

THROWAWAY DADS; Children's struggle for wholeness in the wake of divorce

By Shari Schreiber, M.A.

At five years old, I was caught in the middle of a divorce and custody battle between my parents. My folks were both good and honest people, but my father was the healthier parent, and had the presence of mind to recognize this at the time. Still, I was 'awarded' to my mother. Two years after my parents split, my mother was hospitalized and was absent physically and/or emotionally for long stretches of time throughout the remainder of my childhood. According to relatives years later, the signs of her disease had been "somewhat apparent" beforehand--but we weren't as savvy about recognizing and diagnosing mental illness in those days. Back in the fifties, custody was automatically awarded to mothers. Unfortunately this practice still exists, and the consequences to children can be tragic.

My father was the source of virtually all my affection and attention, and we shared a very close and special bond. When he left, the bottom of my world dropped out. Being without him trapped me in unimaginable pain and emptiness, and there was no one capable of comforting me or picking up the slack. My mother had (falsely) accused him of 'molestation,' a reliable catch word among vindictive wives and divorce attorneys back then (and now). Visitation with my dad was sporadic; in part because of our *justice system*, but mostly due to instinctual measures to mend his broken heart and survive what surely must have felt like an amputation.

Dazed, I wandered around for months with what seemed like a huge hole in my middle, like a *cannon ball* had been shot through me. At the age of five, my ability to articulate this pain was understandably limited--but in retrospect, I'd managed to envision an extremely accurate picture of my loss. Starting school in the midst of this emotional trauma made it impossible for me to focus on *learning* anything, and I'm certain this set me back for a number of years.

I've met with and spoken to countless men who've forged stronger and more loving, healthy attachments with their children than their ex-wives have (or could). I'm privy to men's stories that *unwittingly* reveal their ex-spouses or lovers to be personality disordered. Many of these are women are ill-equipped to raise children in ways that are consistently loving, nurturing and stable. To make matters worse, these children are being programmed to hate their fathers and **men** in general. This has crucial ramifications for female **and** male children, in context of healthy self-esteem and fundamentally sound relationship dynamics and expectations. Essentially, these women carry archaic wounds from childhood due to having been raised by *emotionally impaired mothers*, and unresolved 'primal rage' from this period is projected onto their ex-husbands and children. PAS

(Parental Alienation Syndrome) is a direct outcome of this rage, and poses a very real and present danger to the health of our society.

Narcissistic and Borderline Personality Disorders stem from deficits in loving attention, positive mirroring and *nurturance* in infancy and beginning phases of childhood. Attachment issues typically result from early wounding to an infant's sense of Self, and are prompted/driven by the **mother**. Until resolved, these wounds are re-created and perpetuated within each new generation. **Trust** (in self and others) is *ideally* established between an infant and his/her mother within the first year of life, and this *symbiotic attachment* is vital to our sense of well being. The issue of solid emotional bonding does **not** fall within the domain of the father's role until a few years later. Sometimes referred to as **core** trauma or narcissistic injury, a child's earliest and *most critical* bonding experience is punctuated by the mother's emotional misattunement and lack of empathic/nurturant response to her developing infant. Typical consequences of this are addressed in my article; **DO YOU LOVE TO BE NEEDED, OR NEED TO BE LOVED?** (<http://www.GettinBetter.com/needlove.html>).

There is no doubt I would have greatly benefitted from living with my father, who was *much* better equipped to provide a stable and nourishing foundation for me and my growth. But in contrast to a number of friends and colleagues, I was lucky in certain respects; **my** mother was not mean-spirited, critical and emotionally undermining--she just wasn't well or *whole*, which derailed her capacity to meet her children's intrinsic needs.

We learn to love ourselves and others, by how we were loved as kids. I've personally done a great deal of self-healing in response to childhood deficits, and I'm deeply grateful my journey has enhanced my ability to assist others. But in hindsight, so many years were focused on surmounting these traumas and *surviving*, instead of constructing a life more viable, and actually *thriving*.

Children have crucial needs that transcend basic physical care. Orphaned infants in the sixties were subjected to '*Failure To Thrive*' studies that unequivocally proved the relationship between *nurturant* care and physical health and longevity. One test group was provided with basic care; food, diapering, bathing, warmth and shelter--but **deprived** of tender/caring touch and holding, loving glances and verbal expressions of warmth and affection. Vast numbers of *these* babies became ill and died.

Perhaps we should devise measures for assessing the emotional health of each parent *before* divorce courts award custody. While this seems a daunting task, I think it would significantly reduce divorce statistics and enable more people to develop stable, loving and *enduring* relationships. It's my unflinching belief that every adult is entitled to this, and every *child* who's brought into this world deserves the very best chance he/she can be given to *thrive*.

<http://gettinbetter.com/throwawaydads.html>