

2012 - Issue Four

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/>.

Juliana Weber is a graduate of Ave Maria University currently on staff at the Pontifical John Paul II Institute for Studies on Marriage and Family in Washington, DC. She also holds a BA in Psychology from SUNY-Fredonia.

[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.).

