
Did You Say “Movement”?

Wade F. Horn

Wade Horn is the president and co-founder of the National Fatherhood Initiative, an adjunct faculty member at Georgetown University’s Public Policy Institute, an affiliate scholar with the Hudson Institute, and a member of the U.S. Advisory Board on Welfare Indicators. Dr. Horn has been commissioner for children, youth, and families and chief of the Children’s Bureau within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services; a presidential appointee to the National Commission on Children; and a secretarial appointee to the National Commission on Childhood Disability. He is the author of many articles on children’s issues and of *Father Facts* (published in 1998 by the National Fatherhood Initiative) and co-author of *The Better Homes and Gardens New Father Book* (1998).

The following is an excerpt from *The Fatherhood Movement: A Call to Action* edited by Wade Horn, David Blankenhorn, and Mitchell Pearlstein, to be published by Lexington Books in 1999.

The single biggest social problem in our society may be the growing absence of fathers from their children’s homes because it contributes to so many other social problems.

—Bill Clinton
President of the United States
1995

We have arrived at a consensus that fathers have been lost and must be found.

—Ellen Goodman
syndicated columnist
1996

Dan Quayle was right.

—Barbara Dafoe Whitehead
Atlantic Monthly
April 1993

Fatherlessness in America today is an unprecedented reality with profound consequences for children and civil society. In 1960, the total number of children in the United States living in father-absent families was less than 10 million. Today, that number stands at 24 million.¹ Nearly four out of ten children in America do not live in the

same home as their father. By some estimates, this figure is likely to rise to 60 percent of children born in the 1990s.² For the first time in our history, the average expectable experience of childhood now includes a significant amount of time living absent one's own father.

For 1 million children each year, the pathway to a fatherless family is divorce.³ The divorce rate nearly tripled from 1960 to 1980, before leveling off and declining slightly in the 1980s.⁴ Today, 40 out of every 100 first marriages end in divorce, compared to 16 out of every 100 first marriages in 1960. No other industrialized nation has a higher divorce rate.⁵

The second pathway to a fatherless home is out-of-wedlock fathering. In 1960, about 5 percent of all births were out of wedlock. That number increased to 10.7 percent in 1970, 18.4 percent in 1980, 28 percent in 1990, and nearly 33 percent today.⁶ In the United States, the number of children fathered out of wedlock each year (approximately 1.3 million annually) now surpasses the number of children whose parents divorce (approximately 1 million annually).

No region of the country has been immune to the growing problem of fatherlessness. Between 1980 and 1990, nonmarital birth rates increased in every state of the Union.⁷ During this time period, ten states saw the rate of nonmarital births increase by over 60 percent. Furthermore, births to unmarried teenagers increased by 44 percent between 1985 and 1992.⁸ In fact, 76 percent of all births to teenagers nationwide are now out of wedlock. In

fifteen of our nation's largest cities, the teenage out-of-wedlock birth rate exceeds 90 percent. Overall, the percent of families with children headed by a single parent currently stands at 29 percent, the vast majority of which are father-absent households.⁹

African Americans are disproportionately affected by the problem of father absence. Sixty-three percent of African American children live in father-absent homes. But fatherlessness is by no means a problem affecting minorities only. The absolute number of father-absent families is larger—and the rate of father absence is growing the fastest—in the white community. Currently, nearly 13 million white children reside in father-absent homes, compared to 6.5 million African American children.¹⁰

Research consistently documents that unmarried fathers, whether through divorce or out-of-wedlock fathering, tend over time to become disconnected, both financially and psychologically, from their children. Forty percent of children in father-absent homes have not seen their father in at least a year. Of the remaining 60 percent, only one in five sleeps even one night per month in the father's home. Overall, only one child in six sees his or her father an average of once or more per week.¹¹ More than half of all children who don't live with their fathers have never even been in their father's home.¹²

Unwed fathers are particularly unlikely to stay connected to their children over time. Whereas 57 percent of unwed fathers are visiting their

child at least once per week during the first two years of their child's life, by the time their child reaches seven and one-half years of age, that percentage drops to less than 25 percent.¹³ Indeed, approximately 75 percent of men who are not living with their children at the time of their birth never subsequently live with them.¹⁴

Even when unwed fathers are cohabiting with the mother at the time of their child's birth, they are very unlikely to stay involved in their children's lives over the long term. Although a quarter of nonmarital births occur to cohabiting couples, only four out of ten cohabiting unwed fathers ever go on to marry the mother of their children, and those who do are more likely to eventually divorce than men who father children within marriage.¹⁵ Remarriage, or, in cases of an unwed father, marriage to someone other than the child's mother, makes it especially unlikely that a noncustodial father will remain in contact with his children.¹⁶

The absence of fathers in the home has profound consequences for children. Almost 75 percent of American children living in single-parent families will experience poverty before they turn eleven years old, compared to only 20 percent of children in two-parent families.¹⁷ Children who grow up absent their fathers are also more likely to fail at school or to drop out,¹⁸ experience behavioral or emotional problems requiring psychiatric treatment,¹⁹ engage in early sexual activity,²⁰ and develop drug and alcohol problems.²¹

Children growing up without their fathers are especially likely to experi-

ence violence. Violent criminals are overwhelmingly males who grew up without fathers, including up to 60 percent of rapists,²² 75 percent of adolescents charged with murder,²³ and 70 percent of juveniles in state reform institutions.²⁴ Children who grow up without fathers are also three times more likely to commit suicide as adolescents,²⁵ and to be victims of child abuse or neglect.²⁶

In light of these data, Urie Bronfenbrenner, noted developmental psychologist, has concluded:

Controlling for factors such as low income, children growing up in [father absent] households are at a greater risk for experiencing a variety of behavioral and educational problems, including extremes of hyperactivity and withdrawal; lack of attentiveness in the classroom; difficulty in deferring gratification; impaired academic achievement; school misbehavior; absenteeism; dropping out; involvement in socially alienated peer groups, and the so-called "teenage syndrome" of behaviors that tend to hang together—smoking, drinking, early and frequent sexual experience, and in the more extreme cases, drugs, suicide, vandalism, violence, and criminal acts.²⁷

If ever there was a problem in need of a broad-based social movement, it is this one, for the evidence suggests that we can expect little improvement in the well-being of either our children or our communities without a restoration of responsible and committed fatherhood as a valued, respected, and widely practiced institution. In short, if a

fatherhood movement does not yet exist, someone better start one.

Characteristics of a Social Movement

A social movement has been defined by sociologist John Wilson as a “conscious, collective, organized attempt to bring about or resist large-scale change in the social order by noninstitutionalized means.”²⁸ Social movements are important because they frequently are the means through which new ideas and practices enter the social fabric. Indeed, the very appearance of a social movement is a sign that the old social order is being challenged.

Social movements typically view existing institutional structures as part of the problem, and hence unlikely avenues for achieving social change. Social movements have broad goals and incorporate diverse groups of people as they seek to affect not just their own constituency, but society as a whole.

Social movements do not emerge or succeed by accident. Although they may capitalize on fortuitous events to further their goals, their founding is purposive and their activities transcend the vagaries of day-to-day events. In this way, they are different from temporary coalitions or mere aggregate action.

Successful social movements frequently go through a three-stage developmental process. The first stage is the setting of an agenda, during which the problem is defined and given urgency. Sometimes this occurs through the appearance of an influential book. The modern environmental movement was,

for example, largely triggered by the publication in 1962 of Rachel Carson’s book *Silent Spring*. Alternatively, a social movement may have its agenda set by a major speech, a focusing conference, or even a television program. Some, for example, credit the airing of a 1990 Bill Moyers television special “A Gathering of Men” for kick-starting a modern men’s movement.

This does not mean, of course, that there were no organizations or individuals working on behalf of the issue prior to the birth of a social movement. All social movements have roots that predate themselves. For example, as pointed out by noted columnist William Raspberry, “Every single element of what was to become the Civil Rights Movement was already being carried out by someone, somewhere. Before there was a movement there were voter registration drives, demonstrations against segregated parks and swimming pools, attempts to desegregate residential areas, restaurants and other places of public accommodation.”²⁹

What defines the birth of a social movement, therefore, is that the disparate activities of various organizations and individuals are, for the first time, brought together under one overarching agenda or philosophical-organizational umbrella. In doing so, the movement is able to heighten the public’s awareness of the issue in ways that no single group or individual would have been able to, while at the same time giving new significance and power to the various organizations and individuals comprising the movement.

In other words, with the birth of a movement, the total becomes greater than the sum of the parts.

Second, members from outside the initial group of originators are recruited by various groups, whether formally or informally. Most successful movements do not draw their members using one charismatic leader, for when membership recruitment is too reliant on the activities of an individual, gathering converts is likely to be slow or highly episodic. Instead, the most successful social movements are those that develop more generalized strategies for membership recruitment, thereby enhancing their reach. The nineteenth-century temperance movement, for example, developed the strategy of convening revival-style gatherings to encourage individuals to take a pledge of abstinence as a signal of their allegiance to the temperance movement. In fact, overidentification of a single leader with a cause can be one distinguishing feature between a social movement and a cult or fad.

The third stage is the development of organizational structures capable of sustaining the movement. In some cases, one preeminent organization emerges, serving as the main vehicle for coordinating the movement and communicating its message. In other cases, several relatively autonomous organizations emerge, but with each dedicated to an overarching goal. As the movement progresses, the development of local chapters can help sustain it and nurture new leaders.

Given this understanding of social

movements, is there a fatherhood movement?

The Birth of a Movement

If there is a fatherhood movement, one of its early stirrings revolves around thirty-nine words delivered by a public figure widely perceived at the time as an intellectual lightweight—Vice President Dan Quayle. While campaigning for reelection, Dan Quayle made a speech on May 19, 1992, at the Commonwealth Club of California in San Francisco, during which he asserted: “It doesn’t help matters, when prime time TV has Murphy Brown—a character who supposedly epitomizes today’s intelligent, highly paid, professional woman—mocking the importance of fathers, by bearing a child alone, and calling it just another ‘lifestyle choice.’ ”

The importance of this event was not that Dan Quayle himself went on to lead, or even propose the formation of, a fatherhood movement. In fact, prior to Quayle’s speech, several national commissions, including the National Commission on Children and the National Commission on Urban Families, had already concluded that father absence was one of the most significant problems facing America. Rather, the importance of the Quayle speech was that it galvanized others to come to the defense, if not of him, at least of the larger point he was trying to make—that fathers matter to the well-being of children and that society experiments with father absence at its peril. His speech was not the creative moment, but rather the defining moment.

One of the first spirited defenses of Quayle's point was the appearance in *The Atlantic Monthly* magazine of an influential article by Barbara Dafoe Whitehead entitled "Dan Quayle Was Right." In this article, Whitehead laments that "every time the issue of family structure has been raised, the response has been first controversy, then retreat, and finally silence." Undaunted, she continues:

The debate . . . is not simply about the social-scientific evidence, although that is surely an important part of the discussion. It is also a debate over deeply held and often conflicting values. How do we begin to reconcile our long-standing belief in equality and diversity with an impressive body of evidence that suggests that not all family structures produce equal outcomes for children? . . . How do we uphold the freedom of adults to pursue individual happiness in their private relationships and at the same time respond to the needs of children for stability, security, and permanence in their family lives?³⁰

The themes laid out in Whitehead's article were further refined and expanded in a series of compelling articles and books, including *Life Without Father* (1996) by David Popenoe; *New Expectations: Community Strategies for Responsible Fatherhood* (1995) by James Levine and Edward Pitt; *FatherLove* (1993) by Richard Louv; "Marriage in America: A Report to the Nation" (1996) by the Council on Families; and, most especially, *Fatherless America: Confronting Our Most Urgent Social Problem* (1995) by David Blankenhorn.

These writings, in turn, spawned a renewed interest in programmatic activity on the fatherhood issue, including skill-building programs, outreach programs for unwed fathers, the development of public service announcements, and legislative advocacy. In fact, the most compelling evidence for an emerging fatherhood movement is the dramatic increase in the number of books and programs, both secular and sectarian, addressing fatherhood that have appeared over the past several years. In just a few short years, fatherhood has grown from a topic worthy of derision to an important and legitimate subject for serious journalists, social commentators, philanthropists, and social programmers.

But to be considered a social movement, the fatherhood issue must be more than a collection of disparate activities—more than a search for new knowledge about the institution of fatherhood, seminars to increase the skills of fathers, or the pursuit of legislative victories for divorced and unwed fathers. To be considered a social movement, there must, at a minimum, be evidence of a purposive, collective effort to organize under a single theme, and, in doing so, to seek broad social change.

On this score, there is evidence that we are witnessing, if not the actual birth, then at least the labor pains, of a fatherhood movement. Increasingly, fatherhood advocates, researchers, analysts, and programmers are coming together to seek common cause. Although these leaders and organizations certainly maintain a primary

interest in their own activities and agenda, increasingly there is a sense that each is a part of a larger whole—that the work of each is contributing to a greater social good. Despite widely divergent perspectives on the causes of and strategies for overcoming fatherlessness, leaders in the fatherhood arena are demonstrating an increasing willingness to put aside their differences in the pursuit of a common goal—ensuring that an increasing proportion of children grow up with an involved, committed, and responsible father.

Probably the earliest manifestation of this desire to seek common cause under the fatherhood banner was the convening of the first-ever National Summit on Fatherhood in Dallas, Texas, in October of 1994.³¹ Hosted by the newly formed National Fatherhood Initiative, an organization of which I am president, this gathering attracted more than 200 fatherhood advocates, researchers, and public policy analysts, along with fathers' rights advocates, fathering education and skill building experts, advocates for low-income fathers, and religious leaders involved in fatherhood promotion. Other gatherings followed, including the formation in 1995 by the philanthropic community of the Funders Collaborative on Fathers and Families; a 1995 Father's Day gathering in the District of Columbia of major fatherhood activists; an Interfaith Summit on Fatherhood in June of 1996; state-wide, governor-sponsored fatherhood conferences in California (1995), Massachusetts (1996), Indiana (1996 and 1997), and South Carolina (1997);

and a conference on the fatherhood movement in 1996 in Minneapolis, Minnesota, that resulted in the book in which this essay appears.

The Elements Needed

A bona fide movement requires more than simply a series of meetings and conferences. It also requires sufficient ideas, numbers, distinctiveness, and organization. The answer to the question of whether or not the fatherhood movement has these qualities is, at best, maybe.

The fatherhood movement certainly has no paucity of ideas. All who are involved in the fatherhood issue believe passionately in their own perspective and idiosyncratic agenda. Religiously oriented advocates believe fatherhood is part of God's plan, without recognition of which the institution of fatherhood will not be recovered. Fathers' rights advocates consider the current focus on deadbeat dads inaccurate and counterproductive, and lobby for divorce and child custody reforms. Advocates for low-income men believe poor economic circumstances are a primary cause of fatherlessness and see the solution in job training and education programs for disadvantaged and minority men. Culturalists believe fatherlessness is a failure of our culture to reinforce a compelling fatherhood script and seek the definition of one. Marriage advocates believe only a restoration of the institution of marriage will lead to a renewal of fatherhood. The list of ideas concerning the nature of fatherhood and the cure for father absence goes on and on.

Is there a core idea?

But for a social movement to survive, it must eventually coalesce around a single, core idea, while at the same time respecting diversity of opinion. This is, perhaps, the most immediate challenge facing the nascent fatherhood movement. It will require achieving a delicate balance between having a set of firmly held beliefs and accommodating a diversity of viewpoints. If, on the one hand, the movement is too rigid and uncompromising, it will have difficulty attracting followers and building momentum. If, on the other, the movement is overly accommodating to differing opinions, it will have difficulty sustaining an energized, passionate, and committed leadership and communicating a clear and unambiguous message to the public at large.

So, if there is a fatherhood movement, what is the core idea around which its member organizations can coalesce? Although there is certainly room for legitimate debate on what the core idea ought to be, here is my candidate: Every child deserves the love, support, and nurturance of a legally and morally responsible father. This core idea is based on three assumptions: (1) responsible and committed fatherhood ought to be a norm of masculinity; (2) fathers are different from mothers in important ways; and (3) the father-child bond is important to the healthy development of children. It is also the core idea expressed in the "Call to Fatherhood" at the end of *The Fatherhood Movement*.

But social movements are not just about establishing a core idea or mere

consciousness raising. They are about changing behavior. Abolitionists in the nineteenth century were not content with having the public agree with them that slavery was wrong; they wanted it abolished. The temperance movement was not content with the public agreeing that alcoholic beverages, and especially "hard" liquor, were bad for one's moral and physical health; it wanted alcohol consumption dramatically reduced, if not stopped. So too, the fatherhood movement cannot be about getting the public to agree that fathers are "good"; it must be about changing the behavior of men and women to ensure that a greater proportion of children grow up with involved fathers. This goal requires that the movement settle on at least the broad outlines of an agenda for social change.

But if achieving agreement on a core message is difficult, attaining a consensus on an overarching agenda for achieving broad social change will be even more difficult. Will, for example, the divorced men's groups be able to reconcile their agenda to improve access of divorced and noncustodial fathers to their children with the agenda of those who seek greater accountability from noncustodial fathers through stronger child support enforcement? Will organizations dedicated to advancing the interests of noncustodial, unwed fathers be able to coalesce with a movement that also includes advocates for stronger statutory rape laws? And will those organizations that advocate marriage as the institution most likely to deliver fathers to chil-

dren be able to coalesce with those that seek greater involvement of noncustodial fathers in the lives of children?

The answers to these questions are by no means clear. But social movements succeed only when their member groups, while still pursuing their own individual agendas, see themselves within a larger context. The alternative is a return to focusing on the parts, at the expense of the whole. If this happens, the nascent movement will surely be stillborn.

Is there broad appeal?

There do seem to be signs of a developing grassroots dimension to the fatherhood issue. Most notably, Promise Keepers, an evangelical Christian enterprise seeking, in part, to inspire men to be better husbands and fathers, routinely draws tens of thousands of devotees to football stadiums across the nation. Similarly, the Million Man March in the summer of 1995 drew over a half million African American men and their sons to the nation's capital. The message from these gatherings that fathers matter certainly does seem to have some resonance with the general public. What is still needed is a means for converting grassroots participation in these special events into mass identification with the core message and agenda of a fatherhood movement.

Thus far, this goal is unmet, primarily because the sponsoring organizations of these special events emphasize other issues in addition to fatherhood. Promise Keepers encourages not only responsible fatherhood, but also, and

more centrally, reconciliation with God and the acceptance of Jesus Christ as one's personal savior. Speakers at the Million Man March organized by Louis Farrakhan preached not only the importance of responsible fatherhood, but also the need to organize politically to thwart the plans of a Republican-led Congress to downsize the federal government. Certainly it is legitimate for these organizations to have a broader agenda than fatherhood. But doing so dilutes the fatherhood message at these gatherings and makes it harder to develop a grassroots membership specific to and identified with a fatherhood movement.

In addition to developing a strategy for greater identification of the grassroots with the core message and agenda of the movement, the fatherhood movement must also find ways to broaden its appeal beyond its natural constituency of men. Historically, many successful social movements found creative ways of forging coalitions with other organizations and constituencies. The abolition movement was able to forge an alliance with pro-Union sentiments in its battle against slavery. Similarly, the women's movement creatively found connections with fathers of daughters in its pursuit of equal rights for women. So too, the fatherhood movement will need to garner the active support of women and women's organizations if it is to be successful.

Is it distinctive?

While the fatherhood issue has a number of historical roots, including the

men's, fathers' rights, civil rights, and mythopoetic movements, it is distinct from these movements in a number of critical ways. First, the men's, fathers' rights, and mythopoetic movements tend to be inner-directed (toward the feelings, needs, and well-being of men and fathers), whereas the fatherhood movement is largely other-directed (toward the feelings, needs, and well-being of children). These former movements also tend to be focused on the "rights" of men and fathers, whereas the fatherhood movement is largely focused on the "responsibilities" of fathers. Thus, the fatherhood movement does not appear to be merely a branch of some other men's movement.³²

A more critical issue is whether or not the fatherhood movement is distinct from a marriage movement. Many people, including several contributors to *The Fatherhood Movement*, argue that fatherhood and marriage go hand in hand. One cannot have the former, they argue, without first having the latter. Indeed, some even argue that ultimately the fatherhood movement's importance lies in its being a "stalking horse" for a marriage movement. If these critics are correct, there is no fatherhood movement, only the stirrings of a marriage movement. If so, some groups and leaders currently seeking to help establish a fatherhood movement will surely splinter away. In fact, we are already seeing the marriage issue develop into a dividing line within the fatherhood movement. Resolution of this issue is, therefore, one of the most critical challenges facing the fatherhood movement.

Is there organizational structure?

The establishment of a number of national fatherhood groups over the past several years, including the National Fatherhood Initiative, the National Center for Fathers and Families, the National Institute for Responsible Fatherhood and Family Revitalization, and the National Center for Fathering, suggests that the rough outlines of a movement "infrastructure" are starting to emerge. Although there is an attempt by a group of private philanthropic foundations to nurture and organize the fatherhood "field," thus far the chief organizational features of the emerging fatherhood movement are decentralization and specialization, not centralization and hierarchical command-and-control. Some fatherhood groups specialize in increasing public awareness, others in teaching fathering skills, others in stimulating research, and still others in public advocacy. No one national fatherhood group commands the allegiance or deference of any other.

Given this penchant toward specialized and decentralized organizational structures, it seems unlikely that the fatherhood movement will galvanize around a single organization, akin to the way the women's movement coalesced around the National Organization for Women. Instead, it appears likely that the fatherhood movement will function through a broad array of like-minded, and often specialized, organizations, similar to what has developed within the environmental movement.

The lack of a centralized organizational structure creates certain advan-

tages for movement making, including a more flexible, diverse, and pluralistic movement; less reliance on any one leader or small group of leaders; and the ability to try different approaches and solutions. But a decentralized organizational structure also creates certain disadvantages. First, it makes the clarification of a core message all the more critical; without it the movement may simply become an ever-shifting series of temporary alliances among the various member organizations. Second, it makes it harder for member organizations to move beyond their idiosyncratic agendas and embrace a common overarching agenda for achieving social change. Third, it makes it more difficult for the grassroots to identify primarily with the broader fatherhood movement, as opposed to the parochial interests of a single organization. Still, as evidenced by the success of the environmental movement, it is an organizational structure that can work. But it does make movement building more difficult.

The Measurement for Success

One critical issue for all social movements is how to measure success. One possible measure is the degree to which the movement is able to increase public awareness of the importance of fathers to the well-being of children. Progress toward this goal could easily be measured through public opinion surveys. There are, in fact, already indications that an increasing majority of Americans view father absence as the most significant social

problem of our time. But while attitudinal change is helpful, it is not sufficient. Enhancing public awareness of the fatherhood problem does not guarantee that an increasing proportion of children will grow up with an involved, committed, and responsible father. In fact, numerous psychological and sociological studies indicate that while attitudinal change is frequently a precursor of behavior change, it is neither necessary nor sufficient.

Another possible measure is whether or not the number of children living with their biological fathers has increased. On the surface, this goal seems self-evident. If the problem is father absence, the solution must be father presence. As such, one would assess the success of the fatherhood movement by declining divorce and out-of-wedlock birth rates. But while reversing the historically high divorce and out-of-wedlock birth rates would logically reduce fatherlessness, father presence alone is not sufficient as the goal of the fatherhood movement. For a father to have a positive impact on the development of his children, he must not only be present, he must also be involved. It is only when fathers are engaged in the lives of their children, not just as co-residents, but as nurturers, disciplinarians, teachers, coaches, and moral instructors, that their children evidence greater self-esteem, higher educational achievement, a more secure gender identity, and greater success in life. If the present father is, in actuality, psychologically and morally absent, or worse still, abu-

sive, his presence may well make things worse, not better, for children.

Ultimately, I believe the most important outcome measure for a fatherhood movement is improvement in the well-being of children. As such, increasing father presence is really an intervening or process variable, one that may or may not improve the true outcome measure of interest: the well-being of children. Focusing on improving the status of children as the goal for the fatherhood movement holds the best promise for achieving a broad-based coalition of both men and women dedicated to revitalizing responsible and committed fatherhood as a respected and valued social institution.

Promoting fatherhood, then, is really a strategy for improving the well-being of children, just as promoting abstinence from alcohol was really a strategy for promoting civic virtue through moderation. In fact, an interest in improving the well-being of children is the entire rationale for the fatherhood movement, for if father absence did not increase the risk of poor outcomes for children, there would be no need for a fatherhood movement. If, in the end, increasing the proportion of children growing up with fathers does not enhance child well-being, the fatherhood movement ought to be judged a failure, and we all ought to move on to something else.

A Movement Enemy

A final issue is whether or not the fatherhood movement needs an enemy—an opposition against which

the troops can be energized. Abolitionists railed against the evils of slavery; the temperance movement against demon alcohol. What should fatherhood advocates rail against?

Some are tempted to designate absent fathers as the “enemy.” Certainly there are too many men who desert and abandon their families, and such men ought to be ostracized. But designating absent fathers as the bogeyman will undoubtedly alienate one potentially important constituency of the fatherhood movement: divorced fathers. Indeed, divorced fathers frequently contend, with a good measure of truth, that they very much want to remain actively involved in the lives of their children, but are prevented from doing so by a court system that treats them like “cash machines” and ex-wives who deny them access to their children. Unless the fatherhood movement is ready to write off this constituency—and some appear willing to do so—it designates absent fathers as the “enemy” at its peril.

Others assert that the enemy is feminism. But a fatherhood movement that seeks simply to turn back the hands of time to an earlier period when men were patriarchs and feminists were rare will surely fail. It is only by forging a movement that seeks a revitalization of fatherhood within a modern understanding of the enhanced choices, rights, and prerogatives of women that the fatherhood movement has a chance to succeed.

If an enemy there need be, here is my candidate: family relativism—the notion that all family structures are

morally and socially equivalent, all equally deserving of support, and all equally good for children. Elevating family relativism to “bogeyman” status does not mean that one has to demean other family structures. One can assert that children do best when they are reared with the love and commitment of a mother and a father, bound in marriage and dedicated to each other, and still demonstrate compassion for the fatherless and provide support for widowed and abandoned mothers. But the argument must be made—frequently and with great passion—that society needs a critical mass of married two-parent families, both to raise their own children well and to serve as models for children growing up in alternative family structures. Tragically, we are in great danger today of losing that critical mass; in some communities it has already been lost. Whatever else it does, the fatherhood movement must be, in large measure, about reclaiming that critical mass.

A Work in Progress

For those who seek a fatherhood movement, there is evidence of one in the making. Delicate, certainly. Ill-formed, of course. In need of definition, yes. But a movement nonetheless. Its leadership is clearly committed to effecting broad-based social change, and it does seem to have sufficient ideas and a growing grassroots presence. Furthermore, the rough outlines of an organizational structure are appearing, although no one organization appears likely to emerge to lead it.

But critical issues remain. Can the movement achieve consensus on a common core message and, even more importantly, on a core agenda for achieving social change, without undue fragmentation and splintering of its member organizations? Can an effective grassroots membership be cultivated that will identify with the core message and agenda of the movement? Will the highly decentralized organizational structure that seems to be emerging serve the fatherhood movement well, or will it increase the pressure toward fragmentation? Is the fatherhood movement really only a stalking horse for a marriage movement?

Given the uncertain resolution of these questions, perhaps it is best to consider the fatherhood movement a work in progress. But important work it surely is. Let us get on with that work.

Notes

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31. One might argue that Vice President Al Gore's meeting in Nashville, Tennessee, in July of 1994 was the first fatherhood gathering. Initially, that conference was to focus on fatherhood. As planning progressed, however, the focus changed from "fatherhood" to "male involvement," reflecting

just how politically sensitive the topic of fatherhood was at the time. But encouraging male involvement in the lives of children is quite different from encouraging father involvement. Hence, Vice President Gore's meeting may have been an important precursor to the fatherhood movement, but its broader focus argues against portraying it as the initiating event of a fatherhood movement.

32. In its emphasis on responsibilities over rights, the fatherhood movement appears to be distinct not only from the men's and fathers' rights movements, but from many modern social movements as well. In fact, most large-scale social movements in the twentieth century have mostly to do with expanding the rights of a designated group, whether that group be minorities, women, or homosexuals. It remains to be seen whether or not the fatherhood movement's emphasis on personal responsibility and obligation to others will resonate with a culture more accustomed to calls for expanded rights. n