

Chapter 9 – World Weighing

“However, researchers have shown that one of the best determinants of a child’s adjustment to divorce is the extent of the father’s continuing involvement.”
- Edward Teyber, “Helping Children Cope with Divorce”

My world had changed and, if you don’t already realize it, for the worse. Divorce is like a death except it occurs over and over again. The lives of these folks live on; and though, in my case, you were once a parent with all the privilege, that has changed for the worse. Even before realizing the full extent or trauma of this death was the very deep financial or economic problems.

To began with the division of assets. Of all things, I did receive the newest vehicle—along with the loan outstanding. Of a particular problem would eventually be the joint nature of the loan. I will come back this particular outcome, but for the time being, will say that for months later this vehicle would have to parked because I would be unable to get it registered in another state. Just bear in mind that when someone has co-signed on a loan and suddenly does not like you, your loan can become their leverage for their dislike.

Besides the newest vehicle, I took nothing save my clothes, a few tools and some books; the house and all the furnishings went to her (and to my children). This property included items given to us by my parents and other members of my family. The house, which has been solely in my name (at her prior request), was now transferred to her via a Quite Claim Deed. Remember all the debt she accumulated? Yep, it became *my baby!* In addition, I would maintain health insurance for the children and life insurance policies for her and I that amounted to more than I could pay or afford on my income and the child support.

Each child was valued by the state as a standard \$350 per month; and although I consider them worth a lot more, who is going to argue with the state? Thus my monthly outlay included \$1400, health insurance, life insurance, a car note, and the debt described earlier as due her. Not fully employed at the time, she would also be able to claim all the children on her taxes for that year and for all future years.

Instead of continuing *down this road* of losses, I will stop now and repeat that the loss of my children—or the privilege of being a true parent—was (or has been) far greater than all other losses as described above or experienced since that time. Divorce is not a highway to happiness as thought by my wife at the time, but it is the beginning (not the end) of a dying process; it is the admission by one spouse to give up on life together, cash in all the time and effort, and attempt to live or survive in the aftermath. Is it possible? Evidently, it is possible to live; but what about happiness?

How does one go from being be a regular and active part of their lives to be regulated by the state? How does one go from accessible and able to help his children—even if they aren't sure they need help—to being undesirably disparate? At the time of the divorce, my four children ranged in ages form ages four to eleven. I believed that they needed a father; but I was now regulated by a state as though he was part of an institution or corporation.

As a related concern of mine, “the state” has never been able to muster the passion of being a parent – and is ill-equipped to do so. To intercede with the unjustified dismissal of a child’s parent—as was done in my case—is a direct assault on the family. When parents do not act as parents by being responsible for their children—or invite the state into their homes—they (or that person) is inviting disaster. The state is not a surrogate parent and, to say it again, is ill-equipped to be so.

In my changed role from a parent to a babysitter, our lives were not the same. If one or more of my children expressed concern or confrontation with another, what could I do? I was not there is impose the parental duty of interceding with the aim of resolving the matter; but all I could do was listen and make some tacit effort at trying to support them in the weekend allocated by the state. If it sounds as though I’m trying to blame the legal community—the courts and the state in general—I have accurately expressed my view. Divorce is an

How does one go from coming home, to seeing his children, and to otherwise be a regular and active part of their life...to be regulated by the state?

industry that has besieged the family; the legal community has profited while the children continue to suffer the most.

The concept of two worlds can characterize the life of a so-called non-custodial parent. One world being the “old world” where dad or father existed and was an integral part of the family; the other is a frightening world where he is alone most of the time, while in shock over the entire divorce and its losses. If there is such a thing as depression and despair, I experienced it during the months leading up and following the divorce. Insomnia, constant and uncontrollable thoughts and a deep sense of despair were among the conditions of my life. Was I depressed? Yes, I was very much so and, what’s worse, was determined to do nothing immediately for it.

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Besides the depression was the utter shame I felt. No one in my immediate family have ever been divorced, and to be “that one”, was very shameful for me. I felt ashamed around my family, my brother whom I lived with for several months. I felt ashamed before the church that she and I had attended as a family. Perhaps indistinctly mixed with guilt, my feelings were that of failure to my children, my family, and my God.

In the depression, was I ever suicidal; or in other words, did I ever think about taking my life? I’m not sure if I ever pondered this act but, honestly, I did not care whether I lived or died; for to me, death had already taken place —and it seemed to be worse as disbelief gave way to shock and then reality.

Within months, I was laid-off from my employer. Though it doesn’t really matter, the lay-off was a business downturn and affected a percentage of the employment; but the loss was yet another on top of the monumental loss of marriage and family. In a sort of battle-hardened disbelief, I met with my manager for breakfast the next morning and got the bad news. I thanked him for everything, accepted his well-wishes and post-employment assistance, and left

for the last time. As bad as it may sound, his treatment of my dismissal was *worlds ahead* of the treatment received by the courts. He (or the company) treated me with dignity and respect—which was immensely better than the experience of divorce. Need I go on except to say that being “fired from my family” was more difficult than anything I’ve ever gone through.

If I could have made a mistake at this time, it a “rebound relationship”; only months following the divorce, I met (or re-met) a woman that I went to high-school with. I was in no position to be dating—let alone a serious relationship—but with some rationalization in view of my losses, I jumped headlong into it. It lasted a few months; and perhaps realizing that there was *better fish in the sea*, she moved on to another fish. I regret having jumped into a relationship because, for one, it was wrong before my God. The relationship was pursued on the basis that it could fix my hurt and pain or, at the least, make me feel better about myself; but all it did was cause further hurt to me (and possibly to her too). I also regret that it may have hurt my children to see me with another woman so soon after the marriage. Yes, I made a critical mistake—and have not forgotten it.

Unemployed and living in my parents’ home was an adjustment for both of us. My children continued to live in our home (I mean, their home) in Georgia, while I commuted every other week from Alabama to honor what little time I given with them.

As far as child support, the obligations were financed now with retirement. What I had not planned for was a massive tax liability. My withholding for the prior year had been arranged with the children as exemptions, but now under the terms of the divorce, I was filing without any of the children as exemptions. My tax liability had gone from a pre-determined net zero to a whopping \$9,000! In perhaps the only time my ex-wife was supportive, she compassionately offered two of the four children which reduced my liability to just over \$5,000. With this act of mercy came the ability to continue my child support until re-employed in the months to come.

Life was hard for me—with all “the mess”—but so much harder for my children. They may “seem” adaptive or flexible, but the truth of the matter is that such a crisis as divorce does not really manifest until much later in their lives. I hope and pray that they do not suffer beyond what has already occurred; but with the reading and understanding gained through research, the worst may yet to be.

In keeping with my ongoing concern for them is the strong belief that much has to do with their future relationships; and in those relationships, with their prevailing memory and experience of divorce. Though it may sound like *a broken record* (to use a dated term), the concern is very real and is worthy to repeating. It is not only about me or about my children, but as is understood, is about a social problem or crisis of our culture. In his book, *Life without Father*, David Popenoe describes the culture in conjunction with fatherhood:

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The end result of many cultural, social, and economic trends we have discussed is a society surprisingly unsupportive of fatherhood. Indeed, if one were specifically to design a culture and a social system for the express purpose of undercutting fatherhood and men’s contribution to family life, our current society would be close to what would result.

He elaborates:

Consider the following **key elements** one would want to incorporate:

1. Make marriage into a weak institution. Say that marriage is just a piece of paper...Replace the phrase, “till death do us part” with “so long as I am happy.”
2. Sexualize the society. Emphasize sex as often as possible in the media and popular culture...
3. Institute an educational system that disregards the fact that childrearing is a major adult responsibility and that marriage is important to childrearing.
4. Have an economic system that does not recognize worker’s family responsibilities and that stresses ever-increasing material consumption.
5. Develop a culture that heavily stresses individualism. As the primary goal of life, promote individual freedom and self-fulfillment rather than social responsibility and obligation...

6. In social discourse, through the media, and in the design of the built environment, de-emphasize the importance of children to the continuation of society.
7. Overlook the importance of fathering when discussing gender roles.
8. When fathering is discussed, don't mention that fathers are unique and irreplaceable as protectors, disciplinarians, and guides...

From almost every social and cultural perspective, fatherhood has been made not only increasingly difficult but often seemingly superfluous and unnecessary.

Understand that this is not about men, not about fathers or dads, and not just about the male gender; but it is about our culture and the changing conditions that have undermined and is destroying marriage, family and, yes, even children!

He continues on this note, with the ever dissolving "post-nuclear family":

The disturbing reality is that the post-nuclear family appears to be inherently unstable. With other relatives already out of the family picture, women cannot be expected to do the job of childrearing all by themselves. The state can help economically but not socially. Without fathers, parental investments – the sine qua non of good childrearing – are ever in shorter supply. Moreover the men who are released from family responsibilities have a higher propensity for antisocial behavior...

The possibility that men are being driven from the families in some cases ushers in the chicken & egg dilemma to the question: where have all the fathers gone? Did they leave entirely because they are inherently irresponsible to their families; or could there be other reasons affiliated with divorce and the demise of the conventional family? I think there are other reasons; **I am sure of it!**

A man (once husband, but always father) that is pressured between the figurative two worlds is in, what my grandfather use to say, "no-man's land". He has lost his accessibility to his children, and is now under the jurisdiction of the state and the mercy of his ex-wife; he has lost his authority in his household and with children; and he lost his ability to sustain a living because of the daunting debt levied on him in the form of child support and post-divorce obligations. He is not *caught*

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between a rock and hard place; but is more likely lost between two worlds—the one he cannot forget and the other he does not know anything about. Worst than a “nowhere man”, he is a has-been father that in some cases did nothing to warrant the gender-prejudice bias of the courts. He has all the weight of both worlds upon him to the degree that he is up to ten times more likely to commit suicide than the female partner of this broken relationship. And the children suffer too.

In his book, *Fatherless America*, David Blankenhorn describes the “plight of the non-custodial parent:

Divorce, almost by definition, destroys this basis or effective paternity. Indeed, in most cases, divorce does not simply end the parental alliance. Divorce inverts the alliance, turning mutualism into adverseness. For after divorce, according to Robert Weiss, “most custodial parents find non-custodial parents more nearly a burden than a resource.” The visiting father becomes “someone to worry about, an obligation that limits what can be done on a weekend, a source of distraction and disturbance to the children.”

The second debilitating feature of the visiting relationship is the absence of co-residency with children. To be a good-enough father—to sustain the daily effective parenting—a man needs to live with his children. When he does not, he literally becomes an outsider.

Here is the bottom line for the Visiting Father: the end of co-residency and the rupture of the parental alliance mean nothing less the collapse of paternal fatherhood, a simulacrum of paternal capacity.

As I have posed the question before (and will like again), what about the children? Continuing on this subject in Judith Wallerstein's classic study, *Second Chances*, the following on children of divorce:

Loyalty conflicts, sometimes flipping from one parent to the other and back again, are a common experience for children of divorce...

Many children feel guilty, and some feel that it is their duty to mend the marriage...

The devastation children feel at divorce is similar to the way they feel when a parent dies suddenly, for each experience disrupts close family relationships. Each weakens the protection of the family; each begins with an acute crisis followed by disequilibrium that may last several years or longer; and each introduces a chain of long-lasting changes that are not predictable at the onset. But divorce may well be a more difficult tragedy for the child to master psychologically...

One can not predict long-term effects of divorce on children from how they react at the outset.

Not that enough has already been said (because enough will never be said), but Robert Warshak writes in his book, *The Custody Revolution*:

The situation is appalling and getting worse; our record-high divorce rate creates new victims daily, but no new solutions. As the worst battle scars are born by the children. Mental Health experts agree: one of the leading causes of emotional problems in children of divorce is the diminished contact with their fathers.

Where have all the father's gone? Have they gone between worlds, everyone? When will they ever learn....when will we ever learn...and what have the children learned? They too are hemmed between two worlds; the one world where they spent much time with their father and paternal family, and the other world where those folks have been profiled as enemies and threats.