

Propel Beyond Fear: Dive into Life  
Introduction

A fellow free diver was giving me a hard time over the lack of sport fish from my recent spear-fishing adventures:

“How long has it been since you shot a sport fish, Larry?”

“Frank, I haven’t even *taken* a shot at a fish in three years!”

Frank nods his head.

And it’s *not* because of my accident.”

“I didn’t say you were blaming the accident Larry.”

“You didn’t have to *say* it, Frank.”

“Well then what is it Larry? Why aren’t you getting fish anymore?”

Time and again, my good friend Stan shared sea stories about his twenty-five years of diving adventures. His excitement about the underwater world of blue seas, life-covered reefs and giant amber kelp forests was contagious. When I was ready to join him and dive in fifteen years ago, he gave me the heads-up on what to expect my first time out:

Waist deep in cold, sandy water, covered in a patchwork, used, gray and black dive-suit; I lower myself into the water. The sound of my snorkel-contained breathing is deep, powerful and deafening. Ahead of me, through the plate glass of my snug dive mask, the surf-stirred, murky water limits my visibility to the swirling brown soup inches away. Only the surf pushing against my shoulders tells me I’m headed in the right direction.

This is a point where many folks figure out that diving is not for them. Even non-claustrophobics give up. Before we entered the water, Stan told me to keep on kicking. I do.

With my face buried in the water, an unseen three foot swell lifts me, turning me sideways. I grab my mask so I don't lose it. The wave rolls me over and gives me a mouthful of salt water.

*Maybe I'm not cut out for this.*

I flail to the top, struggle to lift my head out of the water, and spit the snorkel out, coughing. I turn right and left, looking for Stan. I can't see him. I right myself in the water and find I'm only in four feet of water.

*Duh.*

Standing awkwardly in my fins, I reinsert my hard rubber, j-shaped, black snorkel and blow out the remaining saltwater. Facing down my fears, I drop back into the brine and push forward into a visibility of maybe two feet. I hold my right arm out to check. I can't see my finger tips clearly. Moving quickly past the surf break, the murk clears and I see that I am in six to eight feet of water. In patches all around me, ribbon kelp sways rhythmically with the swells while directly below me, rocky reefs break through the sandy bottom and green eel grass looking close enough to touch. Surf perch and small schools of bait fish surge back and forth with the swells, backlit by filtered sunlight.

*This is awesome!*

Although my journey into the ocean was just beginning, I recognized that day that something profound changed in my heart and in whom I saw myself to be. I struggled to put my finger on it because in one sense, it was perfectly natural to want to go diving. The ocean is a beautiful, strange world. Although a physical challenge, diving is a phenomenal, spiritual experience. I'm glad I overcame my fear. Yet in another, more reasoning sense, it was not the safest way to spend my time.

Shortly thereafter, my twelve year-old son Kevin joined me and Stan for the first time. Within months, Kevin successfully speared perch, rockfish and calico bass regularly. One evening, as Stan and I sat by our beachside campfire, Kevin came swaggering up with his first large, twenty inch calico bass! Don't get me wrong, it was not a boastful, macho swagger. Kevin is a solid Christian: humble and thankful to God for his life. He was deservedly proud of his accomplishment. Big calicos are older, wiser calico and they are quick. They dart off at the first sign of danger, falling prey only to experienced, silent hunters.

Kevin overcame all this: He was dangerous. He conquered. Most importantly: *He knew it.*

For the first time that day, I saw the man that Kevin was turning into; a confident, purposeful, Christian man.

One year after my life-threatening boat accident and near-death experiences of nine years ago (catch the miraculous survival story in my book, "Dead Man Rising" ©2012), I began the struggle to get back into free-diving and spear-fishing. At first, the mere thought of 'getting wet' freaked me out. My kids and some good friends helped me face these fears; taking me down to the beach and carrying the gear I could not. I'd pull on my wet-suit, clip my weight belt around my waist, strap on my fins, dive mask and snorkel and head for the water. But then a boat would speed by and I couldn't go through with it.

My love for the sport of free-diving and lifelong love affair with the ocean kept bringing me back because I knew:

*If I don't return to the water, a vital part of me will slowly die.*

When my youngest daughter began diving with Kevin and me thirteen years ago, many friends and family thought I was nuts:

“Aren’t you afraid of sharks?”

“You could get hurt.”

“Your children could get hurt.”

Now, after essentially being cut in half by a boat and resuming free-diving, they are convinced: I *am* nuts.

*Am I the only man like this?*

Throughout history, men have fought against great odds, braved the unknown and sought experiences not understood by their family, friends and peers. Whether sailing over the far horizon or scaling Mount Everest, crossing barren deserts or voyaging to the moon, men have sought to conquer the unconquerable. While I don’t claim to be Christopher Columbus nor Neil Armstrong, I believe there is a kindred spirit of adventure common to all men.

This quest for exciting exploits starts early in our lives. Boys view sticks as swords; front yards become alien planets; ornamental hedges transform into dark jungles; empty appliance boxes make strong forts. As I write this introduction, three ten year old boys across the street are shooting each other with pump-action, super soaker squirt guns and having a blast.

Even adult men love a typical ‘guy’ flick: there is a battle between good and evil and the good guys always win. Well, in the *good* movies at least. That’s because men love a challenge and *love* to win.

How is it that three out of four men work at jobs they can’t stand, looking forward to Friday, hoping the plumbing doesn’t break?

What happened to our identification with adventure? Was it just childish make-believe or was it an insight into something that deeply defines men? Did this part of our boyhood need to be left behind only to be fantasized through ‘guy’ flicks and TV sports? Was there another choice we could have made?

Was it driven from us by others: by society, by responsibilities, by our parents, by our wives, by events beyond our control, by life itself? If so, can we get it back? Do we even *need* to get it back?

Are we leading “safe” lives, afraid to get *it* – whatever *it* is - back?

As time goes on, the spirituality of the dive grows on me. The greater my comfort and ease in the water, the more I feel a part of the kelp bed community. It’s as if every moment there is a heightened awareness of the specialness of life. When I return to land, I am somehow transformed into a more thankful, peaceful person and see beauty all around me. It’s kind of weird, but I’m thankful for the changes in me.

My boating accident left me permanently disabled with major nerve, muscle, bone and joint damage making every step on mankind’s concrete-paved world painful. Yet in the weightlessness of the water, I am nearly pain free. It’s ironic that the very activity that resulted in my disability is my rare yet favorite pastime now. I have difficulty carrying my gear to the shore. I expanded my circle of dive buddies to include men who never dove before in order to help with the gear. It seemed a pretty good deal: They learn to dive and I get to go diving.

I observed the same changes I saw in Kevin and me happening in these men. I failed to understand the reasons until five years back I read the John Eldredge book: “Wild at Heart.” Finally, everything fell into place.

Before my accident, I enrolled in a lay-counseling course taught by one of our pastors and produced by the American Association of Christian Counselors (AACC). After my accident, I completed this course while on disability and got involved with my church’s Compassionate Care Ministry. This primarily involved prayers, phone calls, greeting cards and hospital visitations.

Sometimes I got referrals to men that were going through “stuff.” Whenever possible, I encouraged teenaged through middle aged men to go diving with me. Fortunately, they were all okay with carrying my gear.

Great things happen when men work together for the common good. We simply enjoyed God’s beautiful creation together. These men all knew I’m a Christian, but the funny thing is, *they* usually brought up the subject of God. Perhaps it’s the Holy Spirit working, or maybe it’s the spirituality of the dive. Most likely, it is a combination of the two. All I know is that I have witnessed men’s lives changing: drug, alcohol and sexual addictions conquered; broken hearts mended; marriages made stronger; tragic childhoods healed and most dramatically; depression and suicidal thoughts firmly conquered.

I completed another AACC course in “Professional Life Coaching.” I recently completed training with the International Coaching Federation, the oldest and most-highly respected association of professional Coaches in the world. I discovered that ‘coaching’ perfectly described my relationship with these men. As we explored the depths of the local Central California Coastal kelp beds, we also discovered life-changing truths about ourselves.

Journey with me and my dive buddies as we jump in to the adventure that every man is made for, exploring the above questions and the very depths of what it means to be a true man - a man of God: a man free of the dead weight of having to prove himself and thereby free to live his life for his family and others. Not a boastful, full-of-himself arrogant macho-man, but a true adventurer: the knight in shining armor, the dragon-slayer; hero of the game; front-line soldier fighting for honor and freedom for those he loves while living an adventurous, fulfilling life.

In the words of Abraham Lincoln, offering encouragement to a disgruntled Union Major General David Hunter: “Act well your part, there all the honor lies. He who does *something* at the head of one regiment, will eclipse him who does *nothing* at the head of a hundred.”

Back to my conversation with Frank:

“Not one shot in three years, Larry? Why?”

“I’ve taken twenty-two new divers out in the last six years Frank. You know how noisy they are. They scare away all the fish.”

“*Twenty-two* new divers? Wow. I don’t think I’ve taught that many guys all my life.”

“I’m fishing for new game now Frank. I’m fishing for men.”

Join us and dive in!