



“We like to think of ourselves as acting based on our beliefs, but it’s often the other way around.”

Juliana Breines, Ph.D.



Fathers and Sons

Being a father is life’s fullest expression of masculinity. But for many males, life consists of a search for the lost father.

By Frank Pittman, published on September 01, 1993 - last reviewed on November 28, 2012

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We know that raising children is the central experience of life, the greatest source of self-awareness, the true fountain of pride and joy, the most eternal bond with a partner. We know that being a father is life’s fullest expression of masculinity. So why did so many men forgo this for so long, and will the current crop of post-patriarchal fathers fare any better?

FOR A COUPLE OF hundred years now, each generation of fathers has passed on less and less to his sons—not just less power but less wisdom. And less love. We finally reached a point where many fathers were largely irrelevant in the lives of their sons. The baby was thrown out with the bathwater, and the pater dismissed with the patriarchy. Everyone seemed to be floundering around not knowing what to do with men or with their problematic and disoriented masculinity.

In addition, over the same 200 years, each generation of fathers has had less authority than the last. The concept of fatherhood changed drastically after the Industrial Revolution. Economics suddenly dictated that somebody had to go out from the home to work. Men were usually chosen, since they couldn’t produce milk. Maybe they would come home at night or just on weekends.

As a result, masculinity ceased to be defined in terms of domestic involvement—that is, skills at fathering and husbanding -and began to be defined in terms of making money. Men stopped doing all the things they used to do. Instead, they became primarily Father the Provider, bringing things home to the family rather than living and working at home within the family.

This gradually led fathers to find other roles to fulfill when they visited home after working somewhere else: Father the Disciplinarian: "Wait till your father comes home!" and Father the Audience: "Tell Daddy what you did today."

FATHER THE PROVIDER

If all father’s functions were economic, if all his status was measured by how well he provided, the rich and economically powerful father became a potential tyrant; but the father who wasn’t rich and famous was an inescapable failure, a disappointment, a buffoon. The father’s position in the family was no longer determined by how well he functioned as a father, but was scored by his status in the eyes of the world, in a set of economic contests in which there were few men winning by being the richest of them all, and most men losing.

Once a father had moved out of family life and became part of the work crew, family values ceased to be his primary definers of himself. He adopted instead the values and job descriptions of the other workers. His work ceased to be something he did for the sake of his family and became work for the sake of work.

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He didn't slow down when he'd achieved a level of sufficient comfort; instead, he strove even harder to get the approval of his fellow workers and to earn glory in their eyes. He worked because he worked; that was what he did because that was what he was. He was no longer paterfamilias, he was homolaboriosus. In the endeavors and identity dearest to his heart and heaviest on his schedule, he was a working man, and his family should understand that their claims on his time came second best.

In his mind, he had moved out. He had gone to conquer the world.

FATHER THE SUCCESS

When society decided that raising children was women's work and that making money was the single-minded point of men's lives, fathers became too busy for their children and boys began to grow up without fathers. That would not have been critical if there were uncles and cousins and grandfathers and older brothers around to model masculinity for boys. But our ideas of mental health and the goals of the housing industry required that families trim themselves down to the size of a married couple and their children.

Reducing the family to such a tiny, isolated, nuclear unit made it mobile enough for the purposes of industrial society. Workers were no longer rooted in the land or community. Now nothing came between a man and his job. Companies could extract the utmost loyalty from employees by making them a part of the family of work and cut them further away from the family of home. Men on the Daddy Track were severely penalized, much as women on the Mommy Track are now.

The children of this generation may grow up with the idea that a father's life is his work, and his family should not expect anything more from him.

I recall one man, talking about the problems of his son, saying, "I don't know what Betty could have done wrong raising that boy. I know it wasn't anything I did, since I was busy working and left it to her. I barely saw the kid so I couldn't have done anything wrong."

FATHER HUNGER

Life for most boys and for many grown men then is a frustrating search for the lost father who has not yet offered protection, provision, nurturing, modeling, or, especially, anointment. All those tough guys who want to scare the world into seeing them as men and who fill up the jails; all those men who don't know how to be a man with a woman and who fill up the divorce courts; all those corporate raiders who want more in hopes that more will make them feel better; and all those masculopathic philanderers, contenders, and controllers--all of them are suffering from Father Hunger.

They go through their adolescent rituals day after day for a lifetime, waiting for a father to anoint them and treat them as good enough to be considered a man.

They call attention to their pain, getting into trouble, getting hurt, doing things that are bad for them, as if they are calling for a father to come take them in hand and straighten them out or at least tell them how a grown man would handle the pain.

They compete with other boys who don't get close enough to let them see their shame over not feeling like men, over not having been anointed, and so they don't know that the other boys feel the same way.

In a scant 200 years--in some families in a scant two generations--we've gone from a toxic overdose of fathering to a fatal deficiency. It's not that we have too much mother but too little father.

THE MYTHS OF MASCULINITY

Our modern mythmakers are busy tackling the relationships between fathers and sons to find connections between pre-patriarchal and post-patriarchal consciousness, between the old fear of the too-powerful father and the new longing for a father to love and teach and anoint us.

The pain and grief and shame from the failed father-son relationship seem universal, as evidenced in the popular movies of the past few decades which had father-and-son themes that overshadowed anything going on between men and women.

Father-son myths attracted huge audiences in the 1970s and '80s. Men feared being like their fathers, but they wanted desperately to bond with them even if they could never really please them enough to feel anointed.

In 1989, the film that set the tone for the Men's Movement was Field of Dreams. Baseball, with its clear and polite rules and all its statistics and players who are normal men and boys rather than oversize freaks, is a man's metaphor for life.

In this magical fantasy, Iowa farmer Ray Kinsella (Kevin Costner) tells us his life story: how his mother died when he was two so his father gave up his efforts to play pro baseball in order to raise his son.

Costner hears a voice from his cornfield telling him "If you build it, he will come." He understands the message to mean that if he mows his cornfield and builds a baseball diamond, his father's hero, Joe Jackson, will appear. He does. Then Costner's dad appears in his baseball uniform, and father and son solemnly play a belated game of catch. Father and son don't talk much, they just play catch with total solemnity. And it is quite enough.

What goes on between the father and son-and what does not go on between them--is surely the most important determinant of whether the boy will become a man capable of giving life to others or whether he will go through life ashamed and pulling back from exposure to intimacy with men, women, and children.

A NEW GENERATION OF NURTURERS

It takes the fulfillment of all these relationships for a boy to become a man who is able to live in peace and cooperation with his community and to give something back to his family. Fathering makes a man--whatever his standing in the eyes of the world--feel strong and good and important, just as he makes his child feel loved and valued.

Mercifully, parenting is not an efficient process--the old concept of "quality time" is a cruel cop-out. A father who gets to hang out with his children is reliving the joys of his own childhood. The play is the thing.

Becoming Father the Nurturer rather than just Father the Provider enables a man to fully feet and express his humanity and masculinity. Fathering is the most masculine thing a man can do.

Will this new generation discover the healing power of fatherhood? As I look at the young men coming into manhood now, I see many who are willing to risk being hands-on fathers in a way that was rare in my generation. My son and son-in-law and nephews, for instance, are yearning for children, not just children to have but children to raise.

They are not alone. I feel optimistic about the sort of fathering these guys will do. The trend is dear: the boys who got fathered want to be fathers, and the boys who didn't fear it.

PHOTOS (3): Atlanta attorney Frank Morro and son Thomas: "Sharing the responsibilities of parenthood can add a new level of enjoyment and intimacy."

PHOTOS (2): Connecticut father and son Bill and Billy Bergner.

PHOTO: L.A. Law(yer) Ed Casey with twin sons Michael and James.

PHOTOS (3): Financial Officer Vincent McCann and his son Gerald:
"Fatherhood lends purpose to your life; you provide and protect for a reason."

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