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“A Vital Christian Presence in Social Work”

**FATHERS:
THE AFFECT OF FATHER WOUNDS, FATHERLESSNESS, AND
THE VALUE OF FATHERNEED**

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This paper will address how childhood trauma from our fathers affects men and women as adults both personally and professionally. Second, the social crisis of fatherlessness in our communities/nation and the impact it has families/children will be highlighted. Finally, the absolute need of fathers in each child's life will be emphasized. This paper is both a personal and a professional look at father.

Let me state it clearly. The ideas presented herein are taken from God's Holy Word. They aren't my best thoughts. By this I mean, God ordained family order. First the man and woman are to leave father and mother and to cleave (marry) to one another, and then become one flesh (unite in intercourse). It is from the sanctity of the marriage, the fidelity of it from which parents bring forth children. This was God's plan for the married couple to be the safest place to raise children. This is my point of reference in considering the subject of fathers, especially when it comes to the crisis of father absence. The husband is to love his wife as Christ loved the church and gave Himself for it. The father is to be the priest of the family and is not to provoke his children. The children are to honor their parents. We have the template. Is it perfect? Yes! Are we as His people perfect and able to follow the template perfectly? No! So does that mean we throw out the template and follow our best thinking? Do we seek God's grace to cover our imperfect families? You bet!

The first aspect of fathers, which I'd like to address, is that of fathers provoking their children. Specifically, I'd like to address a very significant provocation, which many of us as children have had to face, which is being wounded in our hearts or our being by our fathers. This is referred to as being traumatized. This woundedness or trauma may carry over into our adult personal and professional lives if not healed. (Trauma, will be referred

to using Dr. Bryon Post's, LCSW, definition as "being any stressful event, which is prolonged, overwhelming, unpredictable and is unexpressed, unprocessed and not understood." From a lecture given in 2006.)

During my childhood I endured trauma due to living with a father who would unpredictably change from dad into a monster of a dad of whom I was terrified. Chaos reigned in my home with shouting, hitting, cursing, and beating inflicted upon my mom, brothers, and myself. This trauma usually took place at night, which made it all the more frightening to me as a child. At night, I couldn't easily run out of the house and hide. Instead, I'd tremble in my bed. Dad had a problem with alcohol. He did things, which in his right mind he probably wouldn't have done. However, since he never found recovery through AA, he died an un-recovered alcoholic some twenty-four years ago.

By the grace of God, when I was in my early forties, I found healing from my childhood trauma through outpatient group therapy for adult children of alcoholics, Alanon, and Adult Children of Alcoholics groups (ACOA). Embraced by the love of my Heavenly Father I also found a spiritual healing which has helped me to know Whose I am, and who I am.

Of great importance was the opportunity to forgive (yet not excuse my father's actions) my dad as well as minister to his needs before he died of cancer. As God would have it I went on to work as the Family Therapist and then in-patient counselor at a freestanding drug rehab hospital working with alcoholics and their families.

My personal recovery helped me to be much less passive, more self-defined, happier, and more genuine, I also believe I was a healthier social worker. This I saw in being more compassionate as well as being more genuine (being less of a "nice social worker" who wouldn't tell clients the truth at times when it was needed, as I wanted to be liked). I also no longer backed away from rocking the boat when it needed to be rocked.

It was in the rooms of Alanon, ACOA, working in the drug rehab hospital, and later at a drug rehab prison where I found how prevalent the father wound was. Eventually my passion became offering help for men in prison to heal their own father wound. This in turn would help them to stop wounding their own children. Though I no longer work within the walls of the prison, I am committed to freeing others from the bonds of their father wound.

As I've come to learn the extent to which the helping professions are wounded healers, it is imperative that each of us as social workers address our own childhood traumas and find healing. Why? We owe it to ourselves and to our clients to be the healthiest men and women and servants of Father God.

Does the trauma caused by the father wound exist only in social workers and for alcoholics and addicts and their families? Certainly not! Then does it exist in our church family? According to John Eldridge, Christian author of *Wild at Heart*, Thomas Nelson, 2003, most men have experienced a father wound. His book offers hope and help for any

man who wants to understand his father wound, how it impacts him, and how God can heal. John and his wife Stasi have also written a counterpart for women, *Captivating*, Thomas Nelson, 2005, which addresses the wound the woman carries from her father. Both books are of great value to the Christian community as they illuminate a common problem, and offer a way for men and women to find healing through the help of fellow Christians and God.

As a member of my church, I've offered the men of our church an opportunity to address their father wound, acknowledge it, and begin to heal it. The format for this is either an eight-week small group series, or a weekend retreat. This ministry can be an immensely valuable part of any church, which seeks to have men, and women given the chance to be healed of childhood hurts or trauma experienced from their father. A healed man, in addition to becoming a happier, healthier man, is a happier, healthier servant of his spouse, children, church family, and community.

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Finally, we as social workers need to be aware of the importance of two things. First, are we "father friendly?" Do we have unfinished business with our father which may hinder us in our work with our clients who are fathers. Is your agency "father friendly" in its' policies, forms, staff sensitivity to fathers? To answer this question The National Fatherhood Initiative (www.fatherhood.org) offers a one-day workshop that allows staff of public and private organizations to assess the degree to which their organization is "father friendly." Secondly, being aware of the prevalence of the father wound, we can explore this with our clients. At a minimum we can validate their wound, offer healing, and incorporate it into their treatment plan, or refer them to someone who would help them if this were the client's need. For those clients who are open to incorporating God into their treatment, this can be the most powerful and empowering way to find healing from their father wound.

The process to heal the father wound according to Eldridge, (in brief) begins by asking God to show us our woundedness. Acknowledge it. Yes, this happened to me and it was traumatic. (What is in the past will stay part of our present unless it is healed). Express your grief to God and another human being whom you trust (seek counseling if needed). Forgive. Forgive your father for wounding you. (This doesn't mean we excuse the behavior). Confess any wrongs we may have done in response to being wounded. (We need to clean up our side of the street). Examine your ways. (Are there thoughts, beliefs, and attitudes from the past, which hobble us today)? See yourself through new eyes as God sees us as a new creation.

PART II FATHERLESSNESS

Next, we will look at how far from God's original design of a husband and wife raising their children in the safety of a committed marriage. Tonight, four out of ten children will go to sleep in a home where their biological father doesn't live (Father Facts, Fourth

Edition, 2004). That equates to roughly 24 million children who aren't living with their father. Like many statistics it's hard to wrap our minds around a huge number such as 24 million. Likewise, it's hard to really understand what that number translates to in a boy or a girl's life. Equally complex is an understanding of how this statistic impacts our families, our neighborhoods, community, state, and finally the nation.

David Blankenhorn, in his very important work, Fatherless America, Harper Collins Publishers, 1995, believes fatherlessness in America is our most urgent social problem. He presents a convincing argument to support this as the most troublesome crisis facing today's families. As he points out "unlike earlier periods of father absence in our history, we now face more than a physical loss affecting some homes. We face a cultural loss affecting every home. For this reason, the most important absence our society must confront is not the absence of fathers but the absence of our belief in fathers." Following his documentation regarding fatherlessness, he offers twelve ideas towards the goal of

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a father for every child." That's the heart of his message, a message that resonates with me as a father, and social worker.

As Blankenhorn points out our society has lost our belief in fathers. Today we live in a society which questions if a father is needed, or even necessary. Consider the work of Dr. Peggy Drexler, Raising Boys Without Men: How Maverick Moms Are Creating the Next Generation of Exceptional Men, Rodale Inc. 2005. She contends that father-absent homes—particularly "single mother by choice" and lesbian homes—are the best environment for boys. (From Glenn Sacks, Sociology Professor, Yale, weblog, August 31, 2005).

As social workers we too need to consider: Is a father for every child necessary? Is he needed? Is it even better for children to be raised without fathers? What message do we convey to our clients in regards to this issue of father absence? Do we speak to it in a sensitive yet important way?

A contrary opinion to Dr. Drexler's current voice, comes from the past. "What is man? A man is nothing. A man must be with his family to amount to anything with us." (A quote from a Pomo Native American in 1935, when he was 112 years old- taken from the Lake Sonoma California State Park historical exhibit). This man in my understanding was referring to a value his culture held a man's/father's importance is in his being part of his family. Another voice from the not-too-distant past weighs in on this issue in a very pointed way. "From the wild Irish slums of the 19th century Eastern Seaboard to the riot-torn suburbs of Los Angeles, there is one unmistakable lesson in American History: A community that allows a large number of young men to grow up in broken families, dominated by women, never acquiring any stable relationship to male authority never acquiring any rational expectations about the future---that community asks for and gets chaos." Daniel Moynihan, 1965, a quote from Blankenhorn's book.

Here are more recent voices, “If I had to put my finger on one thing, it’s the homes. I look at the kids on the corners, and 9 out of 10 times there is no dad and maybe 7 out of 10 times there’s no mom in their lives and they are being raised by an aunt or grandma.” Officer William Whitfield, himself a black police officer with San Francisco Police Department, from the San Francisco Chronicle, 12-18-06. Here is the thought of Shawn Johnson, Psychologist: “The research is absolutely clear the one human being most capable of curbing anti-social aggression of a boy is his biological father.” (Father Facts, Fourth Edition, 2004). With the social crisis of gang problems in so many communities, the father, present in the home and involved with his son and or daughter is in my opinion one of the strongest preventions for gang membership. A teen has a strong sense of belonging when he or she is loved and protected by their father.

From my perspective as a social worker I’ve seen two areas where the absence of the father has hurt our children. First, I worked in the Ozark Correctional Center in Missouri with men who had committed felony crimes and were receiving treatment for substance

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abuse. There I found about 7 out of 10 men either never knew their father, or their father was also in prison, or their father was out of the home due to a drug addiction. Secondly, as a social worker for True to Life Children’s Services (an adoption and foster family agency), I estimate about 8 out of 10 of the children I work with don’t have a father present to be reunited with once they are returned to their parent.

My work leads me to believe their loss of their father has hurt them deeply be it in a lost sense of belonging, self-esteem, or emotional problems. I also believe along with Blankenhorn this connection is lost to society and if it is recognized, the experts down-play it. As stated earlier by Dr. Drexler, she even believes it’s a good thing for a boy not to be raised by their father as they turn out even better than if they were raised by the biological father. Blankenhorn offers this counter view “A good society celebrates the ideal of the man who puts his family first.”

Having laid out the problem, what is the cause of father absence? Consider this from Kathleen Parker, syndicated columnist for the Atlantic Constitution, “And baby used to make three! Remember that? Man and woman wed in holy matrimony followed by baby? Forget it. We don’t do that anymore. Today having a baby is like swinging through McDonalds for a burger. One baby all the way, hold the dad.” She points out the sad statistic found in our communities across the nation, 4 out of 10 children were born outside of marriage in 2005. While the teen birth rate dropped to the lowest level ever, births among unwed mothers rose most dramatically among women in their 20s. About 1.5 million (37%) babies were born to unwed mothers of the total 4.1 million born in the United States in 2005. (From the San Francisco Chronicle, 11-12-06). Twenty-five years ago, the out of wedlock birthrate was 18% of the total number.

An even sadder fact which Blankenhorn points out is having a child outside of marriage is no longer considered by our society as wrong or problematic or cause for concern. What once was considered the healthy way for a child to be born, i.e. first comes love, then comes marriage, followed by the baby’s carriage, (God’s plan) is left lying in

the dust of a society now experiencing the consequences of this moral value being lost. No longer does our society value a child to be raised by an married couple. This is coupled with a recent survey by the Guttmacher Institute, which revealed 95% of Americans they polled say they have engaged in premarital sex (San Francisco Chronicle, 2-11-07). With this choice have come the crises of STDs and the spread of HIV.

Another factor, which has contributed to the crisis of fatherlessness, is divorce. We know the rate of divorce remains at about 50% of all marriages. Sadly. “A consistent finding in the literature is that non-resident fathers’ involvement with their children falls steadily over time, even for fathers who were highly involved initially.” (Father Facts, Fourth Edition, 2004.) Beyond the pain many of these father’s experience when no longer living with their children is the impact on their children. “Children do not dismiss their fathers just because there has been a divorce... the poignancy of their reactions are astounding, especially among the six-, seven-, and eight-year olds. They cry for their daddies-whether they have good, bad, or indifferent daddies. I have been deeply struck
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by the distress children of every age suffer at losing their fathers.” Judith Wallerstein and Sandre Blakeslee, From Second Chances: Men, Women, and Children a Decade After Divorce, 1996.

In 2000, of the 19.2 million children in the U.S. living with only one parent, 56 % were living with a divorced or separated parent. Of this number 9% live with their father. (U.S Census Bureau, 2001.) UNICEF ranks 19 wealthy countries better for children than the U.S. The U.S. has the highest proportion of children living in single-family homes, which the study defined as an indicator for increased risk of poverty and poor health. (Source, United Nations, as reported in the San Francisco Chronicle, 2-23-07)

How does this translate in terms of the impact on children of divorced couples? Individuals whose parents remained married reported higher levels of life satisfaction than those whose parents divorced. Children of divorced parents suffer from lower levels of self-efficiency, self-esteem, and social support. Compared to children in intact families, children whose parents have divorced are much more likely to drop out of school, to engage in premarital sex, and to become pregnant outside of marriage. These effects are found even after taking into account parental and marital characteristics before the divorce. (From Father Facts, Fourth Edition, 2004).

In 1930, 84% of the households in the U.S. were made up of married couples. In 1990 that number dropped to 56%. In 2005 the percent dropped to 49.7%. That represents 55.2 million of the some 111.1million households in 2005. For the first time ever in our history as a country the rate dropped below 50%. Why is this important to the absent father concern? As Blankenhorn points out, “marriage is the most effective pathway to responsible fatherhood. The future of fatherhood is highly dependent on the future of marriage”. Why? In order for the father to be that “good family man,” he must live with his children, and have a parental alliance with the mother of their children. Without this it is very difficult for a father to be a good family man.

Co-habitation has now taken over as the means for couples to live together as opposed to marriage first. Consider in 1970 the rate of co-habitation was 11%, while now it is at 54%. Of those co-habiting, in 2000, 41% had children while 46% of married couples had children. Now consider this sobering information: -the incidence of domestic violence is double for couples that co-habit. The divorce rate is 46% higher if co-habitation occurs first. Children who live with their mother and her boyfriend are more poorly adjusted psychologically and have more behavioral problems than children living with their biological parents. (Father Facts, Fourth Edition, 2004). The least safe of all environments for children when it comes to abuse and neglect is when the male living in the home with the mother and her children is not the father of those children. Additionally, when the biological father lives with his children, the incest taboo is a strong deterrent against sexual abuse. However, this is not so if a boyfriend is living in the home. (Blakenhorn).

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What are the application points for us in Christian Social Work and in the Christian Church? Do we as social workers hold up to our clients the value of fathers in the lives of their children? Do we warn and encourage couples to marry vs. co-habit if we understand they are more likely to experience a lasting marriage and also less likely to experience domestic violence? Do we tell these couples that being in a committed marriage would increase the chance of life successes for the children that their union may produce? Do we warn mothers who are allowing their boyfriend to live with her and her children that this is the least safe place for her child? Do we discuss the incest taboo? Do we encourage the single woman in her twenties to abstain from intercourse as a way to avoid heartache, such as guilt, STDs, loss of innocence, out-of-wedlock children or abortion? If she is already sexually active, do we encourage her to practice birth control, knowing this age group has the highest percent of children born outside of marriage? If our clients are Christians do we talk with them about God's plan for marriage and family? Certainly we aren't presenting this to our clients in a judgmental way, yet do we present what we know from research? Do we represent the truth of God's laws of love, which are designed to protect and preserve the union of man and wife and the sanctity of the family?

Having presented some of the major causes of father absence, what can be done to arrest this social crisis? Blakenhorn offers twelve ideas for "recovering fatherhood." Here are some of them. All proposed domestic legislation should be evaluated as to whether it will strengthen or weaken marriage. This is not to be the sole question yet the first one. (Note, the federal government has allocated \$150 million dollars for the Fatherhood Initiative (fatherhood.hhs.gov/shtml). This program aim is to help dads to succeed with their family. It also earmarks programs, which strengthen marriage). Another idea is to create an interfaith council of religious leaders who would speak up and act on behalf of marriage, recommitting to marital preparation. Community organizers would aim at reversing the trend of family fragmentation. States would regulate sperm banks from selling sperm to unmarried women, therefore, not producing radically fatherless children.

(Stacey, born to a mother by a sperm donor, “Mommy, what did you do with my daddy? I need a daddy or I can’t be a kid.”)

In my community, Ukiah, California I co-author a monthly article for the Ukiah Daily Journal called “For Dads, From Dads.” This feature in its fourth year is designed to encourage dads in their parenting as well as underscore the absolute value of fatherhood. In addition, I founded the Fatherhood Coalition of Ukiah, whose mission is “to touch fathers and their children for good.” So far we have sponsored several low cost fun activities for fathers and their children. One of our goals is to eventually sponsor a marriage enrichment seminar for couples thinking of marriage as well as those currently married. In my church, the Ukiah Seventh-day Adventist Church, I’ve begun a Men’s Ministry. One of its goals is to help men/fathers heal their father wound, therefore becoming healthier men/husbands/fathers.

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As social workers, as church family please consider doing what you can to reverse the social decline of fatherhood and turn the surge of father absence to enable every child to have a father, and to affirm the “good family man.”

PART III FATHERNEED

As serious as the father wound is and the crisis of the absent father, as Christian social workers we must not lose heart. For God says in Malachi 4:6, “***He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and hearts of the children to their fathers...***” We are a people of hope and faith. God can and does heal the father wound. God can and does turn fathers back to their children. God can and does help all families, whatever their form or structure, which call upon His name. God is a God of grace and mercy. We can join hands with him to be part of the fulfillment of this prophecy.

To close our discussion on Fathers we will consider a very good thing - Fatherneed. Fathers are indeed needed and necessary. Fathers aren’t optional. Only fathers can father and only he can bring his uniqueness into the child’s life and wellbeing. This is not to diminish in any way the same absolute value the mother brings. It is simply meant to underscore our children’s need for their father. Kyle Pruett M.D. has authored a wonderful book Fatherneed, Why Father Care is as Essential as Mother Care for Your Child, Broadway Books, 2000. Dr. Pruett makes the case for a father’s absolute value through thoughtful research and direct practice experience. He takes issue with authors such as David Blankenhorn as he believes the father absent spokespeople give too much emphasis to the role father absence plays on the social problems seen in children. Rather he believes there are factors such as social and economic, which contribute to social problems seen in children and society.

Dr. Pruett makes sure the children have the last say on fathers. Here is a quote from young Jamie, age 5, “My dad takes me to parks and zoos with my dog and my sister...and is top man in my life. He’s like almost better to me than God.” Whoa, that’s quite a tribute to her dad! She underscores one of the consistent findings of the father’s value to his children, that being his doing fun things with their children. And, dads just play differently with their children than moms, and kids love dads playing with them. (When my own children were preschoolers, we had such fun as they tried to ride the bucking bull-dad down on all fours). Alejandro, a teen, had this to say about his dad, “He seems to know how hard it is to say no to your friends...when I’m starting to think about getting into trouble.” This points out another truth, only a man/dad can understand what it means to be a boy as he once was one. Only he can reflect that back to his son.

A very important aspect only dad can bring to the older child is the opportunity to explore and interact with maleness itself and explore male-female differences in context of daily family life. Dads can show his son how to treat a woman by the way the dad

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treats his wife. Dads can show his daughter how she is to be treated by a man she may date or marry.

A father’s influence is especially important precisely because they are influences not of the mother. He is the interesting non-mother partner in his own right. He also balances the strong pull a child feels toward the mother. However, when that mother feels supported by the father, she is more patient, flexible, emotionally responsive, and available to her children. Marital satisfaction according to Dr. Pruett, is clearly both a source and a consequence of paternal involvement. He very wisely points out how the woman shapes the access their men have to their children (referred to as “gate keeping”) in general relates to how supported she feels by her man. If the mother moves to amputate the fatherneed (with the father of her children), the child suffers. If she moves to separate her needs from her unhappiness, the child can manage better.

An important spiritual/physical influence only the father can bring to his son is pointed out by Eldridge when he says, “The Lord He is a Warrior, The Lord is His Name.” Exodus 15:3. That being so then men and their son’s are warriors too for they are made in His image. Only the father can teach his son to be a warrior (authentic masculinity). Eldridge says “like it or not, there’s something fierce in every man’s heart.” “He will lose heart if as a boy he’s trained to be soft; one day you just might need that boy to defend you.”

Again, the children have the final say. Alisha, when asked what advice she’d give to fathers as her father remarried said this, “You have to love your children. They’re your own flesh and blood...It’s really all you have to do.” A single tear rolls down her cheek to join her trembling lower lip as she struggles for composure, giving away the secret of her aching heart.

Children have wisely described how their life is different when their father is involved with them-or how different it would be if only he were. Fathers are the single greatest untapped resource in the lives of our children. We can't afford to let another one get away.