
Fatherhood and Language

Mitchell B. Pearlstein

Mitch Pearlstein, president of Center of the American Experiment, made his career in education, journalism, and government before founding American Experiment in 1990. He holds a Ph.D. in educational administration from the University of Minnesota.

The following is taken from a new anthology, *The Fatherhood Movement: A Call to Action*, with permission of the publisher, Lexington Books.

How can we most effectively—which is to say frankly but graciously—talk about the importance of fatherhood and the calamity of fatherlessness?

Let me start with two quick stories from my own public speaking.

About a half-dozen years ago, in response to my remarks to a diverse group of people in Duluth about the unlikelihood of the United States making real educational progress as long as so many children were brought into this world out of wedlock, a woman in the small room began to cry. It wasn't difficult to imagine why, as she was visibly pregnant and (as I correctly assumed) not married. A few moments later she explained to the now painfully uncomfortable audience that while she had been brought up to believe that it was wrong to have children out-

side of marriage, she was desperate to have a baby. But since there had been no potential marriage partner in her life, and since her "biological clock" was running down, she decided to conceive.

If I do say so, both of us handled the situation well. She was brave and open, and I talked about how I understood that life was complicated and messy and said that I very much regretted hurting her. But I also said that widespread fatherlessness is such an immense problem that we have no choice as a national community but to discuss it head-on—albeit with as much grace and fellow-feeling as we can muster.

The episode ended as well as one could hope, though it reinforced my assumption that, given such risks, most politicians and other leaders would continue working hard at not publicly

addressing questions of father absence. Just imagine if news cameras had been running that day in Duluth.

More recently, I was once again talking about fatherlessness, this time in Minneapolis to a group of public-sector finance officers from several Midwestern states, when a woman in the audience essentially asked how I had the nerve to frame such issues in “moral” terms. My doing so, she suggested, was highly suspect insofar as my own first marriage had ended in divorce, a fact I had acknowledged in my prepared remarks, as I almost always do when I’m talking about families.

I responded that if only unflawed people were entitled to talk “judgmentally” about the toughest problems confronting us as a state and nation, little that is useful ever would be spoken. This, I said, would be a disaster compounded. Still, in the same way that most speakers are not enthusiastic about causing expectant mothers to cry, they are equally hesitant about provoking questions in large congregations about their effrontery.

All of which is to say that productive debates and discussions about families and fathers are contingent on substantial backbones, certainly. But they also depend on a keener appreciation than is usually demonstrated about how language can either modestly cool or radically heat such an inherently flammable cluster of issues.

Without in any way suggesting a prefabricated formula or voice, let me describe what has come to work best for me. This is the case in terms of getting my argument across as persuasive-

ly as possible, as well as in allowing me to talk to single moms and other women with as little anger as feasible on their part and with as little squirming as possible on mine.

Opening with Qualifiers

I generally start by making it as clear as I can that my aim is not to bash single mothers, millions of whom, I say, are raising their children heroically and successfully with little help from men. I report that, along with sociologist and theologian Michael Novak, I prefer talking about the masculinization of irresponsibility rather than the feminization of poverty. One important aside: I’ve learned not to make this latter point with too much gusto, as not only are some men honorable and responsible and at least a few women not, but every once in a while I hear agitated and believable stories about men who really have been worked over by ex-partners and the “system” when it comes to visitation and similar issues. These occasional stories come not just from irate men themselves, but also from their angry mothers and other female relatives and friends.

It’s at this point that I usually acknowledge that life does not always work out as scripted and that, indeed, I’m in my second marriage, as is my wife, who was a single mom for a long time after her first marriage ended.

Yet having said all this, I begin to make the case that while literally millions of children growing up in single-parent homes may be doing very well, and while millions of other children growing up in intact, two-parent fami-

lies may be doing poorly, generally speaking, in the main, in the aggregate, children who are forced to grow up without their biological or adoptive fathers at home tend to do worse than other children when it comes to education, crime, and every other measure we know.

I have found this three-pronged qualifier—"generally speaking, in the main, in the aggregate"—to be an essential caveat, as it is remarkable how many people have a hard time distinguishing between what is true about father absence in large settings (such as neighborhoods and nations) versus what may very well be true about it in their own homes. With great energy, many single moms want me to know that not only are their kids doing just fine, but that they're doing appreciably better than when they lived with their invariably abusive fathers.

In response to such testimonials, I genuinely congratulate them on their devotion and good fortune, but once again note the lesser fortune of a disproportionate number of other similarly situated families. In sum, I repeat that fatherlessness is the overwhelming social disaster of our time, as it is implicated in virtually every problem we face as a nation. I then go on to substantiate this claim in two ways.

First, I ask a hypothetical question, which I readily concede at the time to be too bulky to be scientific, but which is telling nonetheless.

About 45 percent of children born in Minneapolis, I announce, are now born out of wedlock. Given these numbers, I continue, and not even begin-

ning to take into account the additional effects of divorce and separation, is there anyone in the room who is confident that public education in Minnesota's largest city can get adequately better by the year 2000, or perhaps 2005, regardless of how much more money we might reasonably spend, and regardless of how talented and devoted teachers and administrators might become over and above current levels of talent and devotion?

I've asked this question of at least three thousand people in Minnesota over the past few years. No more than 2 percent have raised their hands. I mentioned a moment ago that I recently spoke to about 75 state budget officials, men and women who deal professionally with public education. How many of these practiced observers do you think raised their hands, signaling their confidence about educational advancement? Not one. In light of this, I asked the group why there is so little public talk about what just about everyone, evidently, believes really matters? No one jumped to answer.

A second way I reinforce the assertion that fatherlessness is America's most serious social problem is by drawing from an ever-growing store of empirical research on the very personal effects, reciting the findings in rapid order for dramatic effect. Rarely do I not hear muffled gasps in the audience when I go through these data.

I have found these substantive and stylistic rudiments to set the right context and tone, not just for speeches about fatherhood, but also for broader treatments of related topics, including

education, welfare, crime, and so on.

Avoiding Needless Abrasions

I suspect that most readers already have detected that I rarely use the word illegitimacy or its variants, relying instead on terms such as out-of-wedlock births. This is very much a conscious decision based on the fact that illegitimate mightily hurts many women who hurt enough already. It's also grounded in the fact that I see much more needless pain than profit in informing youngsters that while they may indeed be children of God, they nevertheless are less than "legitimate" or "real" in the eyes of other mortals.

In this spirit, and while I found his essay on the end of courtship to be insightful, even brilliant, I would not recommend public repetition of a University of Chicago scholar's recent use of the acutely harsh bastardy.

Yet I have little fondness for language that beclouds. Such politically correct straitjackets, aimed at protecting every possible sensibility, ultimately deserve everyone. In a similar vein, there is no question that a prerequisite to whittling down nonmarital births is a yet-to-be recaptured shared sense of personal stigma and shame. I'm not unmindful, for instance, of the importance of reaffirming the principle of legitimacy. Still, on balance, I think it wisest and more decent to avoid words such as illegitimate under most circumstances.

I recognize that some will interpret this interest in staying clear of words that needlessly rile as reflecting too much sensitivity on my part. Is my voice too cautious when I talk about

fatherhood and fatherlessness? Are my words too carefully chosen? Am I, when you get right down to it, intimidated when I'm dealing with these issues in the presence of women—especially single mothers—because, if truth be told, I'm a man?

I would never claim that my heart always beats steadily, or that my voice never betrays tension, when I'm talking to a demographically mixed audience about abandoned kids. But what else is new?

The subjects raised in this brief essay are viscerally powerful, and I see little profit in not choosing words prudently. Likewise, I see nothing necessarily timorous about a man demonstrating an extra measure of caution—call it manners, if you prefer—when he's entering this fray. I'm more than willing to make such a concession given that women generally do have more leeway when they're talking about the various drawbacks of "AWOL" and missing men.

It's accurate to charge that middle-class (formerly divorced) observers like myself are generally keener to focus on out-of-wedlock births, rather than divorce and separation, in writing and speaking about absent fathers. This is not really fair, and we need to do better.

This essay has dwelled on the sadness of fatherlessness and had little to say about the pleasures of engaged fatherhood. Yet good conversations about fatherhood do not dwell on pathologies and catastrophes alone. They also celebrate its sacred joys and obligations. n