



Everything I know about being a man  
I learned from a woman.



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BY MICHAEL EASTER

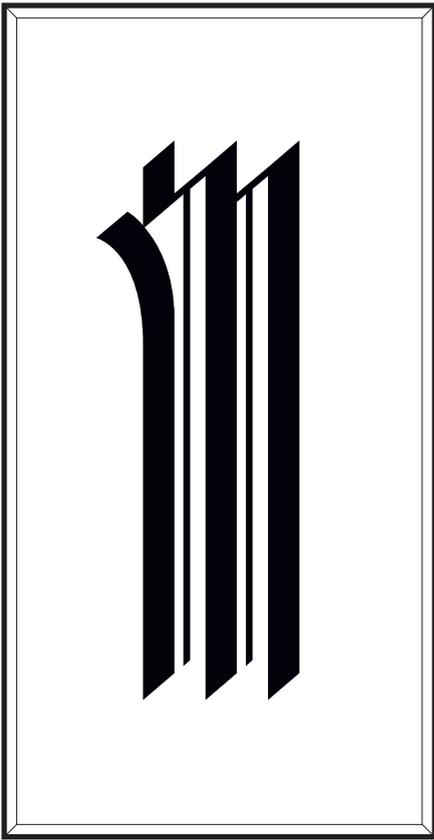


PHOTOGRAPH BY AUSTIN HARGRAVE



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**MY MOM GOT SOBER** when my dad was in rehab. This was 1985. She was sitting in the bathtub sipping a vodka tonic and flipping through a paperback. It was the same book my father would be reading in his recovery program. She came across these lines: “Try to drink

and stop abruptly. Try it twice.” After years of boozing and drugging, those words revealed an undiscovered truth: At 35, she, too, needed to clean up. ¶ With their shared source of misery behind them, my parents found calm, and my mom soon became pregnant with me. But five months in, my dad, at 29, decided the party wasn’t over and that a pregnant, dry, drinking buddy was no drinking buddy at all. He walked out on his two-year marriage for good.

So there she was: alone, baby on the way, white-knuckling the wagon, no college education or money in the bank. The only things to her name were a failing women’s clothing store and our home—a bank-owned trailer on the side of a highway outside Ketchum, Idaho.

This was a rotten hand. The American dream isn’t so easy to find when you have two X chromosomes, an infant, and no help or degree. According to one estimate, the poverty rate of single mothers is five times that of married couples, and half of single mothers live in what the government calls “extreme poverty,” getting by on less than \$200 a week.

So my mother folded. She closed the store, walked away from the trailer, and moved us to Utah to be near family. Despite the misgivings of her parents, who wanted her to take a safe job at the IRS, she started a business as an independent wholesaler of women’s clothes.

Have you ever played tug-of-war with a pit bull? It’ll pull until you quit or it dies. That’s Lynda Easter. She called on more clients, did more favors, and drove more miles than anyone in her industry. We ate a lot of takeout.

“You’re lucky,” my mom’s work friends would tell me as I sat in her office playing Game Boy or reading while she faxed in orders and prepared the next season’s line. “Your mother works very hard for you.”

That work paid off. When I was 8, she bought us a house in the nice part of town. Our first nights there, we blasted Motown—Smokey, the Temptations—and danced like fools in the living room, her shimmering brown hair horizontal as we twirled.

Every summer we took a two-week vacation to a faraway country like Thailand, China, or Hungary—an education for us both.

## How Strong Is Your Mom?

Tell us with a few words (and a photo) at [MHstory@rodale.com](mailto:MHstory@rodale.com). She may appear on [MensHealth.com](http://MensHealth.com) in time for Mother’s Day!



“My mother used a rough childhood as inspiration to give me an upbringing of love, support, and understanding. Beyond that, she stands as a perfect role model for healthy, active living, helping me lose 50 pounds and build confidence.”

COLTON DAVIS, 28, BURFORD, ON



“My mom is a warrior. She’s a loving, amazing woman full of faith. She has gone through domestic abuse and a son in prison, and as a single mother she raised me to be the man I am today. She has always said, ‘Everything happens for a reason.’”

JOSEPH MONTES, 28, EDINBURG, TX



“I started a gay youth group when I was 16. My mother, who is a single parent, came to the meetings to share her support of my coming out. Her own battle as a woman and a single mom sent a message to those young people: Never give up being yourself.”

MICHAEL DAVIS, 41, NEW YORK, NY

And after I graduated from high school, she put me through college.

In our small Utah town, where the Rockwellian, patriarchal family ruled and one religion dominated, Lynda stood out. She was a single mother who not only worked but made good money, didn't go to church, voted Democrat, traveled the world, and read 100 books a year. She was viewed by some as a beacon of hope and by others as a threat to the community.

We felt the glances. People spoke in "poor you" subtext. Certain kids weren't allowed to hang out with me. But I never once heard my mom complain about what she faced then and still faces today. I have, however, seen her help others cope with their own hurdles. Like when we'd deliver food to a man dying of AIDS. Or visit a women's shelter, offering time and empathy. Once we picked up an elderly Navajo woman hitchhiking outside Shiprock, New Mexico, and drove her to her hogan deep in the Navajo Nation.

People ask me what it was like to grow up without a father. I used to say I didn't really

▼  
**PEOPLE ASK ME WHAT IT WAS LIKE TO GROW UP WITHOUT A FATHER. I TELL THEM I HAVE A REALLY GOOD MOM.**

know because I had nothing to compare it to. But I've come to realize my answer shows just how adept my mom was at creating comfort, stability, and knowledge, pulling double duty as both mother and father. I now only say, "I have a really good mom."

I never regretted not having a dad talk to me about standing up for myself—because I had a 5'3", 110-pound pit bull in my corner. My mom once shoved a 180-pound guy who cut into our movie line. And who needs a father running the sidelines when I have a mother who wouldn't let me win in horse and worked overtime so we could have season tickets to the Stockton-and-Malone Utah Jazz?

The downfall of some fathers is that they are men, and men don't ask for help. From my mother I learned that not asking for help is self-centered. She recognized her weaknesses. When I wanted to learn outdoorsy, "manly" stuff, for example, she signed me up for Scouts and kept after me until I earned Eagle Scout. "Finish what you started," she'd say once I'd reached my teenage years and was more interested in girls and cars than tying knots and building lean-tos.

When I wanted to go fishing, she'd pass me off to her father—a businessman who inspired her work ethic—who'd get a speeding ticket on every trip and pull more trout out of high-country streams than I could believe.

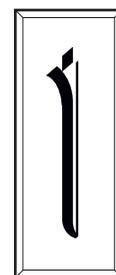
My mom and I have always had each other's back. I never knew when we struggled financially, how she felt about my dad leaving, or the trials she faced in our community. I, too, gave her an edited version of my own issues because I didn't want her to worry. But two things happened over the past few years that drew us closer.

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## An Anchor's Rock

BY MATT LAUER



I took my 15-year-old son, Jack, to see my mother the other day. He had asked if we could spend some time with her, as if he's begun to do the math and wants to soak her in as much as possible. We all do.

As I listened to them talk, I marveled

at the way she focused on him, connected with and questioned him, and teased him in a loving way. I couldn't help but think how lucky he is to be her grandson, and how lucky I am to be her son.

My mother is a wonderful woman in her mid-80s, as quick with a story as she is with a hug. Time has clouded her sight and made her steps more difficult but hasn't dampened her spirits. Mentally she is every bit as agile and curious as someone half her age. Her sense of humor has lifted our spirits in challenging times.

My mom is a strong woman, eager to stand up for herself and her family. Her strength comes from being tested by life's unpredictability. It comes from soldiering on for her children, even when she might rather have given up. I know it hasn't always come easily, but I also know it's her greatest gift.

Some things our parents pass on to us in our DNA. Other things we have the privilege of getting through the power of their example. I've been lucky in both ways.

Matt Lauer is coanchor of NBC News' TODAY.



"My mother was in the U.S. Air Force Academy's third class to accept women. She served for over 20 years while also raising my two sisters and me. Her success in a male-dominated field taught me that anyone who puts in the work deserves respect."

PETER JONES, 28, CHICAGO, IL



"My supermom was a single mom. She doubled down and adopted my sister in 1988. She made it home for dinner every night and went to all our games and concerts. She provided for our higher education, then retired early to take care of her parents."

STEVEN SPRINGER, 33, VISALIA, CA

► MY BADASS MOM, FROM P. 125

gears mentally. For example, in high-stress situations that require calm decisions, Rangers use diaphragmatic breathing—inhaling deeply through the nose for a four count and then exhaling on a four count.

Heintz's office at the gym doubles as a library. He hands specific books to guys in the spirit of coaches like Phil Jackson. His favorites include *Deep Survival* by Laurence Gonzales, *On Killing* by Lt. Col. David Grossman (ret.), *The Gift of Fear* by Gavin de Becker, *Being Wrong* by Kathryn Schulz, and *Mindset* by Carol Dweck, Ph.D. Quotes are posted on the walls, with talking points underneath. Here are some (and the takeaway for you).

**FIX YOUR FACE!** By deliberately changing your facial expressions, you can control your emotions, shift your focus, and increase or decrease your intensity. If there is a job to do and you're struggling, fix your face.

**BOLDLY INTO DARKNESS.** Exceptional performance starts with belief. Confidence is that belief. Like any skill, confidence is built, earned, forged. Do something every day that scares you. (For example, if you can power clean 245 pounds, try 255 next time.)

**OWN IT.** Why you are not performing at your best is irrelevant. Don't judge yourself. Excuses are instinctive and distracting. Own who you are and stare into the abyss and say, "Okay, now what?"

Heintz, who has a quote for every situation, shares two more that resonate with the men: "Acknowledge that vulnerability allows you to improve" and "You're not defined by your experiences but by what you learn from them." It's tough being a Ranger in an era of emoticons and likes. "The men I work with would say their work doesn't inherently produce consistent feelings of happiness that our culture has come to expect at all times," Heintz says. "The work Rangers do is not happy, though it can be fulfilling. I tell them, 'It's okay to feel whatever you're feeling. It's okay not to feel awesome all the time.'"

One guy who is feeling awesome—and exhausted—is Horsager. He's held on to his lead, completing the competition in just over six hours. He's endured a 30-plus-mile movement with 55 pounds of gear and blasted through two obstacle courses. Now he owns bragging rights for the regiment. But he's matter-of-fact about his win. "I focused on what I needed to do," he says. "I knew it was going to be nonstop pain until the finish." Then he quotes legendary runner Steve Prefontaine. "To give anything less than your best is to sacrifice the gift." ■

First, I realized that I have the family drinking bones, a condition that leads a man to believe his world will be perfect after the next drink. She was the first person I called. "You're not a bad person," she said. "You're just a sick person. Here's what I did when I was in your situation..." In our hours of conversation afterward, she delivered empathy and advice in a nonjudgmental way that let me know she was there for me, but that this was my journey and I wasn't that damn special. I now understand that I don't have to worry whether I can stop drinking abruptly if I don't start drinking in the first place.

Last May she called to tell me she had cancer. For the first time, I saw a chink in her armor. She said she was afraid of what she'd see at the hospital, that she was tired from all the chemicals in her body and angry that her beautiful hair was falling out.

I gave whatever advice I could and told her when her thoughts were getting ahead of her. I've been able to return, in a small way, all the help she's given me. Cancer didn't get my mom, but it sure did kill our filters.

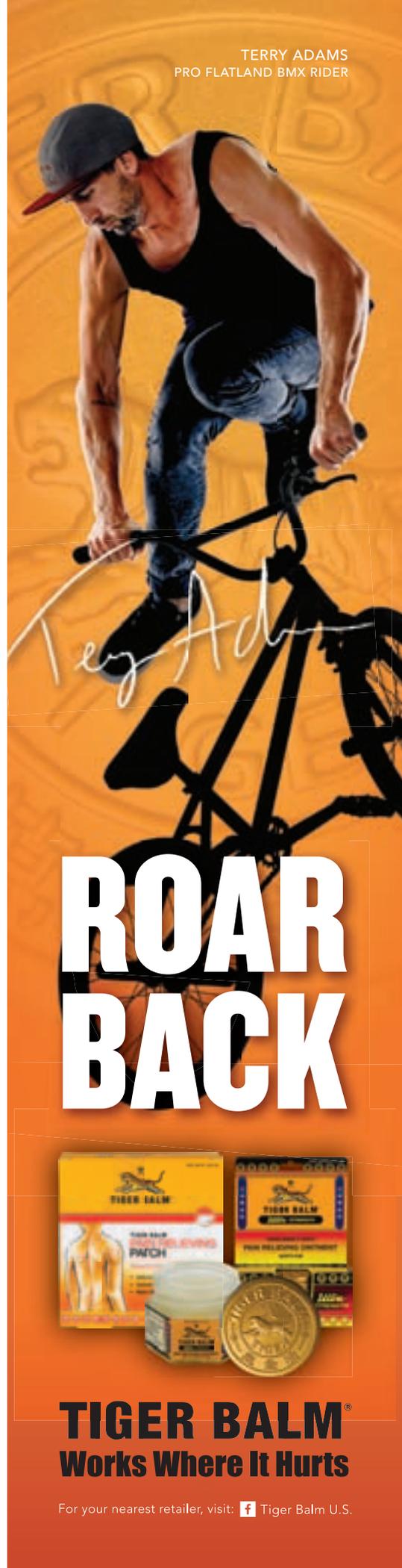
As men, we think we can control everything. I now realize that it's not only okay to be vulnerable, but that embracing your powerlessness is necessary for emotional and spiritual growth. It allows you to quit fighting when you're beat, and cures you of the notion that your way is the only way.

When I try to understand the ultimate promise of my mother, I'm left with the idea that you need to bet on and strengthen yourself so that you can improve the lives of others. She placed a bet on herself: that she could get clean, build a business, and be a good parent. Then she tipped the odds in her favor by working her hardest, and—most important—paying it forward.

Seeing her live out this idea recently gave me the strength to leave a high-profile magazine job and move across the country to teach in college. So now, happy with my choice, I remember a lesson she taught me: When the cards fall your way, don't forget to stop and dance to a little Motown.

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