsed in the 7-Eleven parking lot. But mostly I had no thoughts at all. I was free.

I'm not saying that men should start acting more like boys. We more or less built a civilization on that, and look. But maybe I was looking at things all wrong out there with Casper. Instead of teaching him how to be a good man, maybe I needed to figure out how to be a child. There's a tiny window of our lives before all the brokenness of our warped society seeps in, a window where the world is just big and strange and wonderful—and exalting in that world is purer than anything.

At the start of our trip, I had offered Casper a dollar continued on page 97 >

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a day for his observations. It was a way to wrangle thoughts out of a sometimes circumspect soul, plus I figured he'd appreciate an assignment, given all the UTV-driving monotony.

"A lot of dry grass and a lot of trees. You let me drive sometimes," he told me on that last day. We'd made a final pit stop. Scrub and parched earth stretched out to red canyon walls in the hazy distance. The light was saturated, everything extra vivid, like an acid trip.

"And do you think you're getting better?" I asked. "You know how all those signs say WILDERNESS MAKES YOU BETTER."

"What do they mean, makes you better?" Casper asked.

"What do you think?"

"Better at camping?"

"Maybe. Or a better man? What do you think being a good man means?"

He was quiet a while. I thought maybe he'd lost interest. But then he rattled off, "Being nice, not selfish, liking nature, knowing how to swim, knowing how to camp."

"I like those!" I said. "Is that different from what a woman should be?"

"No. What do you mean?"

Then one of Casper's buddies came over with a stick, which meant it was time to start whacking weeds. That's what they did for a good 15 minutes, the dads all watching them, making small talk about football and work as we did.

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