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Finding the Father

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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.

