

How Nature and Nurture Have Helped Men Be Better Fathers

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For the second week in a row, I'm going to ask you to do some time traveling with me back to my university days. It's not like I think of them often—hardly at all, actually, but between thoughts on secularization (last week) and the role of fathering today, my mind has been tripping into the past—to my former, younger self and to some received wisdom that, years later, has, perhaps, passed its expiry date.

It was a fine, sunny, late spring day at my Ivy League university. I was taking a course on the academic study of the New Testament. We'd just read E.R. Dodds' *Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety* (so much anxiety being human!) and our professor was lecturing on the world view of the early followers of Jesus. Now I confess I'm not a reliable witness, but what I recall is, in reference to Dodds' work, our professor claimed that our contemporary world views and psyche were utterly different from those of Jesus's disciples and the early Christian communities; so different, in fact, that it was like comparing humans and Martians—two separate planets, worlds, and peoples.

On the face of it, OK—I get it. It was a world of pagan gods, shrines, and animal sacrifice; of wonder working magicians, and Jewish worship of a mysterious, solitary, bush burning, slave emancipating deity the Romans could scarcely comprehend. (We still don't!)

But there was something in me that revolted then, as I do now, at the comparison—at the presumption of utter unlikeness between us and them, here and then—our world and those ancient days and people. We share the same anatomy, the same physiological needs and urges; like thirst and hunger, like domestic sorrows and joys, similar satisfaction with work well wrought and achieved. A world similar even as the skies revolve aloft from night to day, as it

cycles through the seasons and as we cycle through the similar stages of life—is that not so? Or do I deceive myself? Differences—profound, to be sure; but *alien* root and branch?!

One example; and with it, I find the ancient world and our kin far from remote and beyond our ken. There's a passage in the gospels that goes like this. The word about Jesus—his teaching and power to heal—has been spreading through the countryside and villages around the Sea of Galilee. He's just crossed over in a boat from far shore to near where he's met by a great crowd of people. Then, according to the story, a man named Jairus, one of the leaders of a nearby synagogue, approaches Jesus and falls at his feet and says the following: "*My little daughter is at the point of death. Come and lay your hands on her, so that she may be made well and live.*"

Now the scenes that immediately transpire focus on the mystery of faith and the wonder working power of Jesus. But what strikes me about this whole scene are those three words: *my little daughter*. With three words, the presumed chasm of two millennia and two utterly separate worlds closes up entirely; and we walk from *this* shore of time to *that one* over the bridge of timeless human love. There, we stand face-to-face with something utterly familiar to us—we recognize a loving father, distraught by the suffering of his young girl, who is well nigh unto death, desperate for a cure—who, without thought for his manly pride or the dignity of his office, in front of everyone, drops to his knees before a stranger and asks him to save his female child. *My little daughter*, he says.

Closer to our time, a century and half ago, another father was brought low by the deathly sickness of a child. Unlike Jairus, however, there was no wonder working miracle, no medical cure wrought to save his son. On February 20th 1862, Abraham Lincoln entered a room to see the body of his eleven year old son William. He lifted the sheet from the boy's face, and gazed

at it for a long time. Elizabeth Keckley, the Afro-American woman who'd lost her son in combat, had been washing the boy's body. She wrote later, that Lincoln, in words choked with sobs, said: "*It is hard, hard to have him die.*" And then Lincoln "buried his head in his hands and his tall frame convulsed with emotion. I looked at the man in awe-stricken wonder. His grief unnerved him, and made him a weak, passive child."

No matter the distance in time and place—millennia, or centuries, a remote Roman province or the residence of a president, or in the homes of this city, we are not strangers to love, devotion, and distress. Here we meet in our common humanity.

I know that dad's are a mixed bag; I've told you about my own father and his flawed failings. Dads range from dangerous to dead beat, to banal, to near beatific. No one is born a parent; no one masters its art. We muddle through by our best lights, though dim and flickering they may be. And well we do and try, hoping to overmatch our faults with values, weakness with strength, criticism with praise, roughness with beauty, distress with care, gloom with joy, strife with peace.

Over the past several years, I've been struck by two small books about fathers and their flawed, fierce love—one, a post apocalyptic fiction, the other a searing, loving letter to a fifteen year old son. I think a lot of dads have read them, or perhaps they should, and have found in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* and Ta-Nehisi Coates' *Between the World and Me* men striving to express in the printed word what fathers so deeply feel; what they feel for their children and so often fail in finding words and deeds to match their thoughts and emotions—their dread and delight, their deep desire to protect, to teach, to love, to equip, to thank; and though wanting to always be there for them—to also be able to let them go with a blessing as their children embark into adulthood.

In McCarthy's *The Road*, a book which reads like a medieval quest narrative, a father and son walk a desolate, epic path through a world made barren and cold by unnamed disasters—they walk in rags under a “banished sun which circles the earth like a grieving mother with a dim lamp.” It's a grievous world and perilous; a world reduced to an ashen essence where a child asks the father: “we're going to be okay, aren't we?” “Yes. We are.” “Because we're carrying the fire,” the child asks. “Yes.” Says the father, “Because we're carrying the fire.”

The flame they carry is the fire of love, memory and what's left of the deep, searing, enduring bond of father and child—an affirmation of what's left of in a world, of hope beyond hope. Where a father must say: “I'm right here. I won't leave you.” “You promise?” “Yes I promise. This is what good guys do. They keep trying. They don't give up.”

The Road is a remarkable book. Though not for the faint of heart—and parenting, believe me, as we know, it's not for the feckless and nonchalant—*The Road* reads like nothing if not akin to something like contemporary scripture.

Remarkable, too, is Ta Nehisi Coates' *Between the World and Me*—a novella length open letter from a contemporary father to his fifteen year old son. It's a scorching indictment of systemic racism in the States—“White America,” Coates writes, “is a syndicate arrayed to protect its exclusive power to dominate and control our bodies....However it appears, the power of domination and exclusion is central to the belief in being white, and without it, “white people” would cease to exist for a want of reasons.” This short book is also an account of the perilous passage of Coates from his own youth to adulthood, a searing description of the palpable fear a parent of colour feels for a child every time she and he steps out into the streets of contemporary America. Listen to this: “Black people love their children with a kind of obsession. You are all we have, and you come to us endangered.”

Between the World and Me is a finally a moving document of a father's passionate love for his child—the kind of love that makes Jairus of the Christian gospel two millennia gone, not an alien stranger but an all-too-familiar. “There was before you, and then there was after,” Coates writes to his son. “You were the God I’d never had. I submitted before your needs, and I knew then that I must survive for something more than survival’s sake.”

“Your mother and I knew too many people who’d married and abandoned each other.... The truth of us was always that you were our [wedding] ring. We’d summoned you out of ourselves, and you were not given a vote. If only for that reason, you deserve all the protection we could muster. Everything else was subordinate to this fact. If that sounds like a weight, it shouldn’t. The truth is that I owe you everything I have. Before you, I had my questions but nothing beyond my own skin in the game, and that was really nothing at all because I was a young man, and not yet clear of my own human vulnerabilities. But now I am grounded and domesticated by the plain fact that should I now go down, I would not go down alone.”

I could read this whole book out loud, and it wouldn’t be enough. Let me just share a couple more quotes. “I am sorry that I cannot make everything okay,” Coates writes to his son Samori. “I am sorry that I cannot save you—but not that sorry. Part of me thinks that your very vulnerability brings you closer to the meaning of life.... I have raised you to respect every human being as singular, and you must extend that same respect to the past...I have always wanted you to attack every day of your brief life in struggle. I would have you be a conscious citizen of this terrible and beautiful world.” And finally, with words many dads know intimately, all-too-well, and truly, “I have tried to explain that my work is to give you what I know of my own particular path while allowing you to walk your own.”

And thus a young father, not yet forty, writing to his teenage son—words plumbing and giving expression to feelings of dread, hope and love felt and lived fitting for this Fathers’ Day.

And then there’s the story of Silas Marner, the main character of the 1861 novel by Mary Ann Evans, also and better known as George Eliot, and with it some recent studies that reveal the

remarkable effects of fathering on men. Disappointed in love, falsely accused of a crime he did not commit, Marner is a handloom weaver of cloth who has withdrawn from society and who endlessly repeats in his mind the loss of a young love, the heartlessness of others and the traumatic, baseless condemnation that blighted his life. From years of hard, repetitious labour bending over and working his loom, Marner has also become near insect like, mechanical; his body a hard shell, bent and atrophied; hard and atrophied, too, his heart.

I'll not repeat the whole story—only this; a tragedy leads to his redemption. He discovers an infant girl abandoned in his coal shed. From thence, Silas undergoes a remarkable transformation. He can think and act for nothing else than the well-being and up-bringing of the young girl he calls Eppie. As he cares for the child, his whole body changes from the “crooked tube,” as Eliot calls it, to a hale and sturdy elder; whose heart and soul, as well, is made tender and open to the growing girl, his neighbours and to the world around him. Cared by Silas alone, Eppie not only survives, but thrives, and in turn enriches Silas in his old age. In short, Silas saves her, and Eppie saves him. Great story. And more true, it turns out, than a mere Victorian morality tale.

In his recent book, *How Men Age*, the biological anthropologist Richard Bribiescas, asserts that dad-like behaviours are rooted in biological ones that have evolved over eons of time. In particular, this study is about what happens to men at around and beyond their fortieth year. Along with our primate ancestors and cousins, human males are primed to play the first and primary Darwinian game which revolves around competition and the scoring of mating opportunities. Unlike other primates, however, where aging males are ousted or reproductively silenced by younger rivals, and thus become reproductively irrelevant and hit what Bribiescas calls the “Great Ape wall of death”—our wall extends by several decades in order to increase the

likelihood that our progeny will survive. Over countless generations, the life span of our human ancestors—those dads who devoted themselves intensely to the duties of fatherhood—were imperfectly honed and selected by evolution to endure into a riper old age. That selection for caring fathers helped foster the survival of our children and the human family.

As well, drawing on field work from his colleagues among hunter-gatherer groups, Bibiescas, notes that despite being decades past their muscular prime, older male tribal members are at their professional peak who capitalize on their experience, and thus bring home game to the benefit of other families as well as their own. The testosterone fueled years in our lives, it turns out, are not the sum of male human worth—caring for children and drawing from the matrix of life-honed experience gives aging males and their kin an evolutionary advantage.

Speaking of testosterone, that hormone accelerates aging. It's no wonder, Ta Nehisi Coates observes, that black males age and die so young. From birth, they live on high alert in a world in which their very lives are daily endangered. I don't like thinking of things this way—but stress kills, and males too, live in a hormonal soup made up of ourselves and others and our environment—a soup stirred and made toxic or a blessing given the circumstances in which we live, grow and age.

You can see this process at work in the pages of *Silas Marner*. Being called into fatherhood in his later years bestows upon him a new lease on life—it's almost as though he grows into a new body and soul transformed by his love for Eppie. That transformation is fueled by what's going on within, throughout and beyond his body. The appearance of that child to whose care and upbringing he devotes himself and his all, enables Silas to reverse his own self-annihilation. (see Michele Pridmore-Brown's review of *How Men Age...*, in *Times Literary Supplement*, February 10, 2017, pp 26-7.)

Darwinian stories are painted with a very broad brush; and much is extravagantly hypothetical and potentially reductive. Far be it from me to label love under the sign of a hormone. Yet stories of evolution are suggestive of the material substrate, the roots which can nourish and help thrive our most precious and mysterious human behaviours and values. That which gives *and then cares* for life—no matter its provenance—sustains it over the bridge of time and place. And I'm grateful for it, and that I've made it past the wall of death so far.

And here in the end, I return to the beginning of these words. Shakespeare was onto something, as he usually was, when he has Hamlet say: "I could be bounded in a nutshell, and count myself a king of infinite space..." Each of us are so unlike and unique.

When my New Testament professor, all those decades ago, said that our mentality and world views are profoundly different from those of Palestinian Jews of the 1st century—of course he was right. But utterly alien? No. Hamlet's "king in a nutshell" knows he does not rule over infinite space because of dreams—and once upon a time, it was the dream of being a father that linked me to the countless generations of fathers who themselves dreamed of fatherhood and grew into men through the caring and loving of our children—in tears and perplexities, in pride and joy, in never ending worry and enduring love.

We summoned you—our children—out of ourselves, and you were not given a vote in the matter of coming into this world. If only for that reason, you deserve all the protection we can muster. Everything else is subordinate to this fact. If that sounds like a weight, it shouldn't. The truth is that we owe you everything we have.

So, in closing on this Fathers' Day—to all you dads: to uncles, brothers, cousins, fathers and grandfathers—this is my shout out to you, my thanks and my blessings today and always, that you and we may fare well in our fathering.