



Absent Fathers

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Without Fathers

PRAVIN THEVATHASAN

David Popenoe, *Families Without Fathers: Fathers, Marriage and Children in American Society* (Piscataway, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2009, 287 pages).

David Blankenhorn, *Fatherless America: Confronting Our Most Urgent Social Problem* (New York, NY: HarperPerennial, 1996, 336 pages).

Blankenhorn's work was published back in 1996 and it has rightly become a much discussed classic. He demonstrates that America has, in good measure, lost the very idea of fatherhood. The home has become feminized and the role of the father as provider has been gradually eroded. The author shows how the fragmentation of fatherhood has contributed fundamentally to the ills of contemporary society: increasing youth violence, domestic violence against women, child abuse, and economic poverty.

Blankenhorn is quite clear that the belief that fatherhood is not necessary has been detrimental to the upbringing of children. A myth has been created of the "old father" who is depicted as a wife-beater and stern disciplinarian. In contrast, there is the "new father" who is nurturing and caring and motherly. The author shows that children need neither the old nor the new father. What they need is the father who is "the good family man" who provides for and protects his family. He loves his spouse and children and puts their needs above his own. The father and mother are of equal importance and they complement each other.

It is important to note that although the author (who is non-religious and believes homosexual love to be of equal dignity to heterosexual love) is now a supporter of same-sex "marriage," he has not retracted the major findings in this highly readable and relevant work.

Popenoe's work was published more recently and, like Blankenhorn, he argues that fathers play a crucial role in child development. Children develop best when they are given the opportunity to have warm, enduring relationships with both their fathers and mothers. The research evidence suggests that surrogate fathers are poor substitutes for natural fathers. Fatherless children are more likely to drop out of school, give birth as teenagers and become juvenile delinquents. The author suggests that if current trends continue without redress, "our society could be on the verge of committing social suicide."

The author argues that the main reason for this trend towards fatherlessness is the growth of radical individualism. In the past, self-development was for the sake of a greater good such as caring for the family; now, self-interest has emerged as an acceptable and even desirable good in the pursuit of self-development.

The author argues that it is best to relax the moral prohibition against premarital sex so as to permit limited non-marital cohabitation. However, several studies have shown that this compromise does not

work: those who marry after cohabitation are more likely to divorce than those who do not.

With some reservations, this work is commended for its wealth of information.

Men's Lives

STEPHEN MCGINLEY

Nicholas W. Townsend, *The Package Deal: Marriage, Work and Fatherhood in Men's Lives* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002, 264 pages).

Nicholas Townsend's *The Package Deal* is the fruit of interviews with men who graduated from Meadowview High School in the San Francisco Bay Area in the early 1970s. The author intentionally limits his scope to American peers. There are eight chapters in the book with two appendices, notes, references, and an index.

The "package deal" of the title contains four elements: marriage, children, employment, and home ownership: the author examines how these elements affect fatherhood. There are four facets of fatherhood: emotional closeness, provision, protection, and endowment. The relation between the latter three is asymmetrical. They mutually inhere and depend on each other. However, Townsend claims that emotional closeness stands in contradiction to provision (and therefore also to protection and endowment, though differently) because more time spent pursuing provision necessarily means less time spent with the child(ren) and vice versa. It is here that women's mediation is central. For the men Townsend interviewed, the father-child relation presupposes the husband-wife relation. Townsend notes that divorce terminates the woman's role as mediator between the father and child, thereby gravely wounding the father's capacity to live out his fatherhood.

The author laments the tension between fathers' desire to be close to their children and the physical separation of work and home. Home ownership tends to manifest the provision of the father, and provides a space to pursue emotional closeness. However, rising costs of houses in "good neighborhoods" require that the father either work longer hours or that both parents work. If the former is the case, the emotional closeness that is desired is frustrated by another element within fatherhood.

The final chapter allows the author space to draw out some implications from his work. He calls for untying policies from "heterosexual marriage as the only focus of child rearing" (p. 202). Furthermore, he spells out the hitherto underlying assumption that masculinity and femininity, or gendered difference, are "socially constructed and variable" (p. 203).

My first question when approaching this text was: what does the author mean by "a package deal?" What is the nature of the package? What is his understanding of the unity of the package? I was very excited to read the author's contention in Chapter 3, "The Four Facets of Fatherhood," that the "elements [of the package deal (fatherhood, marriage, employment, and home ownership)] are interconnected and mutually dependent. As a complex whole, they can be viewed from a number of different perspectives" (p. 50). My first reaction was to rejoice that he sees the whole as greater than the sum of its parts. However, it eventually becomes clear that the "whole" is far from being a unity. The package deal is a "constellation... not a seamless whole" (p. 203), because our *cultural vision* is

constructed and variable, extrinsic and accidental. The second appendix explains that “the meaning of fatherhood to fathers and their societies changes and is constructed in the context of changing social and economic circumstances and changing definitions of gender” (p. 212). Thus, in the last analysis, fatherhood is the product of social and economic forces.

Both the author and those he interviewed presuppose that children are simply the product of the will of the spouses. Any deeper notion of the family is essentially undermined by the introduction of the principle of “choice” through the acceptance of contraception, with its capacity and propensity to destroy any real sense of vocation. All this being said, the author’s interviews and commentary give excellent insight into the classic American male (p. 5) and the cultural expectations for American men that we are all exposed to, shaped by nominalism (leading to relativism) and voluntarism (leading to the prioritization of the principle of “choice”).

The option that “fatherhood” could be something that exists in itself, that has a form that can be approached, is simply not part of the author’s way of thinking. Both the author and the men he has interviewed assume a way of choosing that is essentially *unoriented* – until they orient it. It cannot even be called a *disoriented* choice, since that would at least imply a proper orientation. *Unoriented* indicates the essential depth to which both the author and those interviewed took the centrality of self as “self-sufficient” (p. 149).

All of this could be said to sanction a kind of “freedom of indifference” which then permits one to construct an ethically arbitrary notion of fatherhood with no reference to the idea of being drawn to the good (pp. 165ff). It is therefore the burden of those who seek the True, the Good, and the Beautiful to salvage whatever they can from *The Package Deal*, while radically qualifying it in Christ. It is he who reveals the Father and, therefore, the meaning of human fatherhood which is essentially filial and receptive, a mode of being that is totally foreign to Townsend’s book.

New Men

BENJAMIN PETTY

W. Bradford Wilcox, *Soft Patriarchs, New Men: How Christianity Shapes Fathers and Husbands* (University of Chicago Press, 2004, 328 pages).

The author, an eminent sociologist in the field of marriage and family studies, is director of the National Marriage Project at the University of Virginia where he teaches. In this work, he takes up the task of responding to current sociological perspectives which either cast religion as a reactionary anchor (keeping the modern family from reaching a promised egalitarian bliss), or an ultimately irrelevant factor in the face of the inexorable evolutionary force of political and economic realities.

Men are the focus of this investigation because the data shows that, though women have made significant strides in closing the employment and education gap, they are still doing a majority of the housework as well. The revolution of the 60s and 70s has stalled, and it requires a change in male behavior to supply the spark necessary to get it going again. Since there has been a conservative protestant focus on men taking leadership in their families (e.g. the Promise Keeper movement of the mid-90s), conservative Protestantism has been blamed as a major cause of the stall, and therefore as dangerous to families.

Wilcox's hypothesis is that religion, and specifically conservative Protestantism, not only continues to have a significant effect on the family behavior and attitudes of the men who practice it, but is actually linked to remarkably stronger performance in key areas that predict positive outcomes for the well-being of family members.

In order to test his hypothesis, Wilcox first lays out the distinctive responses that mainline and conservative Protestant churches developed in response to mid-twentieth century cultural shifts in marriage and family practice. He characterizes the mainline denominations' largely accommodationist stance as "Golden Rule liberalism" – the institutional embrace of an inclusive notion of family based on an egalitarian caring ethic – and the conservatives' largely resistant stance as "expressive traditionalism," valorizing the traditional family while embracing certain new therapeutic developments. He sees the conservative Protestant response not as a hunkering down but as an active engagement, and as a source of unparalleled religious vitality. For all the distinctiveness of their responses, Wilcox shows through a close reading of secondary literature, that both sides adopted a therapeutic ethic of personal psychological wellness.

But does the institutional emphasis translate into individual adherence? Wilcox's analysis of the attitudes of individuals within those different traditions reveals ambivalence between the institutional stance and individual belief within each denomination, but conservative Protestant affiliation ends up being the most consistent predictor of gender traditionalism and familism. Coming to the heart of the matter, Wilcox examines what effect, if any, the persistence of these traits within conservative Protestantism has on the behavior of married men with children. He examines the areas of parenting,

household labor, and spousal satisfaction.

His analysis of parenting practices shows that active religious men and conservative Protestant men have the highest involvement in their children's lives, and authoritative (linked to healthy outcomes for children) but not authoritarian (linked to negative outcomes) styles of parenting. They are, in short, better than average parents in statistically significant ways for being religious and conservative Protestants. Wilcox distinguishes between the way that mainline and conservative Protestant men perform these roles; the mainline men are new men, who are more egalitarian in their labor and beliefs, while conservatives are the soft patriarchs of the book's title: traditionally minded, but active servant-leaders.

Perhaps the most intriguing parts of this book are the two chapters on household labor division and spousal satisfaction. The data shows that the revolution has really stalled in terms of an egalitarian division of labor, with conservative Protestant men doing the least amount of housework compared to their wives. However, this is coupled with those same overworked wives reporting the highest level of spousal appreciation. In order to explain this link better, Wilcox makes use of the concept of the "economy of gratitude." Feeling appreciated, and being shown concrete acts of appreciation, are more consistent predictors of marital health than equal workload or income.

Wilcox's analysis shows that religion does have a significant and positive effect on the behavior of married men with children according to current criteria. He has demonstrated that the assertion that conservative Protestant men are harming the emotional health of children and women is not supported by any quantifiable criteria. In reality, the facts reveal that those same men, whom certain scholars have labeled as the enemy of the new family, are in fact the best at bringing it about.

This demonstration is both the greatest strength and weakness of this well-constructed and carefully argued book. As a sociologist who is an advocate for a minority perspective within the culture, he confines himself strictly to the style of an article in a journal of sociology. His chapters are each organized around a testable hypothesis derived from current debates within his field. This can frustrate a reader who may be unfamiliar with that style because the import of his findings is so modestly displayed. However, those with a background in sociology will find his method sound, and ample data to explore in the appendices. If there is any bone to be picked with his methods it is his dependence on the General Social Survey, conducted in 1987–8. In the sixteen years that have lapsed between that survey and the publication of this book, cultural attitudes on gender equality and family roles have continued to liberalize. In addition, economic trends have continued to push both parents to work outside the home. Without more recent data, some may argue that those cultural pressures may have weakened conservative Protestants' attitudes and practices since the 1980s.

However, the book's limited sociological style is simultaneously its greatest weakness. By strictly confining himself, Wilcox can rely only on empirical criteria established by the majority of sociologists to evaluate family health. Perhaps, in an indirect way, his refutation of certain majority perspectives calls into question their broader assumptions, but Wilcox refrains from explicitly taking them to task. He includes discussion of some work already done in the understanding of economies of gratitude, which helps to explain the surprising discrepancy between inequitable household labor division and greater satisfaction of wives with their active conservative Protestant husbands. But important questions remain to be answered. Do the new therapeutic criteria, with their emphasis on individual psychological well-being, instrumentalize the family in a way that makes it a tool for personal fulfillment? What is an adequate measure of family health? How does one best define equality within a traditional understanding of gender difference?

Readers will find openings to these discussions in Wilcox's findings and conclusions, but few firm assertions that genuinely transcend the bounds of sociology. The limits of this format do not preclude Wilcox from someday writing a less doggedly scientific work that might synthesize the data with a broader, more philosophical reflection on the intimate relation between church and family in America. But, until Wilcox writes this book, readers will have to content themselves with this more rigid and focused work.

In the end, Wilcox has, by a careful application of statistical analysis, refuted certain elements of current sociological theory that downplay or vilify the effect that religion in general and conservative Protestantism in particular has on husbands and fathers. It is a valuable resource to anyone who has asked themselves if religion really makes a difference in people's lives, and provides a solid empirical basis for thinking so – one that demands a deeper philosophical explanation.

Faith of the Fatherless

MEREDITH RICE

Paul Vitz, *Faith of the Fatherless: The Psychology of Atheism* (Dallas, TX: Spence Publishing Co., 1999, 200 pages).

With the prevalence of divorce and the ever-rising rate of out-of-wedlock births in the US, sociologists have begun to study the effects of growing up without a father in the home. In seemingly every measurable category, the lack of a sustained, committed father-child relationship puts the child at a disadvantage: lower IQ, lower academic achievement, higher anxiety, higher rates of disruptive behavior, lower self-esteem, higher rates of drug use and violence, and an increased chance of child abuse have all been linked with the absence of fathers from their children.

In his 1999 book *Faith of the Fatherless: The Psychology of Atheism*, psychologist Paul Vitz proposes another likely effect of the loss of the father on children: a distance from and doubt of God, which leads in many cases to profound atheism. Vitz develops his proposal as an inverse to Freud's projection theory of belief in God, which proposes "wish-fulfillment derived from childish needs for protection and security" as the major psychological factor leading to religious belief in God (p. 6). Without giving credence to Freud's conclusion that psychological factors in belief render the belief itself suspect or false, Vitz notes that the projection theory in fact offers just as plausible an explanation for unbelief as for belief. Taking up the insight that a child's "psychological representation of his father is intimately connected to his understanding of God," Vitz proposes to test a "defective father" hypothesis, in which an "atheist's disappointment in and resentment of his own father unconsciously justifies his rejection of God" (p. 16). His method is a historical survey of the biographies of prominent atheists and theists, particularly major figures in the development of modern atheism and their interlocutors on the side of faith.

In the column of founders and major proponents of modern atheism, Vitz addresses nineteen cases, from Voltaire, Thomas Hobbes, and David Hume, to Nietzsche, Bertrand Russell, Jean-Paul Sartre, Joseph Stalin, and Sigmund Freud himself. In each case, the "defective father" hypothesis holds to some degree. Each of these men experienced a rift in his relationship with his father: whether the early death of his father, or abuse, neglect or abandonment at his hands, or an unattractive weakness or overbearing character in his father, which led to a personal break and rejection of the father's values. In a few cases, these men themselves draw a parallel between the absence of their fathers and the absence of God. Explaining his mother's inability to impart her waning faith to him in the face of her husband's careless neglect of the family, H.G. Wells relates: "My father was away at cricket, and I think she realized more and more as the years dragged on without material alleviation, that Our Father and Our Lord, on whom to begin with she had perhaps counted unduly, were also away – playing perhaps at their own sort of cricket in some remote quarter of the starry universe" (p. 51). The lack of stability from a father's care appears to leave a void that a discredited God cannot fill, and that instead requires the search for a new principle of order and flourishing, e.g., mathematics (Russell), existential philosophy (Sartre), totalitarian political order (Stalin), and so on.

In his selection of a “control group” of theists, Vitz focuses on prominent intellectual defenders of faith against the atheism or skepticism of their times and reveals a more varied set of circumstances. Blaise Pascal’s father retired from the law on the death of his wife to devote himself to the education of his children, while Edmund Burke was separated from his father at a young age because of health, but was instead raised with the help of three maternal uncles who impressed him with their integrity, benevolence, and faith (p. 65). G.K. Chesterton spent his childhood at his father’s side, imbibing his love of literature and beauty, while Martin Buber lost his mother and was separated from his father at an early age but was raised by grandparents who were attentive and loving. Albert Schweitzer was able to describe his father as “my dearest friend” (p. 86), while Abraham Heschel lost his father at the age of ten but felt himself from an early age to be following in the spiritual footsteps of several Hasidic rabbis whose example guided his growth.

In the examples of theists Vitz cites, the lives of those whose loss or estrangement from their fathers that would seem to locate them in the “defective fathers” category also included the secondary influence of some kind of substitute father figure. And although many of the theists were sons of devout, and even ordained, men (Paley, Schleiermacher, Schweitzer, and Barth were all ministers’ sons), Dietrich Bonhoeffer was raised by a devoted father who was himself agnostic and in a household whose Christian practice was mostly nominal. The commonality appears to be that a father or father-figure in each of these cases was able to provide a stability, affection, and attention that at the very least did not impede the development of faith in God.

The initial conclusion to be drawn from Vitz’s survey is that the historical evidence appears to support his hypothesis that the childhood experience of a “defective father” is a contributing psychological factor to the rejection of God in adulthood. Further, Vitz is able to contextualize this formative experience of the prominent atheists he identified with several further shared personal characteristics that appear to contribute to their skepticism regarding belief: high intelligence, overweening ambition, and the free choice to reject the strictures that belief in God might place on the realization of personal development. Indeed, many of his examples would seem to share the understanding of God’s role in their lives that Sartre attributed to fatherhood in general: “Had my own father lived, he would have lain on me full length and crushed me” (p. 30). In this way, the modern “romance of the autonomous self,” free from all restraint, plays directly into a rejection of belief in God (p. 136).

In substantiating his hypothesis of a projection theory of atheism based on the experience of a “defective” father, Vitz shows that the Freudian dismissal of religious belief based on psychological projection is illegitimate: the ultimate truth (or falsity) of religious belief cannot be determined by psychological factors (p. 145). However, for the general reader, Vitz might have strengthened his presentation by stepping outside this Freudian frame. His discussion of the relationship between family dynamics and belief in God is interesting not primarily for polemical reasons, but insofar as it resonates with the experience and truth of the human person as such. In a fallen world, every father fails in some degree to reflect and interpret the fatherhood of God, and yet many children implicitly or explicitly reconcile that gap with trust in the providence and faithfulness of God. A discussion of this universal human experience would have added a greater depth and credibility to the selective historical survey of exceptional figures that forms the bulk of Vitz’s observations and argument.

The Necessary Wound

PAOLO PROSPERI FSCB

Claudio Risé, *Il Padre: l'assente inaccettabile* (San Paolo, 2007, 6th edition).

“The sign of the father is the ‘wound’: the ‘stroke,’ the blow, effected by the loss” (p. 11). “The event of Golgotha itself can be seen, among its many meanings, as the supreme symbol of this universal, anthropological truth: the wound of the Son makes sense, because it is received ‘in the name of the Father.’” “The Father is bound up with this crucial role: through him the Son receives the ‘wound’ and is thereby *initiated* into the meaning of pain, which means into the *full* meaning of life as such: human existence is in fact not only about gratification, but also about suffering and limitation.”

This is – in few words – the central, simple, and profound idea around which the whole book gravitates. The work of Risé is divided into seven chapters, but we can distinguish in it two main parts: the first part (chs 1-3) is – we would dare to say – an anthropological (1: *The Sign of the Father*; 2: *The Father and God*) and at the same time historical (3: *The Rejection of the Father in Western Modernity*) reflection on the meaning of fatherhood. The second part (chs 4-7) is rather a sort of phenomenology of the disastrous effects of the contemporary collapse of fatherhood in today’s western societies. In this part, strongly based on statistical evidence, the author devotes privileged attention to the US, and in particular to what he calls the “fabric of divorces” – in his opinion one of the main agents of the increasing collapse of the figure of the father in western liberal world (ch. 4). Chapters 5 and 6 are more specifically dedicated to a description of the pathological effects of the “absence of the father” (5: *Pathology of a Fatherless Society*; 7: *The Refusal of Death in the Fatherless Society*). The book ends however with a note of hope, recording the surprising signals of an increasing cry of protest that according to the author comes from the youngest generation. Relying on the results of the research of utterly “lay” authors,[1] the author claims that – paradoxically enough – it is the young generation who demand more and more the “return of the father,” in spite of the opposition of the dominant mentality of liberal societies. Unfortunately the statistics the book provides extend only as far as 2002. It would certainly be interesting to verify how much the past decade confirms (or not) the diagnosis of the author, especially in what concerns the US. However, it is probably more important here to give a short account of the content of the first, foundational part of the book, which is in any case the one that claims a more permanent significance.

Risé, who is a psychoanalyst, obviously approaches the topic from his particular perspective. However, what immediately surprises the reader is his remarkable capacity to integrate the results of his experience and knowledge as a therapist into a far broader vision. What the author in fact does, in this passionate apology for fatherhood, is something more than to point out the disastrous consequences of the “marginalization of the father” – a common theme in the literature devoted to this topic. He dares to face, without claiming to be exhaustive on such a profound issue, the question which is indeed the most fundamental one: “*What* is a father?” Or more precisely: *Why* is the father so irreplaceably important in the life of any human person? Only in answering *this question*, the author seems to claim, does it become possible to understand the drama in our society and at the same time to enter into a fruitful

dialogue with the dominant culture. What the author proposes, in brief, is to “sketch” a “symbolical ontology” of human fatherhood. Nothing more – one would expect, to tell the truth, a deeper development of the argument at many points – but also nothing less.

In the first programmatic chapter, Risé enunciates his main thesis: “The father is the one, who teaches and witnesses that human existence is *not only* about gratification, validation, reassurance, but *also* about loss, lack, toil. The most profound experiences in human existence have their origin and receive their shape through *a loss* (...). Now, the father is the one who hands down the crucial teaching about the meaning of the *wound* that *any loss* inflicts; and this because his primary psychological and symbolical role, in the life of the son/daughter, is to be the one who gives a goal, a *telos*, a perspective; the one who “organizes” the chaotic impulses of the child *in and through the very act of drawing him/her out of the symbiotic relation with the mother*. The father, in other words, is the one who inflicts the *first and therefore most delicate “wound,” from the point of view of the psychological development of the person*: the separation from the mother’s “womb.”

The child lives in a sort of fusion with the mother starting from the moment of conception. Until a certain point, this vital union has to continue. The mother’s caring presence fulfills, of course, all through the child’s infancy, the irreplaceable role of making him/her ever more confident of the unconditional lovability of his/her own self. However, the awareness of the huge significance of this bond should make one all the more aware of the crucial delicacy of the process of the eventual separation of the child from the mother in the person’s life. “If the separation does not happen correctly, the subject is at risk of remaining for his entire life a child who unconsciously cries for the irremediably lost object of his love, the approving gaze of whom he narcissistically seeks in everything he does.

This is why the separation from the mother has always been understood as a central event not only for the person herself, but also for the entire community – as is made clear by the study of *the rites of initiation*, proper to so many different cultures of any place and time” (pp. 11-20). Western society – Risé argues – has decided that rites of initiation are not needed anymore. We want to grow up without wounds, without pain, without experiencing loss. The symbol of the cross – which reminds us of the necessity of pain and separation – has become suspect not by chance, and not only for religious reasons. For the ancient cultures, pain and knowledge go together. There is no authentic wisdom without a painful path of initiation, the agent of which is the father – the one who already passed through, and is therefore reliable, because he “knows.”

Now, what is this wisdom about? The first crucial fruit of the paternal “wound” is *the child’s renunciation of omnipotence* (pp. 21-6). The father, in giving directions and rules sometimes painful to respect, initiates the child into what before, in the fusion-like bliss of the symbiosis with the mother, was unknown: the necessity of the *limit*, as a condition for the shaping of one’s personality, and so for entering into a *higher level of life*. The painful struggle for accepting the father’s rule, far from being a repressive factor, in time liberates the child from anxiety, whereas the absence of a father with the courage to play his role causes anxiety and restlessness. The “spoiled” child, in spite of its apparent arrogance and apparent freedom, is desperately in search of a norm, of a restraining word, to give shape to its chaotic impulses.

Risé’s classification and illustration of this dynamic is rich and impressive: from the loss of self-confidence and self-esteem, to depression, to ADHD. In synthesis: it is “the conscious experience of the ‘irrevocably lost,’ that paradoxically frees the child from anxiety and fear, setting it free from the anxiety of recovering the ‘omnipotent unity’ of mother/child.” The author enters at this point into an

insightful dialogue with some of the great archetypes of the western culture: from Aeneas to Icarus, from Jacob to Herod.

In the second foundational chapter, on the father and God, the author goes deeper, claiming that the relationship with the father is particularly related to the development of the child's religious sense and – more broadly – his or her striving towards transcendence. This is primarily because at the deepest level of one's "I", one unmistakably feels the father as the symbol of the Origin, of the Creator: the father has to do with the *beginning*. This quality makes of him, not in spite but because of his *greater distance* in respect to the mother, the most original companion, the great *other* who "wanted me and knows me" (Psalm 138), the first sign of God. Thanks to his reliable presence, the child learns to trust and welcome existence, without being afraid of its indomitable *mysteriousness*, whereas with the mother alone one will more easily develop a neurotic search for mastery and control.

Along with this function, continues the author, the father is the one who promotes the psychological development of the child's freedom, in spite of the opposite cliché; and this precisely because he gives the child a mission, a task, that transcends the immediate plan driven only by needs and impulses: calling it to a certain responsibility, the father frees the child for transcendence, for the future. If the mother incarnates the past, the secure "paradise lost," the father calls towards "the new heaven and earth," an earth that needs the work of the child too, in order to be transformed.

[1] E.g. Doris Lessing (interview in *Il Corriere della Sera*, 15.08.2001); Susan Faludi, *Bastonati: Sul lavoro, in famiglia, dalla società*, Lyra libri (Como, 2000); Maggie Gallagher, *The Case for Marriage: Why Married People Are Happier, Healthier, and Better Off Financially* (Broadway, 2001).

Finding the Father

SARAH ELIZABETH MAPLE

Donald Miller, *Father Fiction: Chapters For a Fatherless Generation* (Howard Books, 2010).

Drawing attention to the American crisis of fatherlessness, Donald Miller founded the Mentoring Project in 2008 and, in 2010, republished his memoir under the title *Father Fiction: Chapters for a Fatherless Generation*. In a collection of “chapters” written with great accessibility, and unashamed, candid narratives, Miller shares intimate details of his fatherless life to give a personal perspective on a national problem.

Miller begins to explain this national problem by drawing attention to the concept of “natural order” (p. 20). He wonders what knowledge a child will miss by not having a father around. He then turns to the study of “suspended adolescence” in fatherless youths. Fueled by aggression, violent behavior, and sexual frustration, the maturation process of fatherless youths is disrupted and unusually long, since there is no figurehead to show them what to do and how to use all of their energy and muscle (p. 22). “I wondered if some of the confusing emotions I was feeling weren’t a kind of suspended adolescence from which the presence of an older man might have delivered me” (p. 24).

Miller amusingly demonstrates that orphaned elephants seem to share many of the same difficulties as fatherless adolescent humans. Upon finding an adult male mentor, the adolescent elephant tends to experience these shifting frustrations for only a few days. It then spends the rest of its youth living with and learning from the adult male until ready to go off on its own.

Upon finding his own “mentor” in an older male, Miller was able to witness what a father does, how he teaches his children, what a husband does around the house, and how he interacts with his wife and the world around him (p. 32). The ability to belong to and provide for others, as Miller learns, first originates from a sense of belonging and being accepted by your parents and primary family. What men need, and need to receive, in order to claim their identity as men and gain this sense of belonging requires many things. It requires affirmation; a sense of being needed; a sense of responsibility and integrity; and confidence in the capacity to succeed and to lead.

In the absence of a father, Miller recalls from his own experience, “if a kid grows up feeling he is burdening the people around him, he is going to operate as though the world doesn’t want him” (p. 36). Households stretched thin by the absence of fathers commonly have overworked mothers. With both parents absent or stretched thin, the belief that you are loved and *needed* by others may be undermined, with disastrous effect. As Miller says, “I never thought to ascribe my mother’s emotional and physical exhaustion to the lack of a husband and father; rather, I ascribed it to my existence [...] I learned that if I didn’t exist, the family would be better off” (p. 35).

In his fifth chapter, “Spirituality: God is Fathering Us,” Miller begins to address the question of of submission, authority, and trust. Mirroring the parent and mentoring roles on which he focused with regard to orphaned adolescents, Miller discusses *identity issues* of fatherless men in the broader context

of God's fatherhood. He acknowledges that "people who decided not to have anything to do with God [...] not really knowing how to control themselves, not having any discipline [...] didn't know how to be humans, really" (p. 55). He bases this on the notion that "relationships unlock certain parts of who we are supposed to be [and...] being in a relationship with God helps us understand who we are and become who we are designed to be" (p. 56).

Miller describes how children need to be taught how to live together with others. If this educational process doesn't happen, and if it isn't instituted and practiced within the family first, children experience isolation and become defensive, never growing to full maturity (p. 63). Part of the ability to get along with others and discover our own identity involves lessons in forgiveness and reconciliation. "Belonging" lies at the foundation of identity; it "validates" a child and allows him or her to grow within the security of constant recognition (p. 70).

The insecurity of not having one's identity validated leads to a sense of rejection; without the experience of forgiveness, abandonment and rejection often turn into feelings of resentment and foster a distrust of authority. The connection between authority and trust is love, and it is by submitting ourselves to authority that we learn who we are (p. 75). Here Miller concludes: there is no substitute for unconditional love, and there is no substitute for one of its greatest teachers: our father (p. 73).

Deprived of this teacher, men and boys seek a general definition of what it is to be a man without *knowing* how to "own" their identity as men (p. 83). In Chapter VII, "Manhood," Miller states for the sake of every man, that "God wants to heal the father wound, and [teach us] how our identity as men comes from him, [and] how he steps in when our fathers step out" (p. 85). In the national crisis of fatherlessness, Miller seeks to assure us that the awakening of each man's identity is still possible. Beyond our nation's suspended adolescence, "navigating the journey of manhood" is possible for each and every man. Manhood is founded in a paternity beyond the fatherhood of this world.

The theme of responsibility is explored in further chapters which discuss a man's ability to control his emotions, to ask for affection appropriately, to have reciprocating friendships, to date responsibly, to understand and protect the value of sex, to have a family, and to have a work ethic. He also discusses such issues as desperation for love, self-sacrifice, the vicious cycle of self pity and complaining, the need for commitment, responsibility, and self-respect, the desire for beauty and education, and the integrity and forgiveness which each man requires in order to pardon his own father's shortcomings.

Recovering the paramount identity of a man as "child of God" requires this pardoning of the absence and other shortcomings of earthly fathers that may expose a son to neglect, abandonment, manipulation, indifference, self-pity, pride, shamelessness, a lack of responsibility, and desperation for love and affirmation. Recovering our identity as children of God dispels the "father fiction" of abandonment and shortcomings by educating us in the truth of God's loyal love in "separation without abandonment" (p. 189). Fathers who are consistently involved in the lives of their children can mirror this divine love. Validated by one's father, man receives a sense of belonging and identity, and is able to understand life as a gift and an adventure.

Donald Miller's *Father Fiction* makes an engaging and important start in considering how to revitalize and reclaim man's identity, both as son and father. This identity must, however, be recovered complementarily with the true identity of woman, within the larger context of the recovery of marital union in today's divorce culture, subjects which Miller does not consider in this particular memoir.

Lost Fathers

BLESSED JOHN HENRY NEWMAN

Cynthia R. (ed) Daniels, *Lost Fathers: The Politics of Fatherlessness in America* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000, 208 pages).

A cacophony of voices from radical feminists and ultra conservatives resounds in this compendium of essays on father absence or fatherlessness in America. *Lost Fathers: The Politics of Fatherlessness in America* is Cynthia Daniels' attempt to harmonize the dialogue and debate surrounding the economic, political, and cultural concepts of "father" based on what she identifies as the three fundamental points of the controversy: "What is fatherlessness?", "Does fatherlessness matter?", and "What is a father?" In her introduction, Daniels claims that the purpose of her work is to generate "more heat and light" concerning the social questions surrounding fatherlessness in order to come closer to "possible solutions." The following review highlights the main arguments of the nine essays and offers an evaluation of the work taken as a whole.

The social sciences represented in this work take as their starting point the controversy surrounding fatherlessness today (i.e., the 1990s). The controversy, it seems, is really about whether or not absent fathers are a matter for social concern. All agree that fatherlessness has an effect on children and men and women; however, they are not univocal that the effect is negative, nor do they agree on what problems arise from fatherlessness or what actual solutions to it might be. "Conservative" voices claim that the controversy demands a renewed emphasis on marriage and a return to traditional family values; "liberal" voices celebrate emerging and varied expressions of family life that require intense involvement on the part of government institutions in defending the equality of women, legitimizing alternative family relationships, and taking a leading role in the education and welfare of children.

David Popenoe in "Life Without Father" and Maggie Gallagher in "Father Hunger" reflect on the traditional notion of fatherhood, rooted in marriage, where otherwise promiscuous men were tamed, found a bonding agent in the person of their wife, and cared for the offspring they were assured were theirs. Fatherhood, cast in these terms, forms the underpinnings of a stable society and is an institution which governments have a genuine interest in preserving.

Without this structure, Popenoe laments, a whole host of social ills arise including teen violence, teen pregnancy, and child abuse. Fathers, he claims, are the best role models for their sons and the most important male figures in their daughters' lives. In addition, without a father in the family, the instance of child abuse rises in response to the increased environmental, psychological and emotional vulnerability of children. In addition, unwed men can be a danger to themselves as well as society. They have a greater propensity for promiscuity and crime as well as despondency and depression. Popenoe's suggested solution is the reestablishment of marriage and fatherhood through legal and economic reforms that protect and encourage the stability of marriage and family life. Though Sara McLanahan's solutions may differ to those suggested by Popenoe, his conclusions are ratified by the social science research she presents in her essay, "Growing up Without a Father."

Maggie Gallagher agrees with Popenoe on the negative effects of fatherlessness on children. However, in "Father Hunger" she focuses on the personal dimension of how children articulate their physical, psychological, and emotional desire for a father which is not simply accidental but seems to be a defining characteristic of human nature. "For most children of divorce, domicile is destiny: Only one-third of all children living apart from their fathers get to see their dads as often as once a week.... This is the first generation of American kids who must face not the sad loss of death but the brutal knowledge that other things are more important to their fathers than they are" (pp. 167ff). For Gallagher, marriage needs to be held up as a good, economically rewarded, and protected by legislation, because the norms and mores of a culture of fatherhood are what bind men to their children.

New models of "father" that are not reducible to sexual difference emerge in "Dada-ism in the 1990s." Judith Stacey claims that culture needs to wean itself from the childish notion of Dada, and drop the baby talk about fatherlessness. For Stacey, the claims of Dadaism resulted in the Promise Keepers movement, the Million Man March, Dan Quayle's criticism of Murphy Brown, and New Right in politics with pro-family leaders. Pro-family, for Stacey, means restorationism, like that described by Popenoe and Gallagher, which imposes a rigid gender code of post-feminist hostility, inflammatory nostalgia, and chauvinism. Restorationist principles include upholding the sanctity of marriage as the foundation for a successful society that promotes the interests of children, and promoting responsible fatherhood and motherhood.

Stacey espouses the view that this kind of structure is not only vanishing from our culture, but that families do not need the structure of mother, father, or marriage. "The quality of any family's relationships and resources readily trumps its formal structure or form." The infatuation with fatherlessness, she claims, is a scapegoat for dealing with the real fears of engagement with the imperfections of humanity and the inability to come to terms with the fact that fathers are not a "pie in the sky" ideal that, if restored, will solve all our social ills. Stacey claims that there should be political neutrality regarding the structure of the family and that more attention should be devoted to the renovation of economic policy in which the "incompatibility of paid work and parenting in the United States is likely the single most crucial source of fatherlessness in America."

Together, the voices of Lisa Dodson, "'This River Runs Deep': Father Myths and Single Mothers in Poor America"; Jean Bethke Elshtain, "The Lost Children"; and Dorothy Roberts, "The Absent Black Father," harmonize around the theme that single mothers raising families are the poorest people in America. Their varied perspectives on single mothers, teen pregnancy, and black single mothers consider the social and economic implications of fatherlessness for women and children. Their claims are that not all women are radical feminists and not all men are cads, but that there are insurmountable pressures which, in many cases, result in the undesired outcome of fatherless families. The uncoupling of sex from marriage in the 1960s, no fault divorce, the loss of a family wage, the policies of a racially motivated limited government that would renounce a robust welfare state that cares for poor fatherless families, encouraging black men to return home without healing the disease of racism, all contribute to the phenomenon of fatherlessness.

In the opening essay of the book, "The History and Politics of Fatherhood," Robert L. Griswold seeks to clarify and challenge assumptions made by traditionalists and feminists concerning the role of fatherhood in America. He contends that "Conservatives and liberals agree that for most of American history men had a secure place within their families, but the meaning they attach to this security is quite different." Griswold examines three major nostalgic assumptions: the co-residence of fathers with their children, paternal availability, and the notion of the "good-enough" father.

That fathers lived in the same domicile as their children more in the past than they do presently is an incontrovertible fact; yet Griswold offers weighty historic and bioevolutionary evidence to indicate how fundamentally the culture of the home is running “counter not only to America’s prior history but to the evolution of the species itself.... Until recently, American culture for both historical and bioevolutionary reasons powerfully endorsed the father-child bond, and what we have today is a unique challenge to this endorsement.” While this bond is being challenged, Griswold also challenges the notion that fathers were more available to their children in the past and that they were *good enough*, in the sense that they knew and fulfilled their role as providers and examples. His claim rests on data from the early 20th century which indicates that, as a result of the industrial revolution and two world wars, fathers were neither available nor “good enough.” Despite the radical changes to the social and cultural notion of “father,” history rules out any misplaced sense of nostalgia in the Ozzie and Harriet depiction of family life.

While the social science research is dated, and many of the cultural references will not be recalled by some current readers, the book is worth an overview. The work’s major flaw is that it does not capture the meaning of father; rather it simply represents a cacophony of voices in the reduction of fatherhood. Despite her attempt to suggest solutions to the problem of fatherlessness, neither Daniels nor her contributors adequately address the definition of “father.” In other words, for all the time spent giving voice to the problems that come from fatherlessness, the meaning or nature of a father is never defined as a value. Fatherhood remains a secondary concern to the political, social, and cultural ills resulting from fatherlessness. Even those who would be supporters of restored or found fathers tardily approach the question of the value of fatherhood, and then only from the perspective of creating social stability.

When I think “father,” it is my own father who springs to mind first. This means that my understanding of the term “father” will already assume a personal relationship. Even children who do not know their fathers wish to know who they are. This reflection, regardless of whether my relationship with my father was good or bad, or how much he was present in my life, already brings me to the question of acknowledgment of the source of my own existence. And this may, for many people, require a great deal of personal healing. But it is irrefutable that, before the gift of stability, before being an economic value for the family, my father begat me. My life is a gift because of him, and his life is a gift because of his father before him, and so on. Rather than simply reducing the role of fathers to their social and economic contributions, even with the good that might be, we do better to begin with the reality that fathers are superfluous in the sense that they are *gratuitous*. They are more than what is required; they go beyond themselves and exceed their own limitations by giving life to their children. Fatherlessness, then, understood on the part of all the contributors of this work, even though we may agree with some of their proposals, is steeped in a rejection of fatherhood articulated in Robert Griswold’s conclusion: “Above all, we must continue to reflect on a problem central to liberal theory and modern individualism: how to balance the self-interest of adults with the needs of children.”

Fatherhood is a gift which needs to be protected and it is in the very real interests of the state to establish pro-family policies and promote fatherhood. But social reforms will not, in themselves, bring about the good that is required for the return of the “father.” What is required, first, is acknowledgement and a sense of gratitude for the gift and mystery that is expressed in fatherhood.

Healing Fatherlessness

JULIANA WEBER

John Sowers, *Fatherless Generation: Redeeming the Story* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010, 143 pages).

John Sowers is the founder of “The Mentoring Project,” an organization matching fatherless children with male mentors, and in this book he explains why he undertook such a program. The book is organized into two parts: The first examines the wound of fatherlessness; the second part is a call to action, with supporting stories of how mentoring works. For Sowers, mentoring is “an intentional relationship with the goal of seeing the mentee grow and mature into a complete adult” (p. 96). The fatherless live with nagging doubts about self-worth: “Left without an answer, they inevitably consume and destroy themselves, each other, and their communities” (p. 38). The word “inevitably” is an overstatement, which Sowers himself counters in the example of Matthew Redman, a Christian singer and songwriter whose difficulties continually brought him toward God (p. 86 ff.). Nonetheless, mentoring directly confronts the doubts that tempt the fatherless child and does so in the best setting possible: that of a supportive human relationship.

Sowers argues that the desire a child has for a father’s approval is as basic as the need for food and sleep (p. 26). He shares this opinion with a number of other authors, for example (and perhaps most obviously), Robert McGee, author of *Father Hunger*.^[1] The dramatic example that repeatedly came to mind as I read Sowers’ book was from Homer’s *The Odyssey*, in which Athena appeared in the form of a man named Mentor so that she could encourage and advise Telemachus how to act like a man in the absence of his father, Odysseus. She even kept up the masculine appearance after it became clear that Telemachus recognized her and prayed to the goddess by name (Book II). Although it may be intuitive for some that a father (or father figure) is important to a child’s well-being, we are, nevertheless, undergoing a crisis of fatherlessness, Sowers argues, and many children could be spared the suffering if only more men cared to mentor them.

In fact, the statistics stacked up against the fatherless are considerable. Fatherlessness is thought to account for 63% of youth suicides; 71% of pregnant teenagers; 90% of all runaway and homeless children; 70% of juveniles in state-operated institutions; and 85% of youths in prison (p. 37).

Fatherlessness also makes a child four times more likely to suffer depression and schizophrenia, and over 2.5 times as likely to suffer bipolar disorder (p. 41). Sowers argues that these numbers are symptomatic of a deep injury done to those who are raised without a father, like himself, and recommends the powerful intervention that mentoring at-risk youths can be.^[2]

Sowers uses a wide range of anecdotal examples to substantiate both these statistics and the difference that mentoring can make.^[3] The following example is perhaps the most striking because it involves non-rational animals, demonstrating a sub-rational depth to this need:

“Because these particular elephants were fatherless, [...]they were unable to move beyond this phase of

development, and some of the teenage 'boys' were starting to cause trouble. They were tearing up the reservation and killing other animals. They were renegades without direction. [...] After the scientists introduced the elders to the rogue teenagers, they observed an amazing change. Immediately, the teenagers calmed down, [...]. All that was required was the presence of older father figures – older elephants that could rub shoulders with them, give them guidance, and accept them into the tribe” (Sowers, pp. 94–5).

The elder elephants were not biologically related to the young elephants, but they were necessary surrogates for the fathers these young elephants lacked. Statistics show that human fatherlessness correlates with crime, depression, and so forth, but this longitudinal study on elephants suggests that mentors (male elders) can alleviate the crisis by their mere presence as a result of something that may be hardwired into us.

Sowers himself was a “little brother” in the youth-mentoring organization Big Brothers Big Sisters. He is able to use those experiences to illustrate the best of what can happen for a fatherless child – feeling loved, accepted, worthy of someone’s time and attention (p. 19). In fatherlessness, generally, “Someone has chosen to leave you. Someone has determined your value and decided you are not worth having around – or that he would be better off someplace else, without you” (p. 19). And that “someone” is the very person a child most longs to please and to make proud (p. 26). Since the current fatherlessness crisis is generally one of willful abandonment, not death or some other accident, Sower’s book primarily concerns children abandoned willfully. Of course, the statistics he has already cited warrant full attention to all children whose fathers are absent for whatever reason, but Sowers is trying to paint a fair picture of the average child in need of mentoring.

The wound of fatherlessness is a wound that, according to Sowers, propels young men into rebellion against all authority, general mistrust and grasping for personal affirmation (p. 47). The fatherless man tends to sabotage relationships with his lack of trust, and he tends to lose jobs, owing to his lack of respect for authority. Gangs are one way of “belonging” to the world of men (p. 49). Socioeconomic status, education and other factors correspond with gang-involvement, but in the individual stories of gang members, Sowers finds that one loud factor rings out over all the rest: fatherlessness (pp. 50–51).[4]

Fatherless girls, on the other hand, struggle with the absence of their fathers’ affirmation (p. 56). They wonder whether they are lovable at all, since it appears to them that their fathers didn’t love them. This group tends to be emotionally and sexually promiscuous, in misguided attempts to assuage that doubt (p. 60).

Drugs, self-injury and suicide are trends that cut across both genders, as “[t]he fatherless generation embraces pain to escape the anguish of a missing father. They believe the lies of rejection until the lie becomes the truth. Like Legion [the possessed man of Mark 5]... [t]hey have forgotten their own names and become hell-bent on destroying themselves” (p. 69). They have a sense of being nameless, of not knowing who they are (p. 117). “This generation is an Esau generation – a generation that has lost its birthright and is longing for the father’s blessing,” willing to seek it out in all kinds of destructive places out of fear that they might not ever secure such a blessing and name (p. 118).

For Sowers, what we think about God and how we relate to him defines who we are (p. 77), and our fathers have great influence over our perceptions of God (p. 73). Forgiveness (p. 85) and mentors (p. 88) can do much to heal the damage of an absent father. Statistics show that mentoring one-on-one puts children in a better position to avoid drugs, suicide, gangs, and a host of other problems (e.g., again, see note [3]). It communicates the message that a child “matters, and that he is not alone. Mentoring shows

a child how to be respectful and how to interact with peers and elders. Mentoring gives a child confidence in his talents, gifts, and natural abilities, which helps shape his pursuits, education, and eventual occupation” (p. 97).

Mentoring accomplishes this by way of three benchmarks: (1) loving, “unconditional and consistent presence” (p. 103) which is invested in the child’s life and expresses itself through appreciation and celebration of the child (pp. 104–106); (2) modeling, which involves primarily the mentor’s discipleship to God and admission of his own failures, even apologizing for them (pp.107–109); and (3) coaching children through things ranging from practical tasks like how to tie a knot to constructing values worth living by (p. 110). The end result should be affirmation of the child for who he or she is, taking into account the natural gifts and abilities of the child. Such affirmation needs to be given by someone actively committed to seeing it through over the long-term (pp.119-20). He further encourages mentors to get involved in the life of the child by getting to know the family with whom the child resides and other important figures, so that the adults can exchange information and take better care of the child.

In this lengthy treatment of mentoring, I couldn’t help but favorably compare Sower’s mentoring plan with Athena’s treatment of Telemachus in *The Odyssey*. Following Sower’s three benchmarks above, Athena had been (1) consistently present to Telemachus’ father, Odysseus, and remained present to Telemachus for the sake of Odysseus; (2) she acted as model for Telemachus by leading him in his sea voyage and serving as his oarsman; (3) she repeatedly affirmed his prudence and natural abilities, giving him the courage to speak out immediately against his mother’s wanton suitors. In fact, in Telemachus’ newfound courage, he spoke so prudently to his mother about how she should handle her grief that she went to her room to think about it. Finally, Athena was so involved in the family’s life, that she granted Telemachus’ mother a good night’s sleep. Sower’s insight is as ancient as it is practical and specific.

Sowers points out that even Jesus felt the temptation to doubt his identity, specifically his relationship to his Father, in the desert (e.g. Matthew 4). Satan’s temptation cuts right to the heart of Jesus’ strength (p. 121). Jesus’ relationship to the Father completely defines him and his mission. For us, too, “attacking the father-son relationship is the most effective way to destroy lives and force a lifetime of bitter bondage to resentment, shame, and unforgiveness” (p. 121). Sowers notes that the preceding blessing or baptism of Jesus in the Jordan took the form of a promise that stated Jesus’ identity (p. 121). The Father, too, knew where to strengthen Jesus for victory over his temptations and for his ministry (*ibid.*). God himself is the defender, provider, and protector of the fatherless (p. 132), and Sowers feels that the Church is called to join him in that work. There seems to be substantial justification for the Church’s involvement in light of the immediacy of the crisis and in light of Scripture.

In sum, readers will find a prayerful Christian author drawing from a wide range of experience in this area. His mentoring program seems sound and based on reasonable insights and objective statistics. His intended audience is the average Christian man who can be inspired to make a difference, as his goal is to rally men to mentor fatherless children and the scope of his argument snugly fits that particular audience and message. For example, he tends to speak as though the statistics are *necessary* effects of fatherlessness and as though mentoring functions by equal *necessity* on children just as if they were elephants. He doesn’t demonstrate a deep grasp of moral choice or free will. Fine distinctions on this point might not help deliver his message more effectively to his intended audience, however. Considering this limitation, I would recommend this book as a useful resource for inciting a mentoring program in a parish or diocese. For more information on “The Mentoring Project,” visit <http://thementoringproject.org/>.

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[1] McGee, Robert. *Father Hunger* (Ann Arbor, MI: Servant Publications, 1993). McGee writes, "It is truly a need. We don't just want our fathers to love us; we *need* them to love us." Original emphasis, p. 18.

[2] Sowers cites research studies accessible online. Exact statistics and the variables studied depend on the researchers and their subjects, obviously, and he has hand-picked these studies. Nonetheless, the tendency to struggle in the absence of one's father is an established topic in the literature; only the level of impact is ever called into question.

[3] Much of what Sowers argues is substantiated by similar research findings of the Big Brothers Big Sisters program. Cf. J.P. Tierney and J.B. Grossman, "Making a Difference: An Impact Study of Big Brothers Big Sisters" (Public/Private Ventures, September 2000). Accessed 17 October 2012 at www.bbbs.org/site/c.9iILI3NGKhK6F/b.5961035/k.A153/Big_impact8212proven_results.htm.

[4] Other studies at least partly corroborate this finding. For example, single-parent households are one risk factor among many mentioned in a study funded by the Department of Justice, and parent-child relationship training is one program to help prevent gang-involvement in at-risk youths, as is mentoring. Cf. James C. Howell, "Gang Prevention: An Overview of Research and Programs," *Juvenile Justice Bulletin* (December 2010), p. 15. Published by the US Dept. of Justice, Washington, DC. Accessed 17 October 2012 at www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/ojjdp/231116.pdf. This study also treats relationships with teachers and other students evenly with the child-parent dynamics as risk factors, but the greatest of all risk factors for joining a gang is the child's own violent behavior. Meanwhile, Sowers is strangely silent on the point of a child's choice in how to handle fatherlessness, even when recounting the exceptional case of a Christian singer who grew closer to God continuously through his fatherlessness (Sowers, pp. 87 ff.).

In Denial

STEPHEN BARRIE

David Benatar, *Better Never To Have Been: The Harm of Coming Into Existence* (Oxford University Press, 2006).

This is a book of sophisticated pessimism, in which David Benatar argues that there is “grim news”[1] in store for us if we think clear-headedly about the value of coming into existence, and the real value of our lives. This is not your typical Malthusian or environmental approach to population growth, nor one of the more quirky calls for voluntary human extinction in order to save the planet. It is a principled attack on what for many is a basic assumption, that all other things being equal, a new human life is a good thing.

Better Never To Have Been opens with a reminder that it can be hard to challenge orthodoxy: one is likely to be misunderstood, maligned, and unjustly ignored. The book’s headline conclusions are beyond controversial, they strike many as a chilling *reductio ad absurdum*. Benatar argues that coming into existence is always a serious harm, and that procreation is therefore morally reprehensible. He holds that it would be better if, through there being no new people, humanity became extinct – and further, that we ought to rue the day we were born and regret our own existence (p. 57ff). His (self-described) “typical pro-choice views” (p. 15) on the moral status of developing human beings mean that there is a duty to abort even “fetuses quite late in gestation” (p. 26), and while his arguments focus on the value of human existence, they are intended to apply to all sentient life (p. 223). Benatar prefers a universe without any creatures capable of feeling pleasure or pain.

This complex and engagingly written book can be read in two sections. The second and third chapters present arguments that support the claim that existence is always harmful, and that coming into existence is in fact very harmful. The remaining chapters consider the implications of these views for a number of areas of ethics and public policy: procreation, abortion, population problems, and human extinction. I will focus on chapters two and three, and offer some brief comments on Benatar’s challenge to religious “pro-natalists.”

Why should coming into existence be harmful? In Chapter 2, Benatar argues that there is an asymmetry between scenarios involving existence and non-existence, such that while existence involves both good and bad outcomes (in terms of pleasure and pain), non-existence involves the absence of pleasure (which is not bad because nobody is being deprived of the pleasure), but also the absence of pain, which is good, even if this good is not enjoyed by anyone. Since no lives in existence are entirely free from pain (including “trivial” pains), “existence has no advantage over, but does have disadvantages relative to, non-existence” (p. 30). “It is true of the person [who has a life of utter bliss adulterated by the pain of a single pin-prick]... that as pleasant as his life is, it has no advantages over never existing” (p. 48). While the non-existence of pleasure is not a harm, “coming into existence has the disadvantage of the single pain” (p. 48) compared to non-existence, in which the lack of pain is good.

Benatar argues for this asymmetry in two ways: by an analogy and as the best explanation for some of our intuitions about potential people. We are asked to consider whether someone [S] who is sick and has an excellent capacity to recover has an advantage over someone [H] who does not have the capacity to get better, but who never gets sick. With some qualification, S and H are supposed to present a good analogy for existence and non-existence respectively. Benatar argues that the capacity to recover is an advantage for a sick person, but is not an advantage over the person who never becomes unwell, so that we are right to prefer H. This allows Benatar to claim that irrespective of the quantity or quality of goods associated with existence, they do not provide a reason to prefer existence. Some pressure can be applied to this analogy by making the conditions of H's life (a little) more like non-existence, and the conditions of S's life more like (typical) existence. Would one really prefer H's life if health was one of that life's only positive features, and sickness (and recovery) was merely part of S's rich and active life experience?

The asymmetry between existence and non-existence is presented as the best explanation for four widely held intuitions (p. 33). Firstly, that there is no duty to create happy people, but only a duty to avoid creating suffering people. Secondly, in the reasons one gives for or against having a child: it is strange or incoherent to say that the child will be benefited, but not strange to cite the child's interests as a reason for avoiding bringing a child into existence. Thirdly, that "having children for their own sakes [is] odd" (p. 34). Fourthly, that we have asymmetrical judgments concerning distant suffering in uninhabited parts of the universe. We are sad about distant suffering when we think of it, but not similarly "sad for the happy people who, had they existed, would have populated" (p. 35) a remote location. Any thorough rebuttal of Benatar's anti-natalism will provide alternative explanations for such intuitions; for example, it may be possible to explain them by differences in now-or-later judgments, presence-or-remoteness judgments, or in relation to our folk conceptions of what counts as a good (or "odd") reason to bring children into the world.

Benatar's third chapter argues that in fact our lives are much worse than we think, and involve significant amounts of harm. He distinguishes between how good a life actually is and how good it is thought to be (p. 87), and provides sociological evidence for what he sees as our undue emphasis on and evaluation of the positive aspects of our lives. The "Pollyana Principle" (p. 64), which is described as a strong tendency towards optimism, is reinforced by our capacities for adaptation, accommodation, and habituation, and these in combination mean that we are particularly unreliable judges of our own actual wellbeing. Benatar acknowledges that thinking that life goes well can influence how good life actually is, but he does not think that "optimism," no matter how widespread or profound, can significantly improve the quality of a human life.

One failing in Benatar's account is the speed at which he moves from an account of the Pollyana principle and other sociological observations to the strength and significance of this optimism. The Pollyana Principle looks convincing, but it is a further stretch to think that it supplies a complete account of the psychological factors that color our observation and evaluations. As Shakespeare has it in *All's Well That Ends Well* (Act 4, Scene 3): "How mightily sometimes we make us comforts of our losses! And how mightily some other times we drown our gain in tears!" If it turns out that our optimism is only mild, or sometimes counterbalanced by pessimism, then the widespread phenomenon of general contentedness with regard to the value of our own lives will undermine Benatar's conclusion that our lives are in fact riven with unacknowledged harm.

The last few sections of the book represent a careful and wide ranging account of the implications of the position established in Chapters 2 and 3, followed by an attempt to anticipate and answer objections. In one sense Benatar's account is moderated: he draws a careful distinction between the

harms associated with coming into existence and the harms of continuing to exist, and is therefore able to avoid the conclusion that we all ought to commit suicide. The harms of coming into existence are always present and are significant, whereas the harms of continuing to exist are significant, but can be outweighed by an individual's interests.

Readers from certain religious traditions will find Benatar's arguments particularly challenging: in effect, he argues that God made a mistake on the fifth and sixth days of creation in creating sentient life. Benatar targets Jewish and Christian "pro-natalism" through epigraphs that include a Jewish saying and quotes from Jeremiah, Job, and Ecclesiastes. From the prominence of these quotes, one might expect to find some engagement with Jewish and Christian thinking on the benefits of existence, or our responsibilities towards future generations. Benatar considers religious objections in a short and dissatisfying section of his concluding chapter (p. 221ff). He argues that religious responses (in particular those that reference scripture) assume that God exists; that biblical commandments are in any case not binding, even for religious believers; and that one ought not to give a "monolithic" account of religious views, since within and across religions one can find differing views.

Perhaps one ought not to expect an engagement with theology from a philosophical text. For theologically minded readers, however, this work contains some important and interesting themes. Many will agree that there is some asymmetry between existence and non-existence: thus Catholics will agree that one does not have a duty or even a right to bring every possible child into existence. One need not "be fruitful and multiply" (Gen. 9:7) at every opportunity, and responsible parenthood may involve delaying pregnancy through morally appropriate means and for sufficiently good reasons.[2] Augustine and Thomas Aquinas both consider the possible extinction of the human race in the context of whether it is right to abstain from sexual intercourse. Aquinas writes that while priestly and religious virginity is preferable to marriage,[3] preservation of the species is a "duty of the multitude,"[4] which is "not binding on each one of the multitude." [5] This is consistent with what seems to be a qualified acceptance of the possibility of (near) human extinction from Augustine: "What, say they, if all men should abstain from all sexual intercourse, whence will the human race exist? Would that all would this, only in 'charity out of a pure heart, and good conscience, and faith unfeigned;' much more speedily would the City of God be filled, and the end of the world hastened." [6] Needless to say, these words on human extinction are a long way from an actual recommendation, given that virtuous decision-making and motives are needed to satisfy Augustine's conditions, and extinction does not appear to be valued for its own sake, or existence seen as a harm.

Benatar claims that his position is neither pessimistic nor misanthropic. Things could be worse for those who do exist, and even more people could exist (with lives filled with suffering): he is motivated by a concern to prevent suffering. These protestations in the end may not convince, as he focuses so much on correcting our optimistic tendencies, and claims that "superb misanthropic argument[s]" (p. 224) typically do not go far enough in specifying the problems with human existence. In spite of his thorough argumentation, this reader cannot help wondering whether Benatar believes in his own conclusions, or whether he feels forced into them by the lack of a satisfactory alternative account. Happily, this book has provoked and is likely to continue to provoke research on these vital themes.

[1] See David Benatar, "Grim News From the Original Position: A Reply to Professor Doyal," *Journal of Medical Ethics*, October 2007, 33: 577; and David Benatar, "Grim News For an Unoriginal Position: A Reply to Seth Baum," *Journal of Medical Ethics*, May 2009, 35: pp. 328-329.

[2] See, for example, *Humanae Vitae*, n. 10.4

[3] Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II II, Q 152, Art 4.

[4] Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II II, Q 152, Art 2.

[5] *Ibid.*

[6] Augustine, *De Bono Conjugali*, n.10 [<http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1309.htm>].

Why Have Children?

MARY SHIVANANDAN

Christine Overall, *Why Have Children? The Ethical Debate* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012, 272 pages).

Christine Overall is a professor of philosophy, holding the Queen's University Research Chair, Kingston, Ontario. She specializes in Feminist Philosophy, Applied Ethics, the Philosophy of Religion and the Philosophy of Education. Publication of *Why Have Children?* by the prestigious MIT Press confirms the view of many that she is "one of the greatest feminist scholars of our time." Not being a philosopher, I approached her book with respect. Nevertheless, my first and continuing problem with her book is philosophical: her imprecise use of the term "procreation" and its confusion with "reproduction."

Collins English Dictionary (HarperCollins, 2003) derives the origin of the term "procreation" from the Latin *pro* and *create*, which together mean "to bring forth." It gives two English definitions: (1) to beget or engender offspring, and (2) to bring into being. The word "beget" means "to be the father or sire of" (*Webster* and the *New American Heritage Dictionary*), and secondarily to procreate or bring into existence. A phrase like "bring forth" implies that something is brought forth from somewhere. In human procreation this means a child is brought forth from the union of a man and a woman in conjugal embrace. Of course, when the child is prevented from "coming forth" as a result of abortion the process cannot be called procreation. Furthermore, the word "reproduction" is used when the child is conceived through assisted reproductive technologies such as in vitro fertilization or assisted donor insemination.

In this review I shall examine how Prof. Overall's basic philosophic premise as well as her anthropology are flawed from this confusion. Her basic premise is that the decision (in her terms) to "procreate" a child rests only with the woman, because it is part of her body as a fetus until it is brought forth, when it becomes a child with a life and identity of its own. There is almost no mention of the father's role in engendering the child. In fact, she explicitly states that the book is not about a father's relation to his child. In the few instances when a father is mentioned it is as a financial provider, nothing more.

Right at the beginning Overall says that: "A woman's choice whether to procreate can be made independently of being in a relationship with a man – indeed with the assistance of insemination, it can be made independently even of sexual interaction with a man" (p. 10). Yet she terms it a "procreative decision," in which women can be "self-determining decision-makers." With access to contraception she does not think this at all far-fetched. She aims to focus primarily on the choice to procreate through heterosexual intercourse or assisted donor insemination (AID), but not other reproductive technologies. While this limitation would seem to make a major distinction between a reproductive technology and "procreation," in reality, as stated above, it simply obscures the true difference. In a true procreative act, the man and woman make a decision together to engage in sexual intercourse from which the child is the superabundant fruit – a gift. Instead, what Overall is talking about is a unilateral decision on the

part of the woman either to produce a child or not, and the means, i.e. heterosexual intercourse or AID, are immaterial, as is the presence of the father, except for his sperm and later possibly his financial support. The father is treated as a means to an end and the child ceases to be a gift.

In Chapter 2, Overall discusses moral reproductive rights. She defines a right as “an entitlement that we have good reason to accept... that is an expression of one’s humanity and belongs to an individual by virtue of his or her being a human person” (p. 20). Reproductive rights fall under such a foundational category. Along with the right to reproduce comes the right not to reproduce. It is significant that Overall does not talk about procreative rights. Rather she affirms that reproductive rights provide the foundation for the ethics of procreation (p. 21). In other words, what she is really talking about is not true procreation, where the child is a superabundant gift of sexual intercourse, but about a situation where he/she is the product of a self-interested individual decision in the Lockean manner. In fact, she says that reproductive rights are grounded in general human interests (p. 32). Yet at some level Overall recognizes that procreation per se is not a matter of rights and never can be. She actually says that “the right to reproduce does not guarantee a baby to anyone” (p. 32).

In Chapter 3, Overall deals with other philosophers’ solutions to prospective parents’ disagreement on having children. Here she attempts to tackle head on the problem of men’s “procreative asymmetry” (the fact that the man plays such a different role in procreation to that of the woman). In order to reduce the asymmetry she posits that the fetus inside the womb is not a child but merely an appendage of the woman’s body that she can dispose of at will. When it is born it becomes a child and is entitled to a father’s financial support. She holds men financially responsible even when their sperm has been stolen (p. 46)!

Chapters 5 and 6 deal in turn with deontological and consequential reasons for having children. Here, as in later chapters, her confusion on whether the child is a gift and wanted for its own sake is on display. She wants to say both that the child is and is not a gift, and has intrinsic value but cannot exist for its own sake. Countering the argument that the child cannot be a gift because a gift needs a recipient and the child did not exist to receive the gift of life before the parents created him, she grants that not all gifts have a specific target in mind. Charitable donations are an example. Yet she argues that since the parent creates the child, it cannot be brought into existence for its own sake. From that she concludes that child-bearing is not intrinsically worthwhile, but has worth from other values – in her view, from the developing parent-child relationship.

Based on these premises Overall dismisses most deontological arguments. With regard to religion she rightly holds that philosophy cannot know what God wants (p. 67), but in her rejection of any religious argument she comes down on the side of the non-existence of God instead of leaving it open. She rightly calls consequentialist arguments utilitarian. In opposing “savior siblings” she comes closest to seeing the child as a disinterested gift. Since savior siblings are inseparable from the reasons for their existence, “the needs of others pre-exist and generate the child’s interests” (p. 84). “No child,” she concludes, “...should be a means primarily to his parents’ and siblings’ ends” (p. 86). Here again we see Overall’s ambivalence flowing from her faulty logic as well as deficient anthropology. She argues that while the child cannot be created for its own sake, after birth it can be valued for its own sake.

From these considerations Overall regards it as very difficult to justify having a child that passes three moral tests: (1) concern for women’s and children’s well-being, (2) respect for women’s autonomy, and (3) refusal to use the child for another good, i.e. as an instrument. Note again that the father is absent. This brings her to argue for the decision and even the obligation not to have a child if the proper circumstances do not exist for its flourishing. But she refuses to consider single- or same-sex

parenthood as not conducive to a child's flourishing or that of the woman. With regard to impairments from disease or disability, she says that "it is sometimes evident that not existing is sometimes better," but she does not discriminate against persons with impairments across the board, considering rather their competence to mother (p. 170).

On the question of "overpopulation," Overall advocates one child per adult as the ideal, but insists it must be voluntary. She does not see "a moral duty to resist human extinction... founded on the basis of our collective happiness or the alleged intrinsic value of human life" (p. 199). Paradoxically she sees human cultures as worth preserving, but questions whether the continuing existence of human beings is necessary to preserve them. "I have not found adequate reasons to show that the extinction of the human species – provided it is voluntary – would inevitably be a bad thing." Since it is a burden on women to have to reproduce, Overall hopes that the human race will gradually evolve into a higher species, one that presumably does not involve women in child-bearing.

In the final chapter, Overall sheds her academic identity and reaches into her role as a mother, which she acknowledges is not wholly rational. Being a parent has been a profoundly satisfying experience and it has brought her face to face with seeing her child as an end in himself, not as a mere artifact. She describes it as a transforming experience, in which the parent grows and changes along with the child. It is this that has counteracted at every turn her unequivocal endorsement of reproductive rights, and shaped her ambivalent and ambiguous arguments. The one reason she finally gives as the best reason for choosing to have a child is the parent-child relationship. "The lifetime of parent-child interactions," she says, "is key to understanding what is good about procreation" (p. 212). Yet in the final analysis her feminist academic self prevails. It is morally risky to have children, and the burden of proof must always rest on those who choose childbearing. In her own case, judging by the pronoun "I" not "we," it was a unilateral decision arrived at without the father's input.

It is disturbing to find so much muddled thinking on the nature of the human person and the ethics of procreation from a philosopher who has obviously devoted years wrestling with the topic and influenced countless students in the process. A healthy antidote is the philosophic writings of Karol Wojtyla, especially his book, *Love and Responsibility*. Only after understanding the true nature of the person as an incommunicable spiritual being composed of a unity of body and soul can one treat of the communion of persons, of which the conjugal relationship between a man and a woman is a unique form.

In the marital sexual relationship, the body of the other is an object of desire, but the object of desire is not just a body but an incommunicable person. Thus the person can never be treated simply as a mere means, say to sexual pleasure or even to the conceiving of children, although conception is the natural (superabundant) end of the sexual act. (In theological language sexual intercourse is by nature ordered to procreation.) Wojtyla agrees with Overall that there is an asymmetry in the sexual relationship between a man and a woman, but this cannot be overcome through unilateral actions that violate the integrity and personhood of the man, woman, or child. Rather the man is called to respect the woman in all her bodily uniqueness as well as the relationship of love between them. This he does through espousing a true ethics of procreation, one which places his own sexual desires at the service of life and love and honors their joint fertility.

This does not always happen, as Overall points out, with great detriment especially to the woman, but the remedy does not lie in so-called reproductive rights, which guarantee that the child, the man, or the woman will be ultimately an object of manipulation and not a person valued in his or her own right. Her prescription for the human race contrasts vividly with the Christian ethic of hope for the future,

expressed in the child as a superabundant gift of the love between a man and a woman.

Usable History?

MICHAEL LUEKEN

Ralph LaRossa, *The Modernization of Fatherhood: A Social and Political History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997, 287 pages).

Ralph LaRossa, a professor of sociology at Georgia State University, deals in this book with what he calls the “social construction of New Fatherhood” (p. 13). The reader must contend, then, with the particular parameters of modern sociology. On the other hand, there is a wealth of historical detail concerning attempts to shape fatherhood in the 1920s and the 1930s, and this latter is the book’s strength. However, the author’s agenda goes beyond merely recounting this “social and political” history, as the title suggests; LaRossa aims to provide a history that is *usable* (pp. 3-5). What he means by “usable” is the crucial question in evaluating this book.

LaRossa asserts that during the 1920s and 1930s “the current image of the father as economic provider, pal, and male role model all rolled into one became institutionalized” (p. 1). As he sees it, economic and cultural factors constructed a notion of fatherhood which became “America’s ideal” (p. 1). How and why this took place is, he says, the subject of the book (p. 18). He proceeds to take the reader on a fascinating tour of how fatherhood changed during the decades in question. He examines, in great detail, the roles of the popular press (especially magazines like *Parents Magazine*), books, radio shows, advertisements, baby doctors, parent education associations and clubs, and the Children’s Bureau, a government agency which produced a hugely popular manual for parents called *Infant Care*.

All of this material is quite interesting to anyone interested in the institution of fatherhood, or indeed, American history generally. What was the transformation of fatherhood in question? First of all, the father-child relationship was brought to life in a new way. This can be seen in the infant care manuals which became more father-inclusive. LaRossa notes that these manuals abandoned the “mothers-should-do-it-all” approach during these years (pp. 193-4). The ascendancy of child-care experts turned parenting into a learned activity, and fathers as well as mothers could access the basics of parenthood. Behaviorist child-rearing philosophies were influential because, since child training had to be consistently applied by all caregivers in the family in order to achieve the desired effect, fathers, too, “had to be persuaded to abide by the systems that had been set up” (p. 195). The evidence (including the marvelous reproductions of postcards and advertisements) in the book supports LaRossa’s contention that fathers were more than playmates to their children. He paints a convincing picture of more fathers involved in taking part in “the heavier demands of child care work” (p. 195).

The book succeeds, then, in drawing attention to an undernoted history. LaRossa describes how research has focused on how histories of fatherhood have concentrated on the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries, or from the 1940s to the present, while the 1920s and 1930s have been either ignored or “erroneously classified as a deceptively uninspiring and cartoonlike phase in father annals” (p. 2). Failure to recognize the importance of the development of fatherhood in these decades, says LaRossa, leads to the misunderstanding of the state of fatherhood today. It is necessary, he argues, for

this history to be told. Contemporary fathers need to know that they are not “the first generation to change a diaper or give a baby a bath.” He adds, “Lost in the artificially generated excitement of being around when the first caring men happened on the scene is the debilitating effect of not having what historians call a *usable past*.”

It is as well to pause, at this point, to consider this concept of a “usable past.” LaRossa goes on to cite Gerda Lerner’s book *The Creation of Feminist Consciousness* which argues that the advancement of women in society has been hindered by the loss of a usable past. That is, although struggles for women’s rights have been going on for many centuries, most will trace the struggle to the early twentieth century or to the 1960s. Without a true history of their ancestors, women tend to write and act for advancement as if they were the first to do so. LaRossa’s point is that something like this has happened to the history of fatherhood with the loss of those significant years, the 1920s and 1930s. Thus, “Caring and loving men have been denied the value of knowing that there were others before them, others who shared their concept of what good fatherhood meant” (p. 4).

What might this denial look like? LaRossa describes a contemporary father who writes an article about taking responsibility for the children while the wife is out of town. What will likely be lacking, argues LaRossa, is any sense that this is not really news, that many fathers faced this same situation before and have already written about it decades earlier. LaRossa sharpens his point further, “There is little recognition, too, that writing about having sole responsibility for the kids while one’s wife is away reinforces the gender-based division of labor” (p. 4). Here, the social and political agenda of the book begins to become apparent. This is clearer still as LaRossa draws out the implications of the lack of a usable history of fatherhood for women. They are “negatively affected” because “when they ask men why the division of child care is so one-sided, with the mothers doing most of the nitty-gritty work” they are told they should be happy to live in such a time when men are doing so much more. LaRossa describes this as telling a “subordinate” group to be patient, and adds that this is a way to “put the brakes on a revolution” which is what he says has happened to the contemporary “gender revolution.” He concludes that despite all the celebration of new ways of fatherhood, “mothers continue to shoulder most of the child care burden.”

Thus, LaRossa’s goal is not to provide a simple historical account, but rather to help take the brakes off the gender revolution. To do so, he uses the language and methodology of modern social science. This gives us a definition of fatherhood which, he says, “Should be conceptualized as a social role and a sociological institution”, with attendant norms that fathers are expected to follow (p. 10). The historical period LaRossa examines, and which he finds so important, is one in which this institution and its norms were subjected to a unique Machine Age combination of economic and cultural factors resulting in “the social construction of New Fatherhood” (p. 13). Indeed, fatherhood, social science has shown, is also “a product of people’s collective imagination” (p. 14). Given these assumptions, LaRossa can quite easily say: “It is not uncommon for people to assume that there is a natural distinction between fatherhood and motherhood. And on a biological level, there may very well be” (p. 14).

He goes on from here to assert that attention to the distinctiveness of fatherhood and motherhood is to be traced to “gender politics,” because the “concepts of masculine and feminine are not accidentally constructed, but are politically motivated for the simple reason that money, status, and power itself are often distributed along gender lines.” He concludes this line of reasoning with, “In a nutshell, men, who have been in the position to control definitions of masculinity and femininity, generally have done so to their own advantage” (pp. 15-16). All of the above has been established, purportedly, by social science. However, the “science” is rather thin. For example, the statement that social science has shown fatherhood is “a product of people’s collective imagination” is supported by a single source (Gayle

Rubin) in a single brief endnote. The single source's evidence for how fatherhood should be understood is an assertion that gender identities arise not out of natural differences but from "the suppression of natural similarities" (pp. 215).

But these questionable anthropological assumptions are not the subject of the book. LaRossa focuses instead on recovering the usable past in service to a stalled gender revolution. There is much of interest in the book, and LaRossa's larger purpose does not seem to distort this narrative of an interesting period of American history (although this may remain a question for a specialist in the field). Other histories of fatherhood in this period written with a different purpose in view could tell a different story. In any event, it seems reasonable to surmise that the research LaRossa has accomplished could be of service to other social projects (for example, one which seeks to build a civilization on the premise that men and women really are different and that this difference is vitally important). One could very well agree with LaRossa's conclusion that it is important to acknowledge that there have been a *variety* of fathering styles in the past" (p. 195) which deserve reexamination, without agreeing with his assessment of "what we perceive of the present" (p. 200).

Fatherhood Matters

MARGARET LARACY

Catherine S. and Cabrera Tamis-LeMonda, *Handbook of Father Involvement: Multidisciplinary Perspectives* (Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc., 2002).

Research on fathers has itself become a burgeoning area of research in recent decades. Some observers note that fatherhood has been “rediscovered” in the social sciences and become a key theme in various streams of research. The *Handbook of Father Involvement* follows this trend, drawing into one volume perspectives from multiple disciplines, with sections addressing demography, developmental psychology, sociology and anthropology, evolutionary psychology, public policy, and economics. Within a social and cultural context often marked by skepticism about the need for fathers, and in which many children live apart from or do not know their fathers, this volume communicates a significant message: fatherhood matters, and vitally so.

The centrality of fathers in the lives of children comes to the forefront in the study of child development. This review focuses exclusively on the substantial section of the *Handbook* dedicated to “Father Involvement and Child Development,” edited by Michael E. Lamb, who also contributed two of the four chapters. Topics addressed include: “(1) the initial development of relationships between fathers and their children in infancy; (2) the effects of father-child relationships on the child’s integration into social relationships outside the family; (3) the diverse faces, facets, and consequences of father involvement; and (4) the role of nonresidential fathers in their children’s lives” (p. 91).

Lamb first takes up the issue of infant-father attachment. He points us to some of the ways in which fathers are like mothers: fathers experience hormonal changes around the birth of their infants, they adjust their speech patterns when interacting with infants, and they demonstrate sufficient sensitivity and responsiveness to form strong bonds with their young children. Mothers, we learn, are by no means the sole attachment figure. Reliable differences in the response to mothers and fathers on the part of the infant are also observed. For example, relative to fathers, mothers are typically the preferred attachment figure of very young children. Between the ages of 10 and 20 months, children show a preference for mothers both as a “secure base” from which to explore, and as a source of safety and comfort in times of distress. By two years of age, however, no such preferences are reliably observed: both parents are equally sought as attachment figures. Furthermore, during the earlier months in which mothers are more sought as a “safe haven,” fathers are more often sought out for playful interaction, especially among boys. Indeed, other research has shown that as playmates, fathers are preferred, both by boys and girls, to mothers throughout childhood.

Play, it seems, is a particular gift of fathers. In a chapter addressing “Fathers’ Contributions to Peer Relationships,” Ross D. Parke and his colleagues note that fathers “tend to engage in more physically stimulating and unpredictable play than mothers do” (p. 145). This style of interaction is, in turn, positively linked to children’s social competence. Through the more energetic and physical play of fathers, children learn to manage affect, direct attention, and understand emotions. The distinctness of

fathers and their role in child development emerges in the research on paternal interaction.

Lamb, Parke, and the other contributors to this section survey a broad array of research. The focus is clearly on early childhood, however, which means that somewhat later developmental outcomes do not appear. For example, the link between externalizing behaviors in boys and criminality in adolescent males and low father involvement and absence is not discussed. Nor, for girls, is the fact that those with absent fathers tend to engage in earlier sexual activity and are more likely to become pregnant as teenagers relative to peers who live with their fathers. These later outcomes reflect low father involvement over the course of development. When sons lack the discipline and affirmation of fathers, many of them display antisocial behaviors. Girls, on the other hand, seem to look for the affirmation of men through sexual relationships. Evidence suggests that fathers provide order and structure in different ways than mothers. They also play a vital role in affirming their children in their gender identities. These themes are absent from this section on fathers and child development. Nonetheless, those interested in the research on father-child relationships and outcomes in early childhood will find a helpful introduction in this book.

Despite the many strengths of this work as a survey of research, one finishes reading it without having discovered just what is meant by “fatherhood.” The problem is one of scope: it is not a matter of science to define what a thing is. Thus, the social sciences are in need of an extraneous discourse in order properly to define their subject. In turn, operational definitions of “father involvement” are then constructed and utilized without clarity about the nature of fatherhood.

This issue of the definition of terms comes to the forefront in a chapter entitled “Involved Fathering and Child Development: Advancing Our Understanding of Good Fathering.” Rob Palkovitz makes the case that greater levels of father involvement are not a matter of quantity but of quality, stating: “what is most beneficial is ‘good fathering’” (p. 120). This is certainly a reasonable claim; however, in order to identify “good fathering,” it is crucial first to define the term “fathering.” Rather than defining this term, however, Palkovitz proceeds by posing the question “Who are fathers?” He describes the complexity of the issue, noting that fathers and fathering contexts are diverse. Asking about fathers becomes ambiguous, he writes, because of the different issues that surface when confronted with varied “biological, social, psychological, and legal perspectives” (p. 121). Indeed, it is true that the perspectives listed do not finally answer the question: what is fatherhood? This is a philosophical and ultimately perhaps a theological matter.

Lamb’s second contribution is a chapter entitled “Nonresidential Fathers and Their Children.” Here, too, we see that the fundamental nature of fatherhood remains unclear. Specifically, the link between spousal love and fathering a child is absent. The “nonresidential” status of many fathers is described without recognizing the wound that this physical separation represents. While Lamb’s efforts to help fathers remain connected to their children in the wake of divorce are positive, the breakdown of a marriage does more than physically separate fathers and children. A deeper investigation of marriage, family, and the person is needed to see more clearly what a father is, how this relates to marriage, and what paternal presence means for a child in this context.

In introducing the *Handbook*, Tamis-LeMonda and Cabrera point out the value of a cross-disciplinary approach, suggesting that the study of father involvement has been “an insular enterprise,” and indicating that this text’s “integrative approach is fundamental to a comprehensive understanding of human development generally, and to fathering more specifically” (p. xii). Such an integrative, cross-disciplinary attempt is laudable, as it attempts to overcome the fragmentation of knowledge so characteristic of the modern sciences. At the same time, the problem faced by each of these disciplines

remains that of definition. If an integrative paradigm that can serve the fullness of the human person is to be achieved, philosophical and theological methods are needed to provide conceptual clarity and to facilitate a unified and authentic view of man and of reality. In the second edition of this text, which is forthcoming, another decade of research will be added to the wealth of valuable observation contained in this first edition, but I would venture to say that the task of achieving a truly fruitful integration on the issue of fatherhood will remain.

Fatherneed

CARLA GALDO

Kyle D. Pruett, *Fatherneed: Why Father Care Is as Essential as Mother Care for Your Child* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2001, 256 pages).

Kyle D. and Pruett Pruett, *Partnership Parenting: How Men and Women Parent Differently -- Why It Helps Your Kids and Can Strengthen Your Marriage* (Boston, MA: Da Capo Press, 2009, 240 pages).

“The fullness of fathering,” asserts Dr Kyle Pruett in *Fatherneed*, “lies in the raising, not the having, of children.” By analyzing the benefits of active, engaged fathering to both fathers and their children, as well as providing father-specific advice regarding an array of child development stages, Pruett's book seems well positioned to discourage what he refers to as the “push toward androgyny as a cultural goal” (p. 166). Children, he says, don’t want “their fathers to be more like their mothers or vice-versa” (p. 166). Through various real-life anecdotes, Pruett illustrates how children crave the vital differences that distinguish father from mother and thrive when they are given enough quality father-time.

One particular interest of Pruett's is early childhood. He argues, with the support of various studies, that fathering is essential even from the earliest months of a child's life, and outlines the unique traits that fathers tend to display when they interact with their children from infancy onward. Fathers are more “rough-and-tumble,” tending to activate (rather than soothe) their children. The idea of an “adventure with Dad” comes from the fact that fathers often approach their children in less predictable ways than mothers, and encourage more novelty-seeking on the part of their offspring. Father-play makes use of fewer toys than play with mom, and in many cases the main “toy” used by father and child is the father's own body. Fathers, finally, tend to tolerate a higher level of child-frustration before providing assistance to complete tasks, challenging the child to learn to function through and despite the frustration.

In a book on fathering, one does not expect an in-depth analysis of motherhood, and Pruett does not provide one, noting that, until recently, most parenting studies focused almost exclusively on mothers, ignoring the fathers' role and contribution to the direct raising of children. Many mothers themselves can fall into this trap, acting as jealous gatekeepers, endeavoring to control their husbands' behavior with and access to their children. Such gatekeeping behavior is resented by husbands and detrimental to children. How to solve such a problem and encourage shared parenting by both mothers and fathers according to their strengths? Pruett suggests that “for men and women to share the responsibilities and gratifications of the nurturing domain, we need readily available (which probably means subsidized) quality child care.... This is the *only* way shared parenting will continue, or even start to work, for most families” (p. 147, emphasis added).

Such a suggestion is surprising, especially given that Pruett himself notes that the separation of work from home is a relatively recent phenomena when viewed against the whole sweep of human history; it is only within the last 150 years of industrial and technological revolution that the location of productive, family-sustaining employment has been transferred to a location other than the home and

its immediate surroundings. Prior to this great change, mother and father engaged in differing but complementary tasks for the survival of the family, and children participated as appropriate to their age and ability, learning as they worked side-by-side with their elders. Certainly this was a type of parenting which did not require hired-out childcare, but emphasized the unique strengths and abilities of both mothers and fathers.

While it may now be the cultural norm that both men and women work outside the home, this does not mean that men and women are interchangeable, as Pruett recognizes with his detailed descriptions of the particularities of fathers' contributions which illustrate that fathers do not "mother," and mothers do not "father." If this is true, it is surprising that Pruett includes the following quote from Michael Lamb, a psychologist from the University of Cambridge: "With the exception of lactation, there is no evidence that women are biologically predisposed to be better parents than men are," – a statement which can be too readily understood to imply that it makes no difference which parent (or how many) raises a child. When coupled with Pruett's enthusiasm for the stay-at-home dads who raised their children from infancy while their wives went back to work, a note of confusion seems to arise. Certainly mothers have no greater right to raise their children than fathers do – in this sense Lamb's quote is correct – but in another sense it misses the mark, because if what Pruett writes is true, there can be no such thing as gender-neutral parenting. There is only *mothering* and *fathering*, and only a mother can *mother*; only a father can *father*.

It may very well be the case that in particular seasons of life, a child has more need of *mothering* and in others they are more in need of *fathering*; thus in a certain season a stronger presence of the mother may be "better for" the child. An increase in *mothering* cannot replace a lack of *fathering* – Pruett's advice to single mothers regarding how to fulfill their child's fatherneed despite the absence of a father in the immediate household reflects this fact. His disapproval of single women who seek out IVF in order to conceive their own children is due not to the nature of the IVF procedure, but to the fatherlessness to which these women actively choose to subject their children. He echoes the wise question of Penelope Leach, a well-known British psychologist, who asks, "Why is it socially reprehensible for a man to leave a baby fatherless, but courageous, or admirable, for a woman to have a baby whom she knows will be so?" Pruett's wisdom is lacking, however, when he approves of gay "fathers" who adopt and raise children. He makes no mention of the motherlessness suffered by children raised by two gay men, nor does he proffer the same type of advice to gay men that he gives to single women in order to compensate for the lack of a mother in the home.

The most obvious season in life in which children would benefit from a mother's constant presence is that of infancy and early toddlerhood, because of the many nutritional, neurological, and psychological benefits to the child. The American Academy of Pediatrics emphasizes this when they state that breastfeeding "is a public health issue and not just a lifestyle choice." [1] Pruett's study of families who sent mothers back to work and kept fathers at home from their children's infancy does include families who continued breastfeeding despite the separation of mother and child, illustrating that working and breastfeeding are not mutually exclusive. For the mother who mechanically pumps and stores breastmilk, and for the child who suckles milk from Dad's bottle rather than from Mom's breast, the phenomenon is not quite the same as having a constant and direct breastfeeding relationship.

Pruett highlights the benefits he sees arising for children who have full-time fathers; there is little to no reflection on what might be lost if children lack full-time mothers at crucial junctures in life.

Partnership Parenting, written by Dr Kyle Pruett nine years later in collaboration with his wife, Dr Marsha Kline Pruett, is less academic observation and more practical parenting advice. The book is

addressed to men and women who see themselves as equally suited – yet distinctly equipped – to care for their children, and both are featured in the anecdotes and advice throughout the book. At the same time, Pruett’s propensity to advocate for more dad-involvement, and for more respect for the male-specific way that many fathers interact with their children, continue to play a starring role in this book. The nine-year lapse, as well as perhaps the wifely collaboration, seem to make this book more specifically insightful and useful than *Fatherneed* for those seeking not only practical parenting strategies but also ways to nurture and sustain a marriage during the often stormy years of childrearing.

The advice to couples is particularly valuable in its recognition of the sea-change which can occur in a marriage the moment a first child is born. “When partners become parents, their gender differences come into play in a strong and familiar way, harking back to grade school and the first realization of differences in how the other gender thinks and behaves” (p. 5). Perhaps for many couples who were socialized and educated, and who dated and married, in a culture that tends to reduce the specificity of manhood and womanhood from an early age, gender differences are far from conscious reflection until pregnancy and birth hit a marriage with full force. Suddenly a woman is wholly woman and her struggles and trials with pregnancy and birth are uniquely those of motherhood, and the man’s are uniquely those of fatherhood. Pruett’s book is a boon to first-time parents, in particular to help them figure out how to maintain the vitality of their relationship while they navigate those challenging weeks, months, and years with their first children.

Maternal gatekeeping, or the tendency for a mother to try to control her husband’s interaction with their children – both in intact marriages and in divorces – shows up as an issue in this book as well. Many of the anecdotes shared in the book involve family scenarios with only one or two children in the mix. However, the gatekeeping issue often resolves itself when a couple raises more than one or two children. It is physically impossible (not to mention practically and emotionally unwise) for a mother to try to care for every child simultaneously at all times. Father-care becomes less optional and more a regular way of life in the presence of many children.

[1] “Breastfeeding and human milk are the normative standards for infant feeding and nutrition. Given the documented short- and long-term medical and neurodevelopmental advantages of breastfeeding, infant nutrition should be considered a public health issue and not only a lifestyle choice. The American Academy of Pediatrics reaffirms its recommendation of exclusive breastfeeding for about 6 months, followed by continued breastfeeding as complementary foods are introduced, with continuation of breastfeeding for 1 year or longer as mutually desired by mother and infant” (from the *American Academy of Pediatrics 2012 Policy Statement on Breastfeeding and the Use of Human Milk*).

A Father's Guide

NICK BAGILEO

Stephen Gabriel, *Speaking to the Heart: A Father's Guide to Growth in Virtue* (Moorings Press, 2011, 138 pages).

M.D. Meeker, *Strong Fathers, Strong Daughters: 10 Secrets Every Father Should Know* (Ballantine Books, 2007, 267 pages).

In *Speaking to the Heart*, it becomes clear that the author's experience of the trials and joys of fatherhood inform the book with a reality that many will find hopeful. Mr Gabriel and his wife, Peggy, have eight children and sixteen grandchildren. He works for the federal government as a senior financial analyst as well as being a freelance writer.

The book is centered on the theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity, as well as the cardinal virtues of prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance. Experience has confirmed for Mr Gabriel the age-old wisdom that in order for our children to thrive, actually to become virtuous, they need not only to be taught what the virtues are, but to experience constant practical instruction and the witness of virtuous people. As a reliable mentor, he outlines a sensible balance between family life, work, and recreational activity.

In each chapter, one virtue is introduced by a short biblical quotation, followed by a passage from a famous author on the same virtue. A one-page definition of the virtue combined with suggestions on how fathers can grow in each particular virtue completes the chapter. The chapters are streamlined so that one could read a chapter during a break or at lunch and reflect on it during the day.

The chapter on the virtue of friendship begins, "I shall not call you servants any more, because a servant does not know his master's business; I call you friends, because I have made known to you everything I have learned from my father" (John 15:15). Gabriel quotes William Penn on friendship, "Friendship is a union of spirits, a marriage of hearts, and the bond thereof virtue." The root of friendship is the real knowledge of the other, "a knowledge of the inner person." Husband and wives are each other's best friend. Each spouse flourishes when correction is given in love, which can be difficult for both parties. Telling someone the truth is one of the most loving things friends can do for each other. Gabriel suggests developing a healthy sense of friendliness to help us become friends with people we ordinarily wouldn't think we could get close to. This seems an apt suggestion in the year of faith and the new evangelization.

The book is well suited for young fathers or men thinking of getting married. The sensible suggestions at the end of each chapter will help young men become aware of the various daily situations and temptations they may face in the struggle to become good husbands and fathers. Gabriel knows that the only way to raise virtuous children is to become virtuous yourself.

Fathers can learn to see themselves through their daughter's eyes. This is a vital characteristic of Dr

Meg Meeker's book, *Strong Fathers, Strong Daughters*. Meeker says, "I want you to see yourself through her eyes. And I don't want this just for her sake, but for yours, because if you could see yourself as she sees you, even for ten minutes, your life would never be the same." Meeker points out that a daughter measures every man that comes into her life against her father. If father and daughter have a good relationship, she will choose boyfriends who will treat her well. "If she sees you as open and warm, she'll be confident with other men. If you are cold and unaffectionate, she'll find it hard to express love in a healthy way."

Dr Meeker practices pediatric and adolescent medicine. She is married and has four children. Her book is inspired by her experiences as a mother and practicing physician, with twenty years of experience treating children and families. It is clear that she keeps up on the latest articles and journals required by her profession. These experiences lead her to identify ten secrets every father should know which she spells out in individual chapters. They are:

You Are the Most Important Man in Her Life

She Needs a Hero

You Are Her First Love

Teach Her Humility

Protect Her, Defend Her (and use a shotgun if necessary)

Pragmatism and Grit: Two of Your Greatest Assets

Be the Man You Want Her to Marry

Teach Her Who God Is

Teach Her to Fight

Keep Her Connected

The format of each chapter is the same: Dr Meeker explains the secret by providing real-life examples of how people have worked through problematic situations. Using stories from people's lives is a two-edged sword. It can be helpful to see that other people have experienced similar situations in life, but it can become a bit tedious to read numerous stories about people you do not know.

Although Dr Meeker is a practicing Christian, the book is aimed at a secular audience. As a mother and a doctor, the author has both personal and professional insight into the problems of modern society and its particular instabilities and is aware, therefore, that seemingly obvious ideas nevertheless need to be clearly articulated. It is a compelling feature of the book that, despite being published by a secular publishing house and intended for a secular audience, it does not regurgitate the usual "progressive" view of hot-button issues: sex education, divorce, complementarity of man and woman, and fathers being the head of the family. To be sure, she does not use the theological language of Blessed John Paul II or Benedict XVI, but Dr Meeker is writing for men who are not conversant with their works. She is writing for those fathers who have just begun to see the toxicity of the culture, and she offers advice to help them make their way through the minefield of modernity.

Dr Meeker, as a mother and practicing physician, is also aware of the different pressures to which

fathers are subject. For example, she notes the marketing mania for children's clothing wherein "after age six, 'little girl' clothes are hard to find. Many outfits are cut to make her look like a seductive thirteen- to fourteen-year-old girl trying to attract older boys." To counteract this perverse advertising, the first obvious truth Dr Meeker discloses is that fathers are the most important men in their daughters' lives. She tells fathers that their daughters need their masculine courage, their intelligence and fearlessness, along with their empathy, assertiveness, and self-confidence.

Meeker has treated daughters whose fathers have not developed these character traits. The most common problems she faces in the treatment of young girls can be disquieting even for those who keep up on cultural indicators. These are girls who, at an early age, have experienced sexual activity, drug use, bulimia, the contraction of sexual transmitted diseases, and the depression that follows from sexual activity before marriage.

Dr Meeker provides plenty of statistics showing just how poisonous the culture has become. For some, this will be a routine overview of the situation, but she is writing for those unfamiliar with the depth of the problem. For the latter, the information can be upsetting. It is refreshing to see that she is aware of the duplicity of SIECUS (Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States). Under the guise of "assisting children in understanding a positive view of sexuality," SIECUS advocates debased moral activity. Dr Meeker outlines SIECUS's guidelines for "sex education" in public schools. Her list is quite long so a short sample must suffice. Starting in kindergarten students are taught that "touching and rubbing one's own genitals to feel good is called masturbation." Starting in third grade, students are taught "homosexual love relationships can be as fulfilling as heterosexual relationships." Starting in seventh grade, students are taught "masturbation, either alone or with a partner, is one way people can enjoy and express their sexuality without risking pregnancy or STD's/HIV." Also, "Having a legal abortion rarely interferes with a woman's ability to become pregnant or give birth in the future."

A constant theme throughout the book is that fathers must provide nurturing and leadership in all areas of family life or children can easily end up getting affirmation and information somewhere else. She notes that in the area of the child's natural yearning and questions about God, if a father does not take the lead the daughter will come up with answers on her own and the father's authority will be replaced by another's.

Although leadership in our daughters' religious life is most important, they need male leadership in all areas of their life. If a father will not lead, the child is left to navigate the major questions of life by the standards of the prevailing culture. If the father does not teach what is good and that the truth is knowable, and does provides unconditional love, children will look to other places that can easily be destructive to them.

Pope Benedict XVI made the same point in his book, *Turning Point For Europe*. In the book, he mentions a dinner party he attended in the 1960s where the topic of teenage drug use was discussed. Cardinal Ratzinger noted that drug use is

...the result of despair in a world experienced as a dungeon of facts, in which man cannot hold out for long. Naturally, many other things are involved, too; the search for adventure; the conformity of joining in what others are doing; the cleverness of the dealers, and so on. But the core is a protest against a reality perceived as a prison. The "great journey" that men attempt in drugs is the perversion of mysticism, the perversion of the human need for infinity, the rejection of the impossibility of transcending immanence, and the attempt to extend the limits of one's own existence into the infinite. The patient and humble adventure of asceticism, which, in small steps of ascent, comes closer to the descending God, is replaced by magical power, the magical key of drugs – the ethical and religious path

is replaced by technology. Drugs are the pseudo-mysticism of a world that does not believe yet cannot get rid of the soul's yearning for paradise. *Thus, drugs are a warning sign that points to (something) very profound: not only do they disclose a vacuum in our society, which that society's own instruments cannot fill, but they also point to an inner claim of man's nature, a claim that asserts itself in a perverted form if it does not find the correct answer.* [My emphasis.]

Another refreshing issue brought out in the book is the false notion that divorce, even a so-called amicable divorce, is good for children. "The most common cause of unhappiness and despair, what crushes the spirit of children more often than anything else, is divorce. Divorce is really the central problem that has created a generation of young adults who are at high risk for chaotic relationships, sexually transmitted diseases, and confusion about life's purpose."

Dr Meeker is realistic in the area of the complementarity of husband and wife as good for marriage and raising children. Although she does not use the terminology of the husband being the head of the family with primacy of authority, and the wife the heart of the family with the primacy of love, this pattern is, nevertheless, illustrated in various ways throughout the book. She is clear that the physical, psychological, spiritual, and emotional differences between husband and wife are good and meant to enable family life to flourish. As head of the family, the father protects and provides for those entrusted to his care. Women, as the heart of the family, naturally look to nurture and support those around them in a personal way.

Meeker writes: "men see problems differently than women do. Women analyze and want to understand; men want to solve – they want to do something...of course, I'm not saying that all fathers are analytical or pragmatic or better at this than their wives, but it is certainly true in general that mothers and fathers have complementary approaches to problems: fathers reach immediately for solutions while mothers yearn to understand and empathize. Your daughter needs you to be that voice of reason and pragmatism."

Each book can be recommended with the caveat that they were written for distinct audiences. Mr Gabriel's book would be an excellent gift for new fathers or engaged men who are active in the Church. Dr Meeker's book is written for someone not particularly religious, but who senses something is amiss within society and is looking for help to find the right answers.

The Eclipse of Fatherhood

NICHOLAS J. HEALY JR.

Does a child ever grow up sufficiently to be able to do without his father? Can a father ever grow so old that he has no need of children?

—Paul Claudel

The crisis of fatherhood we are living today is an element, perhaps the most important, threatening man in his humanity. The dissolution of fatherhood and motherhood is linked to the dissolution of our being sons and daughters.

—Joseph Ratzinger

Every age has seen its share of absent fathers. Whether due to illness or the casualties of war, the demands of working far from home or the shameful flight from responsibility, there have always been fatherless homes. The novelty of our situation is not simply the unprecedented number of children being raised in households without fathers. Underlying the sociological data is a profound shift in our culture's understanding of the meaning of fatherhood. In the past, the absence of a father was experienced and understood as a tragic misfortune or loss. Today the absence of a father is considered optional, a "lifestyle choice" that "may actually have a number of advantages."^[1] What does it mean to be a father in a society that countenances anonymous sperm donation, *in vitro* fertilization, and embryonic screening for the sake of selective abortion?

At the heart of the crisis of fatherhood is a forgetfulness of origins. To be a father is to participate in the sourcing or coming to be of new life. This is an impossible task for a human being, except in the mode of sonship or representation. As Gabriel Marcel observes, "I can no more give existence to someone else than I can to myself."^[2] The task of learning how to be a human father requires an acknowledgment of one's dependence and thus an openness to the transcendent source of life. In order to be a father, one must first be a son. The contemporary crisis of human fatherhood goes hand in hand with the eclipse of the countenance of the divine Father.^[3] At the same time, the wounds that result from a broken relationship with one's human father are encompassed by the mercy of God the Father who remains faithful to his creation. "Mercy," writes John Paul II, "seems particularly necessary for our times."^[4]

My aim in what follows is to reflect on the crisis of fatherhood in light of the mystery of God's fidelity to creation. The promise of the prophet Malachi – "He will turn the hearts of fathers to their children, and the hearts of children to their fathers" (4:6) – is accomplished in a surpassing way in the mystery of Jesus Christ, who reveals the love of the Father. If the contemporary experience of fatherhood is marked by absence and confusion, the hope for a renewed relationship between children and their fathers is grounded in the mercy of God.

I. The Essence of Fatherhood

"I bend my knee before the Father from whom all fatherhood on heaven and on earth is named" (Eph. 3:14). To be a "father" is to be a source or origin. In the deepest sense of the word, "there is but one

fatherhood, that of God the Father, the one Creator of the world, ‘of all that is seen and unseen.’[5] It is not surprising that many ancient cultures and religions named the ineffable source of all being “father.”[6] At the same time, a long process was needed “in order to purify the divine title from all anthropomorphic dross.... God’s fatherhood only emerges with decisive clarity when we learn that he is the Father, which we cannot do without the manifestation of the one who alone can claim the title of Son.”[7]

The revelation of God’s fatherhood was prepared by the singular election of Israel. Roch Kereszty describes how Israel’s growing awareness of the fatherhood of God entailed a new understanding of the unity of divine transcendence and immanence:

“Instead of fading away or being transformed into a lesser god, Yahweh draws nearer to his people while at the same time he ‘grows in stature.’ He reveals himself eventually not only as the ‘god above all gods,’ but the only God, the creator of all and the sole master of history. Israel simultaneously experiences his threatening holiness and loving fatherhood. He is both the Holy One of Israel and Israel’s Father. The awareness of his unbearable otherness and that of his faithful and tender, fatherly and motherly love grow together. In fact, it is his holiness that binds him in a faithful and tender love to his son, Israel.... His fatherhood is not based on physical descent nor solely on the fact of creation, but above all, on the divine initiative of free election by which God chose Israel as his adopted son.[8]

The election of Israel as the first born son of God (cf. Ex 4:22-23) is ordered to the priestly vocation of Israel to be a blessing to the nations so “that the whole world may share in the dignity of the people of Israel.”[9]

The figure of Jesus Christ fulfills this messianic promise by revealing a new image of God together with a new sense of “fatherhood.” The full meaning of God’s fatherhood becomes clear only in light of the mystery of Jesus’ eternal sonship. Let us listen again to Fr Kereszty:

“The one whom the Father gives up for us is not merely a great prophet, not even a lower, intermediary ‘god’ made flesh, but – as the first councils of the Church have clarified – his own eternal, only-begotten Son who is true God from true God and consubstantial with the Father. Only then does the incomprehensible mystery of the Father’s love for us appear in its full depth.”[10]

God is Father not only in the sense of being the transcendent source of creation, but he is eternally Father within his own life. From all eternity the Father surrenders himself in begetting a Son who is equally God. The perennial temptation to equate fatherhood with an abstract notion of power or arbitrary authority is addressed and overcome at the root. The omnipotence of the Father, who is “the source and origin of the whole divinity,”[11] is expressed as a generous self-communication that lets another be.

To be a father, then, is not simply to be a transcendent source, but to generously communicate the substance of one’s own life in openness to another. As Joseph Ratzinger emphasizes, within the Godhead the Father is this very act of self-communication:

“In God, person means relation. Relation, being related, is not something superadded to the person, but it is the person itself. In its nature, the person exists only as relation. Put more concretely, the first person does not generate in the sense that the act of generating a Son is added to the already complete person, but the person is the deed of generating, of giving itself, of streaming itself forth. The person is identical with this act of self-donation.”[12]

In other words, being Father is not an accidental relation that modifies an already existing subject. The personal identity of the divine Father is the act whereby he communicates himself to the Son and Spirit. What the Father communicates is nothing less than the Father's own being even as he remains distinct Person. "The eternal Father," writes Hans Urs von Balthasar, "gives his entire Godhead, without holding anything back, to his Son (that is, the Father does not merely give the Son some divine essence distinct from, and excluding the Father's Person), yet without losing his Godhead in this act of self-surrender." [13]

In the words of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, "by sending his only Son and the Spirit of Love in the fullness of time, God has revealed his innermost secret: God himself is an eternal exchange of love, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit." [14] The unsurpassable teaching of John that "God is love" (1 John 4:8) is the key to the meaning of fatherhood. The essence of fatherhood is love understood as self-surrender or a total gift of self in openness to another

II. The Risk of Human Fatherhood

If it belongs to the nature of fatherhood to be source or origin, an immediate difficulty presents itself. How is it possible for a human being to be a "father"? As a creature who receives the gift of being from God, a human being is precisely not the source or origin of life. Gabriel Marcel explores this issue in light of what he calls the "nothingness" or emptiness of a father's experience of procreation:

"If, in order to catch a glimpse of what creation can be, we go to the only domain to which we have more or less direct access, that is to say to the realm of art or of thought, we shall be obliged to recognize that to procreate is not in the least to create. In the last analysis what is required of the male is not really an act, it is a gesture, which can be performed in almost total unconsciousness and which, at least in extreme cases, is nothing but a letting go, an emptying of something which is over-full. When we say that in generation the active part belongs to the man, it is only true if we play upon the word active to some extent, giving it the impoverished and vague meaning which it commonly bears in the natural sciences, instead of the full meaning which is associated with it when we are speaking of human action and its special value.... The gesture of procreation can be accomplished under such conditions that the man only has an indistinct recollection of it and is able to wash his hands of all its consequences since they will take place outside him, in another world as it were, a world with which he has no direct communication." [15]

Beginning from the nothingness or poverty of this experience, the question that interests Marcel is the nature of the bond between a father and his children. Guided by the insights of Marcel and José Granados, we can reflect on the significance of this relationship by considering some of the deviations or corruptions of authentic fatherhood. [16]

The first and most common corruption takes the form of absence or a lack of involvement in the life of one's child. The temptation to be absent follows upon what Marcel calls the "nothingness" of man's experience – his externality with regard to the conception and early development of the child. Here is it helpful to contrast the experience of a father with that of a mother. Granados writes,

"the father is not immediately aware of the fruit his generative action entails. What comes first for him in his experience is a certain lack of involvement, as if the child were alien to him. In fact, regarding time, the relationship of the father with the child takes place in the future; regarding space, it happens outside of him. [by contrast]... the orientation toward maternity is embedded in the woman's own corporality, a fact that helps her intuitively realize the connection between the conjugal act and the generation of life. Of course, the link is present also in man's bodiliness, but it is hidden at the outset

and discovered only through the mediation of the woman.”[17]

We will return to this last point below. It is possible for a father to be completely indifferent to his children and uninvolved in their education. Implicit in this attitude is a reduction of paternity to a biological fact without human and spiritual significance. Instead of interpreting the “nothingness” of the experience of generation as a sign of man’s dependence and an invitation to self-transcendence through openness to another, the absent father accepts and extends the separation of the biological and the human. As a result, both the meaning of his own fatherhood and the original goodness of human origins are obscured.

The second deviation noted by Marcel and Granados takes the form of a father who desires a child “only because he expects someone to continue his own work. He wants a son to be like himself, molded according to his own will and projects.”[18] The father has failed to grasp the irreducible novelty of the child who exists for his or her own sake. In this case, the bond with one’s father is experienced as a burden that hinders genuine freedom. A father who instrumentalizes children for the fulfillment of his own desires creates a situation wherein emancipation requires the rejection of fatherhood. The result is tragic both for the children and the father. The illusory idea of freedom as self-grounding autonomy has its roots in the attempt to overcome a false notion of fatherhood.

At the root of both of these corruptions is a failure to grasp the representational nature of human fatherhood. The astonishing capacity to participate in the coming to be of a new human life is grounded in a twofold dependence. Every human father depends on a woman, and man and woman together depend on the generosity of God. “Fatherhood,” writes Granados, “implies man’s generous openness to another ‘I’ who, while belonging to the father’s existence (while being the father in a certain sense), differs from him through an irreducible novelty, witnessed to by the separation in time and space.”[19]

The essential task of fatherhood is to communicate life by receiving a child as a gift. In a seminal text in his 1994 “Letter to Families,” John Paul II writes:

“When a man and woman in marriage mutually give and receive each other in the unity of one flesh, the logic of the sincere gift of self becomes a part of their life.... The process from conception and growth in the mother’s womb to birth makes it possible to create a space within which the new creature can be revealed as a gift: Indeed this is what it is from the very beginning. Could this frail and helpless being, totally dependent upon its parents and completely entrusted to them, be seen in any other way? The newborn child gives itself to its parents by the very fact of its coming into existence. Its existence is already a gift, the first gift of the Creator to the creature.”[20]

Children are the supreme gift of marriage and a living reflection of spousal love. But just who is giving what to whom? In their reciprocal exchange of vows, and the consummation of this exchange in spousal union, each spouse simultaneously gives the gift of a child to their beloved and receives a child from their beloved. And yet, as every parent knows or should know, there is a mysterious “excess” at the heart of their giving and receiving – the fruit of their love is not simply their own. The reality of the child, a “third”, cannot be reduced to their agency. The child is not manufactured or produced by the spouses, but received as an undeserved gift. This “excess” or gratuity points to God as the true origin and end of both their giving and receiving and the fruit their reciprocal love.

This opening to God from within the heart of human love sheds light on the astonishing turn in the passage cited above. The child is not only a gift, John Paul II tells us, but he or she gives himself or herself to the parents. The key question is, what could a helpless child possibly give to its parents? There is something profoundly useless about a newly conceived child. In an obvious sense, it cannot *do*

anything except reveal what it is – a gift. Now, in order for the child to be able to “give itself” to its parents, it has to exist for its own sake. The child’s existing for its own sake is the core of what it gives to its mother and father; it is the deepest sign of the mysterious “excess” and thus the truth that own giving and receiving is a real participation in the generosity of God.

A father and a mother are called to receive the gift of a child in distinct ways. At first glance, everything seems to be demanded of the woman, with the man’s contribution (and responsibility) reduced to a fleeting moment of pleasure. The conception and development of the child occur within a woman’s body. It is the woman who nourishes the child by creating a space within herself for the existence of a new life. John Paul II observes that while a woman depends on a man for the conception of a child, she knows how to be a mother, as it were, by nature. The dependence of a man on a woman is more significant and enduring: “*he has to learn his own ‘fatherhood’ from the mother.*”[21] One of the most significant things that he learns is that fatherhood takes time. “To be a father does not simply mean to generate biologically.... It also and above all means to educate, to establish bonds or relations with the one generated.”[22] The task of education requires time and space. The father and child learn that the bond of fatherhood is not simply a biological fact from the distant past, but a relationship that encompasses all of the vicissitudes of life. In order to communicate the gift of life, it is necessary to pledge or give the whole of one’s life.

The father’s “distance” from the conception and development of the child allows the father to initiate the child into a positive sense of his or her otherness from the mother. “What the father contributes,” suggests Granados, “is the appearance of a primordial separation in the world of the child.... [The positive sense of distance] allows the child to grow in his encounter with the world and to understand his life as a journey toward transcendence.” In the absence of a human father, the meaning of transcendence is obscured.

It is tempting to cover the wounds that result from an absent father or from an abusive father by diminishing the significance of fatherhood. But this forgetfulness of origins leads to a greater loneliness and metaphysical confusion. A more promising path is to reflect more deeply on the hidden Fatherhood of God that undergirds and encompasses every human origin no matter how broken.

The French poet Charles Péguy, whose own father died when he was an infant, continuously meditated on the intersection of human fatherhood and the mystery of God the Father. His poem the *Portal of the Mystery of Hope* begins with the image of a father who is working in the forest and praying for his sick children. The poem moves seamlessly to a reflection on the Fatherhood of God as revealed in the parables of Jesus. The final image of the poem contains an unforgettable reversal. The poet adopts the perspective of God the Father who has sent his Son into the world. Everything has been handed over to Son, and all the Father can do is await the accomplishment of his Son’s mission. The Father’s hands are, as it were, tied for all eternity. The poem concludes with the Father’s homage to the night his Son died.

O beautiful night... you remind me of that night.

And I will remember it eternally.

The ninth hour had sounded...

Everything was finished. Let’s not talk about it anymore. It hurts me to think about it.

My son’s incredible descent among men.

Into their midst.

When you think of what they made of him.

Those thirty years that he was a carpenter among men.

Those three years that he was a sort of preacher among men.

A priest.

Those three days when he fell victim to men.

Among men.

Those three nights when he was dead in the midst of men.

Dead among the dead.

Through the centuries that he's been a host among men.

This incredible adventure was finished.

The adventure that tied my hands, God, for all eternity....

Now every man has the right to bury his own son.

Every man on earth, if the great misfortune befalls him

Not to have died before his son. And I alone, God

My hands are tied by this adventure,

I alone was unable to bury my son.

It was then, o night, that you arrived...

It was then, o Night that you came and, in a great shroud, you buried

The Centurion and his Romans,

The Virgin and the holy women,

And that mountain, and that valley, upon which the evening was descending,

And my people of Israel and sinners and, with them, he who was dying, he who died for them.

And the men sent by Joseph of Arimathea who were approaching

Bearing the white shroud.[23]

The Father whose "hands are tied" – the Father who at times seems absent from the drama of human history – has involved himself in the most complete and intimate manner conceivable: he has handed over his Son. Everything is at stake for the Father, and henceforth he views creation through the

medium of his Son. The supreme dignity of man is the grace of being a child of God.

[1] Gian Panettieri, *The Single Mother's Guide to Raising Remarkable Boys* (Avon, Massachusetts: Adams Media, 2008), 5. Cf. Louis B. Silverstein and Carl F. Auerbach, "Deconstructing the Essential Father," *American Psychologist* 54 (1999), 397-407.

[2] Gabriel Marcel, "The Creative Vow as Essence of Fatherhood," in *Homo Viator: Introduction to a Metaphysic of Hope* (New York: Harper, 1962), 120.

[3] In an address to students in Palermo, Sicily on March 15, 2000, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger reflected on the link between human fatherhood and the mystery of God: "Human fatherhood gives us an anticipation of who God is. But when this fatherhood does not exist, when it is experienced only as a biological phenomenon, without its human and spiritual dimension, all statements about God the Father are empty. The crisis of fatherhood we are living today is an element, perhaps the most important, threatening man in his humanity. The dissolution of fatherhood and motherhood is linked to the dissolution of our being sons and daughters."

[4] John Paul II, *Dives in Misericordia*, n. 6.

[5] Benedict XVI, Celebration of Vespers, Yaoundé, 18 March 2009.

[6] Cf. M. Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1958), 38-123.

[7] Jean-Pierre Batut, "Calling Fathers 'Father': Usurping the Name of God," *Communio: International Catholic Review* 36 (2009), 295-308.

[8] R. Kereszty, "God the Father," *Communio: International Catholic Review* 26 (1999), 258-77, at 261.

[9] Prayer of the Easter Vigil in the Roman Rite.

[10] Kereszty, "God the Father," 265.

[11] Council of Toledo VI (DS, 490).

[12] J. Ratzinger, "Concerning the Notion of Person in Theology," *Communio: International Catholic Review* 17 (1990), 439-454.

[13] Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Logic*, vol. III, *The Spirit of Truth* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2005), 225.

[14] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 221.

[15] G. Marcel, *Homo Viator*, 102.

[16] The following paragraphs are indebted to the profound reflections of Fr Granados on the relationship between fatherhood and the Sacrament of Holy Orders in "Priesthood: A Sacrament of the Father," *Communio: International Catholic Review* 36 (2009), 186-218.

[17] *Ibid.*, 188.

[18] *Ibid.*, 189.

[19] Ibid.

[20] John Paul II, *Letter to Families*, n. 11.

[21] John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, n. 18.

[22] Massimo Camisasca, "The Father, the Source of Communion: Fatherhood as the Generation of Life," *Communio: International Catholic Review* 37 (2010), 539-47, at 539.

[23] Charles Péguy, *The Portal of the Mystery of Hope* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 136-137.

Editorial: Absent Fathers

STRATFORD CALDECOTT

The collapse of marriage in the developed world is happening faster than many believed possible. Civil marriages exceed religious ones, and both are in steep decline. In Italy, the heartland of Catholicism, where the largest religious institution on earth might be expected to have some influence, there are only 3.6 marriages a year for every thousand inhabitants, compared to 4.7 for the European Union as a whole – in the wealthy parts of Italy the numbers are even lower. Clearly most couples now do not get married. Single parents, especially single mothers, are commonplace. Given that it is hard enough for a stable, loving couple to bring up a child, or children, the difficulties faced by single parents are formidable.

The decline of fatherhood – and in our understanding of what fatherhood means – is only one part of this picture, but it is an important one.

For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every fatherhood in heaven and on earth is named, that he may grant you by his power according to the riches of his glory to become mighty through his Spirit in the inner man, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith (Eph. 3:14).

What is a “father”? According to the Christian understanding, “father” means something like “originator” or “source.” This is why the Letter to the Ephesians describes the heavenly Father as the only true father, because all things begin with him. In the biological act of “fathering,” the seed comes from the father to the mother, making her fertile. But this is only a faint shadow, not sufficient to explain the notion of fatherhood. In fact the destruction of the family and of fatherhood is bound up with reductions like these.

The recovery of fatherhood is not merely a political and sociological challenge, to be met by strengthening the legislation that keeps families together, deters separation, and insists that a man takes more responsibility for his children (whether he be married or not). What needs to be recovered is a vision, a sense of responsibility, something the philosopher Gabriel Marcel in his book *Homo Viator* (1951) called a “creative vow.”

The father is more than a biological instrument above all when he is prepared to consecrate himself for a role that transcends the physical. He gives of himself biologically to the mother when the child is conceived; but he gives of himself spiritually when he accepts a continuing and indeed eternal responsibility for the gift that God gives him in return – the gift of the child whom he did not fashion and whose destiny he cannot determine or control.

This fatherly vow or consecration will also deepen and consolidate the vow of marriage itself, for fatherhood (like motherhood) blossoms within the sacramental garden of marriage, calling from the man a love that nothing else could reveal. Thus we see the eternal divine Spirit indwelling both, deepening both their differences and their unity.

No longer the primary breadwinner, today’s father is not even necessarily the one who engendered his own child, thanks to the wonders of IVF. Technology, which already in the 1960s severed the

connection between sex and reproduction, now promises to separate gender from parenthood entirely. It is hardly surprising that so many fathers are missing from the landscape of the contemporary family.

G.K. Chesterton lived through the early stages of the feminist movement. He poured scorn on the tendency of suffragettes and aspiring secretaries to glorify the world of work outside the home, in the office and factory. He perceived the world of the family as infinitely more exciting, more adventurous, and more challenging. The home may be physically small, but the drama and social influence of life in the home is far greater than that of the world outside. But at the same time, he perceived that the feminists were rejecting the home and going out to work and in search of votes for a *reason*. “The generation in revolt fled from a cold hearth and godless shrine.” The Victorians, far from upholding or exemplifying Christian “family values,” had *already betrayed* that tradition. The home that had once, perhaps, been larger inside than out had become a prison, from which it was understandable and inevitable that woman should want to escape.

The betrayal began long before, with the dominance of the pragmatic mercantile mentality. When the only values were those that could be *counted*, and the only truth was a truth that *worked*, when knowledge and authority had become equated with mere *power*, then the romance and adventure of making a home and a family together had given way to the idea of a marriage of “convenience.” This so-called marriage amounted to little more – and it soon amounted to much less – than a business contract between consenting adults, for the exchange of certain services and the amalgamation of property. With marriage so degraded, the ideal held in contempt, broken marriages started to become the norm rather than the exception.

Today, statistics seem to show that children who grow up in a fatherless family are considerably more likely to go to prison, experience depression, become pregnant as teenagers, or be abused. And yet many voices insist that because men and women are “equal” it must be possible for women to “father” and men to “mother.” Of course whether either can do both at the same time is another question. In any case this is to confuse equality with sameness. The debate on “genderless parenting” has been stirred up recently by Andrea Doucet’s 2006 study *Do Men Mother?*, which discovered persistent, significant differences between mothering and fathering. (The book is reviewed [here](#).)

The present issue of *Humanum* is intended to draw attention to this important aspect of the ongoing collapse of the family. The “father” goes missing long before he physically disappears from the scene. He starts to disappear as soon as he forgets the vocation that is his. (We have no “witness” piece in the current issue, but PLEASE READ this extract from the play by Karol Wojtyla/ Pope John Paul II, *The Radiation of Fatherhood*.)

Please also view Jennifer Lahl’s Anonymous Father’s Day documentary.

You may also be interested in this article on Fatherhood and Truth, which includes some remarks on the priesthood, from *Second Spring*.

Stratford Caldecott

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