

THE MAGAZINE: From the May 25 Issue

A Dad's Life

On fatherhood, manliness, and failure

MAY 25, 2015 | By JONATHAN V. LAST

the weekly
Standard

I was once reasonably dignified. I dressed like a gentleman and luxuriated in the cultural heritage of Western civilization. My three places of residence—my home, my office, and my mind—were free of clutter and arranged so as to allow me both to make the most of my days and to begin to venture out into intellectual life. Then I became a father.

One afternoon, I was changing my infant son's diaper when he began micturating. Not in a feeble stream, but in a great, turbo-charged geyser, like one of the fountains in front of the Bellagio. As was his wont. So I reached over, cupped my hand above his manhood, and waited in quiet satisfaction as he peed on me. I was pleased—genuinely pleased, the way I once might have been, say, after finishing *Middlemarch*—that my reflexes had prevented him from spraying the wall and nearby bookshelf. The dismantling of my dignity took three weeks, more or less. I don't keep strict count of these things. Not anymore.

This is about when I started to realize that the primary effect of children is to take things from you. It begins with sleep, time, and dignity and then expands over the years to include serenity, sanity, and a great deal of money. I am making an observation here, not complaining. It's just what they do. In that way, children are like the aging process itself: an exercise in letting go of the ancillary parts of your existence until you are stripped bare, and what remains is your elemental center. Your soul. I'm told Jews see something of this in the Suffering Servant songs in Isaiah. Christians know it as the Way of the Cross. A consultant from McKinsey would call it addition by subtraction.

I'm not going to lie to you. In fatherhood there is much—so much—to be lost. But there is much to be gained, too. For example, while it may seem diametrically opposed to the indignities of the job, fatherhood is the wellspring of a quality critically important to our culture: manliness.

There is a school of thought that views the idea of manliness—and even men themselves—as obsolete, or unnecessary, or perhaps even harmful. You can see it in contemporary books, such as Hanna Rosin’s *The End of Men* (which is more celebration than lament), but you also find it earlier. At the height of the women’s suffrage movement, Charlotte Perkins Gilman wrote a novel called *Herland* in which three male explorers stumble upon a lost society made up entirely of women. It’s paradise. Until the men muck everything up. Obviously.

For thousands of years masculinity and femininity were the yin and yang of the world—the opposing sensibilities whose interaction created harmony at every level, from the societal to the personal. As a result, the modern push to downgrade half of humanity has created some confusion. On the one hand, it’s now socially acceptable for young men in their early twenties to wear footie pajamas. Which suggests surrender. On the other hand, there has emerged a self-conscious “men’s movement.” What began with drumming and sweat lodges has expanded to include Brooklyn hipsters paying for facial-hair transplants. It often manifests in a talk-radio-friendly form, such as Helen Smith’s book *Men on Strike* or the collection of websites known as the “manosphere.” The men’s movement is fighting what its followers see as a feminizing culture and asserting themselves as manly men. This frequently involves complaining about child custody laws and bad divorce settlements. Not that I’m judging.

Any way you slice it, manliness is in a patch of trouble. Yet it remains an indispensable, vibrant quality that shapes the world in ways large and small. Consider two men, Dave Karnes and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn.

You probably know about Solzhenitsyn, a Soviet dissident and writer who was one of the most consequential figures of the last century. He was born in Russia in 1918, a bad time in a hard place. In 1945, he was arrested, tortured, and sent to the Gulag for criticizing the Soviet regime in a private letter. During his imprisonment he began what would become his life’s work—a series of novels and poems dissecting communism and erecting a moral framework for opposing it. He wrote in secret, while doing

hard labor, under the threat of further torture, and while battling the early stages of cancer. During one stretch he composed an epic poem, “The Trail,” more than 7,000 lines long, entirely in his head because he had neither pen nor paper.

When Solzhenitsyn was released, he continued writing. As his work began to circulate as *samizdat* and leak out, it exposed the Gulag to the world. He was eventually labeled a “non-person.” In 1971, the KGB tried to poison him. He survived, so later, they exiled him, and he lived for years in Vermont. The Communists were right to be afraid of Solzhenitsyn, because he was trying to destroy their revolution. But he was also fighting for the soul of his people by articulating a positive vision of what it meant to be Russian. That’s manliness.

Dave Karnes showed his steel on a smaller scale. A retired Marine, he was working as an accountant in Connecticut on September 11, 2001. When he heard the news, he left his office and went to a barbershop, where he got his hair buzzed high and tight. Then he went home and put on an old uniform. Then he went to church, where he asked his pastor to pray for him. And then, with his errands complete, he drove 41 miles south to Manhattan, where he passed himself off as an “official” rescuer and set to work combing the ruins for survivors. It was in this smoldering graveyard that Karnes met Chuck Sereika, another man who had taken the initiative to go help out.

Karnes and Sereika spent hours picking their way through the twisted steel and shifting rubble, calling out, over and over, “United States Marines. . . . If you can hear us, yell or tap.” They were alone after the official rescue teams had been called off the pile because conditions were deemed too dangerous. Around 7:00 p.m. Karnes and Sereika heard voices. It took them three hours, but eventually they dug out the last two survivors of the attack, Will Jimeno and John McLoughlin, who had been trapped 20 feet underground.

“Manliness brings change or restores order at moments when routine is not enough, when the plan fails, when the whole idea of rational control by modern science develops leaks,” explains the political philosopher Harvey Mansfield. “Manliness is the next-to-last resort, before resignation and prayer.” Which is a perfect description of what Solzhenitsyn and Karnes did, each in his own way.

The problem is that manliness has a dark side. “Manliness can also be vainly boastful,” Mansfield cautions, “prone to meaningless scuffling and unfriendly.” It can drive quarrels and conflicts for small reasons, bad reasons, or no reason at all. Thugs and bullies are manly. I would even go so far as to say that Joseph Stalin and Mohamed Atta, who forced Solzhenitsyn and Karnes into action, acted from manliness themselves. So manliness can be a source of trouble and a cure for it, too. Mansfield is probably the greatest exponent of manliness since Plato, and even he admits that on the whole, manliness “seems to be about 50-50 good and bad.” For every Wyatt Earp, there is a Johnny Ringo; for every Fitzwilliam Darcy, a George Wickham.

The question we should ask ourselves, then, is whether there is anything that unifies the good parts of manliness. And indeed there is. If you drill all the way down to the nuclear core of manliness, Professor Mansfield says, what you find is a familiar impulse: chivalry.

The chivalric nature of manliness reasserts itself through history, from the knight, to the samurai, to the soldier. Why? Because, as Mansfield explains, “Masculinity must prove itself and do so before an audience. It is understood often to be an act of sacrifice against one’s interest, hence concerned with honor and shame rather than money and calculation.”

If you wanted to distill these two big, interlocking concepts, you’d say that manliness is chivalry, and chivalry is the impulse to seek honor by protecting the weak and the innocent. What you have just described is the essence of fatherhood. We might even take this a bit further: Fatherhood isn’t just manliness. It’s the purest form of the good side of manliness, the side that brings light into the world.

If you wanted to get really metaphysical about the whole thing, you could note that this link between manliness and fatherhood goes even deeper. The Greeks originated the concept of *thumos*—it means “spiritedness.” It is *thumos*, Mansfield says, “that induces humans, and especially manly men, to risk their lives in order to save their lives.”

So this, finally, is fatherhood: We destroy our lives so that life will continue and be renewed, with part of ourselves baked into it. Through our DNA, of course. But also, transcendently, through the ideas and truths and loves that we teach our children.

By “fatherhood,” I mean the raising of and caring for, as opposed to the siring of, children. And in this regard, American men have, to a shameful degree, abdicated their posts. When we talk about the decline of manliness, it’s not just the footie pajamas that should worry us. The single worst thing men have done over the last two generations is abandon their families: Today, 40 percent of children in America are born out of wedlock—that is to say, without a father standing there, committed to help raise them.

That number is worse than you think. In America, only about 69 percent of kids live in a home with two parents. How do we stack up against the rest of the world? In 2014, the World Family Map project looked at the 49 countries that make up the vast majority of the world’s population. The percentage of children who live with two parents is 88 percent in the Netherlands, 85 percent in the Philippines and Indonesia, 83 percent in Germany, 78 percent in Canada, 76 percent in Nigeria—*Nigeria*—74 percent in Ethiopia, and 72 percent in Bolivia. With our 69 percent, the United States sits in 32nd place. We beat out Uganda. Barely.

If you believe that (1) manliness, however problematic, is essential for a society, and that (2) the positive aspects of manliness stem in large part from fatherhood, then this abandonment is, as the philosophers might note, a Very Bad Thing.

And, believe it or not, philosophy has consequences. Take a look around modern America. With each passing year our society becomes more callow, nasty, and unpleasant—predisposed to juvenilia, ephemera, and self-centeredness. Look at our politics. Look at our entertainment. Look, by God, at Twitter.

Now, this isn't the sort of thing you can measure precisely, but ask yourself this: Does America feel like a happier, more contented place than it was five years ago? Ten? Twenty? This is a subjective question, but if you're the kind of person who likes confirmation, the data are there. The General Social Survey finds that over the last generation, the percentage of Americans who identify themselves as being "not too happy" has nearly doubled.

Economists and sociologists have spent years trying to figure out why this is. It isn't a question of money—in real terms, per capita GDP has increased by 37 percent in a generation, so we're a lot richer. It isn't a question of education—more people go to college and graduate school than ever before. It might have something to do with marriage and family, though. For decades, surveys have consistently shown that married people are happier, on average, than people who aren't married. And today, the percentage of married people in America is at an all-time low. People stay single longer, get divorced more often, and have fewer children to boot. The American decline in happiness has occurred at the same time as the collapse of the family.

All of which is to say that if we are failing as a nation, it may well be because we're failing at manliness. And if we are failing at manliness, it's almost certainly because we're failing at fatherhood.

For my part, I fail at fatherhood six days a week and twice on Sundays. A few months after my first child was born, I sat visiting with my best friend trying to convey what I had learned thus far about being a father.

"You see," I explained, "it turns out that it's not hard work in the intellectual sense. It's not rocket science,

where some people can figure it out and others can't. No, it's hard work in the way that digging a ditch is hard. Anyone can dig a ditch. There's no way to dig smarter. Or dig faster. Having a baby is like being assigned to dig a ditch. That goes all the way to the horizon."

"Okay," he replied warily. "But it's good, right? You're glad you did it?"

"Sure," I said. "It's like going to the dentist. Everyone dreads the dentist. And it's no fun. But when you're 70 and still have your teeth, you'll be grateful you went."

I turned to my wife for confirmation. Her face was frozen in horror. "You just compared parenthood to ditch digging and dentistry," she said evenly.

It was at this point I realized I might be doing fatherhood wrong. But the good news for dads is that it's a long game and you get points just for showing up.

And it turns out that the street runs both ways. Society is greatly enriched by fatherhood, yes, but so are fathers themselves. For instance, a man with no children can easily be lulled into the sense that time is standing still. It is not. It is marching past us, relentlessly. Having a child growing and changing before your eyes makes this unavoidably clear. This realization is depressing, but also necessary. Because it means that your time on earth won't sneak past you. And if you're living well, it helps you focus on not wasting the time you have.

As I said at the beginning, fatherhood costs us a great deal. Every hour you spend driving your minivan to Babies 'R' Us is an hour you can't be sleeping, or watching football, or reading Dostoyevsky. And in truth, I'm not sure the ditch-digging metaphor is entirely wrong. Much of childrearing—the tantrums, and the sibling rivalry, and trying to get them to sleep, and *will you please eat your dinner already!*—is deeply unpleasant. But to paraphrase James Madison, if children were angels, fatherhood would be unnecessary.

As a general rule I try not to talk in the conditional mood, especially when it comes to family life. Everyone

has their own circumstances and I respect that. I really do. But if you aren't otherwise engaged in some duty that precludes it—say, the priesthood—and you have the opportunity, then you should be a father. There is nothing more vexing, exhausting, noble, or manly.

It's the worst job you'll ever love.

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