MERE ORTHODOXY

Spiritual Formation for the Family

In Praise of Being Inconvenient

By Nadya Williams

One recent night around 2:00 AM, my daughter's distressed voice, calling for me, jolted me out of deep sleep. Barely awake herself, she was looking for her stuffed doll (named Dolly, obviously), the one without which she cannot sleep, because without clutching it in a very precise way, she cannot suck her thumb. And without sucking her thumb, she cannot get back to sleep. This vicious cycle makes perfect sense in her six-year-old mind, even if it might not in yours. Thence the cry of alarm at 2:00 AM.

We located Dolly in the recesses of her bed. All was well again, and we both got back to sleep. End of the story in one sense. And yet, it is deeply telling of something obvious that perhaps we don't consider sufficiently: Moments like this are deeply inconvenient. Let's face it. No one wants to be awakened in so rude a fashion and for such a trivial cause, especially when a full day of various responsibilities looms ahead. And yet most parents, faced with such an inconvenience, will get up and assist the distraught child, will find the dolly, and will tuck the child back into bed with a kiss.

Such is the daily work of parenting and any other caregiving—the work of doing things that might be inconvenient for us and doing them patiently out of love for another person who might not be able to do these things for herself, whether temporarily or ever. Of course, as parents we also train our children to learn to do more themselves—starting with such simple tasks as toasting bagels, spreading butter on them (and, for crying out loud, not licking the knife before re-dipping into the communal butter dish—why is this so hard to learn?), pouring juice into glasses, and putting dishes away into the dishwasher when done with a meal, instead of leaving them along with the meal's unfortunate crumbly detritus behind on (and under, and around) the table as some sort of low-brow Renaissance-style nature morte.

The truth we often would rather not voice aloud is: We are desperately afraid of inconveniencing others—and at the same time, we are no less desperately annoyed when others inconvenience us. The two are connected. But you know who will rarely inconvenience you? Inanimate objects that operate the way they ought. Machines generally behave exactly as programmed—operating around the clock without needing rest, not making errors of judgment because of fatigue, not crying when overwhelmed with some sort of inconvenient emotion, and most definitely never re-dipping the knife into the communal butter dish after licking it (that is, if a machine were ever to butter a bagel). The one exception to this

rule, it goes without saying, is printers. Printers never behave as they should. They're such unreliable machines, they might as well be human.

In contrast to machines (other than printers, of course), people come into this world pre-programmed with infinitely creative ways of inconveniencing others. Long before a person is even born, pregnancy—the process by which human life begins—is terribly inconvenient to the mother. Who wants to feel sick quite possibly for nine whole months, uncomfortable with her changing body, all to await painful labor that will begin at the most unexpected and inconvenient moment possible? There is nothing convenient or comfortable to self or others about the entire process through which new life comes into existence. And then, nothing is convenient about the work of caring for newborns. They are helpless to an extreme degree, unable even to hold up their own heads. But mothers are not machines. And so, mothers lovingly carry the infants within, then love them unconditionally upon arrival into the world outside the womb.

None of this makes sense in our modern increasingly mechanized world. All of this is just so, well, inefficient. Wouldn't it make more sense to gestate humans in eggs à la dinosaurs, or maybe embrace the modern technology that, some hope, will soon allow us just to use really nice *artificial wombs* or machine incubators as Aldous Huxley envisioned almost a century ago in Brave New World?

At least the degree to which children inconvenience us will diminish over time, in most cases, as children grow older. Furthermore, as a general rule, healthy people are less bothersome to their family members than the sick. And yet, the inconvenient truth is that all relationships that are genuine and deep will inconvenience us at least sometimes and, in turn, will make us inconvenient for others. That is the one guarantee of all relationships we have with other people. Why? Because dwelling in communion with others will at times require us to be a burden or, conversely, to do something we would have preferred to skip. Who loves doing laundry? Making multiple meals a day? Sweeping the floor all the time? Caring for a sick person, whether child or adult? Consoling someone who is upset? Losing sleep because other people wake you up to find Dolly?

But then, as Christians, we can also ask: Who would go to the cross? Who would die not just to self, as the overused (but oh-so-beautiful!) phrase goes, but would willingly die a torturous death not for any personal guilt but for the sins of others? As Paul put it, “Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die” (Romans 5:7). This is no less true today than it was in antiquity. Selfishness comes naturally to us all, and it is ironically a sign of our selfish pride when we are wary of inconveniencing others, of sharing our weak moments with anyone we actually know—but paying an expert we don't know to listen to us unburden our innermost sorrows.

One thing about marriage and parenting is that they are a school in these virtues, in this dying to self that can look like middle-of-the-night dolly search parties, as opposed to the much more glamorous other sorts of parties. The extreme decline in *birth rates in the U.S.* and *worldwide* suggests that the choice for increasingly more people is to bypass having kids—the decision to avoid ever experiencing the inconveniences that such a life of daily service to another person requires. The fruit of such choices speaks for itself.

A recent secular book that attempts to help those ambivalent about children to make a decision either way—Anastasia Berg and Rachel Wiseman's *What Are Children For?*—only makes one important point even clearer: Without a Christian anthropology, without an understanding of who people are in God's eyes, rather than in our selfish and narrow vision of humanity, not having kids makes a lot more sense than having them, because there is no framework for either valuing people or thinking that any of that "dying to self" business ever needs to happen. Who came up with that anyway?

God did, on the cross. But long before that, on the sixth day of creation, God created the first people: "Then God said, 'Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness'" (Gen. 1:26). This doctrine—the incredible truth that God made human beings in His own image!—is what separates Judeo-Christian anthropology from any other.

This doctrine of the imago Dei is a game-changer for how we view all people—beginning with *mothers and children*, as I argue in my recent book. God delights in us, including in our weakness, imperfection, and finitude. He loves us simply because we are, not because of anything we have done or might do. It is easy, at the height of an adult life of health, to imagine oneself as a self-sufficient individual who is not an inconvenience upon anyone and would prefer not to be inconvenienced by others. And yet, if we are blessed to live long enough, all of us are guaranteed to become burdens for others in our old age, if not before.

The math is simple. We begin our lives with two decades of significant *dependence* on others—ideally, on our parents, who feed us, guide us, care for us when sick, help us make better decisions than our brains with their undeveloped frontal lobes would allow. And then, if we are blessed to live into old age, we may end our lives with two decades of growing dependence on others—perhaps, ideally, our kids or other loved ones. In those twilight years, they will also feed us, help us put on socks and shoes when trembling hands no longer allow, drive us when we no longer can do so safely ourselves, and will do all of this while reminding us of their love. There is such sorrow mingled with a reciprocated love in this process. We need to embrace the dignity of dependence, argues *Leah Libresco Sargeant* in her forthcoming book.

Years ago, a lovely elderly saint at the church I was attending at the time resolutely turned down a meal train that the other women wanted to set up for the aftermath of her forthcoming surgery. Another lady confronted her: “You are depriving us of a chance to serve you.” She relented. I still think about this exchange, over a decade later. When we love others the way God calls us to love them, tasks that may objectively seem inconveniences become cherished joys.

Forsaking All Others

By Kirsten Sanders

> “Purity of heart is to will one thing”. — Soren Kierkegaard

Christians are promised people. Some of the earliest biblical stories tell of God calling Israel to follow him alone. This was not an act of fiat, but an invitation. “You will be my people, and I will be your God” (Gen 6:7) is a promise but moreso, a pledge. Israel would have to be bound to this particular god. They’d need to choose this one thing.

To choose this god would be to deny themselves the benefits of that one. Israel would miss out on a lot of other things; other gods promised pyrotechnics and instant wealth and even protection against natural threats. It might be better to keep the household gods close at hand, under their garments, to retain the benefits of foreign gods. But to belong to Israel’s god was to belong to him alone. You’d have to forsake all others.

Israel’s story can be told through this pattern of call and response, though it frequently comes off more like one missed opportunity after another. There are Adam and Eve, who cannot bear to abide just one rule. Then there is Abram, who receives the promise of a son and immediately goes out to break his own marriage vow to ensure it. Just one chapter after God’s covenant with Abram, in Genesis 15, he takes Hagar as his concubine. A few chapters later, in an attempt to keep God’s covenant, he nearly sacrifices his own son.

Israel was a promised people who wasn’t any good at keeping promises. It was this promise-keeping that becomes the story of their own life with God. To follow Israel’s God was by definition to limit your options. But in doing so, you would become a people to whom God kept his promise.

The Christian vision of personhood prioritizes an active vow. But instead of being a choice that expands options, this vow intentionally limits them. It is not surprising that the covenantal imagery of the Hebrew Bible slowly becomes bridal imagery in the New Testament. Keeping God’s commandments brings with it its own reward, which is being kept.

Christian marriage is a dim and somewhat foggy envisioning of God's covenant with his people, and as with Israel, the difficult part of Christian marriage is almost always the promise-keeping.

There are after all so many interesting ways to break a promise. When a young adult takes a spouse, the choice of this one person is equally a choice against any others. To all of the lives that might have been, it is the closing of a door.

Limiting one's choice through marriage has long been how people became adults. But adulthood now is prioritized at the expense of marriage, and seen as a season of expanding choice rather than limiting it. To become an adult now seems to entail everything other than marriage—travel, experiences, acquiring wealth and a house, getting to know yourself and living precariously. Marriage, which was once seen as an important rite of passage into adulthood, now is thought to compete with the things that actually make adults.

Limiting one's options has always been a risk, but now in our age of digital technology it is perhaps even moreso. As each person reaches the age where they approach adulthood, they are handed a phone. Phones, of course, allow for young adults to be constantly distracted and entertained. They provide also the means to avoid eye contact and miss the opportunity for stolen glances, casual introductions, and most of all—flirting.

Personhood and the Ordinal Society

Historians note that already in the seventeenth century numbers were seen to have "special virtues." Unlike people, they could not lie. Numbers, therefore, were thought to be especially useful in organizing a population. Through procedures of counting, individuals could be tabulated without being identified. Once persons were reduced to numbers, it was thought they could be assessed in terms of their behavior alone, without the pesky distractions of demographic identifiers coming into play.

But as manual counting machines gave way to electronic and then digital methods of data collection, new ways of assessing individual behavior were developed. These relied on collecting the digital "traces" that their individual choices left behind. These traces are "left on everything from social media to credit bureaus, shopping websites and fidelity programs, courthouses, social welfare agencies, pharmacies, and the content of emails and chats." Every purchase you make electronically and everything you search for online could contain a trace.

All of this information comes to form a “data double.” Data doubles are the false spouses of modern personhood. In *The Ordinal Society*, Marion Fourcade and Kieran Healy describe how these doubles work:

> “While you exist as a physical person in the world, your data double is the representation of you, your tastes, and your actions that can be reconstructed in whole or in part from the records and traces you leave behind.”

Over time, these digital traces became more than just evidence of human behavior. They came to have value, too, as an assessment of an individual’s trustworthiness. When corporations rely on these assessments and use them to assign things like insurance rates and mortgage opportunities, these benign digital traces come to have a predictive power. The false spouses of modern personhood create other lives. Their power threatens and predicts our own futures.

Because these algorithmic evaluations of our data doubles are invisible, we have the sensation of full liberated choice as we move about the world. But we are all bound in ways we cannot see. The tools of digital capitalism have come to have a predictive power far beyond the power of counting. It is ironic that the view of human persons as equal and “self-propelled” has developed in tandem with the tools that would allow persons to be sorted and constrained.

The great irony of the modern world is that the self-propelled individual has not been aided by the technological arm but has instead found itself co-opted by it. Even as modern man imagines himself autonomous, he is, like Promethus, bound.

The very means that were thought to serve as the engine of man’s own propeller have instead gummed up the gears. Our agency, always an illusion, has now been impeded by the very means that were thought to liberate us. There is no escaping these data doubles. We now live in the age of no-fault divorce, and yet in a perverse inversion of marriage we find that we cannot rid ourselves of our data doubles. They are stuck to us, ‘til death do us part.

To Will One Thing

The Christian riddle of modern life is that we have a tradition whose very own story is that of an oath and with it a chosen constraint. But we must inhabit that tradition in a world whose society is based on the myth of endless choosing, and that has developed the tools to impede our choices, even as we

imagine ourselves to be free. We don't want the thing that is good for us to want—an oath, a permanent vow—and the thing we are trained to want is the thing that leads us to be further constrained.

Sound familiar?

Our modern condition is a version of the divided will that originated the Western church's teaching on original sin. Concupiscence, the post-Fall human condition, speaks of the way the will does not follow desire; indeed, we may desire things we ought not to desire, and we may will to act in ways that are against our desired actions. This theological reflection on Paul's "wretched man!" of Romans 7 becomes even further embedded as digital tools more deeply plow the furrows of human desire. As the opportunities to develop lust and greed are digitally enhanced and mediated, the western teaching on original sin increasingly gains relevance. But it is needed just as it is falling out of fashion.

The Christian answer to the problem of man's bound will comes in the form of grace. Through grace, we might receive aid so that our wills can be assisted toward the good. Grace can take many human forms, and I'd suggest that the form we must encourage is the simple good of marriage. Though not recognized by most Protestants as a sacrament, marriage might be still seen as a means of grace in the way that it tells a truer story about human life. If it is not only the case that the self-propelled man is an illusion, but that data has made him doubly so, might there be a way to respond to this lie of autonomy with its opposing, but truer story- that the bound life is the freer one?

Asceticism has always found a home within Christian practice. It is ordinarily associated with grand gestures like fasting, going to the desert, and standing on a pole. But in an age as saturated with choice as our own, even the vow to belong to only this one might be seen as ascetical. Marriage might be the asceticism we need most.

Like an ascetical vow, in marriage you promise to forsake all others. But in order to forsake all others, you must also forsake all other lives.

To bind yourself to another necessarily narrows your options. Nowadays this strikes an ugly chord. Self actualization just is how we think about adulthood. Expanding choices, opportunities, and experiences is how we judge a cultured individual. We parent our children with the stated goal of gaining for them a glut of experiences and opportunities that they can actualize by becoming a certain kind of successful person. For the most part, we don't parent them to keep their promises.

This might be because our own lives in midlife are often marked by regret over lost opportunities, opportunities that we remember and imagine and turn into phantasms and dreams of lives that never

were. We treasure these imagined other loves and fondle them like rosary beads. We imagine ourselves greater and grander than we are. The Queen of all such rosaries, Miranda July, has been getting rich and fat off of our misplaced grief by fictionalizing it in the story of a woman who in midlife runs away from her family to chase the things she'd lost. Everyone's reading it.

The irony of Christian marriage may be that in the face of the pressure toward endless choice, it is this constraint that really makes adults, because it is with this constraint where we find the grace of limits. By limiting our freedom to choose, we are bound to just one thing. To choose one thing, or in this case one person and one life, you risk having only that one thing. In this constraint we resist the optimization and ordinalization of our worlds. When we bind ourselves to just one thing, we refuse to imagine ourselves as the sum of all of our choices. We might then become persons who have received grace, not made but given.

To have at the end of your life one single story, a promise that was kept, would gesture to all the things you did not choose. It might leave their shadow in its wake. But it might reveal as well the One who in fire and blood made himself known as Covenant-keeper, as a promise-making God. In forsaking all others, you'd be choosing this one thing, marriage as the shadow of the oath made in smoke and fire.

Why I Don’t Like the Term ‘Homeschool’

By Tessa Carman

“Are we doing school today?” my son asked me. I looked at him curiously, because we don’t use the term “school” much at all in our home.

“We’ll do some lessons and reading,” I replied.

Such moments remind me of the difference between “school” and “education.” We don’t often ask: How will you educate your children? Rather it’s usually, Will you homeschool or send your kids to school? If the latter, will you choose a private, classical, Christian, or public school (if you even have all those options in your area)?

I admit I don’t like this question. According to the state, we’re currently homeschoolers. That is, the home is the center of our civic education, and my kids don’t learn their three r’s primarily from an institution, but from my husband and me.

Perhaps a better term would be that we are home-based educators. We don’t “unschool” because we don’t have schooling to unschool from. And my kids have other lessons from the best teachers I can find and afford, sometimes in a formal setting (right now my daughter is taking ballet at a community center), sometimes informal (my kids have learned a lot about local food, and the farm cycle through spending time with extended family and talking with folks at the farmers’ market, and about Shakespeare from listening to us read and discuss plays with friends). A friend or family member here and there will tell them a fairy tale, a story from history, or a tip on whittling or crocheting.

In the evenings lately our dinner table conversations have involved lots of begging for family stories (especially from my husband), requests to tell stories in Latin (again, my husband’s specialty) or simply to tell them more about something that’s seized their attention. “Frogs!” one night. “Snakes!” another. The other day, after a day of lessons at home and away, my kids begged my husband for some family lore, which led to a spontaneous lesson on how to take care of an injured person in an emergency, followed by a request to do a bedtime story in Latin.

I plan a lot of lessons, but they’re pretty low-key, and we observe the liturgical and seasonal calendar as best we can (hopefully better each year), and I’m always on the lookout for beautiful music, stories,

records, books, to show them. I'm always putting books on hold through interlibrary loan and looking out for books to add to our home library.

We practice noticing what's around us: the crocuses coming up for spring, the birdsong (and working on identifying more than just the bluejay, robin, and chickadee). When we host—dinners or music nights or poetry readings—our kids help with the food, dishes, and conversation. During morning prayer and Scripture reading, often a thorny theological question will come up, and we'll spend some time talking about fighting sin, getting demons angry, what angels are, why people do bad things when they don't want to, and why some people don't go to church.

It's all education.

But if we sent our children to a private or public school five days a week from 8 to 3, we still would be home-based educators. Our children would still be fundamentally formed by our home culture and liturgy. We would still be their parents, directing their education, though delegating certain tasks in a different way from how we do it at present.

Currently my daughter has been in two choirs, at church and a local classical school, takes classes in nature study and etiquette at our homeschool cooperative, goes to ballet and violin lessons once a week at a community center and university, speaks Latin with my husband, crochets with her aunt, and rides horses with her cousins when we visit them in the Midwest. I'm constantly on the lookout for opportunities for continuing their living education—that is, for them to continually grow in wisdom and courage, and in the skills and abilities that will enable them to live a full life.

Some of these things depend on our particular family situation and the opportunities we encounter: for instance, my daughters are less likely to become competent seamstresses—an ability I believe would serve them well—unless I find enough outside help in teaching them, since I do not qualify even as an incompetent one. My older brother's children have horses at home, and unless we move out of the city and acquire some horses ourselves (something my children are rather open to), their cousins will be more likely to grow up into cowboys than they.

And that's okay. Each of us is going to be shaped by the place we're in, and we each have places and gifts to steward. In our own context, I have some high schools in mind for my children, as well as different apprenticeship ideas, depending on their interests and needs, and our own family situation, when the time comes. But always the question of "school" is secondary, at best, to the question of education—that is, of the formation of character, ability, relationships, and virtue. "Don't let school

interfere with your education," my schoolteacher dad, recalling Mark Twain, told me and my siblings time and again. I'd like that mindset to stick with my own children—and I'd also like them not to let "homeschool" interfere with their education either.

This is why I think the debate within Christian circles of public vs. private vs. homeschool is tired and often unhelpful. If we recognized that parents are, after the Holy Spirit, their children's primary educators, and then recognize that a full human life is nurtured within the home and family and then expands to neighborhood, church, village, and beyond, then, perhaps, our discussions would be on firmer footing. How ought a human person be formed for a flourishing life? Answering that question, in our different situations and contexts, given our different opportunities and gifts as parents and communities, will, and ought, guide us. "Schooling," especially the strictures of modern compulsory education, and all the hoops one must jump through, is only part of the picture.

G.K. Chesterton wrote, "Philosophy is not the concern of those who pass through Divinity and Greats, but of those who pass through birth and death." We may say, then, "Philosophy of education is not the concern of those with education degrees, or those who homeschool their children, or those who teach public school, or those who are headmasters of classical schools…but of those who wish for a good, full, virtuous life for themselves, their neighbors, and their descendants."

How do we learn to live? That's the question of education—what we could call the school of life. Parents, then, need to be philosophers—lifelong lovers of wisdom and students of human nature. This is not a task for teacher parents, nor for literary or artsy parents, but for all of us as persons.

How do we learn virtue—i.e., become like Christ? How do we cultivate good habits, in the nitty gritty everyday? These are not "homeschool" or "classical education" questions. Rather, they are human ones.

Teaching Children to See

By Kelly Givens

This past winter, my six-year-old began each day looking out the window. I would hear him roll out of bed, feet hit the floor, his footsteps moving toward one of the windows in his room. I knew what he was looking for: snow. A little while later he would come down the stairs, still sleepy-eyed, and ask to check the weather app on my phone. Would any of the icons in the 10-day forecast have changed from a sun to a snowflake overnight? For weeks, this was his first order of business. If there was a possibility of snow, he would be the first to report it.

I love his awe and wonder at the weather, at everything in the natural world. I love it because there is so much to delight in on this beautiful planet and he's only just beginning to discover it. I love it because I get to experience it all fresh again from his eyes. And I love it because it gives me hope that, if he can hold onto his awe and wonder, he just might grow to be a humble man.

In her book On Reading Well, Karen Swallow Prior defines humility as "an accurate assessment of oneself." She writes that its sister word, humble, means "earth" or "ground." "The person of humility," Prior writes, "is literally and figuratively grounded." This grounded, rooted definition serves as excellent imagery for the role of humility in growing our character. Prior writes that humility has "long been considered the foundation of all other virtues." We might think of humility as the roots from which the tree of our character grows. The stronger we grow in humility — the stronger our roots — the greater our character will be, and the more virtuous fruit we will grow.

Of all the virtues our society needs to meet the present moment, humility is among the most necessary and urgent. It is a powerful antidote for the poisons infecting our culture: hyper-individualism, greed, irresponsible leisure, and our insatiable appetites for more of everything.

And while I have seen more calls for humility as a response to these things, I have had trouble finding conversations around how exactly one becomes humble. Maybe it's because we believe that the truly humble never think about their own humility. That to focus on our own humility would only be an exercise in hubris. But humility, like all virtues, is a habit of excellence formed by practice over a long period of time. It takes intentional cultivation. And I believe there are certain habits that, if practiced, will stimulate the growth of humble roots in our lives. One of those is a habit of awe and wonder.

By awe and wonder, I mean the regular practice of paying careful attention to the world around us. Not merely seeing but observing. Perceiving. Considering. Asking thoughtful questions about what we see, smell, hear, touch, taste. In other words, attending with love and curiosity to what our senses sense. (How often do we eat without tasting? How often do we look without seeing? Hear without listening?) Admiring, imagining, receiving the beauty of the world around us in a regular, intentional way: this is the habit of a wonder-filled person. And it leads to humility.

A regular habit of awe and wonder de-centers us. It opens a window in our imaginations, beckoning us to climb out of our own opinions and experiences and to consider things greater and beyond our own lives. It strengthens our curiosity, which in turn lowers the volume on our anxieties and grows our ability to empathize. Over time, we become less self-focused and can admit without embarrassment what we don't know. In short, we grow more humble.

It seems notable to me, then, that God gives children a built-in sense of awe and wonder. Kids marvel at everything around them. They gape at a trail of ants. Every dandelion is worthy of a bouquet. They ask endless, unembarrassed questions about how the world works. They see small pleasures like flowers in the spring, a snack with friends, and the warm sun on their shoulders for what they are: enduring, daily gifts. The facts of a good life.

Somewhere along the way, we lose this delighted, grateful response to the world around us. We begin believing a different story about what makes a life good. We get an education — which tells us we need a "better life." We've got to move up, move on to "something better." Something better might be found in a lifestyle we can purchase. Or it might be in a powerful position of influence. But when the good life is only found in what we can possess, exploitation and careless consumption will follow. When the good life is only found in how influential we can be, isolation, burnout and exhaustion will surely come knocking.

How then, do we resist our culture's definition of the good life, one which promises power, wealth and fame but delivers anxiety and toil? How do we train our kids' hearts and minds to love what the world scoffs at: fidelity to one another, natural limits, contentment in what we've been given? I think the key lies in cultivating our own wonder at the world and sharing that wonder with our children, all their lives. For my family, this has mostly come down to going outside and reading good books, both as much as possible.

On going outside: It's not enough to simply go out. We must slow down enough to attend to the world around us. We must draw our kids' attention to that which has captured ours. We practice curiosity,

asking questions about how the world works. We taste and see the gifts of the day, and bless God for them.

“Listen to that bird! Why is he singing like that, do you think?”

“I can’t believe how many acorns are under this tree. Why do you think one oak tree makes so many acorns?”

“How amazing is it that God made all these different tasting fruits for us to enjoy? He could have made food bland but he made flavors incredibly complex and varied. Thank you, Lord, for fresh peaches.”

When I attend to the daily, ordinary miracles of cardinals, acorns and peaches, when I name them, marvel at them and call them blessed, when I practice gratitude for them, I feel more content. I find myself desiring more of those things, and less from the consumer world. I find I would much rather spend a Saturday morning in the woods or on a walk than at a shopping center or scrolling Instagram. I want the same for my kids; to grow up with the outdoors under their skin, with so many good and happy memories in the woods and on beaches and in our own backyard, that they can’t imagine a good life apart from the natural world, where “earth’s crammed with heaven, /and every common bush afire with God.”

On reading: We read poetry each morning at the breakfast table, because I love poetry, and I want to give my children words for the beauty they experience in the world. Throughout the day, we make time to read well-written stories, with characters who are full of virtue (and some decidedly not). We read because “good stories and poems do more than convey ‘content.’ By their form, they embody, sustain, elicit, and encourage the very habits and virtues” we hope our children one day exhibit.

“The good life begins and ends with humility. I pray my children have eyes to see what the good life looks like in the kingdom of God. I pray for my own eyes to discern what is truly good and what is merely a mirage of goodness. I pray my son is always full of awe and wonder at fresh snow on a bright winter morning.

Dignity Beyond Accomplishment

By Justin Hawkins

> "The examination combines the techniques of an observing hierarchy and those of a normalizing judgment. It is a normalizing gaze, a surveillance that makes it possible to quantify, to classify, and to punish. It establishes over others a visibility through which one differentiates them and judges them." (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*)

On Christmas Day 1999, when she was six years old, my little sister Jenna swallowed a whole jar of diuretic pills. Or rather, she chewed them. She always chews pills like they're candy. And that is probably what she thought they were, lying there on the piano side table at our grandparents' definitely un-childproof house in a leafy Pennsylvania suburb. This was no suicide attempt. Jenna has Down Syndrome, but her cognitive slowness did not ever imply that she was any less adept than other children at briefly escaping the watchful eye of even the most conscientious parents, which mine were and continue to be, and causing plenty of havoc in those brief few unsupervised seconds.

If she had swallowed the pills whole and without chewing, we probably would not have realized it in time to get her to the hospital before the damaging effects of an overdose became visible, and perhaps irreversible. It was only because of the white powder from the chewed-up pills at the corners of her mouth and dusting the front of her brand new Christmas dress, complete with the shoulder pads that late nineties fashion demanded. That white powder led us to the empty bottle of pills, and the empty bottle of pills led to panic. She was taken by an ambulance which, thanks to those willing to work on Christmas Day while the rest of us celebrated at home, arrived promptly. And that is when the real trouble began.

The ambulance drivers, citing "policy," did not want my mother to ride in the ambulance with them on the way to the hospital. But my mother had by then acquired a protective streak she never hesitates to summon in defense of any of her children, let alone her most vulnerable one, Jenna.

Well, then I'll just put her in my car seat in our car and I'll drive behind you to the hospital.

We cannot let you do that; it is against policy and we need to get there quickly.

We'll get there quicker if you just decide that I'm going to come in the ambulance with you, because she is not leaving my sight.

Eventually my mother got her way, as she often does. Maternal watchfulness triumphed over protocol, and she rode in the passenger seat of the ambulance to the hospital, talking to and reassuring an increasingly sick Jenna through the rearview mirror the whole way there.

When they got to the hospital the conflict of wills intensified. The doctors decided to pump charcoal into Jenna's stomach to absorb some of the medicine through a tube in her nose, which was made difficult because Jenna has the flat nose phenotypically common for people with Down Syndrome. One again, the usual practices did not apply. There was little room for Jenna in the best practices of that hospital. Jenna was in need of an IV, but because of her low muscle tone, her veins are difficult to find. The doctors and nurses probed her arm over and over searching for the vein, and when she understandably began to cry from their stabbing, they proceeded to attempt to hold her down.

"She gets bloodwork done all the time. She'll hold her arm out and let you do it if you just talk to her." They never once tried to talk directly to Jenna. And so my mother took Jenna in her lap, told her to hold out her arm like she was used to doing, and the doctors were able to find a vein without problem. My mother's maternal affection did what their attempts at coercion could not do.

That maternal affection took an increasingly and justifiably protective cast throughout Jenna's early development. Her first such bout took place before Jenna was even born, when the unmistakable signs of Down Syndrome were detected in an ultrasound scan and the ultrasound technician brought in a doctor to consult my parents on their options to "deal with it."

Stories like that one are so common that it would likely come as little surprise to any family that has decided to carry a child with Down Syndrome to term that the BBC reported in October 2020 that women were offered abortions up to fifteen times over the course of their pregnancies, even after repeatedly signaling that they did not want the procedure (my own mother recalls being asked five times over the course of fifteen minutes). But her advocacy and protection of Jenna have been constant now for decades, giving the lie to those who suggest that heroism is absent in modernity.

Stories like those reported in the BBC are obviously troubling for those who are pro-life. But they should be a subject of concern even beyond that group. After all, it is beyond question that this practice violates the sacrosanct ideal of non-paternalism on the part of physicians. At the very least, it is a deployment of the authority and mastery of the medical professional over the purported ignorance and

vulnerability of the patient — precisely the sort of power imbalances that Leftists continue regularly to note and decry.

But it would be a mistake to see the problems with the healthcare workers in my story above, or in that BBC story, as reducible simply to the personal prejudices of individual medical practitioners. In fact, the presumption of the undesirability of people with Down Syndrome is woven into the best practices and standards of care for these medical professionals, and likely, into the wider cultural institutions of western society.

There are innumerable ways of categorizing this phenomena. Charles Taylor would say a pre-reflective bias against people with disabilities constitutes the social imaginary of the medical profession. Pope John Paul II, with much more polemical and moral force, would call it a "culture of death." Foucaldians can see here a hint of that regime of normalization that suppresses eccentricity and uniqueness. Liberationists would see here a structural evil. There is, in short, something here that is widely objectionable to a varied group of people, and yet the practice persists—a vestige of a long history of medical discrimination against persons with disabilities.

In his 1973 article, "Mongolism, Parental Desires, and the Right to Life," Christian ethicist James Gustafson takes as his bioethical case study the true story of a child born in 1963, before the advent of the prenatal testing regime. A child was born and diagnosed with an intestinal blockage that could be corrected surgically at very little risk to the child. But that surgery did not take place. The mother refused permission for that operation to take place because she did not want the child on account of the boy having Down Syndrome—referred to at the time as "mongolism," a word that manages to combine ableism and racism in one word by comparing the phenotypically slanted eyes of a person with Down Syndrome to those of people thought to be historically descended from the Mongols. And so, Gustafson reports unceremoniously, "the child was put in a side room and, over an 11-day period, allowed to starve to death." That this is evil is beyond question. What we do not know is whether to be more outraged by the barbarism of this act, or by how recently it was performed.

The remainder of Gustafson's article is an ethical analysis of this series of actions. Ultimately he argues, and rightly, that it was the morally vicious course of action. But the information gathered along the way is revelatory. Take, for instance, when the doctors were asked whether they would go to court to override the parents' wishes if the child did not have Down Syndrome. They responded unanimously that they would, and they gave the following rationale: "When a retarded (sic) child presents us with the same problem, a different value system comes in; and not only does the staff acquiesce in the parent's decision to let the child die, but it's probable that the courts would also. That is, there is a different standard. . . .

There is this tendency to value life on the basis of intelligence. . . . [It's] a part of the American ethic." The doctor quoted here said more than he knew, for by saying that at the heart of the American ethic is a double-standard that values life inequitably based upon intelligence, he meant to justify the hospital's practice, and instead condemned the entire American ethic.

That same social imaginary has changed but little, and it combines now with new screening technology, the universal adoption of which constitutes an existential threat to people with Down Syndrome. This was the central topic of an article published in the December 2020 edition of The Atlantic. It was published under the title "The Last Children of Down Syndrome," a strangely ungrammatical title that performs in microcosm one feature of ethical discourse in liberal democracies: We do not quite know how to speak of the disabled. But at least the article did endeavor to speak of them, and should be lauded for doing so. Nowhere in it is the absence of feeling and moral peril that some conservatives so frequently ascribe to establishment media sources.

The article recounts how prenatal testing in Scandinavia combines with discriminatory views against persons with disabilities in order to render their existence almost completely extinguished. It is comprehensible that Down Syndrome occupies this role; the phenotypic characteristics that accompany it are easy to discover in prenatal testing, and therefore the fetuses carrying them are easy to segregate and eliminate. Yet on the other hand, those who know several people with Down Syndrome—which is rendered increasingly impossible in a society in which they have been almost entirely eradicated—know Down Syndrome to be a disability that admits a wide variety of abilities and functions. Some, commonly those with comorbidities like autism, may never become fully verbal and communicative. But it is common for people with Down Syndrome to learn to read and even to hold a low-skill job. It is nearly universal for them to have relationships of love and affection. None of this can be determined in the womb by the ultrasound wand. The fetus is reduced to one single characteristic—disabled—and jettisoned accordingly.

At the heart of this article is a moral puzzle the difficulty of which emerges from liberal society's commitments both to the rights of the individual and to the particular protection of minoritized groups. The acts discussed here (in this case, abortions of fetuses with Down Syndrome), would not individually be the rightful object of international news attention. But when those individual acts are sufficiently multiplied, the aggregate result is an outcome that is obviously discriminatory and prejudicial against the continued existence of a minority community, which community ought to be the object of care, attention, and protection among the majority population: "Few people speak publicly about wanting to 'eliminate' Down Syndrome. Yet individual choices are adding up to something very close to that."

In other cases that bear those same moral features, we do not hesitate to name such a pattern a structural injustice—that is, an injustice not reducible down simply to any particular prejudice on the part of individuals but which permeates a legal structure, cultural norms, and the social imaginary. We see such structural evils as residues of less-enlightened lawmakers whose errors it is our duty to slough off, a task in which to delay tempts the rightful accusation of complicity. Justice delayed is justice denied. But of course, western societies are not yet at the point of moral development to recognize prenatal testing combined with a regime of abortion on demand as constituting in our moral evaluation what it is in fact: a grave, civilization-defining evil that is the rightful object of moral censure and legislative remedy.

To dramatize this fact, consider the following hypothetical. Imagine that a biological basis for homosexuality were discovered and that our prenatal testing technology advanced to a point where it was possible to reliably detect that biological basis for homosexuality in utero. Imagine then that upon the development and widespread adoption of this technology, birthrates for children with this biological basis for homosexuality began to decline precipitously almost to the point of the near-erasure of that class of people, on account of a newfound ability to abort children with the relevant biological markers and the social prejudice against them by parents who were concerned that homosexual life was somehow deficient and not worth living.

Gay-rights activists would rightly see this as the result of a prejudice against the desirability of a homosexual life. They would seek to alter public opinion about the desirability of a homosexual life in order to undercut the moral imaginary that produces the widespread devaluing of homosexual life. And, here is what is crucial for our purposes, they might go so far as to argue—again, by my intuitions, rightly—that the harms against the class of homosexual persons are so grave that they cannot wait for remedy simply upon the renovation of the moral imaginary, but instead require some kind of legal protection, in the shape of bans on selective abortion of those kinds. The harm here is not just against individual fetuses that are aborted, but against the entire class of persons of which those individual fetuses are members.

The minority model of disability permits us to make this hypothetical parallel. The minority model (sometimes called the Social Model of Disability) holds that the primary problem of persons with disabilities is not medical, but social. According to this model, the primary hurdle to a flourishing life is not some physical handicap, but a society structured in ways that subtly and overtly exclude persons with disabilities from full participation in that societal life. It is this model that influenced the original wording of the Americans with Disabilities Act to describe persons with disabilities as ““a discrete and insular minority,” worthy of particular protections. Without those protections, a society renders those lives less livable, and then deems them less worthy to be lived.

The view that there are lives unworthy of being lived is not a novel one. It appears in a very different context in Socrates's famous Apology, in which he says against his accusers that he has pursued the philosophical life because "the unexamined life is not worth living." It is perhaps the most frequently-quoted phrase from Socrates. It appears on the first day of Introduction to Philosophy courses the world over. Behind it is a germ of insight that has guided humanistic study since Plato recorded it, namely, that human beings are, so far as we know, unique among the creations of the gods that are capable of reflecting upon our actions and guiding them in accordance with Reason, which is our participation in the divine life. Not to apply Reason as the rule to our actions is, therefore, to make us like the beasts rather than like the gods. Therefore, a life lived justly and philosophically is superior to one lived unjustly and instinctively.

But I would like to submit that "a life not worth living" is not a Christian category. It sits strangely next to that great Augustinian principle that being is itself interchangeable with Goodness, and that life is itself the condition of life with God. Therefore life is, in all cases, to be received as a great good, worthy of respect and protection. This Christian belief blocks the subtle implication lurking in Socrates's famous dictum that those who are, because of disability or some accident of history and autobiography, unable to examine their lives thereby forfeit their claim to a good life.

If Socrates was captive to the idea that the practice of philosophy was the condition of a worthy life, America flirts often with captivity to the notion that accomplishment is the condition of a worthy life. Only occasionally are there cracks in this edifice, and one crack in it appears in Zhang's article:

"Stephanie Meredith, the director of the National Center for Prenatal and Postnatal Resources at the University of Kentucky, told me of the time her 20-year-old son saw his sister collide with another player on the basketball court. She hit the ground so hard that an audible crack went through the gym. Before Meredith could react, her son had already leapt from the bleachers and picked his sister up. "He wasn't worried about the rules; he wasn't worried about decorum. It was just responding and taking care of her," Meredith told me.

She had recently been asked a simple but probing question: What was she most proud of about her son that was not an achievement or a milestone? The incident on the basketball court was one that came to mind. "It doesn't have to do with accomplishment," she said. "It has to do with caring about another human being." That question had stayed with Meredith—and it stayed with me—because of how subtly yet powerfully it reframes what parents should value in their children: not grades or basketball trophies or college-acceptance letters or any of the things parents usually brag about.

By doing so, it opens the door to a world less obsessed with achievement. Meredith pointed out that Down syndrome is defined and diagnosed by a medical system made up of people who have to be highly successful to get there, who likely base part of their identity on their intelligence. This is the system giving parents the tools to decide what kind of children to have. Might it be biased on the question of whose lives have value?

This anecdotal evidence supports the common experience of persons with Down Syndrome, and what little empirical research has been performed on them. In what is to my knowledge the only extant study on empathy and virtue acquisition among children with Down Syndrome, researchers found that when placed into an experiment in which a researcher feigned pain to study the responses of children, children with Down Syndrome were more likely than other children to attend and attempt to comfort the researcher than did typically-developing children. Said more colloquially, their social intuitions were inordinately attuned to the care and consolation of the injured than were the intuitions of any other group studied.

Zhang herself reflects on the frequency with which people replied to her investigation into Down Syndrome with surprise at what they are able to accomplish in spite of their disabilities:

I can’t count how many times, in the course of reporting this story, people remarked to me, “You know, people with Down syndrome work and go to college now!” This is an important corrective to the low expectations that persist and a poignant reminder of how a transforming society has transformed the lives of people with Down syndrome. But it also does not capture the full range of experiences, especially for people whose disabilities are more serious and those whose families do not have money and connections. Jobs and college are achievements worth celebrating—like any kid’s milestones—but I’ve wondered why we so often need to point to achievements for evidence that the lives of people with Down syndrome are meaningful.

My suspicion is that the reason Zhang’s acquaintances reply by grounding the worthiness of a human life in its accomplishments is because that is the way we meritocrats conceive of ourselves. We are habituated to a world of accomplishment and competition, and consequently have very little intuitive comprehension of a life largely devoid of those.

The subtle implication that dignity adheres not to life but to accomplishment showed up again just a few days before Zhang’s article. The New York Times reported on Chris Nikic, who recently became the first person with Down Syndrome to complete a full Ironman Triathlon. At the crucial moment of the race, Nikic “summoned a well of patient, hopeful perseverance—along with the energizing power of the

simple vision he had set for his life." We are familiar with these themes: willpower, dream-chasing, goal-setting. As is so often the case in sports, the physical achievement is a metaphor for something larger: "Chris Nikic knew this wasn't only about finishing an Ironman, but about showing himself what he could achieve in the future. His own home. Independence. A wife as kind and beautiful as his mother."

But the aspirations Nikic articulates here are ones that, because of the limitations posed both by the handicaps that accompany Down Syndrome, and because of the continued prejudices against those with Down Syndrome, might never come into being. If they come into being for Chris, that is no indication that it will come true for others with Down Syndrome. The American dream of homeownership, independence, marriage does not happen for many Americans. It is the logic of merit and accomplishment, not the logic of grace, that convinces us that dignity attaches to those things.

At their best, liberal societies are able to distinguish between a baseline moral standing that every human being possesses by virtue of their humanity (commonly called "dignity"), and the special recognition that accompanies excellence of achievement (commonly called "honor" or "glory" or "praise"). Allowing these two systems of evaluation to work side-by-side prevents equality from lapsing into homogeneity and dignity from being contingent upon excellence or achievement. But in a world that prizes accomplishment over existence, those unable to perform the former will come to be seen as unworthy of the latter.

This is the difficulty of framing Nikic's story as a triumph of the indomitable will. Stories like these are important correctives to the invisibility and misunderstanding that mark the position of persons with Down Syndrome in modern America. However, left intact by such stories is the suspicion that worth and dignity adhere to accomplishment, but it just turns out that those with disabilities are able to accomplish more than we thought they might. These examples are inspiring, but they have the nefarious side-effect of implicitly suggesting that those with disabilities who do not run marathons or complete an Ironman do so not because of their congenital heart defects or the absence of a social support network, but because they did not work as hard as they could have, they did not pursue their vision with undoubting singleness of mind. Meritocracy is content to accept occasional visitors if only they are willing to shore up the logic of meritocracy. That is why many disability advocates call such stories "inspiration porn," a term coined in a Ted Talk by Stella Young:

I use the term 'porn' deliberately, because they objectify one group of people for the benefit of one group of people. So in this case, we are objectifying disabled people for the benefit of non-disabled people. The purpose of these images is to inspire you, to motivate you, so you can look at these images

and think ‘well, however bad my life is, it could be worse. I could be that person.’ But what if you are that person?

As an alternative to the notion that dignity and worth adhere to accomplishment, consider the little-known The Congratulations Project. The Congratulations Project is overseen by the PALS program, which creates summer camp experiences for people with Down Syndrome. Each camper is paired with a volunteer (their “pal”) for the duration of the camp. They go to the beach, play sports, ride roller coasters, sing karaoke. One small part of the weeklong camp offers campers with Down Syndrome the opportunity to write letters of congratulations to families who have recently received a prenatal diagnosis of Down Syndrome. The logic behind this project is stated in the Congratulations Project book itself:

When a baby is diagnosed with Down Syndrome, parents are confronted with coping strategies, given statistics, and often told ‘I’m sorry.’ This book contains handwritten, original letters from individuals with Down syndrome to expecting or new parents whose baby has received the same diagnosis. They all begin with the same, simple message: congratulations.

The Congratulations Project is not explicitly Christian, but it is implicitly theological. The notion that the proper first word at the existence of new life is only and always “congratulations” flows from the deep intuition that life is itself a gift worthy of celebration, that existence is resplendent in glory visible even through the misty-eyes of heartbreak and disappointment. God’s first word over humanity is “good.” Camp PALS’s first word over new humanity is “congratulations.”

Jenna’s letter for the Congratulations Project goes like this:

> Dear parent,
>
> Congratulations on your new baby! My name is Jenna Hawkins and I am (sic) camper at camp PALS. I am proud of being an aunt to my new nephew, Wesley. I like to swim like a mermaid, color, and watch movies. In the future, I want to be a fashion designer and get married. I love my life because of the friends I have made at church and camp PALS. My faith is very important to me. I have faith that you will have a happy family just like I do.
>
> Sincerely,

> Jenna

Jenna had to have her stomach pumped to expel those diuretic pills from her system. She and my mother spent Christmas night in the hospital under the observation of the doctors whose skill and whose medical technology made her full recovery possible. The same medical system structured by intuitions and technologies that might easily have been deployed against her life roused instead to save it. So it is in the ambiguous world where the badness of sin and the goodness of creation intermix all the way down. She was transferred by ambulance to the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia (CHOP) where my mother slept in her bed with her overnight, and was discharged and sent home the next day.

She turned twenty-seven this past December. She will love that I told her story here, and that you have read it, for two reasons. The trivial reason is that she, like many other sinners, loves attention far too much. The second reason is the more substantive: she loves her life. She loves her life even though she will, like most Americans, never finish an Ironman. But that does not finally matter. Human life is good and worthy of dignity not because of accomplishment, but simply because it is loved into being by God. Jenna loves her life. In this, she is our teacher.

How Do Our Kids Stay Christian?

By Cameron Shaffer

How do our kids stay Christian? Some version of this question has animated both scholarly and pastoral discussion over the last several years, especially as the great dechurching marches on unabated. This is not merely an academic question, but one that has kept younger parents anxious as they watch more and more of their peers turn away from the faith.

Of course, it is the Holy Spirit sovereignly acting as he wills that keeps people abiding in Christ. And of course, God who ordains the salvation of his children has also ordained the regular means of bringing about that salvation, specifically the word, sacraments, and prayer. But how should the church approach those gifts in regards to the discipleship of its children? And what steps can the church take to maintain its children's faithfulness as they grow into adulthood?

Several recent works have provided invaluable insight into this dilemma, the most important of which is Handing Down the Faith: How Parents Pass Their Religion to the Next Generation (2021) by Amy Adamczyk and Christian Smith. Adamczyk and Smith looked at the religious landscape of North America over the last few decades and came to a simple conclusion: the communities that were most effective at handing down their religion were those that prioritized faith in the family home.

That might not sound earth-shattering, but it corroborated decades of sociological research showing that things like Sunday School, youth group, VBS, Christian camps, confirmation, and youth conferences are either minimally consequential to the maintenance of a child's faith or in some cases actually counterproductive. Sociologists of religion have known for some time that these programs, while they feel nice, are led by earnest people, and have some anecdotal success stories, are ineffective for passing along the Christian faith. The British educational reformer Charlotte Mason commented in Parents and Children (1897) that Sunday School, then a recent innovation, was a necessary evil. Sunday School was created for parents who were unable to do their "first duty" of instructing their children in the faith and needed a substitute to step into that role for them. The church embracing this model led to decline in faith transmission.

Lyman Stone at the Institute for Family Studies recently demonstrated that secularization begins at home. This was also shown in a 2017 Lifeway study, by Stephen Bullivant in Nonverts: The Making of Ex-Christian America (2023), and by Jim Davis and Michael Graham in The Great Dechurching (2023).

If kids born to Christian parents are to grow up Christian, they need to be raised as Christians by their parents. All of these books and resources provide parenting guidance. But where does this leave the church?

If secularization begins at home and parental investment is the primary indicator of a child's future faith, what should the church do? How should it prioritize its resources, especially when many churches heavily invest in programs that, frankly, are ineffective in producing disciples?

Authoritative Parenting

Parents are far-and-away the greatest influence on children's faith development and retention. Churches should overwhelmingly prioritize in their strategies and resource-allocation (i.e. staffing, programs, volunteer focus) reaching and discipling parents to raise godly children. This is, after all, what parenting fundamentally is: fathers and mothers teaching their children to grow in maturity as they imitate their parents who, in turn, are imitating Jesus.

It's critical that parents teach the Bible and catechize their children in the articles of the faith, of course, but alone this is insufficient. Christianity is taught, not caught, but how it is taught affects whether kids hold onto it. Parents who successfully inculcate steadfast faith and love of God joyfully demonstrate the importance of their own faith on a daily basis.

Is the faith of parents sincere? Do they value and talk about their faith? Does it visibly inform their decisions? Does faith characterize their regular, daily behavior and conversations, or is it compartmentalized to worship services and being around church people? Do they acknowledge their shortcomings without hypocrisy? Do parents clearly love God? Do they delight in Jesus?

Adamczyk and Smith found parents whose faith is the warp and woof of their lives are the parents who pass along that faith. After all, that concept of a life of faith is what God commands in the Shema (Deuteronomy 6:4-9): The words of God will be on your heart, and you shall diligently teach them to your kids, talking about them around the house, when you're in the car, when you're getting ready for the day and preparing to go to bed. When kids truly believe that faith matters for their parents, they believe it should matter to them.

The danger for children is parents who believe and either don't expect anything of their kids on the one hand, or are tyrannical and overbearing about it on the other. Adamczyk and Smith discovered that an authoritative parenting style is most effective at raising children to faithful maturity. This approach

maintains high expectations for kids, but in a home and parental relationship that can be honestly described as “warm” rather than rule or discipline-oriented. Being loosie-goosey (they’ll figure out and make faith their own) or overbearing are equally damaging to a child’s faith. As Anthony Bradley is fond of pointing out, kids don’t rebel against joy.

This is what Davis and Graham found in The Great Dechurching. The kids who held onto their faith were able to have conversations with their parents about faith that were sincere (the parents knew their faith and believed it) and humble (the parents were confident, not self-focused, defensive, or belligerent about the kids’ questions and hesitations about the faith). Parents don’t need to be geniuses or theologians, but should know what they believe, believe it, and be confidently humble.

The church can prioritize childhood discipleship first by encouraging parents to take the airplane-oxygen mask approach. Are parents being taught the faith so that they may have something to believe in themselves? Are parents being encouraged to be diligent in their own discipleship? Are they being given tools to teach and catechize their own children? Are they showing their kids that faith and worship matter into adulthood, not just as concepts, but as committed practices?

Second, is the church providing not only content to parents, but models? Throughout the New Testament the leaders of the church are exhorted to model following Jesus to their congregations. Parenting style is a non-negotiable requirement on pastoral and elder job descriptions. Are the leaders of the church modeling sincere, confident, and humble discussions of the faith? A joyous approach to kids? If the pastors and elders of the church are not doing this, the parents in the church will struggle to as well. Leaders need to model to parents, especially to fathers, warmth, firmness, joy, and patience and take proactive steps to teach that.

Third, is the church encouraging the formation of community and friendships among the adults of the church? Doing this helps ensure that faith is seen as a joyous (friendship!) part of life, not a burden. It provides a community to help encourage one another (keep that oxygen mask on) and communicates to kids that their parents take their own discipleship seriously. If parents take their own discipleship seriously, their kids will as well.

The church’s message and service to parents should be: Don’t outsource teaching the faith, take this up yourself. Take your own faith seriously, hold your kids to a high standard, and be warm and open with them.

Incorporation, not Accommodation.

If you want kids in your church to grow up Christian, then include them in the church's corporate worship.

This is one of the greatest influences on faith retention, though not nearly as high as direct parental and family influence. But these two things go hand-in-hand: if children are segregated from the rest of the church in worship, including their parents, the value of worship to their parents is hidden from kids in their formative stages. Rather than accommodating children, churches ought to strive for their incorporation.

Parents prioritizing corporate worship with and in front of their kids communicates the value of faith to their children. A common example that makes this point: Parents have no problem passing down their sport loyalty. Their kids become fans of teams or schools long before they ever have a chance to reason through which team they should support. The love of the team is taught by their parent's enthusiasm and caught by the children. And when parents watch games they don't send the kids out of the room or to a different, segregated section of the stadium: they watch together. And just because the kids don't understand all the rules doesn't mean they're not really rooting for their team.

Worship is the same. When children witness their parents worshiping, and worship God alongside them, the gospel is taught and kids catch the love of God. Fathers and mothers worshiping God with their children is the demonstration that what is said the rest of the week has merit, that it really is believed. Otherwise it's like talking up a team but never watching the game.

And of course this is what we see in scripture. The youngest kids, even the nursing infants, are present for the corporate worship of God, including the exposition of God's word. This is both an Old Testament and New Testament reality and expectation. When worship is first thought of as the transferal of information, then having young children present runs counter to our programmatic age. But when worship is properly understood as a covenantal encounter between God and his people, then including his youngest saints in worship makes complete sense. After all, to such belong the kingdom of heaven, and in meeting Jesus in kingdom worship alongside their parents, the children of the church receive his blessing and are transformed as they grow more and more into his image.

So how should churches approach this? First, churches need to make it abundantly and enthusiastically clear that children of all ages are welcomed and wanted in worship. The cries of infants and fidgeting toddlers are the sounds of God building his church. Pastors need to make clear to the congregation that these noises are not a distraction from corporate worship, but part of it, even during the sermon.

Parents should be encouraged and supported when their kids are in the service with them. Beyond the explicit affirmation that children are welcome in worship, the church can provide practical things to help children grow in attentiveness and discipline, like pew cards for parents, coloring pages related to the sermon, teaching aids for children and their parents, occasional direct addresses to the children from the pulpit, and regular encouragement to parents to keep at it. Fussy and wiggly kids in worship are not a failure, but part of the family of God growing together.

Christianity is caught because it's taught, and should be taught clearly in the worship service. The instinct is to dumb down the service or sermon to accommodate kids, but pastors should not talk down to the children. They are being invited into something meaningful and deep, where they meet God, and they are expected to exercise their minds and spiritual muscles alongside their parents. Nor should churches underestimate what is grasped as kids learn the rhythms of the gospel and the words of scripture; kids are sponges, after all, and the amount they learn from an "adult" sermon is often surprising. But most of all, worship of God in the church is an act of faith. Worship and faith belong to children, and when these characterize their lives, starting at the smallest age, it is theirs for life. Worship of God in the church is not something that you graduate into once you mature, but the place where God forms the spiritual habits of even his littlest saints.

The Church is a Family

A high school student in my church once approached me because she wanted to invest more deeply in the church and grow in her faith. Unfortunately, her parents were completely uninterested in anything more than a superficial religiosity and she felt unsupported in her Christian walk. Every pastor has had some version of this experience, which is both exciting (she wants to grow in faith!) and frustrating (her parents are disengaged). In light of what we know about how faith is passed on, what should the church do now?

The most important biblical metaphor for the church — a family — is not actually a metaphor. The church is the family and household of God, and our call is to act as a surrogate family (e.g. Mark 10:28-31) to those who come through our doors who are without their own natural family. This is the third meaningful characteristic of children who hold onto faith: participating in a community of faith that interacts with and supports one another throughout the week.

The people of the church spending time together is essential for forming a community of faith that has lasting effects. For kids, teenagers especially, the best way the church can leverage this is by having faithful parents of the church hosting the children of the church in their homes. Simply spending time

with them is huge, and is a way for children with absent parents to mature in the faith. Do the children of the church know the family of fathers and mothers? Do they know they're loved? The adults of the church acting as surrogate parents to kids is the best way to cultivate and protect the faith of kids whose parents are not invested in Christianity. This is a critical way that older adults — whether they still have their own kids at home or not, whether they are childless or not — can invest in the teens and kids of the church.

The church's mission and purpose are familial: gathering together in communion and fellowship. In worship the greatest expression of this is the Christians' family dinner, the Lord's Supper. But the mission and purpose of God's family is also found in living life together before the face of God. The fellowship of the saints is an essential article of the Christian faith, and a simple way of having saintly-family fellowship is sharing meals and time together.

In practice, what this means is that having kids present at a vibrant fellowship hour is more effective in passing down the faith than either Sunday School or youth group programs. Being together, and enjoying being together, in worship and throughout the week forms kids into this community of faith.

So, what should churches do? Encourage faithful parents and adults to know the children of the church. Interact with the kids of the church, especially outside of classrooms. Adults and parents and families of the church should open up their homes throughout the week and host the kids there.

What about classes and youth groups? Every congregation should be grateful to the faithful people who have volunteered to teach and serve the kids of the church. That is a godly and virtuous commitment and should be honored. However, there is a spiritual danger in these kinds of programs. Adamczyk and Smith found that when classes, like confirmation, Sunday School, or youth group, are treated like something from which you need to progress and graduate, then children are likely to "graduate" from the church as a whole. Similar to how once a student completes driver's education and receives a license they don't keep going back to driver's ed, classes like these can implicitly teach kids and families that once they've completed them and received their basic spiritual skillset there's really no more need for the church.

How is this danger avoided? Primarily through incorporating kids into the greater life of the church and stressing that the whole life of the church is for formation.

Sunday School and youth groups still have some uses. The first is what sociologists call "channeling": parents who are committed to the faith of their kids use classes as channels to invest and build up the

faith of their kids. To be clear then, the value of these classes is downstream of and effective because of parents who are already committed to their kids' faith.

Second, as Charlotte Mason put it, Sunday School (or its equivalent) may be a necessary evil. Kids may not stay in worship or be incorporated into the greater life of the church and parents may not be teaching their kids. And we live in a matrilineal society; families may not come to churches without classes or youth groups, and sometimes these programs can be useful on-ramps, like missionary outposts. In this case the value of the classes is for the church to have an initial contact point in order to better direct families and kids to more effective routes for faith transmission.

For the church there are several principles that should be followed: First, fight to keep the cart and horse properly arranged. Parental guidance at home, kids present in worship, and the greater church as God's surrogate family, not programs, are indispensable tools for passing along the faith. Programs are easy and expected in American evangelicalism, life and fussy kids are hard, and congregants and parents default to taking the easy and known way. Programs can become political and sacred cows, yet are unnecessary, ineffective on their own terms, and potentially counterproductive. If your church wants them to be helpful at all, it needs to prioritize these other areas. The church needs to keep its messaging about faith transmission on point and hold the programs as dispensable.

Second, get parents and seasoned, godly adults to lead in Sunday School, catechetical classes, and youth group. Regardless of content (and youth groups should give up gimmicks), having spiritually mature parents and adults forming relationships with youth is the most important contribution of these programs. Peer-to-peer friendships are good and fine, but passing down the faith happens best in a family context. Encourage gatherings to take place in homes around meals. The ministry framework for youth group should not be about teens having their own niche, but about greater incorporation into the family of the church.

Redeeming Neverland: The Question of Shame & the Crisis of Agency Facing Modern Men

By Brad Edwards

J. M. Barrie first wrote Peter Pan as a play in 1904, expanding it into a full novel in 1911. Nothing he wrote before or since would ever come close to sparking such popular reception. It tapped into and articulated the tension of a society in the throes of rapid social change and economic reordering. British Imperialism's assumed stability shuddered in the face of America's rise to power on the global stage. Though Britain was technically victorious, the South African War (1899-1902) offered Great Britain both a disturbing preview of WWI and a painful illustration of the consequences in being slow to adapt to rapid technological advancement. Combining the dated tactics of the muzzle-loading era with breach-loading rifles led only to carnage. A growing fear of national decline was palpable, with its attendant implications spreading through British society.

The original play's subtitle, "The Boy Who Refused To Grow Up," encapsulated both a conflicted nostalgia for the passing Victorian Era and an anxious uncertainty of what the emerging Edwardian Age would hold. The world that was (Hook) no longer is, but what will be (Pan) is yet-unclear, with British men caught in an economic, cultural, and political crucible not unlike the liminality of our own cultural moment.

To mark the 70th Anniversary of their animated classic, Peter Pan, Disney is releasing a live-action remake, Peter Pan and Wendy. While I'm looking forward to seeing Jim Gaffigan in the role of Mr. Smee, it is highly unlikely to resonate with a new generation of young men. The most dark and honest themes of Barrie's original work will undoubtedly be either cut or as kiddified as the animated version it celebrates the anniversary of. And if so, it will tragically miss an invaluable opportunity to offer hope to a modern generation of boys and men in crisis.

Men, Masculinity, and Culture Wars

For reasons largely outside of their control, boys and young men are falling through society's cracks at alarming rates. This is happening so consistently and comprehensively that men are now imminently facing an even greater educational disadvantage and disparity in workforce representation than women have since Title IX passed in 1972. In an article focused on the friendlessness and despair facing modern

men, David French shows that the disappearance of vocational outlets has left men with a crisis of meaning, purpose, and community — one greatly worsened by the collapse of institutional safety nets that historically mitigated the pain of similar socio-economic shifts.

Parallels abound between the Late Victorian Era and Late Modernity, but they end with the start of WWI (at least for now). The first Industrial Age conflict violently accelerated transition across Western society. Albeit at catastrophic cost, it also provided an outlet for young British men floundering in transition, “adventure” equipping them with patriotic meaning and purpose. We may be living through a period of similarly seismic erosion of consensus, but God forbid we become desperate enough to view war as a viable solution to modern liminality.

What are modern men to do when our culture provides vanishingly few realistic or socially acceptable outlets for men longing to matter and eager to prove it. What aspiration is left for men when the Left believes your sex is irredeemably depraved and the Right gives participation trophies for being born with a penis?

I too would rather take flight with happy thoughts or play the pirate king of a fictional paradise than fight over equally dishonest utopias. Like all escapist fantasies, anti-visions require nothing of those preoccupied by them except to conceptually “be against” the other. It’s an easy, distracting fantasy. But our modern culture wars and the anti-visions fueling them are not innocent distractions. A false 911 call is a felony because it draws life-saving attention and resources away from actual needs.

Dehumanizing legalism (on the Left) and empty caricatures (on the Right) make no meaningful impact on the existential realities of men and succeed only in compounding the existential crisis lurking beneath the economic and educational one.

The Existential Crisis of Unanswered Shame

Thanks in large part to Brené Brown’s popularization, many people finally have some language to describe the pool we’ve been swimming in — shame. But being aware that we’re drowning in shame isn’t the same as being equipped or skilled to wisely answer it (especially theologically), and Brown almost exclusively focuses on negative or toxic shame. Shame can be healthy. It functions as a guardrail to our most socially damaging inclinations (e.g. adultery or child neglect). Its absence can be disastrous to families, communities, and cultures, but shame-as-social-consequence is, on its own, limited in affecting long-term transformation.

To be “shameless” is not a complement. It describes someone who selfishly ignores social guardrails at the expense of their community (either knowingly or foolishly). Yet only sociopaths reach that point due to a true absence of shame. Counter-intuitively, it is when an over-saturation of shame accumulates and metastasizes, that we simply stop caring about social consequences. We become shameless when shame overwhelms our capacity to attend to it, resolve it, or both. We, men and women alike, will slide into shamelessness if we believe we no longer have any standing left to lose. Once shame reaches that tipping point within a person or community, it flips from guardrail to jet fuel, empowering the very social ill it was leveraged to mitigate.

Shame is the fear of insignificance, the lived experience of finitude (healthy) and/or not-mattering (unhealthy). Biblically, it is the opposite of “doxa,” or “glory” (also translated as “weight/significance”). Kids subjected to verbal abuse, or who are repeatedly shamed for minor infractions start to assume it’s true because it’s easier than being haunted by the question of whether it is or not. Anyone who has adopted or cared for foster children knows how much time and effort it takes to answer shame’s narrative with one of enough-ness and beloved-ness. If you are always a burden to those around you, why bother trying?

Richard Reeves points out in his new book, Of Boys and Men: Why The Modern Male Is Struggling, Why it Matters, and What To Do About It, that the two most common words men use to describe themselves are “useless” and “worthless.” “Well, if this supposedly is who I am,” men say to ourselves, “then why shouldn’t I (watch pornography/have an affair/embezzle money/binge digital entertainment)?” I encountered no narrative more consistent while screening soldiers for PTSD as a Chaplain in the Army National Guard. Over 9 years, I counseled over 50 soldiers with suicidal ideations, six of which culminated in a formal intervention (a medical 72-hour hold). All of them were warriors fighting demons of fear and despair, but stunningly only one of them suffered due to combat-related trauma.

Arguably, the most toxic aspects of modern masculinity are behaviors of despair — symptoms of deep insecurity and prolonged experience of not-belonging. As one of the few remaining institutions still seen as trustworthy, young men often gravitate toward the military as a means of overcoming insecurity through an even greater belonging. Many men enlist to flee their demons, but they never stop fighting them.

Contrary to their reputation as angry task-masters, Drill Instructors intuitively function as paternal glory-surgeons. They know, intuitively if not consciously, that when we puritanically tell men “be better” without believing they can be (never mind mentoring them in that journey), we empower the deep-

seeded shame and insecurity that produced it in the first place. But shame's insecurity, when answered with another's authoritative reassurance of significance ("glory"), becomes the fertile soil of transformation. Apart from glory's surgical renarration of the soul, shame will fester until not-mattering becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

That is the existential crisis facing men, and the context for why it's being ignored.

The Left's Lost Boys and Cultural Shame

No one epitomizes the Left's anti-vision of masculinity's toxic excess more than John Wayne. Let's avoid the minefield of whether that is fair or accurate, and assume for the sake of argument that I actually agree that he personifies toxic masculinity, that I also want to see a more kind, humble, and Christ-like servanthood to characterize modern men. So why isn't that happening?

Predating Kristin Kobes Du Mez's wildly popular book by three years, Stephen Metcalf traced a surprising thread through John Wayne's career — being bullied.

That's right. The man's man who ain't never took no lip from nobody was relentlessly and publicly shamed by John Ford, the man who discovered and molded him into the silver screen's no-nonsense, gruff-talking stoic. Ford was apparently "savage in his mistreatment of Wayne" who so passively took it on the chin that others on set would have to step in to defend him.

Yes, we are indeed talking about the same John Wayne.

What's even more surprising is why Ford bullied him: Wayne wasn't man enough. To Ford, he was a floating signifier, a malleable vessel to project his idealized masculinity into. As much (twisted) Drill Instructor as Film Director, Ford wasn't satisfied with merely shaping Wayne's performance, he had to remake Wayne himself into his own (imagined) swashbuckling image. It was a projection birthed from his own unaddressed shame, even self-hatred, over what he saw as feminine attributes he longed to purge.

Like John Ford, James Hook relentlessly sought to purge Peter Pan from Neverland after losing both his hand and his significance in a sword fight with a child. Shame is ever the domain of the bully. And, to the degree that it directs his aspirations, one to which he is utterly enslaved (and compensating for). Prescient of the masculinity crisis that has grown over the last decade, Metcalf sees Wayne's transformation as a cautionary tale:

Masculinity as puerile male bonding, as toxic overcompensation and status jockeying—this is what's unleashed when masculinity no longer has an obvious function. Divorced from social purpose, "being a man" becomes merely symbolic. (emphasis mine)

If many on the Left want to actively encourage men to LARP as pirates and spread juvenile masculinity, then they should simply continue doing exactly as they are. To stunt all expressions of masculine strength — both healthy and toxic — is a doomed strategy, and one increasingly transparent in its goal of role reversal rather than real equality. This puritanical impulse simply genders depravity in the opposite direction, shutting down even healthy masculine expression for a counterfeit (i.e. "worthless" and "useless").

Without affirmation of worth or aspiration to grow, shame begets shame. We will never shame men into better behavior, but that's a hard pill to swallow for those who are themselves shaped by the toxic shame of cancel culture. If all you have is a hammer (shame) you'll see every problem as a nail. The direction we swing that hammer, whether Ford's bullying of Wayne toward caricature, or society's use of caricature to gender depravity, is wholly irrelevant. Both are shameful hyperbole. Neither resolve unanswered shame.

Wayne tolerated mistreatment only because he longed for Ford's approval. He needed it. And according to Metcalf, he got it. Personal mentorship and inclusion within Ford's inner circle were powerful infusions of worth and belonging offered to an insecure young man. That need to belong is real and was somehow critically lacking in Wayne's formative years (or at least, I assume it was considering what he endured to achieve it). It is a valid need almost universally neglected by the modern Left.

We shouldn't be surprised that one lost in a desert will be less than discerning of mud's drinkability. Neither should we be surprised when men adrift at sea slake their thirst on the only (salt) water available to them. For Wayne, the facade of significance was better than nothing. Likewise, Neverland's false glory is an understandable temptress to men lacking purpose or starving for significance.

The Right's Pirate Kings and Vain-Glory

In a sermon entitled "Young Men and Their Strength" from September, 2020, Moscow ID pastor Douglas Wilson articulates an acute awareness of how cultural dynamics have intensified and sensitized men to shame:

Our culture has a real hostility to genuine masculinity and because of that, we don't want to bring our additional contempt on masculinity… We'd only be pouring gasoline on these cultural fires if we bring

along any additional contempt. (emphasis added)

Wilson plays “good cop” to culture’s “bad cop,” and effectively so. He positions himself and those who think similarly as a refuge for the persecuted and misunderstood male. This isn’t malicious. After all, Jesus offered refuge to many ostracized by impoverished culture or oppressed by legalistic religion. What could be more noble or biblical?

In the same sermon, Wilson defines “godly masculinity” as “the glad assumption of sacrificial responsibility.” I’d prefer “glad acceptance” to reinforce that sacrificial responsibility is ordinarily bestowed by others (and God, ultimately), and is therefore entrusted and received rather than entitled or presumed. Still, that short definition offers shame-burdened men a genuinely worthwhile telos, an aspiration of real significance to men feeling trapped by shame both culturally- and self-imposed.

However, it is my hesitation at his use of “assumption” rather than “acceptance” that illustrates where Wilson’s masculinity goes astray: no aspiration is independent of its path, and no end is unshaped by its means. Wilson’s admirable and biblical aspiration of “sacrificial responsibility” is nevertheless corrupted by its means. When masculine strength assumes responsibility it is not entrusted with it becomes functionally presumptive and entitled. Responsibility with presumption as its genesis can’t help but become self-serving and vain. Complementarian ends through patriarchal means is neither complementarian nor Christlike. At best, it is extremely difficult to arrive at a virtuous stewardship of masculine strength or agency. At its worst, “glad assumption” becomes a Trojan horse smuggling selfishness through the gate of “sacrificial responsibility,” reducing masculinity to performative means and counterfeit ends.

In Barrie’s novel, Hook designed and fabricated his own cigar holder so he could smoke two at the same time. In a video thick with irony, Wilson uses his cigar to ignite a field soaked in gasoline poured in the shape of a very pirate-like skull and crossed pencils. You can’t make this up.

Wilson, of course, is only one of a variety of dissident conservative male figures in media with a large and enthusiastic audience of young men. Many of these figures resonate with young men because they (falsely) promise young men something they truly are not getting elsewhere: meaning-full mentorship. Young men resonate with the parade of Captain Hook cosplays because they’re desperate for guidance that affirms and guides their strength rather than fears it or shames them for it. They resonate for the same reasons Hook did a hundred years ago: they personify a pride in masculine strength that is increasingly deemed irrelevant by modernity or taboo by society.

Pirate Kings thus meet Drag Queens on the culture war battlefield. Visions enslaved to antithesis, they each become the caricature of masculinity their nemesis derides. Two different flavors of gendered relativism, they're mobilized to either break (Pirate Kings) or fortify (Drag Queens) the front lines of gendered depravity.

It is a masculinity neither theological nor cultural, but something simultaneously alchemical and therapeutic. By flipping the script on toxic masculinity — voila! — shame's lead becomes glory's gold. For men bullied to exhaustion by incessant cultural reminders of not measuring up yet still fighting the temptation of succumbing to shamelessness, the false promise that our accumulated shame is actually confirmation (you're doing it right) rather than condemnation (you're never enough) is one hell of a siren's song.

Pyrite masculinity is every bit the fool's gold that pirate masculinity is false glory: imitation of something good and real, yet impotent to transform the substance of shame. As Alastair Roberts wrote over five years ago, "Faced with the pathologization of any actual manliness in much of the culture, a simulation of masculinity may be the best many can muster." Performative masculinity isn't victory over shame, it's a dressed up SOS of the lost. That so many image-bearers settle for counterfeit glory rather than its substance should provoke the conscience of Christian men and women alike.

And if it doesn't, we call that shamelessness.

The Problem With Neverland Masculinities

Neverland was an appropriate (if ironic) battleground for Captain Hook and Peter Pan, enabling one to live in anachronistic denial of reality and the other to escape within do-no-harm refusal of aspiration. With swords digital rather than fictional, via "based" chad memes or policing "problematic" language, we can flee reality's pressure and shame's despair for a make-believe that promises mattering without maturity.

Neverland's fantasy, in other words, is that men can give up on growing up (Lost Boys on the Left) or just pretend to (Pirate Kings on the Right). But the more we LARP as either Lost Boy or Pirate King and the more we confuse virtual pugilism for masculine virtue, the more impotent our capacity to exercise flesh and blood responsibility becomes. Of course Neverland is easier! Who doesn't long to be part of a grand story with an endless supply of (online) villains where the good guys always win?

That’s the tell. That’s how we know Neverland is too familiar, too unserious, and too alchemical to be the “far-off land” worth fighting for:

“If Christianity (or its masculinity) could tell me no more of the far-off land than my own temperament led me to surmise already, then Christianity (or masculinity) would be no higher than myself. If it has more to give me, I expect it to be less immediately attractive than “my own stuff.” — C.S. Lewis, The Weight of Glory [parentheticals and emphasis mine]

The very first line of Peter Pan is an ominous one: “All children, except one, grow up.” “Growing up” is more than aging, more than growing a beard, or more even than simply having responsibility. Without meaningful aspiration, Lost Boys will remain lost. Without glory’s inoculation of shame, masculinity will be reduced to performance dressed-up with double cigar holders. Neither are a sufficient Muse to virtue or character. Neither rescue men from this existential crisis, nor do they deliver more than momentary relief from shame.

What then, shall men do?

Well, we actually do need to fight. But we need to relearn both why we fight (not to resolve our shame) and how we fight (to steward our strength).

Shame’s Question and Glory’s Giggle

I have been prepared to talk to my son about bullies for longer than he has drawn breath. Nothing is more motivating to get that right than being bullied and (though he tried, truly) your own dad not being able to provide an answer to the shame it induced. Still, I was definitely not prepared to do so during his first semester of kindergarten.

Another kid in his class had punched our son in the face on the playground. The aide (thankfully) handled it flawlessly, but she couldn’t get much more out of them than that. Knowing my son has a very sensitive conscience, I canceled plans and settled in to draw out the full story without compounding any guilt or shame he might be carrying.

I felt a very different kind of burden on my conscience. It was the acute awareness of my responsibility to help my son meet this moment with virtue, to help him take some of a boy’s first steps in growing up. I aspire to be the “Intentional Father” Jon Tyson describes in his book by the same name, to imperfectly teach my son and model that “a man is an image bearer and son of God with power and the responsibility to relate, cultivate, and defend, for God’s glory and the good of others.”

I explained to my son that this was the first of many important conversations we were going to have about what it means to grow up into a young man. I assured him he was loved, not in trouble, and wouldn't be no matter what he said. It took a bit, but he shared (and we later confirmed) that the other kid started it but he didn't know why. The other kid ended up on top of my son and hit him "twice, but probably three times." He was free with details up until I asked him what made the other kid stop. I suspected he hit the kid back and was probably worried I'd be upset with him.

To say that I had a whole script for this moment is an understatement, but it assumed (perhaps naively) he'd be in at least 2nd or 3rd grade before having to break it out. How do I explain that men distinctly bear God's image when and as we sacrificially steward our power or strength for the good of others to a kindergartner? I still don't know, but I gave it my best shot.

"Son, why did God make us strong?"

Huh?

I explained that good men ask themselves that question when someone is using their strength in bad ways. To help him learn how to steward his strength, I came up with a simple call and response. Question: "Why did God make us strong?" Response: "To help people and keep them safe." After we practiced it a few times, I continued…

"That means that if someone is hitting you, here's what I want you to do… You ready? I want you hit them as hard as you can until they stop."

At this point he gave me a look that was a combination of nervous, confused, and… hope? I pressed on, telling him that as soon as they stop, you stop. Immediately. Not one moment (or one punch) later. We don't ever use our strength against someone because we're mad or because they deserve it. That's what little kids do, not young men. I promised him that if he does as I've asked, if he aspires to stewarding his strength as I described, I will never ever be mad at him. Only proud. Proud that he used his God-given strength to keep himself and others safe.

All that said, I asked again if he hit him back.

After a brief flash of panic, he admitted that he hit him back, "but just one time" because he didn't want to get in trouble. I repeatedly and emphatically assured him that I was so proud of him, that he was not in trouble even a little bit. And yes, of course we can talk as long as he wants to because he matters to his dad. And I was so sorry this happened but, again, he did the right thing. I saved for another day that

stopping bullies is an act of love because unjust use of strength is self-damaging. Instead, I focused on cultivating trust and creating space for future conversations.

He finally started to relax, but… it still felt like I was missing something I couldn't put my finger on. "Hey bud, last question. I promise… Remember when you hit him back?"

Yeah…?

"It felt really good, didn't it?"

And as any kindergartner in his shoes should, my son giggled. And I joined him.

That was it. Gap closed. Question answered. He really opened up after that. So much so that I had to gently walk back some of what I'll summarize as enthusiastic overcorrection. ("No, we always stop when they stop… Yes, even if they say something really mean.")

I'll admit, I worried I might have just enabled my 5 year old, but then it hit me: this is how boys grow into men! By neither fearing masculine strength (despite the Left's shame) nor defining yourself by it (despite the Right's caricature), but learning to rightly steward it. "Turning the other cheek" is a lesson for when he's older, when he can understand that that is love's sacrificial choice, not when agency is taken from him before he knows how to use it. Within the safety of his dad's shame-inoculating affirmation is where my son should explore his strength and learn to steward it through trial and error.

The good news is that men don't have to go back in time to rewrite their childhood. To be "in Christ" means that when Jesus was baptized and God-the-Father declared through parted clouds, "This is my beloved Son, with him I am well pleased," he declares through our haze of shame that we are his adopted sons and heirs. The cross signed and sealed in blood an inheritance of existential weight, significance, and mattering more than sufficient to resolve any doubt, question, or shame. Glory-empty orphans are made glory-full sons.

If you can imagine even a little of what the Father's glory means to you in Christ, you can imagine what my affirmation meant to my son. Ours was not a celebration of violence, but of strength rightly used and gloriously affirmed. My son didn't giggle because he's shameless, but because bullying plants seeds of shame and doubt that I was able to free him of before they took root. He giggled because he didn't even know he had those questions until his dad answered them. I affirmed his mattering, gave him a glimpse of aspiration worth fighting for, and it was glorious.

I joined him because it took me years to articulate the shame enough to even know how to ask: “Am I worthwhile? Am I enough? Do I have what it takes?” I joined him because, by entrusting me with the answers my son needed, my Heavenly Father again met my shame with glory. Behold, you are my beloved son. With you I am well pleased. Men should not aspire to earn their Father’s love any more than my son could earn mine. He already had it. As I answered my son’s question, I discovered anew that my question was answered too.

With shame resoundingly answered by Glory, all that’s left for men is to steward what strength or power we’re entrusted with for God’s glory and the good of others. God willing, I’ll steward my own strength well enough to help him grow into it. That glad responsibility is an adventure more exciting and satisfying than anything Neverland has to offer.

The Need for Father-Scholars

By Ian Harber

“It’s so boring.” This, apparently, is one of the main reasons Gen Z parents are not reading to their children. Only 41% of parents are reading to their children under five years old, down from 64% in 2012. While that’s the data we have and it’s specific to Gen Z, it isn’t a stretch to imagine that books on the whole have less of a place in young families than they did in the past.

Growing up with my grandparents, I can remember many nights of my grandfather reading me to sleep with a hefty children’s Bible, James Herriot’s All Creatures Great and Small memoirs, Hank the Cowdog, and many more tales. I still have the children’s Bible and James Herriot books, with the tattered copies of Herriot sitting across from me on my bookshelf as I write this. I remember my grandfather laughing out loud at Hank the Cowdog’s overzealous shenanigans on the ranch and crying during moments of joy and heartbreak from the farm stories in Harriot’s memoirs. We shared emotions together and, naturally, stories; stories that are the imagination of my childhood and stories that formed both my literal and symbolic vocabulary.

These are the stories that parents find too boring to give their children and are replacing with screens. And it reveals the deeper problem that if parents find reading simple children’s stories to their kids too boring then of course reading for themselves would seem to be too boring as well. Nevermind the positive effects of boredom for our lives and mental wellbeing, reading books is one of the primary ways we develop wisdom through submitting ourselves to time with sustained thoughts and stories and wrestling with them in our lives.

As good as podcasts and YouTube videos can be, the medium is passive. It doesn’t require us to lean into the world that books aim to construct for us the same way. Books are the best way for us to exit the dopamine-addiction economy and develop free-thinking minds that enable us to view the world through the lenses of generations of wisdom we have received as an inheritance. Instead of getting second-hand knowledge from passive mediums that require nothing from us but a click, we should pursue first-hand wisdom from the active engagement with ideas and stories. It should be remarkable to us that it costs less than $10 to read Plato.

The question for many parents who see this issue and want to correct it in their families—and I have dads in particular in mind here—might not be “Is reading good?” but more practical. “What should I

read?” “What is my reading for?” “How can I actually make time to read?” These are the questions someone would ask who might not yet consider themselves a “Reader” but are looking to opt-out more and more from the algorithmic slop-world they find themselves sucked into and begin reclaiming their life and family. It’s for this reason that I believe fathers, and young fathers in particular, should think of themselves in a new light: as a father-scholar.

The Wisdom of The Father

I’m often struck by the fact that the book of Proverbs was written from a father to his son about his and the mother’s parental instruction. “Listen, my son, to your father’s instruction, and don’t reject your mother’s teaching, for they will be a garland of favor on your head and pendants around your neck” (Proverbs 1:8-9). The parent’s instruction is raising his children in the fear of the Lord which is “the beginning of wisdom” (1:7). The Lord who is, remember, Our Father. The father admonishes his son:

> “Wisdom is supreme—so get wisdom.
> And whatever else you get, get understanding.
> Cherish her, and she will exalt you;
> if you embrace her, she will honor you.
> She will place a garland of favor on your head;
> she will give you a crown of beauty.”
> (Proverbs 4:7-9)

The father tells his son to do whatever it takes to get wisdom, and he will show his son how to do it through his instruction, which is guiding him in the fear of the Lord. Proverbs then goes on to cover nearly every aspect of life: work, marriage, parenting, relationships, authority, money, and more. This wisdom is not an academic exercise, but a wisdom that is in the details of life.

What I wonder to myself, sometimes, is how many fathers could write a book of Proverbs of their hard-earned wisdom to their children? Are the habits of learning, reflection, and articulation cultivated and honed in order to pass their wisdom down to their children, who will in turn pass it on to their children, and so on? I have to assume that if 41% of young parents find reading bedtime stories to their kids too boring, then cultivating the life of the mind for the good of the family and community must certainly not be a normal practice.

Teacher and Scholar In One

The South African preacher, Andrew Murray, has a devotion in his 1887 book The Children for Christ called Parental Self-Culture. In it, he reiterates one of his main points throughout the book that children learn far more from their parent's example than their words. Which means that the most important part of parenting is not any single tactic or conversation, but the parent's character.

In Parental Self-Culture, Murray stresses that whatever we desire to teach our children, be it a habit or a character trait or a practical skill or any other form of knowledge, we must first teach it to ourselves. We have to develop the habits, characteristics, skills, and knowledge that we want to pass on to our children.

You might say that one of the most important tasks of parenting is self-parenting, and that includes acquiring the knowledge for ourselves that we wish our children to have before they leave our home for adulthood. As Murray writes, "I can effectually teach my children only what I really teach myself, and that I can only expect the truth that influences my own life really to influence theirs."

Our influence in our children's lives begins with the influences in our own. So to this, Murray says, "The first and most needful thing for being successful teachers of our children: teaching ourselves. Yes, parents, teach yourselves. If we are to train our children wisely, we must go through a new course of training ourselves. We have to put ourselves to school again, and to be teachers and scholars in one."

That last phrase stuck with me: teachers and scholars in one. In order to wisely train our children in the wisdom that begins in the fear of the Lord, we must be both teachers to our children and scholars ourselves. Which is why I believe one of the great needs of our time is for fathers to see themselves as father-scholars; fathers who make it a habit of their life to gain wisdom in both knowledge and skills and pass it on to their children.

What should we, as parents, be studying? Does every dad need a degree (or another one)? Far from it. Being a father-scholar has nothing to do with academia. It's not about appearing smart or reading esoteric philosophical tomes (unless you would like to). It's for every father. According to Murray we should, "Take time to study God's word. Study man's moral nature, with its wonderful capacities, as the sacred trust committed to your care. Teach yourself to cultivate that nature to its highest fitness for God's service: it will be the best preparation for teaching your children aright." All of our study begins with God's word. We should recommit ourselves to the practice of daily scripture and prayer and have a plan for doing so. Wisdom, as we have said, begins with the fear of the Lord, therefore all wisdom begins with scripture itself and all other learning is done in light of God's wisdom in scripture.

From there, we have man's moral nature and the capacities God has given us to steward and cultivate. To make this practical, one of my favorite ways of thinking about our capacities is how Reagan Rose from Redeeming Productivity talks about the Seven Domains of Life.

Those seven domains are: Spiritual, Mental, Physical, Relational, Recreational, Vocational, and Economical.

These seven domains are the capacities God has given us to steward. And in each one, we have a moral nature for us to cultivate "to its highest fitness for God's service."

While I believe learning concrete skills with your hands is absolutely part of the father-scholar vision, I want to focus on the life of the mind. Setting aside the physical domain for now (only because it's difficult, with some exceptions, to think of the physical domain in terms of reading, and it might be better here to commit to learning skills), someone could potentially read one well-chosen, quality book —preferably a classic when possible—in each of these six categories each year and be more well read than the vast majority of other people.

That's only six books per year. One book every other month. Along with daily scripture reading, six books a year is an achievable goal, especially if you factor in audiobooks for those who find them helpful. Six books a year also makes room for bigger or more difficult books. It's okay if a book takes two or three months to read; the time for that is baked in and could be offset by smaller books.

I believe the most important keystone habit to form in order to do this is to rise before your responsibilities. That means, whenever possible, being up before the kids, before work, before anything or anyone else needs you, and giving time to the Lord and your own development. There are situations where this isn't possible, and so it might need to be the evening.

But for most people, the morning will be best, even if it's difficult to set that habit at first. Like the French Dominican, A.G. Sertillanges, wrote in The Intellectual Life,

> The morning hours thus bedewed with prayer, freshened and vivified by the breezes of the spirit, cannot fail to be fruitful; you will begin them with faith; you will go through them with courage; the whole day will be spent in the radiance of the early light; evening will fall before the brightness is exhausted, as the year ends leaving some seed in the barns for the year to come.

This may not work for everyone, of course, but the point is that developing a consistent routine is one of the best ways to train yourself for this commitment, so you'll want to discover what that is for you.

Doing this surely involves some sort of asceticism, even if only minimally. It might look like severely limiting your consumption of short-form video, TV, and movies. It might look like adjusting your bedtime and your nights out. It might mean not doing other things you could be doing so that you can make time for reading. That doesn't mean you can't enjoy things other than reading or even that some of those things can't involve screens. There's time and place for entertainment and leisure, but it does mean that with many things competing for your attention, you must give some level of priority to reading, and that involves limiting (or even eliminating completely) other forms of media and entertainment.

The Father-Scholar, ideally, is surrounded by other father-scholars who are cultivating the same virtues in their life and family. The best work comes when fathers are able to gather together and discuss what they're learning and how they're being formed, and to workshop ways to practically integrate what they're learning into their lives, as well as developing appropriate community action when necessary. One example of how this could work would be a quarterly get together where men come together to discuss a book they've committed to reading over the past quarter. Basically, a modified book club, but one specifically aimed at the cultivation of the intellectual life for the formation of the whole person.

I imagine there might be dads who are where I described above, wanting to cultivate this sort of life but feel intimidated by all of the books that they could read and simply don't know where to start. I'd like to suggest a starting point by making some recommendations in each of the six domains of life.

Spiritual

The Spiritual category are books specifically for the benefit of your faith.

Growing in Christ — J.I. Packer

Confessions — Augustine

Mental

The Mental category are books that are for developing your thinking in a particular area. This can be a wide range of things. You can even pursue topical interests in this category.

The Abolition of Man — C.S. Lewis

The Nicomachean Ethics — Aristotle

Relational

The Relational category is to help you grow in the various relationships in your life: spouse, parent, friend, leader, etc.

How To Know A Person — David Brooks

The Gift of Being Yourself — David Benner

Vocational

The Vocational category is to help you in your work. Some books might be highly technical and specialized, whereas others are more broadly about your life's work.

Every Good Endeavor — Tim Keller

The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People — Stephen Covey

Recreational

The Recreational category is designed for rest and delight. Put your novels, poetry, or narrative history here. You can (and maybe should!) prioritize classic novels, but you don't have to.

The Lord of the Rings — J. R. R. Tolkien

Hannah Coulter — Wendell Berry

Economical

The Economical category is to help you be a good steward of your resources. Both personal finance and macroeconomics can fall in this category.

The Psychology of Money — Morgan Housel

Broken Money — Lynn Alden

Conclusion

This is meant to be an entry point. There's no need to artificially limit yourself to six books per year. But it's important to see just how doable this kind of life actually is. Six books a year in these areas would be a major success for the vast majority of people. There is much, much more that could be said about the father-scholar, but I believe it all starts with the same invitation St. Augustine heard in his garden, tolle, lege, take up and read.

None of this is so that we may be perceived as smart, but so that we can cultivate wisdom. Even wisdom is not an end to itself, but is in service of love. By reading both to our children and for our children, we plant seeds of love that have the potential to outlast us and produce fruit that goes beyond the infinite scroll of a shallow life. By making reading a cornerstone of our life, we aim to become loving fathers who raise loving children through our example.

As Murray exhorts us again, "In the daily life of the family the parents must seek to prove that love is the law of their life." We want our homes to be homes of love for our family. It starts when we submit ourselves to God's wisdom in every aspect of our life and allow that wisdom to be the tangible ways we love our families. We will fail and fall off our commitment to the life of the mind and have to start again over and over. We are creatures. But may it never be said of a father that he didn't pursue a life of love and wisdom because he was too bored. We read for ourselves. And we raise readers by reading to our children. Because in reading there is wisdom and in wisdom there is love.

Markets and the Strangulation of the American Family

By Gracy Olmstead

Maxine Eichner was a lawyer with a new baby girl. At work, she felt pressured to keep up with the long work hours of her peers, but in her heart, she longed to be home with her baby. One day, her every effort to get home in time for dinner was stymied. She sped home, hoping to at least see her daughter before bedtime—and was stopped by a police officer.

“When I got home, post-ticket, still sobbing, I lifted my then-sleeping child out of her crib and rocked her while she slept,” Eichner writes. “I made the decision to quit practicing law that night.”

Eichner’s fight to balance work commitments with caregiving needs is not unusual in America today. Indeed, as a lawyer (and now professor) near the top of the economic ladder, she admits that she has been far luckier than most Americans. But across all income levels and class backgrounds, U.S. families are struggling to balance the stresses and strains of work with the needs of their children.

This struggle is the focus of two recently published books: Alissa Quart’s Squeezed: Why Our Families Can’t Afford America, which came out in 2018, and Eichner’s The Free-Market Family: How the Market Crushed the American Dream (and How It Can Be Restored), published in January of this year. Both books painstakingly document the plight of U.S. mothers and fathers from many economic backgrounds, career fields, and geographic regions. The picture they paint is bleak, and often maddening: as Eichner puts it, “A range of harsh market forces are undercutting American families today. … Markets, rather than supporting sound family lives, are strangling the life out of them.”

Fixing what’s broken, both authors argue, will require far more than a few tweaks to the tax code. It will demand a complete reevaluation of our economic system and governmental safety net. It will require us to consider who our economy is actually meant to serve—and whether conservatives, in particular, are willing to back their pro-life, pro-family rhetoric with actual economic policy. We have to start asking ourselves what we believe the telos, or “chief end,” of our economy is meant to be.

Both American parents and children have alarmingly high rates of depression and anxiety. Deaths of despair and the opioid crisis are both often tied to familial and economic instability. Two-earner parent households in the U.S. work longer hours than their peers in any other developed country, Eichner

reports, with a total paid and unpaid workload of about 135 hours a week or more. Zero percent of mothers and just five percent of fathers say they have time to spare.

Yet despite all this work, a large share of American parents still struggle to put food on the table, to afford safe daycare for their young children, to pay their bills, and to stay on top of debt. They are, as Quart puts it, “running furiously and breathlessly just to find themselves staying in place.”

Why is this true of so many Americans? Both Quart and Eichner assemble a long list. Many U.S. jobs are less stable and permanent than in the past, with highly unpredictable work hours and stagnant wages. The job market itself is uncertain, and any semblance of work-life balance has become increasingly difficult. Yet “middle-class life is now 30 percent more expensive than it was twenty years ago,” Quart notes. The costs of education, health care, day care, housing have all “exploded” in recent decades, and Quart cites a Washington Post/Miller Center poll which found that 65 percent of all Americans worry about paying their bills.

Eichner quotes a professor who sums up the situation bluntly but perfectly: “‘It is families that have borne the brunt of these larger changes, and it is families that falter when, as is too often the case, the strain proves too much.’”

Eichner’s research suggests that economic insecurity and anxiety are tied to rising divorce rates amongst married couples. In one astonishing statistic she cites, America’s wedded couples are far less likely to stay together than Sweden’s cohabiting couples are. This instability foments the anxiety experienced by low-income parents, who often lack stable rhythms of life and constantly worry whether they’ll be able to provide for their children. Their children, meanwhile, are often forced to go without the parental nurturing that would help them flourish.

On top of all this, Quart and Eichner are both brutally honest about the unjust treatment parents—particularly parents who are people of color—often receive. Many men and women are penalized for asking for maternity or paternity leave, or for their attempts to set aside time to care for young children. Parents of color with the same work experience and credentials as white parents are less likely to get hired, and are often subject to lower wages. In a chapter titled “Inconceivable,” Quart painstakingly chronicles the harassment, hostility, and stress experienced by pregnant women in the workplace, many of whom try to hide their pregnancy for as long as possible for fear of being penalized.

Why is this? How is it that, in an incredibly wealthy country—one in which most Americans believe strongly that families matter, and ought to be protected and preserved—we seem to be selling families so

short?

Quart and Eichner tackle this question in different yet complementary ways. For Quart, to understand the plight of the parental worker, one must take into account the brutal autonomy and ruthless logic of our economic system. We have centered the norms of the workforce around the assumption that most workers are untethered and autonomous—and employers and politicians often get irked and annoyed when they realize that most workers, in fact, are neither of these things. Dealing with parents-as-workers requires us to deal with embodied humans: humans who age, who have babies, who need a place to breast pump, or who require more than a week of unpaid maternity leave in order to heal from the strain of childbirth.

“As President Donald Trump once commented, pregnancy is ‘certainly an inconvenience for business,’” Quart writes. “However loathsome, he was articulating the cruel common sense of capitalism: why should employees take any kind of leave for any reason at all, least of all for reproduction? But by this logic, what about those of us who do reproduce?”

All of us humans, regardless of our relationships or parental status, are embodied and indebted. We have people we care for, physical needs that must be addressed. But single or parentless humans are far better able to hide or dismiss these needs, whereas parents (especially mothers of babies) cannot. Thus, in a society which desires to promote autonomous, career-centric individuals and ever-growing profit margins, parents are indeed inconvenient and unprofitable.

“If some of us are to survive as workers, we have to deny, on some level, the existence of our bodies—bodies that age and give birth,” Quart writes.

But the way we treat pregnant and nursing women, Quart argues, is also “a symptom of how little American businesses and legislators care about care.” Our society has fostered a “caregiver penalty” which harms and disadvantages those tasked with the hard, thankless, often unpaid work of caring for small (or elderly) humans. This stems in part, she suggests, from “an intolerance for human weakness, and thus for those who serve humanity.” But it’s also true that workers with caregiving responsibilities are often less efficient, less likely to work nonstop or at odd hours, and more likely to need health care benefits, paid time off, and a proper work-life balance.

Many American parents are thus forced to hand off or severely curb their care responsibilities in order to stay employed. In the battle between adequate economic provision and parental nurturing, most parents must sacrifice nurturing (though most say that this is their priority, and the thing they most wish they

were doing). In The Free-Market Family, Eichner tells the story of a single mother forced to go back to work a mere week after giving birth, crying with longing for her baby as she seeks to make it through the day. Quart writes of parents who have to put their babies and toddlers in overnight daycares as they work crazy shifts that are often automatically assigned to them.

We often assume that American parents have a myriad of choices. This is the argument for free-market policy: that it should offer parents the choice, flexibility, and quality they would not receive through a state-run, tax-driven system.

But Eichner and Quart both argue that, due to the ruthless efficiency, severe inequality, and hyper competitiveness of our system, parents have less choice, little to no stability, and are most often forced to accept whatever options are cheapest. There's little freedom reflected in the lives of the families Eichner interviews. Rather than being constrained or controlled by big government, their bosses (and the whims of the market) dictate and control their lives. Americans, given our history, are very good at pinpointing and fighting government tyranny—but we can perhaps be blind to the corporate tyranny many vulnerable workers experience.

This lack of choice in America is most damning and revealing when we look at our welfare state and its impact on the poor—especially single mothers. Most low-income American parents never get the choice to stay home with their children. Their bodily needs are not respected, and the needs of their children are pushed to the wayside time and time again. Conservatives, in particular, tend to see the poor as "lazy," and tie all sorts of work requirements to welfare benefits and SNAP programs in our efforts to make sure that recipients are, in fact, "worthy" of our care.

Reading both these books, I saw time and time again the ways in which American policy punishes the most financially unstable mothers and their children, suggesting that the ability to nurture and raise a child should be available "for me, but not for thee." This is a horrible degradation of human worth and dignity. Through our policies and cultural expectations, we purposefully separate the poorest mothers from their children, and often pressure them to put their children in high-risk environments. All out of our own utilitarian designation of human worth, tied to work productivity rather than the intrinsic dignity and the imago Dei inherent in every human life.

Yet "the proper goal of economic policy," according to Eichner's thinking, "should be enabling Americans to live good lives consistent with our values, not enabling free markets regardless of the consequences." All too often, she writes, we "treat markets as if they are the economy. That's because we wrongly view the ultimate goal of the economy as an ever-increasing GDP. As the economist Kate

Raworth has observed, though, those who equate economic success with rising GDP don't ask hard enough questions about the purposes the economy should serve."

To Eichner, it's obvious that families ought to be served by our economic and political systems. In a decidedly conservative tone, she notes that the family is the backbone of our society, and the institution which most often undergirds all other institutions. Nothing (in our American culture, at least) compares to the intact two-parent family in terms of providing a stable, healthy environment for children.

"Undermine families, and the rest of society topples down right along with them," she writes. "Damage families, and you also undermine the American Dream as it was originally understood…"

The central thesis of Eichner's book, then, is that free-market policy is the crux of American families' problems, and must be replaced. She believes that pro-family government programs—such as mandatory paid parental leave, a basic child allowance, heavily subsidized daycare and prekindergarten, and a strong safety net—would help families flourish once more, and uses Finland's pro-family policies as her primary positive example (although other countries are also referenced and considered throughout her book).

The painful catch-22 experienced by today's parents—being forced to choose between putting food on the table, and caring for their children—stems from the fact that, at certain times of life, our care responsibilities or needs are disproportionately large, making it difficult to also meet financial needs at the same time. This is why, one might argue, we provide Social Security and Medicare to the elderly: they have disproportionately large care needs, coupled with a decreased ability to make financial contributions to society. Because we want to emphasize their dignity and worth, we use state funds to ease the tensions inherent in their condition.

But the same could be argued of children: as Matt Bruenig puts it in the introduction to his proposed Family Fun Pack program, "Like the elderly or the disabled, children… create enormous financial strain that only the welfare state or other non-market distributive mechanisms can offset."

Parents of young children are expected to meet high caretaking and high income needs—but as Eichner points out, these responsibilities "work at cross purposes in most families with young kids…. To provide financial support for their families, [most parents] compromise on the caretaking their kids receive—returning to work earlier than they'd like, sacrificing high-quality daycare and prekindergarten, and being less attentive to their children when the family is at home because they're so fried by their busy lives."

Many American parents compromise on this catch-22 by having one parent stay at home full-time (this is what I do, in fact). But this is only possible in two-parent households, and it is only possible if that second parent is making enough to provide for the entire family—a situation that can, in and of itself, be stressful and straining. Finland's pro-family policies, on the other hand, ease these burdens by allowing state subsidized health care and child care to step in and fill the gap.

Arguing for Scandinavian-style health care and child care policies is anathema to most conservatives. The point of our system, many would argue, is to keep the government out of the family, to empower individual choice via private consumption, to minimize taxation, and to motivate employers and workers to act virtuously on their own, without the government acting as "traffic cop," as Eichner puts it.

And it is, indeed, important to note that both Eichner and Quart are at risk of emphasizing governmental action and changes in economic policy to the exclusion of many other important factors that could or should be considered. Both touch in their books on the role that conspicuous consumption and class comparison have had in straining Americans' finances: we are not always or only victims of our economic circumstances. Expectations of what a solidly middle-class existence should look like have changed drastically over the last several decades, and Americans are spending more (and buying bigger homes) in order to "keep up with the Joneses." Quart notes that at least a few of her success stories don't just involve parents seeking out better, higher-paying jobs—they also involve parents moving to cheaper neighborhoods and cutting down on expenses. Comparison can have a deeply toxic impact on parents' sense of wellbeing, even leading to severe health problems down the road. This is indeed a part of American culture which is toxic, dangerous, and tied as much to virtue and a retraining of the will as it is to systemic reform.

Beyond the perils of our consumer culture, there are evils in our corporate culture here which the government is not solely responsible for fighting (not because it cannot or should not, but because we as consumers could also be holding U.S. companies to account). Quart argues in her book for a universal child allowance, better-subsidized daycare, universal public pre-K, and even a universal basic income in order to better address familial instability and anxiety. But she also acknowledges that such massive changes could be hard to achieve. And so she argues that we ought to begin exerting moral pressure on companies as soon as possible, through—as one example—"ratings of 'corporate culture compliance'" that would applaud the best companies and "shame the worst" in regards to their treatment of employees.

"Companies that do not want to be baddies [have to build] family needs into their business models," Quart suggests. Companies would be applauded for "babies at work" programs, offering excellent paid

parental leave programs, and the like.

Our entire economic system is built on cultural expectations: companies understand what they can and cannot get away with without being stigmatized. More regulation and policing by the government can indeed alter what we view as acceptable in the work environment (as most companies today would be shocked to consider the child labor practices viewed as normal in the early 20th century). But there may also be an important role we as consumers, and even as members of institutions, play in determining this culture and its expectations.

All that said, both authors—Eichner, in particular—build a compelling case for government intervention on behalf of the family. While the principles of fiscal conservatism often prompt American conservatives toward libertarianism in regards to economics and social policy, it makes sense that a government in pursuit of the common good, supportive of the sanctity and dignity of human life, would be pro-family in its policies.

In addition, it's worth pointing out that conservative arguments for fiscal responsibility have little to do with how much we actually spend as a country, and more to do with where we believe we ought to be spending our dollars. Bruenig has already estimated that creating free child care and pre-k programs in the United States would cost 0.5 percent to 0.9 percent of GDP annually, "depending on precisely how it is designed and modeling assumptions"—whereas in contrast, we already spend 3.4 percent of GDP on our military.

"If we cut the military budget to fund the program, it would still be, by far, the largest military budget in the world and well above the 2 percent NATO target," he notes.

Eichner rightly points out that a "free-market" system isn't really free in the sense we imagine it to be (unregulated, open, with equal competition between all involved). The government has already—and indeed, always—chosen "sides" in its cultivation of our economic system. It is neither a passive nor a detached player. We already lived in a rigged system—but it's rigged in an anti- rather than a pro-family fashion.

"[I]n the past fifty years, government has shifted laws deliberately to make families more beholden to the market," Eichner writes. "… Policymakers have also passed corporate laws that favor shareholders over employees, and tax laws that favor the rich over the poor. So equating free-market policy with true freedom or even the absence of regulation is nonsense."

Neither would establishing “free” programs for families—especially economically insecure mothers and their children—be unprecedented in our history. In one fascinating chapter of her book, Eichner writes of the “mothers’ pensions” which Americans established in the early 1900s:

“These pensions provided cash benefits to widows with children, and potentially to other mothers without husbands at home. Significantly, the pensions were considered to be honorable subsidies that supported the valuable labor rendered by mothers. In the words of one pension activist, ‘We cannot afford to let a mother… be classed as a pauper, a dependent. She must be given value received by her nation, and stand as one honored…. If our public mind is maternal, loving and generous, wanting to save and develop all, our Government will express this sentiment.’”

Forty-six states passed these pension laws between 1911 and the early 1930s. The payments were called “pensions,” Eichner notes, “precisely to recognize both the dignity of the care work that mothers performed and the public responsibility for supporting this work.”

Practically speaking, there’s one policy discussed in both books that I think would be achievable in American politics and policy in the near future, if we were able to make the implications of its implementation more clear. Eichner notes that we are one of two countries in the world not to provide any paid maternity leave (the other is Papua New Guinea)—yet eight in ten Americans already believe women should receive paid maternity leave.

Eichner documents the exact benefits to maternal and infant wellbeing created through a generous paid maternity leave program: the ways it cultivates infant health, decreases the likelihood of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS), and the ways it helps mothers to heal and avoid postpartum depression (a debilitating condition which can lead to other health problems down the road).

Maternity leave is a policy which touches on the basic dignity of human life, our embodied needs for nurture and rest, and the worth of strong familial bonds. It is, by its very nature, “pro-life”: many women turn to abortion in the United States out of financial fears and stresses, worried they will be unable to provide for the unborn life within them. It is worth noting that Finland’s abortion rate is almost half what ours is, and represents the lowest abortion rate in the Nordic region; it seems that the pro-family policies that Eichner argues for could empower parents—regardless of income or life circumstances—to more freely choose life.

One difficulty in establishing such a policy, going forward, would likely lie in convincing people on the right that we ought to value life with our monetary policy, not just with our rhetoric. It would also

require determining the proper means to institute such a program: the left might suggest greater taxation in order to put it together, and I personally think that's a possibility pro-lifers should be okay with. But as Bruenig points out, we could also probably pay for (or come close to paying for) such a program by reconsidering and refiguring our fiscal spending in other sectors of the economy. There's plenty of crony capitalism that we could replace with proper spending on behalf of families.

The ultimate casualties of our current system, Eichner argues, are our children. Quart's book shows the ravaging toll our economy takes on parents and their emotional, mental, and physical health. She is worried about the barriers of entry, difficulties of economic inequality, and unjust work circumstances foisted on parents, women, and caregivers. She considers at great length the stresses and anxieties they bear due to their role as parents. But rarely does she consider the cost of these stresses and anxieties on the children themselves. Even in her chapter on "extreme daycare"—in which children sleep on cots on the floor of their daycare centers overnight, waiting for their parents to pick them up as late as midnight or as early as five in the morning—Quart focuses on how this impacts the parents and daycare workers, not the impact it might have on babies who are mere months old, or the toddlers who act old beyond their years.

Eichner, on the other hand, is most concerned with what this system is doing to our children. She is, by far, the more policy-oriented of the two authors, and her book is overflowing with data, statistics, graphs, and charts. But at the heart of her book, underlying all that data and research, is a deep maternal passion. She is concerned with the toll that parental anxiety, stress, and neglect take on our tiny humans, and she fills her book with data on the impact these things have on children in their early years. She worries over the children whose early experiences with insecurity and financial stress end up fomenting their own struggles with depression and anxiety.

"Early childhood is … not simply a holding period until children reach grade school and are ready to learn, but a crucial developmental stage in and of itself," she writes. "Children's environment during this time critically affects whether they'll establish a sturdy or fragile foundation for development throughout the rest of their lives. If children don't get what they need to flourish in these first years, this crucial window of opportunity is lost. It's much harder and more expensive to correct problems later on, if they can be corrected at all."

Both books filled me with questions concerning the cultural assumptions we've encouraged surrounding the human person—and encouraged me to dream about what it might look like to cultivate the opposite. What if CEOs were taught to assume that every worker they employ is responsible for a plethora of human ties and obligations outside of their office, all of which must be preserved and protected? What if

we taught companies and employers to think of their average worker as obligated to care for at least one vulnerable person, and in need of space and time to fulfill that caretaking role?

Most Americans have people in their life to whom they owe care—and our society would "function" much better if we could more easily meet those care needs (although functionality should be the least of our concerns in this area). If you are not a parent to an infant, toddler, or school-age child, you might have an aging parent who is dependent on you for support. You might serve as second to someone who is a primary caregiver. (Many elderly Americans work full-time, and still help with their grandchildren, Eichner and Quart write.) Or you might have someone else in your life who is "needy" for care: a friend or family member with mental health issues, or a disabled relative who could benefit from greater attention, comfort, and company.

Assuming that humans are indebted and tied results in a society that values and dignifies those ties. Assuming the autonomous, free individual results in disappointment or disdain when we inevitably find ourselves bumping up against the reality of those ties.

But being truly pro-life means seeing, valuing, and celebrating those ties at every opportunity: because care work is the crucial support and sustenance of human life, the indispensable labor which affords the most vulnerable dignity and wellbeing. Care work keeps infants alive, and sustains and nurtures the elderly until their last breath. To assume human autonomy is to practically undermine care, and therefore to undermine the worth and value of the most vulnerable.

Once again, there are a myriad of complex, important ways that we can re-value care work and caregivers in America. Finnish economic and government policy are by no means the only way we can achieve these things. But Quart and Eichner are both right to point to the complexity of our problem, as well as the ruthless capitalist logic often underlying it. They are right to consider the rigorous response this problem might demand of us. If we truly want to value life, we may have to reconsider many things: the companies we support, the taxes we're willing to pay, and—more practically and personally—how we are supporting our co-workers, employees, neighbors, and family members. If the family matters to us as Americans, we need to start acting like it.

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