What It Means to Be a Man

Mullen, Bill

Published by Marine Corps University Press

Mullen, Bill.
What It Means to Be a Man: How to Become a Better Person.
Project MUSE.  muse.jhu.edu/book/111378.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/111378
I succeeded in getting you to open this book because of the title. That was by design, but it does not mean what you think it might mean. This is not just a book about men for men. It was written for all who choose to pick it up and consume the content. Its origin lies in a discussion that my son and I had regarding a movie we both love—Secondhand Lions. Released in 2003 by New Line Cinema, the movie stars Robert Duvall and Michael Caine as two crotchety old brothers who live together in an equally old house in rural Texas in the 1950s and are decidedly antisocial. Their world is turned upside down when they have their young grandnephew (Haley Joel Osment) dumped on them for the summer by their flaky niece who wants to go off and party. It is a funny and thoroughly enjoyable movie, but what impressed me most was referred to as the “What it means to be a man” speech.¹

¹ “‘The Speech’—Secondhand Lions (2003),” YouTube video, 14 August 2016, 4:42 min.
Robert Duvall’s character is a rough and tumble guy who, though old, still knows how to fight and proves it against a group of punk teenagers in a local café who successfully pick a fight with him. After the altercation, in which he does some damage to them physically, but even worse, thoroughly embarrasses them in public, he invites them to his house for a steak dinner, where he gives these young men his “What it means to be a man” speech. Michael Caine and Haley Joel Osment’s characters watch him speak to these young men and Osment asks what it means. Caine’s character explains that Duvall’s character gives it to young men in an attempt to encourage them to grow up and be good people instead of the knucklehead’s they were before they met. Osment’s character spends the rest of the movie doing everything he can to ensure that Duvall’s character will be around to give him the speech when he gets older. In one of the climactic scenes, he finally wheedles a portion of it out of Duvall who says:

Sometimes the things that may or may not be true are the things that a man needs to believe in the most: that people are basically good; that honor, courage, and virtue mean everything; that power and money, money and power mean nothing; that good always triumphs over evil; and I want you to remember this, that love, true love, never dies. . . . No matter if they’re true or not, a man should believe in those things because those are the things worth believing in.²

Both my son and I enjoyed the movie and, after watching it, he asked me what I would say if I were to give this speech. While I had thought about the advice I might pass along based on my knowledge and experiences in life, I had not passed that advice along as much as I should have and certainly never put it in writing. The result of that

² “The Speech.”
discussion was an article that I wrote that was published in the *Marine Corps Gazette* in November 2018.\(^3\) I wrote the article due to my belief that we all have flaws because, as humans, we are all inherently fallible. I believe that if we can focus on becoming better people in life, it will likely help mitigate that fallibility. I wrote the article thinking that if all of our younger Marines could read the things I wrote, internalize the words and thoughts behind them, and use them to not only be better Marines but more importantly, better people, then we can be a much better Marine Corps overall. By expanding the article to this short book, I do so in the hopes of reaching a larger audience, but with the same general intent.

The importance of younger Marines taking this information to heart is that there is a real need for them to mature much more quickly and without the penalties of immaturity and bad behavior that are becoming so much more prolific in the information age. When I was young, youthful mindlessness was just as prevalent as it is today, but there were no cell phone cameras to record some of the less admirable aspects of my life and that of my peers. Today, cell phone cameras are everywhere and almost nothing seems to go unrecorded and then posted on some social media site for all to see and “admire” . . . or not. Unfortunately, whatever makes it onto the internet stays there forever (except for Snapchat, I suppose) and potential employers are now using these platforms to evaluate those who have applied for jobs. I am not sure I could have successfully weathered that kind of scrutiny in the early 1980s when I was competing for a scholarship from the U.S. Marine Corps and then becoming a Marine officer.

That original article, and now this book, focuses mainly on young Marines because, as with most young people, they tend not to consider the potential consequences before taking action and generally have

---

little sense of perspective. They are damaging their future with this
behavior, and they are, for the most part, seemingly unaware of this
fact. My intention with the article was to get their attention in order to
change their behavior for the better. Both the Marine Corps and their
families have invested so much time, effort, and money into them that
they are more than worth any effort to make them better people. This
is not only for when they are actually serving in the Marine Corps, but
maybe even more importantly for when they take off the uniform and
return to civilian society.

Do not misunderstand me though. We have a great Marine Corps
made up of some of the most selfless and patriotic young women
and men you could ever want to meet. The overwhelming majority of
them do exactly what we need them to do every day despite relatively
low pay and, in some cases, spartan living conditions. They have nev-
er forgotten what it means to earn the title Marine and what it takes
to live up to our core values of honor, courage, and commitment ev-
ery day. Unfortunately, we can do a hundred things correctly and only
one thing wrong, but that single wrong thing will be more readily re-
membered, especially when documented by the seemingly ubiquitous
cell phone camera.

Being an organization made up of human beings, the Marine Corps
has its share of mistakes of both omission and commission. We have a
stringent indoctrination program that transforms civilians into Marines,
but it is certainly not foolproof. Some of our Marines do succumb to
temptation and/or peer pressure and forget what they are obligated
to represent after earning the title of U.S. Marine. We also know that
America expects more from the Marine Corps. While perfection is not
possible, it is an ideal the Corps should strive to live up to and further-
ing the pursuit of this ideal is the purpose of writing this book. If it caus-
es one Marine, male or female, to make better decisions and try harder
to live up to our core values, then it will have been worth the effort to
write and publish. By extension, if it gains the attention of the general public and causes any member of the American population to become a better person, then the effort will have been even more worthwhile. We are seeing that across our society, young people are ill-equipped for the difficulties of life. Whether they are getting sucked into the alternate realities to be found in video games, addicted to internet pornography or illegal substances, afflicted by a multitude of mental health challenges, or death by their own hand, our youth today need help to enable them to be the people who will lead this country into the future.

Last, I am writing this in the hope that it will be a solid byproduct of all the reading I have accomplished by this point in my life. Throughout my career, I read voraciously and widely in the attempt to better understand not just the profession of arms but also those who I was tasked with leading. Though I have now retired, I continue to read at virtually the same pace because I believe that every book I finish adds another tool to the toolbox with which I address the challenges I face in life. The more I read, the more my personal toolbox becomes like that of a master mechanic—never at a loss for the right tool at the right time. I also believe that the combination of knowledge and vicarious experience gained from reading (actual experience is good, but we rarely have much choice in if or how that occurs) when combined with understanding, common sense and insight, renders wisdom. Wisdom is the ability to make sound decisions using good judgment, which is essential to the profession of arms, just as it is in many other walks of life. Since the list of books I have read is more than 3,000 titles now (yes, I keep track), and I cast my net widely to read not only what I like, but things that I disagree with in order to learn from them also, I hope to use some of the wisdom in the writing of this book so as to benefit those I care so much about—the youth of our nation. They are indeed our future and it is up to us to help ensure they get off to the best start possible.
WHAT IT MEANS TO BE A MAN