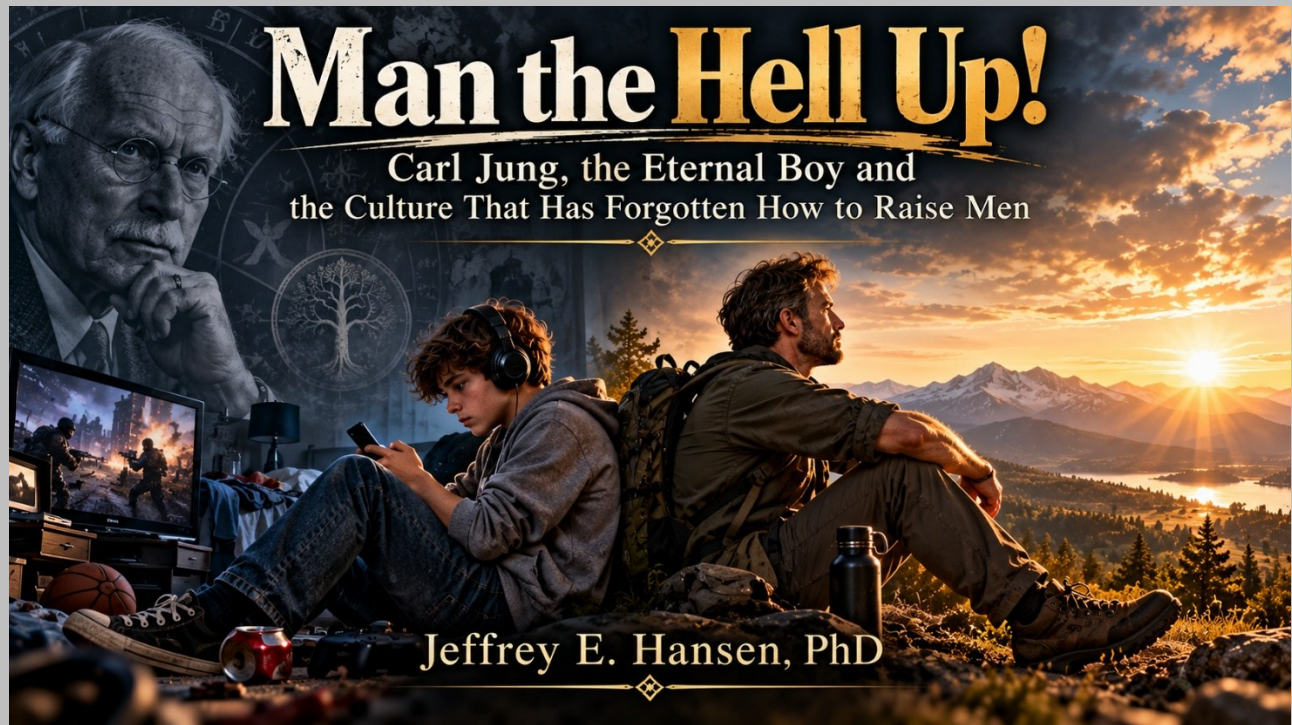




Houston, We Have a Problem

Gentlemen, I believe we have a problem. I am talking about the man-boy: a male who has reached adulthood chronologically but has not quite made the psychological journey from boyhood to manhood. He may be thirty, forty, or fifty, yet struggle with responsibility, commitment, independence, perseverance, and the capacity to love without expecting someone else to manage his life. This is not a diagnosis or a claim that an entire generation is failing. It is a pattern I have encountered in clinical practice, and one I believe deserves attention.

I have listened to young women ask some variation of the same exasperated question: “Dr. Hansen, where are all the men?” They are not asking where the males have gone. There are plenty of those. They are looking for someone emotionally available, capable of commitment, willing to shoulder responsibility, and prepared to build a life together. Where are these elusive creatures? Well, I suspect a few are still downstairs in Mom's basement, playing video games until three in the morning, entertaining themselves with pornography, and wondering why the world has not recognized their extraordinary potential. Forgive my sarcasm. Sometimes humor helps us approach uncomfortable subjects.

Living with parents or enjoying video games does not establish immaturity. Economic pressures, illness, and trauma complicate independence. But when avoidance becomes a lifestyle, entertainment substitutes for purpose, and adult obligations are continually postponed, we ought to ask why. One of my favorite psychological thinkers was exploring this question generations before anyone dreamed of a PlayStation.

Carl Jung: One of My Clinical Psychology Brethren

I have always had a special affection for Carl Gustav Jung (1875–1961). Technically, Jung was a Swiss psychiatrist, trained as a physician, but I have long suspected he was really one of my clinical psychology

brethren who wandered into the wrong profession. Forgive me, my psychiatry colleagues. I could not resist. Jung was an extraordinary thinker whose writings have shaped my own thinking. He was interested in the whole person: unconscious conflicts, childhood wounds, identity, meaning, mythology, spirituality, and what it takes to become psychologically whole.

Jung began as a close collaborator of Sigmund Freud, who regarded him as a promising successor. Their eventual separation reflected profound disagreements about the psyche. Freud emphasized unconscious drives, sexuality, and childhood conflict; Jung developed a broader account involving archetypes, symbolic life, and a movement toward psychological integration. I have always found Jung's perspective more compelling. People are not simply collections of symptoms or prisoners of their past. They are also searching for meaning and struggling to become themselves. His writings on archetypes and the collective unconscious remain influential in analytical psychology (Jung, 1959).

Jung's idea of individuation—the lifelong movement toward a more differentiated, integrated self—speaks to the heart of my clinical philosophy. Healing involves more than reducing symptoms or improving scores on an inventory. It involves discovering identity, accepting responsibility, finding meaning, and developing the capacity to love. That resonates with my NeuroFaith® approach, even though Jung's spiritual ideas and my Christian convictions are not identical. And more than six decades after his death, his ideas still make me wonder: Good heavens, Carl, what would you make of us now?

And perhaps this is where I should confess another reason for my affection for Jung. He asked questions that our profession sometimes treats as peripheral: Who am I? What gives my life meaning? What am I here to contribute, and what sort of person am I becoming? I have never been particularly enamored with our dependence on the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, now in its DSM-5-TR edition (American Psychiatric Association, 2022). Yes, I have used diagnostic classifications throughout my career, and they serve practical purposes. But a diagnosis describes a pattern of difficulties; it does not necessarily explain the person, much less provide a coherent account of that person's identity or purpose. We can become remarkably efficient at attaching labels to distress while remaining strangely incurious about the life in which that distress occurs. If I sound a little irreverent toward one of our profession's sacred books, well, I have been accused of worse.

And while I am irritating a few colleagues, I might as well mention our enthusiasm for manualized therapies. Cognitive behavioral therapy and dialectical behavior therapy offer genuinely valuable tools for changing unhelpful patterns, managing emotion, and tolerating distress. I have drawn on such approaches myself. Some applications also have meaningful longer-term evidence, so I would not dismiss them as merely short-term fixes. But their success at improving symptoms or teaching skills does not automatically answer the larger questions of identity, belonging, responsibility, faith, and meaning. Those questions may be addressed within good CBT or DBT work, especially when a thoughtful clinician makes room for them; my concern is what happens when treatment is reduced to a checklist of techniques. We may help a man regulate his emotions without ever asking what kind of man he intends to become. Jung would have wanted to keep that larger question on the table. And that is precisely why his account of the eternal boy speaks so forcefully to me.

The Puer Aeternus: The Eternal Boy

The Latin is wonderfully descriptive: puer means boy, and aeternus means eternal. The puer aeternus, or eternal boy, is an archetypal figure that Jungian psychology uses to examine arrested psychological maturation. Jung explored related archetypal themes, and his student and colleague Marie-Louise von Franz examined the pattern extensively in *The Problem of the Puer Aeternus* (von Franz, 2000).

The eternal boy may be intelligent, charming, creative, sensitive, and full of plans. His difficulty is not a lack of potential but an unwillingness to exchange possibility for commitment. He loves imagining achievement more than enduring the ordinary work required to achieve it. He may want marriage but recoil from its daily sacrifices, dream of fatherhood but avoid its obligations, or continually search for the next opportunity when the present one demands perseverance. He wants to fly indefinitely without learning to land. The puer aeternus is not a DSM diagnosis, but it offers a vivid language for a recognizable clinical and human struggle.

Mommy's Little Boy: When Love Becomes a Prison

Some developmental difficulties emerge not from obvious cruelty but from relationships overflowing with affection. Consider the devoted mother who anticipates every need, rescues her son from discomfort, and cannot bear to see him struggle. Children absolutely need warmth and protection. The trouble begins when a mother's need to remain indispensable becomes more important than her son's need to grow. Perhaps she is lonely or carries unresolved wounds; perhaps her marriage is emotionally distant. Without intending harm, she begins relying on her son for reassurance, companionship, or meaning that ought not be his responsibility.

The boy learns that independence makes Mom unhappy. Assertiveness begins to feel selfish; separation feels like abandonment. He may leave home, marry, and build a career while remaining psychologically tethered to her approval. Contemporary research distinguishes supportive parenting from psychological control, which can intrude upon a young person's developing autonomy (Barber et al., 2005). That distinction matters. A loving mother is not the problem; emotional enmeshment and guilt-based control are. There may be self-serving needs in this dynamic without any justification for casually diagnosing the mother with narcissistic personality disorder.

The tragedy is that she may believe she has given her son everything, while withholding something indispensable: the freedom to become himself. A mother should hope her son loves her for life. She should not need him to remain a little boy to feel loved.

Dad, Where Were You?

And where was Dad? It would be unfair and clinically shortsighted to place this developmental burden on mothers alone. Some fathers are absent because of circumstances beyond their control. Others are physically present but psychologically unavailable: earning a paycheck, occupying a recliner, and missing the everyday opportunities to demonstrate mature manhood. Boys benefit from seeing how responsible adults handle frustration, honor commitments, apologize, treat women, manage fear, and persist when

life is hard. Research on father involvement supports its importance for multiple aspects of children's development, while recognizing that family relationships and circumstances vary (Sarkadi et al., 2008).

A father need not be perfect, and a boy without an involved biological father is not doomed. Grandfathers, coaches, pastors, mentors, and other dependable adults can model integrity and responsibility. The point is not that boys require a flawless masculine superhero. They need someone who shows up, sets boundaries, offers affection, and allows them to encounter manageable challenges without immediately swooping in to rescue them. The goal is not to raise a son who forever needs his parents to decide for him; it is to raise a son who can make sound decisions because of what they taught him.

What About Testosterone? Is Biology Following Behavior?

Now let me throw another log on the fire: testosterone. As a clinical psychologist fascinated by the relationship between mind and body, I wonder whether some modern habits are shaping not only men's psychological functioning but their endocrine health. Travison and colleagues (2007) reported an age-independent decline in serum testosterone in a studied population of American men over time. That finding does not establish a universal decline or identify a single cause, but it raises legitimate questions about health, environment, and lifestyle.

Testosterone is not a laboratory test of manhood. Courage, responsibility, tenderness, and character cannot be read from a hormone panel. There are many medical causes of low testosterone, and no credible evidence that failing to act “manly” directly causes testosterone deficiency. Yet the broader biological question is intriguing. Obesity and metabolic dysfunction are associated with lower testosterone, and some related hormonal changes can improve with weight loss (Grossmann, 2020). In a small experimental study, one week of sleep restriction was associated with a reduction in daytime testosterone in healthy young men (Leproult & Van Cauter, 2011).

Think about how much of contemporary life is spent sitting: at work, in a car, at a desk, before a television. Physical exertion and challenge increasingly have to be scheduled rather than naturally encountered. My conjecture is not that competition or assertiveness magically boosts testosterone. It is that patterns of sleep, movement, metabolic health, social experience, and behavior interact with physiology, and that an increasingly sedentary lifestyle may have consequences we are still working to understand. The relationship between biology and behavior is reciprocal, although the particular causal pathways deserve careful research.

Within NeuroFaith®, I emphasize Movement as Medicine because the mind and body are not separate enterprises. We were not designed to develop strength by avoiding every challenge that requires it. Gentlemen, while researchers continue sorting out the endocrinology, perhaps we can at least get off the couch and take a walk. Our muscles and our minds might appreciate it.

From Eternal Boy to Mature Man: The Puer and the Senex

Jungian psychology places the puer alongside the senex, the elder or old man, whose constructive qualities include discipline, structure, patience, wisdom, and responsibility. The senex is not simply an

elderly fellow with gray hair and a good retirement account. A young man can develop those qualities, and an old man can spend his entire life avoiding them. Neither archetypal pattern is wholly good or bad: the shadow side of the senex is rigidity and control, just as the shadow side of the puer is endless possibility without commitment. The youthful spirit contributes imagination, playfulness, curiosity, and adventure. I hope never to lose mine. I still love motorcycles, laughter, and occasionally doing something that causes my wife to wonder whether I will ever grow up.

But vitality needs judgment. Freedom needs discipline. Affection needs dependability. A mature man does not have to kill the boy within him; he has to stop letting that boy run the entire show. He can be tender without being helpless, assertive without being cruel, and adventurous without abandoning those who count on him. That is not the death of boyhood. It is the boy finally becoming a man. And, gentlemen, there is a world of difference.

Have We Raised a Generation of Spineless Christians?

I realize that heading may make a few church folks squirm. Perhaps it should. I am not talking about the man who cries at his daughter's wedding, prays with his children, listens carefully to his wife, or admits when he is afraid. I admire those men. I am talking about the fellow who confuses being Christian with being perpetually agreeable, who avoids necessary confrontation, and who calls his reluctance to act "gentleness." Somewhere along the way, have we begun to teach boys that goodness requires the surrender of courage? I worry that parts of the Christian world have embraced a picture of manhood so harmless, so carefully polished, that we have forgotten what conviction looks like when it costs us something.

Consider David. He confronted Goliath when others stood paralyzed by fear, yet this same warrior gave us psalms of grief, repentance, longing, and worship. I sometimes wonder whether we have become so determined to raise gentle Christian men that we have inadvertently raised a few who would rather negotiate with Goliath than pick up a stone. Good heavens, gentlemen, David must be rolling his eyes. His strength did not make tenderness impossible, and his tenderness did not make him weak. Or consider Jesus, who wept with the grieving, welcomed children, and showed compassion to the marginalized, yet also confronted hypocrisy and refused to abandon His calling in the face of suffering. I cannot reconcile either example with the idea that Christian masculinity means becoming a pleasant, conflict-avoidant bystander. Biblical courage is not bullying; it is the willingness to act rightly when doing so is frightening or costly.

This discussion also touches an influential idea in psychology. Sandra Bem (1974) described psychological androgyny as the capacity to possess traits conventionally labeled masculine and feminine, such as assertiveness and tenderness. Her argument was not that biological differences vanish or that everyone must become identical. I appreciate the insight that a mature person can embody both sets of strengths. But I question a cultural tendency, sometimes echoed in church life, to treat distinctly masculine responsibility as embarrassing or suspect. In my understanding of Christian family life, husbands are called to sacrificial love, not domination; Ephesians 5:25 sets the standard at giving oneself for another. Women

are no less courageous or capable of protection, but I believe fathers and husbands should take seriously their responsibility to lead through service, defend the vulnerable, and remain steady when life turns ugly.

The problem is not that we have taught men to be sensitive. The problem is that sensitivity without backbone can become another refuge for the eternal boy. A man can learn every polite phrase, speak fluently about feelings, and still disappear when his family needs him to take responsibility. I want men who can comfort a frightened child and confront a bully; who can apologize when wrong and stand firm when right; who can pray with tenderness and act with conviction. The Christian church should be helping boys grow into that kind of integrated manhood. Jung might have called it part of the difficult work of becoming whole. I would simply call it growing up.

Parents, It Is Time to Wake Up

Parents, our task is not simply to keep children happy and comfortable. It is to prepare them to live competently and courageously when we are no longer standing beside them. Secure attachment and emotional attunement are foundations, not substitutes, for growing autonomy. We should offer affection and safety while also providing age-appropriate responsibility, opportunities to solve problems, and manageable experiences of frustration. Parental psychological control is not the same as guidance or love (Barber et al., 2005).

Our children are not here to complete us, repair our marriages, or reassure us that we matter. They are separate human beings entrusted to our care. I say that as a psychologist, a father, and a grandfather who knows parenting is never as easy as the textbooks make it sound. We all make mistakes, sometimes recognizing them only after our children are grown. But we can still change how we show up: encouraging responsibility instead of dependency, celebrating independence instead of interpreting it as rejection, and modeling the maturity we hope to see. Have we become so determined to protect children from the discomfort of growing up that we inadvertently protect them from growing up at all? That question ought to make every parent, including this one, squirm a little.

Manhood Is Earned, Not Bestowed

I have spent decades helping people understand wounds from childhood, relationships, trauma, and the disappointments of being human. I know that avoidance and immaturity are not always born of laziness. Sometimes they reflect fear, insecure attachment, or skills that were never taught. Those histories deserve compassion. But compassion and accountability are not enemies. Understanding why we struggle does not absolve us of the work of growing.

That conviction is personal. My son Gregg, a Marine who served in Iraq, has taught me much about courage, duty, and the cost of carrying both. I have also been privileged to co-author two books with remarkable colleagues: *When Duty Called*, which tells stories of courage, trauma, and redemption among those who served, and *The Wounds We Carry*, which explores the wounds borne by active duty service members, veterans, and first responders—and the paths toward healing. In the latter work, I had the honor of writing alongside Kris A. Peterson, MD; Johnnie Griffiths; Salvatore Bitondo, LICSW; Stephanie Bowser, PsyD; and Jack Marion. I name them here deliberately: these men and women have earned my

respect, and their contributions deserve to be seen. Those books are not arguments for swagger or emotional armor. They are reminders that courage and vulnerability can live in the same man (Hansen & Griffiths, 2026; Hansen et al., 2026).

Some men need therapy, mentorship, spiritual guidance, healthier boundaries, or help learning emotional regulation. Some need to stop escaping into entertainment and begin honoring commitments. I am not calling for a caricature of masculinity in which men suppress emotion, dominate others, or confuse intimidation with strength. I am calling for men strong enough to be gentle, courageous enough to be vulnerable, disciplined enough to be dependable, and secure enough to love without possessing.

Perhaps that is why Jung continues to speak to me. He understood that becoming whole requires more than explaining the past. It requires confronting who we are and moving toward who we can become. For those of us who are Christians, that journey also involves grace, forgiveness, humility, and service to purposes larger than personal comfort. To the man who recognizes himself in these pages: your past may explain some of your struggles, but it need not dictate your future. There is still time to grow. Nobody else, however, can do that work for you. So, with affection, conviction, and a little exasperation, allow this old psychologist one final plea: **Men, for heaven's sake, wake up, and man the hell up!**

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