



**Auckland Unitarian Church**  
*Love beyond belief*

## **A NEW WAY OF BEING - MEN BEING REAL**

Paul Watson © 10 September 2023

Kia ora everyone, and a heartfelt thanks to Ted for that beautiful introduction. When I first met you Ted around 20 months ago I instantly liked you, and I think one of the reasons is because as you presented last week 'You've always had a thing for language'. I think our brains connected quickly, my Auckland spelling, speaking and debating days came flooding back as an articulate American shared his recent struggles, learnings, and pain with me.

In the past 20 months however, our hearts have also connected and I'm now proud to call you my friend, brother, and a mentor in life. It's certainly an honour to be invited here by you today and I hope I can do your invitation justice. I certainly see you as a father figure to me, and as such, I seek your validation. Validation was what I was often looking for from my father as a young boy, and recently I've realised that what I experienced sometimes fell short of my expectations.

In your introduction you mentioned that you've grown to learn, love and respect me, which are amazing things to hear from another person. The young boy inside me who seeks understanding, love and connection feels warm when I hear those things, even if my critical adult male brain finds them hard to let them infiltrate my persona. Over time I have built up some strong barriers into my warm heart, including my over-developed thick skin, alongside my self-deprecating nature and internal negative rhetoric.

The journey I'd like to take you on with me today is how Essentially Men has helped me in various parts of my life, including the polarities between Paul Watson as a man in 2023 before you today and Paul Watson as a 'man' in 2012 as a 28 year old. I'm not going to stand here and spout off everything that Essentially Men could do for you or a man you know, but rather share with you some of my battles in life and how Essentially Men has helped me with them over the past 11 years, allowing you to make up your own mind as to how it might be able to help you or a loved one.

### **Investigating my Inner Boy**

I was lucky enough to have a wonderful mother. If someone asked me to describe her in one word, I would use the word 'glorious'. If pushed for another I might stretch to 'perfect'. She raised me by herself for the first couple of years after a short relationship with my biological father, but then fell in love with my dad at a parent teacher interview and our blended family began when I was 3. I inherited two older step-sisters and a dad.

Because mum was my safety net, I 100% became a mummy's boy. Dad was at times a scary proposition for me as a boy and my early teens, he was overtly dominating as times and we struggled to build a connection. I always thought he favoured his girls and he always thought mum favoured me. Both assessments are probably true, and both were probably inflamed by their own projections.

I became initiated to the world of sport through my uncle and grandfather, much more than my dad. I discovered cricket, soccer, and rugby league at a young age, which weren't really dad's jam. We would go hiking and camping because dad was a park ranger, but that wasn't really my happy place. As a result we struggled to connect and form a relationship that looked after my little boy. All the nurturing came from mum, I'd snuggle in their bed with her and always went to her first if I needed something. I have memories of wrestling and boxing with dad, but never getting hugs or affection from him.

I was bullied and a bully through my early teens, not surprising considering home wasn't always that great and the relationship with dad was a bit strained. I really lost my way and was searching for brotherhood, comradery, and fun through the wrong channels, although sport often kept me in line. Westlake Boys was a real saviour for me, their strong discipline, sports excellence, and competitive undertones really called to my brash and arrogant being. They helped to get me on the straight and narrow and things started turning around at school and at home.

It wasn't me who turned things around with my dad though. Just a year after strongly suggesting I started flatting at the age of 18 because he wanted the nest empty, my dad invited me away camping with a bunch of men up in Whananaki. He had recently completed the Essentially Men weekend and was heading up to a social gathering and wanted me to come along before the gathering started to 'help' with the set up and see a bit of his new found world. I was way outside of my comfort zone, there were men hugging everywhere and everyone talked differently to what I was used to.

Dad had softened though. Anger, rage, and abuse of power that spilled out from time to time beforehand stopped suddenly. He had more time for me and was interested in how university was going and hearing about my girlfriends. He started hugging me and we hung out more often, ten pin bowling, mini golf and the occasional sports game. Over time I started giving him more too, and our relationship deepened and became a positive one.

It was just last week I had an epiphany. On the last Essentially Men weekend, someone paid me a nice compliment which I really took on board and felt deeply. I realised that this man had briefly taken on the role of my father in my eyes, and the reason it felt so good was because it was the affirmation and words that I always yearned to hear from my dad as a boy but never got. The boy in me had been under-fathered and liked it when a part of him was affirmed.

I've realised more and more in recent years that in a lot of ways I'm still a boy at heart. I've worked in a job that encourages that, I like to play as much as I can, and I love a joke or

two. The beauty of me being aware of this is that sometimes I can check myself and assess whether I'm being a man or a boy in a certain situation. I have a newly found self-awareness around how much of a boy I can be, which never existed before doing the Essentially Men weekend.

## **Making Mates**

All my friends growing up were through sport, debating or drama. In all these activities, I was the same guy. Loud, opinionated, boisterous, arrogant. I was often self-deprecating and always tried to be the funniest guy in the room. I always wanted to have a seat at the table, and liked to be the leader or the 2IC to a powerful leader. I cared what others thought, I wanted to be liked by everyone. I had no concept of the idea that I was a polarising figure, some guys loved me and some didn't.

What I never comprehended though was that I was wearing a mask to protect myself from being outed. In my mind, if they thought I was funny, they would accept me. If they agreed with what I said, they would accept me. If I played hard and we won, they would accept me. I always had to be something within those environments, I was always pushing and striving for acceptance and validation. Now that I think about it, I was also looking for the acceptance and validation I so desperately yearned for from my father.

On the inside though, I was a scared little boy who was frightened of not being good enough. If I was teased or put down, very quickly I turned into a victim and either ran away upset or went home and cried to mummy, literally. I wasn't comfortable in my own skin and was battling inner demons. My weight was a real issue for me, partly because mum would always talk to me about it, so I knew it must be a big deal. I was very sensitive to being teased about it and inwardly believed I wasn't what a man should be, largely because I was overweight.

Invariably at an all boys school come the penis jokes, and I had played rugby with some of these guys, so very quickly a harmless joke which was shared amongst everyone became a reality in my mind. It's hard to attract a member of the opposite sex when your self-rhetoric is that you're overweight, unsexy and have a small penis, I learned that the hard way.

Through Essentially Men I journeyed with some men who I weren't used to. I was 28 when I did the weekend, meaning every single other man was older than me, I was the young buck. However suddenly, through doing nothing differently other than being me, I was good enough in their eyes. And as it turns out, because I was good enough in their eyes, I became good enough in my eyes. It's amazing how I believed other people's opinions with more convictions than my own.

After the weekend we formed a men's group, a place where we would meet fortnightly and talk about things that were real for us. We wouldn't talk about the weather, sport, politics,

or work, just what was really going on for us. I shared with these men things that I'd never shared with my parents or even my best couple of mates. I didn't have to wear a mask, they already knew who the real Paul Watson was after sharing the Essentially Men weekend with him, and all of him was welcome at these fortnightly get togethers.

## **Walking with Women**

I'd had a sheltered upbringing, with sport and academia keeping me busy up until Form 5/Year 11. It was the following year when girls came on the scene, the combined drama with Westlake Girls and Pak 'n Save Albany were the two lightning rods for me.

I remember that I was internally terrified of the opposite sex, especially when they appeared interested in me. My assumption was that they'd only want to be friends with me because of my physical appearance and negative internal self rhetoric. But the ones I appeared to attract were strong women who would give as good as they got when it came to opinions and banter. Shrinking violets didn't interest me either, I was always attracted to women who had fire in their bellies and a gorgeous smile on their face.

I had a few girlfriends from the ages of 16 to 21, some breaking my heart after 13 days, others after a year and a half. It was always them doing the breaking up though, I've never broken up with anyone to this day. Of course as well as the ending of a relationship, the self-doubt, wondering and internal bullying which followed was always really intense. It wasn't so much of a "What's wrong with me?", moreover a "Why don't they like me as much as I like them?". It always felt like I fell harder than them.

Since doing the Essentially Men weekend I've discovered that my relationships with women prior to doing the weekend was messy and unclear. What I was wanting from a girlfriend was to love me as much as my mum did. A tough ask for a girl who's only out for a good time and only really signed up for that with the loud, funny, and smart class clown.

After doing the Essentially Men weekend, my self-confidence changed and I felt enough. I became attractive to the opposite sex again after a long dry spell and was fortunate to meet my wife Chrissy around a year after doing the weekend and about 6 months after a tough break up for me. I was way more comfortable in my own skin and was able to meet a woman in a relationship rather than expecting something from them.

We have had a workshop at Essentially Men events called "Living with the Lioness", which helps men find ways of better engaging with strong and powerful women in relationship. My wife is certainly a lioness, it's one of the things I love the most about her. Whether it's protecting her cubs or showing her opinions or disapproval, her roar can often be heard and needs to be respected.

It was only 2 years ago when a man I highly respect said to me "You don't have any issues with your mum though eh?" I said "No, she's pretty much perfect". He then replied with

“Well that’s a lot of pressure on Chrissy then”. I didn’t really understand what he meant, but I quickly did! With my mother on such a pedestal, I have very high expectations of any woman I’m in a relationship with. My mum has set an incredibly high invisible ceiling, one which is almost impossible for any woman to reach. I’m very glad that I’ve found Chrissy, who can smash through that ceiling in my eyes.

## **Acknowledging Addictions**

I stand before you and can admit that I have a gambling addiction. It’s deep seeded, I’ve been gambling since I was 17 and it has become a part of everyday life for me. Some people have the need to be loved, some have the need to be in control, mine is to be right. Trace it back to the debating days and trying to make my points count. In my spelling competitions I either got the word right or I didn’t. Deeper than that, I thought that if I knew things and was correct and knowledgeable, then people would like me.

Gambling fulfilled an itch that I wanted to scratch, I could be right, make money and watch sport all at the same time. 3 great things, how easy is that! Throughout my 20’s, my gambling addiction and problem started to manifest and I lost sight of how much I was betting. Because I bet big and normally won, I wasn’t paying attention to the fact that I was betting thousands of dollars, multiple times a day. All I was paying attention to was how much I would win when I was inevitably right and my team won.

There have been some dark, dark days. Days which have overshadowed key events in my life, and days which have no doubt taken years off my life. The associated physical and mental stress of watching to see if my big bet would squeak home or lose is a feeling which is hard to describe. As is the black hole when I’d lost a lot of money in the space of minutes. I felt very alone and very stupid, two things I really don’t like feeling.

The biggest learning for me through Essentially Men is that addictions are normal, particularly for men. Work, drugs, alcohol, sex, pornography, love, gambling, and food addictions are demons for a lot of men who I have encountered. In my experience, addictions often hide and fester away in the darkness, manifesting themselves in different ways, both overtly and internally. As Ted mentioned to you all a couple of weeks ago, naming something can help take away some of its power. I have certainly found that in naming my struggle it has helped dissipate some of the hold that gambling has over me.

In hearing other men’s struggles with addictions over the years, it’s also made me feel some gratitude that I only have two addictions. Looking at me today you might be able to guess my second one! A lot of men have many more addictions which they are constantly battling and trying to overcome, releasing the hold they have over them. Men have shared with me how their addictions have ruined their relationships with other people they love, leaving them with a sense of hopelessness.

Hearing other men's battles has helped me to process what is real for me, and that gambling has the potential to ruin not only my life, but my entire families life. Do I have it under control? Never. Am I doing everything I can to keep the monsters away? Yes. Am I being open and honest with other men and my wife about gambling? Yes. That's a novel idea for me. For many, many years it hid in the darkness where the demons live and no one could ever see it. I'm slowly bringing it out into the light.

## **Figuring out Fatherhood**

Growing up, we were always a family. Mum and dad were so dedicated to us doing things together as a family, we were always such a tight unit. We weren't always a happy family, but there were many amazing trips, outings, and events together. I was lucky enough to live at Long Bay Regional Park, having a park and a beach as my playground. As I became a man, I always wanted two kids, ideally a boy and a girl. I always wanted to be a father and had an idealistic and sheltered view of how it would be.

I feel very blessed to have had a smooth ride with conception, I have a few close friends who aren't so lucky and my heart bleeds for them. Chrissy and I were lucky enough to get pregnant very quickly on both occasions. She is very maternal and always wanted kids too, so we had a honeymoon baby and were parents only 3 years after getting together.

A bump in the road came when our first child was only 24 weeks in the womb, as Chrissy went to hospital after a routine check up. I was in Wellington for work at the time and still remember getting the phone call. "Come home now, the baby might be coming today". It was a hard plane ride home as I tried to make sense of what was happening. Sienna was born 2 weeks later and spent 100 days in NICU and SCBU. A week after being born, she had a very scary operation which was one of the scariest hours of my life, I genuinely feared she wouldn't make it through.

Brady came along around 3 years later and since then we've been a family of 4. There's been some tough times, I've been made redundant from a job twice in that time, putting financial pressure on our family. Chrissy is a wonderful and devoted mother, she always wanted to be as present and available for our kids in their formative years, a decision I strongly agreed with. However, raising kids under 5 isn't easy, as I'm sure many of you listening have experienced. Time is taken away, money is tighter, patience is tested and intimacy wanes, certainly in my experience anyway.

Through the last couple of years, I've started to understand that I wasn't ready to be a father. I was outside of the Essentially Men network at the time, my men's group had finished and I wanted to have as much time available for Chrissy and Sienna as possible. The 100 days in intensive care for Sienna were traumatic for Chrissy, she's changed forever because of it. I would describe myself more as numb. I didn't really know what to say, do or how to be. I wanted to come in and see her and Chrissy, but found it hard because I hate hospitals and found it so hard to see someone I loved so much doing it so tough.



In more recent years, I've re-entered the Essentially Men network and am heavily involved, and I have no doubt that this has had a positive effect on my fathering. In the poem "For brother, what are we", there is a quote which I love, being "We are the sons of our fathers, and we shall follow the print of his foot forever". Sometimes I catch myself doing things that dad did. There is very rarely a light left on in the house I can tell you that!

The beauty of the Essentially Men network is that over the weekend itself and in our men's groups we father each other in a way. Ted has fathered me over the years and I have gained knowledge and wisdom from him. Others who have shared pain around addictions have also fathered me, showing me the vulnerability to be authentic and real. At my men's group I can share and be real and I am listened to, giving me all the undivided attention that my young boy always yearned for.

Make no mistake though, the path ahead of me as a father has been laid by my dad. He is the one I look up to the most, he has faced his demons, broken the chain of under-fathering and became a guiding light for me. He tells me he's proud of me and the father I am. I am proud of him and the father he is. I know that it's OK to let my kids see me cry, I don't need to be invulnerable and strong the whole time. I can have strong arguments with Chrissy in front of them but they know I still love her and them. I hug, kiss and wrestle with them almost every day and love every second of it.

It's not perfect, but I've discovered that nothing in life ever is. They test my patience, do silly things, and don't always listen. Chrissy and I have different parenting styles and that isn't always easy either, it creates friction between us which we need to resolve. What I come back to though is gratitude. Gratitude for having a wife who loves me for who I am. Gratitude for having two amazing children who I get to father every day. Gratitude for having two parents who have laid a golden path for me to follow. I consider myself a very lucky man.

Essentially Men also plays a key role in my life. I can be the real Paul Watson in those environments, I don't need to wear a mask or armour. It helps me to be a better father as well as being nurtured and fathered at the same time. It helps me with my sense of self. As Confucius once said "He who conquers himself is the mightiest Warrior".

If some of the things I've said today resonate with you, then please consider attending an [Essentially Men weekend](#) or encouraging a loved one to attend. I could always use another brother and would welcome one with open arms.

## Meditation / Conversation starter

What is your experience of people — yourself or loved ones — being challenged to be authentic, vulnerable or emotionally connected?