

THE STATE OF FATHERHOOD

There's no precise job description for a male parent

BY DON MORGENSON
FOR THE RECORD

In the English language, the verb "to father" connotes a basically biological concept, as a man contributing sperm to the project of producing a baby. On the other hand, we usually understand the verb "to mother" as a more social concept, connoting the caring and co-operative qualities we Canadians associate mainly with mothers.

To mother someone is not simply to give birth to a child but implies to watch over, encourage and protect a growing individual. Though such "genderized" responsibilities are changing among mothers and fathers, even today when I ask my students which of their parents appeared most responsible for them when they were ill, overwhelmingly they report their mothers were more often at their bedside.

When we consider the social role fathers are expected to play, the expectations are certainly not as well defined or delineated. Whereas in the past what might be referred to as "the cult

of true manhood" dictated that fathers were primarily breadwinners, as was the case in my own family ... at least until my father became too ill to teach, when my mother took on the role of family breadwinner.

"True manhood" also dictated that fathers would often play the role of a rather stern disciplinarian, supposedly the counterpoint to a mother's constant softness and sensitivity. But I do not remember there being any clear distinctions in terms of a father's daily sustained role in the social/psychological/emotional development of the children, and perhaps to a great extent that's true today.

I guess most of us men make our way into fatherhood without much in the way of textbooks in developmental psychology, help from Dr. Spock, or an atlas of any kind. And knowing men, we probably would be too stubborn or prideful to ask for directions to find our way.

I'm reminded of a recent New Yorker magazine cartoon, which pictured Moses as point man, leading the wan-

dering tribes of Israel through a barren desert. Behind Moses two women were speaking to each other, and the caption read: "Just like a man... he refuses to stop and ask for directions."

Most of us learn the tools of fatherhood by example and, in the past at least, this has meant an active transmission of traditions and values. I remember once when I was acting up and my father reprimanded me rather sharply. One of the other men present said to my father: "Einer... you can't do that. You're only imposing your own values on your son." My father responded, equally sharply: "He's my kid, and I want him to have my values."

It was at my father's insistence the family toured many of the national monuments, seeing the beautiful sights of Washington, D.C. — in an insufferably hot July. We visited Arlington Cemetery, West Point and Annapolis. We toured what national parks we could afford, and spent days wandering the battlefields around Gettysburg, Pa., reliving some of the horrors of the American Civil War. My father was

sharing with his young family, the cultural and natural beauties of his adopted country. (Einer, his mother and father and nine brothers and sisters came from Denmark.)

And of course, there were times when we were somewhat ashamed of our dad. He wore "winged tips" and a fedora, had a little moustache, his hair was slicked back with Wildroot oil, and more often than not we did not consider him "cool." His only fashion was "old-fashioned." And he certainly did not look like the "cool" dads on early TV, or the cool dads of my high school friends — most of whom were really "cool" physicians at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minn.

Essentially, he was teaching us that "cool" is not necessarily the best posture in a world that cries for justice and fairness. In a way I guess, while he was preparing his own children for our futures, he was trying to prepare a decent future for all children.

So rather than merely siring a child, my father saw fathering just as it is with mothering, as inevitably political.

Simultaneously, as he was occupied in shaping us children to be good and caring citizens, he was also struggling to shape a good and just society.

Clearly Einer, as a father and a school teacher, felt that his responsibilities should not stop with his three biological children and our specific needs — and that any father's responsibilities extend to some responsibility for the quality of the world into which all children must finally travel.

Even though he left us much too soon, we remember him with deep gratitude.

Happy Father's Day, to all of our fathers.



• Don Morgenson is a professor psychology, now retired from Wilfrid Laurier University.

Separation robs both children and their dads

BY BARRY LILLIE
FOR THE RECORD

Every father is acutely aware of the gift of life of a daughter or son. Father's Day is a unique, reciprocal celebration — child to father and father to child.

Fathers have the unique experience of becoming a parent by observing the changing shape of their partner or, in my fortunate case, through the gift of life of a virtually anonymous young woman through the adoption process. In either case, dads' reactions are likely as universal and emotional as mine: "Damn it, this is my son or daughter, and I will love this child with all my heart for the rest of my life."

A father's way of fulfilling this commitment is often different than a mother's, but it is not of less value or any less intense. It takes shape often through ensuring the material necessities of family life, to provide the resources that will contribute to encouraging their child to be the best that they can be, to protecting their child in every possible way, to provide adventures and create the magical moments every child needs to thrive, to comfort and care in such a way that their child will know that they are loved forever.

Every day I witness a father's love, in settings that range from the mini-zoo at Waterloo Park to the ringette rinks and ball fields of our neighbourhoods, from teaching their child how to ride a bike to learning to drive a car, from taking their child to the doctor to sitting at their sick child's bedside, from working at difficult and demanding jobs to long hours of overtime and doing undervalued work to put food on the table and provide opportunities for their children.

And yet, 50 per cent of children from separated families — about 40,000 every year — will have a remote relationship with their dad within three years following a family breakdown. Twenty-eight per cent of all Canadian children live their lives without their father's presence. Separation and divorce is now the life crisis that leads to "fatherlessness," and all the negative outcomes for children, parents, grandparents and extended family.

Father's Day is becoming a celebration only for the dwindling intact family, and is obviously not for that 28 per cent of children and fathers who live apart.

Father's Day is a day of reflection for many of us who have lost our dads and grandparents to death, or who have suffered through the experience of a separation. It is about the memories and gifts of life that our fathers provided from our earliest days to their last caring moments.

For this writer, my passion for dads and children is in that connection to my own past and the "what-if" my father or grandfather had died in the world wars, or the "what-if" they had separated from my mother or grandmother?

It's the answer to the "what-if" question that informs us about what our community needs to do to support fathers, children and families.

I recently met a young teen and learned that his parents had separated some seven years earlier. This mom and dad had the wisdom to know that effective parenting following their separa-



RECORD FILE PHOTO

From the time of their children's birth, fathers play a significant role in helping their sons and daughters understand the world around them.

tion required two involved parents. The young man had an interesting perspective on his parents' choice.

He said he would not act the same way that he acted now — that he'd be different. He said most of the people who meet him said he inherited his dad's personality — so if he acted like his dad when he saw him all the time, he could not imagine how he would be without his dad as a major role model in his life.

It was not easy for these parents to do what they did. It was, however, worth it. Ensuring their child had two engaged, loving parents was the single most important commitment these parents ever made for their son.

In every separation, and in the legal process that currently exists, there is a high risk that the separated father may fade away or eventually disappear from his child's life. Fathers who remain involved daily following a separation know that they were fortunate to have had the resources and personal strength to meet the challenges.

Should a father have to be lucky to remain an involved dad? Do children need to have parents that will make "good choices" at a time when they are probably most angry?

Father's Day is about memories, the gift of being a dad or grandpa, and about our commit-

ment to our children on our first day of being a dad. It should also be about reflection on the "what-if" questions and what our children would be missing if their dad or grandpa were missing.

I know this father only through e-mails, and the words of his parents. It seems more poignant at this time, with our soldiers in Afghanistan, that he serves in our military. About 10 years ago the family suffered through a separation, and the mother chose to leave the area of the base and moved hundreds of miles away across the country.

Dad had a choice, to leave the military and follow the children wherever she took them, or stay in the military, serve our country and expect that the legal system would lead to a just access agreement. The dad stayed in the military and he became part of the human wreckage of our family saw system. He has seen his children four times in 10 years.

This dad recently wrote to one of his children on their birthday. The card read: I remember on this day when you were born. Daddy cried. I was so happy to have been given a baby. Put your hand to your chest and you will feel me there. Every beat of your heart is my loving you.

Every time a father and child are unnecessarily apart, there is a significant failure in our support network. We have too many failures.

Father's Day is a celebration of what many of us as sons, daughters and grandchildren enjoy. It is about what our dads gave to us.

Unfortunately, it is for too many about the interruption of dad's gifts of caring, pride, energy, perseverance, magic, resiliency and compassion.

A separation makes parenting more challenging, but it does not change the needs of our children to be supported in every way by both of their parents.

Our community has the support services to help families just entering this difficult separation process or to help families restore relationships they have lost through the years.

Father's Day is the perfect opportunity to create new paths to rebuild relationships that have been damaged or ignored for too long. A new start may begin simply with a phone call or an e-mail, or by engaging professional help to meet the challenges of time and distance.

In doing so you will be making a difference for several lifetimes, and Father's Day 2007 will be remembered as a day of personal courage, strength and love.



• Barry Lillie of Kitchener is a retired history teacher, and is the facilitator for the support group Kids n' Dads.

It's our fault that racism has not been driven from region

There are uncaring, evil and sometimes vicious people living in Waterloo Region.

That is not our fault. When some of those people attack other members of our community, that is not our fault. When those attacks are against visible minority people, whether that visibility is due to skin colour and/or disability, that is not our fault.

We must, however, share the blame for such attacks and their long-term results when we do not respond to them with more than a quiet, typically polite Canadian clucking of our individual and collective tongues. That is the main point of the victim impact statement given by leaders of the black community in the June 1 Record in response to yet another attack on two of their members. They were also saying that we are all culpable when those isolated criminal acts when we do not respond to instances of verbal racism and other forms of exclusion that many black people face every day throughout Waterloo Region.



TERON KRAMER
COMMUNITY EDITORIAL BOARD

We are at fault when we, as employers, exclude people from diverse cultural backgrounds solely on the excuse that they lack Canadian experience.

We are at fault when we, as community service providers, ignore or dismiss the complaints of poor service because language differences mean those complaints may not be articulated as well as some others.

We are at fault when, even in 2007, there are few role models for visible minority youth in positions of authority and power within our public institutions.

We are at fault when we do not respond to racist jokes, slurs or other forms of verbal abuse directed at those who are perceived to be different because of their skin colour, dress, lan-

guage or disabilities.

I was at fault when I recently sat in a room full of people from various cultural backgrounds and did not respond to the speaker who suggested that racism would disappear if those who thought they were experiencing it would simply develop greater self-confidence.

It is not tolerance that we should be striving for here; it is full inclusion that will come about only when we make genuine efforts to connect to, and include in our individual and collective lives, people whose backgrounds, lifestyles, abilities or physical appearance may be different from our own.

I recently interviewed, with two other members of the John Chamberlin Refugee Scholarship Fund, six refugees now living in Waterloo Region. Their stories of perseverance and determination in the face of incredible odds against them were a testament to the absolute best we will ever find in any of us.

Equally inspiring are the stories of

people who were born and raised here, but still have had to fight discrimination, racism and other forms of exclusion as they have tried to become contributing members of the community.

When we genuinely connect with others, when we get to know their stories, we cannot continue to remain silent in the face of the discrimination or brutality in their daily lives.

There are ample opportunities in this region to connect with and support those we often perceive as different from ourselves. We can attend Tapestry, a festival on now in Kitchener which celebrates this region's diversity and which concludes with the Multicultural Festival in Victoria Park on June 23 and 24. We can attend theatre productions by MT Space, about the immigrant and refugee experience in Canada, with their latest production running June 14 to 23 at the Registry Theatre. We can volunteer with or financially support the K-W Multicultural Centre, Focus for Ethnic Women, the YMCA's Immigrant Services in

Kitchener and Waterloo as well as Cambridge, the Mennonite Coalition for Refugee Support, the Working Centre, the John Chamberlin Refugee Scholarship Fund (through the Kitchener branch of the Mennonite Foundation of Canada) or any of the many local organizations which support persons with physical, mental or developmental challenges.

Only when we actively work to expand the circle of understanding and acceptance of our diverse populations, only when we individually and collectively speak out against racism and other forms of exclusion, will we be able to reduce the circles of racism and exclusion that exist here.

Perhaps then, people like Francis Pitia and Salah Dawoud, who were attacked just for being different from their attackers, may once again be able to feel safe and secure in their community.

• Theron Kramer of Kitchener volunteers with a long list of community organizations.