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“Great, because that’s exactly what you need . . . *one more* pursuit!”

The playful sarcasm in my wife’s voice was thicker than the syrup on my pancakes. It was a blustery, cold day in January. Jagged ice crystals like ornate daggers crept inward from the corners of our windows. My son, Aidan, and I had snuggled under a quilt to eat pancakes and watch a bow-fishing video. The guys on the screen were seated backward as their boat raced down the Mississippi River. Thousands of Asian carp, stimulated by the motor, jumped back and forth in the wake. The shooters launched arrows, one after another, piercing fish mid-jump. To an adrenaline-seeking boy, and his seven-year-old son, this was pretty awesome stuff.

Between our “oohs” and “aahs,” I’d shouted to Jamie in the kitchen that Aidan and I were “definitely trying this bow-fishing thing next summer!”

She poked her head into the family room, made her

comment, then playfully reminded me that this would make passion number thirty-four and counting.

I deserve every bit of Jamie's ribbing. As I write this chapter, I'm sitting in our living room, less than a hundred feet from evidence of my thirty-three passions. My garage houses a sixteen-foot aluminum bass boat, an old surfboard, and a closet whose doors won't shut because it's overstuffed with footballs, softballs, and smacked-up golf balls. Our upstairs closet looks like the shoe department in a sporting-goods store, housing river sandals, hunting boots, and several worn-out pairs of running shoes. The back corner of our basement stores my bow and arrows, chest waders, and numerous decoys. In a month or so, this area will likely contain bow-fishing gear.

Something must have happened when I was a kid. At some point, perhaps around the age of two, the Lord must have looked down into my toy box full of rubber balls and action figures and said, "Be fruitful and multiply." Multiply they did. Today, our three-story home, which appeared spacious before we moved in, is cramped and overrun with the fruitful multiplication of Zeke's playthings.

I'm a hyper-hobbiéd man. Yet I'm passionate about more than just sports. The number of books in my library hints at a book fetish. My Internet history reveals an inordinate amount of time spent researching coffee growers and distributors. Our kitchen cabinets store my end-grain maple cutting board, a couple Santoku knives, and aluminum-core cookware, all evidence of a wannabe chef.

I've lived the first thirty-nine years of my life by Irishman Laurence Sterne's creed: "A large volume of adventures may be grasped within this little span of life, by him who interests his heart in everything."

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“Everything” might be a slight overstatement. There are a few pursuits that I haven’t thrown myself into. But then, they involve knitting needles, scrapbooks, and shopping malls, so they don’t really count anyway, right?

I’m a simple case, really. Like many men, I don’t handle inactivity well. My lowest lows—the times when I feel blue or despondent—come to me when I’m sitting on my hands wondering what to do. I keep busy in order to keep sane. On my days off, I fish, exercise, or clean the garage. In the evenings, I write, wrestle with my kids, or play basketball at the fitness center. I even started cooking because it gives me something to do during that restless hour between when I get home from work and when it’s time to sit down for dinner.

Some people enjoy large blocks of time with nothing planned. I don’t understand those people.

I need more than busy-ness, though. I need to be challenged. An after-dinner stroll around the neighborhood holds little appeal. But I’ll walk for hours if there’s the chance a pheasant might flush or the next swing might be the golf shot of my life. Likewise, I can’t sit for fifteen minutes and do nothing. But I can plant my rear in a tree stand from sunup till sundown, listening for the snap of a twig, the faintest indication that a deer might be walking in my direction. In order to enjoy time, I need something to do, and that something must hold the power to thrill me.

Perhaps this is why I’m always looking to pick up another pursuit—all the more opportunity for adventure. This morning at church, a man asked me if I liked to ice fish. I replied, “You know . . . I bet I *will*. Ask me in a couple of weeks.” With that, I went home and researched ice fishing online. Sigh.

My one consolation is that I’m in good company. Not every

man has thirty-four hobbies. Some have twenty-one. Some have eleven. Some have only two or three. It's not about the number. I've known several men who need only one endeavor to consume their lives. Every man is different when it comes to what jump-starts his heart. He's unique, but not alone. He's surrounded by millions of pursuit-driven men scurrying around the offices, lakes, ballparks, and kitchens of our country.

I am not anti-pursuits. In fact, I believe very deeply that the human spirit was designed for challenge, stimulation, and even risk. Men were made to be on the run.

It's hard to be a man today. Our culture's expectations for men are confusing and contradictory. Men are called to lead at home, in the office, and in the community, often simultaneously. They're expected to be rugged and masculine yet gentle and tender. We want men to maintain a solid presence at work, *and* in the home, *and* in society, *and* in the church. Our culture has a thousand ideas about masculinity.

Men sense these fragmented images and expectations, and they feel overwhelmed. But the external messages aren't the only source of tension. Most of the men I've encountered put tremendous pressure on themselves to excel. They want other people's respect. They want to respect themselves. They believe that these two outcomes *only come* when they achieve greatness in all things. Most men I know cut themselves very little slack.

The demands from inside and out, along with the everyday stress of ordinary living, can foster toxic stress levels. I worry about guys who don't have a way to get swept up in the occasional adventure. Men who don't have healthy ways to experience risks, rewards, and challenges tend to find harmful ways.

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The movie *Fight Club* perfectly illustrates a man's need for the occasional thrill. Ed Norton's character, the narrator, is an automobile-company employee struggling desperately with boredom and insomnia. He doesn't know how to deal with a life void of risks, rewards, and challenge. He tries faking various terminal diseases so he can attend support groups. There is something about hearing others bare their souls and share their pain that awakens him—for a little while. Joining the support groups helps him sleep and feel alive for a few weeks, but eventually, his boredom and insomnia return. He returns to feeling sterile and dull.

Then the narrator meets Tyler Durden, a soap salesman. One night, outside at a bar, Tyler demands that the narrator hit him in the face. After some coaxing, the narrator does, and the two men have a fistfight in the parking lot. Fists slam into cheekbones. Blood flows. Bruises form. Yet when it's over, they realize that the fight made them feel alive. Tyler and the narrator start up a "Fight Club," giving other bored, under-adventured men a chance to experience the same adrenaline rush. By the end of the movie, fight clubs are operating in every major city, proving that men all around the nation are crying out to feel alive.

Fight Club makes a fascinating social commentary; most men shrivel up and die inside when they're not regularly involved in some form of adventure. The movie apparently struck a nerve with men in America. A "Gentleman's Fight Club" started up in Menlo Park, California, in 2000.¹ In 2006, a young man was injured in a fight club in Arlington, Texas, and the event was recorded and sold on DVD.² As unhealthy as they are, these fight clubs illustrate author John Eldredge's

point that, “Adventure, with all its requisite danger and wildness, is a deeply spiritual longing written into the soul of man.”³

Serious problems follow bored men. Men should be combustible goods, regularly ignited and set ablaze by challenging endeavors.

What’s more, when men attack their pursuits with over-the-top enthusiasm, they often accomplish wonderful things. Last summer, I returned from an archery hunt in Alaska with excruciating pain in both feet. It felt as if someone was stabbing the padded undersides of my toes with scalpels. My physician, Dr. Buhlke, who was nicknamed “All or None Buhlke” by his medical-school colleagues, spent an entire night pounding cheap coffee and searching medical journals for information on my condition. By his third pot of coffee, as the sun was rising, he correctly diagnosed my injury (Morton’s neuroma) and put me on the proper medicine.

Last week, I ran a 5K—pain-free—because “All or None Buhlke” wouldn’t rest until he solved my problem. Let us praise pursuit-driven men!

Immeasurable good has come from zealous men launching themselves into their passions. America’s independence from Britain is due in part to John Adams’s obsessive commitment to the revolution. Michelangelo’s eccentric dedication to his craft gave us the “Creation of Adam” painting in the Sistine Chapel. We wouldn’t have the songs “Amazing Grace,” “Where the Streets Have No Name,” or “Crazy Love” if John Newton, Bono, and Van Morrison weren’t at least a little over the top as artists. And while I admit that it hardly compares to America’s liberty or the most famous painting in Rome, my family has

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enjoyed some pretty scrumptious meals because I came home from work and “went crazy” in the kitchen with my cutting board, Santoku knife, and aluminum-core pans.

I love to read biographies of great men doing great things. *The Perfect Mile* by Neal Bascomb is just such a book. In this work, Bascomb describes three men’s simultaneous race to break the seemingly impossible four-minute-mile barrier. Wes Santee from Kansas, John Landy from Australia, and Roger Bannister from England not only battled the mental and physical challenges laid down by the four-minute mile, but they also battled one another. Whenever one man scheduled a race to attempt to break the mark, the other two waited anxiously by the radio for news on the outcome.

Each man poured himself into this goal, radically adjusting his lifestyle to shave tenths of a second off his four-lap journey around a quarter-mile track. Bascomb records:

All three runners endured thousands of hours of training to shape their bodies and minds. They ran more miles in a year than many of us walk in a lifetime. They spent a large part of their youth struggling for breath. They trained week after week to the point of collapse, all to shave a second, maybe two, during a race—the time it takes to snap one’s fingers and register the sound. There were sleepless nights and training sessions in rain, snow, and scorching heat. There were times when they wanted to go out for a beer or a date yet knew they couldn’t. They understood that life was somehow different for them, that idle happiness eluded them. If they weren’t training or racing or gathering the

will required for these efforts, they were trying not to think about training and racing at all.⁴

When Roger Bannister ran a mile in 3:59.4 in Oxford on May 6, 1954, he made history. *Forbes* magazine labeled that chilly moment on a damp English track the “greatest athletic achievement” of the past one hundred and fifty years.⁵ Bannister broke what many saw as a physically impossible barrier.

He also shattered a psychological hurdle, raising the ceiling and opening the gate for others to follow. Forty-six days after Bannister’s moment of glory, Landy made headlines with a time of 3:57.9. By the end of 1957, sixteen runners had followed Bannister’s cleat marks into the realm of the subfour elite.

Today, the world record for the mile is 3:43.13. Hicham El Guerrouj from Morocco ran that inconceivable time in 1999 in Rome. I cannot comprehend what it feels like to travel at that speed; I need a good tail wind even to get my truck to go that fast.

Passionate men serve to inspire us. They add vibrancy and excitement to life. Passionate men and their pursuits aren’t the problem.

The problem occurs when guys run after their pursuits with such intensity that they neglect other priorities, *higher* priorities. The problem begins when men go overboard.

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The movie *The Perfect Storm* closes with Mark Wahlberg’s character, Bobby Shatford, floating in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean. As the *Andrea Gail*, the fishing boat he was on, sinks to

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the depths of the sea, the camera slowly pans out and shows the hopelessness of Bobby's situation; he's overboard, in the center of one of the most violent storms in recorded history, with an expression of absolute despair. The water temperature of the Atlantic in the middle of the winter would have been between 25 and 30 degrees. Bobby has only a few minutes of life left before his body completely shuts down, and you can see the desperation on his face as the camera pans out.

I've seen this same desperation on the faces of dozens of men shocked by the storms they've created.

Located in the Midwest, just three miles north of the Platte River, our church is teeming with sportsmen. When our family interviewed at the church on a Sunday morning in 2005, one deer hunter, Beau, pulled me aside in the foyer and whispered, "Zeke, if you come to Central City, I'll hook you up! You'll have a ton of great places to hunt."

Beau kept his promise. But he had competition; about twenty men invited me to hunt with them that first season. In my first six months as a new senior pastor, I was invited to sit in two duck blinds, hunt deer on four farms, and fish on five private ponds. I thought I'd died and gone to heaven. I remember thinking to myself on a frosty morning, while scanning the sky for incoming geese, *Wow, if this is ministry . . . I can do this!*

Every time the phone rang with another invitation from a sportsman, I'd smile a sly smile at Jamie and say, "I'd better accept. I need to get to know the guys in my church."

I did get to know these guys well. I built many strong relationships over the sulfur smell of gunpowder. But alas, at some point, the demands of ministry picked up, and I needed to spend more time at the church and less in the wilderness. Being

a pastor in rural Nebraska proved not to be heaven on earth after all.

Over the past five years, several of my hunting buddies have met with me for counseling. Sometimes they brought their wives. Sometimes they came alone. The problem was typically the same: these men had pursued their passions with such narrow-minded fanaticism that they'd thrown themselves overboard into the middle of a perfect storm.

Men are creatures of tremendous pride and self-respect. By the time a man asks to meet me at my office, as opposed to the deer woods, things are in a pretty desperate state. He's caught in the throes of a hurtful addiction, or his life is severely out of whack. The recurrence of this theme has overwhelmed me during my first five years as a pastor.

Men usually know when they've gone too far with a pursuit. You hear it in their language. Whether you watch hunting videos, golf tournaments, or SportsCenter, you'll hear men frequently use the words *obsession* and *addiction* to describe their pursuit. One outdoor-sports company even goes so far as to use the slogan "It's not a passion, it's an obsession."

To be addicted means "to devote or surrender [oneself] to something habitually or obsessively."⁶ When someone admits to an addiction or obsession, he's admitting that he's no longer in control. He's no longer driving the bus. The bus is driving him. We laugh about these labels, largely because they resonate with us, but these words—*obsession* and *addiction*—reveal that something is out of balance.

Yet we hear this language all the time. Actor Zac Efron said, "From day one, I got addicted to being onstage and getting the applause and laughter." Journalist Dan Rather commented, "I got addicted. News, particularly daily news, is more addic-

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tive than crack cocaine, more addictive than heroin, more addictive than cigarettes.” Basketball player and legendary coach Pat Riley made the statement, “To have long-term success as a coach or in any position of leadership, you have to be obsessed in some way.”

These are strong statements. Yet many guys can’t communicate who they are without using such extreme language.

Sometimes it’s not one particular hobby or interest. Many men are simply addicted to being busy or distracted. A woman in our community came in for marriage counseling this past year. Susan was furious. Her face was crimson red when she walked through the door but somehow managed to reach darker and darker shades as she described her husband to me. I learned several new adjectives in the first ten minutes of our time together.

At one point, I stopped Susan mid-adjective and asked her, “Help me understand the core issue. Does your husband have an addiction?”

Her face hit an even darker shade of red. She replied, “YES! He’s addicted to the *next thing*, whatever it is!”

I congratulated Susan for finding the perfect words to describe not only her husband but also 75 percent of the men I’ve worked with as a pastor. I also told her that she’d wandered dangerously close to my backyard with that statement.

RUNNING HARD, STAYING FOCUSED

Passionate, pursuit-driven men can make great husbands, fathers, friends, and colleagues precisely because of their tenacious tendencies. Yet the same qualities can wreck their lives.

Like lumberjacks in a logrolling contest, many men are aggressive, competitive, and fully engaged in the task at hand. Yet they're easily knocked off balance. When this happens, zealous men can destroy relationships, break commitments, and cripple their consciences.

This doesn't need to happen. Men are capable of living with passion and zeal while remaining balanced and faithful to their most important relationships and priorities. They just need to choose the best pursuits and then run after them with intentionality. Run hard, run well, but run after the right things, the right distances. To do this, men must have a clear picture of which relationships and priorities deserve their highest commitments. They need to recognize the activities they should avoid. They require regular infusions of vision and encouragement. They need the help and support of their wives, children, friends, and greater community. If these basics are in place, watch out. Everyone wins when men are on the run.

When I was a child, I'd race into one challenge after another with boyish fearlessness and determination. I'd lower my head, clench my fists, and give it my best shot. I volunteered for the lead role in a play, tried out as pitcher on our baseball team, and (along with 75 percent of teenage boys in America at the time) signed up for karate after watching Ralph Macchio crane-kick Johnny in *The Karate Kid*. My parents watched me take on a thousand challenges with varied success.

Whenever I picked up a new pursuit, worked hard, and did well, my parents would say, "Way to grab that bull by the horns, Zeke!"

This is what we want for men. We want them passionately

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and courageously engaged in life. We want them to rise to new heights and feel alive inside. We want them to grab the bull by the horns and live well.

But how to do all of this while maintaining balance in life—that's the challenge of a lifetime.