



Courtesy of Polly Ingraham

The writer's son, Henry Hirschfeld, works at the Terra Organics farm in Contoocook.

MY TURN

a meditation on
BOYHOOD

When young men go so far astray, like the Charleston shooter, we need to consider what led them there

By POLLY INGRAHAM

For the Monitor

During these lovely days of early summer, I'm thinking about how we cherish the little treasures that glimmer through our daily lives while, at the same time, not shrinking from the full force of tragedies outside of our own households. Sometimes, of course, it can be the opposite: our own worlds may grow dark with loss and pain, yet we manage to recognize that for others, the sun still shines.

As last month's mass shooting at the church in Charleston still pounds on our souls, it is hard to know what to do, how to act, where to turn. The regular, tranquil moments can seem inconsequential in the face of such unfathomable horrors.

Since I find myself in a precious patch of days at home in the company of my teenage son, however, I am thinking about what it means, for boys in particular, to grow up: What do they need to thrive? What are the factors that, in some cases, can set them dangerously off course? Their job is to claim places in the world, feel recognized, and still fulfill their responsibilities to others. It's serious business all right. It is for us too – we watch our sons grow tall, push off from us and sometimes become mysterious in their own might.

Maybe that's why the hilarious moments are so welcome.

While we were eating

dinner the other night on the screened porch, our 16-year-old Henry decided to pose some questions about those years before his father and I got married. He wanted to know what kind of jobs we had, what the dating scene was like, how we navigated our late twenties and early thirties before being thunderstruck by love. His father being on the other side of the country at the Episcopal Convention, I was on my own, and so I tried to answer with my usual decorum.

The drumbeat of news from the outside, though, rams home the point that far too many young men are lost, unmotivated, full of hate, or all these combined. In these cases, "growing up" is really not at all what they're doing.

When I mentioned that I'd spent some time working for a "temp agency" in Boston, his face suddenly lit up and he exclaimed, "A tempeh agency?!" Having recently adopted a vegan way of life and now learning to cook many flavorful dishes with this wonderful if drab looking stuff, he was thrilled to hear that his mother had actually been employed at a place dedicated to the production of it. Attaway, Ma! Little did he know, of course, that my time with the temp-not-tempeh agency was

far from the wondrous era he imagined. While I did in fact meet a whole lot of characters in offices around the city, my self-esteem plummeted as people barely saw the need to learn my name or anything else about me. I might as well have worn a sign that said, "I'm In Between Things, so I Don't Really Count." What does count, during this stretch of the longest days of the year, is the time I'm getting to be with my son. He's balancing working at an organic farm with taking driver's ed, that staple of teenage life. While the affable teacher rambles on with his acronyms about all the things you have to worry about behind the wheel, Henry can stand it because he spends most of his daylight hours outside in the fields, surrounded by green things growing everywhere. And then in the evenings, he runs.

Since the prospect of getting his license is hovering out there in the near future, I still accompany him in the car, doing the daily circuit from home to farm to class and around again. And then there are the screened porch dinners, too. Gathered up together, these pieces qualify, especially as he is my third child, as a glimmering treasure.

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too many young men are lost, unmotivated, full of hate, or all these combined. In these cases, "growing up" is really not at all what they're doing. I came upon a book called *Boys Adrift* recently; it's not about how mass murderers are made so much as it's about the factors that, according to the author, Dr. Leonard Sax, lead boys astray, cause them to squander their abilities. They're doing a dangerous kind of drifting, he argues, and the whole society suffers as a

result. Video games, prescription drugs, devaluation of masculinity, teaching methods that favor girls, and environmental factors – these are all contributing to the problem, and we'd better take notice.

This rings true to an extent, based on what I've seen. And yet, as *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* forever reminds us, drifting done right – in the pursuit of true freedom – can also be glorious.

Here's what Huck says at

the end of Chapter 18: "I was powerful glad to get away from the feuds, and so was Jim to get away from the swamp. We said there warn't no home like a raft, after all. Other places do seem so cramped up and smothery, but a raft don't. You feel mighty free and easy and comfortable on a raft."

Amen to that. For my own boy, and so many others coming into their own strength, having plenty of drive is a good and necessary thing of course. Once

in a while, though – not when they're actually behind the wheel – some Huck-like drifting might just keep them from getting "all cramped up and smothery." Let's all do what we can to celebrate our boys . . . to care for them, to support them, to let them know that they can make a positive difference and enjoy themselves, too.

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