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Fathers try to rise above themselves

By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—Father's Day is a good time to put on the comfy slippers of selective memory and walk gently on the carpets of the past. Undoubtedly, mistakes have been made.

Father's Day is between a Dad and his children. It's not between him and their mother, though children are one of the things between them.

It's a reckoning day, one that's papered over with sappy cards and then gift wrapped. The reckoning is often avoided...often best avoided.

Most of America's 71 million fathers, including me and mine, came to fatherhood with good intentions. At the end, we hope that we were able to get most of the main things right some of the time. At least, the kid might remember the ice cream cones.

Success in fatherhood should be judged like career baseball batting averages—three hits out of 10 tries is exceptional performance, and .400 lifetime gets you your own Hall of Fame. Most mothers and children expect .800 and a ton of RBIs.

I've noticed that successful fatherhood is unrelated to family income, though the expressions of failure often differ. Fathers in poor families disappear physically; fathers in wealthy families vanish in other ways and strike with words. Withholders are found in all socio-economic classes.

Father failure is, of course, to be blamed on evolutionary biology. (I also blame evolution for ear hair, high body mass and high school.)

Male mammals did not evolve as child caregivers. Only humans, among the 5,500 or so mammalian species, have come around to the idea of expecting fathers to do something more than start the ball rolling. Some bird and fish fathers do child care, but family responsibilities among male mammals is typically defined as defending territory (the "home"), reproduction and, in some cases, protecting the group. Even male mammals who hang out in family units -- like lions, wolves and bison -- do minimal amounts of what we might call, "involved fathering."

The models of fatherhood that have come down over the centuries were often those of tyrants. How many modern parenting fathers are found in the Bible, history and western literature?

Start with the Biblical Adam, western civilization's first father and head of our first dysfunctional family. Genesis does not show him taking on a parenting role. A more active Dad might have settled Cain before he whacked Abel. Use your words, Cain. Go to your timeout corner and think things over.

I've found few Biblical Dads parenting in the modern sense of the term, and many act badly toward their children. King Saul, for one, gave his daughter, Michal, to David only after David presented him with the foreskins of 200 Philistines. Saul had demanded a ransom of this type in hope that the Philistines would kill the up-and-coming David as he tried to make off with a portion of their assets. Michal's thoughts on her Daddy's deal for her are not presented.

I don't recall 1 Samuel 18 being read to us at Peabody High School in the early 1960s, but then my attention was often drawn toward less spiritual but equally uplifting subjects who threatened to head-butt me with their bouffant helmets.

How did America's Founding Fathers do as Dads? Anyone want to take Franklin (whose estranged son sided with the British) or Jefferson (who kept his six kids with Sally Hemings as slaves during their youth, only freeing them later)?

By the mid-20th Century, American television was showing fathers who were said to know best. More recently, television shifted down from Ozzie, Andy and Bill Cosby's Cliff Huxtable to fools and buffoons like Al Bundy of "Married with Children" and Homer Simpson.

It's a wonder that any of us even get a second-hand necktie on Father's Day.

The holiday traces its origin to America's worst coal-mine disaster, the explosion at Monongah, W.Va., on December 6, 1907 when 360 to 500 miners died in an operation owned by the Fairmont Coal Company, the core asset that led to today's industry heavyweight, Consol Energy.

Mrs. Grace Clayton wanted to celebrate the fathers who were killed that day. Her one-day effort in neighboring Fairmont didn't catch on, but two years later, Sonora Dodd of Spokane, Wash., started the celebration that stuck. It became a national holiday in 1972 by Richard Nixon's pen.

Men have a better chance today at being involved Dads. Some portion of our culture has shifted to support male parenting, Homer Simpson notwithstanding.

One benefit of the feminism that boiled over in the late 1960s was that it allowed, encouraged and often forced fathers to be better Dads. Dustin Hoffman's evolution in "Kramer vs. Kramer" (1979) was based on a novel written by a Dad, Avery Corman, and adapted for film by Robert Benton. Hinted at in the final scene was the notion that better Dads make better husbands.

It's possible.

Those Dads who have overcome their evolutionary history and our mixed-message cultural heritage deserve a pat on the back from their children. Or, at least, a palsy-walsy punch in the bicep.

We still may not bat cleanup in a lot of families, but we need to be in the lineup every day.

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