

# FATHERHOOD AND THE WORLDS IT CREATES

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So many men spend so much time worrying about their place in the world. They want to matter. They seek to carve their names in the stone of the ground. They pay a terrible price for it.

But a father, especially a good father, knows this: he matters to his family. That is enough for him. Others may covet the world. They may nurse a quiet desperation to be someone, to be recognized as outstanding, to be adored by a world of admirers. But a father, especially a good father, is content with a world of two, or three, or four, whatever God allows. He knows that the ordinary, as I just wrote for the Washington Times, is extraordinary. The love of even one tiny child swallows a father whole, claims his attention, determines his days. The child, after all, does not want the world's affection. The world doesn't even exist yet for the child. The child just wants a father, a father who loves Mom, and that will be enough.

Fathers are those who need never worry about fading things. They do not care for image; they have limited time to spend on hobbies; they can take or leave much of what passes for happiness in this world. Fathers have unearthed a deeper joy. In loving one woman, they may love children. This ability to love another, a smaller, needier other, closes off the world. Fathers work to provide for their families, but the family is not structured around the work. The work is structured around the family.

A father has been called out of himself. He has been called into community, the first society: the family. He loves one wife and he raises his children. No one else is responsible for these ones; he would not give up the leadership of this family for anything. Only death will end this rule of love. His never-leaving is not always stated, but the assumption is as sure as a concrete basement floor. His wife no more doubts it than she worries that the concrete will turn to liquid. His children no more doubt it than they worry that the walls that guard their toys will dissolve to ash. A father is there. He doesn't walk away. He is the center of a worldview that is as much lived as it is taught.

Every time you see a father, you see strength, and you hear protection. This is how a child reads a father, at any rate. It is the most precious thing, and so fragile. To have a father there, in front of you, is to see and hear goodness. But to have that father gone? Only the strongest force in the world can overcome such smoldering, burning anger. You cannot replace a father anymore than you can rebuild a firebombed kingdom. The determinists tell us we are simply matter, that love is just chemicals, but when we consider our scars, we have to wonder: if the body cannot shed its past pain, can the heart, whose hurt is so much worse?

Fathers are a worldview gained by living. In their cargo shorts and aggressively normal haircuts, fathers rebuke decadence without even trying. They might prefer a fancy getup, but they have no time. They might want to cut loose, but they have worlds to sustain. They might consider the extravagances of the modern identity culture—attention-getting, brand-cultivating, and public-performing—but what they really need is to get the trash out in the morning.

If civilization needs saving, if neighborhoods need protecting, you don't go to the nightclub for recruits. You don't go to the rave. You go, inevitably, to fathers. Why? Because you know, instinctually, that the call to serve and die for others is best fulfilled by those who already serve and have died to themselves.

Everything a father does is motivated by the desire to put as much distance between his family and the fall as he can. Every day he is alive is another day to face the foe of his family, and every day he prays for strength, he looks to Christ, and he grits his teeth. Yet the truth about every father is that his strength will go out. One day he will not be able to protect his family any longer. He will not be able to soothe his daughter's sobs. He will not be there to laugh with his son, and watch his boy try to outrun the wind. He will not be there for his wife, who found his mere presence an equal match for all the fears urged on her by the world.

Someday, the light in his eyes will dim. His breath will quiet to a whisper, and stop. It is the cruelest thing. But a father, especially a good father, gives his family one last gift. He prepares them for this. He readies them for his dying, and he commends them to a father who never dies.

Fathers, especially good fathers, make their wife and their children their world. When they die, their absence becomes for their loved ones a tuning fork that never stops humming. But there is no other way. Fathers cannot undo this great sadness; only the Son of the Father can. All fathers have is now, and maybe a little while longer. While there is time on the clock, there is a wife to be cultivated, and children to be treasured. There is work to be done, a house to guard, a church to serve. There is a world, a little tiny world, that depends on them. Others may covet great things. A father is one who knows this: he already has them.

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