



### ***About a Boy: How to Know You Are Making Progress***

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The movie *About a Boy* is so true-to-life in depicting psychological development that, after seeing it, I rushed to read the Nick Hornby book of the same name on which it is based, figuring that the book had to be even better. It wasn't. It wasn't even as good. Seeing the movie along with the running commentary feature by Paul and Chris Weitz, who directed the movie and co-wrote it with Peter Hedges, explains why. The brothers Weitz consciously crafted the movie to faithfully depict psychological growth in both of its main characters—12-year-old Marcus (Nicholas Hoult) and 38-year-old bachelor Will (Hugh Grant)—a shift in focus that takes the story beyond the title of Nick Hornby's book. The movie should have been called *About Two Boys*.

I particularly liked the movie's portrayal of the interactions between our relatively stupid and shortsighted conscious self and our crafty and forward-thinking unconscious self, which is responsible for leading us to an expanded concept of who we are. Our conscious self, as expressed by our emotions and thoughts, portrays us to ourselves as who we are now and enforces the attitude that we will never be anything more. In effect, it says, this is the way you react to situations, these are the kinds of things you have been able to accomplish, and here is a long list of things you have failed at. All of that defines who you are for the rest of your days—get used to it; don't plan for a life outside of the boundaries these realities define. All the while, our unconscious self seeks escape routes out of this trap, continually nudging us to take little steps our conscious self will not quite understand that will give ourselves the experiences we need to build a basis for change.

The movie doesn't tell us much about Will's background, but from the few insights the movie does provide, it is possible to see that his was not a happy childhood. His father drank and didn't have a regular job, opting instead for a career as a freelance songwriter. He had one tremendous hit, in 1958, a schlock Christmas song called "Santa's Super Sleigh," whose royalties paid the household bills as he worked unsuccessfully for the rest of his life to duplicate his achievement. Will's mother didn't support her husband in this endeavor, with the result that there was much bickering in the house and continual use of young Will as a pawn in these battles.

Will's natural tendency through all this would have been to tend to be like his father, but his mother evidently inhibited him in this by continually warning him to not turn out that way. This left him confused about what to be, and apparently Will found no teacher or mentor outside the home to help steer him in any particular direction. The steering forces in his life were all defensive. He developed the pathogenic belief that people are more likely to hurt you than help you, and that therefore the safest course was to not let people into your life. He also learned to escape criticism by keeping a low profile and superficially fitting in by way of mannerisms and modes of dress. In school, he always dressed and acted fashionably, if unobtrusively.

We meet Will in his apartment as he is reacting to the John Dunn adage, "No man is an island," that he heard on a TV game show he was watching. His conscious self, having had a lifetime to rationalize his defensive posture, takes issue with the quote, claiming that Will is an island and that island living is the best approach to life. An island stands alone. It doesn't need anything or anyone. It is self-sufficient. That is Will to a tee, as far as he is concerned. He is financially independent because he continues to receive royalties from the Christmas song his late father wrote. He is also socially independent in that he lives most of his life alone, contenting himself with TV, CDs, DVDs, and bouts of "exercise" during which he plays pool alone. He also spends Christmas alone, getting drunk and stoned while watching old movies, usually horror flicks he has rented. His only form of social interaction comes during forays to the human mainland to line up dates with attractive women for bouts of sex. So even there he makes no personal connection.

Will has never had a relationship with a woman that lasted longer than two months. Emotionally this is just fine with him. His bad relationship with his mother taught him that women are sources of grief over the long haul, that the safest strategy is to interact with women only for as long as it takes to get what he wants and then break off the relationship before the women started meaning something to him, which would provide them a hook for using him. Although their tears at the break-ups he continually instigated would make him feel "like a bastard," they didn't really bother him very deeply because he saw them as indicating that the women had designs on him that would eventually result in his being used by them. His background made him incapable of believing that a woman could be attracted to him for himself. He was nothing, so there was no basis for such an attraction, as far as he is concerned.

Consciously Will is satisfied with his life. About the only negative he consciously recognizes is that he is a very shallow person who means nothing to anyone. Unconsciously, however, it is a different story. We know this because Will occasionally acts contrary to his island living philosophy. He at one point came up with the idea of helping feed the homeless at a local shelter, but turned away at the last minute when he realized that it would mean dealing with a lot of grubby men. At another point, he volunteered to man a phone at a fund raiser for Amnesty International, but his lack of commitment to the cause led him to use calls from females to line up blind dates. Both initially magnanimous impulses were unconsciously instigated to put Will in situations in which his life could take on wider meaning. Both involved safe situations, in that both promised that Will would be doing something meaningful while not becoming involved with people too much. Nevertheless, even this marginal level of involvement proved too much for Will at this time in his life.

Will's next opportunity for expanded meaningfulness came unexpectedly. He had a blind date with a woman who blurted over dinner that she was divorced and had a small son. Not wanting to appear to be truly a cad by ending the date right there, Will lied saying that that was fine with him because he loved kids.

If Will had been as committed to island living as he professed to be, he would have dropped the woman the instant the date ended. But he calls her again, because she represents yet another safe opportunity for increased meaningfulness. She is safe to relate to because she thinks Will is a great guy in comparison to the louse she had married and divorced. Secondly, she has a son, not a daughter. Early in the movie Will is seen holding a baby girl as if she were a ticking bomb about to explode. Will, however, knows something about boys because he'd been a boy and remains one in many respects, so there is a possibility that he could do okay with her son. And if worst came to worst, he could concentrate on her while she took care of the child. To his astonishment, Will is great with the little boy. They get along famously.

This positive experience opens up a new avenue in Will's life, but he still isn't ready for a lifelong commitment. So he starts rationalizing petty annoyances and is about to call the relationship off when she beats him to it, saying that she isn't ready for a new relationship. This frees Will to pursue his expanded concept of meaningful living with another divorced mother. He learns of the organization Single Parents Alone Together (SPAT) and jumps at the chance at attending a meeting, imagining a bevy of beauties desperate for his attentions. He strikes a disappointment there but does find one keeper, a woman named Susie who has a little girl. To give some reason for being at the meeting, Will manufactures a life for himself as a divorced parent with a child. Not surprisingly, he imagines himself having a little boy. And he seems to relish the notion of having a son, at least an imagined one. This largely unconscious congeniality will soon be put to the test, as his relationship with Susie leads him to a much more involved relationship with Marcus, a real-life boy.

While Will is remaining a child in many respects in pursuing his island lifestyle, events are occurring in Marcus's life that are dislodging him from the style of relationship he has always had with his mother. The movie begins with Marcus and his mother enjoying a seemingly idyllic relationship. This, however, is somewhat phony, as we learn later. Marcus's mother is distressed about the lack of a man in her life since her divorce from Marcus's father. Nevertheless, she doesn't let on about this to Marcus. Marcus also is somewhat dissatisfied with their relationship, although at this point, he probably isn't consciously aware of what his dissatisfactions might be.

In the opening moments of the Marcus part of the movie, Marcus's mother, Fiona (Toni Collette), reminds Marcus that they are not sheep. In reality, Marcus is something of a sheep. And he must remain so, to maintain the kind of relationship that his mother will accept. His mother in effect dictates every aspect of Marcus's life with little thought of what Marcus may want or need. Part of being in a relationship with his mother involves dressing like a klutz, just as she does, which is fine when they are together but makes Marcus look very strange to his schoolmates. Marcus's preoccupation with old songs is another characteristic he got from his relationship with his mother that his schoolmates find to be very odd. His mother should have protected him by forcing him to dress more appropriately and by seeing to it that he developed interests that were more

contemporary, but she is so caught up in her own situation that she does not think to do this.

One morning out of the blue Fiona starts weeping, signaling her distress about her relationship with Marcus as it is now, but without explaining her tears. The crying worries Marcus because he can't understand why she should do this, since she has a steady job and they have enough money to get by on. Fiona begs off going a SPAT picnic, saying that she is ill, leaving Marcus to tag along with Will and Susie, who are going on their first date. Marcus doesn't like Will at first, considering him to be a "wolly," but warms up to him after Will lies to a groundskeeper about Marcus killing a duck by hitting it with a loaf of his mother's homemade bread. While everyone is away at the picnic, Fiona tries to commit suicide.

Up to this point, Marcus has tried everything he could think of short of speaking up for himself to maintain his relationship with his mother, even though it has meant that he remain under her thumb, which has cost him dearly, particularly at school. His mother's suicide attempt causes Marcus to take his first step toward being a man by speaking up to her for the first time when she returns from the hospital. Marcus brings up the matter of the suicide letter she left behind. He voices his displeasure and tells her that her reassurances about feeling better now are worthless, because she might change at any time and he can't look out for her every second. He comes to recognize that he needs help in dealing with her. What eligible men does he know? Oh, yes, Will.

Will's involvement with Suzie led to his entanglement with Marcus and Fiona and the unpleasant suicide business, and the sudden rush of complications frightens Will, causing him to retreat to his original concept of island living. So when Marcus calls asking that they get together the upcoming Saturday, Will initially turns him down. But then thinking it will be just he and Marcus, he accepts, only to discover that Marcus wants his mother along, too, because of course he hopes that Will will become interested in her and serve as his backup. The luncheon is a disaster from Will's viewpoint, but a success as far as Marcus is concerned. So Marcus continues pursuing Will, at first by stalking him while he shops. In this way, Marcus learns that Will has no child.

At some point during this period—perhaps as early as the SPAT picnic when Will protected Marcus by lying about who killed the duck—Marcus comes to the unconscious realization that Will may just be the male attachment figure he needs in his life. Learning there is no child means to Marcus that there will be no competition, which causes Marcus to redouble his efforts at establishing a relationship by forcing himself into Will's apartment after school. Consciously Marcus does this to get Will interested in his mother. Marcus also thinks about the attempted suicide every single day, which provides an additional excuse for visiting Will instead of staying at home. But there is little talk of the mother and no attempt at establishing a second date with her. The focus is exclusively on their relationship together.

Will grudgingly accepts Marcus's presence at first but then gradually establishes an attachment to Marcus as well. This is manifested when Marcus runs to Will's apartment for protection from school kids who are throwing bits of candy at him. Will not only protects Marcus by sheltering him and driving the kids off, he moves to deepen their relationship by buying him some cool shoes that he hopes will make Marcus less of a

target at school. Altruism is a hallmark of an attachment relationship. Will is consciously unaware of the attachment relationship, so he is amazed that buying Marcus the shoes gives him a new feeling, “a natural high,” as he puts it. He is also amazed at his own altruism, in that he bought the shoes even though there was nothing in it for him; he didn’t even want to shag Marcus’s mother.

Fiona learns of Marcus’s relationship with Will because the shoes that Will buys for him are stolen by school kids and Marcus returns home shoeless in the rain. Fiona, imaging something unsavory, confronts Will about his relationship with Marcus. This is an important moment for everyone in the movie because Will defends himself vigorously by indicating that Marcus is getting beaten up at school and his mother doesn’t have a clue about what is going on. This is amazing to Marcus who sees Will as understanding his situation whereas his mother does not. This distances Marcus a bit more from his mother and moves him a bit toward a stronger relationship with Will.

The mother quickly recognizes that Will is right and that she has done poorly by Marcus. This also is important for Marcus to see. Whenever Marcus argued with his mother, she always stood her ground until he caved in. Here she retreated completely as the result of what Will said. Since Marcus has started looking to Will as a role model, the lesson Marcus would take from this is that it is not necessary to always give in to his mother to maintain a relationship with her.

Fiona turns to Will for help. So Will now has two people depending on him. This is definitely not island living. Marcus at that point invites Will to a Christmas party. Once again, Will defensively refuses at first but then eventually accepts, mainly on the strength of his attachment to Marcus. At the party, Fiona shows once again what a flake she is and how little she understands the life that Marcus lives at school by giving him a tambourine in the hope that he will start a “pop group” at school. She also tells him that when he sings, it brings sunshine and happiness to her heart. Will is the only person to give Marcus an appropriate gift, which is a CD by rap singers and a portable CD player. Marcus also gets Will a gift, the paperback single parents handbook, as a joke. The joke impresses Will.

Susie shows up at the party and shows her displeasure with Will; Will decides to leave, but Marcus speaks up, saying he wants him to stay. Marcus defends Will on several points, such as he bought him great shoes and he lets him come over to his house even when he doesn’t want him to. Fiona responds to the shoe purchase remark by saying that if he wants anything, they can talk about it, but Marcus answers that they never have a discussion, only an argument, which she always wins. He asks, why doesn’t she tell him what to do? She answers that she wants him to think for himself. Marcus answers that he is thinking for himself and he wants Will to stay. This is the most candid he has ever been in speaking up to his mother. This obviously is something that he recognized in the past but never let himself think or say. Marcus gets himself worked up to such an extent he is about to bring up his mother’s suicide attempts but is stopped by Will who redirects the discussion to the dead duck incident.

Will’s defenses fall in reaction to this strong show of support. He finds that he is really enjoying himself being with this odd bunch and especially being with Marcus. The Christmas party gave him a warm fuzzy feeling, which is in contrast to his childhood

Christmases when his mother would force Will to sing his father's Christmas song in front of his relatives by way of getting back at his father.

The next time we see Marcus and Will, they are both reaching out to women, with an eye toward establishing genuine relationships with them. In Marcus's case, it is a girl, named Ellie (Natalia Tena), at school; with Will, it is a woman named Rachel (Rachel Weisz) he met at a New Year's Eve party. At the party, Will confesses that he does nothing in life, causing Rachel to lose interest. Soon afterward, however, he fights back, regaining her interest by leading her to believe that he has a twelve-year-old son, as does she. Will is smitten with a woman for the first time in his life.

Will takes Marcus to the zoo to tell him that he is really interested in a woman and needs Marcus to come with him to her home, posing as his son. He wants to go out with her and would like her to be his girlfriend. This is all a bit new to him, so Will is embarrassed to talk about it. Marcus bursts forth with news about Ellie, and asks Will about the difference between a girlfriend and a girl who is a friend. Will asks whether Marcus wants to touch her and then makes the flip comment, "You've heard about sex; it is kind of a big deal." Marcus answers that he wants to be with her all the time. He wants to tell her things he doesn't tell Will or his mom. And he doesn't want her to have another boyfriend. But he doesn't really think about touching her. Will at this point could have again been flip by saying something like, "Are you a homo or something?" Instead he says something very wise: "You won't feel like that forever." This is in contrast to the stupid comments he came up with at the hospital, indicating how good Will has become at making meaningful comments since then. Marcus swears for the first time at the zoo, indicating his desire to be accepted by Will as kind of an equal, since he has already heard Will swear. It also shows his burgeoning outspokenness.

Will and Marcus's visit to Rachel's home goes very well for Will even though he is extremely nervous. He finds that his mouth is dry and his palms are sweating and that all he can think to do is grin like an idiot. He doesn't know what's happening to him. What is happening of course is that he is nervous because he really wants an actual relationship with Rachel, not just a sexual one. If it were merely sexual, he would not be nervous because he would be operating on familiar ground and there would be no threat to his safe loner existence. Rachel is a real threat to his whole concept of life because he really wants to mean something to her, and when he was a child wanting to become meaningful to his mother, she used that desire for her own ends to the detriment of Will's psychological development. Will is now taking the chance that this won't happen again for the first time in his life. Will is interested in everything Rachel says and finds her incredibly sexy, which is different from the way he reacted to other women from whom he wanted sex. He didn't necessarily find them sexy emotionally. It was a more of an intellectual interest, the way a predator sizes up his prey. Will wants to touch Rachel but would settle for just being with her at the moment.

Will and Marcus are apparently seeing each other quite regularly, for we next see them playing pool together. Becoming even more outspoken, Marcus brings up the problem of Will's relationship with Rachel being based on a false premise, saying that he should be honest with her. This leads Will to generate the courage to actually tell Rachel the whole

truth so that he will have a relationship with a woman on an honest basis for the first time in his life. Will makes the stumbling confession over dinner.

It is natural and normal for psychological advances to lead to periods of retreat. Up to this point in the movie, Marcus and Will have made steady progress. Now, however, each stumbles a bit. When Rachel becomes confused by Will's confession, rejecting him to an extent, he does not redouble his efforts to win her, as he did previously. He merely agrees with her that he is a blank and walks out of the restaurant. Fiona starts crying again just as she did before her suicide attempt, making Marcus desperate to do something about it. Despite all of the progress he has made, all I can think of is a strategy he would have come up with before making the progress—singing his mother's favorite song, Roberta Flax's "Killing Me Softly with His Song," at a school concert, even though doing so will be his own suicide. Marcus does go to Will for help, but Will has retreated completely out of depression and says there is nothing he can do. Will tells Marcus that he is someone who is really good at choosing things like cool shoes but that he can't help him with anything that means something.

In the end, Will helps Marcus on stage, winning Rachel's affection, as she is in the audience to see her son perform. We next see everyone at a Christmas party at Will's apartment. Rachel and her son are there, as is Marcus's mom and his friend Ellie. Will has also arranged for a friend of his to be there as a possible prospect for Fiona. So we have a classic Hollywood happy ending.

Will and Marcus changed greatly over the course of the movie, which represented a time span of about a year and a half. Will moved from a life that had been essentially on hold for 38 years to beginning to make major strides out of the rut he had been wallowing in. He did it one small step at a time, with great hesitancy at each step, as successful experiences led him to become progressively more emboldened. Having tasted of the satisfactions of an attachment relationship with Marcus, he was encouraged to the major step of attempting one with a woman. His future seems promising, particularly since Rachel appears to not be in a hurry for him to work things out. She is a little at sixes and sevens herself, so they both have things to work on.

Marcus was dragged kicking and screaming out of the rut he was in with his relationship with his mother, but pursued the opportunities available to him quite forcefully and took forward steps at leaps and bounds. Marcus is a much different kid than he was at the beginning of the movie. Yet his prospects are clouded a bit, particularly with respect to his relationships with women. Marcus ends the movie repeating the lesson learned from his traumatic relationship with his mother, that a person needs a backup in a relationship, that two people are not enough. This pathogenic belief will inhibit him in the future unless he can find some way to overcome it.