

FIRST THINGS

DADS, DON'T GO

by
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“**A**re fathers necessary?” asks Pamela Paul in the latest issue of The Atlantic. That she considers the question worth asking is a clue to how the article will conclude: “there’s nothing objectively essential about his contribution.”

Published just before Father’s Day, it would be easy to dismiss such cheap contrarianism as an attention-getting stunt. (The empirical claims presented in Paul’s article—and the research it was based on—have been adequately rebutted. W. Bradford Wilcox and others have already pointed out that most of the studies relied upon small, unrepresentative samples of same-sex and heterosexual couples.) But the fact remains that in America we *act* as if fathers are unnecessary. We enjoy a fit of pique when Heather has two full-time mommies, yet only respond with a sad shrug when Heather has one part-time daddy. But if fathers are necessary, they have to be completely involved in the lives of their children—and living at home with their children’s mothers.

As David Blankenhorn notes in Fatherless America: Confronting Our Most Urgent Social Problem, “The evidence shows that the great majority of visiting fathers are not—indeed, cannot be—good-enough fathers to their children. The deck is stacked against them. Too much has changed, too fast; too much will continue to change.” In theory, he continues,

it may be possible to restructure everything else about a family while maintaining fatherhood as a constant. In practice, it is hardly ever

possible. Visiting fathers have lost the bases of fatherhood. As Bronislaw Malinowski put it in his classic cross-cultural analysis of parenthood, “the child is linked to both its parents by the unity of the household and by the intimacy of daily contacts.” But for the Visiting Father, both aspects of this linkage are irrevocably shattered.

I first read that passage in 1995, the year I myself became a “weekend dad.” In February my wife told me she was gay. In March she left our home and took my daughter with her.

At the time I was on recruiting duty for the Marine Corps, on an unforgiving assignment that required working fourteen-hour days, six days a week. I could only see my little girl on Sundays after making the ninety-mile trek from Olympia to Everett, where my soon-to-be-ex-wife had moved.

I’d pick up my two-year-old daughter, strap her into the car seat, and we’d set out on our weekend routine: to the park, if it was sunny and warm; to the play-land at McDonalds if it was rainy and cold. (In Everett, it is always rainy and always cold.)

Over the next several years, I was the one who moved—to Japan, San Diego, Dallas, Chicago, and Washington, D.C. I went from being “weekend dad” to being “summer-and-holiday dad.” Through it all I tried my best to be a “good-enough father.”

A few years ago I met Blakenhorn and talked to him about his book. I wanted to tell him that he was wrong. I wanted to tell him the base isn’t always lost and that the linkage is not always shattered. I wanted to tell him that it was indeed possible—because I was one—to be a “good-enough father.”

But it isn’t true. As much as I wanted to believe otherwise, *Fatherless America* was devastatingly

prescient about my own experience as a “visiting father.” My experience was one more data point in the reams of empirical studies that show what millions of part-time dads before me have learned: Our children always need more than we can give them in a few weekend hours.

Of course, visiting fathers aren’t the only ones aware of the damage being done to our country’s children. Almost everyone acknowledge the harm in treating dad as if there is “nothing objectively essential about his contribution.”

Yet if we’re too specific, too personal, we may offend some poor hapless father who is doing the best he can. And who are we to judge any individual’s family situation? America’s true religion—unfettered individualism—requires that we find some way to justify everyone’s choice and ignore or play down the damage that results from such choices.

Although it is tempting to join in bending a knee to the cult of individualism (I’m an American, after all), I want to take a different approach. I want to directly address the specific, narrow audience who can do more than anyone else to change this destructive cycle. I want to make a policy proposal to the fathers who are on the verge of leaving their families.

As with all policy proposals, certain assumptions must be shared before agreement can be reached. My proposal is based on a simple argument: When your first child is born, your life stops being about what you want and starts being about what they need. If you disagree, you can stop reading now.

Here is the only way to fix the problem of fatherlessness: You must find a way to stay with your children. You may be having a tough time in your marriage. You may be thinking that you no longer love or can live with your spouse. You may believe that divorce is the only remaining option.

I don't know your situation. I don't know what you are going through. I only know that your children need you at home. Your sons and your daughters need your presence. They need you around, all the time, and not just for regularly scheduled visits. If you want to be a good father, don't leave your children.

I'm fully aware that such a suggestion will be unpopular and that it will be deemed impractical. Our society tells us that you shouldn't "stay together just for the kids." Some social scientists will tell us that staying in an unhappy marriage will hurt the kids. Our culture tells us that progress has made fatherhood a vestigial artifact. Our hearts tell us that we deserve to pursue our own bliss. Even our churches can tell us that marriage is about being happy and that we deserve to be happy no matter what.

B ut again: **When your first child is born**, your life stops being about what *you want* and starts being about what *they need*. They need you at home. If you're a good man and aspire to be a good father, that is all you need to know.

If your wife is physically abusive to you and the children, you need to get out—and take your kids with you. Otherwise you stick it out, and try to love your wife in every way possible. Maybe the marriage will heal (they sometimes do). Maybe it won't. It doesn't matter. If you have to stay in your marriage for one year or for eighteen, you stick it out until your children are grown.

What do you do, though, if you're wife wants a divorce? You beg her to stay. You change what you have to change. You use guilt if necessary, and try to get her to "think about what is best for the kids."

If nothing else works, then you ask her to commit to six months of marital counseling before she files for divorce. If at the end of the six months she's still resolved to end the marriage you ask for another six months. You keep asking for as long as it takes. You may lose the fight eventually, but

if you're a man you will not give up on your family until you are bloodied and broken.

Don't kid yourself that your divorce will be different because you have a good relationship with your children's mother. My ex-wife has become a dear friend and a superb partner in parenting. Despite the peculiar circumstance that ended our marriage, I couldn't ask for a more thoughtful, accommodating woman to be my former spouse.

But as hard as we work to make it easier on our daughter, everything we can do is not enough. Even though my daughter has lived with me for the past couple of years, her being with me hasn't changed the fact that our child lives in a house where one of her parents is missing. Divorce doesn't just end a marriage—it ends a family.

By now I've lost almost everyone who has followed me this far. Most people will pity my naivete or denounce my blanket recommendation as insensitive and idiotic. So be it. It may not even be the type of argument that we can comprehend in our individualistic culture. We've become so accustomed to politically-oriented solutions for societal problems that we've forgotten that sometimes the only way to fix what we've broken is by individuals making tough choices. In this situation, there is no other way.

I can't convince everyone, of course, but my hope is that there is at least one father left—even just one—who will seriously consider what I'm saying. I hope that he will go into his child's room tonight and watch them while they sleep. I hope that he will think about what it means to his babies that he is there for them when they go to bed and that he is there for them when they wake up.

Finally, I hope he'll realize he has the power to retain a precious gift that we visiting fathers have lost and that we can never get back. He still has the opportunity to be a good father.

