

Life Without Father

Our society is in real trouble. Several social cancers threaten its very existence. They seem to be separate and independent from each other, yet closer scrutiny may reveal that they are all metastases from one primary source. Our troubles, economic and political, national and international, including crime and drugs, domestic strife and most foreign wars can all be traced back to the crisis and breakdown of the Family, preposterous as this may sound at first. This strange statement cannot simply be dismissed as the brain-child of one who works daily with individuals suffering from emotional difficulties that commonly are connected with early family experiences. Its validity can be demonstrated to the satisfaction of most skeptics, and even in the space allotted to a short article a few important features can be highlighted.



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Ours is a society without a father. In industrial mass society, Father is usually away from the family most of the time, except for a few evening hours, when he is tired and preoccupied. His image often is one of a benign and ineffective figure of fun, or alternately as mother's terror-striking rod. He may assume the role of breadwinner and titular head of the family, but his influence has steadily been waning, more so in the United States than anywhere else. The existence of a Women's Liberation Movement seems a cynical farce in this picture. If political movements could really correct distortions within the family, surely a Men's Liberation Movement would have been helpful, although most men would not admit to this, to spare themselves painful humiliation. The political and economic power positions of Men are usually pointed to by both men and women to contradict statements about Man's weakness. The fact that fathers only rarely have real authority in their own homes and families is generally ignored.

The social consequences of such a situation are serious and many. The very concepts of power and authority have become highly suspect. The Presidency as an institution is losing power relative to the other two branches of government, especially after Watergate, and likewise, all authority figures are being deprecated. Whether president or policeman, anyone with power is regularly suspect as a probable abuser of such power, even though society chooses to relegate authority to such individuals only after they have passed rigorous, difficult and exacting tests.

The youth rebellion of the 60's most probably was an expression of mass frustration by young men and women growing into adulthood in a permissive society of weak, and therefore unreasonable, authority figures, unable to set firm and fair limits. The CIA and the FBI are now suspect, not only because they have sometimes been abusive of their powers, but perhaps even more so because they are suspect of being arbitrary, cruel and inhumane by their very nature. Such suspicions of father-like individuals and institutions reflect an unreasonable fear of a powerful and insensitive father, and they may well render our society indefensible and leaderless. The possibility that the United States might fail in its efforts to survive the onslaughts of others without similar problems cannot be realistically overlooked.

Even religion and God are being re-made to appear less autocratic and less authoritarian, as if morality can be legislated by a simple majority. The travesties of recent votes in the United Nations point to where this process leads. The image of the Father in Heaven is being re-shaped to fit that of the weak fathers on earth.

The Physician has always given prescriptions. These are orders, not requests. He always *told* patients what *must* be done in order for them to get well. In fact, his all-knowing, father-like image in the days of old, before the advent of scientific medicine, was his chief asset with which to allay patients' panic, and that was what he did most and best. It still is an important tool even today.

The repeated and many-sided attacks on doctors, and the general suspicion cast upon them by the media must be seen in this light. Physician and patient may be equal in their humanity, but they are not equal in their roles. It is a distortion of the basic concepts of Democracy to assume that such inequality is wrong. Patients are, by definition, sick and needy and unqualified to judge which medicine is best. Only in a deranged society is it conceivable that non-professional "consumers" would attempt to grab control of medicine, and have the support of many disgruntled groups for it. Like fathers, physicians have always had to make decisions regarding their patients, often without consulting them. Now they are called upon to become "providers" and to offer something called "care," which in essence is a mothering function.

Incompetent physicians are probably no more prevalent now than they were at any other time. They should be weeded out now, as it was necessary to do so always. Their existence is used, however, as an excuse to attack the integrity and dedication of physicians in general. The malpractice crisis must be considered in this light also. It is all part of an effort to dethrone and topple Father, a process that historically has often lead to the total disintegration of societies.

Physicians are themselves products of this unhealthy and most dangerous state of affairs. Many physicians themselves have a need to topple Father, and consequently they have difficulties in exercising the authority of their expertise. Others become unreasonably authoritarian to hide discomfort, guilt and doubt. Either way compromises their effectiveness as physicians with frightened patients. Such confusion about authority also explains the failure of many physicians to rally to the defense of their own beleaguered profession, and their apathy in the face of it.

Not all cancers are curable. It is too early to tell whether this particular one is. It is high time, if it is not too late, to lay bare some of the reasons that are at the bottom of the attempts to destroy the private practice of Medicine, for much more than the fate of one profession is at stake.

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