

Mother's Day misses missed opportunities

By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—It's always tricky for men to write about motherhood on Mother's Day, because the closest we come is fatherhood—and often that's not very close at all. Unfortunately, my wise internal editor is still on the sabbatical that began in elementary school.

Mother's Day -- a day for kids and husbands to honor Moms -- should happen more than once a year.

Mothers are a membership-only club. Parenthood, on the other hand, is open to almost anyone.

Parenthood is all about child-rearing and may have little to do with the biology of conception and birth. The one hurdle to becoming a biological mother is small, and many jump it.

In contrast, individuals who want to parent as adopters must clear numerous hurdles, all of them high. Adoptive parents are willing volunteers. The same cannot be said for all biological parents.

Perhaps a federal Parent's Day should be added to Mother's Day and Father's Day to recognize those who take in foster children, those who adopt and the biological Moms and Dads who deserve recognition for parenting beyond simply bringing a child into the world.

(November, incidentally, is National Adoption Month as of a 2012 Presidential proclamation, and November 23rd will be National Adoption Day. Both are intended to encourage the practice. I'd focus equally on celebrating the parents who have done it.)

We have in our social vocabulary the phrases, "good mother" and "bad mother." By "good," we probably mean responsible, caring and constant. Good mothers are supposed to like their kids as well as love them.

I've known good Moms who found themselves with kids who can be fairly described as one or another type of "bad outcome"—not very functional, or disappointing, or not nice, or inclined toward bad choices or chronically resentful of how they were mothered.

Sometimes the explanation of bad outcome is a "bad Daddy." Gresham's Law that bad money drives out good in a two-currency system may have a parallel in raising children where a bad parent overrides a good one. Bad parenting gets in deep, and it's hard to shake. Sometimes it's just

hard to figure out why there's no straight line between what was and what is, why decent parenting produced a failed adult.

Maybe Mother's Day (and Parent's Day, too) would do best to recognize good-faith parenting effort over time and not judge anybody on outcomes. This would acknowledge the persistent fact that there's no perfect one-to-one correlation between "good" parenting and "good" child outcome as well as the equally perplexing companion fact that decent adults can emerge from "bad" parenting and family life.

But I concede that I've generally found some degree of cause and effect between adults who don't turn out well with either the lack of parental effort or a misaligned effort.

Mothers have traditionally and usually taken on more of the parenting than fathers. And, accordingly, they get more blame when kids can't function as adults or turn out badly.

I think mother-blame has to do in part with the anti-female bias that has been historically part of most religions and cultures, which, on the whole, have been organized and run by men to their benefit. This started changing in the 60s, but it persists.

The first seven decades (1890-1960) of what became the field of psychoanalysis stamped "science" and "medicine" onto the background biases of these years. Sigmund Freud, a man of his times, had little good to say about women, except for his mother, Amalia, whom he idealized. It was a Freudian disciple, Karen Horney, who first started to identify psychiatry's defective understanding of women.

I think the other part of mother-blaming follows from the fact that mothers, who bear the children and traditionally take on most of the child-raising, are the handiest scapegoats for bad outcomes.

The person who shows up every day to do the child-raising work inevitably gets loaded down with the most retrospective scrutiny. The opposite may be more true—that it's a physically or emotionally absent father who may bear more than an equal share of the blame for bad outcomes.

I'm not excusing truly dreadful mothers. I'm just saying that it's too easy to blame "bad mothering" for bad results. The first and handiest explanation is not necessarily the most insightful. It's also true that the term "bad mother" can be used to mean almost anything.

Bad outcomes often have multiple causes—inadequate parenting by both adults, abusive parenting, hostile and unforgiving circumstances and factors that can include genetics and illness.

Most Moms in my experience try, which is as it should be. Good outcomes rarely happen without this effort.

My mother, Rena, had a life -- work and community philanthropies -- that was independent of me, her only child. That was good for both of us. She always had my back, but I never felt that I was carrying her around on it.

I knew her more as a child to a Mom than as adult to adult. That was my fault—I had other interests that seemed more important at the time. I missed those opportunities and regret missing them now. When you're young, you're often just not old enough.

Rena died at 50 in 1971 from breast cancer. Today, she would have survived. I've now lived 17 years longer than she did. I don't feel older.

Like most people, I combine good and bad outcomes. What's increasingly clear is that I would have fewer goods and more bads had she not put the mothering effort into me.

On Mother's Day, I look at her high-school graduation photograph in my office as I do most days. She's serious, maybe resentful at not having money to go to college. She's not flashing her big smile, which is how I remember her, and I can't see her freckles. She got prettier as she got older and smarter about things.

She made more than a good-faith effort with me. I try to remember that on more days than just Sunday, Mother's Day.

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