

# Images Are What You Make Of Them

## (Part 3 of 3)

*An Edited Reprint of the November 1997 Edition*

In order for this final installment to bring some sense of conclusion to the series, perhaps it would be best if a few sentences from the first installment were restated here.

"A topic of some concern in many of the letters I receive is that of images. Some write letters wishing there might be a way in which they could start over. Others indicate real problems with fantasy-especially inappropriate fantasy. And still others write of an inability to connect with themselves as men." Here's a little story to get us into Part 3.

"Mark was a quiet boy. While he enjoyed playing with the others in the neighborhood, he really did not have the same interests. Even on the best of days when it was quiet in the house, there was always some kind of tension in his family, and he hated it.

"As he grew older, he kept seeing how different he was. He wasn't like his dad or his brothers despite his efforts to do and like the same things they did and liked. The guys at school would share stories-some he believed, some he didn't, and some he wanted to believe. When he looked at himself in the mirror, the image was unclear and often less than desirable.

"Years passed and life got more complicated, his failures far outnumbering his victories in the one thing that mattered most to him-becoming a man. Without meaning to do so, he placed the men he most admired on pedestals, the result being that his efforts to copy the qualities those men possessed failed dismally.

"Prison was not on the list of places where he wanted to live, but it was where he found himself, a convicted child molester. Whatever happened, he wondered, to his dream of becoming a respected husband and father? Whatever happened to the image of manhood he had carried so long?"

I could write an ending to this story, an ending that might have the "happily ever after" sound we have all read in children's books. But the truth of the matter is that this story will have countless endings. Every man who reads it is faced with options as to how Mark's life will turn out because every man who reads this story *will* in some way or another see himself as Mark or at least parts of Mark.

Mark's image of manhood and his dream are not gone, just distorted over the years and in some ways overshadowed by false images and dreams. Of this much I am sure, Mark will not find what he really desires in the world of children.

*"When I was a child I used to talk like a child, think like a child, reason like a child. When I became a man I put childish ways aside (1Cor.13.11)"* I need to put aside Mark for the moment and bring reality into this conclusion. While I can relate to many of you, I can best relate to myself, so that *will* be the manner in which I'll try to draw things to a close.

With every fiber of my being, I wanted a place among my peers and a sense of belonging. Perhaps I had more of that than I realized at the time, but my insides told me I was an outsider despite my efforts to be otherwise. As some therapists will admit, a perceived situation or feeling is as real as one born in reality. In other words, had I been a part of the crowd but believed myself to be outside of it, I *was* outside of that group despite what the reality might have been or looked like to others.

As I grew older, I found that young people looked up to me and respected me. In their eyes I was an adult who cared about them, while in my mind I forgot about being an adult and saw myself as one of them. The needs they expressed were familiar to me because I still had those same needs. In my distorted thinking, to focus on the young meant not having to face what I believed was my rejection by the adult world.

As an adult, skills I had learned and developed provided me with a career and eventually a reputation as someone skilled in that career. The career I chose, teaching, seemed like the best of both worlds. My work brought me into close contact with the young as well as respect from their parents as being an adult who really cared for their children.

In the end, I sexually molested students while tragically believing that I was doing them no harm, that our relationship was merely an honest expression of intimacy. As I eventually realized and accepted as truth, it was neither.

While in prison I had time to look again at the image I wanted for myself and at the dream of becoming husband and father. In prison my faith life and relationship with God took on new dimensions and, for the first time in my life, I believed that both image and dream were possible. In order for that to happen, however, I had to see myself as God saw me. I had to believe in my personal brand of masculinity, seeing it as a good thing.

Now and again I still put someone on a pedestal and try to be a copy of that person. I will always fail, though, because as I often say, no one can be better at being me than I am, so it stands to reason that I could never be a better anybody else than they are.

Standing as a man among men can be scary at times, especially given my criminal history, but I have a right and maybe even a responsibility to be in the presence of other men. Like them, I have things to learn and I will learn them. Like them, I have things to share and I will share them. But my words alone change no one—especially me. Words backed by a consistent lifestyle and a spirit of commitment will open the doors of possibility with others. They are the stuff of which miracles are made.

Whether the images we confront are from a fractured childhood, a distorted fantasy life that won't go away, or a frustrated sense of identity as men, we must believe in ourselves and in the plan God has for each of us. We all have a story that is still being written and the ending can be incredible! Between you and me, how will *you* end the story?

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*All things are possible with God!*